The Life of Christ
A Chronological Study and Lesson Guide

by Todd Scopes
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Life of Christ Study #1

John 1:1-18

Theme: The Big Picture

Summary:

In the New Testament, four Gospels tell the story of the life of Jesus on earth from roughly 5 B.C. until A.D. 30. They are histories or biographies, but not in the style to which we are accustomed today. The writers were more concerned with presenting an important message about Jesus than with chronicling every event of His life. They selectively recorded deeds and teachings of Jesus to emphasize who He was and what He did. In fact, Luke is the only Gospel which seems to follow a consistent chronology. Of course, the person they are presenting is unique in all of human history. There have been many who have performed great deeds or left far reaching legacies, but none compares to the works and claims of Jesus. He is seen by different people as everything from a mad man to a good man to an angel to God's greatest prophet. The Gospels, however, say that Jesus is God. The apostle John takes time at the very start of His Gospel to make that fact clear, for without that understanding, the life of Jesus is a puzzling aberration. The deity of Jesus is the context in which the Gospels must be viewed.

1) He was God (John 1:1-3). The Old Testament started with the declaration that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. John's Gospel began with the statement that Jesus was there with God at creation because He, in fact, was God. The stable in Bethlehem was only the beginning of the earthly human life of Jesus. He had shared God's glory before the world was made (see John 17:5), and He was the one who brought everything else into existence (see I Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2). John called Jesus the Word because He was the living expression of God's revealed communication. The life that John and the other Gospel writers presented was the life of God as a man.

2) He brought life and light (John 1:4-9). The world into which Jesus came was dying in darkness. People tried many religions and philosophies, but sin had separated them from any hope of eternal life and blinded them to any knowledge of how to find it. Into this darkness, Jesus brought the offer of salvation and the piercing light of truth. But the people had grown so accustomed to the dark that they were unable to understand the light and unwilling to let it expose their lives (see John 3:19). Therefore, God first sent John the Baptist to identify Jesus for the people. He worked to prepare men for the coming of the light
so that they might believe and find life. God Himself was coming to provide for the world what it could get no other way.

3) He was not recognized by most (John 1:10-13). God entered His own creation as a man and most people did not even recognize Him. He came to the people He had chosen to be His own, but they largely rejected Him. They were too set in their pride and self-righteousness to see their need. Yet there were some who accepted Jesus and believed Him and His message. These were the ones who were given the authorization to become children of God. It was a privilege that could not be gained through human birth or effort. They put aside their worthless attempts to buy admittance to God's family, and in Jesus they found the only way to the Father (see John 14:6).

4) He became a man (John 1:14-18). Jesus chose to be born into the world as an infant and to share the human experience for more than thirty years. Yet the glory, grace, and truth of His deity were evident even in His humanity. John the Baptist captured the puzzle of Jesus when he said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me." John was born before Jesus and began his preaching ministry first, but because Jesus was God, He existed before John and embodied the truth which John could only speak. The law, a written statement of God's communication, was given through Moses, but Jesus made the words of God come alive through the grace and truth of His deeds and teaching. No one has seen God in His glory, but the One and Only Jesus, who was God, revealed Himself to men as one of them.

Discussion:

1) In Luke 9:18, Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do the crowds say I am?" How would you answer? Who do people today say Jesus is?

2) Read John 1:4-5. Why do many people today still not understand the light of Jesus? Why do you think some people ignore or even dislike the message?

3) Read John 1:6-9. What task was assigned to John the Baptist? To whom has that task been given today? What can you do to carry on John's work?

4) Read John 1:10-13. How does a person become a child of God? What do you think it means to "receive" Him and to "believe in His name"?

Application:
Many people have accomplished amazing goals and had their lives recorded in biographies, but when we read them it does not much matter whether or not we believe what is reported. But the story of Jesus is unlike any other, for a person's response to it will affect his eternity. It is just as true now as it was when Jesus walked in Israel that those who will receive Him and believe in His name will be given the right to be children of God. They will be saved from the darkness and death of the world. The Gospel writers knew the seriousness of this issue when they arranged their material under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of their work is more than recording the life of Jesus for history. It is convincing their readers that Jesus is God and that His message is vital to their lives. God reveals Himself to men through the life of His Son and offers them the way to eternal life.

Life of Christ Study #2


Theme: Genealogies: Line of the Promise

Summary:

The coming of Jesus into the world was the fulfillment of God's promise stretching all the way back to the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden. A way of salvation was needed and a way of salvation would be provided. From the time that Adam fell into sin and all mankind was separated from God until the birth of Jesus, God preserved the human line of the promise from generation to generation. At times He would renew His promise or give more details about it. At times the disobedience of men would threaten to nullify it. But God was determined to be faithful to His word, so the promise continued. Every Jew knew about the promise and the requirements for its fulfillment. That is why Matthew and Luke included the genealogy of Jesus in their Gospels. Matthew traced the line from Abraham through Josep, the earthly "father" of Jesus. Luke, meanwhile, recorded the ancestry of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Between them, the genealogies establish the legal and physical right of Jesus to hold the throne of David and to be the fulfillment of God's promise.

1) Son of Adam (Luke 3:38). When God pronounced the curse on the sin of Adam and Eve, He also foretold a time when one of their descendants would crush the head of Satan the serpent (see Genesis 3:15). In the midst of the sorrow of the fall, God placed the hope of salvation. Just as sin and death were unleashed in the world through Adam, so one man brought the salvation of grace and righteousness (see Romans 5:12, 19). Jesus, the seed of Adam, brought freedom from the death and bondage of sin.
2) Son of Shem (Luke 3:36). Noah had three sons named Shem, Ham, and Japheth. After the flood, Ham and his descendants were cursed because of his indecent actions towards his father (see Genesis 9:24-25). Shem was singled out for a blessing that prophesied a unique relationship with God for his line, and Japheth was told that his line would find shelter in the tents of Shem (see Genesis 9:26-27). Through Shem came Jesus who would extend the way of salvation to all people of the world. Thus, the blessing given to Shem was fulfilled in Jesus.

3) Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1-2, Luke 3:34). Abraham was one of the two names that Matthew especially highlighted. Long after the flood, Abraham was chosen by God out of all the people of the earth to be the father of His chosen nation. Part of the promise that God made to Abraham was that all nations of the earth would be blessed through him and his descendants (see Genesis 12:2-3; 22:18). Jesus, in the line of Abraham, offered the blessing of forgiveness and eternal life to the nations.

4) Son of Judah (Matthew 1:2-3; Luke 3:33). The promise God gave to Abraham was passed on to his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. Jacob became the father of twelve sons, and at the end of his life he pronounced a prophetic blessing on them. Judah was the fourth son in age, but his three older brothers had disqualified themselves from the birthright because of wicked actions (see Genesis 49:3-6). Therefore, Judah and his descendants were promised the ruler's scepter and staff "until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (see Genesis 49:9-10). The royal line began with Judah and Jesus was his direct heir.

5) Son of David (Matthew 1:6; Luke 3:31). David was promised by God that his royal dynasty would never end (see II Samuel 7:16). Matthew traced the line through the men who sat on Judah's throne after David starting with Solomon. The last to do so was Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah; Matthew 1:11-12). Because of the wickedness of Jehoiachin, God declared that no descendant of his would ever be king (see Jeremiah 22:30). Joseph, the earthly "father" of Jesus was directly descended from Jehoiachin, but since Jesus was not his son by birth, Jesus escaped the curse of Jehoiachin. Instead, Luke traced the line of David through Nathan, another of David's sons. Mary was descended from David through this line. Thus, Jesus obtained the legal right to the throne through Joseph and the physical right through Mary.
6) Son of God (Matthew 1:16; Luke 3:23). Both Matthew and Luke carefully emphasized that Jesus was not the physical son of Joseph. Matthew called Joseph "the husband of Mary," but attributed the parentage of Jesus to Mary alone. Luke said that Jesus was only thought to be the son of Joseph. His real Father was not a man.

Discussion:


2) What can you learn about God's preparation for fulfilling His promise from the list of names? Is God able to handle the details of your life?

3) Read II Samuel 7:16. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be descended from David? How will Jesus fulfill the promise to David according to Revelation 11:15?

4) Read Matthew 1:16 and Luke 3:23. Why do you think the Gospel writers were so careful to emphasize that the relationship of Jesus to Joseph was not son and father?

Application:

At first glance, a list of family ancestors does not seem too important. However, the genealogy of Jesus was vital to all that He came to accomplish. Only a son of Adam could pay for the curse of sin. Only a son of Shem could lead the way to a personal relationship with God. Only a son of Abraham could bless the nations of the earth. Only a son of Judah could lay claim to authority among the people of Israel. Only a son of David could rule and reign forever. And only the Son of God could bring salvation to the world. The curse of Jehoiachin had to be avoided without giving up a physical connection to the throne of David, and the birth of a child who was both man and God had to be accomplished. Jesus satisfied all the demands of history and law in His ancestry, for God had faithfully preserved the line of the promise for thousands of years.

Life of Christ Study #3

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Theme: Birth of John the Baptist

Summary:

The final words written in the Old Testament prophesied the coming of a second Elijah before a time when God would
purge and purify His people. The role of this prophet would be to heal the relationships within families so that they would seek God together (see Malachi 4:5-6). Elsewhere, Malachi referred to this prophet as a messenger from God who would prepare the way for the Messiah, God's chosen Savior for His people (see Malachi 3:1). More than 400 years passed after Malachi's prophecy, and the people of Israel waited. Persian rule gave way to the Greek Empire and there was no relief from foreign oppression. There was a resurgence of national and religious zeal during the Maccabean revolt and the Jews even regained control of their land for a brief period (142-63 B.C.). But the rebellion soon lost its religious passion and became a political movement led by hypocrites which was crushed by the Roman army. When the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C., hope was nearly extinguished. God had been silent for a long time, yet some still waited for His messenger.

1) Silence broken (Luke 1:5-17). Zechariah and Elizabeth were one couple who held to their hope in God's promise. Zechariah served as a priest and he and his wife remained loyal to God and to His commands. They were now growing old and they had been unable to have children. But hope was given to the nation and to Zechariah personally one day in the temple about 6 B.C. He was chosen for the honor of entering the holy place alone to burn incense on the altar. The angel Gabriel appeared to him there, and Zechariah was terrified. But the angel brought good news. Elizabeth would have a son named John and he would be the messenger foretold by Málachi. He would be uniquely set apart by God from birth for a specific ministry (v.15). His work would be in the "spirit and power of Elijah" to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of Messiah (v.16-17).

2) Silence imposed (Luke 1:18-25). Gabriel's announcement was overwhelming to Zechariah. After 400 years the promise would be fulfilled through his own son! He had hoped and prayed for God to act, but now he found it hard to believe when his prayers were answered, so he asked for some kind of confirmation. Because of his unbelief, he was rendered unable to speak until the angel's words were fulfilled. That was the confirmation that God would do what He had promised. When his two weeks of temple service were completed, Zechariah returned to his home with amazing news for his wife. Soon after, Elizabeth became pregnant.

3) Silence released (Luke 1:57-80). Zechariah remained silent until eight days after the birth of his son. The time came for the child's circumcision and naming, and most people assumed he would be named after some family ancestor. But Elizabeth insisted that his name should be
John as the angel had instructed. Zechariah took a writing tablet and indicated his agreement as he wrote, "His name is John." Instantly, he was able to speak again and his first words were praises to God. He praised the Lord for keeping His promises to David and Abraham in bringing a way of redemption to His people (v.68-75). The Holy Spirit revealed to Zechariah that the birth of John was the first of a series of events that would lead to salvation provided through God's chosen Messiah. He also recognized that the specific role of his son John would be to get people ready to meet the Messiah by preaching "salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (v.76-77). With the birth of John, 400 years of waiting and silence were ended. Now would come the fulfillment of faith and promises.

Discussion:


2) Read Luke 1:16-17. What was needed for the people of Israel to be prepared for the Lord? What is needed today in your life and the lives of your neighbors to be ready for the coming of the Lord?

3) Read Luke 1:68-75. What was Zechariah expecting from the Messiah that God would send?

4) Read Luke 1:77-79. This is the first mention of salvation through forgiveness in the Gospels. How would you explain the concept to someone who has never heard it before?

Application:

The pain of barrenness could not turn Zechariah and Elizabeth from their devotion and trust in the Lord. Even 400 silent years could not exhaust their belief that God would keep His promises faithfully. In a time of great discouragement and confusion, Zechariah and Elizabeth obeyed God and waited for Him to act. When the day of fulfillment came, they were positioned to experience the blessings. Yet it is somewhat ironic that it was on that day that the faith of Zechariah finally faltered. Having waited so long he could not believe that his waiting was over. However, his unbelief did not last for long, and by the time John was born he was fully aware of what God was doing. Elijah had come and the Messiah would soon follow. There is great benefit in simple obedience even when there are no apparent results. God always keeps His promises, and those who persist in following Him will be the first to recognize His hand at work.
Life of Christ Study #4


Theme: The Call of Mary and Joseph

Summary:

For more than 400 years since the final Old Testament prophet Malachi wrote, heaven had remained apparently silent. But the announcement of John's birth to Zechariah (see Luke 1:11-20) opened a flurry of messages from God to people who would play key roles in the coming of the Messiah. The event had been foretold by the prophets and anticipated by the faithful, but its magnitude was so great that God sent special angelic messengers to prepare the hearts and minds of certain individuals. Since Jesus was to come as a man, he had to enter the world through a human birth, yet it would be a birth unlike any the world had ever seen, for while the mother would be an ordinary young woman there would be no human father. Many would never understand this truth, but it was important that Mary and Joseph did. They would enjoy the privilege and bear the responsibility of being the central people in God's plan to be born into the world as a baby.

1) Announced to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). Mary, like any young bride-to-be, was expectantly awaiting her marriage. But her wedding plans took a most unexpected twist when the angel Gabriel appeared to her in her Nazareth home. He greeted her as one who had been given a great honor. This surprised Mary who was not aware that she had done anything to merit such favor. The angel repeated that she had found favor with God. Then he announced to her that she would be the mother of the Messiah who would be equal with God and would inherit the throne of David and rule over the line of Jacob. Thus, the promise of God to Abraham and David would be fulfilled through Him. He was to be named Jesus which meant "He is the Savior." Mary must have been overwhelmed at such news, but her only question was a very practical, "How will this be since I am a virgin?" The angel explained that God would supernaturally cause the child to grow within her. As proof that God was able to do this, he cited the miracle which had already come to Elizabeth. Mary accepted the angel's word without complaint or objection. She was content to be in the hands of God.

2) Confirmed by Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). Probably moved by a mixture of excitement and curiosity, Mary quickly traveled to see her relative Elizabeth. As soon as Mary spoke a word of greeting, the child within Elizabeth leaped with joy and Elizabeth was given insight by the Holy Spirit to recognize what was happening. She
rejoiced over the news before Mary had even told it, and she called her "the mother of my Lord." These two women shared the joy of being chosen by God to bring the fulfillment His plan into the world. One would bear the messenger who would prepare Israel for the coming King. The other would be the mother of the King Himself.

3) Praised by Mary (Luke 1:46-56). Mary was lifted to the heights of praise and rejoicing as she listened to Elizabeth. She understood the glory of the work God was preparing to do through her. She, a woman without wealth or position, would possess a unique place among all the women of history. The proud and the powerful and the rich would not always oppress the humble, for God was faithful to His promise to Abraham and his descendants. All who had feared God and looked for His mercy would now see the answer to their hopes. The Messiah was coming and Mary was to be the means of His coming.

4) Announced to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25). Joseph also received a visit from one of God's messengers. When he discovered that his bride-to-be was pregnant he could only conclude that she had been unfaithful, for he had never had sexual relations with her. It must have grieved him deeply, but his compassion for her moved him to consider a quiet divorce, so that she would not be subjected to public inquiry. But God intervened by sending an angel to Joseph in a dream. The angel explained the role Mary had been chosen to play and assured him that she was pure. He also charged Joseph to take Mary as his wife and assume responsibility for rearing the child who would be the Savior. All that was occurring was part of God's plan (see Isaiah 7:14). It was a hard task, for there would be questions and accusations, and Joseph's reputation would be ruined in the eyes of some, but he, like Mary, accepted the call of God on his life.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 1:26-38. In what ways did the angel's announcement complicate Mary's life? What might others have thought and said about her once it became known she was pregnant?

2) Read Matthew 1:18-25. In what ways did the angel's announcement complicate Joseph's life? What might others have thought and said about him once it became known that Mary was pregnant?

3) Why do you think that Mary and Joseph were willing to accept the announcements without complaint or objection? What motivates you to obey God when
it costs you something?

4) Read Luke 1:46-55. What does Mary's song reveal about her understanding and character? How would those traits help her in accepting the role God assigned to her?

Application:

Mary and Joseph were people with plans. They were looking forward to their wedding and setting goals for their lives. But the announcement of the angel changed the rest of their lives dramatically. Accepting God's will meant giving up some of their own plans and ambitions to make room for His. It meant enduring the gossip that was sure to accompany a pregnancy before marriage. It meant postponing some aspects of their relationship (see Matthew 1:24-25). Later, it would mean a disruption of life in Nazareth and an escape to Egypt. Yet they accepted these and other changes without complaint because they knew they were obeying the Lord. Mary's statement to the angel, "I am the Lord's servant," was a remarkable declaration of loyalty and submission which was tested many times. That is how it is for anyone who would be greatly used by God. He does not often reveal all that is to come. He simply tells us to follow and trust Him. Mary and Joseph were willing. Are we?

Life of Christ Study #5

Luke 2:1-20

Theme: The King is Born

Summary:

One theme that can be seen throughout the Gospels is the difficulty the Jewish people had in accepting Jesus as the Messiah. He simply did not seem to fit the picture they had in their minds. The religious leaders, the multitudes, and even the disciples stumbled over the contrast between their hopes and the earthly ministry of Jesus. The concept of a coming Messiah was deeply ingrained in the Jewish mindset of the times. It was a theme closely bound in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants with the promise of a wonderful kingdom on earth. Given their circumstances the Jews correctly recognized several changes which would have to occur before the Messianic Kingdom could be a reality. They looked for the Messiah to regain autonomy for the nation, revive the temple worship program, reinstate the kingly line of David, punish the nation's enemies, and bring physical and material prosperity to the land. It was a huge list for anyone to fulfill, and the birth of Jesus hardly fit the entrance of such a great King from all appearances.

1) Subject to foreign rule (Luke 2:1-4). When Jesus was born, about 5 B.C., Palestine was a client kingdom within the Roman province of Syria. This
meant that while Herod the Great could claim the title of king, he and his country were subject to the policies of Rome. The client kingdom was permitted to maintain some degree of autonomy only as long as it did not violate the will of the Emperor. Therefore, when Caesar Augustus issued a decree for an enrollment or census of the Empire, Quirinius the governor of Syria would enforce the decree and Herod was required to obey. It was that decree which sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. So, from a human perspective, the birthplace of the King of the Jews was dictated by a Roman Emperor through a provincial governor. But, in reality, those men were just used by God to bring about the plan He had established and announced many years earlier (see Micah 5:2).

2) Born in a stable (Luke 2:5-7). Normally, when a King is to be born, the best treatment and facilities would be expected for his mother. But Mary was forced to make the journey of about 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem with her betrothed as her date of delivery was drawing near. Apparently, the census had sent many people traveling away from home, for the guest house at Bethlehem was full. When Mary’s labor began the couple found shelter in a stable, probably a hollowed cave, and Mary laid the baby in the carved feeding trough which was there. The stable could have been made clean in preparation for the birth, and Mary may have even had the assistance of a midwife. But it was certainly not the setting expected for the birth of a King.

3) Announced by angels (Luke 2:8-14). The news of a royal birth would usually be carried by heralds throughout the realm, but the birth of Jesus was largely unnoticed by men. However, the angels took the message to a group of shepherds in the surrounding fields. They brought better news than any royal messenger. "Savior" and "Lord" were titles the Emperor claimed for himself, but the angels properly attributed them to Jesus. They also called Him "Christ," a Greek word which meant the same as the Hebrew "Messiah." This was not just another human ruler entering the world. This was the supreme King. More angels came and formed a heavenly chorus to praise the newly born King. Emperor Augustus was lauded by men for bringing peace to the Empire, but Jesus would bring true peace between men and God to those who would receive it.

4) Attended by shepherds (Luke 2:15-20). Shepherds were considered nearly outcasts by the Jewish religious community, for their responsibilities in the fields prevented them from attending
religious feasts and ceremonies. Yet the priests and Pharisees who considered themselves religious experts were skipped by the angelic messengers in favor of those who would normally be the last to hear the news. The shepherds immediately left their sheep and went into the city to see the child. Bystanders who had wandered over to the stable to see the new baby were amazed at the story the shepherds told, but Mary inwardly rejoiced as she remembered a previous angelic message (see Luke 1:26-33).

Discussion:

1) Compare Micah 5:2 with the events of Luke 2:1-4. Do you think the Romans who ordered the census were aware that they were helping to fulfill God's plan? What does this tell you about God's role in world events today?

2) Read Luke 2:5-7. How did the circumstances of Christ's birth differ from the conditions you would usually expect for the birth of a King?

3) Read Luke 2:9-14. What made the angel's message better than any delivered by a human ruler?

4) Why do you think God sent the angels to announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds instead of to the religious leaders? How do you think Luke 5:29-32 applies to this question?

Application:

When a new prince is born in a palace, the scene is mobbed by reporters and important well wishers. The news is taken as quickly as possible throughout the land, and the people of the nation celebrate. No such festivities accompanied the birth of Jesus on the earth. There were no headlines or parties, and the people of influence were ignorant that anything of note had happened. But the angels of heaven sang the good news, and humble shepherds responded with awe and excitement. The King of all kings came quietly into the world in a stable, and His mother nursed Him while His earthly father watched over them. Caesar Augustus governed his vast Empire from Rome, unaware that one of his many decrees had set the stage for the Messiah to be born in the city of David. The religious leaders who should have been waiting eagerly were bypassed in their mistaken expectations. Often God works His will unobtrusively and unexpectedly. We sometimes do not recognize His hand because we have already decided how we think it should appear. Yet His work is accomplished in spite of our misunderstanding.

Life of Christ Study #6
Luke 2:21-40

Theme: Dedication in the Temple

Summary:

To most observers, the birth of Jesus seemed to be like the many births that took place every day in Israel. But this seemingly ordinary birth was surrounded by extraordinary events. The child's mother was a virgin, yet she gave birth. The circumstances of His coming were humble, but heavenly messengers delivered the news of the baby's nativity. Through all of this, Joseph and Mary behaved like normal parents who wished to bring up their child in obedience to the Lord. The angelic visitations and inside information were for select audiences only. Most of the people around them suspected nothing except perhaps the awkward timing of the birth in relation to the marriage. Still, Joseph and Mary carried the secret of their son's identity, and they must have wondered what other unusual occurrences might come. Mary, indeed, treasured and pondered the words of the shepherds in her heart. Meanwhile, God revealed the truth to certain people who had long awaited its arrival.

1) Obedient parents (Luke 2:21-24). Apparently, Joseph and Mary decided to stay for a while in Bethlehem after the birth of the child. Probably this was to allow time for Mary to recover fully and to be conveniently closer to Jerusalem when the time of dedication came. When the boy was eight days old, He was circumcised as dictated by the law (see Leviticus 12:3) to signify His participation in the Abrahamic covenant (see Genesis 17:10-14). At the same time, He was given the name Jesus as the angel had instructed (see Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21). Thirty-three days later, Jospeh and Mary took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to be dedicated to the Lord as their first son (see Exodus 13:2, 11-16). They also fulfilled the requirement of a sin and a burnt offering for Mary's purification at that time (see Leviticus 12:4-8). Obviously, Joseph and Mary took seriously the role that had been entrusted to them.

2) Simeon the righteous (Luke 2:25-35). Simeon was a man who had faithfully waited for God to bring comfort to His people. The Lord had promised him that he would live to see the Messiah personally. On the day that Jesus was brought by His parents to the temple, the Holy Spirit prompted Simeon to go there also. The old man recognized the child at once and thanked God for keeping His promise. Simeon called Jesus God's "salvation" and prophesied that the child would be God's means of bringing His truth to the Gentiles and His glory to the people of Israel. Joseph and Mary were amazed at this new example of God's extraordinary work surrounding their baby. Simeon pronounced a blessing on them and then spoke to Mary. He told
her that Jesus would be a dividing line for Israel, for people would rise to life or fall to destruction based on their response to Him. He also told her that she would suffer grieve over her son. This came to pass when she watched Him die on the cross years later.

3) Anna the prophetess (Luke 2:36-38). Another old saint was in the temple that day. She was a widowed prophetess named Anna who had devoted the many years since her husband died to serving and worshiping in the temple. Like Simeon, she was also given instant recognition of who Jesus was. She told others who were waiting for God’s promised Messiah that this child was the one sent by God to redeem His people and His city (see Isaiah 52:7-10). She knew that the Lord was fulfilling His word before her eyes.

4) A unique child (Luke 2:39-40). Joseph and Mary completed the requirements of God’s law in regard to their new son and returned to their home in Nazareth. But they went with more than the normal satisfaction of having obeyed God. They also went with a renewed assurance that everything the angel had told them was true. The baby boy, not yet two months old, was the Messiah. As the child grew, the wisdom and grace of God became more and more evident in His life.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 2:21-24. What do these verses reveal about the commitment of Joseph and Mary to God and to the unique parenting role He had given them? What can a child learn through his parents’ obedience to the Lord?

2) Read Luke 2:29-33. What do you think went through the minds of Joseph and Mary when they heard Simeon’s words?

3) Can you think of people you know who, like Simeon and Anna, have faithfully followed God for many years? What qualities do you see in their lives?

4) What message do you think God wanted to give to Joseph and Mary through the events at the temple? How could this help them when they returned to Nazareth with their new son?

Application:

God could have sent angels to speak to every person on earth about the new Messiah. He could have given Jesus a rich and powerful entrance into the world. But instead He chose to send Him humbly and to reveal Him to a select few who were prepared by their faithfulness to understand the importance of the child’s birth. Joseph and Mary did not demand special
privileges or treatment from God because of Jesus. They simply set themselves to the task of bringing up their son in obedience to the Lord. This section of Luke presents a beautiful picture of several people who served God without fanfare. They were content to trust Him and grateful to see His work. Some might say they missed their opportunity to shine by telling others what they knew, but they did not try to hurry God's plans. They knew how to wait in contented obedience and let God move in His time. God is looking for such people today.

Life of Christ Study #7

Matthew 2:1-18

Theme: Wise Men and an Unwise King

Summary:

Herod the Great was declared king of Palestine in 40 B.C. by the Emperor Octavian. It was hoped that the appointment of a Jewish ruler would calm the rebellious nature of the area. In 37 B.C., Herod gained control of Jerusalem and succeeded in consolidating the nation under his rule. Palestine was granted the status of a client kingdom by Rome. This gave Herod a large measure of political freedom, yet he always had to be careful not to arouse the Roman government. Herod proved to possess a deadly combination of suspicion and cruelty. He ordered two of his sons executed because he suspected them of plotting against him. He had one of his wives strangled in a burst of rage. The Emperor reportedly said, "Better to be one of Herod's pigs than his son." Even on his deathbed, the king ordered the executions of his third son and several other nobles. This was the man who ruled Palestine at the time the new King, the Messiah, was born. Herod was not a man to tolerate rivals, and he posed a real danger to the baby Jesus.

1) Visit of the magi (Matthew 2:1-3). Luke did not record these events in his Gospel, but apparently Joseph and Mary did not return to Nazareth immediately after the dedication of Jesus at the temple (see Luke 2:39). Instead, they went back to Bethlehem for a period of time. In fact, they may have resided there for nearly two years (see Matthew 2:16). It was while the family was living in Bethlehem that the magi arrived from the east. The magi were astrologers who scanned the skies for signs that might indicate great events. A new and bright star was thought to signify the coming of a great ruler. Possibly, these magi were familiar with predictions about a Jewish king, and so, when they saw the star, they came to pay homage. It was natural that they would go to Jerusalem first, for that was the place they would expect to find a king. Herod was disturbed by this news of a potential rival.
Given Herod's violent and cruel record, it is little wonder that the whole city quaked.

2) Herod's plan (Matthew 2:4-8). Herod consulted with the priests and teachers of the law to learn the Messiah's birthplace. The Jewish religious leaders knew that Micah 5:2 predicted the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, yet they were ignorant that anything of importance had happened. Instead, God had revealed the birth of His Son to foreign astrologers who traveled many miles to seek Him. Herod asked the magi when they had first seen the star. This told him the approximate age of the child. Of course, Herod had no intention of going to worship Jesus. His motives were far more political. He saw a chance to discover the location of his rival so he could eliminate him.

3) God intervenes (Matthew 2:9-15). The magi proceeded from Jerusalem toward Bethlehem with no suspicions that they were being used by Herod. As they journeyed, they saw the star again and rejoiced, for it confirmed that the King of the Jews was indeed in Bethlehem. The town was not large, and through inquiries they could learn of a child the right age fairly quickly. When they found Mary and the child, they recognized Him as the one they were seeking and worshiped Him. The gifts they brought were appropriate tokens of honor to a king. They did not return to Jerusalem as Herod had instructed, for God gave them warning in a dream. So they went back to their land by a different route. God also sent a dream to Joseph, instructing him to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Joseph obeyed at once, and so Herod's plan was foiled by the Lord.

4) Herod's wrath (Matthew 2:16-18). Herod did not accept failure well. When the magi did not return, he sent troops into the Bethlehem area to kill all the male children under two years of age. It is estimated that this vicious act by a jealous tyrant may have claimed as many as 25 innocent victims. In Jeremiah 31:15, the voice of Rachel was heard weeping for her descendants who were carried into exile by the Babylonians. Now, her cries were raised again over the senseless slaughter in the town where she was buried (see Genesis 35:19-20). The magi were wise men who came to worship, but Herod foolishly came to destroy because his heart was full of pride and fear.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 2:1-2. What motivated the magi to search for the child? What motivates people to come to Jesus today?
2) Read Matthew 2:3-8. What motivated Herod to search for the child? What motivates people to reject Jesus today?

3) Why do you think the Jewish religious leaders, who knew the prophecies concerning the birth of the Messiah, made no move to travel ten miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to seek Him?

4) Read Matthew 2:16. Why do you think Herod was so afraid of the birth of a new king? What was his idea of power?

Application:

From the very start, God demonstrated that the Messiah would bring His redemption to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Abraham had been told that all nations would be blessed through the promise given to him (see Genesis 12:3). Simeon proclaimed that Jesus was "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (see Luke 2:32). Then, as if to drive the point home, God led magi from a nation in the east to come to Jerusalem and instruct the Jewish religious leaders on the coming of Messiah. The magi were willing to leave their homes and travel a great distance to gather news about the new King, while Herod and the priests would not walk ten miles to see the child. Instead, Herod wanted to kill Him to protect his political ambitions. But Herod did not fear a baby in a manger. He feared the King of the Jews who could lay claim to his life and power. The same is true today. Some who are lost in darkness see in Jesus their salvation while others see only a threat to their pride and foolish independence.

Life of Christ Study #8

Matthew 2:19-23; Luke 2:40-52

Theme: Jesus as a Child

Summary:

Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C., probably just a few months after the massacre of the babies in Bethlehem. His kingdom was divided among his three surviving sons. An angel had warned Joseph in a dream to take the child Jesus to Egypt (see Matthew 2:13), and now the angel told him it was safe to return to Israel (Matthew 2:19-23). It seems that Joseph intended to settle once again in his home region of Bethlehem, but he changed his mind when he learned that Archelaus, who inherited his father's unpredictability, was the new ruler of Judea. Joseph opted for going back to Nazareth in the region of Galilee which was ruled by the more stable Herod Antipas. There, Joseph and Mary applied themselves to the task of rearing the Messiah to adulthood. They did it among whispers of an illegitimate birth, their own knowledge that the child
was the fulfillment of God's promise, and the unique traits that Jesus must have shown. It was a parenting responsibility without comparison, for the child was unlike any other.

1) A divine child (Luke 2:40). Most children grow and become strong, but Jesus was unique even in this. He developed without any of the effects of personal sin. Even as a young boy He was filled with wisdom, for His mind and heart were untouched by the cloud of man's fallen condition. The grace of God was truly upon Him, and no shadow of rebellion or pride interfered with His relationship to His heavenly Father. It would be wrong to think of Jesus as merely a tremendously gifted child, for He was more than that. He was the divine Son of God, developing physically and mentally without the defects of inherited or acquired sin.

2) A human child (Luke 2:41-45). Yet the divinity of the boy must be balanced with His true humanity. Some apocryphal writings tell stories of clay birds brought to life and taunting playmates struck dead, but Luke does not embellish his account with such fantasies. Jesus lived and grew among real people. He was not isolated in some special room cut off from the normal activities of life. When His family went to the Passover Feast in Jerusalem in accordance with the law (see Deuteronomy 16:5-6), Jesus traveled with them. On one such occasion, when the boy was twelve years old, they packed up and began the return trip to Nazareth thinking that Jesus was somewhere in the caravan. At the end of the day they searched for him among their relatives and friends. They assumed that Jesus, like any other boy, was off playing with friends or helping others set camp. It was only when he could not be found among the caravan that Joseph and Mary went back to Jerusalem looking for Him.

3) A child with understanding (Luke 2:46-47). The boy had been missing for three days when his parents found Him on the temple grounds discussing the law with the Jewish teachers. The usual practice was for the teachers to reply to questions with questions meant to spur deeper thought. Jesus, even though He was still a year short of being considered an adult, proved adept at both answering and asking questions. His understanding went beyond age and intelligence and amazed all who heard Him.

4) A child with a mission (Luke 2:48-50). When Joseph and Mary found Jesus in the temple, they expressed relieved indignation. They had been worried about Him and were happy that He was safe, but Mary chided Him for not thinking of their concerns. From any other boy, the reply of
Jesus would sound defiant, but from Jesus it was a simple statement of fact. He understood His mission, and it was necessary for Him to be attending to His Father's business. He saw that so clearly at age twelve that He was surprised His parents did not see it also.

5) An obedient child (Luke 2:51-52). Jesus had spiritual understanding that His parents lacked, but He submitted to their authority in obedience (see Exodus 20:12). He did not claim special treatment or look down on His earthly parents. He knew that He had a unique mission to fulfill, but He also knew that He would pursue it within the guidelines of God's law. As He later would say, He came to fulfill the law not to abolish it (see Matthew 5:17).

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 2:40. What do you think would be some unique challenges of parenting a child who was without sin? How would the presence of other, normal children complicate matters even more?

2) Read Luke 2:48. Why do you think Joseph and Mary were surprised when they found Jesus in the temple grounds? Why do you think Mary was upset with Him?

3) Read the reply of Jesus in Luke 2:49. What would you do if your twelve year old child said this to you? Was Jesus being defiant? Why or why not?

4) Read Luke 2:51-52. What reasons could Jesus have used to justify demanding special treatment from His parents? What can you learn from His willingness to obey human authorities?

Application:

Like everything else about Jesus, His childhood was extraordinary, but in a quiet manner. There was no grandstanding for attention or aloof behavior. His parents did not isolate Him from the average crowd nor restrict Him from normal activities. When the caravan went to Jerusalem He ran and helped and played like the other boys. Yet His uniqueness came out in certain words and actions. He did not flaunt it, but He also did not hide it. When the Jewish teachers began discussing issues of God's law, His understanding was soon evident. When His parents questioned His actions, His sense of mission was clear. But when He accompanied them back to Nazareth, He obeyed and honored them as any young boy should. That blend of mastery and humility characterized His entire life on earth. He was God in human flesh, yet His human flesh was real.
Life of Christ Study #9

Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-9; Luke 3:1-18

Theme: The King's Messenger

Summary:

The Gospels now jump ahead to a time when Jesus was an adult nearing thirty years of age. The King had apparently lived in relative obscurity in Galilee with His family until this time. But for every king there comes the day when he is to assume his royal duties publicly, and it is usually announced with fanfare and proclamations. For Jesus, that day came, probably in A.D. 26-27, and His kinsman John the Baptist was the messenger who proclaimed the beginning of the Messiah's public ministry. It was customary to place events of importance in their historical context with the rulers of the time. Luke does this both politically and religiously (Luke 3:1-2). Tiberius was emperor in Rome and Palestine had lost its privileges as a client kingdom and was now an imperial province. In theory, Tiberius ruled Palestine directly through an appointed governor or prefect. The sons of Herod the Great retained their position, but they had to accept the title of tetrarch and put away kingship. In the Jewish religious system, Annas and Caiaphas led the way. Into this setting came Jesus with claims to a greater authority.

1) The King's summons (Luke 3:3-6). When a new ruler came to power, people were sent scrambling to prepare themselves to make as good an appearance to him as possible. Old policies, loyalties, and customs might need to be scrapped to please him, but it was wise to make whatever changes necessary to gain favor with the new authority. So it was that when John heralded the coming of Messiah, he gave a summons to prepare to meet the demands of a new regime. Matthew recorded his cry of "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2). Luke said that he preached a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Repentance was required by the coming ruler. He would lead the people to salvation, but they had to prepare themselves to follow.

2) The King's sign (Mark 1:4-5). Jews required Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism to undergo baptism to remove their impurity. But John proclaimed that even the Jews were not pure enough to meet the new King! They needed their impurity removed before they could stand before Him. Notice that the physical act of baptism was not the means of obtaining forgiveness. The confession of sins or repentance was the change required from the people. Baptism was a visible, public way of expressing that change. A person who submitted to be baptized by John was openly admitting his need for cleansing and his
unworthiness to meet the King in his present condition. Baptism without such repentance would be an empty ritual.

3) The King's stipulations (Luke 3:7-14). That is why John challenged the people who came to him for baptism. Particularly, Matthew noted that he singled out the religious leaders who were accustomed to rituals without repentance (see Matthew 3:7). Like snakes which flee a burning field to escape the flames, the Pharisees and Sadducees might be willing to observe any ritual to escape "the coming wrath," but only concrete changes, the fruit of repentance, would be accepted by the Messiah. They should not trust their Jewish heritage, for it would do them no good. The new King would judge by what a person's life produced. This warning struck home with John's audience, and so they asked what this fruit was that the King would demand. John answered that for the average individual, repentance and change would be seen in a new unselfish compassion for the suffering. For a tax collector, it would be demonstrated in honesty and fairness. For the soldier, it would be manifested in giving up practices of intimidation for personal gain. The new King was looking for real, inward change.

4) The King's sifting (Luke 3:15-18). Many people began to wonder if John was actually the Messiah. John quickly set the record straight. The Messiah would be someone of such greater authority and majesty that John would not be worthy to perform the simplest task for Him. Furthermore, John baptized people with water in symbolic preparation for the coming King. But the King Himself would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Judgment would be in His hands, and He would sift the people to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Discussion:

1) How do people usually prepare for the arrival of a powerful and important person? How do they dress? How do they behave? Why?

2) Read the quote from Isaiah in Luke 3:4-6. Where would the Messiah lead all mankind? Why would it be so important to get ready for His coming?

3) Read Luke 3:7-8. Why do you think John put such emphasis on "fruit in keeping with repentance" to those who wanted to be baptized by him? Should fruit always be expected as a result of repentance?

4) What fruit of repentance would you expect from a
person who confesses to
(a) having a violent temper?
(b) falsifying statements and records?
(c) not loving his or her spouse?
(d) spreading gossip?
(e) other?

Application:

John's words must have been a shock to many of the Jews who assumed that the Messiah would come merely to punish their enemies and reward them for being His people. They were confronted with the fact that their own hearts and lives were sadly lacking in the righteousness He would demand. They needed to be forgiven in preparation for His coming just as much as the worst pagan. Today, we have God's promise that Jesus is coming again. And in much the same way, He is coming with judgment against the wickedness of the world but with salvation for those who have prepared to meet Him through forgiveness and the fruit of repentance. It is deadly to assume that Jesus will come to reward us just because we participate in church or have observed the rituals of Christianity. The King will look for real and inward change and a repentance that is proven by corresponding fruit in our lives. The kingdom of heaven is near. Are we prepared?

Life of Christ Study #10

Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-23

Theme: The Baptism of Jesus

Summary:

The Bible does not tell us exactly how long John continued his work of preparing the people to meet the coming King. If John began his ministry about A.D. 26-27, then it was almost certainly less than a year later that Jesus came to be baptized, for He was about thirty years old at the time (see Luke 3:23). It is clear that Jesus chose baptism as the act which would introduce his public work and teaching in Israel. Until this time he had apparently remained working and living in Nazareth. For the months that John proclaimed His coming and called men to a baptism of repentance, the identity of the Messiah was a mystery. John gathered a following of people who had made themselves ready by appealing to God for forgiveness of sin and who were expectantly looking for the kingdom of heaven to be revealed. Now, the time had come for the Messiah to be openly declared.

1) An act of introduction (Matthew 3:13-14). Matthew's wording tells us that Jesus traveled from Galilee to where John was along the Jordan River near the Dead Sea for the express purpose of being baptized by him. This was a calculated action and not random chance. But when Jesus
declared his intention to John, the King's messenger balked. He had been telling people that the baptism of repentance was only a preparation for the baptism of Holy Spirit and fire that the Messiah would bring. But now the Messiah who John said would bring salvation was asking to be baptized by him. This was hardly the first public action to be expected from the King! It is no wonder that John was confused by this. He needed the salvation that Jesus brought, but Jesus did not need forgiveness or repentance. Yet this was the way Jesus chose to introduce Himself to His waiting followers. It was not a private session, for many others were there to be baptized as well (see Luke 3:21).

2) An act of identification (Matthew 3:15). In fact, baptism by John was the perfect way for Jesus to begin His public ministry. After all, He came as the Messiah, the ruler of the kingdom of heaven. He was the King, but he also identified with His subjects. If baptism was the physical sign by which people announced their desire to be prepared for God's kingdom, then the King would demonstrate His devotion in like manner. He did not need to repent of any sin or to seek forgiveness for any wrong, but He would join His people in their public commitment to God and His righteousness. In this way, it would be similar to the leader of a nation reciting an oath of loyalty with his people. That is why Jesus told John to "let it be so now." He was not obligated to be baptized, for He did not need to get ready for His own coming. But it was proper or appropriate for Him to participate in a symbol that declared He was indeed ready.

3) An act of confirmation (Matthew 3:16-17). Any doubts that John still held about baptizing Jesus were certainly dispelled by what followed. When Jesus came up out of the water, two powerful confirmations of His position and ministry were given. Isaiah had prophesied on three occasions that the Spirit of God would uniquely rest on the coming Messiah (see Isaiah 11:1-5; 42:1-4; 61:1-3). Now, John and the people at the Jordan River saw the Holy Spirit visibly rest upon Jesus. In addition, the voice from heaven declared Jesus to be God's Son, a statement of His right to be King (see Psalm 2:6-9). In a time when prophecy was thought to be a thing of the past, God sent John to prophesy about Jesus and then confirmed his testimony visibly and audibly in unmistakable fashion. There was no stronger way to announce that the Messiah had come.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 3:13. Where would you normally
expect a new king to be introduced publicly? Why do you think Jesus chose this region of the Jordan River?

2) Read Matthew 3:14. Why do you think John objected to baptizing Jesus when he had baptized so many others? What do you think Jesus was trying to show through seeking baptism?


4) Read Psalm 2:6-9. What did being declared God's Son give Jesus the right to do? Why do you think God made this declaration along the banks of the Jordan River instead of among the crowds at the temple in Jerusalem?

Application:

An inauguration took place at the Jordan River that day which was largely unnoticed by the political and religious establishment of Palestine. The invited guests were John the Baptist, who had served as the herald for the King, and a group of people who were declaring their allegiance to the kingdom of heaven through repentance and baptism. Jesus purposely came to these people for the first public act of His ministry. He joined His people in a physical sign of devotion to God and His position as King was confirmed miraculously by God. The waiting was over and the King had arrived. Today, He still looks for those who will recognize Him and prepare to meet Him through repentance and the forgiveness He offers. The prophecies of Isaiah and Psalm 2 are accomplished in Christ. He has brought peace and hope and salvation to those who accept Him, and He will reign over the nations with absolute power and authority.

Life of Christ Study #11


Theme: The Testing of Jesus

Summary:

The baptism of Jesus provided a triumphal start to His public ministry as Messiah. But immediately after this introduction He withdrew into the barren hills and ravines of the wilderness between the Dead Sea and Jerusalem. Again, this was not a random action but another planned step in the presentation and establishment of His Kingship. Matthew and Luke said that Jesus was led by the Spirit, but Mark used a word that meant to be forcefully sent (see Mark 1:12). In other words, the time of testing in the wilderness was necessary. A king can be publicly introduced and confirmed,
but until he is tested there is no way to know what type of king he will be. Will he flee from enemies? Will he give in to pressure and persuasion? Will he defend and represent his people or use his position for personal gain? In the case of Jesus, who was sent by God to bring salvation, the important question was, "Will He fulfill His mission or be turned aside?" The time of testing in the wilderness would provide the answer. Satan would offer the challenges, but God clearly sought the confrontation.

1) Will God really provide? (Matthew 4:2-4). To say that Jesus was hungry after forty days and nights without food is stating the obvious. In the desert of Judea hunger pangs could not be satisfied easily. The desire for food could become overwhelming, superseding all other considerations. This was probably what the devil was hoping when he approached Jesus with the first test. His words bore the suggestion that, since God had obviously not taken food into consideration, it was time for Jesus to take thought to His own needs. As the Son of God He had power to produce bread out of stones, and He clearly needed food, so He should act. The reply of Jesus revealed Satan's true agenda. He quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3 in which Moses told the Israelites, who had constantly whined for food, to make obedience their priority and to trust God to provide for their physical needs. Jesus would face many difficult times while pursuing God's mission for His life, and the issue at hand was whether He was willing to trust God to care for His basic needs. Many have turned aside from obedience in order to gain some security about physical comforts, but Jesus refused to yield.

2) Is God really there? (Matthew 4:5-7). The devil next took Jesus to a corner of the temple in Jerusalem which overlooked a steep valley. A fall from such a height would be certain death, but Jesus had already confirmed His trust in God's provisions for His life. So, Satan proposed a jump as a way to prove the reality of God's care. He even quoted Scripture to support his test (see Psalm 91:11-12). Of course, he took the quote out of context, for the Psalm promised God's servants protection from the normal dangers and circumstances of life, not from their own acts of presumption (see Psalm 91:9-10). Jesus was not fooled for a moment. He did not need to engage in little experiments to assure Himself that God was still looking after Him. He trusted that God would respond when the need arose and that His timing and help would be good. Moses had warned the Israelites about demanding that God prove Himself to them and Jesus quoted that warning (see Deuteronomy 6:16 and Exodus 17:1-7).
3) Is God’s way really best? (Matthew 4:8-10). The devil made one more attempt. He took Jesus to the top of a mountain and showed Him all the world had to offer. He promised to give it all to Jesus on the spot if He would only bow down and worship him. Jesus was destined to rule it all anyway, but this would be a much easier and quicker way of obtaining the end without having to endure rejection and crucifixion. Jesus again saw through this test at once. It was true that Satan had it in his power to grant rulership of the world, for the minds and hearts of men were under his dominion through sin. But all he could give to Jesus was an unredeemed world, enslaved to the corruption of sin and the doom of death. God sent Jesus to save the world, not to merely take control of it. Jesus again quoted Moses from Deuteronomy 6:13. There, the Israelites were told that single devotion to God was the only way to secure well being. Any other path, no matter how attractive, would lead to judgment. Satan's tests failed because Jesus stood firm in the truth and obedience to His Father. Adam had fallen to the devil's temptings in the Garden of Eden and had lost dominion of the earth. Jesus defeated the prince of this world and won the right to redeem the earth. Satan left “until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). There would be more tests, but the pattern was set. The King had proven His mettle.

Discussion:

1) Why was it important for Jesus to be tested in light of what God sent Him to accomplish? To whom do you think Jesus proved Himself by passing the tests?

2) To what human weaknesses did the three tests appeal? How have you experienced testings in these areas?

3) Read the quotes Jesus used in their contexts. What do these verses reveal about the tests Satan was presenting? What was he really wanting Jesus to do?

   (a) Test 1: Deuteronomy 8:1-5.

4) Read Hebrews 2:14-18 and 4:14-16. What benefits come to you today because Jesus passed the tests?

Application:

From public confirmation Jesus passed quickly to personal testing. The King could not hold His position just by the popular favor of people. He had to prove that He was
ready to fulfill His mission. Of course, since Jesus was God, there was no doubt in heaven about the outcome. But it had great significance on earth, for Satan had taken dominion from man through temptation, and now he wanted to prevent the work of Jesus through the same tricks. But Jesus would not be turned aside. He would follow God's will obediently to the end. Satan could not stop Him, for his lies were exposed and he was disarmed. Jesus would not settle for ruling an unredeemed world. He would endure the pain of bringing redemption, so that we could be freed from the dominion of Satan and sin and death. We can now resist the tests of Satan in the same way Jesus did if we commit ourselves to God and His truth.

Life of Christ Study #12

John 1:19-34, 3:22-36

Theme: Jesus and John

Summary:

If the life of Jesus were enacted in the theater, John the Baptist would be a role player. His part was important, but he was not the lead actor in the drama. His job was to prepare the audience for the main actor, announce his arrival, and then retreat to the background. It would be a difficult assignment for anyone who carried big ambitions or pride, for from the beginning John knew that Jesus would far outshine him. Yet John accepted his role without complaint and performed it with zeal. He demonstrated a humility and willingness to be used by God in whatever way He chose. He did not bemoan the fact that his talents were never fully appreciated or beg for more time in the spotlight. He was content to serve his purpose and then watch God accomplish His plans. Because John performed his short role well, Jesus was able to move quickly into the work He came to do.

1) Setting the stage (John 1:19-28). As Jesus was tested by the devil in the wilderness, John faced his own type of test along the Jordan. His preaching and baptizing became known throughout Palestine, until finally the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent a committee of priests and Levites to find out more about him. If he had accepted their questions about his identity, John could have possibly gained fame and a larger following. But he refused to be called the Messiah or Elijah (see Malachi 4:5-6) or the Prophet (see Deuteronomy 18:15-19). When they pressed him to identify himself, he fell back on the words of Isaiah 40:3. He was not the way. He merely pointed to the way. The committee then demanded to know his authority to baptize since he was no one great himself. John admitted that his baptism was just a symbolic washing with water, but one of far greater authority was already

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present. John consistently stayed within his role.

2) Holding the spotlight (John 1:29-34). John did not identify the Messiah for the Jewish leaders, but the next day he clearly placed the spotlight on Jesus. When he saw Jesus approaching, John called Him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." This was probably a reference to the Old Testament sacrifice of a lamb to atone for sin. Jesus would be this sacrifice not only for the Jews, but for the world. John further identified Jesus as the greater one he had said would come. That was the whole reason for John's ministry of preaching and baptism, to get people ready for the revelation of Jesus to Israel. Then John presented his most conclusive testimony about Jesus. He had seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus at His baptism, and God had previously told him that would be the sign to identify the Messiah. John's conclusion was that Jesus was the Son of God.

3) In the shadows (John 3:22-30). From the time that John gave testimony to the identity of Jesus, his own role and following began to diminish. Not long after, Jesus and his disciples (some of whom had previously followed John) came into the area. It was reported to John that they were also baptizing people and that more and more people were gathering to Jesus. John's reply showed the secret of his humility and contentment. He knew he was not in a competition with Jesus. God had assigned each of them a role, and if the audience was now shifting toward Jesus, it was because God intended it so. John saw himself as the best man at a wedding whose sole purpose was to help the bridegroom get ready for his time of joy. When it came, the best man faded into the background, but he rejoiced at the joy of his friend. It was proper that Jesus should become greater while John became less.

4) Leading the applause (John 3:31-36). It is one thing to accept and allow another to take the spotlight, but it is a sign of true servanthood to lead the applause for the new lead actor. John continually turned the attention of people away from himself and toward Jesus. He knew that Jesus was the One who came from heaven. Jesus would speak the words of God in full power of the Spirit. Jesus had received full authority from the Father. And Jesus would be the dividing line between eternal life and wrath. John had worked to see another step onto the stage, and he now cheered wildly from the wings.

Discussion:
1) Do you find it hard to watch others surpass you in position or reward or success? What thoughts make it difficult to be happy for them?

2) Read the prophecies about Elijah and the Prophet in Malachi 4:5-6 and Deuteronomy 18:15-19. What could John have gained by claiming to be Elijah or the Prophet?

3) Read John 3:22-26. How could this situation potentially have been divisive between John and Jesus?

4) Read John 3:30. How can this commitment be seen in your life as you work, plan, and interact with others. List some ways you can throw the spotlight on Jesus.

Application:

In a time when most people seem to be concerned with making sure they receive attention, it is refreshing to read again about John the Baptist who made it his goal to draw attention to another. John had a significant following, but he freely gave his followers to Jesus. In fact the day after he testified to the identity of Jesus, John encouraged two of his disciples to leave him for Jesus (see John 1:35-37). There was no possessiveness or competitiveness about John. He accepted his role from God and set about to perform it as faithfully as possible, even though its completion meant less attention and popularity for himself. Among Christians today, there can easily arise competition and jealousy over position and popularity in ministry. We need more John the Baptists who think only of honoring Christ. Perhaps we will find that real contentment and satisfaction lie in fulfilling the role God has given us, even if it a seemingly small one.

Life of Christ Study #13

John 1:35-2:25

Theme: Foundations for a New Kingdom

Summary:

The public presentation of Jesus was gaining momentum quickly. His baptism had served as a public introduction and confirmation following John's work of preparing the way. His testing in the wilderness showed His commitment to fulfill His mission and His ability to confront the spiritual ruler of the world. Then John formally testified in the presence of witnesses that Jesus was the Messiah. Still, the new ruler did not proceed as most people had expected. Typically, if a man came to rule an occupied land, he would raise an army of military and popular followers. Then he would choose a time and place for a display of power to challenge the existing regime. Finally, he would storm the capital to claim his
1) Raising an army (John 1:35-50). The followers whom Jesus gathered did not carry swords and banners. He was looking for people He could teach, not people who could fight. His first two disciples were sent to Him by John the Baptist who was glad to refer his followers to a greater master. One of these two was Andrew and the other was likely John the son of Zebedee who wrote the Gospel of John. Andrew was so impressed that he immediately went to his brother Simon (also called Peter) and told him, "We have found the Messiah." The next day, Jesus went to Galilee, presumably accompanied by the three. Perhaps Andrew and Peter recommended Philip to Him, for they were from the same town. Jesus found Philip and simply recruited him with the words, "Follow me." It would have been understood as an invitation to discipleship. Philip at once looked for someone to tell. Nathaniel (also called Bartholomew) was skeptical at first, but when he met Jesus, all doubts were dispelled. The fact that Jesus was able to discern his character even before meeting him was enough to satisfy him that this was "the King of Israel." Jesus now had the beginnings of His army, and He promised them that they would see heaven opened, for He was the ladder connecting man with God (see Genesis 28:10-15).

2) A display of power (John 2:1-11). Jesus did not choose a highly visible place for his first display of a miracle. Nor was the event filled with flashing fire or thundering roars. Instead, he chose a small wedding celebration in a little town. Cana was close to Nazareth where Jesus had lived, so it was natural that He and His family and followers would be invited to the seven days of festivities. During the week, the host found himself confronted with the embarrassing problem of running short of wine. Mary was probably motivated by concern for the host more than a desire to see Jesus perform a public miracle. The reply of Jesus indicated His awareness of His mission. A display of power would attract attention and draw the opposition which would eventually lead to the cross. He did not want to engage in that battle too early, so He performed the miracle in such a way that only His mother, His disciples, and a few servants saw what He did. Everyone else assumed that the bridegroom had arranged a special treat for the guests. The miracle was meant to strengthen the disciples.

3) Storming the capital (John 2:12-25). Jerusalem was the logical place for the new King to go. There He could present His credentials and establish His throne. But when Jesus entered the
capital for the Passover, He went to the temple courts instead of the palace courts. He wanted to rule men's hearts, not their property. He offered no challenge to the political leaders, but He claimed His authority over the spiritual leaders by routing the market which He found in the temple courts. People needed animals for sacrifices and money changers could handle the various currencies that were brought, but such transactions had been moved within the temple grounds so that the religious leaders could profit from the trade. This was intolerable to Jesus. The temple was meant for worship, but it had been made a place of commerce. The zeal of Jesus was truly revealed. When the leaders asked Jesus to prove His authority, He predicted His resurrection, although the Jews misunderstood Him. Jesus performed miracles in Jerusalem which attracted crowds, but rather than encouraging them, He questioned their motives. He knew that popular opinion was not the same as commitment.

Discussion:

1) Read John 1:35-50. What drew each of the following men to Jesus?
   (a) Andrew and John
   (b) Philip
   (c) Nathanael
   What drew you to Jesus?

2) Read John 2:11. How did the miracle at Cana reveal the glory of Jesus? How would it strengthen the disciples' faith? Why do you think Jesus did not perform the miracle in front of everyone?

3) Read John 2:13-18. By His actions in the temple, what authority did Jesus claim? What message did He send about the nature of His kingdom?

4) Read John 2:23-25. Why do you think Jesus refused to accept the cheers of the crowds at face value? What may have been missing in their belief? Can you think of examples of shallow belief today?

Application:

Had Jesus been after a political kingdom He would have played to the popular opinion of the crowds. He might have picked followers by what they could do for Him rather than what He could teach them. He might have used miracles to stir fanatical fear and devotion instead of using them to teach and encourage. He might have sought an alliance with the religious leaders against the common enemy of Roman government instead of confronting the hypocrisy and abuses of the temple rulers. He might have manipulated the people to do His bidding rather than challenging them to real faith. But Jesus was clear on His mission to bring salvation to those who would
believe. So he shunned the road of fame and power for the way of service and suffering. That is the Jesus who inspired men like Andrew and Philip. That is the Jesus we follow.

Life of Christ Study #14

**John 3:1-21**

Theme: Nicodemus: The New Birth

Summary:

Jesus had certainly not entered Jerusalem quietly and inconspicuously. When He disrupted the tables of the money changers in the temple, He quickly drew the attention of the Jewish leaders. Then, His miracles attracted the crowds who had come to celebrate the Passover Feast. It was no surprise, therefore, that members of the Jewish religious and political hierarchy would want to investigate this new teacher. Some probably saw Him only as a threat, and perhaps a few wrote Him off as a madman, but some were genuinely intrigued and curious to know more about Him. Nicodemus was one such man. He was both a religious leader, being a Pharisee, and a political leader, being a member of the Jewish ruling council which oversaw the administration of Roman law in the province. He came to Jesus with real interest and questions, for the miracles that Jesus performed marked Him as one with special power from God. However, he also came to Jesus with real fears and doubts. A visit by night allowed him some secrecy and also made his inquiry more personal and less official. Jesus made the interview very personal.

1) You must be born again (John 3:3-8). Like most of the religious leaders, Nicodemus assumed that he was well prepared for the kingdom of God when it came. He came to evaluate Jesus not to be evaluated by Him, but Jesus knew what Nicodemus really needed. No one, not even a teacher of the Old Testament law could see the kingdom of God without experiencing a spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus should have understood that Jesus was referring to a new life through conversion, for the Jewish leaders spoke of Gentile converts to Judaism as "newborn children." But the idea that he, a Jew and a teacher, needed repentance and forgiveness did not register, so he asked for a clearer explanation. Jesus made it plain that He was not talking about a physical rebirth, for what was needed was not a new body but a new heart and spirit. Spiritual rebirth could only come through the repentance symbolized in water baptism and the new life brought by the Holy Spirit. Just as wind is invisible but its effects are felt and seen, so the work of the Spirit leaves its mark.
2) You must look to Jesus (John 3:9-15). Nicodemus still struggled with the concept of spiritual rebirth. Jesus gently rebuked him for his lack of understanding. How could he teach Israel about God's kingdom when he was not able to see it himself? Jesus was able to speak about the kingdom of God and spiritual rebirth because He came from heaven and had seen the heavenly reality. Nicodemus could not even comprehend the earthly issues, so Jesus gave him an illustration he could understand. In Numbers 21:4-9, the Israelites were grumbling against God, so He sent poisonous snakes among them. When the people realized that they were dying, they acknowledged their sin and pleaded with Moses to help them. In answer, God told Moses to mount a bronze snake on a pole. When the bitten people looked at the snake, they were saved from the poison. In the same way, Jesus told Nicodemus, people who are dying in sin must look to Jesus, the Son of Man, for life.

3) You must believe (John 3:16-21). Snake bitten people need a cure or they will die. God provided that cure because of His love for the world. If anyone believes in Jesus, like the dying Israelites put their faith in the bronze snake, he will be saved from death and receive eternal life. God did not send Jesus to condemn the world. It was already condemned to death, just as the Israelites were already poisoned. God sent Jesus to provide a cure for people bitten by the snake of sin. Jesus told Nicodemus that whoever would believe in Him would not be condemned, but whoever would not believe would die because he had rejected the only cure. Jesus was the light that came to lead men out of the darkness, but many would rather stay in darkness than let their evil deeds be exposed by the light. However, those who willingly confessed their deeds in the light received new life from God.

Discussion:

1) Read John 3:1-2. What drew Nicodemus to Jesus? What do you think Nicodemus as a religious leader wanted to find out about Jesus?

2) In John 3:10, Jesus told Nicodemus that as a teacher of the law he should understand the idea of new birth. What could Nicodemus have learned from the following Old Testament verses?
   (a) Jeremiah 31:31-34
   (b) Ezekiel 11:19-20
   (c) Ezekiel 18:30-32
   (d) Ezekiel 36:25-27

3) Read Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-16. How could
you use the story of the Israelites and the snakes to explain why people need Jesus?

4) Why would a person who has been bitten by a poisonous snake refuse the antidote? Read John 3:19-21. Why would a person who is dead in sin refuse Jesus?

Application:

Apparently, Nicodemus came to understand the new birth which Jesus presented. In John 7:50-51, we find him trying to persuade his fellow Pharisees to give Jesus a fair hearing before passing judgment on Him. And in John 19:38-42, it is Nicodemus who joins Joseph of Arimathea in claiming the body of Jesus and preparing it for burial. As a Pharisee and teacher of the law, it would have been difficult for Nicodemus to acknowledge his need for cleansing and forgiveness. That is what prevents many people today from giving their lives to Christ. They do not know that they are snake bit or they think they can cure the poison through their own efforts. But Jesus made it clear that no one can ever see the kingdom of God without first experiencing a new, spiritual birth through repentance and forgiveness. The kingdom is not entered through talent or deeds of service or intellectual curiosity. It requires a new birth through the Holy Spirit as people look to Jesus as the only way to live.

Life of Christ Study #15

John 4:1-42

Theme: Samaritan Woman: Spiritual Truth

Summary:

About one year had passed since Jesus was baptized and began His public ministry. His teaching and miracles had attracted a large following, for He spoke about spiritual things as though they were real. Nicodemus had been confused by talk of a new birth because he could only think of it in physical and material terms. But Jesus showed him that spiritual rebirth was more real and important than any physical deeds or actions. People came to hear this talk of a kingdom of God that was available to them through repentance and rebirth. Word reached the Pharisees in the fall of A.D. 27 that Jesus was attracting more followers than even John the Baptist. Jesus possibly did not want to provoke a confrontation with the religious leaders at that time, so He left Judea to return to Galilee. He could have taken the long route by way of Jericho and the Jordan valley, but it wasted time and risked encounters with thieves. The alternative was a more direct route through the region of Samaria. Many Jews avoided that road because of their hatred for the Samaritans, but Jesus had a special appointment there to give more spiritual truth.
1) Living water (John 4:5-15). The Samaritan woman was amazed that a Jew would speak to her. After the ten tribes of Israel were deported in 722 B.C., the Assyrian king moved foreigners into the region. These people practiced a worship that included the true God along with their own idols (see II Kings 17:24-33). In time, the Samaritans claimed to be the true descendants of Jacob, as can be seen in the woman's question in verse 12. A bitter feud developed between them and the Jews. That is why the woman asked Jesus, "How can you ask me for a drink?" But Jesus wanted to talk to her about the living water He could provide. Living water was the term applied to water that flowed from a stream or spring as opposed to the stagnant water of a well. Jacob had provided still water from the well, but Jesus said He could give living water. Jesus drew the woman's curiosity even farther by telling her that His living water could quench her thirst forever. The woman still could not make the switch in her mind from physical water to spiritual water, but she knew she wanted what Jesus offered.

2) Worship in spirit and truth (John 4:16-26). The woman was seen as immoral by even her own people. The fact that she came to the well alone in the heat of the day showed she was an outcast. Her statement that she had no husband may have been her way of expressing her availability rather flirtatiously. But the details that Jesus revealed convinced her that He had supernatural knowledge and her attitude changed. She asked about the point of contention between Jews and Samaritans concerning the place of worship. In 409 B.C., the Samaritans had received permission from the Persian king to build a temple on Mt. Gerazim which was visible from Sychar. In 130 B.C., Jewish reformers had torn it down. Jesus honestly avoided the controversy by stating that the heart of the worshiper was more important than the place of worship. God looks for people who worship Him from a cleansed and obedient heart. The woman was now beginning to understand, and when she raised the subject of the Messiah, Jesus confirmed that He was the one.

3) Unknown food (John 4:27-38). The woman now understood spiritual truth, and she rushed back to Sychar to tell the good news to others. Meanwhile, the disciples of Jesus showed that they still had a lot to learn about a spiritual point of view. They could not see the reference to food outside of their physical and material concept of the world. Jesus was not dismissing the need for physical food, but He was putting it into perspective against the eternal work of harvesting people into the kingdom of God. He
challenged His disciples to follow up on the sowing others had performed.

4) Harvest of people (John 4:39-42). In this case, Jesus had sowed the seed in His conversation with the woman. Now the disciples had the privilege of seeing the harvest as she spread her news throughout Sychar. These Samaritans, who had been excluded from the Jewish religious system, were excited to hear about a real Savior who would extend God's offer of spiritual life to them.

Discussion:

1) Read John 4:4-15. Make two lists comparing the woman's idea of water with the living water Jesus offered.

2) Read John 4:19-24. The woman thought that worship had to happen in a certain place. What are your opinions about the following aspects of worship?
   (a) setting and atmosphere
   (b) volume
   (c) type of music
   What did Jesus say was most important in any style of worship?

3) Read John 4:34-38. How was doing God's will better than food to Jesus? What benefits did it provide to Him?

4) What religious and social obstacles did Jesus overcome to bring the message of salvation to a city of Samaritans? What religious and social obstacles isolate groups of people from hearing about Jesus today?

Application:

Jesus redefined common words like water, worship, food, and harvest to teach spiritual truth. He challenged people to see the world in a new way which placed spiritual matters in the center of reality. The woman would have continued to settle for still water and ritualistic worship, but Jesus offered her far better things. The disciples would have continued to see only physical food and a harvest of grain if Jesus had not opened their eyes to a greater reality. We tend to place spiritual ideas in a compartment which does not affect all of life. But Jesus emphasized the fact that all of life is essentially spiritual. It is not a matter of whether God fits our view of the world. It is a question of whether our view fits God's real world. Most Jews would have seen only a wretched Samaritan woman to be avoided. Jesus saw a person who could be filled with living water so that she overflowed into the lives of others. When we learn to see the world as Jesus did, we will know spiritual truth and live with spiritual power.
Life of Christ Study #16

John 4:43-54

Theme: The Official's Son: This is Faith

Summary:

After two days among the Samaritans in Sychar, Jesus continued His journey back to Galilee. It is interesting that John inserted Jesus' comment about a prophet in his own country here. The Samaritans, who were essentially foreigners, had accepted Him gladly, but the people of His own hometown would soon reject Him (see Luke 4:24). His first tour of the area with His disciples had been rather quiet, and even the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana was known to only a few (see John 2:1-11). But confronting the temple abuses in Jerusalem had placed His ministry and teaching in public view, and the miracles He had performed there made Him a public figure. His initial reception in Galilee was very favorable. Those who had seen and heard Him in Jerusalem (see John 2:13-25) told of His actions there, and curiosity and anticipation went before Him into the region of Galilee. That is not to say that these people understood and believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but His reputation as a teacher and a worker of miracles drew crowds who were eager to see Him. One man in particular sought to meet Jesus, and He exemplified the faith Jesus hoped to find.

1) He heard (John 4:46-47). This man, who held a position of authority in the service of Herod Antipas, traveled all day to find Jesus at Cana. The official's home was in Capernaum, more than fifteen miles to the east on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He came because he had heard of the wonders Jesus performed in Jerusalem, and a hope was awakened in his heart. He had a son who was dying, and he begged Jesus to come to Capernaum and heal him. Royal officials were not accustomed to begging favors nor to walking long distances to see religious teachers, but this father was desperate. He heard so he came to discover if what he had heard was true.

2) He believed (John 4:48-50). Jesus' response may at first sound insensitive, but He never missed an opportunity to illustrate truth to his listeners. He did not want people to treat Him as some kind of magician who would do tricks upon demand. His words were directed to the crowd of bystanders more than to the pleading father. The man entreated Him again to come. Jesus told the official to go because his son was healed. The Bible records an amazing thing when it says, "The man took Jesus at His word and departed." He was willing to walk all the way back to Capernaum.
trusting that what Jesus said was true. If he arrived and found his child still sick, it would be too late to rush back to find Jesus again. Jesus had just chided the people for not believing unless they saw, but this man proved his faith was different. He believed without seeing and acted upon that belief without visible proof.

3) He knew (John 4:51-53). Probably the man hurried along the road home as quickly as his strength would allow. Possibly doubts assailed him as he traveled, yet he continued toward Capernaum. Jesus had said his son would live and he believed Jesus. When servants from his home reached him with the joyful news that his son was well, his faith became sight. He had come to Jesus based on what he had heard. He departed because he trusted Him. But now his hope and his faith were rewarded with the certainty of proof. He discovered that his son had recovered at the very hour Jesus told him to go, yet for an entire day this man had obeyed by faith without proof. It is little wonder that when he shared his story with his family and servants, they too believed the truth about Jesus.

Discussion:

1) Read John 4:46-47. What drew the royal official to seek Jesus? What needs draw people to explore Christianity in the world today?

2) Based on Jesus' statement in John 4:48, why were many of the people coming to see Him? Why do you think He chose not to perform a miracle in their sight?

3) Read John 4:50. If you were the parent of the dying child, how might you respond to Jesus' instructions? What doubts might plague you on the long walk home?

4) How would you apply the following verses to the royal official in John 4:46-53?
   (a) John 20:29
   (b) Hebrews 11:1
   (c) James 2:17

Application:

The miracles that Jesus performed and the truth He taught gained Him a reputation which attracted crowds of seekers. But He was not content to enjoy His popularity, for He knew there is a big difference between curiosity and real faith (see John 2:23-25). Most of His listeners were inwardly demanding that He prove Himself by some miraculous sign. They wanted to be close to a powerful person who could possibly benefit them without really changing or committing themselves
to anything. However, the royal official did not approach Jesus in that way. He may have been drawn by his need without fully understanding who he was going to see, but he was willing to put his trust in Jesus' promise and to take action on his faith. Where are we today? If we stand around waiting for God to perform wondrous tricks for us, we will wait a long time. But if we act on what He has said and commanded in faith that His word is true, we will see His power at work in our lives.

Life of Christ Study #17


Theme: Rejection at Nazareth

Summary:

Jesus had found two unlikely candidates for His kingdom in Nicodemus and the woman at the well. Most of the Jewish religious leaders would not take the time to listen to Him and the Samaritans were outside the typical flow of Jewish society, yet these two had believed His message. From Samaria He continued into Galilee where His teaching and miracles spread His fame throughout the region and He was enthusiastically received. Then He came to Nazareth, the city where He had been raised. It may have been the growing reputation of Jesus or mere politeness to a hometown native that led the synagogue attendant to hand the scroll to Jesus for the reading that day. It certainly was no mistake that the book chosen was Isaiah. And there is no doubt that Jesus purposefully selected the prophecy of Jubilee from Isaiah 61:1-2. He was going to give the people of His home city a clear explanation and offer of the benefits of His kingdom.

1) Jubilee proclaimed (Luke 4:18-19). The year of Jubilee had been commanded to the people of Israel when God gave the law to Moses (see Leviticus 25:8-55). It was meant to provide a new start for the poor, the enslaved, and the oppressed. There is no record that Israel ever obeyed this command, but when the people were taken into captivity, first by Assyria and then by Babylon, the concept of Jubilee took on new significance. Now the entire nation of Israel could be grouped with the poor and the oppressed. The section from Isaiah which Jesus read prophesied that the coming King, the Messiah, would proclaim a Jubilee for Israel. It was a cherished promise among the Jewish people who languished under the authority of Rome.

2) Jubilee fulfilled (Luke 4:20-21). It was customary for a person to stand when reading Scripture and then to sit when teaching about Scripture. The reputation of Jesus made the
people in the synagogue eager to hear what He would say, but no one was prepared for His opening statement that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by Him. With those few words He claimed to be the rightful King of Israel and the anointed Servant of the Lord who was appointed by God to proclaim a Jubilee. This presented a stumbling block for the Jews. Their concept of release involved freedom from Roman domination through "the day of vengeance of our God" (see Isaiah 61:2), but Jesus stopped short of that phrase in His quotation. The release Christ proclaimed was from bondage to sin through repentance, and the good news he offered was the gospel of salvation through faith. The institution of a physical kingdom with its absolute justice was not to be fulfilled by Jesus during his first sojourn on the earth. He certainly proclaimed the Messianic Jubilee, but the aspect of vengeance was delayed a while longer.

3) Jubilee challenged (Luke 4:22-27). It would be wrong to assume that verse 22 indicated a favorable reception to the announcement Jesus made. The words used conveyed an attitude of astonishment rather than acceptance. The residents of Nazareth had known Him as the son of a carpenter, but now He was telling them He was the Messiah! Jesus sensed their skepticism. They would not be convinced without the proof of some miraculous sign such as the one He had performed in Capernaum (see John 4:46-54). But instead of satisfying their curiosity Jesus condemned their unwillingness to believe. He pointed out that Israel had a history of rejecting its own prophets while outsiders listened and received the benefits.

4) Jubilee rejected (Luke 4:28-30). The people were enraged by this stinging criticism. It was one thing for a carpenter's son to have delusions of being the Messiah, but they would not endure rebukes from such a man. They drove Jesus to the edge of a cliff, intending to throw Him down and stone Him, but God intervened and Jesus walked right through the crowd and away from Nazareth. It was a sad day for Jesus and for His hometown. He offered them the chance to experience the joy of Jubilee, but they rejected Him and His words because they refused to believe. They had waited years for such a day, yet when it came they missed the call. As John said in his gospel, "He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11).
Leviticus 25:8-55. Make a list of what was to be done in that year.

2) Read the following phrases from Luke 4:18-19. What expectations might people in the world today attach to them? How do those expectations differ from what Jesus really offered?
   (a) "good news to the poor"
   (b) "proclaim freedom for the prisoners"
   (c) "recovery of sight for the blind"
   (d) "release the oppressed"

3) Read Luke 4:20-22. Why do you think it was so hard for the people of Nazareth to accept the claim of Jesus that He fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy?

4) Read Luke 4:24-27. Why were these words of Jesus so offensive to His Jewish audience?

Application:

Jesus clearly revealed His mission to the people of His hometown. He offered them a place in the fulfillment of the Messianic promises, but their eyes could not see and their ears could not hear. They insisted on viewing spiritual issues through material eyes, and so they could not see that they needed the salvation that Jesus brought. They were offended that He would dare to suggest they were in need of anything from Him. They knew Him only as the carpenter's son and would not see Him as the King. Even today Jesus offers Jubilee to people impoverished, enslaved, blinded, and oppressed by sin. Release is what they need most, and only Jesus can give it. But they must first admit their needy condition and accept Him as the one anointed by God to deliver them. It is humbling, but the alternative is the foolishness and condemnation of a pride that turns away the Messiah from their lives as surely as the people of Nazareth turned Him away from their city.

Life of Christ Study #18

Matth 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11

Theme: The First Four Disciples

Summary:

More than a year had passed since the public ministry of Jesus was introduced by his baptism. During that time, several men had accompanied Him for periods of time as He traveled throughout Judea and then through Samaria into Galilee. Andrew and John had been the first two at the prompting of John the Baptist (see John 1:35-40). Andrew had recruited his brother Simon Peter (see John 1:41-42) and Philip and Nathanael soon joined the small group of followers (see John 1:43-50). These men went with Jesus and saw His
early miracles and heard His teaching, but He had not yet officially called them to leave their jobs and homes to be His constant companions. However, early in A.D. 28 the ministry of Jesus was becoming more formalized. After He was rejected by His own people in Nazareth, He settled in Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee (see Matthew 4:13-16). This became a kind of headquarters for His work in the region of Galilee, and from there He began to formally build a team of disciples.

1) A new skill (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). Jesus apparently knew where to find the first group of men He wanted. Simon Peter, Andrew, and John were already known to Him from their previous time together. It seems that after accompanying Him back to Galilee they had eventually returned to their fishing business. James the brother of John was a new face, but he had undoubtedly heard all about Jesus from his partners and he did not hesitate to follow. Usually, young men would ask to be allowed to follow a noted teacher, but in this case Jesus came looking for His disciples. He called them to learn a new skill under His tutelage. They knew how to catch fish, but He would teach them to catch people for His kingdom. Given the fame and attention Jesus had generated in Galilee, His call would probably have been considered a great honor to the fishermen. In addition, they had already accepted Him as the Messiah, so they were eager to go with Him. Nevertheless, their willingness to leave everything immediately showed unusual zeal.

2) A new understanding (Luke 5:1-9). Peter, Andrew, James, and John followed Jesus on a tour of Galilee beginning in Capernaum (see Mark 1:21-39; Luke 4:31-44). This tour may have lasted only about a month, yet in that time the disciples witnessed the power of Jesus over demons and diseases and they heard Him proclaim the good news of the kingdom. It was an extended seminar in fishing for men, but when it was over they returned to their boats and nets. That is where Jesus found them again as He was teaching a large crowd along the Sea of Galilee (also called Gennesaret). Jesus stepped into Peter's boat and asked him to go out a little into the lake so that people could see and hear Him more easily. When He finished teaching Jesus told the fisherman to head for deep water and let out his nets. Peter explained that they had already fished the entire night without catching anything. They were tired and had just cleaned the nets to put them away, but he agreed since it was Jesus who asked. Day was not normally the best time to fish, so the overwhelming catch was clearly miraculous. Peter was reminded with new force of the power and majesty of Jesus. He also
realized what it meant to be in the presence of the Messiah, and his own sinfulness made him ashamed. Yet in his weakness Peter was in the best position to follow Jesus.

3) A new calling (Luke 5:10-11). Jesus calmed Peter's fears with the assurance that he would be His disciple. The first time, Jesus had invited the men to learn how to catch people. Now, He called them to that work as a life vocation. No clue is given as to why Andrew was not mentioned in this call. Perhaps he was engaged elsewhere at the time, or it could be that he was included but not named. It is significant that the three who were named formed the inner circle among Jesus's disciples while He was on earth. Peter, James, and John at this point left their fishing equipment again. This time, they would not return to it until after the death of Jesus.

Discussion:

1) What might inspire a person to leave all that he had to follow a new goal? What considerations might prevent a person from making such a choice?

2) Read Matthew 4:18-22. What did the four fishermen know about Jesus that encouraged them to leave everything to follow Him?

3) Read Luke 5:6-9. Why did Peter react to the large catch of fish in this way? What do you think he understood about Jesus? What did he understand about himself? How might these realizations prepare him to be a disciple of Jesus?

4) Does Jesus still call people to leave things to follow Him? How might your possessions limit your responsiveness to the call of Jesus?

Application:

We should not dismiss lightly the two occasions on which the disciples left their boats and homes to follow Jesus. Fishermen generally made a good living in those times, and they had a lot of time and money invested in their equipment. Yet Andrew, Peter, James, and John found a cause more valuable to them than all the materials and relationships they had accumulated previously. They were drawn to Jesus in an understanding that His work was more important than their business and His words offered a life that could be found nowhere else. They seemed to accept the truth that He did not need them but they needed Him completely. Their example challenges our own satisfaction with the material comforts and shallow entertainments which so often fill our lives. Our attachment to things and routines limits our responsiveness to the call of Christ. Jesus simply says, "Come, follow me." We must make choices about anything that stands in the way of obedience to that call.
Life of Christ Study #19

Matthew 8:14-17; Mark 1:21-39; Luke 4:31-44

Theme: The Real Work

Summary:

When Jesus called Andrew, Peter, James, and John to follow Him, He promised He would train them in the art of fishing for men (see Mark 1:17). These four embarked on a tour through Galilee with Jesus, beginning in Capernaum. During this time, the most spectacular events of Jesus' ministry were the miracles of healing He performed. Indeed, it would be easy to focus on the miracles only. His reputation spread and people flocked to see Him mostly due to the miracles. He could have filled the entire tour with endless healings and wonders, for disease and suffering were everywhere in Palestine. But Jesus had a goal greater than the relief of physical pain. He wanted to heal the hearts of people from the eternal death of sin. He certainly cared about the illnesses of people, but His main ministry was teaching and proclaiming the kingdom to those who would repent and seek forgiveness. The miracles showed His authority and drew the crowds, but His words offered eternal life.

1) Teaching with authority (Mark 1:21-28). The first place Jesus took His four followers was the synagogue in Capernaum. It was customary on the Sabbath to permit a visiting teacher to address the gathered people. Usually, the speaker gave a dry lecture on principles of interpretation and application based on the opinions and writings of other scholars. But Jesus electrified the audience because He spoke as one who had authority. He did not simply mouth the best and newest ideas of others. He treated God's word as though it really demanded response and change from its listeners. In the midst of the teaching, a demon interrupted through the voice of a man under his influence. It would appear at first that the demon was confirming Jesus's identity as the Messiah, but in reality his words were a challenge to the authority of Jesus. That is why Jesus commanded the spirit to be silent and ordered him to leave the man. The demon had no choice but to obey. This astonished the people even more, for in their tradition a magician might battle a demon with incantations or some magical talisman, but Jesus used simple and direct commands and the demon obeyed. But the display of power drove the people back to Jesus' teaching. The miracle gave fresh credibility to the message.
2) Teaching with compassion (Mark 1:29-34). That is not to say that miracles were nothing but a marketing tool to Jesus. He recognized the value of relieving physical suffering. This can be seen in what happened after He left the synagogue with His four followers. They went to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew and found that Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus immediately healed her. Then He spent the whole evening responding to the needs of the sick and demon afflicted. He was primarily there to teach, but His teaching held a compassion which saw the suffering of people and addressed it.

3) Teaching with purpose (Mark 1:35-39). The next morning, before sunrise, Jesus went out from the town to a quiet place to pray. The four companions found Him and told Him that more people were looking for Him. Perhaps many of them had heard of the miracles He was doing and came out of curiosity. Jesus could have returned to Capernaum and continued His healing ministry from the previous night, but instead He was eager to go to other villages. He did not make this decision because there were other people who needed healing in those villages. He gave His reason to His disciples when He said, "So I can preach there also. That is why I have come." He never forgot His purpose was to teach people about entering the kingdom of God through faith and forgiveness. He could heal a person, but that person would someday die anyway. But if the person believed His message, the result would be eternal life. The crowds might seek and beg for miracles, but Jesus wanted them to hear and believe His words. So He led His disciples throughout Galilee teaching and authenticating His message with acts of power.

Discussion:

1) Of what immediate value is a miraculous healing? What is its lasting effect fifty years later? Of what immediate value is a proclamation of salvation? What is its lasting effect fifty years later?

2) Read Mark 1:27-28. How did the miracle affect the way people listened to Jesus's message?

3) What is the value of relieving physical suffering if it only puts off death? Should Christians be concerned with addressing physical needs?

4) Read Mark 1:32-39. How did Jesus balance the physical and spiritual needs of the people He addressed? Did He feel both were important? On which did He place the greater priority?
Application:

If Jesus had listened only to the cries of the crowds, He probably would have spent all His time in hospitals and leper colonies healing the sick. If He had taken the route of the religious leaders of the time, He might have developed eloquent and impressive lectures without ever personally touching those who were hurting. Instead, the King balanced the two courses in a blend of truth and compassion. He knew that the people needed salvation more than anything else, so he consistently taught and proclaimed the need for repentance and forgiveness. But He was also moved by the pain and suffering He saw, and He worked to relieve it. His miracles drew the audience and His teaching challenged them. He listened to what people felt they needed and told them what they really needed. In this, He modeled ministry for us. Ministry is the proclamation of truth with the compassion to listen.

Life of Christ Study #20

Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26

Theme: Healing a Paralytic

Summary:

It is sometimes debated whether Jesus wanted people to know that He was the Messiah or not. Certainly, there were times when it appeared He wished to keep His identity a secret. He hushed the demons which recognized Him (see Luke 4:33-35, 41), left Capernaum at the height of popularity (see Luke 4:42-43), and warned a leper He healed not to tell anyone (see Luke 5:12-14). However, at other times He seemed to invite recognition, such as when He confronted the moneychangers in the temple (see John 2:13-19) and when He claimed to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy in Nazareth (see Luke 4:17-21). Perhaps the answer lay in Jesus's unique attitude toward publicity and popularity. He wanted to challenge people with His claims so that they could decide to accept and follow Him, but He was not interested in generating a fickle or shallow crowd of supporters. He was not ashamed or afraid to boldly announce His identity, but He chose His moments according to His purposes and not the whims of people. One such moment came in the form of a paralytic with four faithful friends. It was on an occasion when a group of religious leaders was present to check out this new teacher (Luke 5:17). Jesus gave them a lesson they could not miss.

1) A striking plea (Luke 5:18-19). Probably fifty people would be the most that could fit into a large village house in Galilee, and this one was sufficiently packed that the crowd spilled out of the doorway so that the four friends could not find a way to get their sick companion inside. Determined and undaunted, they went up the outdoor staircase that led to the roof and made a
new entrance. Mark says they actually dug a hole through the mud and wood (see Mark 2:4) to lower their friend down to Jesus. The owner of the home may have been annoyed when plaster and dirt rained upon the heads of his guests, but Jesus was impressed.

2) A strange answer (Luke 5:20-21). The men apparently did not verbalize their request, but what they wanted was obvious. Yet when Jesus spoke to the paralytic, He said nothing about healing or physical help. Instead, He told him that his sins were forgiven. We do not know what the paralytic and his friends thought of this strange reply, but the Pharisees and teachers of the law were shocked. They knew that God alone has the authority and ability to release men from the penalty of sin, and they were not about to consider Jesus as God, so they assumed He was blaspheming by claiming to do what only God can do.

3) A strict confrontation (Luke 5:22-24). Jesus knew what these religious leaders were thinking, and He directly challenged their thoughts. Saying, "your sins are forgiven" required no visible proof, so it was easier to say. However, if Jesus said, "Get up and walk" and the man remained paralyzed, He would be proven a liar. Jesus then proceeded to heal the man, but He did it "that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." The Pharisees had come to discredit Jesus, and they had inwardly scoffed when He forgave the man, but even they could not deny the miracle that everyone plainly saw. If Jesus could heal, then He could also forgive, and if He could forgive, then He was God. The Pharisees were caught.

4) A strong proof (Luke 5:25-26). When the paralytic immediately stood and walked out of the house carrying his mat, the confrontation was settled. Doubt and speculation gave way to amazement and awe as the people realized what they had just seen. They praised God because the miracle was clearly from Him. The Pharisees could offer no response to the proof given. Jesus had confronted and exposed their unbelief and revealed His identity in unmistakable words and actions. From that time onward, until the crucifixion, the Pharisees became more openly hostile toward Jesus. Their problem was not insufficient evidence or genuine doubts. It was a spiritual blindness in which they refused to accept the abundant evidence and answers that were given.

Discussion:

47
1) Read Luke 5:17. Why do you think that religious leaders from as far away as Jerusalem came to Galilee to see Jesus? Did these men really want to learn from Him? How does their response in verse 21 help to reveal their motives?

2) Read Luke 5:20. Which was more important for the paralytic to receive, forgiveness or healing? What did Jesus see in the sick man and his friends which prompted Him to grant forgiveness?

3) What was the paralytic's obvious outward need? What was his hidden inward need which Jesus addressed first? How can this principle be applied to the people around you?

4) Read Luke 5:21-24. How would you answer Jesus' question? How did the healing of the paralytic prove that Jesus was God?

Application:

It is amazing how Jesus responded to each person according to his or her need. He showed compassion to the paralytic both in granting him forgiveness and in healing his physical problem. He carefully taught the crowd through His proof and demonstration of His identity. They were there because of His miracles, but they really needed His forgiveness also. He directly confronted the religious leaders who were looking for a way to discredit Him since their deliberate unbelief refused to ask for compassion and would not accept teaching. It is also interesting to see that the crowd and the paralytic rejoiced and praised God for what had happened while the Pharisees apparently became angrier and more hardened against Jesus and His message. That is the dividing line that Jesus still brings to lives today. Those who listen and believe find compassion, instruction, and joy, but those who refuse to accept lose their ability to see and understand.

Life of Christ Study #21


Theme: The Call of Matthew

Summary:

As Jesus expanded His ministry in Galilee in that year of A.D. 28 the crowds became ever present companions. They watched His every move and followed Him wherever He went. Yet Jesus never gave in to the lure of popularity. He taught the crowds, but He did not let them dissuade Him from the central issues of His work. One of these was the ongoing search for men to include in His team of disciples. Andrew, John, Peter, James, Philip, and Nathaniel had been identified and called at
various times, but the team was still taking shape. These men were not the movers and shakers of Jewish society at that time. They had no special positions of influence or talents to attract people, but they shared one trait which seemed to qualify them for the team Jesus was building. They were willing to listen and follow at His request. No one forced Andrew and John to leave John the Baptist (see John 1:35-37), and no one dragged Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel to accept the invitation to follow (see John 1:41-49). The four fishermen left their nets, boats, and families by their own choice (see Matthew 4:18-22). Now, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, another man would be invited to join the team.

1) A change of career (Mark 2:13-14). Matthew, also called by his Hebrew name of Levi, probably helped to monitor the shipping trade in and out of Capernaum as a customs agent. It was not a popular job with his Jewish countrymen, for the tax system was imposed by the Roman overlords and tax collectors were viewed as collaborators. However, it was a secure job which offered a healthy income. Some tax collectors abused their positions and added surcharges for personal gain, but Matthew may have been one of the honest ones. Even so, his occupation hardly made him the kind of person the Messiah would be expected to favor. Certainly some of the people who had witnessed His healing of the paralyzed man appeared to be more likely candidates (see Luke 5:26). Yet Jesus invited Matthew to follow, and the tax collector left everything (see Luke 5:28) to begin a new career.

2) A table of testimony (Mark 2:15). Actually, there was one part of Matthew's life which was not immediately left behind. He gave up his job and income, but he did not give up on his friends and associates. He wanted to share the new purpose he had found with them. Matthew organized a dinner at his home (see Luke 5:29), and the place was filled with people deemed unacceptable by the religious leaders of the area. Those called sinners were not necessarily living immoral lives, but they clearly were not conforming to the religious teachings and interpretations expected by the Pharisees. They were outcasts in the eyes of the established spiritual leaders, but they were the people Matthew knew, and they were welcomed by Jesus. It was a marvelous opportunity for this changed man to introduce his old friends to his new Master.

3) A call to compassion (Matthew 9:11-13). The Pharisees probably would not lower themselves to attend such a gathering of sinners, but they took careful notice of who did come. Perhaps afterwards, as the reception was breaking up, they confronted Jesus and His disciples with their complaint. How could a man who claimed to
teach about God associate with such people? Jesus's answer revealed the flaw of the Pharisees' religious system. If a medical doctor decided that he would rather spend his time around healthy people instead of dealing with the unpleasant sights and sounds of sick people, he would stop functioning as a doctor. The Pharisees had done this by removing themselves from contact with people who most needed spiritual help. They concentrated on the "healthy" who fit their standards and massaged their egos. But Jesus refused to do this, for He had come to call sinners, those who recognized their need, to repentance and salvation. In this way, He fulfilled the will of God who values the heart of righteousness more than the ritual. His quote from Hosea 6:6 emphasized the need to find ways to bring more into the kingdom rather than finding ways to shut out those deemed undesirable.

Discussion:

1) Luke 5:28 says that Matthew "left everything behind" to follow Jesus. Make a list of the possible problems and consequences you would face if you abandoned your job today. Why do you think Matthew was willing to make such a sacrifice?

2) Read Luke 5:29. What was Matthew's attitude toward his old friends and colleagues after he committed himself to following Jesus? Does this give you any ideas for evangelism opportunities?

3) Read Mark 2:16. Who are the people today who tend to be viewed as sinners and outcasts by religious establishments? How should you respond to them? How can you show mercy to them without compromising what God says about their sin?

4) How would you apply Hosea 6:6 to your life today? How would you apply it to your church?

Application:

Matthew probably would not have been considered for membership in the religious system of the Pharisees, yet Jesus called him to discipleship. Apparently, Matthew possessed a faith and righteousness that did not fit the performance standards of the Jewish leaders. But with one dinner, the former tax collector reached out to a segment of society that the religious leaders had abandoned. Jesus was happy to be included, for He came to call those who knew they were lost and not those who thought they were already righteous. Sacrifice and religious practices are certainly not bad, but if they are detached from mercy and the heart of righteousness, then they are empty rituals. Jesus' invitation to the kingdom is inclusive not exclusive. It may be that
relatively few will accept, but they should not be kept away by legalistic barriers foolishly set up by God's people.

Life of Christ Study #22


Theme: Sabbath Confrontations

Summary:

The scribes and Pharisees, leaders of the Jewish religious system, were increasingly upset by Jesus. They simply could not fit Him into their interpretation of God and His work. Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sin and backed up the claim with miracles of healing (see Luke 5:17-26). He associated with the kinds of people that other religious leaders considered outcasts (see Mark 2:15-16). One issue that provoked the ire of the leaders on several occasions was Jesus's perceived disregard for the Sabbath observance. Saturday, the seventh day of the week, had been set apart by God at creation (see Genesis 2:2-3) and codified as holy in the law He gave to Moses (see Exodus 20:8-11). The Sabbath was to be a perpetual covenant between God and His people, and the penalty for violating it with work was death (see Exodus 31:13-17), a punishment that was enforced on at least one occasion (see Numbers 15:32-36). Therefore, the Pharisees had good reason for carefully protecting the sanctity of the Sabbath, but they had not counted on meeting the King who was greater than the Sabbath.

1) Sabbath work (John 5:1-18). In late March of A.D. 28, Jesus left Galilee for a short time to attend the Passover in Jerusalem. While there on the Sabbath He visited the pool of Bethesda which was a gathering spot for disabled people. Apparently, there was a tradition that said an angel would occasionally stir the water and healing would be granted to the first person who entered the pool. Jesus instantly healed one man who had been an invalid for 38 years. He told the man to pick up his mat and walk. Some Jewish leaders saw the man and immediately stopped him for violating the Sabbath. The religious laws prohibited 39 basic types of work on the Sabbath and carrying a mat was included in one of them. When the man eventually identified Jesus as the one who had given him permission to do this, the leaders turned their anger on Him, for unnecessary work by a doctor was also prohibited on the Sabbath. Jesus responded with a statement that revealed His equality with God. The Sabbath rules against work did not apply to God who continually worked, and therefore, they did not apply to the Messiah. This made the Jewish leaders furious. They had no legal authority
under the Roman system to impose a death penalty, but they increased their efforts to find a way to bring charges against Jesus that would condemn Him under Roman law.

2) Sabbath authority (Matthew 12:1-8). Back in Galilee, Jesus and His disciples walked through a field on a Sabbath. The disciples picked some of the grain and rubbed the heads in their hands to dislodge the kernels to eat (see Luke 6:1). According to the traditions of the Pharisees, this action was the same as the process of reaping, threshing, and preparing food, and so it was a violation of the Sabbath. Jesus argued in reply that the Sabbath laws were not meant to hinder the necessary functions of life. David was permitted to eat consecrated bread normally reserved for the priests (see I Samuel 21:2-6 and Leviticus 24:8-9). Even the priests were allowed to do the work needed for the offerings on the Sabbath (see Numbers 28:9-10). This took place in the temple itself, yet the Pharisees dared to impose their Sabbath taboos on the One who would fulfill the sacrifices of the temple. Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 which expressed God's desire for mercy more than for mere ritual observance. The Pharisees could not get beyond the words of the laws to see the intentions of the laws. Mark added Jesus' summation that the Sabbath was instituted for man’s benefit. Man was not made to be the slave of the Sabbath (see Mark 2:27). Finally, Jesus challenged the Pharisees' right to question Him. They had appointed themselves to be guardians of the Sabbath, but He was its Lord.

3) Sabbath compassion (Matthew 12:9-14). Jesus then went on the offensive in the Sabbath debate. He went into a synagogue, where there was a man with a shriveled hand, on the Sabbath. The Pharisees and religious leaders were looking for grounds to discredit Jesus as a law breaker, so they asked Him publicly whether the law permitted healings on the Sabbath. Jesus pointed out that the Sabbath laws did not prevent a man from rescuing one of his animals that had fallen in a pit on the Sabbath. Therefore, it was even more permissible to help a hurting person. He then healed the man in front of everyone, leaving the Pharisees without an argument. How could they condemn Jesus for healing on the Sabbath when God had so obviously given Him the power to do it? Deprived of a victory once again, the hatred of the Pharisees grew.

Discussion:

1) Read Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. What was the Sabbath observance originally intended to be? What did God want His people to think about
and understand? Do you set aside time for this kind of reflection?

2) Read John 5:1-18 and Matthew 12:1-14. List some of the attitudes and ideas the Pharisees held about the Sabbath.

3) Now list the attitudes and ideas Jesus demonstrated toward the Sabbath. Did He really disregard it?

4) The Sabbath was Saturday, but today Christians observe Sunday as a special day of worship. How could Mark 2:27 be applied to your view of Sunday?

Application:

The Pharisees truly cared about keeping God's Sabbath laws, but in their zeal they focused on the details and missed the real meaning. They saw the Sabbath as a list of prohibitions rather than a celebration of a unique relationship with God. They made the Sabbath a day of burden and fear instead of a day of rest and reflection. Jesus respected the Sabbath and did not violate God's laws for it. But He was not shy about challenging and confronting the interpretations and traditions which the Pharisees had compiled and legislated. He wanted them to see true obedience and devotion, not legalistic ritual. The unnecessarily strict rules stole the joy from a day of worship. God intended the Sabbath to serve man. He did not intend the Sabbath to enslave man.

Life of Christ Study #23

John 5:19-47

Theme: Equal with God

Summary:

The first confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel concerning the Sabbath (see John 5:1-18) raised an even deeper point of contention between them. Jesus reasoned that since God was not bound by Sabbath prohibitions against work, then His Messiah was not bound in performing God's work. The leaders recognized at once that this amounted to a claim of equality with God, and they became enraged. Jesus knew what they were thinking, so He gave them a full explanation of His statement in the form of a legal defense. He was accused of acting against the law of God and claiming equality with God. His reply assumed that this was a formal charge as He responded to His accusers point by point. He cited four facts about His relationship to God which established His claim to be fulfilling God's work as God's divine agent.
1) Assignment from God (John 5:19-23). Jesus began His case by stating that He did nothing by His own initiative, but He took His direction from the Father. The Father had revealed His will and plan to the Son and the Son performed it. Thus, Jesus did not heal on the Sabbath in defiance of God, but because God willed it. Jesus promised that God would reveal much greater things to and through Him, for even the work of eternal life and judgment had been entrusted to Him by the Father. Jesus was no ordinary servant of God. He was the Servant foretold in Isaiah 42:1-4. Rejecting the Son and His message was the same as rejecting the Father who commissioned Him.

2) Authority from God (John 5:24-30). As God's agent, Jesus was authorized to offer eternal life. In fact, accepting the words of Jesus was the only way to escape the condemnation of rejecting God's gift of life. But Jesus was more than the messenger of life. He was given authority to grant it, for the Son, like the Father, was the source of life. He was the Son of Man, foreseen by Daniel, who will judge all people of the world (see Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus told the religious leaders that a time will come when all who have died will be raised to eternal life or eternal condemnation, and that the voice of the Son will be the signal for this last judgment. Jesus could be a fair and unbiased judge because He did not express His own wishes or opinions, but He judged by the authority of God and in accordance with His perfect will.

3) Testimony from God (John 5:31-40). The Old Testament law stated that facts in a legal case must be established by more than one witness (see Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15), so Jesus presented the witnesses in His defense against the accusations of the religious leaders. The Pharisees had sent representatives to John the Baptist to ask if he were the Messiah. In reply, John had publicly identified Jesus as the Lamb of God and the Son of God (see John 1:19-34). But Jesus had stronger witnesses than even John. The work He performed, with miracles of power and healing, testified that God sent Him because they showed that God's power was with Him. At Jesus' baptism God verbally gave witness to His identity and authority (see Matthew 3:16-17). Still, these witnesses had not convinced the leaders, so Jesus introduced one more. He knew that they studied and revered the Old Testament writings which also pointed to Him as the King God would send. The witnesses were many and powerful. If Jesus' accusers refused to accept them, they were rejecting the life He brought.

4) Praise from God (John 5:41-47). Jesus had
presented His defense. Now He accused His accusers for their hypocrisy. They were more concerned with the praise they could get from men than with pleasing God. They would not accept Jesus because He threatened their prestige. Prophets and holy men who spoke by their own authority could be controlled and manipulated, but one who spoke by God's authority superseded their influence and position. They claimed to be protectors of the law of Moses, so by Moses they stood accused. For Moses had written about the coming Messiah (for examples, see Genesis 3:15, 22:18; Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19), but the teachers of his law would not even accept his testimony about Jesus.

Discussion:

1) Read John 5:16-18. What assumptions were the Jewish leaders making about Jesus? To what accusations did these assumptions lead?

2) Read John 5:19-30. What things did God give Jesus authority to do? What authority does this give Him in your life?

3) Read John 5:31-40. What witnesses did Jesus call to His defense against the accusations of the religious leaders? Who testified and what testimony did they give in the following verses?
   (a) John 1:19-34
   (b) Luke 5:17-26
   (c) Matthew 3:16-17
   (d) Daniel 7:13-14

4) What are the consequences of ignoring or rejecting the words of Jesus in the following verses?
   (a) John 5:23
   (b) John 5:28-29
   (c) John 5:39-40
   (d) John 5:45-47

Application:

Jesus defended His work and claims as if He were in a Jewish law court. And if the religious leaders had been fair judges, they would have had to acquit Him of all accusations. He did the work God assigned to Him under God's authority. God used people, miracles, His own voice, and His written revelation to bear witness to Jesus' identity. Yet the leaders were not impartial in their judgments. They feared losing the prestige of their positions if they accepted the truth of Jesus' words. So, they rejected the testimony of God's witnesses and even closed their hearts to the writings of Moses whom they claimed to follow. They would not humble themselves to acknowledge the validity of Jesus and to receive eternal life. In this legal case, the Jewish leaders pronounced their own sentence. As John wrote elsewhere, "Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:18).
Life of Christ Study #24

Mark 3:7-19; Luke 5:12-16

Theme: Appointing the Twelve

Summary:

The battle lines were clearly drawn by this time. The leaders of the Jewish religious establishment were actively looking for opportunities to create an accusation against Jesus that would bring the death penalty in a Roman law court. They probably dared not kill Him through direct violence because He had the overwhelming support of the general populace. Their attempts to find Him in violation of the Sabbath and so, perhaps, turn the people against Him had failed. Jesus had responded boldly and directly to their accusations with proofs and arguments they could not rebut. From this time until His death on the cross Jesus and the Pharisees were essentially at war. As in any campaign there would be attacks and counterattacks, traps and escapes, periods of open conflict and periods of planning and regrouping. For the most part, the Pharisees would take the offensive. Jesus was more interested in teaching those who would listen than in debating those who would not. He increasingly focused on preparing His followers for an active role in the war. He began by calling a few of them out of the ranks of learners and into the position of leaders.

1) An army of followers (Mark 3:7-8). If the religious leaders were growing more and more hostile toward Jesus, large crowds of people certainly did not share their hatred. Indeed, Jesus could have staged a sizable revolt if He had been so inclined. When He left His confrontations with the Pharisees and returned to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, a crowd followed Him, and they were soon joined by people from Judea and Jerusalem to the south, from the region of Idumea across the Jordan River to the east, and from the cities of Tyre and Sidon to the northwest. These people had heard of His miracles and came to see the amazing prophet for themselves. Not even the disapproval of the Pharisees could stop them.

2) A withdrawal from conflict (Mark 3:9-13). Jesus knew that the crowds came to Him with a mixture of motives. Many came to be healed while many more came to watch the healings. Some may have been rebels looking for a leader while others were probably spies for the religious rulers. Some may have had a true understanding of who Jesus was, but most were drawn by curiosity. Jesus also knew that the sight of the crowds
would make the Pharisees more angry than ever. But this was not the kind of conflict Jesus wanted to force. A mob of followers could be incited to attack buildings and people, but that was not His goal. He wanted to rule men's hearts not their governments. So, when the crowd became so thick that He was pushed to the edge of the Sea, He stepped into a small boat and continued to teach and heal. But He would not permit the demons He cast out of people to stir up the crowd with cries of His identity. Then, perhaps making use of the boat, He came to a mountainside, went up part of the way, and spent the night alone. He left behind the adoring crowds and the fuming Pharisees for more important business.

3) A council of war (Mark 3:14-19). Generals often meet with their captains before battle to plan strategy. Jesus removed Himself from the crowds and the conflicts for just such a purpose. Luke said He spent the whole night in prayer (Luke 6:12). In the morning, He called twelve of His followers and designated them as His apostles or appointed messengers. Their job was to go out and spread His teaching, and He gave them authority to perform miracles as His representatives. Jesus was still the King, but He gave His royal power to these men to carry out His work and to engage the enemy on multiple fronts. Seven of the twelve appeared earlier in the Gospels. Simon Peter, John, and Andrew had been with Him for some time (see John 1:40-42), and along with John's brother James, they had already been called into His service (see Mark 1:16-20). Philip and Bartholomew (or Nathaniel) had also been introduced to Jesus before He began His ministry in Galilee (see John 1:43-51). Matthew had only recently left his tax office to follow Jesus (see Mark 2:13-17). To these men were added Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus (also called Judas son of James), Simon, and Judas Iscariot. These men were Jesus’ captains and companions who would lead the charge someday. But even one of them would prove faithless.

Discussion:

1) After their confrontations with Jesus what do you think the Pharisees feared when they saw people from all over gathering to see and hear Him?

2) Read Mark 3:7-10. Why do you think so many people were following Jesus? Did they all understand that He was the Messiah? Why do some people flock to church today? Do they all have a personal relationship with Jesus?

3) Read Mark 3:11-12. Why do you think Jesus prohibited the demons from announcing His
identity? What was He trying to avoid?

4) Read Mark 3:13-19. What did Jesus's actions reveal about His goals on earth? What role did He call the apostles to play in His plan? What role has He called you to play today?

Application:

Apparently, there had been other men who claimed to be prophets from God and had led uprisings and revolts around the time of Jesus (see Acts 5:35-37). The people were looking for a deliverer, but Jesus was not willing to play that part. He did not come to debate the Pharisees or to overthrow the government. He came to introduce the kingdom of God to the world. He had compassion for the crowds and offered them eternal life, but He did not incite them to rebellion. He had the power to command evil spirits, but He would not use them to His personal advantage. He turned away from masses who could have swept Him to military and political victory to focus on twelve men who would spread His message to others. Jesus did not fit the expectations of many and He was misunderstood by most, but He never lost sight of His true purpose. He did not come to rule the world but to save it. That remains His purpose today.

Life of Christ Study #25


Theme: Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom People

Summary:

Luke recorded that, immediately after appointing the twelve apostles, Jesus came back down the mountainside with them to a level place which overlooked the crowds waiting below (Luke 6:17). There, He began to teach them in detail about life in His kingdom. This was especially important for the twelve who had been designated leaders in it. He started with a description of the people who would be subjects of His realm, and the main idea centered on being blessed. The word itself was a fairly common word which meant happy. However, Jesus was not talking about the happiness that most people seek, gained or lost by changes in circumstance or the influence of others. In the Beatitudes (Latin for blessed), Jesus made a declaration or pronouncement of happiness upon those who live by the dictates of kingdom law rather than the shifting fortunes of the world around them. They are blessed because God grants them what they need in response to their obedience. Based on this promise of blessedness they are free to live by principles that go against the accepted thinking of the world system.

1) They are poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3). They do not rationalize or excuse their guilt to escape
blame. They recognize their need for cleansing and forgiveness by God. They lay aside pride and embrace humble repentance. And they find that the kingdom is given into their hands. What grand statements and disciplined behavior can never accomplish, a poor spirit does.

2) They mourn (Matthew 5:4). They see the effects of sin, their own and that of others, in the world and they honestly grieve. They do not replace tears with complaints or anger or hiding. And they are given comfort by the one who is able to respond to any pain (see II Corinthians 1:3-4).

3) They are meek (Matthew 5:5). They are not worried about getting their fair share before anyone else does. Life is not a competition for them, because they believe God safely holds what they need. They are free to serve others without fear of losing. In this way, they inherit what others strive to grasp.

4) They want righteousness (Matthew 5:6). They crave what is right above what is convenient or pleasurable or advantageous. They do not stuff themselves with things that leave them empty. They hunger and thirst for righteousness and they find satisfaction.

5) They are merciful (Matthew 5:7). They do not take advantage of the fallen, even a fallen enemy. They show kindness and forgiveness to those who do not deserve them, and, in return, they receive mercy from the Lord when they fall.

6) They are pure in heart (Matthew 5:8). They accept the process of examination and sacrifice which must accompany purification. They put away whatever distances them from God. Their reward is a clear sight and understanding of the Lord and His work.

7) They are peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). They are more concerned with truth and fairness than with victory. Manipulation, intimidation, and exaggeration are missing from their arsenal. They well represent their Father who freely offers peace to all.

8) They are sometimes persecuted (Matthew 5:10). The blows and insults they receive are not deserved. They do not force righteousness on others, but they will not depart from it themselves even when threatened. They know God's kingdom will prevail, and they place their hopes in the celebration to come.

9) They are committed to Jesus (Matthew 5:11-12). Insults, accusations, and even hardships cannot
pull them away from following Jesus. Like the faithful prophets, theirs is a commitment of choice and conviction, not convenience. God will give them great reward.

10) They are not fooled (Luke 6:24-26). Wealth, plenty, entertainment, and popularity do not lull them into a false contentment, for those things are deceitful and capricious.

11) They are salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). They are meant to be different and to make a difference in the world. Salt has a distinctive flavor and a light in darkness is easily seen. Kingdom people should not try to hide or obscure this quality. They are God's beacons to the earth.

Discussion:

1) Make a list of ways that people try to gain and keep happiness. For each item list something completely out of human control which can ruin that plan for happiness.

2) What is the difference between being happy and being declared blessed? Who gives and controls your blessedness?

3) How could you use the Beatitudes to counsel a fellow Christian who says, "I just want to be happy"?

4) Read Matthew 5:13-16. What are some ways that the distinctiveness of your life as a follower of Jesus could be seen in the following settings?
   (a) Family          (c) Church
   (b) Work            (d) Community

Application:
The kingdom Jesus presented was nothing like the kingdoms and systems of the world. The world promotes toughness and competitiveness as the way to find happiness. Since they believe there is a limited supply of wealth, power, and prestige, people race and fight to get their share before it is all gone. They look for an edge over others and work hard to satisfy their craving for security and comfort. In contrast, Jesus said that people who are part of His kingdom have the freedom to be genuine and caring, because God has already promised to supply their needs in His service. Happiness is elusive and difficult to hold, but blessedness is a gift from God who has plenty to spare and the ability to deliver. The world cries for happiness while Jesus offers blessedness. One is uncertain and temporary, the other is sure and eternal.
Life of Christ Study #26

Matthew 5:17-48

Theme: Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Precepts

Summary:

Every kingdom has rules and precepts by which the people are expected to live. Usually, when a new ruler takes power, he changes certain laws to reflect his own interests and agendas. That is what the Pharisees accused Jesus of doing when they said that He violated the Sabbath. They claimed that He was abolishing the Old Testament law and prophets by changing or ignoring the commands they had given from God. But Jesus, in His detailed description of His kingdom, said that He came to fulfill the law not to abolish it (Matthew 5:17). He affirmed that no detail of the law could be altered or ignored until it was fulfilled (Matthew 5:18). He also declared that anyone who broke even a seemingly insignificant commandment from the law would not be honored in His kingdom, but those who obeyed and taught the law would be honored (Matthew 5:19). The Pharisees displayed themselves as the careful guardians of the law, but Jesus said that their efforts fell short of the standards for His kingdom (Matthew 5:20). His precepts looked for more than outward conformity to a set of rules, and He cited six examples of the righteousness the kingdom of God required.

1) Precept on anger (Matthew 5:21-26). The Pharisees condemned murder in keeping with the law (see Exodus 20:13), but they felt as long as they did not kill anyone they were keeping the law. Jesus looked at the anger and hatred that underlies the act of murder. A person who harbors anger against another is already guilty even if he never has the boldness or opportunity to commit violence. Slander is an expression of hatred as much as physical killing, and verbal attacks are equally deserving of hell. Jesus wanted a changed heart not just controlled behavior. He told His audience to lay aside pious and religious rituals to first deal with issues of anger and reconciliation. That was the only way to avoid judgment.

2) Precept on lust (Matthew 5:27-30). Again, the Pharisees considered the law fulfilled if they did not actually have sexual relations with a woman outside of marriage (see Exodus 20:14). Jesus, however, said that a lustful look was adultery even if it never went beyond the realm of thoughts and desires. To emphasize the seriousness of "hidden" sins, Jesus said that it would be better to amputate the part of the body which fed the sin than to be consumed by lust which could destroy a man completely. Of course, even a blind man can lust in his heart, so such
righteousness cannot be gained by even the most radical human effort.

3) Precept on divorce (Matthew 5:31-32). The Pharisees covered divorce with a legal document which gave it an appearance of respectability, but Jesus returned to God's high standards of marriage. He called any divorce, except on the grounds of unfaithfulness, a violation of the marriage covenant.

4) Precept on promises (Matthew 5:33-37). The Pharisees considered promises sworn to the Lord or with God named as a witness as sacred. Any other vow could be excused if broken. Jesus pointed out that, since God is ruler of everything, anything used as a witness in a promise was as binding as God Himself. Instead of an elaborate network of vows and oaths, Jesus simply called His people to follow through on their promises faithfully. No excuses or exclusions. Just "yes" or "no" followed by appropriate action.

5) Precept on retaliation (Matthew 5:38-42). In the Old Testament, God had instituted a system which called for justice to match the crime (see Deuteronomy 19:21), but this rule was intended for use by the legal authorities not individual people. The Pharisees extended it to justify personal retaliation against almost any offense. Jesus demanded tolerance and forgiveness in His kingdom. The government still wielded the sword of justice (see Romans 13:1-5), but the individual must not take that sword into his own hands.

6) Precept on enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). The Pharisees practiced a conditional system of kindness and fairness. They felt obligated to return kindness to those who were kind to them, but they felt no obligation to help a fallen enemy. Jesus said that the measure of true righteousness and love would be seen in merciful treatment of enemies. That is what distinguished a person as a child of God.

Discussion:

1) Overall, how would you characterize the Pharisees' attitude toward the law? How was Jesus's attitude different?

2) Read Matthew 5:17-20. How could you use these verses to answer a person who says, "It doesn't really matter if I disobey God's law because I can be forgiven by Christ"?

3) Read Matthew 5:21 and 27. What people would be
condemned by the Pharisees' interpretation of the law? Read Matthew 5:22 and 28. What people would be condemned by Jesus' view of the law? Based on this, how do you think a Pharisee would define righteousness? How would Jesus define it?

4) What have you learned from this section about the following issues?
   (a) Righteousness by human effort.
   (b) The importance of motives as well as behavior.
   (c) The need to defend your own rights.

Application:

The Pharisees reduced the law to a guide for behavior which could be comfortably kept. As long as they did not actually kill someone, sleep with another man's wife, or break a direct promise made in God's name, they could consider themselves righteous. Hatred, lust, and occasional betrayals could be hidden, so they did not count. Jesus demolished this shallow concept of righteousness when he presented the precepts of God's kingdom. Human judges cannot read the corruption in a man's heart, but God can and does. A legal document and smiles cannot hide the selfishness of a wrongful divorce from Him. Acts of kindness for friends cannot conceal malice toward enemies in His eyes. The righteousness of the kingdom will not be accomplished through human discipline or good intentions. It requires a life broken in repentance and changed by the power of God.

Life of Christ Study #27

Matthew 6:1-18

Theme: Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Practices

Summary:

Jesus continued His discussion of the righteousness required in His kingdom. He had already dealt with the charges that He was replacing God's law with His own by showing how He fulfilled the law to a degree that even the Pharisees could not match. Next, He turned to the good works or "acts of righteousness" that religious people performed. Acts of charity, prayer, and fasting had become public measures of a person's godliness. But Jesus again examined the motive behind the action. If good works were performed as a way to gain respect, admiration, or popularity, then they were no longer really good. In fact, they could become just another expression of personal pride and selfishness. God was not pleased by such self-serving exhibitions, whatever men might think (Matthew 6:1). Jesus wanted acts of righteousness motivated by hearts of righteousness in His kingdom.

1) Charity (Matthew 6:2-4). Gifts to the needy
should come out of a desire to help the needy and not to build a reputation of generosity. The hypocrites, the ones who only put on the appearance of righteousness, are more concerned with their charity being seen than with the good they can do for the needy. Their gifts are simply the cost of buying some publicity for themselves. There is nothing truly charitable about it. In contrast, Jesus said that people should even be careful about congratulating themselves for their acts of charity. The goal should not be public praise or even a private good feeling. The goal is to help a person in need and to obey God. Then, God will reward the act of pure and untainted charity.

2) Prayer (Matthew 6:5-15). In the same way, prayer should be practiced as communication with God and not another way to impress people. Jesus is certainly not condemning all public prayer, but He is warning about prayers designed for public show rather than for honest expression. The hypocrites want their praying to be seen by others so that their reputation for holiness will increase. What they are saying to God in their prayers is irrelevant because they value the attention of people and not the response of God. Some pagan religions practiced long, rambling prayers under the assumption that God would not know what to do otherwise. But the prayers that Jesus wants in His kingdom recognize God as the focus and authority in their communication. He should be honored as the rightful ruler of our lives (v.9-10). He should be sought as the faithful provider of our needs (v.11) and the only forgiver of our sins (v.12). He should be approached as the source of our spiritual strength and righteousness (v.13). Prayer is a time to do personal business with God not to put on a show for other people. Prayer should be practiced to address real issues like forgiveness not shallow impulses of vanity.

3) Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). Hypocrites were willing to give up food or pleasures for a time, but only if they could show other people how much they were suffering for their devotion to God. Jesus said the attention of men was the only reward they would ever receive for their empty performance. The Pharisees observed fasts to commemorate important events on the religious calendar and, occasionally, as a sign of humility in asking God for divine help. In either case, fasting was intended to be a personal expression of dependence on God. Using it as an opportunity for public display made it a fraud. Jesus told the people of His kingdom to take steps to preserve secrecy when they fasted, so that the practice could remain a pure act of devotion.
Public display would only be rewarded by men, but private sincerity would be rewarded by God.

Discussion:

1) How does it make you feel when you see people putting their good deeds on public display? What do you think motivates them?

2) According to the hypocrites in Matthew 6:2, 5, and 16, what was the best way to use good deeds to their full advantage? What are some activities that Christians might use in the same way today?

3) Why did Jesus tell the people of His kingdom to do their acts of righteousness in secret in Matthew 6:3-4, 6, and 17-18?

4) What should be the motivation for the following acts of righteousness?
   (a) charity  (d) church attendance
   (b) Bible study  (e) fasting
   (c) prayer  (f) volunteering

Application:

Many people in our own time, as in the time of Jesus, take pride in their acts of righteousness, but then they are no longer righteous acts, for God looks at the motive of the heart rather than the size of the deed. Jesus did not want to abolish acts of charity, prayer, and fasting. He wanted to put them in their proper perspective. It is always tempting to voice or display our good deeds before others and then use the compliments and appreciation we receive as justification for our righteousness. But we only deceive others and ourselves and forfeit any eternal reward our action might have brought. As citizens of the kingdom of God we should abound in acts of righteousness because they are expressions of our true character not to convince others that we really are good. A life transformed by Jesus and led by the Holy Spirit will produce acts of righteousness. It will not stage them.

Life of Christ Study #28

Matthew 6:19-34

Theme: Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Prosperity

Summary:

The kingdoms of the world rely heavily upon money for their existence. The search for new sources of revenue is evident in the constant debates and pushes for taxes, acquisitions, or invasions. The world is seen as a giant pie, and everyone scrambles to get the biggest possible piece before it is all gone. The people of the kingdoms carry this
contest to every level of society. Money is desired as the means to secure what they need and the key to obtain what they want, and the line between the two becomes increasingly blurred. Money is used as a measure of accomplishment and as a tool of influence. It is used to maintain the loyalty of those who can help and to buy protection from those who might hurt. It is sought as insurance against the uncertainties of life and as guarantee of experiencing its pleasures. The perspective and place of money was specifically identified by Jesus as a point of difference in His kingdom. The economy of His people would not be driven by the promises of material wealth, for there would be enough for everyone who followed Him.

1) Investment plans (Matthew 6:19-21). The currency of the world is passing and vulnerable according to Jesus. People may construct elaborate plans to guard and multiply their wealth, but there is no sure protection. What thieves do not steal, the effects of time and shifting circumstances will eventually destroy. And death, the great leveler, is not impressed or deterred by large accumulations of assets. As God would later tell the rich fool who concentrated only on earthly treasures, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (see Luke 12:20). Jesus told His followers to invest in the certainty of His kingdom rather than the temporary and unstable fortunes of the world. This meant that they should place higher priority on finding ways to obey God than on discovering new sources of income. They should value righteousness more than affluence. Ultimately, that decision would direct the whole course of their lives, for whatever they made their treasure would become the determining factor in all of their efforts and goals.

2) Hostile takeovers (Matthew 6:22-24). Jesus then moved the discussion of money into its spiritual implications. A person's eyes were regarded as a symbol of his whole character, for whatever the eyes focused their attention on would flood the person's life. Jesus argued that if a man set his eyes on the wrong treasure, the darkness of that error would pervade him. His thoughts and actions would be consumed by the lure of his false treasure. A darkness or blindness would set in which would prevent him from seeing anything truly. Perhaps a person might answer that he could pursue his earthly treasure without violating his commitment to God, but Jesus flatly denied that possibility. He stated that serving two masters could not be done. The demands of the two would conflict at some point, and then the servant would have to choose which he would obey. For a person driven by money, God will always become an obstacle.
3) Social security (Matthew 6:25-34). Jesus called His followers to a radical departure from the world's obsession with material resources. Obedience to God might very well jeopardize the normal system of acquiring food, clothing, and shelter. Jesus wanted to free His people from worries about such things, so that they could be truly free to focus on God and heavenly treasure. He assured them that they were more important in God's sight than the birds or the flowers. If God cared for those things greatly, He would care for His beloved people even more. Jesus said that the subjects of God's kingdom did not need to be consumed with concerns about the necessities of life. People without God have no assurance, but God's people have His promise of provision. Jesus promised that if His people gave themselves in obedience to God, He would see that their needs were met. If pursuing the principles of God's kingdom meant leaving the normal sources of life's basics, He would certainly provide for them. The promise of God gave a security that no amount of planning or investing could ever furnish.

Discussion:

1) Make a list of some of the most attractive things money can buy. Now, for each item on the list, name three ways that item can be stolen or destroyed.

2) What would happen if a football player tried to play for both teams in the same game? Could both teams win? How can you relate this illustration to Jesus's comments about serving two masters in Matthew 6:24?

3) According to Matthew 6:26-32, what should you learn by watching the birds or the flowers? What assurance does a Christian have that a pagan lacks? How should this affect your outlook on life and its basic necessities?

4) Read Matthew 6:33. Based on this verse, should you quit your job? Should you expect to receive whatever you want? What are "all these things" that are promised? What should the promise free you to do?

Application:

The economy of God's kingdom is based on very different principles from the world's system of material possessions. The world assumes a limited supply of resources and a competitive climate. Jesus tells us to assume sufficient resources controlled by our heavenly Father. We do not have to compete for our share. We are free to serve God and to serve others without fear of losing our share to someone more
talented or aggressive. We should work to earn the things we need to live, but we do not have to become enslaved in a fight for survival. We serve one Master only, and we can safely sacrifice anything and everything that conflicts with obeying Him, because He has promised to provide what we need. In the kingdom economy, the bottom line is that God has the resources and knows our needs. He can make each of us millionaires if He chooses or He can give us only what is sufficient for the moment. But He promises to give us all we need to continue obeying Him today. Our job is to seek His kingdom and righteousness. He will supply the rest.

Life of Christ Study #29


Theme: Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Principles

Summary:

It should be clear by now that the lifestyle Jesus presented for the subjects of His kingdom was a very pronounced departure from the typical priorities and values of the world and from the religious appearances of the Pharisees. Jesus wanted a genuine and effective righteousness that flowed out of a real relationship with God through faith. He wanted a righteousness in His people that honestly invited inward scrutiny and instruction from the Lord rather than a code of behavior that satisfied the outward standards of men. He called His people to a life of good deeds that recognized the benefit of obeying God whether any other person noticed or not. And He gave them the freedom to pursue righteousness without fear because He promised to provide everything they needed as they submitted their plans and energies to His will. Matthew related that the people who heard the Sermon on the Mount were "amazed at His teaching." It was not the safe, repetitive formulas of the Pharisees. Jesus spoke of bold commitments and solid promises as one who had the authority to determine right and wrong (Matthew 7:28-29). It was the authority of God.

1) Judging others (Matthew 7:1-6). One of the easiest ways for a person to appear righteous in his own eyes is to compare himself to the failings of others. But there is no great virtue in being able to see the faults of someone else. The real trick is to humbly recognize and admit our own sin. Jesus said that anyone who measured the lives of others in an unbalanced scale would have his own life measured by the same scale (see Luke 6:37-38). In other words, we will be treated by God with the same measure of compassion or severity that we show to others. That is why Jesus told people to deal with the plank in their own eyes before presuming to critique the specks other people have. Then they
would be in a position to offer help to a brother. But it should be offered carefully. Dogs and pigs were considered undiscerning animals. They were just as happy with garbage as with good food. Such people will not receive genuine help gratefully.

2) Asking and receiving (Matthew 7:7-12). Again, the principle is repeated that the people of God's kingdom will not lack any necessary resource to accomplish what God wants. Jesus told them to ask, seek, and knock, and they would find the Lord very willing to respond. Even the people of the world know it is wrong to mock their children's requests for food with stones and snakes. God delights to give good gifts to His people when they ask. But we must keep in mind that God is the one who determines when a gift is good. James warned believers about asking for things to feed their own sinful desires (see James 4:3). God will respond to the legitimate needs of His people, and His people should respond to the legitimate needs of others in the same way.

3) Discerning and producing (Matthew 7:13-23). Jesus knew that many would come along with their own teachings and methods for entering the kingdom of God, so He made it clear that there is only one path leading to life. False teachers can disguise their lies with smooth words and gracious appearances, but their fruit will betray them. A bad tree cannot produce the good fruit of righteousness. It may produce works that will sway the opinions of men, but when these false teachers stand before God, He will not be fooled in the least. Their outwardly correct words and impressive deeds will perish with them as they are exposed as evildoers.

4) Standing (Matthew 7:24-27). Jesus said that the only way to stand in His kingdom is to hear and obey His words. Circumstances and pressures may blow and beat upon His people, but if they have this solid foundation, they will stand. However, anyone who tries to live his life by self-made rules is heading for disaster. The floods of life will tear him to pieces and he will fall in ruin. It does not matter how strong and impressive the building appears, if the foundation is weak, the house will collapse. Wise is the man who begins and builds upon the truth of God.

Discussion:

1) What assumptions do you sometimes make about a Christian who
(a) buys a new luxury car?
(b) takes medication for depression?
(c) applies for financial assistance?
(d) admits doubts about his faith?
What does Matthew 7:1-5 say about your reaction to these people?

2) Read Matthew 7:9-11. What are some good reasons for a parent to say "no" to a child's request? What are some good reasons for God to say "no" to one of your requests?

3) Read Matthew 7:15-20. What should you look for in the lives of people who claim to speak for God? How do you reconcile these verses with the command in Matthew 7:1-2 to not judge others?

4) How could you use the illustration in Matthew 7:24-27 to counsel a person who is disobeying God but says, "I am happy"?

Application:

People who would live as subjects of the kingdom of God are called to obey the laws of the King. It is a commitment which should affect every area of our lives profoundly. It demands that we put aside personal ambition and comfort to serve God and others. It claims precedence over our preferences, desires, and even our prosperity and safety. That sounds outrageous until we remember that God has also promised to provide for our needs as we put His kingdom and righteousness first. If we believe that what He said is true, then we will understand that there is no more secure way to live than in submission to His laws. The foolish man may build a bigger, more impressive house, but without the solid foundation of hearing and obeying Jesus all that he accomplishes will come to ruin. The kingdom of God is not a hobby or an amusing piece of conversation. It is the narrow gate, and all others lead to destruction. It is the only way to live successfully on the earth.

Life of Christ Study #30

Matthew 8:1-13; Luke 7:1-10

Theme: The Centurion's Faith

Summary:

Ever since the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C., the land of Palestine had been under foreign rule. A Jewish uprising in A.D. 7 had worsened the situation by leading to Judea being declared an imperial province. This meant that, in theory, it was ruled by the emperor himself through an appointed prefect. In A.D. 28, the emperor was Tiberius and the prefect was Pontius Pilate. In Galilee, the
situation was only slightly better. Herod Antipas was tetrarch, but he also was subject to the authority of Rome. Roman soldiers were a constant presence in the land, for they were stationed to prevent rebellions and to enforce Roman law, especially the collection of taxes. The Roman soldier came to represent all that the Jews hated about living under conquest. A small sect even developed within Judaism of people called Sicarii (Greek for "daggersmen"). Their solution to Roman occupation was to assassinate Roman soldiers and sympathizers by approaching them in a crowd and stabbing them. Jewish religious leaders detested the immorality of the soldiers, many of whom kept mistresses. Therefore, when Jesus singled out a Roman soldier in Capernaum for special praise, the Jewish crowds took notice.

1) Respect of people (Luke 7:1-5). The centurion (a commander of roughly 60-80 men) who sent to Jesus was not a typical Roman soldier. He apparently did not exhibit the common contempt for people in an occupied land. He demonstrated a love for the land and the people, and he had personally financed the building of the synagogue in Capernaum. Indeed, he was respected enough by the elders of the city that they approached Jesus to plead his request. Matthew's account sounded as if the centurion approached Jesus himself, but Luke provided the details that the exchange between Jesus and the centurion took place through representative messengers. The elders appealed to Jesus on the basis of the centurion's worthiness to receive help from a Jewish teacher.

2) Understanding of authority (Luke 7:6-8). When Jesus accompanied the elders toward the centurion's house, He was met by another delegation of the man's friends. This time the Roman expressed his realization that what he was asking was culturally unusual. Many Jewish religious leaders would not enter a Gentile's home because it was considered unclean. The centurion did not want to offend Jesus or the Jews. Then, he made the amazing statement that he was certain that a simple word of command from Jesus at a distance would heal his servant. The Roman reasoned that Jesus as God's chosen one held an authority over nature similar to the authority he as an officer held over his men. He knew that his authority came from the Roman government but that Jesus's authority came from God. He was not a skeptic looking for proof. He was a man of faith asking for help.

3) Example of faith (Matthew 8:10-13). Jesus was not easily impressed, but the faith of the Roman centurion left Him astonished. Then He turned to the elders and the crowd that had followed Him into Capernaum from the mountain. He had just taught many of these same people about the requirements and nature of His kingdom, and now
He had found a living example in a Roman soldier of all people! His statement to His Jewish audience was both a challenge and a rebuke. The Jews had the benefit of the Old Testament law and prophets to prepare them for the Messiah, yet a Gentile proved to have a better grasp on spiritual truth than any of them. Jesus told the people that other Gentiles would show this same faith and feast with the heroes of Israel in God's kingdom, but some of the Jews would be excluded because they would not believe. The centurion did not need displays of power like some of the Jews (see Matthew 12:38 and 16:1). The Jews demanded a sign before they would believe, but the centurion asked for a sign because he already believed. His faith was rewarded with the recovery of his servant.

Discussion:

1) Which comes first, faith or sight? What do the following verses say about this question?
   (a) John 20:29
   (b) Hebrews 11:1-2
   (c) I Peter 1:8-9

2) Read Luke 7:1-8. What can you learn about the character of the Roman centurion from these verses? How does he compare with some of the religious leaders Jesus had encountered? How does he compare with the kingdom characteristics Jesus outlined in the Sermon on the Mount?

3) Jesus obviously approved of the centurion's illustration of authority and faith in Luke 7:6-8. What can you learn about faith from his illustration?

4) Read Matthew 8:10-12. How do you think the Jewish religious leaders would have felt as they listened to Jesus' praise of the centurion? What challenge does it hold for people who consider themselves religious?

Application:

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus outlined the characteristics and principles which should govern a subject of God's kingdom. His audience was Jewish, a group rich in heritage and pride as the chosen people of God. Yet, when Jesus singled out an example of the kind of faith He was seeking, He found it in a Gentile Roman soldier. Apparently, the people of Capernaum respected this man, but it would have been a rather condescending admiration. They would not have thought of him as spiritually superior to themselves. But this Roman had understood an important concept which had eluded most of the Jews. He believed that Jesus really had authority from God, and he did not need a miraculous sign to prove it to him. Many people watched and listened to Jesus...
without accepting His message. The centurion accepted Jesus and His words without ever seeing Him. We should approach Jesus as believers seeking help and direction, not as skeptics seeking proof.

Life of Christ Study #31

Mark 6:17-29; Matthew 11:2-19; Luke 7:18-35

Theme: A Eulogy for John

Summary:

John the Baptist had done his work of preparing the way for Jesus the new King. He had called people to repentance to get ready for the coming kingdom. He had baptized Jesus and later rejoiced when Jesus drew the crowds and attention that had earlier been his own (see John 3:26-30). Yet, although his time on center stage had passed, John continued to faithfully speak for God. Early in A.D. 28, John had even dared to confront Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea about his immorality. Antipas had started an affair with Herodias the wife of his own brother Philip. As a result, Herodias divorced Philip and married Antipas. At the urging of Herodias, Antipas had imprisoned John at the fortress of Machaerus. Eventually, John would be killed because of the hatred Herodias bore against him (see Mark 6:14-29). While in prison John received reports from his followers about the words and actions of Jesus (see Matthew 11:2). He learned about Jesus raising a widow's son from death in the town of Nain, and he heard that people throughout the region were calling Him a great prophet (see Luke 7:11-17). Finally, John sent messengers to Jesus to ask a question.

1) John's question (Luke 7:18-20). John's question may seem surprising in view of his earlier confident identification of Jesus (see John 1:29-34), but it must be remembered that he was in prison trying to piece together second hand reports. Perhaps he shared some of the Jewish expectations of a Messiah who would expel the Roman government from Palestine. Perhaps he had difficulty understanding how he could be left languishing in a cell if the kingdom of God had come. Perhaps he just needed some reassurance that God's plan was progressing. Whatever the reasons, John apparently was experiencing some doubts. He wanted to know if Jesus was really the Messiah or simply another prophet like himself.

2) Jesus' answer (Luke 7:21-23). By way of reply, Jesus proceeded to perform many miracles of healing and authority over evil spirits. Then he told John's messengers to go back and tell him
what they had seen and heard. The miracles of healing were a sign that the kingdom of God had come (see Isaiah 35:5-6), and the message that Jesus proclaimed fulfilled His role as God's anointed one (see Isaiah 61:1). John would see in these words the proof he desired. Jesus closed His answer with a statement that was both a gentle rebuke and a promise of hope to the captive prophet. Jesus knew that many people fell away from following Him because His ministry did not fit their expectations. But the ones, like John, who still believed in Him would be blessed by God, for they would see His kingdom.

3) Tribute to John (Luke 7:24-28). Jesus then turned to the crowds and praised John to them. John the Baptist was no weak reed, shifting with every wind of circumstance and popular opinion. Nor was he like the palace advisors who made their fortune by telling important people what they wanted to hear. John was a true prophet who spoke the words of God. Indeed, he was the prophet foretold in Malachi 3:1 who would prepare people for the coming of Messiah. In faithfulness and devotion to God John was without peer among men, yet the lowest position in the kingdom was far better by comparison. Those who trusted and followed Jesus were part of the advancement of His kingdom in the face of opposition from violent men (Matthew 11:12). John started that advance as the last in a line of prophets who foretold the coming of Messiah (Matthew 11:13). Malachi had said that Elijah the prophet would come again to turn the hearts of people toward God before judgment fell (see Malachi 4:5-6). John was that Elijah (Matthew 11:14; see also Matthew 17:10-13).

4) Challenge to Pharisees (Luke 7:29-35). The people who had accepted John's message agreed with what Jesus said, but the Pharisees, as usual, rejected His teaching. Therefore, Jesus challenged their criticism by comparing them to children who were never satisfied. When everybody else was playing wedding, they wanted to play funeral. But if others gave in and played funeral, they complained that no one was playing wedding. They accused John of having a demon because he did not eat bread or drink wine. Then they accused Jesus of gluttony because he did eat and drink. The only thing consistent about them was that they would criticize whatever another person did. But the true children of God recognized and followed the truth in spite of opposition.

Discussion:

1) Think of times and circumstances in which you have experienced doubts about God and His care for
you. What were they? How did God reassure you in those times?

2) Read Luke 7:21-23 along with Isaiah 35:5-6 and 61:1. How did Jesus' actions and words relieve John's doubts?


4) Read Luke 7:31-34. Why do you think the Pharisees were critical of John and Jesus?

Application:

Jesus and His kingdom did not fit the expectations of most people. Even John the Baptist experienced doubts. He could not match his circumstances with his perception of God, and he could not reconcile what he heard and saw with his hopes. Yet he did not throw away his faith over his uncertainties. He asked for reassurance and understanding so that he could continue to follow the truth as he had faithfully done throughout his ministry. In contrast, the Pharisees had determined not to believe the truth about God's kingdom. They could not refute the message, so they criticized the messengers instead. If they could claim John had a demon and Jesus was a glutton, then they could dismiss their words. They stubbornly held and protected their self-righteousness and missed the truth which could give them salvation. John was a great prophet, and those who listened to him and to Jesus entered God's kingdom. Meanwhile, the Pharisees stood and mocked like spoiled children.

Life of Christ Study #32

Matthew 11:20-30

Theme: Unrepentance or Rest

Summary:

God's laws of righteousness are universal, applying to those who do not know them as well as to those who do. Yet, there is a principle throughout the Bible that assigns stiffer blame and punishment to those who have seen and heard God's standards but willfully refuse to obey. The Old Testament law given to Moses permitted a sin offering as payment for an unintentional or ignorant sin, but it demanded the death penalty for a willful or defiant sin (see Numbers 15:27-31). The prophet Amos reminded the people of Israel that their special position as God's chosen people made them subject to harsher judgment (see Amos 3:1-2). And later in His ministry, Jesus applied the same principle to those who heard His words
(see Luke 12:47-48). The Pharisees and their followers dismissed the warnings of John by saying he had a demon, and they ignored the teaching and miracles of Jesus with claims that he was a drunkard (see Matthew 11:18-19). Their rejection was willful in the face of conclusive truth and proof. Therefore, their judgment would be severe.

1) Price of unrepentance (Matthew 11:20-24). Jesus was still responding to the unbelief of the Jewish people and leaders when He denounced the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. During His tour of Galilee these three towns, on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee, had witnessed many of His miracles and heard many of His teachings. Very likely, most of the people who had listened to the Sermon on the Mount were from those towns. Yet the majority of those people had seen and heard without turning from their sins for forgiveness. Tyre and Sidon were Mediterranean cities known for wealth, idolatry, and immorality. In 701 B.C., Sennacherib of Assyria subdued them in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of woe (see Isaiah 23). Jesus said that those wicked Gentile cities would have repented and mourned if they had seen the miracles Korazin and Bethsaida witnessed. In the same way, Sodom, destroyed because of its excessive evil (see Genesis 19:1-26), would have been preserved if it had seen the miracles performed in Capernaum, for its inhabitants would have repented. The people who saw and heard Jesus were more guilty than those ancient cities because they had seen the truth and willfully rejected it.

2) Praise for revelation (Matthew 11:25-27). The fact that people could hear the message of Jesus, see it confirmed with miracles of supernatural power, and still reject it defied logic. Yet Jesus knew that understanding and believing spiritual truth was not a matter of human intellect or education. God had hidden the truth from those who trusted in reason and investigation and had revealed it to those who would trust Him like children. That is the faith that pleases God. God further placed the revelation of truth into the hands of Jesus, making Him ruler of the kingdom, so that none could know God without first accepting His Son. This gave Jesus the authority to choose those to whom He would reveal the truth of the kingdom. Many would hear and see, but only the chosen ones would understand and believe.

3) Promise of rest (Matthew 11:28-30). The ones Jesus chose to receive His truth were those who were weary of carrying the burden of their own righteousness. They were the ones willing to admit that their works, systems, rules, and rituals would never be enough to make them
acceptable to a holy God. To them Jesus gave the invitation of rest. In His yoke they would find the peace that all their efforts could never obtain. He invited them to learn from Him rather than the elaborate law books of the Pharisees which only increased their burden without relief. They would find Jesus a gentle and compassionate master in comparison, and their souls would find the peace and rest of forgiveness. The yoke of following Jesus and the burden of obeying Him are easy and light compared to the toil and anguish of trying to escape the guilt of sin alone.

Discussion:

1) According to the following verses, what added responsibility does hearing the truth bring to a person? What is the price of willful rejection?
   (a) Numbers 15:27-30
   (b) Amos 3:1-2
   (c) Luke 12:47-48

2) Read Matthew 11:21-24. How could you apply these verses to people today who participate in the activities of God’s people without turning from their sins?

3) Read Matthew 11:25-27. What kind of people are least likely to understand spiritual truth? What kind of people are most likely?

4) Read Matthew 11:28-30. In what ways have you found the yoke and burden of Jesus to be easy and light in comparison to what the world offers?

Application:

Jesus put the choice very plainly before the people who heard Him and saw the miracles He performed. They could choose to reject the truth revealed to them and bear the judgment of unrepentance, or they could humbly accept His yoke and burden and find rest for their souls. The choice should have been obvious, but the determination of people to trust their own wisdom, skill, and efforts is astounding. The weariness they feel from carrying the burden of their own righteousness is God’s constant reminder that their choice is not working. When, at last, they are prepared to acknowledge defeat, He invites them to find compassion and rest in His forgiveness. The freedom of repentance is sweet, for it takes away the heavy burden of guilt and failure.

Life of Christ Study #33

Luke 7:36-50
Theme: Picture of a Sinful Woman

Summary:

As Jesus traveled through Galilee, the responses of the Pharisees and other religious leaders seemed to follow a cycle of curiosity and rejection. They could not withstand the draw of His miracles and His popularity among the people, but they would not accept His calls for repentance or His claims of a unique authority from God. In most of their encounters they would grumble charges of blasphemy or He would sharply denounce their hypocrisy, but they were always drawn back for another try, like a man who cannot resist one more attempt at a puzzle which has repeatedly confounded him. Perhaps that is why Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to a banquet in His honor. Social custom made it a point of pride to host a well known teacher who was visiting the town, and it would also provide an occasion to examine this new prophet more closely. Simon must have heard about, even if he had not personally witnessed, Jesus' antagonism toward the religious system he represented, yet he was compelled to see for himself. His opportunity came when a certain woman of the town showed up at the banquet.

1) The Pharisee's picture (Luke 7:36-39). A banquet was a public occasion when people could drop by to hear the conversation and perhaps receive a scrap of food. Still, it was surprising that a woman with a reputation for living a sinful life would dare to enter a Pharisee's house when he was hosting a famous religious teacher. But she did not come to observe or eat. Her purpose was more urgent and personal, so that she endured the stares and whispers to accomplish it. She approached Jesus from behind as He reclined with His head toward the table and His feet toward her. She was weeping, and her tears fell upon His feet. She bowed her head to wipe them with her hair, and she kissed them again and again. Then she poured a jar of perfume over His feet. Simon was disgusted as he watched these actions. He probably assumed that the woman had some immoral purpose in mind, and he was amazed that Jesus did nothing to stop her. In his system, a prophet should have nothing to do with a sinner. For Simon, the way to demonstrate righteousness was to condemn and despise those who were obviously unrighteous.

2) Refocus (Luke 7:40-43). Jesus knew the attitude of men like Simon, so He told a story to help the Pharisee see the world from a new perspective. Even Simon could recognize that the cancellation of a larger debt would produce a larger sense of gratitude and love, although the slight hesitation in his reply may show that he did not see how the principle related to the current situation. In his mind, forgiveness was something deserved by those who were basically good anyway. It was not given to those who had
sinned in big ways. Simon's attitude toward the woman was unchanged, but Jesus had succeeded in switching his focus from her sinfulness to the issue of forgiveness.

3) Jesus' picture (Luke 7:44-50). Now Jesus turned Simon's attention back to the woman for His application of the story. Simon had invited Jesus to dinner to enhance his reputation as a Pharisee who was involved in the deepest religious matters. The woman came to Jesus to confirm her poor reputation and to seek mercy. Simon had neglected the simple custom of providing water for his guest's feet. The woman had supplied her own humble water and towel in spite of public ridicule. Simon did not greet Jesus with a kiss of friendship. The woman was driven by love to kiss his feet. Simon had not even given the customary drop of oil for an honored guest. The woman emptied an entire jar of perfume to honor Him. She understood her need to be forgiven much, so great was her love in return. Simon did not think he needed anything from Jesus, so he performed only the barest courtesies. Her load of sin was forgiven, and the implications for the proud Pharisee were clear. Once again, Jesus used an encounter with the religious leaders to teach a lesson of true religion and forgiveness.

Discussion:

1) What reactions might be generated in a church today if a known prostitute hugged the pastor in the hallway?

2) Read Luke 7:39. What did Simon's statement reveal about his concepts of righteousness, sin, and forgiveness?

3) Read Luke 7:44-46. Compare the attitude of Simon with that of the woman. What words would you use to describe Simon? What words would you use to describe the woman?

4) Read Luke 7:47. According to this verse, how will a person's willingness to seek and accept forgiveness affect his ability to love? In general, how does a forgiven person view the flaws of others?

Application:

Simon the Pharisee approached Jesus in a way that was socially and religiously proper. However, spiritually his approach was all wrong. He treated Jesus as a respected teacher at best and as a novelty to be evaluated and judged at worst. Jesus was the centerpiece of his party but not of his life. He did not see a personal need for forgiveness and
salvation, and so he looked at Jesus with indifference and the sinful woman with contempt. Since he would not experience forgiveness he could not experience gratitude and compassion. The woman, on the other hand, did not ask for honor or good treatment. She only asked for unmerited mercy. Thus, when Jesus responded with kindness, she was filled with a love that cared not for the opinions of others. She had to find ways to express her gratitude. Her attitude sets an example for all who have found mercy and forgiveness in Jesus. There is no place for boasting in our salvation (see Ephesians 2:8-9). There is only room for grateful worship and love.

Life of Christ Study #34

Matthew 12:22-37; Mark 3:20-30

Theme: A Blasphemous Accusation

Summary:

There is a period of time in the career of any noteworthy public figure during which people in general seem content to watch and wait. They listen to his message, evaluate his actions, and form ideas and opinions about his character and direction. Some are motivated by curiosity, others by genuine interest, and some by jealousy or greed. Then there comes a point when private conclusions are thrown into public debate, and suddenly everyone has an opinion or theory about the person in question. This turning point came in the ministry of Jesus as the fame of His words and deeds spread throughout Galilee in the waning months of A.D. 28. The Pharisees, of course, had already shown their increasing hostility as time after time their attempts to discredit Him ended in embarrassment. They could question His teaching, but they could not refute His consistent interpretation and application of the Old Testament law, and the powerful proof of His miracles beat their arguments into the dust. He was gaining followers not only from among the poor and oppressed, but also from the upper classes of Jewish society (see Luke 8:1-3). Everyone seemed to know about Jesus.

1) Opinions (Matthew 12:22-23; Mark 3:20-21). The fact that everyone seemed to know about Jesus did not mean that they understood Him however. The crowds, which so mobbed Him that He could not even find time or place for an uninterrupted meal, were widely divided in their opinions. On the one extreme were those who were convinced that Jesus was a madman. "He is out of His mind," they said, and apparently enough said it that Jesus's own family came to investigate. On the other side were people like the ones who witnessed the healing of the man made blind and mute by a demon. When they saw this miracle, they began to form the correct conclusion that Jesus must be the Messiah.
2) Accusation (Matthew 12:24). The Pharisees knew they must respond quickly and strongly to such dangerous talk about Jesus being God's Messiah. They had also witnessed the miracle, and they knew that it offered conclusive proof, but they would not allow it to stand. If they accepted Jesus as Messiah, then they would have to acknowledge the truth of His indictments against their legalism and shallow appearance of righteousness. They would have to admit they had a need for repentance and forgiveness, and they would have to give up their monopoly on religious authority. This they would not do. So they blurted out an accusation which they could never prove but which might discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people. They said that He Himself was ruled by Beelzebub, another name for Satan, the ruler of demons.

3) Defense (Matthew 12:25-29). It was a flimsy charge, driven more by hatred and hardness than by any logic or reason. Jesus easily tore apart their argument. To begin, He pointed out that no ruler, least of all one as experienced as Satan, was in the habit of waging battles between his own soldiers (v.25-26). It would only drain his strength and reveal his weaknesses until his kingdom collapsed. In healing the man, Jesus had defeated Satan's efforts not promoted them. Secondly, Jesus asked why the Pharisees did not apply the same weird logic to their own members who practiced exorcisms (v.27). Finally, He proposed the obvious true conclusion (v.28-29). His authority over demons proved that God's Spirit was working through Him as the ruler of God's kingdom. Satan was powerless to stop Jesus from driving out his demons because Jesus had already defeated Satan (see Matthew 4:1-11).

4) Warning (Matthew 12:30-37). Jesus then challenged the Pharisees to give up their game of opposing Him while claiming to speak for God. Just as Satan's house could not be divided against itself, neither could God's. Anyone who opposed Jesus was an enemy of God and His kingdom. Misunderstandings and false conclusions about Jesus could be forgiven, but willful refusal to acknowledge the work of God's Spirit in the face of conclusive visible and physical proof showed a resolved opposition to God which would never be forgiven. Such was the blasphemy of the Pharisees. They tried to look and sound good, but their words revealed the evil within them. They may have spoken carelessly, but their words would condemn them as hardened in disbelief.

Discussion:

different opinions about Jesus did people hold? What do you think prompted these widely divergent conclusions? Do people hold similar opinions about Him today?

2) Consider political or religious debates you have heard. Why do people in these settings make accusations about each other which can never be proven? What do they hope to accomplish?

3) Why did Jesus warn the Pharisees about a blasphemy that would never be forgiven in Matthew 12:31-32? Was their blasphemy in their words or in the attitude of determined resistance their words revealed according to Matthew 12:33-34?

4) Read Matthew 12:35-37. Which of the following definitions of "careless word" would you apply to the Pharisees? Why?
   (a) A statement which does not represent the true views of the speaker.
   (b) A statement which unwittingly reveals the true character of the speaker.
   (c) A statement intended as a jest, but taken as a fact.

Application:

The attitude of the Pharisees could be summed up in the statement, "I've already made up my mind, so don't bother me with the truth." They loved to appear as reasonable and knowledgeable, but their confident and religious exterior covered hearts that were determined not to believe the message of Jesus. They tried to discredit Him with questions and arguments, but when confronted with conclusive proof, they resorted to an accusation that even they did not believe. They knew it was false, but they held to it rather than admit the alternative. Jesus used this to reveal their true character. They could no longer claim to love God while opposing His Messiah. They had removed themselves from forgiveness since they refused to even consider that they could be wrong. God can overcome our ignorance and our excuses, but there is no cure for willful unrepentance. The unpardonable sin is a determination not to accept what God says is true.

Life of Christ Study #35

Matthew 12:38-13:3; Mark 3:31-4:2; Luke 8:19-21

Theme: Time to Decide

Summary:

When the Pharisees voiced their blasphemous accusation, they revealed a deliberate choice to reject Jesus and His
message (see Matthew 12:22-37), and that event marked a change in how Jesus presented His message to the people of Galilee. He still showed compassion to the suffering and offered healing to the sick, but His patience with the religious leaders and the casual followers had worn thin. His teaching took on more of a tone of challenge to make a clear decision to believe Him or to openly reject Him. The time for spectators and doubters had passed. Now He was looking for men and women who would believe and follow no matter what anybody else thought. He increasingly concentrated on His disciples, training and teaching them specifically and at times exclusively. He pushed for decisions from the crowds, where before He had seemed content to leave them contemplating what they had seen and heard in astonishment. These changes became evident in three incidents which occurred immediately after the accusation of the Pharisees.

1) Refusal of a sign (Matthew 12:38-45). The Pharisees, possibly some of the same ones who had just accused Him of being in league with Satan, asked to see a sign of His power. But Jesus knew that they had already chosen to reject Him. They had just witnessed His power over demons, yet they refused to believe. So He refused their demand for an immediate sign and referred them to the story of Jonah. The ultimate display of God's power would be the resurrection of Jesus after three days and nights in the tomb. Then Jesus turned to the more immediate issue of disbelief. The pagan people of Nineveh repented in response to the message of Jonah (see Jonah 3:4-6), but the people of Galilee refused to listen to one greater than Jonah. In the same way, the Gentile Queen of Sheba traveled a great distance to learn from the wisdom of Solomon (see 1 Kings 10:1-2), yet the Pharisees treated one greater than Solomon with contempt. They wanted to see signs but would not hear truth. The effects of miracles were temporary, like a man who is delivered of an evil spirit. If he does not fill his life with truth, the spirit will simply return with seven others even more wicked. That was how Jesus saw the people who witnessed His miracles and heard His teaching without repenting. No matter how many demons He removed, their disbelief simply invited more to come. Thus, they would be in a worse spiritual condition than before they heard.

2) Requirement of obedience (Matthew 12:46-50). At this point, Jesus' teaching was interrupted by the arrival of His mother and brothers. His family had come in response to reports that He had become mentally unstable (see Mark 3:20-21). Now, they were unable to get through the crowd to see Him (see Luke 8:19), so a messenger was sent inside to inform Him that they wished to speak to Him. Instead of leaving at once, Jesus pointed to His disciples and said that they were His true
family. He meant no disrespect to His blood relations, but those who responded to God's message in obedience held a closer relationship to Him than blood could create. Such a statement must have astounded His listeners who considered family ties to be sacred, but Jesus wanted them to know that obedience was essential to a relationship with God.

3) Recourse to parables (Matthew 13:1-3). Later that same day, Jesus went out to the shores of the Sea of Galilee and the crowds followed Him. He spoke to them in parables or word pictures. It is estimated that as much as one-third of the recorded teachings of Jesus were in parabolic form. To be sure, parables could be used to make a point easier to understand. But they could also be used to conceal truth from those who were already hardened against the truth. That is how Jesus used them on this day (see Matthew 13:10-13). He gave His attention and His teaching to those who had decided to follow Him. The others could remain in their chosen state of willful blindness.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 12:24 and 12:38. Why do you think the Pharisees would try to discredit a miracle one moment and then ask to see a miracle the next? What was their attitude toward the miracles and message of Jesus?

2) Read Jonah 3:4-6 and I Kings 10:1-2. Compare the response of these Gentile audiences to God's message with the response of the Pharisees. What differences do you see?

3) Read Matthew 12:43-45. What warning do these verses hold for those who think they can experience blessings from God without obedience?

4) Read Matthew 12:46-50. How do the following verses support Jesus' idea of spiritual family?

   (a) John 1:12-13
   (b) Romans 8:12-16
   (c) Galatians 3:26-29
   (d) Hebrews 2:10-11

Application:

Jesus invited people to see and hear Him and to consider His message. But He also called them to a clear decision. He gave them truth which they could freely accept or reject, but they could not treat it as a neutral issue. They had to decide for or against Him. In the same way today, His kingdom is not one of spectators and doubters. It is a kingdom of people who hear and obey God. It is not for those who simply want to see a few miracles and casually associate with the
good principles of Christianity. It is for those who will accept Jesus as Messiah, His message as truth, and His direction as final. It is not for those who trust in religious behavior and good works to make them pleasing to God. It is for those who will acknowledge their need for salvation like the people of Nineveh, and it is for those who will seek to learn from Jesus like the Queen of the South.

Life of Christ Study #36


Theme: The Parable of the Sower

Summary:

The first parable Jesus told continued the theme that His listeners bore a responsibility to make a clear decision about His message. Anyone was free to come and watch and listen, but the benefits of Jesus' words were only for those who chose to take them to heart. There was no great virtue in being part of the crowd who heard Him teach, and there was not even a reward for nodding approvingly. The kingdom and its promises were reserved for those who grasped the message and incorporated it into their lives. Many Pharisees and rulers heard but rejected the truth in pride and ignorance. Some listened with tempered indifference as they might listen to the musings of any philosopher or wise man. Some heard and were excited, but their enthusiasm soon cooled in the shadows of personal plans and concerns. Others listened and believed, and the seeds of new life began to grow within them. Each of these people was present whenever Jesus spoke to the crowds.

1) Statement of the parable (Matthew 13:3-9). The images Jesus used to tell His story would have been very familiar to His audience. They had all seen a farmer scattering seed by walking along a footpath in a field and casting handfuls to either side. Birds would easily spot the seed lying on the bare path and would snatch it up immediately. The soil in Palestine was notoriously shallow and rocky. A patch could appear filled with new growth one week and brown and withered the next. Thistles and weeds also took their toll, blocking the necessary growth of new roots. Yet, in spite of all these familiar obstacles, the seed which fell on good soil in Jesus' parable produced an excellent return for that region. Even thirty seeds produced for each seed planted was more than double the usual harvest in Galilee.

2) Reason for the parable (Matthew 13:10-17). The disciples immediately detected a change in the way Jesus was using the parable. Normally, such a story was a way to illustrate and help people
to understand a point of spiritual truth (see Luke 6:47-49 as an example), but if the central principle was not stated, then people were left to guess what the story was illustrating. That Jesus would omit such a detail on this occasion was especially surprising because of the large audience. Yet His response to the disciples' inquiry was probably even more astonishing to them. Jesus told them that He was using parables purposely to conceal truth from many of His listeners. They had already proven that they would not or could not grasp the spiritual meaning of what they saw and heard. The image of eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear was associated with rebellion in the Old Testament (see Deuteronomy 29:2-4; Isaiah 6:9-10; Jeremiah 5:21-23; Ezekiel 12:2). They had become hardened in their unbelief against the truth, so the truth would no longer be given to them. But the disciples were blessed, for they believed, and the secrets of the kingdom would be given to them.

3) Explanation of the parable (Matthew 13:18-23). Jesus explained the story of the sower to His disciples in private. He supplied them with the key principle that the truth of the kingdom is spread like seed to everyone but it only takes root in the lives of some. Satan finds it easy to snatch the truth from those not inclined to accept it anyway, and an initial emotional response of enthusiasm may not last in hard circumstances. Others hear but never pursue because their attention is drawn away by the worries, desires, and pleasures that surround them. But the person who hears the truth and adopts it for his life grows and flourishes.

4) Puzzle of the parables (Mark 4:21-25). The disciples were probably still bothered that the use of parables seemed to involve a deliberate hiding of truth from lost people, but Jesus showed them a more accurate perspective. Of course it would be foolish or cruel to hide something that could bring great good to people, but that was not what Jesus was doing. If truth was hidden by parables, it was hidden from those who would not accept it. It was hidden in hopes of being disclosed when they began seeking instead of despising. It would be revealed in measure with their willingness to accept.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 13:3-9 and remember that this was all most of the gathered crowd heard. What would you think of this story if you did not have Jesus' explanation in Matthew 13:18-23?
2) Read Matthew 13:13-15. What do the following verses tell you about the concept of seeing without perceiving and hearing without understanding? What was the real problem with the eyes and ears of the people?
   (a) Deuteronomy 29:2-4
   (b) Isaiah 6:9-10
   (c) Jeremiah 5:21-23
   (d) Ezekiel 12:2

3) Read Matthew 13:18-23. According to the parable of the sower, what are the possible responses to hearing the truth?

4) Read Mark 4:21-25. Will God purposely hide the truth from a person who will believe and follow it? What can happen to someone who treats God's truth with indifference? Why do you think Jesus said, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear"?

Application:

The word parable means "something set alongside or compared." In the Gospels, it is a comparison between an observable situation and a spiritual truth. When both are given a parable serves as an illustration to make the spiritual truth easier to grasp. But if the truth is not stated, the parable is an illustration without a context. At first it may seem cruel that Jesus would present a parable without telling His audience the spiritual truth so that they could not make the connection. However, Jesus was responding to the unbelief of the people. They had already chosen to ignore or reject the spiritual truth, so the unexplained parable was all that remained. Jesus did this to draw them into asking questions which would reveal the spiritual truth. But the disciples were the only ones who cared to ask. The rest were content to see without perceiving and to listen without understanding. Truth is only given in the measure that we seek it, and it only grows and thrives if we hear it "in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance" (Luke 8:15).

Life of Christ Study #37

Matthew 13:24-52; Mark 4:26-34

Theme: Kingdom Parables

Summary:

Just as everyone had an opinion about Jesus, so everyone had a theory about the kingdom He proclaimed. Most probably assumed that it would include all of the Jewish people, while some may have reserved it for the spiritual elite. Many awaited a grand and glorious inauguration. Jesus knew that nearly every theory was fueled more by political and economic
ambitions than by true hunger for the righteousness of God. The series of parables that He used after challenging them with the story of the sower (see Matthew 13:1-23) were given to teach the true nature of the kingdom of heaven. They are called kingdom parables because they illustrate certain aspects of the kingdom. They exploded some of the expectations people carried and emphasized that God's kingdom is not concerned with the trappings the world associates with empires and royalty. The message that Jesus drove home again and again through these parables was that the kingdom had indeed come, but it had not taken the form most people expected. Faith and discernment were needed to understand the characteristics of the kingdom.

1) It is awaiting harvest (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). Many Jews assumed they were part of God's kingdom automatically because of their descent from Abraham. In this parable, however, Jesus pictures the world as a field in which wheat and tares grow side by side. The tares were probably darnel weeds which look very much like wheat until nearly harvest time when the heads of the wheat stalks become evident. At the present time, both Jesus and the devil have their followers in the world. Judgment between the two is delayed until the appointed time of harvest. But at that future harvest, the tares will be separated from the wheat and sent to eternal punishment. Meanwhile, the wheat will be gathered into God's kingdom. Living in the world and hearing Jesus' message and mingling with God's people is no guarantee of membership in the kingdom.

2) It is growing (Mark 4:26-29; Matthew 13:31-35). The people looked for miraculous signs and great changes to mark the kingdom (see Matthew 12:38, 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; John 2:18, 6:30), but its real progress is not so conspicuous, although its effect is huge. Like seeds scattered on the ground, it sprouts and grows slowly but steadily until it is a full crop ready for harvest (Mark 4:26-29). Or it is like a mustard seed, the smallest crop seed used in Galilee at the time, which grows to become one of the largest garden plants, sometimes reaching a height of ten feet (Matthew 13:31-32). Or, again, it is like the small measure of yeast that is placed into a large pile of dough. It eventually permeates the entire mixture (Matthew 13:33).

3) It is beyond price (Matthew 13:44-46). The Jewish religious leaders, especially, did not see the need for any significant changes in their lives. They assumed the kingdom would be theirs along with everything they already had, for they really saw little difference between the two. Jesus presented the kingdom as a treasure found by a
workman or a matchless pearl found by a merchant. It is of such surpassing value that these men would gladly give up all they had to obtain it. Anyone who would gain it must realize that it is not in his possession and that it is worth everything to have.

4) It is selective (Matthew 13:47-50). Again, it was thought that there was no distinction among children of Abraham and that all would gain entrance to the kingdom. However, any fisherman would know that there is certainly a distinction among fish. The dragnet was large, with floats on one edge and weights on the opposite, so that it caught any fish in its path indiscriminately. But later, the fishermen would separate the good from the bad. So will the angels someday cast the wicked into everlasting punishment.

5) It is new and old (Matthew 13:51-52). Some believed the way to the kingdom was through keeping the old traditions while others believed it would come through a completely new set of rules. Those who properly understood what Jesus taught about the kingdom would see that it came as a new message which did not at all violate or negate the Old Testament law.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 13:24-30. How are wheat and tares different in the following areas?
   (a) Their beginning.  
   (b) Their fruit.  
   (c) Their end.

Now read Matthew 13:36-43. How can these differences be applied to sons of the kingdom and sons of the evil one?

2) Read Mark 4:26-29 and Matthew 13:31-35. What words would you use to describe the growth of the kingdom as presented in these parables?

3) In Luke 18:18-23, Jesus encountered a rich ruler. What could this man have learned from the parables in Matthew 13:44-46?

4) Read Matthew 13:47-50. What caution does this parable hold for people who regularly attend church today?

Application:

The message that rings loud in the kingdom parables is that the kingdom is here and growing, but not necessarily in the way people expect. Many of the people who heard Jesus were so busy dreaming and teaching about their vision of what God's kingdom would be that they could or would not recognize the real thing when it was offered to them. God works within
His rules not ours. He was and is completely consistent with His own prophecies and revelation, but He is not bound by our methods and interpretations. God's kingdom is progressing exactly according to His plan and purpose, and man's efforts to speed it up through programs and ideas or to slow it down through laziness and opposition have negligible effect. We must be sure that we are in the kingdom personally and then be careful to proclaim it accurately and faithfully. God will oversee incredible spurts of growth and slow periods of relatively hidden progress. But His kingdom will move toward its fulfillment.

Life of Christ Study #38

Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25

Theme: Calm Sea

Summary:

The day of parables was drawing to a close, and Jesus withdrew from the crowds to have time alone with His disciples. He explained all of the parables to them at that time (see Mark 4:33-34). They were given information that was not given to the people in general, but they soon proved that it was not because of their superior faith. They were willing to learn from Jesus, and they did not ignore or reject His teaching. That is what separated them from the crowds. But they still had much to learn and understand, and their eagerness to listen was always ahead of their ability to believe. When Jesus suggested that they go across the Sea of Galilee that evening, the disciples did not realize that it would be a test of their faith and a rebuke of their shallow understanding. They had been on the Sea many times before, so they knew that squalls could arise suddenly and dangerously away from the safety of the shoreline. Yet the storm that came was swiftly beyond the skill of their hands or the faith of their hearts.

1) Unsettled weather (Mark 4:36-39). A number of other boats accompanied the one carrying Jesus and His disciples. A driving gale swept across the Sea, stirring up waves which crashed over the sides of the boat. The disciples probably bailed desperately, but the boat was soon filling with water and in danger of sinking. Meanwhile, Jesus was sleeping peacefully on the seat in the stern. In their fear, the disciples aroused Him. It was because of His directions that they were in this trouble, and He slept while they worked to save themselves. His calm agitated their terror all the more, and they wondered if He even cared about their lives. In reply, Jesus simply stood and commanded the wind and waves to be quiet and still. Instantly, the squall subsided and the sea was calm.
2) Unsettled men (Mark 4:40). Jesus then turned to His disciples and asked why they were so afraid. From a human standpoint, the answer would seem obvious: wind threatened to tip the boat and waves nearly swamped it. They were too far from shore to swim in such choppy water, and death had appeared imminent. These are sufficient reasons for most people to be overwhelmed with fear. But Jesus also asked His disciples about their faith. It was relatively easy to confidently believe when they were sitting with Him on shore listening to a private explanation of the parables. It was another matter entirely to apply that belief to a raging storm. Yet the proof of a person's faith comes in the wind and waves rather than the calm. Whether they lived or died with Jesus, His presence was enough to insure that they were safe in the hands of God.

3) Unsettling conclusion (Mark 4:41). One fear passed as the disciples saw the Sea calmed, but it was replaced by a new and different fear. They realized, as if for the first time, that they were in the presence of God Himself. Sailors had once asked the prophet Jonah to save them from a storm sent by God, but he was as helpless as they were (see Jonah 1:4-12). Yet Jesus had only spoken a few words of command, and nature had obeyed His voice. They were comfortable with Jesus as a wise teacher and a healer, but such power as this was too unpredictable, too sovereign. When Jesus taught, the disciples could be His faithful followers and intimates, but when He displayed His authority over the earth, they could only stand in awe and see that His sovereignty extended over their lives as well. The King could lead them into storms or into calm.

Discussion:

1) What would you think of a salesman who refused to test his own product? What would be your opinion of a product that failed in a demonstration? How important is it for a teacher to live his own teaching under pressure?

2) Read Mark 4:38. Why do you think the disciples were upset with Jesus? This was the first recorded time that following His instructions had led them into real danger. How could this have added to their terror?

3) Read Philippians 1:20-26. How might Paul have counseled the disciples in their fear of the storm? What does this teach you about the fears and pressures in your life?

4) Compare the reaction of the disciples in Mark 4:41
with the following verses. What is the common reaction of those who find themselves in the presence of God?
(a) Judges 13:19-23
(b) Isaiah 6:1-5
(c) Luke 5:5-8
(d) Revelation 1:12-17

Application:

The disciples crossed a threshold that evening on the Sea of Galilee. They were challenged to consider whether following Jesus was really safe in the way they had thought. Listening to His teaching, watching His debates with the Pharisees, and witnessing His miracles could become comfortable. Realizing that He had the sovereign right of life and death over them was far from soothing. It is a step of maturing that every follower of Jesus must make. The decision to follow Him because we are committed to Him is different than the decision to follow because He makes us feel good and secure. Yet even in the storm, the disciples could not have been in a better place, for they were with Jesus. The confidence of obeying Jesus is not in freedom from pain and hardship. It is in knowing that He is with us and will direct our steps. We cannot lose, for as Paul said, "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Life of Christ Study #39

Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39

Theme: Calm Man

Summary:

The disciples probably were still somewhat shaken when they arrived with Jesus on the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee. They landed in the region of Decapolis, a largely Gentile area outside of the domain of Herod Antipas. Mark called it the region of the Gerasenes after one of its well-known cities, but Matthew specified that the event that followed happened in the area around Gadara, a city about eight miles from the Sea. Apparently, the place where the boat landed was near some tombs, and the first people to meet them were two men with demons who lived in the graveyard (see Matthew 8:28). Mark only dealt with the leader of the two, a man who was by all appearances completely out of control. Evil spirits stirred his life much the same as the storm had stirred the waters of the Sea. Yet Jesus had calmed the wind and waves with simple words of authoritative command. Now, His authority would be revealed again, not toward the realm of nature, but toward the realm of spirits.

1) Out of control (Mark 5:1-5). This man had defied all treatments and restraints that had been tried upon him. People had even attempted to bind him
with shackles and chains on several occasions, but he had broken them in his frenzies. Now, no one dared to approach him, and he was allowed to roam the graveyard, screaming and doing violence only to himself. He seemed more animal than man, naked and wild (see Luke 8:27). In him, Satan's power seemed to be stronger than any cure, and his presence was a continual reminder to people of their vulnerability to the spirit world. He was beyond human hope and even beyond the courage of human compassion, and so he was left to haunt the tombs.

2) Change of control (Mark 5:6-13). Apparently, Jesus spoke first, commanding the evil spirit to come out of the man. That is why the demon offered no resistance. He knew that the authority of Jesus was complete and final. In fact, the demon was so convinced of Jesus' power that he used the voice of the man to invoke the name of God in his own protection (v.7). Jesus could do anything he wanted to the demon, so, in effect, the demon appealed to God for mercy! Jesus simply asked his name in reply. There is no indication that this was a way of gaining authority over the demon, for Jesus did not seek this information in any other encounter with demons and by the demon's own admission he already had the power to dispose of him as He pleased. Probably, Jesus asked the question so that His disciples could understand the nature and severity of what they were seeing. When the demon answered, it became clear that the man had a multitude of evil spirits influencing him. As a last resort, the demons begged Jesus to allow them to go into a nearby herd of pigs instead of casting them into judgment. Jesus agreed, and two thousand pigs charged down the slope and into the Sea of Galilee.

3) Under new control (Mark 5:14-20). The swineherds bolted in terror toward the town. Soon everyone in the area heard about the amazing events. They gathered to the shore of the Sea, probably on the next day, and found the man free from the demons, clothed, sitting and talking with Jesus. The man had been a source of fear to them for a long time, but now they feared Jesus even more. They assumed He was some powerful magician, and they may have been upset over the loss of the pigs as well, so they begged Him to leave (v.16-17). As Jesus and His disciples prepared their boat to go, the restored man asked permission to come with them. He was beginning a new life, and He wanted to follow his deliverer, but Jesus told him to tell his story to his family in Decapolis. The people of that area did not want Jesus to stay, but He left behind a witness who spread the word throughout the region (v.20).
Discussion:

1) Read Mark 5:1-5. What human efforts had failed to help the man with the demon? How do you think he was viewed and treated by most of the people?

2) Read Mark 5:6-12. What evidence do you find that the demons knew that Jesus had authority over them?

3) On three occasions in this section, someone begs Jesus for a favor. What opinion did each of the three hold of Jesus?
   (a) The demons (Mark 5:10-12)
   (b) The people (Mark 5:17)
   (c) The man (Mark 5:18)

4) Read Mark 5:19. If Jesus gave those instructions to you, what would you tell your family?

Application:

The presence and manifestation of evil spirits was as frightening to the people in New Testament times as it is today. There was a feeling of helplessness and uncertainty as human attempts to deal with the man failed. There is much about the conversation that is not explained to us. Jesus obviously did not need the demon's name in order to cast him out, so why did He ask it? Why did the demons beg to be allowed to enter the pigs, and why did Jesus grant them permission? Why did the demons cause the pigs to run into the Sea? This section is not meant to be a manual on handling demons. It is meant to show that Jesus had absolute authority over the plans and messengers of Satan, and the demons recognized the fact instantly. Just as He was able to calm the Sea with a word of command, He had power to calm a man afflicted by countess evil spirits. Not only that, but He could also use that same man to bring glory to God and the truth to a whole region of people.

Life of Christ Study #40

Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56

Theme: Just a Touch

Summary:

After leaving many frightened residents and at least one strong witness around the city of Gadara (see Mark 5:17-20) Jesus returned with His disciples to Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Amazingly, the crowd He had left behind the previous day quickly gathered around Him again. These were the same people to whom Jesus had spoken in parables because they would not believe (see Matthew 13:10-17), yet their curiosity for novel teachings and sights kept them coming back. Jesus knew that a crowd was usually shallow
and fickle, formed by little more noble than a desire to be entertained. In a crowd, however, were certain people who genuinely came to hear and learn. They were looking for a touch that would change their lives where others sought only amusement for a few hours. Jesus' message was for the honest seekers, for He could provide the touch they needed. In the crowd at Capernaum that day were two people looking for such a touch from the King.

1) A touch of compassion (Mark 5:22-24). Out of the crowd came a religious official named Jairus who knelt before Jesus as one would only kneel before a great ruler or before God. He pleaded with Jesus on behalf of his twelve year old daughter who was gravely ill. Indeed, from the words he used, it is clear that her death was a foregone conclusion. Yet this father believed that a touch from Jesus could restore her to life and health when there was no other hope. Jesus recognized immediately that this man was one of the few from the crowd who heard and accepted, so He agreed to go with him to his home. The crowd of people, probably sensing some new show to feed their curiosity, followed. Jesus was willing to leave them behind in order to help one who truly believed.

2) A touch of power (Mark 5:25-34). In this crowd was another person who was genuinely seeking. She probably joined the throng of people with fear, for her condition made her ceremonially unclean to touch (see Leviticus 15:25-27), but desperation outweighed her shame. For twelve years she had lived with a flow of blood which excluded her from worship and from marriage. She had spent all her money on doctors who had tried some rather painful remedies, but her bleeding grew worse. Then she heard about Jesus, and her hope was renewed. She squeezed through the crowd until she was close enough to touch His cloak, and her hopes were realized when she felt the change in her body. Jesus also recognized the touch, for He knew that power had been transferred. The disciples were confused when He asked who touched Him because He was being jostled from all sides by the crowd. But that one touch of faith had been answered with healing, and Jesus was able to discern it from the others. The woman was probably both ashamed and afraid since her touch was usually avoided, but she truthfully told what she had done. Jesus did not recoil or rebuke. He gently praised her for her faith.

3) A touch of healing (Mark 5:35-43). During this brief delay, messengers came to tell Jairus that his daughter had died. They assumed that the matter was finished and that Jesus would have no reason to come now, but He simply told Jairus to
keep believing. Then He dismissed the crowd and allowed only Peter, James, and John to accompany Him with the father. The crowd would be denied the spectacle they desired. When they arrived at the home, the mourners had already begun their work. Jesus announced that the child was only sleeping to the derision of those gathered. He made everyone leave except for the parents and His three disciples. Only they would be permitted to see His touch, for only they believed. Jesus restored the girl to life with a word and a touch and told those present not to give the details to anyone else. The crowd dispersed no wiser and no better, but a chosen few had received a touch that changed their lives.

Discussion:

1) **Read Mark 5:21–24. How did Jairus demonstrate his faith in Jesus?** Read Mark 5:25–29. **How did the woman demonstrate her faith?**

2) **From the following verses, what were Jesus' general impressions of the crowds who came to see Him?**
   
   (a) Matthew 9:36–38  (c) John 2:23–25

3) **Read Mark 5:35–43. Why do you think Jesus excluded the crowd and the mourners from witnessing or hearing about the miracle of restoring the girl to life?**

4) **Some churches tend to measure success by the numbers of people who attend. What cautions about this way of thinking can you draw from Mark 5:21–43?**

Application:

Jesus certainly did not ignore the crowds who gathered to hear and see Him. He offered proof of His identity to them and called them to enter His kingdom through faith. The response was, for the most part, slim. When the crowds showed that they would not or could not understand His message, Jesus focused His attention on the few who believed. The crowds continued to watch, hoping for an amazing sign or an entertaining confrontation with the religious leaders, but Jesus aimed His teaching and miracles to those who would truly follow. His touch of compassion, power, and healing was available to all, but most did not receive the benefits of it because they did not or would not ask and believe. Today, the touch of Jesus still holds life for those who will receive it, but it is not gained by mere curiosity or intellectual analysis. We will not find it by holding back with the crowds, unwilling to commit or to trust. We must step out and come to Jesus as the only One who can provide the touch we need.
Life of Christ Study #41


Theme: Final Tour of Galilee

Summary:

The great year of A.D. 28 was coming to a close, and the ministry of Jesus in Galilee was approaching the end of its course. For a full year, Jesus had lived and worked almost exclusively in that region, teaching and performing miracles. He had called and chosen His twelve disciples there (see Mark 3:7-19). He had proclaimed His kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5-7), and endured the blasphemous accusation of the Pharisees (see Matthew 12:22-37). He had found people of true faith like the royal official (see John 4:34-54) and the Roman centurion (see Matthew 8:1-13), but He had seen most remain unconvicted and unrepentant (see Matthew 11:20-24). Finally, He had turned to parables and secrecy to separate those who believed from the crowds who sought only a show. Yet Jesus was always reluctant to turn His back on a group of people, no matter how hardened they seemed, and so He took one more tour of Galilee with His disciples.

1) Accused (Matthew 9:27-34). When Jesus left the home of Jairus, he was soon hailed on the road by two blind men who begged Him to heal them. Their faith was evident in the name they called Him. They were physically blind, but they could still see clearly that this was the expected Son of David, God's chosen Messiah. It is interesting that Jesus continued His policy of secrecy from the curious crowds by waiting to receive the men indoors, out of view. There, they reaffirmed their faith in Him and were immediately healed. Jesus instructed them not to tell anyone what He had done for them, a warning they promptly ignored in their excitement. In fact, the two men were so effective in not keeping the secret that Jesus was met by a crowd with a man having a demon even as He left the building. When He healed the man, the crowd responded with its usual amazement. The Pharisees quickly moved in to prevent the awe from becoming faith. They repeated their accusation of Matthew 12:24 that He was in league with Satan.

2) Rejected (Mark 6:1-6). Jesus' first visit to His hometown of Nazareth had ended in a mob set on killing Him (see Luke 4:28-30). He had offered the proclamation of Jubilee to His people, and they had rejected Him. Now, He returned after a year which had seen His fame spread and grow. He chose the synagogue, the site of the earlier confrontation, as the place to present His
message once more. As before, His former neighbors were astonished at the things He said and the things they had heard about Him. They knew Him as the carpenter, Mary’s son. They had watched Him grow with His brothers and sisters. His claim to be the Messiah still offended them. They would not believe it. Jesus sadly commented that a prophet was least accepted among the people who knew Him best. Because of their unbelief He performed no great signs there. It was not that He lacked the power or ability. It was that His audience had already chosen to reject the message His miracles would confirm. Therefore, He limited His actions to the healing of a few sick people humble enough to seek His help. Jesus had once marveled at the great faith of a Roman centurion (see Matthew 8:10). Now He was equally astonished by the lack of faith among His own people.

3) Compassionate (Matthew 9:35-38). It is a mark of the deep love Jesus had for people that He did not give up on Galilee. He took a final tour throughout the region, preaching the same message and caring for those who came with illnesses. He looked on the fickle, faithless crowds with compassion and not contempt or anger. He saw them as sheep who are easily preyed upon and confused without a shepherd to protect and lead them. He pointed them out to His disciples and showed them the vast amount of work to be done. He could not accomplish it all alone. There were too many lost and hurting people for even Jesus to touch in His few years of ministry on earth. And now He was about to move on from the area of Galilee, and the people would be utterly without direction. He told the disciples to earnestly beg God to send more workers to shepherd the people. Soon, they would become a part of the answer to that prayer.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 9:27-29. How did the two blind men demonstrate their faith in Jesus? According to Jesus’ words in verse 29, would He have performed the miracle if they had not believed?

2) Read Matthew 9:32-34. What explanation did the Pharisees give for the miracle? How do people today try to explain away Jesus and His message?

3) Read Mark 6:1-6. Why do you think Jesus met such opposition to His message from His own family and neighbors? Have you encountered similar resistance from people close to you?

4) Read Matthew 9:35-38. Try to look at the world around you the way Jesus did. What indications
do you see that people are "harassed and helpless"? What should be your response?

Application:

Jesus spent more than a year among the people of Galilee. He offered the kingdom to them and performed many signs to confirm His message. Yet most of the people, even after so many direct encounters with the Messiah Himself, rejected Him and His gift. The hardness and blindness of sin is incredibly stubborn, but the compassion of Jesus endures it. Instead of leaving the people to wander helplessly, Jesus continued to see their miserable condition and to look for ways to bring His offer of salvation to them again and again. Even today, He patiently waits and endures the stubborn rebellion of the world to allow more time for some to repent and receive forgiveness (see II Peter 3:9). He keeps telling people the same truth, for it is the only truth that can save them. Many scoff and ignore, while a few believe and repent. Someday the time of patience will be done and God will judge the earth and its people, but until then, we are His workers in the harvest, extending His patience and truth to the world.

Life of Christ Study #42


Theme: The Twelve Mobilized

Summary:

As Jesus reviewed the work He had done in Galilee, He saw the vast amount of work still to be accomplished (see Matthew 9:35-38). His twelve disciples had been with Him. They had heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They had also seen the unbelief and opposition of the crowds and the religious leaders. Now it was their turn to be sent as workers into the harvest field. For roughly the next three months, they would travel throughout Galilee as the official representatives of Jesus and the kingdom. They were given authority to perform the signs that only Jesus had performed until then. They had watched, and now they would practice. They had listened, and now they would speak. They had learned, and now they would feel the responsibility of teaching. They probably were very attentive to each word of instruction, promise, and warning that Jesus now gave them.

1) Purpose (Matthew 10:5-15). The disciples were commissioned to carry on the same work Jesus had done among the people of Galilee. Their mission did not include the Gentiles or the Samaritans at this time. They were to focus on the "lost sheep of Israel." And the message they were to take was the one Jesus had proclaimed from the beginning of His ministry (see Matthew 4:17). Along with the message, they were granted the
power to perform confirming signs. Mark tells us that they were to travel in pairs (see Mark 6:7). But they were also to travel light, taking no money or extra food or spare clothes, for God would provide for His workers. Sometimes, that provision would come through people in a town or village who would offer hospitality. Jesus told the disciples to receive it gratefully. On the other hand, if a place would not welcome them or listen to their message, they should treat it as a pagan place, shaking the very dust off their feet as they left. Such a town would be judged for its unbelief.

2) Persecution (Matthew 10:16-23). Jesus did not seem to expect a favorable response to His workers. He warned them that they would be surrounded by wolves, so they would need to conduct themselves with the purity of doves and the cunning of snakes. He told them that they might be tried or beaten, but those difficulties would simply provide opportunities for them to be witnesses to Jewish and Gentile rulers and officials. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say on those occasions. Even family members might turn against them. They might find themselves encompassed with enemies, but they would be delivered if they stood firm. Then they should flee to another place and proclaim the kingdom there, for their message was intended for every city in Israel. Yet they would not have time to finish even that task before Jesus would give them a much larger commission (see Matthew 28:18-20).

3) Promise (Matthew 10:24-33). Jesus, the master, had been accused of being in league with the devil. Should His students expect any better treatment when they repeated His message and works? Yet the disciples could preach without fear, for when all truth was finally revealed, they would be proved right. Their job was to bring the truth out of the shadows and whispers, enduring the danger of physical harm, for they served the One with true power. God cared for sparrows, which were deemed of little value by men, so He would certainly watch over His chosen workers. None of them would face peril without the knowledge of God. If they faithfully proclaimed the truth of Jesus, He would faithfully testify for them in the day of judgment. But if they gave in to fear and denied Him to men, He would deny them before God.

4) Perseverance (Matthew 10:34-42). The Messiah would bring peace to the earth, but first there must be a time of turmoil in which even the closest family relationships would be divided.
over the message of Jesus. Some would believe and others in the same family would not. The result would be conflict and even hatred. In such a setting, anyone who chooses loyalty to family over loyalty to Jesus cannot follow Him. Anyone who is not willing to place Jesus above any other goal or option in life is not worthy to be one of His. No one can find eternal life while placing greater value on the present life. So important does Jesus consider those who are truly His followers that any act of welcome or kindness toward them is counted as kindness toward Him. Such were the men that Jesus sent into Galilee with a mission.

Discussion:

1) Have you ever been placed in a training program for a difficult task? How did you feel on the day the responsibility was finally placed in your hands? How do you think the disciples felt as Jesus told them it was their turn to do the work?

2) Read Matthew 10:9-10. Why do you think Jesus told His disciples not to take money or extra food or spare clothes?

3) Read Matthew 10:26-31. What are some things you should remember when you feel afraid of what people will say or do to you because of your faith in Jesus?

4) Read Matthew 10:34-39. In these verses, what choices are you called to make in relation to the following areas of your life?
   (a) Loved ones who oppose your faith.
   (b) Personal comfort and safety.
   (c) Personal goals and ambitions.

Application:

The task which Jesus commissioned His twelve disciples to do was not easy or popular. The people of Galilee had already largely rejected Him. In fact, Jesus made no promise to them of warm welcomes or favorable responses. He promised them only opposition, persecution, and conflict. They would not be able to measure their success by numbers. They would have to measure it by faithfulness. They were invaders for the kingdom, proclaiming the need for repentance and salvation in enemy territory. Their job was not to win friends or please crowds. It was to tell the truth even to those who did not want to hear it. They pioneered the work that we are to continue today. It requires that we be inoffensive as doves and cunning as snakes. It means overcoming our fear of men and placing our lives in God's hands. We should not expect a painless and easy time.
It was spring in the year A.D. 29 when the twelve apostles gathered together again to give reports to Jesus of their months of ministry. Apparently, they had succeeded in spreading the word about Jesus, for His name even reached the ears of Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (see Mark 6:14). For Herod, the talk of Jesus and His miracles raised memories of his murder of John the Baptist. Some people even surmised that perhaps Jesus was John returned to life. This was an unusual theory, for John had performed no miracles during his life, but Herod was haunted by a guilty conscience, and the suggestion probably caused him some sleepless nights. No other details are given of the work accomplished by the disciples in those three months of travel, but the extent to which their teaching had reached would soon become evident.

1) No rest (Mark 6:30-34). The twelve were full of stories and experiences from their travels, and they needed time to talk about them with Jesus, but their new fame followed them. So many people gathered to see them that they had no chance to eat, much less have a private discussion. Therefore, Jesus suggested they leave the villages and go to a quiet place where they could be alone and rest. John seems to indicate that Jesus and His disciples departed by boat (see John 6:1), and Luke related that they chose a spot near the town of Bethsaida, east of where the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee. However, even there, they could find no rest, for the crowds who saw them leave followed on foot, gathering more people from towns along the way. When Jesus and the disciples arrived at the plain around Bethsaida, they found a large crowd already waiting for them. Jesus was again touched with compassion for the people and began teaching them.

2) No food (Mark 6:35-37). The day was waning quickly, and the disciples grew concerned about the practical considerations of providing food for such a large gathering in that remote location. They advised that the people be dismissed to buy food from the neighboring villages. This, in itself, was hardly a good solution as the surrounding area would have been extremely hard pressed to supply the needs of five thousand men plus at least as many women and children. Yet the disciples saw no other possibilities. Then, when Jesus gave them the
responsibility of finding food for this mass of people, their concern turned into frustration. John recorded that it was Philip who did some quick calculations and arrived at a price of eight months' wages. It was simply too much!

3) No lack (Mark 6:38-44). Jesus was purposely placing more and more responsibility on His disciples. They had to learn to do the work of God's kingdom with a kingdom perspective. But on this occasion their spiritual eyes failed them. They simply could not see any way to feed all those people. Jesus instructed them to take inventory of the food that was immediately available. Again, John supplied the information that it was Andrew who discovered the young boy with five barley loaves and two fish. Even this was not hopeful, for as Andrew asked, "What are these for so many people?" (see John 6:9). The disciples, who had themselves recently performed miracles, did not consider the possibilities of God's power. Jesus told them to arrange the people in groups in preparation for a meal. Then He gave thanks to God and began to break the bread and fish in the normal fashion for distribution. From those five loaves and two fish, well over 5000 people were fed and twelve baskets of food were left.

4) No king (John 6:14-15). Only John related how the crowds responded to this miracle. Instead of connecting the sign with the teaching they had heard only a short time before, they concluded that Jesus was a Prophet from God who would lead them to prosperity and power. They did not want Him as one who could forgive and save them from sin. They wanted Him as one who would fulfill their dreams. That is why Jesus so quickly withdrew from them. He was not there to build a political or military kingdom. He was there to offer a spiritual and eternal kingdom.

Discussion:

1) Read Mark 6:30-31. What do you think the disciples felt as they related their experiences to Jesus?

2) Read Mark 6:35-39. What obstacles did the disciples see to the task Jesus gave them? What obstacles do you sometimes see to the following instructions from God?
   (a) Ephesians 4:25
   (b) Matthew 28:19-20
   (c) Matthew 6:19-20
   (d) James 1:2-4

3) Read Mark 6:39-44. What should the people have learned from watching Jesus divide five loaves

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and two fish among more than 5000 of them?

4) Read John 6:14-15. How did the expectations of the people differ from what Jesus wanted to give them? What expectations do people have of Jesus today? What does He really offer them?

Application:

The disciples came back from their three months of ministry excited and perhaps a bit conceited. They soon learned that there was a price and a responsibility to their success. The needs of the people followed them everywhere and were overwhelming in size. Jesus wanted them to feel the weight of that burden, but He also wanted them to learn how to place that burden in His hands. The feeding of the 5000 was a continuation of His training of the twelve. They soon realized that their human wisdom and resources could never supply what the people needed, but Jesus possessed unlimited resources. Today, the people around us are just as needy, and our human abilities are just as woefully inadequate. But God has not run short on supplies throughout the progression of His kingdom. If He gives us work to do, then He will also provide the tools and understanding for us to get the job done.

Life of Christ Study #44

Matthew 14:24-36; Mark 6:47-56; John 6:16-21

Theme: Walking on Water

Summary:

After Jesus fed the large multitude on the Plain of Bethsaida, He apparently continued teaching them for a while. Then He sent the disciples ahead by boat to the town, probably to gather provisions. Meanwhile, He dismissed the crowd, partly to avoid the plan to make Him king (see John 6:14-15). He went by Himself up a mountainside to spend time in prayer, something there had been little chance for previously that day. Jesus often followed this pattern of withdrawing from the crowds after performing a public miracle. He was not enticed into basking in the amazement and popularity His miracles evoked from the crowds, for He knew the shallowness of their emotions. He wanted people of faith and not a band of curious followers. It was more important for Him to be alone with the Father in prayer, refocusing and planning, than to play to the wishes of the people. Even His disciples were excluded on this occasion, although they were the primary target of His teaching and training.

1) Fear (Matthew 14:24-27). The disciples had, it seems, completed their business in Bethsaida and were once again on the Sea of Galilee. Another one of those sudden squalls had struck, and they were making very little headway against the wind.
The fourth watch would have been between 3:00 and 6:00 in the morning, so darkness added to their terror at seeing a human figure walking toward them upon the water. They may have assumed it was an omen that they were going to drown in the storm. They could find no natural explanation for what they saw, and the thought of Jesus did not occur to them until He identified Himself. Nothing should have surprised them after witnessing the miracle of the loaves and fish, but they still struggled to fit Him into their world.

2) Faith (Matthew 14:28-31). Even with the words of assurance Jesus spoke, the disciples were not certain. Peter proposed a rather bold test which Jesus accepted. No one can describe that first step upon the lake. The water was choppy from the wind and dark as a pit. Peter walked toward Jesus until the wind and waves caught his attention. Then he was overwhelmed by the fear of his position and began to sink. He cried out to Jesus for help, and Jesus grabbed him and raised him out of the water. Jesus chided Peter for the weakness of his faith. It is true that he showed great courage and trust in getting out of the boat, but faith must endure. It cannot start strong and then disappear when danger or difficulties threaten. Jesus was more certain than any potential problems, but, at the time, the wind and waves seemed to be the most pressing matters.

3) Fellowship (Matthew 14:32-36). The reaction of the disciples again showed how little they understood about Jesus. They correctly reasoned that He was the Son of God, but they seemed to need reminding of that truth again and again. Mark said that they had learned nothing from the miracle of the loaves and fish (see Mark 6:51-52). They did not make the connection between the provision of food and the provision of safety. They failed to see that one who could multiply bread and fish could also walk on water. In other words, they were amazed by His displays of power, but they still were not settled in an understanding that He was God. The disciples were not as bad as the crowds, however, for they did believe and were willing to learn. In spite of their slowness, they were miles ahead of the masses who saw and heard but would not repent. That is why the disciples enjoyed fellowship with Jesus that was not offered to others. Jesus looked for faith, no matter how weak. He could build on it and give it strength. So, when Jesus arrived at Gennesaret, back on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, His disciples accompanied Him. He performed many miracles of healing, and perhaps the disciples watched and
listened a little more carefully than before.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 14:22-23. Why do you think Jesus made it a point to be alone in prayer after His miracle of feeding the 5000? How do such times alone benefit you?

2) Read Matthew 14:27-31. In what ways did Peter demonstrate faith in Jesus? In what ways did his faith prove weak?

3) When you are frightened or worried by the circumstances around you, what truth about Jesus do you sometimes forget? How could you apply the following verses to your fears?
   (a) Matthew 6:25-34
   (b) Romans 8:38-39
   (c) Philippians 4:6-7
   (d) Hebrews 13:5-6

4) Discuss the following views people had of Jesus? Why was each inadequate?
   (a) A good teacher.
   (b) A magician.
   (c) A healer.

How did the opinion of the disciples differ from these?

Application:

Even the miracle of feeding more than 5000 people with five loaves and two fish was not enough to impress the truth about Jesus on His disciples. But, it must be admitted, it was a difficult truth to grasp. Jesus was unlike any man they had ever met, and He lived by different rules than the rest of the world. It is easy to say that the disciples should have understood, but changing one's perspective on life takes time. There are bound to be moments of realization and moments of relapse. The disciples experienced both, but they remained willing to listen and to learn. That was the basis of their fellowship with Jesus. The Lord does not demand superior intelligence or ability from His disciples. He asks that they trust Him enough to follow and change.

Life of Christ Study #45

John 6:22-71

Theme: Bread of Life

Summary:

The mode of transportation that Jesus used to cross the Sea of Galilee (see John 6:16-21) caused no small confusion among the crowd of people He had left near Bethsaida. When
they arose the next day, they naturally went looking for Him. They knew that He had not gone in the boat with His disciples, and they also knew that there had been no other boat along the shore (John 6:22). Therefore, they assumed that He was still on their side of the lake, but they could not find Him. After a while, they concluded that neither Jesus nor His disciples were there, and when some boats arrived from Tiberias, they used them to cross the Sea and continue their search (John 6:23-24). Finally, they tracked Jesus back to Capernaum where they gathered around Him once more. But if they expected another free meal, they would be disappointed. Jesus now offered them a different kind of bread, far more important, but not nearly as satisfying to their materialistic minds.

1) Bread that spoils (John 6:25-33). The people still could not figure out how Jesus had managed to cross the Sea before them, and their question upon finding Jesus reflected their perplexity. Jesus, however, brushed aside their curiosity and stated that they were only seeking Him in hopes of another free meal. Their minds and hearts were tied to their stomachs. They were willing to spend a day to find Jesus for physical food without a thought that He could give them eternal life, a gift truly worth any amount of effort. The people then asked what they had to do to gain this life. Jesus told them that the one work God required was to believe in Him. But the crowd refused to believe without first seeing a miracle. They suggested that Jesus could prove He was from God by feeding them the way Moses fed the Israelites in the wilderness (see Exodus 16:1-4). Jesus replied that even Moses could not provide the bread of life He offered.

2) Bread that satisfies (John 6:34-40). The people, still thinking of physical food, at once expressed interest in this special bread. Jesus told them that He Himself was the bread of life. He could satisfy the hunger and thirst of those who trusted Him. The people had heard and seen His message and miracles, yet they still would not believe. God sent Jesus to do His work of offering salvation to all. Any that accepted would not be sent away empty handed, and they would receive the assurance of eternal life. Even if they died physically, Jesus would raise them to life again.

3) Bread from heaven (John 6:41-51). The people began to see that Jesus was speaking about a bread that was not physical, but they reacted against His claim to be the bread from heaven (see v.38). They argued that they knew His parents. He was clearly from Nazareth, not heaven. Jesus again pushed aside their line of reasoning and continued His teaching. Only those who listened to God and learned from Him would understand and receive the bread Jesus offered.
Only they would gain eternal life as they ate the bread of life. The bread which the Israelites ate in the wilderness could not give them eternal life, but Jesus could. They had to eat His flesh to receive such life.

4) Bread and flesh (John 6:52-59). Now the people were thoroughly confused and agitated. Did Jesus really propose that they eat His flesh? Jesus gave His answer in no uncertain terms. Unless they ate His flesh and drank His blood, they would never have real life. They had to stop thinking about physical hunger and physical food and consider the far more important issue of spiritual need. Jesus alone could satisfy that need, for His flesh and blood, given to pay for their sin, could grant eternal life. But they had to come to Him to receive it, just as they had to eat physical food for it to give them strength. They could never be spiritually nourished by just looking and listening. They had to believe and accept.

5) Bread of offense (John 6:60-71). This was much too blunt for some who had been following Jesus out of curiosity. Jesus challenged them with the straight truth. He was from heaven and He offered them spiritual life. They were so concerned with physical needs and comforts that they could not recognize the priceless treasure He held before them. They wanted miracles and entertaining teaching, but they would not see their need for salvation. Only those who were supernaturally given understanding by God could grasp that truth. Many who had been following Him walked away in anger at this rebuke. Jesus then turned to His twelve chosen disciples and asked if they wished to leave also. Peter answered that they believed that He was the only source of eternal life. Unlike the crowds, they followed because they acknowledged Him as the King, God's chosen Messiah. Yet, as Jesus predicted, even one of them would later turn away completely.

Discussion:

1) Read John 6:25-27. What motivated the crowds to follow Jesus? What did they hope to gain from Him? What are some similar motivations people have for following Jesus today?

2) How did Jesus identify the bread He offered in the following verses?
   (a) John 6:33  (c) John 6:48
   (b) John 6:35  (d) John 6:50-51

3) Read John 6:58. How was the bread of life different than the manna the Israelites ate?
Could witnessing the miracles of Jesus give eternal life?

4) Read John 6:60-69. Is it necessary to understand everything God does in order to follow Him? How could you apply the words of Peter in verses 68-69 in times when you do not understand or like God's plan in your life?

Application:

Never before had Jesus challenged the crowds so directly about their motivation for following Him. But it was essential that they understand the issues at stake. A person could follow Jesus all his life, enjoying the teaching and applauding the miracles, and still die in sin. Only those who looked to Him for spiritual life the way they looked to bread for physical life would be saved. Peter answered with the faith Jesus requires. Only He has the words of eternal life. There is nowhere else to go.

Life of Christ Study #46

Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23

Theme: Clean Hands and Heart

Summary:

The motives of the crowds who followed Jesus were often doubtful, but there was usually little doubt about the motives of the religious leaders who watched His actions and listened to His teaching. Occasionally, a Nicodemus (see John 3:1-2) or a Jairus (see Mark 5:22-23) came with real questions and real needs, but for the most part, the scribes and Pharisees came to judge rather than to learn. They had already decided that Jesus did not fit their system of religion and righteousness, yet they needed to find a legitimate grounds of accusation against Him to expose Him as a fraud or a false prophet. His popularity with the people prevented them from openly denouncing Him, and His miracles thwarted their efforts to discredit His message. If their minds and hearts had been more open, they probably would have been convinced to believe in Him, but sin and pride and tradition are powerful blinders. The more evidence they saw that He really was from God, the more they hated Him. Jesus had already seen ample proof of their hardness, and He knew that their emphasis on rules and appearances was leading people away from the real issues of sin and forgiveness, so His answers to their criticisms were clear and sharp.

1) Pure hands (Mark 7:1-5). On this occasion, a contingency of Jewish religious leaders had come from Jerusalem to Galilee to follow and observe Jesus. They were shocked to see some of His disciples eating food without first washing their hands. The Pharisees believed that hands must be
washed in case they had inadvertently touched a
person or object that was ceremonially unclean.
Otherwise, the food would be made unclean and the
person who ate it would become defiled. Such a
law never appeared in the Old Testament, but it
was an important part of the traditions and
accepted rules of Judaism. In the eyes of the
Pharisees, no teacher who was truly from God
would ever permit his followers to violate this
law of purity.

2) Impure hearts (Mark 7:6-13). The Pharisees were
proud of their meticulous observance of the law,
but Jesus waved them aside as hypocrites. They
claimed to honor God with their strict rules and
pious words, but their hearts were controlled by
other desires and goals. They had constructed a
religious system of man made rules and had
forsaken the commands of God in the process. As
an example, Jesus cited their use of "Corban."
Honoring parents was one of the most highly
revered laws in Judaism. The Pharisees also had
a man made tradition which stated that anything
declared by its owner to be "Corban" or devoted
to God could not be used for any other purpose.
One was the law of God, the other was a tradition
of men. But when a Jew wanted to give help to
his parents from his possessions which had been
declared Corban, the Pharisees would not allow
it. They were more concerned with maintaining
their traditions than with teaching people to
obey God's commands. Their actions had the
appearance of religious devotion, but their
hearts were not devoted to God.

3) True purity (Mark 7:14-23). Having exposed the
hypocrisy of the Pharisees Jesus proceeded to
answer their question, inviting the crowd to
listen as well. He declared that, contrary to
the teachings of the Pharisees, spiritual
impurity came from internal rather than external
sources. Even His disciples had a hard time
understanding this concept, so Jesus explained it
more carefully to them. The Pharisees assumed
that they were pure but the world around them was
impure. Therefore, the key to spiritual purity
was to avoid contact with impure objects and
people. But Jesus pointed out that these things
could not affect a person's heart. They were
merely processed by the physical body and
eliminated. The real source of impurity was the
evil in a person's heart. Therefore, true
spiritual purity had to involve much more than
outward rules and disciplines. It had to involve
an inward change of life which could come only
through repentance and forgiveness.

Discussion:

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1) How can you tell the difference between a law of God and a tradition of men? Should a tradition of men ever take precedence over God's commands?

2) Read Mark 7:6-8. What was missing from the Pharisees' system of worship? Is it possible for a person to honor God with his lips but not his heart today?

3) Read Mark 7:9-13. Can you think of examples of how religious and church traditions could stand in the way of God's commands today?

4) Read Mark 7:18-23. If spiritual impurity begins in the heart, why are rules and disciplines insufficient to make you pure? What is the only way you can have and maintain true purity?

Application:

Jesus exposed the core of the Pharisees' self-righteousness. They believed that they were already pure and that it was only necessary for them to remain apart from the evils and impurities of the world, as if the world had a disease which they feared to catch. But Jesus saw the pride and selfishness behind their clean and religious appearances. He taught that impurity was in every human heart and that a person's life was defiled by the evil passions and desires within which expressed themselves in sinful words and deeds. No amount of separation or isolation can prevent a disease which is already in a man's body. There must be a change and cleansing within before purity and health are possible. The Pharisees were simply covering up bad hearts with good behavior. Their hands looked clean, but their hearts were still full of filth. Jesus calls us to let Him purify our hearts so that our hands can be truly clean as well.

Life of Christ Study #47

Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30

Theme: A Canaanite Woman

Summary:

John, at the beginning of his Gospel, had said, "He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). This was certainly the tone at the end of Jesus's Galilean ministry in the spring of A.D. 29. The religious leaders had rejected Him completely and were actively seeking a way to accuse and condemn Him. The crowds continued to flock to Him in great numbers, but He found a woeful lack of real faith among them. They wanted food and prosperity and freedom without troubling about the issues of sin and repentance. So, for a while, Jesus withdrew from the regions of His own people and journeyed into Gentile territory. There He met a woman, removed from Israel and its
spiritual heritage, who demonstrated the faith that was missing in Israel. It was the second time that a Gentile recognized the Messiah that most Jews failed to see (see Matthew 8:5-13).

1) Gentile territory (Matthew 15:21-23). The region of Tyre and Sidon was historically a center of pagan worship. The evil Jezebel had come from that area, bringing the worship of Baal with her (see I Kings 16:31-32). Mark recorded that Jesus wanted to stay there quietly but the news of His arrival soon spread (see Mark 7:24). The woman who came to seek Him was herself a Canaanite, a descendent of the wicked race which had been displaced by the Israelites (see Deuteronomy 7:2-6). For a person of that race to approach a Jew was unusual, but for this woman to address Jesus as "Lord, Son of David" was astonishing. She identified Him as the Messiah and worshipped Him (see Mark 7:25). Her belief and the great need of her daughter drove her to cross a wide cultural gap. The disciples saw her as an annoyance and urged Jesus to send her away. Jesus Himself was silent at first.

2) Jewish King (Matthew 15:24-26). When Jesus did respond, it sounded like He was in agreement with His disciples, yet He was only stating a general principle of His work that He had voiced previously. He was God's promised King sent to God's chosen people. His mission was to gather the lost sheep of Israel (see Isaiah 40:9-11), then He would be a light to the Gentiles as they saw His work among the Israelites (see Isaiah 49:5-7). Even when He had commissioned the twelve, He had instructed them to go to the Jews and not the Gentiles (see Matthew 10:5-6). He held no contempt for the Canaanite woman, but He agreed that she was outside the primary scope of His ministry. His reply to her direct plea was not intended to insult her. The people of Israel had to be given the offer of the kingdom first, and the Gentiles had to wait. Perhaps the disciples nodded approvingly at this apparent refusal of the woman's request.

3) Universal faith (Matthew 15:27-28). The woman willingly acknowledged that all that Jesus said was true. She was not one of the flock of Israel, but she still needed help, even if it were only the crumbs from the table. She knew that she was an undeserving outsider culturally, yet she still asked. Faith and parental love made her bold, and faith made her the recipient of God's mercy. Jesus praised her for her understanding and belief and granted her request instantly. She was a Gentile and He was the Jewish Messiah, but her faith erased any spiritual or racial barriers. Jesus had looked
for such faith in Galilee and had not found it, but this woman of a pagan race humbly placed her trust in the God of Israel. Most likely, the disciples left that encounter amazed and not a little ashamed, but also much wiser.

Discussion:

1) Who are sometimes thought of as the people least likely to give their lives to Jesus? What moral and cultural barriers seem to stand in the way?

2) Compare the attitude of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:22 with the people of Jesus' home town in Matthew 13:53-58. Which of the two seemed to have the moral and cultural advantages in believing in Jesus? Describe the differences in their responses to Him.

3) What was the attitude of the disciples toward the woman in Matthew 15:23? What might have been their inward reaction to the statements of Jesus in verses 24, 26, and 28?

4) What lessons should the disciples have learned from watching Jesus interact with the Canaanite woman? What can you learn from this about God's dealings with people who are very different from you?

Application:

The Jews could be an exceptionally proud people when it came to their religious and cultural heritage. They assumed that they were the center of God's plan and that the Gentiles were excluded. The Canaanites would have especially drawn their scorn, for God had condemned that race in the Old Testament. Indeed, if the Israelites had obeyed God fully when they took possession of the land, the Canaanite woman would never have been born, for all of her ancestors would have been killed. Yet Jesus showed mercy to this woman, whom even His disciples considered something of an outcast, because of her faith. That faith made her more acceptable to God than any Jewish lineage could ever achieve. God is not impressed by our histories or social positions. He is not swayed by our cultural roots or religious heritage. Faith is the universal key to His kingdom. With it, the lowliest outcast is made welcome. Without it, the most decorated hero finds the door shut tight.

Life of Christ Study #48

Matthew 15:29-16:12; Mark 7:31-8:26

Theme: Miracles and Misunderstandings
Summary:

Jesus continued on through the region of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia (Mark 7:31). From there, He apparently returned to the east side of the Jordan River far to the north of the Sea of Galilee. Then He made His way southward to the area of Decapolis where He had previously healed the two men with demons (see Mark 5:1-20). Perhaps He took this long route to allow some time privately with His disciples. On a map, it becomes rather clear that He purposely avoided the region of Galilee. He had not forsaken that area, but the people there had largely rejected Him, and it was now a place of constant opposition from the religious leaders. Jesus certainly did not fear such confrontations, but they detracted from the more important work of preparing His disciples to assume the role of His ambassadors. Time was growing short, and these men still had much to learn.

1) Miracle of healing (Mark 7:32-37). As usual, the arrival of Jesus drew the crowds and among them were the sick. One man who was deaf and nearly unable to speak was brought. Jesus continued His policy of excluding the curious from His miracles by taking the man aside from the crowd. Only his friends and the disciples saw the cure. The method Jesus employed was not really odd considering that His patient was deaf. He merely used motions and signs to communicate to the man that His healing was a miracle from God. Christ's word of command brought instant healing after the man was made to understand what was being done to him. Jesus then told those present to keep the miracle secret from the crowds, but the man and his friends were too excited, and the word soon leaked everywhere.

2) Miracle of compassion (Mark 8:1-9). As a result of the healing of the deaf man, the crowds grew and grew. People left their homes and jobs and followed Jesus for three days. Jesus was not impressed by the size of the multitudes, but He still had compassion on their needs. Whatever their motives for gathering around Him, they were people who needed food and rest. The scene was similar to the earlier feeding of the five thousand near Bethsaida (see Mark 6:35-44). Jesus instructed His disciples to inventory the food that was available, and they found seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. In the hands of the King that was more than enough. Four thousand men and numerous women and children (see Matthew 15:38) ate their fill and seven baskets of leftovers were collected.

3) Misunderstanding of miracles (Matthew 16:1-4). Jesus often used the Sea of Galilee to end His time with a crowd. He crossed to area of Magadan, and was met by a delegation of Pharisees and Sadducees. Their approach was not new. On at least three previous occasions the Jewish
leaders had demanded a miraculous sign as proof of His identity (see John 2:18; 6:30; Matthew 12:38). Each time Jesus had refused to comply. He healed and fed to meet needs and to teach, not to satisfy curiosity. The signs were there for anyone who wished to read them, just as a red sky indicated a storm. Now He repeated His answer that He would only give them the sign of Jonah (see Matthew 12:39-41). They were intent on finding grounds to kill Him, and only after His death would they receive the miraculous sign of His resurrection.

4) Misunderstanding of teaching (Matthew 16:5-12). Again, Jesus distanced Himself from a gathering by crossing the Sea. He used the recent confrontation to warn His disciples about the deceptive and misleading system of the Pharisees and Sadducees which He compared to yeast that permeates dough. But the disciples were more concerned with the physical bread which they had forgotten to bring. Jesus rebuked their lack of understanding. Twice they had seen Him feed huge crowds, yet they still would not trust Him enough to stop worrying about their physical needs. How could He give them spiritual food if they were always looking for lunch?

5) Eyes to see (Mark 8:22-26). They landed at Bethsaida near the place of the first miracle of feeding a crowd. There some people brought a blind man for healing. At first the man was given only partial sight and the world appeared blurred and unclear. Then the healing was completed and he was able to discern true shapes and forms. This is the only example in the Gospels of Jesus performing a miracle that was not immediately accomplished. Perhaps He wanted His disciples to understand that, like the blind man, they were receiving their sight gradually (see Mark 8:17-18). There was still learning to be done.

Discussion:

1) Read Mark 7:36-37 with the prophecy about the Messiah in Isaiah 35:5-6. What were the miracles intended to help people see?

2) Read Matthew 16:1-4. Why do you think Jesus refused the request of the religious leaders? Do people still ask God to prove Himself through signs today? What did Paul say about this in I Corinthians 1:21-24?

3) Read Matthew 16:5-12. What lessons had Jesus already tried to teach His disciples about their physical needs in the following verses?
   (a) Matthew 6:25-34
(b) John 6:26-29
(c) Matthew 10:7-16

4) In what ways do physical needs and concerns take your attention away from the matters of God's kingdom?

Application:

People in general were much more excited about the physical food Jesus offered than they were about the spiritual food He really wanted to give them. The crowds flocked around His miracles and eagerly ate the bread He provided, but they did not stay to follow Him with their lives. The religious leaders treated Him as a magician who used tricks to impress and satisfy the people, and they failed to see the true message of His identity. Even His disciples were easily distracted by hunger pangs. Jesus understands the importance of physical needs, but He tells us to trust Him for those things so that we can concentrate on the issues of the kingdom and eternity. Only then can we see life and the world clearly. Until then our view of truth is blurred.

Life of Christ Study #49


Theme: Peter's Confession and Confusion

Summary:

The disciples were growing slowly in their understanding of Jesus and His mission, but there were two items on which a clear and accurate perception was essential. Therefore, Jesus once again took His disciples away from the controversy and crowds of Galilee, this time to the area of Caesarea Philippi, near the headwaters of the Jordan River. There, He taught the people who gathered to see Him as usual, but the main reason for the change of scenery was to specifically address the issues of His identity and His mission with the twelve men whom He had chosen to train as His personal representatives. Some of them had been with Him for two years, and they had all witnessed many miracles and heard His teachings about the kingdom, yet He wanted to be absolutely certain that they grasped the truth that He was the Messiah. Otherwise, they would never endure what was to come.

1) Confession (Matthew 16:13-16). Jesus began by exposing the misconceptions which abounded about Him. The disciples had seen and heard how the crowds responded to Him and His works. Some people heard His teaching and assumed He was John the Baptist while others saw His miracles and concluded that Elijah had returned. Some, probably having watched Him confront the religious leaders, thought that He was the second coming of Jeremiah, and many simply called Him a
prophet without trying to guess which one. Then Jesus pointed His question at the disciples to see how their perception compared with those of the crowds. Peter answered without hesitation. He was convinced that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God.

2) Promise (Matthew 16:17-20). Jesus must have rejoiced inwardly at Peter's answer, for it showed that he had heard and believed the truth from God. The crowds could go on thinking what they wanted in their human comprehension and logic. As long as Peter and his fellow disciples understood, the work and message of Jesus could continue. His whole plan for the future could be built on that clear statement of His identity. Peter's confession would be the foundation upon which Jesus could build His kingdom of subjects on earth who would hold that same confession. These people would be His church, those who recognize Jesus, listen to God's truth, and are empowered by God to do His work. The powers and schemes of Satan and death will never be able to overcome it, and any who would be admitted to the kingdom must embrace its confession of Christ's identity. For the disciples, it was an amazing preview of the future, but the time was not yet ripe. For the present, the disciples were instructed to keep the matter secret.

3) Confusion (Matthew 16:21-23). The disciples' visions of a kingdom being built were interrupted by a new and sobering glimpse of the future. Jesus began to explain that He would be persecuted and killed by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, but that He would be raised again to life after three days. His disciples had come to understand and believe His identity, so now He revealed to them the details of His mission. But at this they balked. Peter could not reconcile his human hopes of the kingdom and the Messiah with this talk of suffering and death, so he strongly reacted. Jesus immediately reproved him. In his confession, Peter had spoken the words of God, but in his confusion, he followed the lies of Satan and the goals of men. The identity of Jesus was clear to him, but the mission of Jesus remained a mystery.

4) Requirement (Matthew 16:24-28). Jesus made it plain that anyone who wished to follow Him must be willing to lay aside all other plans, goals, and agendas. Peter and the other disciples could not be His representatives and retain their hopes for position and honor in an earthly kingdom. The way of Jesus led to death and a cross, and His followers had to deny their own dreams and accept the pain of His road. That was the only way they could gain eternal life, the prize worth
far more than any earthly treasure. The glory and reward would certainly come, but they would come later. Then Jesus predicted that some of His disciples would see that glory before death.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 16:13-14. Why do you think Jesus first asked His disciples who other people said He was? What answer would you give to that question today?

2) Compare Matthew 16:17-18 with Ephesians 2:19-22. What was to be built on Peter's confession? How do you fit into that building project?

3) Read Matthew 16:21-22. Why would Peter react so strongly to Jesus' words about His suffering and death? How did his view of the Messiah differ from God's plan?

4) Read Matthew 16:24-28. What did Jesus say you must do with your plans and wishes if you want to follow Him? What does He promise to give you in return?

Application:

By any standard, Peter's confession was a crucial point in the ministry of Jesus on the earth. He knew that His time was growing shorter. Suffering and death lay ahead of Him, and the disciples would have to assume their role as His representatives. He needed to prepare them for what was to come, but first He had to be sure that they understood His identity and His mission. If they missed those issues, there would be no foundation upon which to build the kingdom. They did well on the question of His identity. They believed the testimony of God and had not fallen into the confusion of the crowds. However, when it came to His mission, they were still thinking with the understanding and desires of men. They wanted a kingdom of politics and prosperity, and they failed to see that Jesus aimed to conquer sin and Satan more than poverty and Rome. Selfish desires and misguided agendas are a constant danger to the work of the kingdom. We must recognize Jesus, but we must also lay aside our plans to follow His.

Life of Christ Study #50


Theme: The Transfiguration

Summary:

The disciples knew that Jesus was the Messiah, but they had also heard Him say for the first time that He was going to
suffer and be killed at the hands of the religious leaders (see Matthew 16:21). It was too much to take in at once. How could He be the Messiah, die, and still lead the restoration of the kingdom? And when would some of them personally see Him in His kingdom? (see Matthew 16:28). The pieces did not seem to fit. It was not until about a week later that Jesus led three of them to a high mountain for an event that would give them some understanding. The mountain is not named, but if they were still in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi, Mount Hermon, less than fifteen miles away, is a likely choice. Peter, James, and John were the three chosen to accompany Jesus, just as they had been the only ones allowed to witness the raising of the daughter of Jairus (see Mark 5:37-43). No reason is given as to why they were privileged to represent the rest, but it may be significant that Peter would be the one to launch the church on Pentecost (see Acts 2:14-41), James would be the first to die (see Acts 12:1-2), and John would be the one to receive a vision of the final kingdom (see Revelation 1:9-20).

1) What was seen (Luke 9:28-32). As far as the three disciples knew, they were going up the mountain with Jesus to pray, but it soon became no typical prayer meeting. The face and garments of Jesus suddenly became as bright as a flash of lightning. Matthew compared them to the sun (see Matthew 17:2) and Mark said that no laundry could approach the pure whiteness of His clothing (see Mark 9:3). When Moses came from the presence of God, his face had shone with a radiance (see Exodus 34:29-35). Now, the face of Jesus reflected that same glory, and Moses and Elijah stood with Him. Both of these prophets were expected by the Jewish people to return at the time of the Messiah, and now they talked with Jesus about His coming death and fulfillment of His mission. Peter, James, and John, who had grown sleepy during the time of prayer, were suddenly wide awake.

2) What was said (Matthew 17:4-9). Peter and his companions were overwhelmed by what they saw. Two of the greatest prophets in Israel's history were standing with Jesus the Messiah. It is understandable that Peter wanted the moment to last. What wisdom they could learn from three such men! But a bright cloud descended upon them, and a voice spoke from the cloud. Once before, God had given His personal testimony about Jesus (see Matthew 3:17). Then it was to pronounce His approval upon the newly inaugurated King. Now it was to confirm His unique place in God's plan. Moses and Elijah had played important roles, but now the greatest prophet, the Messiah Himself, was present. All attention should be given to Him (see Deuteronomy 18:15-19). The disciples cowered in fear, and when Jesus reassured them, only He remained on the mountain with them. He told them not to relate
what they had seen until He was raised from the dead. The truth of His resurrection in glory was easier to accept now, for they had just seen the resurrected forms of Moses and Elijah. Indeed, they had seen Jesus in the glory of His kingdom for a brief moment. Even so, there were still many questions (see Mark 9:9-10).

3) What was asked (Matthew 17:10-13). One of the questions raised by the transfiguration concerned Elijah. The Old Testament foretold that Elijah would come before the Messiah as God’s messenger to prepare the way (see Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6). The Jews believed that this meant Elijah himself would return from heaven since he had never experienced death (see II Kings 2:11-12). Jesus answered that Elijah had indeed already come first, but he had not been recognized by the people. The disciples realized that He meant John the Baptist. John himself had denied that he was the second coming of Elijah (see John 1:19-21), but he had fulfilled the work of preparation even though the people failed to recognize what he was doing. As a result, he had been put to death by Herod Antipas (see Mark 6:14-29). Jesus predicted that He would suffer the same fate because the people did not recognize Him either. Thus, the Jewish people would kill both God’s messenger and His Messiah, and the curse of Malachi 4:5-6 would come upon the land.

Discussion:


2) To many Jews, Moses represented the Old Testament law and Elijah represented all of the Old Testament prophets. With that in mind, why were the words of God in Matthew 17:5 especially significant?

3) Why do you think Jesus kept the transfiguration so private? What might have happened if the crowds had witnessed this event?

4) Read II Peter 1:16-18. What still impressed Peter about the transfiguration years later? How does it give you reassurance about return of Jesus?

Application:

The disciples struggled with understanding the two ideas about the suffering and death of Jesus and His promise to establish the kingdom. Both were true, but they did not seem to fit together. Through the transfiguration, Jesus revealed to them how there could be glory and life after suffering and death. The one had to happen first, but the other was no less
certain. Moses and Elijah represented the Old Testament law and prophets whose work would be fulfilled in the death, resurrection, and glorious return of Jesus. He was the focal point of God's entire plan. The disciples were instructed to listen to Him, and we are called to do the same. Just as all the events and teachings of the Old Testament led to the coming of the Messiah, so all the events of the world today await His return. His suffering and death have been accomplished, and now there remains the fulfillment of the kingdom in His glorious second coming. That vision of Jesus needs to be kept in our minds and hearts just as the vision of the transfiguration was meant to be cherished by the three privileged disciples.

Life of Christ Study #51

Matthew 17:14-23; Mark 9:14-32; Luke 9:37-45

Theme: Kings and Kingdoms

Summary:

Peter, James, and John had been granted a glimpse of the King in the glory and power of His kingdom on the mount of transfiguration. Yet when the moment had passed, they came down from the mountain back into a world where the kingdom of God was not the only power at work. The earth was still contested ground, for Satan and his demons would not give up dominion over the lives and hearts of men willingly. The light of Jesus had come into the darkness, but the world was still a very dark place (see John 1:5). The victory would not be won in a private display of power on the mountain. It must be fought in the trenches of human suffering and unbelief. The kingdom will come and the King will reign, but the time for celebration is not yet, for the kingdom of darkness holds its sway tightly over those who have not entered and received the light. The disciples were about to see and experience the conflict closely.

1) Kingdom of darkness (Mark 9:14-18). While the three disciples had been enjoying a vision of God's kingdom with Jesus, the others nine had been witnessing the power of another kingdom. A man had brought his son, who had a demon, to be healed by Jesus. Since Jesus was not present at the time, he asked the disciples to help his son. They tried to cast out the demon but were unsuccessful. Apparently, some religious teachers were there, and they began a debate with the disciples, probably over the techniques and procedures of exorcism. It is even possible that these scribes brought the man and his son for the express purpose of finding a charge against them, for if the disciples failed to heal him, their credibility could be brought into question. Meanwhile, the poor boy was no better. The demon would throw him into convulsions, sometimes
endangering his life (see Matthew 17:15). When Jesus arrived, the kingdom of darkness seemed to be winning the day. The boy was still suffering and the disciples were cornered. It was a sharp contrast to the scene on the mountain.

2) King of light (Mark 9:19-29). The disgust Jesus expressed over the situation was probably directed at the scribes who were intent on disapproving Him even at the expense of a boy's suffering. However, His words also may have been a rebuke to the disciples for their mishandling of the scene. Jesus soon took control. The demon recognized Jesus and did its best to show its power. The father explained that his son had been in this condition for a long time and pleaded with Jesus to help him, but Jesus first looked for a sign of faith (v.23). The poor father honestly confessed his mixture of belief and unbelief. He trusted Jesus, but the power of the demon seemed so strong that he doubted anything could be done. By this time, the crowd's attention was shifting from the debate toward Jesus, so He quickly commanded the demon to leave the boy. The kingdom of darkness had no choice but to obey the King of light. Later, in private, the disciples asked why they had failed. Jesus pointed to their small faith (see Matthew 17:20). They had tried to find the power in themselves instead of trusting God. Prayer was the key, not magic words or religious formulas. When Jesus had earlier sent them to preach throughout Galilee, He had given them authority over demons (see Mark 6:7), but they had soon forgotten that the source of power was the King.

3) Kingdoms collide (Mark 9:30-32). Jesus returned with His disciples to Galilee, but He avoided the crowds, for He wanted to concentrate on teaching His disciples. He had not come to Galilee to preach this time. He was beginning the road that would take Him to Jerusalem (see Luke 9:51). He spoke to His disciples again about His approaching betrayal, death, and resurrection, but they still did not understand. They had seen Him demonstrate His authority over the kingdom of darkness. It did not make sense that one so powerful could die at the hands of men. But the King was moving toward the vital confrontation with the kingdom of darkness. The Son of Man would receive God's kingdom (see Daniel 7:13-14), but first He must win the victory that lay on the other side of suffering. He could overthrow demons with a word of command, but the conquest of death and sin would be more costly.

Discussion:

1) Compare the experience of Peter, James and John on
the mountain in Mark 9:2-13 with that of the other nine in Mark 9:14-18. What words would you use to describe the mountain experience? What words would you use to describe the experience with the demon?

2) Have you ever left a time of wonderful worship and encouragement only to be confronted with new pressures and problems? How did you feel?

3) Read Mark 9:23-24. Did the father have faith? Did he also have doubts? Do you ever feel that kind of struggle between belief and unbelief? How does Jesus help you overcome your unbelief?

4) Read Mark 9:30-32. Why did the disciples have such a hard time understanding that Jesus would die?

Application:

Once again, the disciples demonstrated that they were not ready to take the lead in the kingdom. They were in serious trouble until Jesus arrived on the scene. Much of their problem was that they misunderstood the fight in which they were engaged. If the kingdom of God was simply to replace the kingdom of Rome, then courage, strength, and displays of power would be enough. But the kingdom which had to be conquered was not an earthly kingdom. It was the kingdom of darkness which held men in bondage to sin and death. It was a spiritual battle in which prayer and dependence on God were far more important than strength or technique. It was a battle that Jesus would win with His life, death, and resurrection. It is easy for us to make the same mistake as the disciples. We see the power of Jesus and try to copy His technique without seeking His presence. The authority belongs to Him and strength is found in belief. Yet it is also comforting to know that He takes into account our unbelief. Faith the size of a mustard seed is sufficient, no matter how imperfect, because it is placed in the King.

Life of Christ: Study #52


Theme: Stumbling Blocks

Summary:

The encounter with the demon vividly reminded the disciples that they were involved in a conflict (see Matthew 17:14-21). The kingdom of darkness wanted to hold the hearts of men, and sometimes its power was very evident. However, at other times, its grip upon men was more subtle, yet no less deadly. There were obstacles and stumbling blocks to faith that did not appear so obviously evil. Some even had the trappings of righteousness, but they led men away from the
truth and entangled them in ideas and debates and practices without real spiritual value. The disciples needed to be aware of these traps, for if they were to represent the King, they had to help people avoid the obstacles. In fact, they needed to be careful that they themselves did not place obstacles in the way of the people they hoped to teach. As Jesus and His disciples came back to Galilee on their way to Jerusalem, they found several such stumbling blocks.

1) Rules (Matthew 17:24-27). Jesus and His disciples had been away from Capernaum for some time, and perhaps the tax records showed that they had fallen behind on their payment for the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem. It is also possible that they just happened to arrive at a time when the regular collection was being made. The question of the collectors to Peter really was one of national loyalty. Every Jew gave toward the maintenance of the temple, and not to do so would be highly offensive to the people. Peter was quick to answer, but then he went to Jesus to check into the matter. Jesus answered that He had the right to claim an exemption from the tax as the Son of God, for no ruler ever exacted a tax from his own family. However, He did not want to unnecessarily offend the people, so He instructed Peter to pay the tax. It is interesting that He used a miracle to procure the money, so that, in a way, He paid the tax and still took the exemption.

2) Rivalries (Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37). On the way to Capernaum, the disciples had engaged in a debate about which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom. This was a serious stumbling block, for it could tear apart the unity within His followers, so Jesus stopped and called them together. He told them that the way to be first in His kingdom was to take the last position and serve the others. Then He called a young child to join them and used him to teach the disciples these principles. First, He said that they could not even be part of the kingdom unless they became like little children, powerless and dependent (Matthew 18:3). Second, He stated that the one who most exemplified that kind of child like humility would be the greatest in His kingdom (Matthew 18:4). Third, He told them that true service to Him was seen in caring for and accepting those who showed such dependence and humility as a child (Mark 9:37).

3) Restrictions (Mark 9:38-41). John related to Jesus that they had watched a man casting out demons in His name. Since the man was not one of the twelve, the disciples had told him to stop. Jesus warned His disciples not to place unnecessary restrictions upon others. If the man was doing miracles in the name of Jesus, he could
do them no harm, for he would not be likely to speak against the one he claimed to serve. They should be content that his actions were not antagonistic. Anyone who did good to them because of their association with Jesus would be rewarded.

4) Rocks in the road (Matthew 18:6-14). The child was still standing among them, for Jesus referred to him again. He denounced anyone who would cause a child to sin or fall away from belief in Him. Temptations and stumbling blocks would be a constant danger in the world, but the person who became a stumbling block to others would be cursed. It would be better to go through life maimed or blind than to let a hand or foot or eye carry out sin and lead a person to eternal destruction. The disciples should never dismiss the weak and powerless as unimportant, for God's angels intercede for them. Instead, they should work to gather such people into the kingdom. Rather than causing others to stumble, they should seek to restore those who had stumbled.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 17:24-27. Why do you think Jesus was concerned about offending the tax collectors? What rights do you give up for the sake of others?

2) Read Matthew 18:1-4. How does a person become great in a human kingdom? How is the measure of greatness different in God's kingdom?

3) Read Mark 9:38-40. What do you think motivated the disciples to stop the man from casting out demons? How do jealousy and unnecessary restrictions hurt the church today?

4) Read Matthew 18:12-14. How can you help to restore a person who has fallen over a stumbling block?

Application:

People are lost enough without having additional stumbling blocks thrown in their way. Jesus strongly cautioned the disciples about their interactions with other people lest they hinder rather than help. A preoccupation with personal rights or position would severely damage their effectiveness as His ambassadors. The way to greatness in His kingdom lay in humility and service. That service had to extend especially to the weak and helpless, for God has deep compassion for them. We dare not look down on them or ignore them in a quest for recognition. That same humility must guard us against jealousy and criticizing those who also serve God. Rather than making comparisons and judgments, we should set our minds on serving and leave the rewards and corrections
in God's hands. He is able to evaluate and correctly discern motives. We are not.

Life of Christ Study #53

Matthew 18:15-20

Theme: Forgiveness

Summary:

In any movement or organization, internal strife can be far more damaging than external opposition and pressures. Jesus had spoken to His disciples about stumbling blocks that could impede the growth of the kingdom (see Matthew 17:24-18:14), but the most potentially deadly was an attitude of unforgiveness which could destroy the work from within. Not only would such bitterness and anger divide the followers of Jesus, but the credibility of their testimony would be ruined in the eyes of the people they were called to reach with the message of salvation. The reputation of the King would be in the hands of His representatives after He left, and division within their ranks could not be permitted to grow. So, Jesus addressed the issue of forgiveness with His disciples in very clear terms. He knew that sins and offenses would occur among the people of His kingdom, so He gave instruction about how they should be resolved.

1) The process of forgiveness (Matthew 18:15-20). Jesus placed the responsibility in the hands of the one offended. He was not to publicly denounce his brother's sin nor to look for repayment or revenge. His job was to approach the offender privately and try to win him over without anybody else even knowing what had taken place. The goal should be to seek repentance rather than repayment. If the sinning brother would not accept private rebuke, however, the matter moved into a judicial setting among the members of the kingdom. The Old Testament law had dictated that no one could be convicted of a crime on the testimony of only one witness (see Deuteronomy 19:15), and Jesus agreed. One or two others should accompany the offended brother. If the sinning brother still refused to listen, the matter should be brought before the local assembly of believers. If their judgment was rejected, the sinning brother should be treated as an outsider to the kingdom. The church was given authority by the King to render judgments as if He were personally deciding the matter (v.18-20).

2) The limits of forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22). Peter was troubled by this issue of forgiveness. What if a person sinned against another many times? When could forgiveness be put aside for
retaliation? When Peter proposed seven times, he was being more generous than most of the religious leaders who limited forgiveness to three occasions. But Jesus answered that forgiveness should never end. It was never right to hold a grudge or to seek revenge, even if the offense happened again and again. The process of verses 15-20 was the proper means of obtaining justice within the kingdom, but personal forgiveness was required.

3) The model of forgiveness (Matthew 18:23-35). Jesus illustrated the attitude He wanted His disciples to have by telling them a parable. A king called together his chief servants to collect the money they had gathered in their areas of oversight. It was found that one owed the king ten thousand talents, the equivalent of many millions of dollars. No earthly king would ever allow a subject to accumulate such a debt, but this king took the incredible step of forgiving that amount out of mercy and compassion. The forgiven servant, however, showed no mercy to a colleague who owed him a relatively small sum. The king was outraged and he called the servant back into his presence. He rebuked the man for failing to grant the same mercy he had received. The king put him in prison and ordered him to be tortured. Jesus ended the story with an ominous warning that God would do the same to any of His people who refused to forgive one another. He forgave the huge debt of sin which deserved eternal punishment, but that forgiveness carried the responsibility to forgive others. The tone of the warning left no doubt that Jesus considered this an issue of great importance. Without forgiveness among its subjects, the kingdom could not survive.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 18:15. What does this verse tell you about the following ways of responding to an offense? 
   (a) gossip  
   (b) silence  
   (c) retaliation  
   (d) grudge 

2) Read Matthew 18:16-17. What should you do if the person who offended you refuses to acknowledge fault? According to Matthew 18:18-20, what authority does the church have to judge in such matters?

3) Read Matthew 18:21-22. Why is it important that forgiveness is not limited to the first few offenses? What might happen if forgiveness were limited to seven times?
4) Read Matthew 18:23-35. What does this parable teach you about
(a) your debt to God?
(b) God's mercy towards you?
(c) God's expectation of your mercy?

Application:

Forgiveness may be one of the hardest principles for God's people to practice. We seem to understand that when we sin we need to ask forgiveness, but giving it to others is just as important. Many believers live in the hands of the torturers because of a refusal to forgive. The torture may take the forms of rage, depression, fear, or a settled bitterness. Jesus said that the only way out is to forgive. This does not mean that we let people continue to hurt us. That is why Jesus talked about the process of forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-20. Involving the church allows a person to practice forgiveness while guarding against further injury. Forgiveness does not mean that no action is taken against the offender. It means that he is first given opportunity to repent, but if he refuses, then action may be taken by God's people. The process provides justice for the offended and the offender. The instruction Jesus gave to individuals was to forgive, leaving justice in the hands of those authorized by Him to dispense it. Personal revenge, whether active or passive, is not allowed, for it destroys the unity of the kingdom and violates the mercy that the King requires.

Life of Christ Study #54


Theme: The Road to Jerusalem

Summary:

According to John 7:1, from the time of the Passover in April of A.D. 29, Jesus had purposely avoided the region of Judea because the Jewish leaders were intent on killing Him. It was not that He feared them, but it was not yet time for His death. So, throughout the summer months, Jesus and His disciples traveled to Tyre and Sidon (see Matthew 15:21), around the Sea of Galilee to Decapolis (see Mark 7:31), back through Galilee (see Mark 8:10), and into the area around Caesarea Philippi (see Mark 8:27). Towards the end of that period, Jesus began to prepare His disciples for His coming death in Jerusalem. Then, about the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, in October, He set His feet upon the road to Jerusalem. The disciples would accompany Him, of course, but they were still confused about the true purpose of the journey. In their scheme of the Messiah, Jerusalem was the place to establish the kingdom. But the road Jesus walked would not lead to a throne this time. It was a much darker road, and those who would follow Him would have to forsake all other roads.
1) The road to fame (John 7:2-10). It must be understood that the brothers of Jesus spoke ignorantly, for they did not believe He was the Messiah (v.5). They saw in His miraculous works only an opportunity for recognition and fame. The Feast of Tabernacles was an eight day commemoration of God’s provision for His people in the wilderness during the time of the Exodus from Egypt (see Leviticus 23:34-36), and it was one of the three times of the year that every Jewish man was required to go to Jerusalem (see Deuteronomy 16:16-17). It would have been an ideal occasion to launch a bid for political power, since all of the Jewish religious establishment would be there. A few well chosen miracles might very well have lifted Jesus to a throne if that had been His purpose. But Jesus consistently avoided public displays for this very reason. He told His brothers that they were free to go to the Feast whenever they pleased, for they were part of the Jewish world system. However, He had come to expose the evil of that system, so He would meet hatred and opposition at the Feast. For this reason, He did not go with the rest of the men of the area, but He went later in secret. He had to wait for the proper time to confront the world system and meet His death.

2) The road to conquest (Luke 9:51-56). In spite of His words to His brothers, Jesus knew that the time of His suffering and death was drawing near, so He determined to go to Jerusalem. He did not go in the public way they had wanted, but He knew that the fulfillment of His work lay there. He took the route from Galilee through Samaria, probably to avoid the recognition and publicity that would come with the busy road through the Jordan Valley. However, He and His disciples were denied admittance into one of the Samaritan villages because He was headed for the temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans had their own holy place on Mount Gerizim, and they resented those who worshipped elsewhere. James and John asked permission to call down fire upon the village in retribution. To them, their journey to Jerusalem was a march toward victory and conquest. If enemies stood in the way, they should be crushed by the King. But Jesus rebuked their attitude and turned aside to follow the road to the valley.

3) The road to convenience (Luke 9:57-62). As He walked the road to Jerusalem, Jesus passed other pilgrims going to the Feast. One of them vowed to follow Him anywhere, but Jesus challenged Him to consider what that really meant. Perhaps the man saw Jesus as one who would provide power and wealth. Jesus told him that following Him meant...
forsaking his home and security. Another man was invited by Jesus to follow, but he asked for time to complete the funeral arrangements for his father. Jesus replied that there were plenty of other relatives, who were themselves spiritually dead, to take care of the funeral. He called this man to announce the coming of the kingdom. Yet another man agreed to follow if he could first say good-bye to his family. Jesus answered that a person cannot look back once he has decided to plow. Jesus would not accept every potential disciple who offered. He wanted to see if they truly understood that He was the Messiah. If they did, they would leave everything like the twelve (see Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9).

Discussion:

1) Read John 7:2-4. What might have happened if Jesus had followed the advice of His brothers? Why did He want to avoid these possibilities?

2) Read Luke 9:51-56. Why was the attitude of James and John so repulsive to Jesus? How was it different from His attitude and purpose?

3) Read Luke 9:57-62. Why do you think Jesus answered those who wanted to follow Him in this way? What might have been wrong in their motives for wanting to follow Him? Do people follow Jesus with wrong motives today?

4) Has following Jesus ever taken you into situations and circumstances that were uncomfortable or difficult? What have you given up to follow Him?

Application:

Jesus knew exactly why He needed to go to Jerusalem, and it had nothing to do with fame, conquest, or convenience. The road that He chose would be extremely difficult and painful, but He would not be turned aside by any other agendas. He was going to Jerusalem to die so that the doors of the kingdom might be opened to sinful men. Many wanted to follow Jesus as long as there was hope of material rewards and political power. Many wanted to see more miracles. But the road Jesus traveled would test and reveal all the false motives of those who talked of following Him. When we say we want to follow Jesus, we must be willing to let Him select the road. He leads and we follow, even if it means giving up ambitions and comforts or going through rough and difficult terrain.

Life of Christ Study #55

John 7:11-53

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Theme: Opposition and Amazement

Summary:

Jesus' reluctance to go to the Feast of Tabernacles publicly proved to be very wise, for the Jewish leaders were watching for Him in Jerusalem and their mood was not friendly (John 7:11). His previous visit to the city had sparked a determination among the religious leaders to kill Him (see John 5:16-18), and that goal had not changed. The crowds, meanwhile, were divided in their opinions about Jesus. Some defended Him as a good man, one who helped people, while others accused Him of being a false teacher who deceived the people for His own purposes (John 7:12). Neither opinion, however, was voiced in public settings, for the people feared displeasing the leaders (John 7:13). They knew better than to speak out on religious matters, the domain of the Pharisees who did not approve of anyone making judgments without them. So, the coming of Jesus to the Feast would bring the controversies surrounding Him to a head once again. His every word and action would be evaluated and scrutinized through both eyes of opposition and amazement.

1) His teaching (John 7:14-24). The Feast was already half done when Jesus finally began to appear publicly. His teaching amazed even the Jewish rulers, but they questioned its source. Jesus had not studied in any of the accepted schools or with a respected teacher. He told them that His teaching was from God and that if they obeyed God they would recognize that fact. His teaching was clearly not for personal gain but to bring honor to God, so His motives were pure. The Jews agreed that the prophet Moses spoke for God, yet they had not obeyed his command to listen to the prophet who would come (see Deuteronomy 18:17-22). Instead, they wanted to kill that prophet. They denied this, but Jesus reminded them of their words and actions when He healed an invalid on the Sabbath (see John 5:16-18). One miracle on the Sabbath had enraged them, yet they had no problem performing a circumcision on the Sabbath. Their reasoning was inconsistent and revealed a lack of discernment.

2) His identity (John 7:25-36). The crowds in Jerusalem took notice of this confrontation, and because the religious leaders were unable to answer Jesus, the people wondered if they had concluded that He was indeed the Messiah. The leaders answered that He could not be the Christ because they knew that He came from Galilee, but the Christ would appear suddenly. Jesus acknowledged that they did know His human origin, but He still insisted that He was sent by God. The rulers tried to have Him arrested on the spot, but it was not yet God's appointed time. In spite of this opposition, many people decided that He was the Messiah. The Pharisees grew even
more angry and sent temple guards to find and arrest Him. Jesus then told the people that He would soon leave them to return to the One who sent Him, but they did not understand. They assumed that He meant to go among the Jewish communities scattered throughout the empire. They did not know that He was speaking about His coming death.

3) His claims (John 7:37-44). The controversy around Jesus reached a peak on the final day of the Feast. Each day of the Feast, water was poured at the base of the temple altar to commemorate God’s provision in the wilderness (see Numbers 20:1-11) and to look forward to the future time when water would flow from the temple and turn the Dead Sea fresh (see Ezekiel 47:1-12). On that last day of the Feast, Jesus announced that He was the true source of water and that anyone who put their trust in Him would find a spring of living water within them that would never fail (see Isaiah 58:11). The people could not know that He was telling them about the Holy Spirit who would later be given to those who believed. But some of the people did understand that Jesus spoke like the awaited Prophet or even the Messiah. Again, the objection was raised about His origin in Galilee which did not seem to fit the prophecies about David’s family and city. Thus, the people were still divided between believing Jesus and arresting Him.

4) Unsettled arguments (John 7:45-53). Even the guards who had been sent to arrest Jesus were confused. Apparently, they were too busy listening to Him to seize Him. The Pharisees belittled them as part of the ignorant crowds who were easily deceived. But Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had earlier gone to Jesus in secret (see John 3:1-2), encouraged his fellow rulers to listen to Jesus’ message before condemning Him in accordance with their own law. The other Pharisees derided Nicodemus and fell back again on the tired argument about Galilee. They, at least, had made up their minds about Jesus and were not interested in any other facts or information.

Discussion:

1) Read John 7:11-53 and make a list of the different opinions expressed about Jesus. In what form do you meet some of these same opinions today?

2) What arguments did the Jewish leaders raise against Jesus in the following verses? How would you answer them?
   (a) John 7:15       (c) John 7:27
   (b) John 7:20       (d) John 7:41-42

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3) Read John 7:30 and 7:44. Why did the rulers want to seize Jesus? What do you think prevented them?

4) Read John 7:50-52. Why were the Pharisees so unwilling to even listen to what Jesus said? What are some reasons that people refuse to consider the message of Jesus today?

Application:
At the Feast of Tabernacles, the clash between Jesus and the religious authorities became clear. Jesus spoke to the crowds and offered them truth and life, but the rulers continually did their best to turn the people away from Him. Jesus called for a decision while the rulers called for conformity. They attacked His education, called Him demon possessed, and questioned His background, but they could not directly answer His statements. They resorted over and again to the argument about no prophet coming from Galilee. It was a weak line of reasoning at best, and at worst it was not true, for the prophet Jonah came from the region that became Galilee (see II Kings 14:25). The Pharisees, however, were not interested in real discussion. They had already determined to silence Jesus. Spiritual blindness does not follow rules of logic.

Life of Christ Study #56

John 8:1-11

Theme: Cast the First Stone

Summary:

There is debate over whether this section was originally part of John’s Gospel or was added later. The doubt is strong enough to raise a caution, but it is generally agreed that the story may well be a true one. It certainly fits the pattern of other confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees, and it appears to fit the context of His time in Jerusalem. Nicodemus had admonished his fellow Pharisees not to judge Jesus without hearing Him (see John 7:50-51). It may be that several decided to arrange a test for Him on the next day when the case of an adulterous woman was brought to them. Rather than passing judgment on the woman themselves, they brought her to Jesus and asked Him to render a verdict. They were less concerned about the case than about a chance to discredit Jesus or even bring legal charges against Him. The defeat of the previous day was still fresh, and they would take any opportunity to put Him in His place.

1) The charge (John 8:2-6). The scene had all the indications of a set up. The Pharisees had sparred with Jesus the day before and lost. Now He was back on the temple grounds again, teaching
a large group of people who had gathered. Into the midst of this setting the Pharisees and religious teachers thrust their way with a woman they claimed had been caught in the very act of adultery. Apparently, the charge was true, for the woman offered no defense. The Pharisees were right about the law of Moses demanding the death penalty for her sin (see Leviticus 20:10), but Roman law had taken the authority of punishment away from the Jews. Therefore, if Jesus upheld God's law and condemned the woman to death, He could be charged with rebellion against Rome. On the other hand, if He obeyed the Roman law, the Pharisees would accuse Him of compromising God's law. They cared little for real justice and nothing for the public humiliation of the woman. They only asked Him to play the role of judge in the case so they could trap Him no matter what He decided.

2) The testimony (John 8:6-9). There is no clue as to what Jesus wrote on the ground. It is possible that He only did it to show His contempt for the attitude and actions of the Pharisees. But they persisted in questioning Him, so He finally accepted their challenge and proceeded to give them a lesson in God's law. More than one witness was required to convict a person of a capital offense (see Deuteronomy 19:15). Perhaps the Pharisees had met that mandate, for they said the woman had been caught in the act. The law also demanded that the witnesses answer truthfully any question asked about what they saw and heard (see Leviticus 5:1). If they failed to do so or gave false testimony, they would suffer the fate they had sought for the accused (see Deuteronomy 19:16-19). Furthermore, the witnesses were required to demonstrate their confidence in their own testimony by being the first to throw a stone at the accused if the person was convicted (see Deuteronomy 17:6-7). Jesus agreed that the woman deserved death under the law, but He called the integrity of the witnesses into question by inviting them to perform their duty. Then He resumed writing on the ground.

3) The verdict (John 8:9-11). One by one, the accusers slinked away, for they knew they had not dealt fairly in the case. The woman was guilty, but they were ashamed to tell the whole story of how they used her to trap Jesus. Or perhaps some of them simply feared the wrath of Rome if they actually participated in an execution. Their absence voided the punishment, for they were unwilling to perform it. Jesus had upheld God's law without violating Roman law. When the Pharisees were gone, He asked the woman if there was anyone left to condemn her. He dismissed the
case for lack of witnesses and told her that He did not condemn her either. He could do this because He Himself would pay the penalty for her sin on the cross.

Discussion:

1) Read John 8:2-6. The Pharisees claimed to have a zeal for righteousness, but what did their actions reveal about
   (a) their compassion for people?
   (b) their desire for true justice?
   (c) their responsibility to teach truth?

2) What might have been the consequences if Jesus had compromised on God's law? What if He had broken the Roman law? Why was it important for Him to keep both?

3) How might the following questions have been embarrassing to the witnesses?
   (a) How did you happen to catch her in the act?
   (b) Where is the man with whom she committed adultery?
   (c) Has she repented of her sin?
   (d) Why did you really bring her to Me?

4) How did Jesus illustrate the following verses in His treatment of the woman?
   (a) John 1:17       (c) Luke 5:31-32
   (b) John 3:16-17

Application:

Jesus knew that the Pharisees had set another trap for Him. They did not really care about justice and they certainly did not care about the woman they dragged before Him. Their hatred for Jesus was so strong that they would use whatever means available to be rid of Him. But once again, He turned their snare back upon them, and they retreated in shame and defeat. Unlike His enemies, Jesus did care for the woman. He did not excuse or dismiss her sin, but He encouraged her to take advantage of the mercy He extended to change her life. That is what He accomplished for each of us when He died for our sin. He gave mercy to those who deserved death and called them to repent. It should be a caution to us when we are tempted to throw stones at those who have fallen in sin. Our goal, like that of Jesus, should be to restore and heal through grace and mercy so that condemnation can be averted.

Life of Christ Study #57

John 8:12-30

Theme: The Light of the World
Summary:

The Feast of Tabernacles was filled with ceremonies to symbolize God's provision for the people of Israel during their time in the wilderness. Jesus had earlier used the ritual that commemorated the water from a rock to point to His own offer of life (see John 7:37-38). Another symbol of the Feast involved the lighting of lamps to celebrate the pillar of fire God used to lead His people at night. Jesus now called Himself the light of the world, promising that anyone who followed Him would never walk in darkness (John 8:12). He brought the light of truth which leads to life into a world of darkness and confusion (see John 1:4-5). The Pharisees were always ready to challenge and contradict whatever Jesus said to the crowds, for they hated His message, His popularity, and the fact that He had already embarrassed them in debates several times that week. Again, they tried to prove that He disobeyed the law, and again, He caught them in their own trap.

1) Self witness (John 8:13-18). The Pharisees argued that Jesus made the claim to be the light of the world without any proof. They challenged Him to produce evidence or testimony other than His own to substantiate what He said. Jesus replied that His own testimony was really sufficient because it was true. He knew where He came from and where He was going even if they did not. His judgments were true because they were given to Him by God. There could be no greater proof than that. However, the Pharisees insisted on using human standards to make their judgments. One of these appeared in the Old Testament law and required at least two witnesses to establish a fact (see Deuteronomy 19:15). Therefore, Jesus declared that His Father stood with Him as a second witness of His claim.

2) Unseen witness (John 8:19-24). The Pharisees were not convinced. They wanted a witness who could be seen and cross examined. They demanded that Jesus physically produce His Father before they would accept Him as a witness. Jesus answered that they could not accept His Father because they did not know or accept Him. If they listened to and believed the message of Jesus, then they would also believe the testimony of the Father as it had been given through Scripture and through miraculous signs that Jesus performed. Apparently, these words angered the Pharisees to the point of wanting to do violence to Him on the spot, but again they were prevented because the time had not yet come (see John 7:30 and 7:44). Then Jesus told them that He would soon go to a place where they could not come and that they would be left to die in their sin. He meant that He would soon go to His Father after His death, but the Pharisees did not understand. They supposed that He intended to kill Himself. Jesus explained their confusion by pointing out that
they were from two very different origins. He had come from the Father with the message of truth. They were hopelessly tied to a human understanding. Unless they put it aside and accepted His claim, they would die in their sins.

3) Final witness (John 8:25-30). Now the Pharisees came to the heart of the debate. Understanding and accepting the identity of Jesus was the issue that blocked them from finding the light. Jesus had been telling them this all along, but they steadfastly refused to accept Him as the Messiah. Jesus spoke the truth that God had given Him to present to the world and it passed judgment upon them and their sin. Still, they could not or would not grasp the truth, so Jesus told them that when He was lifted up on the cross they would finally understand His identity, for they would see the final proof in His sacrifice that He was indeed God's servant (see Isaiah 52:13-15). It seems the message broke through to some at that time, for they put their faith in Him.

Discussion:

1) According to the following verses, what are the characteristics of a person who walks in darkness?
   (a) Deuteronomy 28:29 (e) Jeremiah 23:12
   (b) Psalm 82:5 (f) John 11:9-10
   (c) Isaiah 59:10 (g) John 12:35
   (d) Jeremiah 13:16 (h) I John 2:11

2) Read John 8:19. The Pharisees demanded to see the Father to hear His testimony. In what ways had the Father already give testimony about Jesus?
   (a) Luke 2:18-12 (c) Luke 5:22-26
   (b) Matthew 3:16-17

3) Read John 8:21-24. Why do you think Jesus kept telling the Pharisees that they would die in their sin? What was more important to Him than winning a debate?

4) Read John 8:28-29. The Pharisees thought Jesus claimed to be the Messiah for personal gain. How would His death on the cross disprove that theory?

Application:

The Pharisees did not want to let any statement by Jesus pass uncontested. They followed Him at the Feast and challenged everything He said. Jesus was more than prepared to answer their arguments however. Yet even in debate, He still constantly called them to repent and receive the light and life He offered. They wanted to win an argument for the sake of their pride while Jesus wanted to convince them for the sake of their eternity. Their minds were rooted in
earthly interests, but He never lost sight of the real issue of salvation. Darkness argues and becomes distracted with details and side issues. Light aims straight for the heart, because if the light can shine there, all else will become clear. The people around us do not need proofs and clever presentations. They need the truth, and until they accept the truth of Jesus, they will remain lost in darkness, stumbling and groping in false beliefs and arguments.

Life of Christ Study #58

John 8:31-59

Theme: Before Abraham

Summary:

The debate with the Pharisees had led to some of the crowd truly putting their faith in Jesus (see John 8:30). There were others, however, who believed what He said without giving their lives to Him (John 8:31). John was careful to distinguish between the two groups by his choice of words. Jesus clearly saw this distinction, so He challenged the second group to go beyond listening and considering and to obey His teaching. Being impressed and open to His claims was not enough to make them His disciples. Only by committing themselves to obey would they really find the truth that would set them free (John 8:32). Their belief had to be practical and complete, not just intellectual. Many people had at various times good feelings about Jesus, but they could just as quickly turn against Him if they did not like something He said or did. Such people were not disciples, for a true disciple had to trust his master enough to follow at all times. The response of these people to Jesus' challenge showed that their belief lacked any real depth.

1) Children of Abraham (John 8:33-41). Jewish history recognized that the nation had been conquered on four occasions by Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, but the people had retained their identity as the descendants of Abraham nonetheless. They believed that their ancestry assured them of ultimate freedom as God's people. However, Jesus had not meant that they needed to be set free from a political conqueror. The enemy that held them in slavery was their sin. Until they were freed from that slavery by Jesus, they could not hold a permanent place in God's family. Jesus agreed that they were physically descended from Abraham, but their rejection of His message was an indication that their father was not God. Again they insisted that Abraham was their father, but Jesus told them that their actions betrayed them. Abraham would not have wanted to kill God's messenger as they did. They were revealing their heritage in Satan's domain of darkness by their rejection of the truth.
2) Children of God (John 8:41-47). Jesus accused the Jews of claiming Abraham as their father while actually being the children of another. They bristled at this suggestion of illegitimacy and declared themselves to be God's children because of their descent from Abraham. Jesus again showed them that their actions were inconsistent with their claim. If God was truly their Father they would love and accept the One He sent. Instead, they followed the patterns of their real father, the devil, intent on murder and clinging to lies. The truth that Jesus spoke to them was confusing and offensive because they were so accustomed to the lies of Satan. They could not convict Him of any sin, yet they hated and opposed Him anyway. The true children of God would recognize and obey what God said, but since they were not really His children, they would not hear.

3) Greater than Abraham (John 8:48-59). The Jews were so enraged by this time that they resorted to name calling. They called Jesus a Samaritan, meaning that He was not a pure child of God through Abraham, and they accused Him of being filled with the devil Himself. Jesus replied that He showed His relationship to God by honoring Him and warned them that their dishonor toward Him would be judged by God. But if they would obey His message, they could escape death. The Jews retorted that Abraham and the prophets had served God and died. How could Jesus claim to be able to overcome death when these great men could not? They accused Him of making empty boasts about Himself. Jesus said that His Father would verify His words, for unlike the Jews, Jesus really knew God and obeyed Him. He told them that Abraham looked forward to His coming and rejoiced when He saw it. The Jews scoffed at the idea that a young man like Jesus could have a personal connection with Abraham who had died more than two thousand years before, but Jesus boldly stated that He had existed even before Abraham. By saying, "I am" instead of "I was," He declared that He was God. The Jews, who had earlier expressed interest in His message, now tried to stone Him, but Jesus eluded them and left the temple grounds. The Jews could accept Him as a good teacher, but they would not tolerate Him as God, for they were indeed slaves to sin.

Discussion:

1) The Jews believed that their ancestry made them God's children. What do people claim as proof they know God today? What did Jesus say was real proof of discipleship in John 8:31-32?
2) Read John 8:39-41. Describe the inconsistency between what these people said and what they did. Describe the manner of life that would be consistent with a claim to know and follow Jesus.

3) Read John 8:42-47. What is the response of a person deceived by lies when he is told the truth? How do these verses help you to understand the response of the world to the message of salvation?

4) Read John 8:31 and 8:59. These verses describe the same group of people. How could their belief so quickly turn to hatred? What was lacking in their belief?

Application:

The blindness and deceptiveness of sin were strong among the people to whom Jesus spoke. Even when they were intellectually convinced by His arguments and message, they could not see the need to give their lives to the truth and follow it. But, as Jesus pointed out, there is a world of difference between knowing and saying the right things and actually living them. The Jews claimed the right spiritual heritage, but they had long departed from living its implications and principles. Pride and a smug complacency had replaced devotion and fear of God. Subtle lies, appealing to their national identity and legalistic righteousness, had so clouded their understanding that they saw the fulfillment of Abraham's faith as a threat instead of a cause of rejoicing. Their Messiah came and they treated Him as an enemy. It is said that people today are seeking truth, but the good news of Jesus upsets their view of the world completely. Only those who are willing to embrace the change can be children of God.

Life of Christ Study #59

**Luke 10:1-24**

Thème: Seventy-two Ambassadors

Summary:

After the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus turned His attention once again to spreading His message and training workers. For the second time, He directed His followers to see that the work was great but the workers were few, then sent them out as His workers into the harvest (Luke 10:2; see Matthew 9:37-38). This time, there were seventy-two, a number corresponding to the number of elders appointed by Moses (see Numbers 11:24-26). These helpers were to go ahead of Jesus throughout the regions of Judea and Perea to the towns He would soon visit Himself. Their instructions were in many ways similar to those given to the twelve when they were sent out in Galilee (see Matthew 10:1-42). Through them, Jesus
could lay the groundwork for His personal ministry in the area and expand His team of trained workers. The Feast had demonstrated that little time remained before a final confrontation with the Jewish religious establishment that would result in His death. Jesus would use that time to continue spreading the news about the kingdom and preparing His ambassadors to carry on His work after Him.

1) Going (Luke 10:3-11). The ministry of these ambassadors was to be very narrowly focused. They were told to travel lightly and swiftly, not even pausing to greet people along the road. They were to go straight to an occupied area or town and seek lodging from someone who lived there. If food were offered to them, they should stay at that house as long as they were teaching in that town, and their blessing would rest upon the one who gave them hospitality. If they were welcomed, they were free to minister there, proclaiming the kingdom and performing miracles to confirm their message. However, if they were not welcomed, they should quickly leave, giving nothing to that place but the warning that the kingdom was coming.

2) Warning (Luke 10:12-16). The seventy-two ambassadors carried the authority of the King with them, and the King's wrath would be against any place that rejected them. Sodom was totally destroyed for its sin (see Genesis 19:24-25), but the fate of a city that refused the message of the kingdom would be worse. Jesus had singled out Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum before as examples of cities which had seen great miracles yet remained unrepentant (see Matthew 11:21-24). Pagan cities, like Tyre and Sidon, were more responsive than God's own people. The workers Jesus sent out so closely represented Him that a rejection of them and their message amounted to a rejection of Him. He would not stop at those places when He came to the area Himself.

3) Rejoicing (Luke 10:17-20). When the seventy-two ambassadors returned from their travels, they were brimming with excitement. The experience that amazed them the most was that demons submitted to the name of Jesus. No incantations were necessary. The mere authority of Jesus was enough to overcome them. Jesus replied that He already knew of their success, for He had seen Satan's defeat in their confrontations. The devil had been thrown down by the representatives of Jesus as though He had been there personally (see Matthew 16:18-19). Jesus had given them authority over the enemy and his agents. However, He reminded His workers that the fact their names were recorded in heaven should be a greater source of joy to them than their victories over demons. He did not want them to
lose perspective on their work. Salvation was the central issue, not displays of power.

4) Blessing (Luke 10:21-24). Jesus also rejoiced at the report of His ambassadors. He praised the Father for allowing His followers to witness His hand at work. The Pharisees and rulers missed it in all their learning and complex arguments. Instead, God revealed it to those who came with the faith of children. In the same way, Jesus revealed God to those who accepted His teaching. He told His disciples that they were blessed, for they were seeing and hearing what the Old Testament saints had longed to see and hear. They were witnessing the kingdom of God and the presence of the King. The Messiah the prophets had foretold had come and He was accomplishing a great victory over Satan and sin.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 9:37-10:5 and Luke 10:1-3. How significant do you think it is that both times Jesus told His disciples to pray for workers in the harvest He then sent them to teach? Can you pray for workers without being willing to be one?

2) Read Luke 10:8-16. What warning do these verses carry for people today who refuse your witness about salvation in Jesus?


4) Read Luke 10:23-24. Name some things you have seen and heard as a follower of Jesus that make you blessed.

Application:

For the second time, Jesus sent out a group of His followers to do His work. They announced the coming kingdom just as John the Baptist and Jesus Himself had done. They encountered the opposition of Satan and, through the authority Jesus had given them, they defeated the enemy. They were welcomed by some people and rejected by others, but in either case they delivered the message of the King. Jesus rejoiced with them in their success, for the future of His kingdom would be placed in the hands of people like them. Today, as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we stand in a position with a rich heritage. The message has not changed, the enemy still opposes our work, the response of people is still mixed, and Jesus still grants us His authority to take the good news to the world (see Matthew 28:18-20). We have been appointed by the King to be His ambassadors. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers and then get ready to go!
Life of Christ Study #60

Luke 10:25-37

Theme: The Good Samaritan

Summary:

Within the sect of the Pharisees were a group commonly called scribes. Among the scribes there were certain men who devoted themselves to the ethical interpretation of the Old Testament law. These men were the theologians of the Jewish religious system. They studied and argued the finer points of the law with a special precision in nuance and language. If there was a question about a specific application of the law, these lawyers were the ones consulted. They also served as teachers in the formal education of young scribes. One of these experts in the law presented a question to Jesus to test His understanding and application of the law. It may well be that this man was chosen by the Pharisees because of his position and reputation to publicly examine Jesus in an attempt to find grounds for denouncing Him to the people. The lawyer certainly employed official language and manners in his questioning, and Jesus answered him in the same style. If the Pharisees wished to challenge Jesus on matters of interpretation and application, He was quite prepared to meet the challenge and to once again turn it back upon them.

1) Reciting the law (Luke 10:25-28). The question the lawyer posed was a common one that would reveal the core of Jesus' teaching. If He bypassed the law in seeking eternal life, the Jews would have grounds to denounce Him as disobedient to God. However, Jesus assumed the role of the teacher and answered the question with a question, an accepted practice in these legal debates. He appealed to the lawyer's expertise and asked him to apply the law. For the lawyer, this was an easy task, and he immediately quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, which commanded love for God and love for neighbor. These were accepted by the Pharisees as the two most important commandments in the law (see Mark 12:28-34), and Jesus agreed with the answer. He then addressed the lawyer's original question by affirming that obedience to those laws would result in life. It was simple to recite the correct answer, but life was found in living the answer.

2) Illustrating the law (Luke 10:29-35). The lawyer did not want anyone to suppose that he failed to obey the law, so he sought an application of it that would fit and justify his current manner of life. When he asked for a definition of "neighbor" he was probably thinking of the usual interpretation used by the Pharisees. To them, a neighbor was a fellow Israelite, based on a
narrow view of Leviticus 19:18. Jesus, however, took the more correct and wider application that included foreigners living among the Jews (see Leviticus 19:34). He illustrated this by making a Samaritan, generally despised by Jews, the hero of His parable. Two champions of the Jewish religion failed to obey the law in helping a fellow Israelite. The Samaritan was the one who stopped and had pity on the beaten man, even though he was not of the same race. He personally tended the man’s injuries and paid for his recovery. That was love for neighbor put into action instead of mere words.

3) Applying the law (Luke 10:36-37). Jesus then asked the expert in ethical law to apply his knowledge to the illustration. The question was not about a technical definition of "neighbor." It was about the practical actions and attitudes of being a neighbor according to the law. Perhaps the lawyer could not bring himself to say the word "Samaritan," but he understood the point. The one who showed mercy fulfilled the commandment while the two who could certainly quote the law failed to keep it. But Jesus was not satisfied with a correct answer from the lawyer. He challenged him to put his conclusions into action. Of course, the man would find that he could never completely fulfill the two commandments of love. His attempts at justifying himself had to be replaced by a realization that he could not earn eternal life by his own system of righteousness.

Discussion:

1) Read the lawyer’s answer in Luke 10:27. What do the following verses say about the chances of a person actually keeping those commandments all the time?
   (a) Romans 3:20 (c) James 2:10
   (b) Galatians 3:10-11

2) Read Luke 10:29-35. List the ways in which the Samaritan acted as a neighbor to the injured man. What excuses might the priest and Levite have offered for their lack of help?

3) How could you be a neighbor to the following people?
   (a) A single parent
   (b) An elderly shut-in
   (c) An unemployed person
   (d) Other

4) What differences do you see in the way Jesus and the lawyer interpreted the law?
Application:

The lawyer thought he was very shrewd in the dilemma he posed to Jesus. There was no doubt that he knew the law from a scholarly standpoint. He could quote it and debate its implications and applications quickly and clearly. However, it became evident that he was weak in obeying it. He wanted to use his knowledge to create an interpretation of the law which would justify his way of life, but Jesus understood that the law was God's perfect standard. No man could keep it completely all the time. Eternal life could not be gained in that way. The law revealed man's sin rather than justifying his righteousness. Until we accept that truth, we, like the lawyer, will look for ways to make the law fit our preferences and desires. A neighbor will only be the one we can conveniently help. But God calls us to treat all men as neighbors, setting aside our own selfish wishes to serve others. Such love can only come from a changed heart, submitted to obeying God and humbly learning love from Him.

Life of Christ Study #61


Theme: Priorities, Prayer, and Persistence

Summary:

As Jesus continued His travels in and around Judea in the closing months of A.D. 29, not all was confrontation and controversy. There were also some times of rest and refreshment. These were ideal occasions to teach and train His disciples as He prepared to place the work of the kingdom in their hands. Away from the skeptical Pharisees and the fickle crowds, He could concentrate on those who had already made their choice to follow Him. He could answer their questions and address specific issues that were of great importance to their growth and development. He could also spend time alone in prayer, finding strength and resolve to stay on the road set before Him to its painful yet purposeful end. He would return to teach the crowds and endure the attacks of the Pharisees, but for now, He would pursue that road in a more relaxed setting.

1) Priorities (Luke 10:38-42). In the midst of the hostility of the religious leaders and the dull understanding of the crowds, Jesus must have found it especially refreshing to come upon people who eagerly received Him and His message. Luke did not name the village where Martha and Mary lived, but John later identified it as Bethany (see John 11:1), about two miles east of Jerusalem on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Martha invited Jesus and His disciples into the home and immediately went about the many preparations needed for their stay. Meanwhile, her sister sat at the feet of Jesus listening to all that He said. Martha became upset that Mary
made no move to help her. Jesus gently rebuked Martha for her misplaced priorities. The preparation of rooms and meals was certainly a necessary task, but it was by no means urgent. Martha was so busy doing things for Jesus that she did not take the time to listen to Him and learn from Him. She was so concerned about deadlines and appearances that she missed what was really important. Mary had chosen the better activity, and nothing would distract her from her place.

2) Prayer (Luke 11:1-4). Prayer is certainly an opportunity to speak to and learn from God, and it can quickly be pushed aside by other concerns and distractions. Jesus, however, made it a priority, and His disciples were impressed as they watched Him. One day they asked Him to teach them how to pray. The example Jesus gave them was very simple. Indeed, it was basically a shortened version of the sample He used in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 6:9-13). But in those few lines Jesus showed His disciples that prayer was a chance to focus on the most important issues of life such as worship, provision, forgiveness, and resisting temptation. All the activity and planning in the world could not address these vital topics of spiritual life as effectively as those words of prayer, for only God could provide what was needed. The prayer of Jesus modeled a dependency and a contentment in God that are essential to following Him.

3) Persistence (Luke 11:5-13). Prayer should not be approached as a mere duty, nor should it be for outward show. Jesus taught that His followers should come to prayer as one who has real need. Being surprised by a friend and having no food to offer him would have been a disgrace to the people of Jesus' time (v.5-6). Hospitality was a matter of character and reputation and failure to perform it would have brought great shame in the community. So, it was natural that a man would rush to his neighbor, even in the dead of night, to borrow food for his guest. He came determined to get what he needed because he considered it very important (v.7-8). In the same way, Jesus told His disciples to ask, seek, and knock for the things they needed from God. God promised that He would respond to such earnest requests (v.9-10). No human father, even though sinful, would respond to his child's request for food by giving a deadly snake or scorpion, and God is even more faithful about giving the gift of spiritual help through His Spirit to His children who ask (v.11-13).
1) What good activities can distract you from spending time with Jesus? According to Luke 10:41-42, which is really most important?

2) Read the prayer Jesus gave as an example in Luke 11:2-4. Why do you need to pray about the following issues? What do you need from God in those areas?
   (a) worship           (c) forgiveness
   (b) provision         (d) temptations

3) Read Luke 11:9-10. God promises to respond to your asking. According to James 4:1-3, what can interfere with that promise?

4) Read Luke 11:11-13. What will God do if you ask for the wrong things? Will He ever deny you something you really need if you ask for it? What gift does He specifically promise to give to those who ask?

Application:

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that following Him involved more than a busy schedule filled with good activities. The good works would not draw them closer to Him. The good works would come as a result of being close to Him. Martha's works were certainly not bad, but she was so absorbed by them that she missed the opportunity to learn and enjoy fellowship with Jesus. Mary was not lazy. She was simply wise enough to set aside the activities long enough to listen. Prayer is a great way to practice the priority of spending time with Jesus, especially when our prayers focus on the spiritual issues that are really important to our lives. God invites us to ask for such things and He promises to give them to us. He is more concerned that we are holy than that we are busy. If we learn from Him and spend time with Him, He will use us to accomplish His work when it is time.

Life of Christ Study #62

Luke 11:14-36

Theme: Another Blasphemy

Summary:

The enemies of Jesus were running out of arguments to throw at Him, so they tried the same old ones again and again. That is why some incidents in the Gospels almost sound like repetitions. After Jesus spoke to His disciples about prayer and persistence (see Luke 11:1-13), He encountered a man who had been rendered mute by a demon. Jesus cast out the demon and the man was healed. Some people in the crowd which witnessed this repeated an accusation which had been heard before. In Galilee, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of using Satan's power to drive out demons (see Matthew 12:22-24).
Now, in Judea, the same flimsy charge was voiced, and Jesus answered with arguments identical to the ones He had used in Galilee (see Matthew 12:25-30, 39-45). Yet the two events happened nearly a year apart. It was a reflection of the stubborn blindness of the people that Jesus had to address the same foolish blasphemy again. The religious leaders were still refusing to listen and learn, and the flaws in their arguments and characters were becoming more and more apparent.

1) No consistency (Luke 11:14-23). Just as He had done before, Jesus quickly exposed the discrepancies in the charge that He drove out demons through the power of demons. A kingdom torn by civil war will not endure, and it would be senseless for a ruler to purposely encourage such division within his realm. Satan is certainly not that stupid. But if Jesus did not use the power of Satan, then the only alternative was to conclude that He drove out demons by the power of God and that He was the true representative of God's kingdom. Far from being in league with the devil, He had attacked and disarmed the devil (see Matthew 4:1-11). That was what gave Him authority over demons. In the same way, Jesus warned His accusers, the kingdom of God would allow no divisions within its ranks. Anyone who did not accept Jesus as King was clearly opposed to Him, and anyone who did not help in His work hindered it. By opposing Jesus they were setting themselves against God whom they claimed to serve.

2) No truth (Luke 11:24-28). The people who accused Jesus had seen Him cast a demon out of a man, but they needed a more radical procedure for themselves. An evil spirit could be cast out, but if a person did not fill his life with the truth, he was continually open to more evil spirits. In fact, his unbelief would attract demons to gather and take up residence with their lies. The people could witness miracle after miracle and receive no benefit from them because they would not repent and accept the truth Jesus taught. Their spiritual condition would continue to grow worse as they sank deeper into deception. A woman pronounced a blessing on Jesus' mother for giving birth to such a Son, but Jesus placed the blessing on those who heard and obeyed God's message.

3) No repentance (Luke 11:29-32). Again, Jesus had to respond to a demand for a miraculous sign from people who would not accept the miracle they had just seen. Jesus referred them to the preaching of Jonah which served as a warning to the people of Nineveh about approaching judgment (see Jonah 3:4). The teaching of Jesus proclaimed a similar sign to the people of His generation, but the people did not listen. The Gentile Queen of
Sheba came from a great distance to hear the wisdom of Solomon (see I Kings 10:1-2), and the pagan people of Nineveh repented when they heard Jonah (see Jonah 3:5-6), but the people of Judea largely ignored One far greater than Solomon or Jonah.

4) No light (Luke 11:33-36). Jesus told the people that a lamp was made for shedding light and that the eye was the lamp for the body. Yet if their eyes were blinded to the truth, then their entire lives would be in darkness. He challenged them to open their eyes to the truth of what He said so that the light could come into their lives. Only a fool would purposely cover a lamp and stumble in the dark, yet their refusal to accept the truth kept them in darkness.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 11:17-18. Why would it be foolish for Satan to allow one of his demons to be cast out of a person in front of witnesses?

2) Read Luke 11:27-28. No human relationship was considered closer than that of a mother to her child. Why would Jesus place the blessing on those who hear and obey instead? Spiritually, how was their relationship to Jesus even closer than a mother’s?

3) Read Luke 11:29-32. On what basis could the Queen of the South and the people of Nineveh condemn the people of Jesus’ time? How could you apply this to people today?

4) Read Luke 11:33-36. Draw two dots about eight inches apart on a piece of paper. Now close your eyes and try to draw a line connecting the two dots. How difficult is it to find your way when your life is full of darkness?

Application:

The accusers of Jesus were clearly intent on rejecting Him and His message. He had answered all their charges and trick questions so that they were left without arguments. Still, instead of acknowledging the truth of what He said and did, they carted out the tired accusation that He was in league with Satan. It was a dismally weak charge, and Jesus had already dismantled it in Galilee, but the alternative was to admit that the kingdom of God had come and that Jesus was the Messiah and that they needed to repent. They could not tolerate that alternative in their pride and self-righteousness, so they entrenched themselves even deeper in their foolish lies to escape the truth. They were inconsistent, deceived, unrepentant, and blind. The truth revealed their condition, but they hid from it. It is nearly inconceivable that people would cling to such a pitiful
existence when the truth could give them eternal life, yet many people do. There is no blessing apart from hearing and obeying the word of God, and there is no life without repentance of sin and faith in Jesus.

Life of Christ Study #63

Luke 11:37-54

Theme: Woe to the Religious Leaders

Summary:

It may seem strange that a Pharisee would invite Jesus to a dinner at his home after the sharp words of Luke 11:14-36, but it was probably just another plot to find a way to discredit Him. The invitation would have the advantage of appearing polite and respectful, but it provided the chance to watch and question Jesus at a banquet attended by a select guest list of Pharisees and experts in the Old Testament law. Unlike an earlier dinner given by a Pharisee (see Luke 7:36-50), the motive for this invitation was not genuine interest or curiosity. That became clear when Jesus first arrived and reclined at the table without washing His hands. The accusation of ceremonially unclean hands had been thrown at Jesus before (see Mark 7:1-5), but the Pharisees took it up again in an attempt to find fault with Him. They had invited Him to a meal, but now they wanted to devour Him. Jesus treated their dissimulation as it deserved and pronounced six woes upon the religious leaders who claimed to be guardians of truth and righteousness. His words ruined the appetites of many at that dinner party.

1) Woe to the pretenders (Luke 11:39-42). The Pharisees were so concerned about ceremonial purity that they insisted cups and dishes be washed a certain way. Jesus accused them of being outwardly clean cups filled with greed and evil. He challenged them to replace what was inside with charity so that they could be truly clean. God made both the outside and the inside and desired purity for the whole cup. The Pharisees even tithed the herbs from their gardens to show their devotion to the law, but they neglected the more important issues of fairness and sincere love for God. They selectively obeyed the law to maintain appearances, but their hearts were not right.

2) Woe to the opportunists (Luke 11:43). The Pharisees used religion to gain social and political standing. They vied for the most visible and prestigious seats in the synagogues and fawned over important people in public settings.

3) Woe to the defilers (Luke 11:44). The Pharisees
believed that walking on a grave made a person defiled. Therefore, they kept graves marked so they could be avoided. However, Jesus said that they were like unmarked graves themselves. They polluted and defiled people with their empty religious practices and teachings, but they bore no mark of warning. Defilement hid under the disguise of religious robes.

4) Woe to the legalists (Luke 11:45-46). A legal expert took offense at Jesus' declarations, for he felt that they were aimed at his group as well. Jesus, without apology, confirmed his suspicions by accusing the legal experts of loading the people with rules upon rules to the point that they were afraid to move. The lawyers had created a demanding and confusing tangle of commands and prohibitions without any thought to how it affected people.

5) Woe to the murderers (Luke 11:47-51). It was considered a sign of piety to give money toward the construction of monuments to the Old Testament prophets. Yet the legal experts held the same attitudes and pride which had led their forefathers to kill those prophets. Jesus held them responsible for all these murders because they had not repented of their sin and unbelief. Abel was the first martyr of the Old Testament (see Genesis 4:1-8) and Zechariah was the last recorded prophet to be killed (see II Chronicles 24:20-22).

6) Woe to the muddlers (Luke 11:52-54). The legal experts were proud of their understanding of the law, but Jesus said that they could not give people the key to knowledge because they did not have it themselves. Instead of making the truth an open door that people could understand and accept, they made it a locked gate which even they could not enter. Their job was to reveal the truth, but they were guilty of obscuring it and putting hindrances in the path of those who wished to find it. Jesus then left the dinner, and the religious leaders set about plotting against Him with more determination than ever. They would hound His every step in their efforts to bring charges against Him.

Discussion:

1) What are some outward signs of righteousness that can be practiced with relative ease? What are some inward signs that require a true commitment to God?

2) Read Luke 11:43. Can you think of ways that people might use religion for personal gain? What do the following verses say about this
issue?
(a) Matthew 6:1-4  (c) I Timothy 6:3-10
(b) Matthew 6:19-21 (d) James 2:1-5

3) Read Luke 11:46. How can religious leaders load people down with unnecessary burdens? How can they help to lift the burdens people carry?

4) Read Luke 11:52. What was Jesus' opinion of those who tried to teach what they had not learned themselves? What are you doing to learn the truth so that you can teach it accurately to others?

Application:

With religious leaders like the Pharisees and the legal experts it was no wonder that the general population of Israel was so slow to grasp the truth that Jesus brought. They were far more interested in defending their position and power than in understanding and leading the people in what was right. Jesus had very little patience for them, because their errors affected the whole nation. Their external brand of holiness exalted themselves and oppressed those who listened to them. It would be tempting to dismiss the Pharisees to their fate, but we must recognize that we are vulnerable to the same errors today. An outward righteousness, based on a set of performed rituals or a maze of intellectual arguments can impress many people and bring us recognition in the eyes of men. But we must remember that God looks at the inside of the cup and He desires to see purity there.

Life of Christ Study #64

Luke 12:1-12

Theme: Fear of Men or God

Summary:

Controversy attracts a crowd, and the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders was no exception (see Luke 11:53-54). Some people were tired of the rules and regulations of the Pharisees and were ready to side with anyone who would challenge them. Others may have been curious about this radical who dared to defy the religious authorities. Still others probably were drawn by the prospect of a good fight, little caring who won or lost. It may even have been that a large part of the crowd was stirred up by the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus. So many people gathered that they were stepping on each other to try to get a clear view of Him (v.1). It was the perfect setting to sway the people with eloquent words and promises, but Jesus would not stoop to playing for favor. He was always more concerned about the motives of a crowd than its size or opinion, for He knew that an army of supporters without understanding and commitment was not worth having. Therefore, He did not even
address the crowd at first. He spoke to His disciples about motives and allowed the crowd to overhear His words.

1) Examined by God (Luke 12:1-3). Jesus compared the influence of the Pharisees to that of yeast which permeates a whole lump of dough. In the same way, the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, their commitment to external purity while neglecting internal attitudes and motives, could control a person's life. Such hypocrisy, practiced in order to please or impress other people, will be useless at the final judgment. At that time, God will reveal the true motives and desires of a person's heart. The secret sins that were carefully hidden from men will be proclaimed before God. The righteousness rehearsed and taught by the Pharisees might withstand the scrutiny of people, but ultimately everyone will be examined by God.

2) Judged by God (Luke 12:4-7). Jesus pointed out the foolishness of acting to please men. The worst that men could do was to kill the body. But God has the authority to kill the body and to cast the soul into hell for eternity. If a man is going to be concerned about pleasing anybody it should be God, for He will be the Judge whose verdict counts. In the meantime, Jesus gave His disciples the assurance that if they were motivated by a proper fear of God rather than a fear of men, God would never forget them. The smallest sparrow, valued little in the market, is noticed by Him, and the very hairs on the head of one of His followers are numbered. No harm will happen to a person who fears God without His attention, for God's people are worth far more to Him than sparrows. He is able to help them stand in the face of the wrath of men.

3) Sustained by God (Luke 12:8-12). Jesus promised His disciples that when they stood before hostile men and acknowledged their relationship to Him, He would also acknowledge His relationship with them in the presence of God. They might face suffering at the hands of men, but they would never have to worry about God's wrath. However, if they gave in to a fear of men and disowned their relationship with Him to avoid the wrath of men, Jesus would also disown His relationship with them before the angels of God. This had serious implications for the people who had accused Him of being in league with Satan (see Luke 11:14-15). They could be forgiven for speaking against Jesus if they repented, but a hardened heart that refused to accept the clear call to repentance by the Holy Spirit would never be forgiven. Jesus made it plain that every person must choose between the fear of men and the fear of God. Those who chose correctly would
find help from the Holy Spirit at the times they
most needed Him. He would instruct them in what
to say when they were called to stand before
hostile men.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 12:1-3. Hypocrisy occurs when your
outward actions do not match your inward motives.
Why do people practice hypocrisy? What will be
the result of hypocrisy when a person is judged
by God?

2) According to Luke 12:4-12, what will be the
penalties for living to please men rather than
God? What are the possible costs of living to
please God rather than men?

3) What are the benefits of living to please God
rather than men? What does God promise to do for
you if you live this way?

4) Read Luke 12:11-12. How was this promise
fulfilled to Peter and John in Acts 4:5-21? Can
you think of times when the Holy Spirit helped
you to speak boldly about your relationship with
Jesus?

Application:

Once again, Jesus responded to the crowds by laying a
clear choice before them. They had to decide whether they
would live to please men and avoid the wrath of important
people or to please God because they recognized that He would
one day be their Judge. They could not have it both ways, for
obedience to God does not please those who have rejected Him.
The hypocrite plans to somehow please men now while still
clinging to a show of loyalty to God, but Jesus did not make
allowances for such dishonesty. Those who would be His
followers must choose to avoid physical discomfort and
possible death or to avoid eternal punishment. He promised
that He will closely watch over us if we choose to stand for
Him and risk the wrath of men. He did not promise that we
would not suffer for our stand, but nothing will happen
without first passing the approval of His love and care for
us. He also said that the Holy Spirit will give us the words
to say when the occasion demands. In short, He tells us to
trust Him when the threats and opinions of the world are
against us.

Life of Christ Study #65

Luke 12:13-34

Theme: Greed and Wealth

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Summary:

Jesus wanted the crowds to understand that spiritual issues, having to do with their relationship to God, were of primary importance. If necessary, it was better to suffer death at the hands of men than to be found guilty at the final judgment (see Luke 12:4-5). Yet His listeners were so entrapped by the cares and goals of this life that they kept returning to things that did not really matter. The request made by a man in the crowd illustrated this problem. In the midst of a discussion about eternal judgment, his main concern was about gaining a material inheritance (Luke 12:13). Respected teachers were sometimes asked to settle disputes, but Jesus refused to get caught up in being a referee (Luke 12:14). The real issue was the greed that ruled the man's heart. He assumed that property would bring him satisfaction, and he was willing to fight with his brother to get it. Jesus warned the people strongly about such an attitude. There were issues in life far more important than accumulating possessions (Luke 12:15). Unless the people broke away from their fascination with material wealth, they would never understand the riches that God offered.

1) More than money (Luke 12:16-21). He told the crowd a story about a wealthy man whose farm experienced such a good year that he did not have room to store all the produce. He decided to build bigger barns to hold his impressive possessions and settle down to an early retirement filled with comfort and ease. He had worked for what he had, and now he could enjoy the rewards of his work. Apparently, he felt that the important goals of life were achieved. But God intruded on his delusive contentment and called him a fool. He had overlooked the reality of death and judgment. His life appeared complete and secure, but in the areas that mattered eternally, there was disarray. The possessions he had so carefully accumulated would not benefit him at all in death. They would pass into the hands of another and he would be left with nothing. Jesus warned that material riches can lull a person into a deadly lie of false security.

2) More than enough (Luke 12:22-31). Jesus turned to His disciples and gave them an alternative to the rich man's sad fate. He repeated to them the principles He had taught in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 6:25-34). Since they were subjects of His kingdom, they did not have to be consumed by worries about physical needs like food and clothing. He reminded them that God feeds the ravens, even though they do not have the ability to grow or store their food. No one can put off the day of death with any amount of hard work or careful planning. Since a person's very existence is in God's hands, he should not waste time worrying about how to surround himself with an abundance of material resources. Jesus
pointed to the lilies which cannot make garments yet are clothed more beautifully than the richest man. If God provides so well for birds and flowers, the subjects of the King should not focus on physical needs like people who do not have a Father in heaven. Instead, they are free to devote themselves to serving Him, confident that He will faithfully provide what they need.

3) More than secure (Luke 12:32-34). Jesus told His disciples that they were in fact rich, for God had given them the kingdom. With such provision and security, they could afford to serve Him with financial abandon. They were free to give generously to those in need even if it exhausted all their resources, for God's supply would never be depleted. He encouraged them to concentrate on building heavenly treasures through obeying Him. Such riches could never be lost or stolen, and their hearts would be drawn more and more toward God since all that they valued was in His keeping. Unlike, the rich man who could not hold on to his barns of possessions, the followers of Jesus could know true security.

Discussion:

1) List some ways that people plan for their financial future. What are some ways those plans could be ruined? Are your material possessions ever really safe?

2) Read Luke 12:13-15. Why do you think the man was so eager to receive the inheritance? What did he assume it would provide for him? What other issues was he apparently neglecting?

3) Read Luke 12:16-21. Was there anything wrong with the way the rich man acquired or managed his wealth? Why did God call him a fool?

4) Read Luke 12:22-31. Where do you feel financial worries? What do you do when you are worried about financial matters? What principles can you learn from these verses?

Application:

It was sad that the man in the crowd was so absorbed in his desire for wealth that he did not hear what Jesus said about eternity. That attitude was present in Jesus's time no less than it is today. The apostle Paul would later warn about the attraction of money which could lead people away from faith and into a destructive trap (see I Timothy 6:9-10). Jesus presented it as a central issue in life, for a person could not trust riches and God at the same time. One or the other would be his master and control the course of his thoughts and actions. Jesus wants us to be free from the worries and slavery of money, so He promised that God would
provide all we needed if we will devote ourselves to following Him. It is not a promise of material wealth but of secure provision. If the idea of selling our possessions and giving to the poor sounds frightening to us, it shows that we have much to learn about trusting God in this area. We must examine our attitudes and actions about money with the understanding that we may not like what we find. But our heavenly treasures are at stake.

Life of Christ Study #66


Theme: Prepared for the Coming

Summary:

The issue of greed and wealth was especially important in view of the coming judgment, for if a person placed his treasure on earth and it controlled his heart, he would not be ready when death and judgment came (see Luke 12:16-21). A proper fear of God and hell (see Luke 12:4-5) would serve as a powerful reminder that life consists of much more than material prosperity. Therefore, Jesus moved from His discussion of greed to a series of warnings and challenges to be prepared for the King's time of judgment, for His kingdom would have no place for those who ignored His requirements. The Jews claimed to eagerly await the Messiah, but they had grown careless in their preparation, substituting outward forms of righteousness for the inner purity that God required. Jesus identified six characteristics of those who would pass judgment and be accepted into the kingdom.

1) Alertness (Luke 12:35-40). A master attending a wedding banquet would probably return home late, but his servants would not know exactly when to expect him. Therefore, they would have to stay awake and prepare a supply of oil to keep the lamps lit, so that whenever he arrived they could be ready. Jesus said that the master will reward the servants who remain alert by allowing them to eat at the table while he serves them, a very high honor. But the servants must stay alert even if the master is gone until the third watch of the night. Then, switching illustrations, Jesus reminded them that a thief never tells the owner of a house the hour he plans to come, so if the owner wants to prevent a robbery he must be alert always. In the same way, the followers of Jesus must be continually prepared for His coming.

2) Faithfulness (Luke 12:41-48). Peter wanted to know if Jesus was speaking only to His disciples or to the crowd as well. Jesus replied that the ones assigned by the master to supervise while he was gone bore greater responsibility than the
average servants. If they did their work faithfully until he returned, they would be rewarded. But if they abused their authority and their fellow servants, the master would deal with them very severely. All are required to be faithful, but those who are given greater privilege and authority will be judged more strictly.

3) Perseverance (Luke 12:49-53). Jesus longed to see His work on earth accomplished, for He knew that a baptism or immersion in pain and suffering awaited Him. And since His work involved the fire of judgment, it would bring division into even the closest human relationships. His followers would be ostracized by their own families and their message would be believed by some and violently opposed by others. Perseverance would be needed to stand.

4) Discernment (Luke 12:54-59). Jesus turned to the crowd and chided their lack of discernment. They knew that clouds from the west signaled rain and winds from the south blew hot air from the desert, but they could not see the truth of His warnings about the coming judgment. He advised them to make peace before it came so that they could avoid the penalty.

5) Repentance (Luke 13:1-5). The Jews assumed that judgment only fell on those who had deserved it because of some terrible sin. But Jesus reminded them that Pilate, the prefect or Roman administrator of Judea, had executed some people from Galilee while they were offering a sacrifice at the temple. The tower of Siloam had crushed eighteen innocent people who happened to be there. Judgment was not reserved only for the very bad. It awaited all who would not repent of their sin.

6) Fruitfulness (Luke 13:6-9). Lest His listeners think that they could simply go through the motions of repentance like some ritual, Jesus told them that repentance must bear fruit. A man who planted a fig tree expected it to produce figs. Otherwise, it was useless to him and should be destroyed so that a better tree could take its place. The tree might be given a short reprieve, but judgment hung over it unless it produced. There is no place in God's kingdom for insincere followers.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 12:42-44. What are the characteristics of the faithful and wise manager who is rewarded by his master? What qualities must he possess to do a good job while his master is away?
2) Read Luke 12:45-46. What are the characteristics of the servant who is punished? How deep was his faithfulness to his master?

3) Read Luke 12:57-59. In your own words, use the illustration Jesus gave to explain the need for salvation. How would you encourage someone to "settle out of court"?

4) Read Luke 13:6-9. How would you apply these verses to a person who claims to be a Christian but shows little evidence of living for Christ? What is some of the fruit you would expect from a follower of Jesus?

Application:

Jesus was speaking to a crowd concerned with issues like wealth and reputation and the opinions of other people. Their hearts were controlled by these matters while the issue of their eternal destiny was neglected. Jesus wanted them to understand that judgment was coming quickly and that they needed to get ready. Pride, comfort, and human relationships could not be allowed to take priority over preparation for eternity. No one could prepare without repenting of sin, and no one could demonstrate repentance without faithfully doing the Master's work. Diligently waiting for the return of Jesus means sacrificing some other goals and pleasures, but we must remember that we are setting our focus on heavenly treasures and the Master's reward and approval. Salvation is more than a planted seed. It is a growing tree which must produce fruit or it is worthless. We should live today with an accurate perception of the future so that we do not lose sight of what is most important. The day of judgment is coming whether we prepare or not, but it will be much more welcome if we are found ready.

Life of Christ Study #67

Luke 13:10-21

Theme: Spiritual Freedom

Summary:

Nothing angered Jesus more about the Pharisees than the way they overlooked the real needs of people in their efforts to make them conform to their rules and interpretations of the law. It was bad enough that they did not know how to enter the kingdom themselves, but it was far worse that they hindered others from entering (see Luke 11:52). As the hostility of the religious leaders toward Jesus increased, so did their desire to discredit His works and teachings and to turn people away from Him. They had begun to oppose Him at every opportunity whenever a crowd gathered to hear Him, so that His attempts to teach became scenes of confrontation and
controversy. Since the religious leaders were never successful in trapping Jesus with their questions and accusations, they were stirred to try even harder. More and more, they took the position of actively preventing people from hearing and receiving the message of the kingdom. They valued their programs and practices more than the spiritual or physical welfare of the people. But Jesus was not interested in establishing programs or institutions. He came to offer the truth to people.

1) Freedom to stand (Luke 13:10-13). On this occasion, the religious leaders did not have to go looking for Jesus, for He came to their domain in the synagogue. A woman, who for eighteen years had been bent over with a back ailment, also came. The fact that her deformity was caused by a spirit does not mean that the demon was still present. Indeed, this woman was different than most of the demonic cases Jesus encountered, for she seemed to be a devoted worshiper at the synagogue and her behavior was not affected. It may be that the demon had left her physically crippled, but spiritually she was a person of faith. Jesus called her forward in the gathered assembly and freed her from the physical affects of the spirit with a pronouncement and a touch. As soon as the woman realized that she had been healed, she praised God, for she recognized that His power was present in Jesus. After eighteen years, she was free to truly stand in praise.

2) Freedom to serve (Luke 13:14-17). The synagogue ruler would have been in charge of preparing and conducting the activities in the synagogue. A healing definitely had not been on his agenda for the day, and he was angry that the Sabbath should be violated in this way. He did not rebuke Jesus directly but warned the people that they should not look with favor on His actions. Jesus had encountered this resistance to healing on the Sabbath earlier in Galilee (see Matthew 12:9-14), and He used a similar illustration to answer the complaint now. Even the religious leaders would release their animals from the stall to eat and drink on the Sabbath. This Jewish woman was certainly more important than an ox or a donkey, so they should not begrudge her release from eighteen years of physical bondage on the Sabbath. The Sabbath law was never meant to prevent people from serving or being served. The people in the synagogue heartily agreed with Jesus, but those who wanted to discredit Him were once again humiliated.

3) Freedom to come (Luke 13:18-21). Jesus then announced to the people that the kingdom of God was offered to them all. He would not discourage or turn away anyone who sought forgiveness and
life. He said that the kingdom was like a mustard seed, the smallest seed among the garden herbs. It appeared tiny and insignificant, but it grew into a plant which could measure ten feet in height and provide room for many birds. It was also like the small measure of yeast which a woman would insert into a large amount of dough. Eventually, the yeast would permeate the whole mixture. Jesus had used these parables before to indicate that the kingdom was growing (see Matthew 13:31-33), but His point now was that the kingdom did not actively seek to exclude anyone. It was meant to provide room for all who would come. The Pharisees drove people away with their rules and restrictions, but Jesus invited His listeners to come.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 13:10-17. What motivated Jesus when He saw the crippled woman? How did He relate her healing to the fact that it was a Sabbath day?

2) What motivated the synagogue ruler when he witnessed the healing? What are some possible reasons for his anger? How did his view of the Sabbath differ from Jesus' view?

3) Can you think of religious rules today which could prevent people from coming to find the spiritual help they need?

4) Read Luke 13:18-21. Was the kingdom of God intended to be small and exclusive? What do the following verses say about God's desire for people to come?
(a) Matthew 28:19-20
(b) John 3:16
(c) Romans 1:16
(d) Revelation 22:17

Application:

Once again, the misuse and rigid structuring of the law came into conflict with its true interpretation. The Sabbath was meant to be a time for people to reflect on the provision and creation of God (see Exodus 20:8-11), but the religious leaders had turned it into a day of fear and confusion as the people tried to conform to an endless list of regulations. Worship and compassion had been replaced by empty form and legalism. It seems incredible that the synagogue ruler would not rejoice in the woman's healing, but we are also sometimes reluctant to accept God's work when it does not conform to our views and traditions. Jesus came to set us free from sin and fear, not to bind us with warnings and conditions. He requires repentance and faith which will enable us to obey Him with a new heart. He does not demand that we conform to His standards of righteousness first. His kingdom wants to include all who will humbly come. The process of making us holy can then begin.
John 9:1-41

Theme: The Blind Man

Summary:

Jesus returned to Jerusalem in December of A.D. 29 to attend the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah (see John 10:22), a celebration which commemorated the cleansing of the temple and rebuilding of the altar after the Syrians were defeated in 164 B.C. The Feast attracted many visitors at that time, but three groups were especially drawn. Beggars gathered because they knew that there would be crowds and a good chance for money. The Pharisees came because it was a religious festival and they were always careful to appear at such events. And Jesus arrived with His disciples because there would be opportunities to teach the people. One blind man, in particular, would encounter all three groups that day. He came to be part of the throng of beggars who mostly worked the area around the temple, and his experiences captured the dynamics of Jesus' ministry and the religious leaders' hatred.

1) Amazed (John 9:1-12). The question the disciples asked about the blind man reflected the common belief that suffering was punishment for sin. But Jesus gave a new reason for the man's condition. He was born blind so that his life could be a testimony to the work of God. Jesus told His disciples they should always be looking for such opportunities to do God's work, spreading the light of truth in a dark world. Then, He used a mixture of saliva and dirt on the man's eyes and sent him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. It may be that Jesus used this unusual means of healing to prepare the man to trust Him a while later. Unlike most of the healings Jesus performed, the blind man had not requested His help. Jesus healed him to teach His disciples a principle about sin and suffering, but He also wanted to bring the man 'to faith and understanding. The blind man's cure was completed when he washed. All he knew at that time was that "the man they call Jesus" had given the instructions that led to his sight. He did not even know where Jesus had gone. He and his neighbors could only stand amazed at the miracle.

2) Annoyed (John 9:13-23). Whenever there was any uncertainty about an occurrence of religious significance it was customary to consult the Pharisees. So, the formerly blind man was taken to the religious experts who were not impressed with the miracle. Indeed, they were mostly annoyed that such an act was done on the Sabbath, although some did point out that the miracle
proved that God was in the action. They asked
the healed man his opinion, and he replied that
he was convinced Jesus was at least a prophet.
The leaders then summoned his parents to confirm
that he really had been blind from birth. They
testified that it was true but offered no opinion
on his healing because they were afraid of making
the Pharisees angry. A warning had already been
issued that anyone who spoke of Jesus as the
Messiah would be banned from religious life.

3) Angered (John 9:24-34). The Pharisees turned on
the man again and demanded that he label Jesus a
sinner. The formerly blind man gave a simple but
profound reply. He had been blind but now he
could see. They could not refute such evidence,
but they asked again for an explanation of how
Jesus had performed the miracle. Perhaps they
hoped to find some flaw or evil in His technique
which would allow them to discredit Him. The
man, however, saw their foolishness and taunted
them, asking if they wished to hear the story
again so that they could become followers of
Jesus. The Pharisees dropped all decorum at this
point and resorted to name calling. They boasted
that they were disciples of Moses to whom God had
spoken, but they refused to admit that Jesus
could be a prophet of God. The man again pointed
to the irrefutable evidence of his sight. He
reasoned that God would not give such power to a
sinner, so Jesus must be from God. In a rage,
the Pharisees banished him from the synagogue.

4) Affirmed (John 9:35-41). Jesus came to find the
man He had healed when He heard what the
Pharisees had done. This was the first time the
man had actually seen Jesus, so when he was asked
whether he believed in the Son of Man, he replied
that he did not know who that person was. Jesus
identified Himself, and the man immediately
recognized Him as his healer and also worshipped
Him as his Lord. Jesus saw an illustration of
judgment in this, for a blind man now truly could
see while those who claimed to see everything
were spiritually blind. Some Pharisees sensed He
was talking about them and challenged Him for
calling them blind. Jesus told them that if they
admitted their blindness, they would no longer be
trapped in guilt and sin, but since they claimed
to see, their spiritual blindness remained. Only
those who acknowledged their blindness would
receive sight (see Isaiah 42:18-19).

Discussion:

1) What do you learn about suffering from John 9:1-3?
Is suffering always a result of personal sin?
Does God always have a purpose for suffering?
What purpose did He have for the suffering of the
blind man?

2) How did the blind man's understanding of Jesus progress in the following verses?
   (a) John 9:11        (c) John 9:31-33
   (b) John 9:17        (d) John 9:37-38

3) Read about the divided reaction of the Pharisees in John 9:16. What do you think should have been their response to the healing of the blind man? Why were they unwilling to admit that Jesus had performed a miracle from God?

4) Read John 9:39. Who are the blind in this verse? How does Jesus enable them to see? Who are the ones who think they see? How are they made blind?

Application:

A blind man was enabled to see because he recognized that he was blind. Meanwhile, those who thought they saw better than anyone were proven to be woefully lacking in sight. The Pharisees assumed they already had the truth and so they refused to recognize it when it came. The healing of the blind man should have been a cause for rejoicing among the religious leaders. The Messiah whom they claimed to await eagerly had come. However, when He came, He did not fit into their rules of righteousness, so they rejected Him. Again, we see that Jesus brings truth and righteousness, but we must be willing to accept Him on His terms and not try to fit Him into our preconceived ideas. He can heal our blindness, but our proud sight can blind us.

Life of Christ Study #69

John 10:1-42

Theme: The Good Shepherd

Summary:

Jesus had revealed the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees (see John 9:39-41), but He was not through with His condemnation of their poor religious leadership. He launched into an extended discussion in which He compared Himself to a shepherd and the people of His kingdom to sheep. It was a common illustration from the Old Testament which pictured God as the shepherd and the nation of Israel as His flock (see Psalm 95:7). Jesus adapted the image to drive home several major themes about pastoral life in the spiritual realm. He was the good shepherd, and He was not at all happy about the quality of care His sheep had been receiving from the Pharisees. He was the promised shepherd in the line of David who would put a stop to the misuse and mismanagement of the sheep of God's flock (see Ezekiel 34:20-24). He was the shepherd who would willingly lay down His life for His sheep.
1) False shepherds (John 10:1-10). Jesus was still referring to the Pharisees when He spoke of the thieves and robbers who sneaked into the sheep pen by climbing the wall. The real shepherd, however, would enter by the gate and be recognized by the one who guarded the pen and by the sheep. Those who belonged to His flock responded to His voice as He called them by name. His sheep would never follow the Pharisees whose voices would be strange to them. In other words, God's flock would not be determined by genealogy as the Pharisees thought, but it would be determined by who responded to the voice of the shepherd. As if to confirm this fact, the religious leaders did not understand what Jesus was saying, proving that they were not part of His flock. As the shepherd He would also serve as gate to the pen, physically laying His body across the opening to protect His sheep from enemies. No sheep could go in or out except by passing the watchful eye of the shepherd. Only those who responded to His call would be saved. They would not listen to the thieves and robbers who claimed to have the truth. The shepherd gave life while thieves brought death and destruction.

2) True shepherd (John 10:11-21). Jesus called Himself the good shepherd who was willing to die for His sheep. A hired hand, like the Pharisees, would not show that extent of care for the flock. He would run to save himself at the first hint of danger. But the good shepherd, who knew His sheep personally, would risk His life for their welfare. The promised shepherd would gather the scattered flock of Israel from all nations (see Ezekiel 34:11-13). Jesus extended that gathering to include sheep outside the pen of Israel. Gentiles also would be brought into His flock. He would accomplish this by giving His life for the sheep and then taking it back again. This caused an uproar among His listeners, and they returned to their argument over whether Jesus was a madman or a true miracle worker from God (see John 9:16).

3) Faithful shepherd (John 10:22-30). Not long after, Jesus was in the temple area when the Jewish leaders confronted Him and asked if He claimed to be the Messiah. He had already told them and they had seen His miracles, but they had refused to believe. He told them their unbelief proved that they were not part of His flock, for His sheep would listen to Him and follow. Any who followed would be given eternal life and nothing could take them away from His care. God Himself would confirm that secure care, for Jesus and God were one and the same. The question of the Jews was answered in unmistakable terms, for
the most sacred belief of their religion was that God was one (see Deuteronomy 6:4), and now Jesus applied that same concept to Himself.

4) Divine shepherd (John 10:31-42). The Jews immediately picked up stones to kill Him. Jesus again appealed to the proof of His miracles, but the Jews could not accept that He called Himself God. Jesus pointed out that even the Scripture called men gods in reference to the human power some men held on the earth (see Psalm 82:6). Now He stood before them, truly sent by God and performing wonders with the power of God. Certainly, these were signs that He told the truth when He called Himself God. But the Jewish leaders had already made up their minds. They attempted to seize Him but He escaped and went across the Jordan River to the region of Perea which was beyond the jurisdiction of the Jewish rulers. Many people followed Him there and believed, remembering the testimony of John the Baptist.

Discussion:

1) Read the following verses which portray the problems with false shepherds. What characterizes their leadership?
   (a) Jeremiah 10:21  (c) Ezekiel 34:1-8
   (b) Jeremiah 23:1-2  (d) Zechariah 11:15-17

2) Read John 10:11-13. How is the good shepherd different from the hired hand? What assurance does this give you when you face trouble in your life?

3) According to John 10:3-5, 27, what marks a person as a member of God's flock?

4) What indications do you find in John 10:28-30 that a member of God's flock is eternally secure in his salvation?

Application:

Ezekiel had prophesied that the selfish, unrighteous shepherds who led Israel in his day would be replaced by a shepherd in the line of David who would lead them forever (see Ezekiel 37:24-25). Jesus took on the fulfillment of that prophecy when He rebuked the false shepherds of Israel and announced that He was the good shepherd. Through His death He would rescue His sheep and give them eternal life. But only those who responded to His message of salvation could become part of His flock. The Jewish leaders rejected His words because they were not His sheep. They tried to kill Him to prevent others from joining His sheep pen, but many followed Him in spite of the rage of the Pharisees. Jesus still guards the pen today, allowing no one to enter unless they respond to His message. For those who do enter there is security and
life. Someday, He will complete Ezekiel's prophecy when all His sheep are gathered in and He rules as our prince.

Life of Christ Study #70


Theme: The Narrow Door

Summary:

Jesus would not actually return to the area of Jerusalem until just before the Passover, in late March of A.D. 30. His last confrontation with the religious leaders there had made remaining in that region nearly impossible. He had clearly told them that He was the Messiah and they had responded with an attempt to kill Him (see John 10:22-39). So, He stayed in Perea until the early months of the new year, but then He began to make His way back toward Jerusalem. His public ministry was now three years old, yet His followers still seemed to be relatively few. He had said that His kingdom would shelter the birds and permeate the whole lump of dough (see Luke 13:18-21), but its progress was slow in terms of numbers. Possibly, it was such observations that led a person to ask Jesus if only a few would be saved (Luke 13:23). The Jews, for the most part, believed that all the descendants of Abraham would be included in the kingdom, but Jesus seemed to exclude even some of the most religious (see John 10:25-26). Jesus acknowledged that most of the people of Israel had not accepted His offer of the kingdom, and He warned those who heard Him that they must act quickly or they too would miss it.

1) A closing door (Luke 13:24-30). Jesus advised His listeners to do whatever was necessary to enter the narrow door before it closed. Many would try but find themselves unable to enter because they lacked the proper key. Jesus warned the Jews that some of them would knock on the door assuming that the owner would open it for them, but He would deny knowing them. This was shocking to His audience, for they had eaten with Him and listened to His teaching. But such casual association was not enough. The owner of the house required a personal relationship to gain admittance. Few would be saved because few were willing to admit their need for repentance and salvation. Many Jews, who expected to be at the center of kingdom life when it came would find themselves excluded while Gentiles from every nation would sit down to eat in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets. Those who were given first opportunity but resisted would be last, and those who came late but in faith would be first to enter.

arrived to warn Jesus that Herod Antipas was seeking to kill Him. They suggested that He leave the area of Perea where Herod held authority. Given the animosity of the Pharisees toward Jesus, it is doubtful that they sincerely wanted to protect Him from harm. More likely, it was a ploy to get Him to return to Judea where they could arrest Him. Jesus replied with a message to Herod, calling him a fox, a creature known for its treacherous and destructive habits. He said that He intended to continue His ministry in the region for a little longer. Herod could not dictate His plans, for He already knew that He must die at Jerusalem soon. He said that it would not be fitting for a prophet to die outside of the city. The time for His teaching and offering of the kingdom was closing.

3) A closing opportunity (Luke 13:34–35). The thought of Jerusalem was never far from His mind even when Jesus traveled through other regions. Jerusalem was the political and religious center of Israel, and God had intended it to be the center of worship and praise to Him, but the people had a long history of killing God's messengers. Still, Jesus longed to gather its inhabitants under His care and protection like a mother hen would gather her chicks under her wings. The Jewish people were often told that they would find refuge under God's wings in the Psalms (see Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). But the people also had a long history of refusing to gather to God. They trusted in their own understanding and systems and would not receive the gift offered to them. Therefore, desolation would be their fate without refuge. Forty years later, the temple and the city would be conquered by Roman soldiers and the people scattered. But the people of Jerusalem would have one final opportunity to see and hear Jesus before His death. He would enter the city to the cries of people shouting, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (see Luke 19:28–38). It would be their last opportunity.

Discussion:

1) According to Luke 13:24–27, what will be the criteria for people to gain entrance into the kingdom? What do these verse say to people who associate with Christianity without committing to Christ?

2) How would you answer a person who based their salvation on the following statements?
   (a) "I've always gone to church."
   (b) "I believe in God and Jesus."
   (c) "I have tried to do what is right."
   (d) "I pray and read the Bible."
3) According to the following verses, what kind of refuge can you find under God's wings?
   (a) Psalm 17:8-9   (d) Psalm 61:2-5
   (b) Psalm 36:7-9   (e) Psalm 63:6-7
   (c) Psalm 57:1   (f) Psalm 91:1-6

4) Read Luke 13:34-35. What prevented Jesus from gathering the people of Jerusalem into His care? What desolation awaits those who refuse Jesus today?

Application:

As the time remaining for Jesus to minister on the earth grew shorter, His appeal to the people grew more urgent. Some treated His presence like a hobby or club. They were happy to tag along and enjoy His company and wisdom and miracles, but they had never made a personal commitment to follow Him. They associated with kingdom subjects but they were not in the kingdom themselves. Such people would be sadly shocked when the door closed and they were left on the outside. The Jewish people had been lulled into a false security based on their descent from Abraham and their association with the temple. But those credentials would not gain them salvation. Today, many people trust in their religious traditions or associations, assuming that makes them Christian. Jesus made it clear that without a personal relationship of faith, He will deny that He knows them at all. The opportunity is slipping away and the door is closing. Only those who have repented of their sin and committed themselves to the King will be allowed to come in to the banquet.

Life of Christ Study #71


Theme: A Kingdom Guest List

Summary:

For the third time in His public ministry, Jesus accepted an invitation to dine at the home of a Pharisee. The first time, in Galilee, the mood seemed friendly enough, but Jesus used the actions of a sinful woman to teach His host about repentance and forgiveness (see Luke 7:36-50). On the second occasion, in Judea, the Pharisees set up the meal as a way to catch Jesus doing something for which they could accuse Him. He turned their attack into a stinging denunciation of their hypocrisy and spiritual abuses (see Luke 11:37-52). This time, in the region of Perea, Jesus was probably expecting an attempt to entrap Him. The Pharisees could no longer pretend to be neutral toward Him, yet a banquet provided the best opportunity to gather around and observe Him in a setting they could control. It seemed they had even prepared a special test for Jesus on this Sabbath day, and they eagerly waited for Him to take the bait. However, Jesus
was prepared to give them a lesson in the proper way to give a banquet.

1) The poor guest (Luke 14:1-6). It was probably not an accident that the man with dropsy, a disease which caused swelling in the limbs and trunk, was seated in front of Jesus. Seats were given according to rank, and normally a man with such a physical problem would not have been placed near a prominent guest. But the Pharisees were watching Jesus carefully, and since it was the Sabbath, they put the sick man there as a test. Jesus knew their motives and asked for their opinion on whether the law allowed a man to be healed on the Sabbath. The Pharisees remained quiet, possibly because it was an awkward question to answer. They prohibited healings on the Sabbath, but the Old Testament law did not specifically address the issue. Therefore, if no help was given to the man it would be because of the Pharisees and not the law. Taking their silence as permission, Jesus healed the man, and then asked whether they would refuse help to an ox or donkey on the Sabbath. Again, their silence revealed their defeat.

2) The proud guests (Luke 14:7-14). The sick man may have been assigned a seat by the Pharisees, but the rest of the guests were left to grab the best spots they could find. When Jesus observed their rush to capture the places of honor, He chided their foolishness. He advised them to take the lower places to avoid embarrassment. If a more distinguished guest arrived, they would be told publicly to give up their high positions, but if they started in the lower seats, they could be promoted by the host in the sight of all. Thus, the proud would be humbled and the humble would be honored. Jesus then turned to the host and told him not to invite only wealthy and influential people to a banquet. The game of invitation and reciprocation was the best way to meet and please people who could make life easier. Perhaps a man might hold a dinner for beggars to boost his reputation for piety, but Jesus told them to serve the poor with no expectation of earthly reward.

3) Kingdom guests (Luke 14:15-24). One of the guests piously exclaimed that it would be a great blessing to eat at the future banquet in the kingdom of God. He, as well as the other guests, probably assumed that they would be there when it came, but Jesus issued a warning in the form of a story. A man invited many guests to attend his banquet. They apparently accepted but became preoccupied with other matters while the feast was being prepared. When the host's servant came to announce that all was ready, he was met with
excuses from the invited guests. In the same way, the Jewish leaders talked often about the coming kingdom, but they had become so engrossed in earthly affairs that they did not even recognize God's servant as He sat among them announcing the kingdom. The host was angry that his guests would not answer his summons so he gave instructions that beggars should be brought instead. These poor people gladly received the unexpected invitation. Then the host sent his servants into the countryside to find other guests to take the places of those who had refused him. In the same way, the proud, spiritual elite of Israel would find their places in the kingdom given to sinners, beggars, and Gentiles. The door would be shut to them.

Discussion:

1) If you were planning a guest list to include the most influential people you could find, who might be included? Who would be on your list if your goal was to invite the most humble people?

2) Read Luke 14:7-14. What seemed to be the goals of most people in social settings like a banquet?

3) What goals did Jesus propose for you to have in such settings? How can you put these into practice in the following places?
   (a) Your workplace  (c) Your home
   (b) Your church     (d) Your community

4) Read Luke 14:16-24. What groups of people today might be considered unlikely to accept an invitation from God? What opportunities has God given you to extend the invitation to these people?

Application:

The sick man who was only brought to the banquet as a pawn in the Pharisees' trap may have been the only guest who left with a reservation for the kingdom. The others were too preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their social positions to understand the significance of what Jesus said. A place at God's banquet cannot be secured by simply knowing about it and talking about it. It is not enough to hear or even receive the invitation. Only those who actively respond to God's call in faith, giving their lives to following Jesus, will actually sit at the table when the feast is served. The guest was right to say, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God," but he was wrong to take it for granted that he would be one of the blessed. The invitations have been sent and the feast is being prepared, but the final guest list is still being filled by those who respond.
Life of Christ Study #72


Theme: The Cost of Discipleship

Summary:

Even though the Pharisees continued to oppose Jesus relentlessly during His tour of Perea, there were many people who accepted Him as a great prophet or even the Messiah (see John 10:40-42). Thus, large crowds followed Jesus as He made His way back toward the Jordan River. Apparently, they proposed to travel with Him to Jerusalem, probably not wanting to miss any of the blessings when He set up His kingdom in the city. His miracles and words about banquets had sparked an excitement and anticipation of political freedom and material rewards among the people. They assumed they would march to Jerusalem with Him, watch while He did whatever was necessary to evict the Roman rulers, and then share in the benefits. But dreams of victory and prosperity would not sustain those who followed the path that Jesus now took, and good intentions and enthusiasm would wither in the cruel reality of opposition and even persecution. Jesus never deceived His followers with hollow promises or false optimism, and He did not want any disciples who were self deceived either. So, He stopped His journey to confront His admirers with the true choice that lay before them.

1) Expectations (Luke 14:25-27). Jesus started by dashing their expectations of personal gain, for the truth was that they might lose everything if they followed Him. Therefore, they had to be willing to give up family relationships, with the comforts and inheritances and approval that accompanied them, for faith in Jesus could turn family members against them (see Matthew 10:34-36). All the ambitions and desires of life had to be laid aside. The march to Jerusalem had to be entered with no expectation other than death. Only those who believed that Jesus was the true source of life would be willing to accept those terms, and only they were qualified to be His disciples. Anyone who would be turned aside by the lure of political and material trinkets or the fear of pain and dishonor would never be found worthy of the great prize of eternal life that awaited the disciples of Jesus.

2) Evaluations (Luke 14:28-33). The crowds of eager admirers must have been shocked by the harsh requirements Jesus demanded from them. Their visions of quick victory and generous rewards were displaced by prospects of suffering and hardship. Now Jesus challenged them to evaluate their commitment to discipleship. It would be
foolish to begin a tower without securing the resources to finish it, for an unfinished building is a worthless object of ridicule. Likewise, a king who attacks without knowing if his strength is adequate is headed for disaster. It would be better for him to negotiate a surrender than to throw his army into slaughter. In both cases, the builder and the king need to ask themselves hard, realistic questions before they risk their reputations or their lives. Jesus said it would be just as foolish for any member of the crowd to begin following Him without considering the cost.

3) Examinations (Luke 14:34-35). Jesus presented a third obstacle to the casual follower when He announced that the lives of those who came after Him would be examined. Excitement and a good beginning do not ensure a strong finish, and the disciples of Jesus would need to demonstrate endurance or they would be like salt that has lost its flavor. It would not be enough to still be around at the end. Their lives would be expected to show a characteristic saltiness that would mark them as truly belonging to the King. The one who tagged along solely in hope of personal gain would be revealed as a fraud, without the taste of a true disciple and fit only for disposal. These statements were issued to those who had ears to hear. For many they would serve as a warning, but for the true followers in the crowd they would be a summons.

Discussion:

1) What expectations do people sometimes bring with them when they begin to follow Christ? How do the following verses address your expectations of the Christian life?
   (a) John 10:10
   (b) John 15:18-21
   (c) I Corinthians 15:51-57
   (d) Hebrews 11:32-38

2) Read Luke 14:27. What expectations does a person carrying a cross have? If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, how might it affect your personal goals and relationships?

3) Read Luke 14:28-33. What costs of following Jesus do you think every Christian needs to consider? Can you think of times when being a disciple cost you something?

4) Read Luke 14:34-35. What causes a disciple of Jesus to lose his saltiness? What do you do to make sure you stay salty?
Application:

There is more to being a disciple of Jesus than listening to sermons and doing religious activities. Once we commit ourselves to following Him, we lose control of the agenda for our lives. We really do not know where He will choose to lead us, but wherever it is, we are called to follow. Any expectations of ease and comfort must be laid aside at the beginning or we will quickly become disillusioned with the road our Lord takes. Following Jesus means going against the flow of the world. It means moving out of the safe and comfortable patterns of pleasing people and accumulating things. Eternal life is a gift that demands our complete attention, and the abundance Christ promised is not lavished on those who seek it more than Him. He calls us to fall in step with Him, understanding that there may well be pain and ridicule and even death, but trusting that His lead will never take us astray. Christian discipleship is not for people who crave honor and reward. It is for those who see eternal life as the prize worth losing everything to gain and Jesus as the only one who can provide it.

Life of Christ Study #73

Luke 15:1-32

Theme: Seeking the Lost

Summary:

It is perhaps significant that, after Jesus challenged the crowds to a true picture of discipleship and its costs (see Luke 14:25-35), the tax collectors and sinners were the ones who persisted in gathering to hear Him. They were keenly aware of their need, so His message of forgiveness and salvation struck home with them. Meanwhile, the Pharisees stood back and sneered, criticizing Jesus for allowing such wicked people to associate with Him. Jesus found their attitude repulsive, for, as the religious leaders of Israel, they should have been teaching these people themselves. But the Pharisees only condemned the lost, concluding that they should find their own way or not at all. Jesus disagreed and pointed out that a shepherd would go to look for the one lost sheep and then rejoice when he found it and brought it back (Luke 15:3-7). Likewise, a woman would search until she found the one coin she had lost and then tell her neighbors about her joy (Luke 15:8-10). Jesus said that the residents of heaven were more excited over the repentance of one sinner than the activities and rituals of ninety-nine religious people who saw no need to repent. The Pharisees might frown at the people Jesus chose to teach, but heaven celebrated.

1) Sin (Luke 15:11-16). Jesus sealed His argument with a parable about a man who had two sons. The younger one demanded his share of the estate, an insulting and selfish request since his father was still alive. But the father did as his son asked, and the young man apparently sold the
property, gathered the proceeds, and left for another country. There, he used up all his money in self-indulgent and sensual living. When a famine struck the area, he found himself in desperate need and went to work feeding pigs for a farmer. He became so hungry that he was tempted to eat the carob pods the pigs chewed and trampled. To this point, the Pharisees who heard Jesus probably would have approved of His story. The young man was getting what he deserved for his arrogance and immorality. He had become a miserable outcast through his own sin.

2) Sorrow (Luke 15:17-20). The despair of the young man's position made him reflect on what he had foolishly wasted. Even the laborers his father hired to do manual work were given plenty to eat, but he had cast away his privileged place as a son to starve to death in a swine yard. His desire to go back home was motivated by more than hunger, however. He recognized that he had sinned against heaven and against his father. The young man was truly repentant when he set out to return to his father's estate. He knew he had forfeited his rights as a son, and he was ready to plead that he be allowed to work as a laborer. Again, the Pharisees would have been satisfied. A sinner could repent, but he would always have to live in shame.

3) Salvation (Luke 15:20-24). Suddenly, the parable Jesus told took an unexpected turn. The father, who had been insulted and misused by the son's wickedness, met him with compassion. He offered love and acceptance instead of rebuke and moral outrage. The son voiced his humble repentance, but the father brushed aside his claims of unworthiness and ordered a celebration to be prepared in honor of his returned son. His father dressed him in his best robe and placed a ring on his finger, signifying his full reinstatement into the family. He put sandals on his feet to show that he was not being accepted as a servant but as a son. Such liberal and complete forgiveness was foreign to the Pharisees and they must have gasped in amazement and indignation.

4) Selfishness (Luke 15:25-32). Jesus introduced a character into His parable who shared the sentiments of the Pharisees. The older brother had remained with his father, apparently obedient and hard working, while his brother had rebelled. But a rebellion had been at work in his heart also, for when he came upon the celebration he was angry. His father appealed to him to join the festivities, but the older son responded with bitterness. He resented the attention given to the younger son. In his mind, his brother
deserved punishment for his sin while he deserved reward for his service. Forgiveness and restoration did not fit into his scheme of justice. In the same way, the salvation of sinners found no room in the Pharisees' system of moral justice. Like the older son, their selfish desire for personal credit and recognition needlessly prevented them from rejoicing over the rescue of another. As the father pointed out, the older son would lose nothing by welcoming his brother home.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 15:11-13. List some of the ways in which the younger son offended his father. Who was to blame for his condition in Luke 15:14-16?

2) Read Luke 15:17-20. What indications do you find that the son was truly repentant? What had he learned about himself? Can you think of a time in your life when you became aware of how desperately you needed forgiveness?

3) Read how King David expressed the joy of being forgiven in Psalm 32:1-2. Does anyone deserve such treatment from God? How did the father express his love and forgiveness in Luke 15:20-24?

4) What seemed unfair about his father's actions to the older son in Luke 15:25-32? How do you think he wanted his father to act? What attitudes and desires controlled him? How do you feel when you see someone else honored?

Application:

Compassion was missing from the religious system of the Pharisees. Instead of seeking the lost they labeled and shunned them. In their selfish pride, they made rules that made it difficult for any sinner to find acceptance and forgiveness. They knew how to identify and punish sin, but they knew nothing about redeeming the sinner. They were offended by the compassion Jesus showed those they had rejected, and that attitude offended Jesus. He came to offer the love of God to people in need. He spoke as a representative of a compassionate Father. The Pharisees represented only a cold system which offered little room for error and few second chances. The father in the parable gave a true picture of God's disposition toward sinners. He expressed love before demanding repentance, and then responded to repentance with full forgiveness. His children should do the same.

Life of Christ Study #74

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Theme: Shrewd Stewardship

Summary:

The parable of the lost son had portrayed the Pharisees in the unfavorable position of loving wealth and prestige more than people (see Luke 15:25-32). Jesus knew that a desire for and an attachment to money would be a constant temptation which might turn His disciples aside from following Him. The people of the world all around them were absorbed in it and exhibited great cunning in scheming new ways to get and protect it. Money had become their master through their own choice to pursue it, and it controlled a large portion of their schedules, thoughts, and energies. The moral standards of right or wrong had been replaced by the financial measures of gain or loss. Jesus did not want the subjects of His kingdom to become enslaved in that trap, so He told His disciples another parable which illustrated the hold that wealth had upon the people of the world. Then He called on them to choose the master who would set the agenda for their lives.

1) Building temporal security (Luke 16:1-8). A manager who worked for a rich man found himself in a difficult spot. His abuses or carelessness in his job had been discovered and he had been notified that his employment was about to end. This frightened him, for he did not have the strength or skill for other jobs, and he was too proud to resort to begging, but he needed to secure some kind of provision to take the place of the job he was losing. Finally, he hit upon a plan to use his few remaining days as a manager to obtain the favor of people who could provide for him later. He contacted a number of his master's debtors and invited them to rewrite their bills for smaller amounts. As manager, he had the authority to do this under his master's direction. It was a fairly common practice for a wealthy man to reduce the debts owed him to prove his generosity and compassion. In this case, however, the master had not authorized the action. But when he discovered the plot of his dishonest manager, he could not punish him without bringing embarrassment on himself, for the debtors had accepted the reductions in good faith. Publicly, the master was forced to commend the manager. And when his job ended, the manager, through his shrewd planning, had purchased many friends who would be happy to support him in return for the favors he had done them. What he did was dishonest, but it achieved his purpose of material security.

2) Building eternal security (Luke 16:8-9). Jesus did not praise the manager's actions, but He did point out the commitment the man had to his goal. The manager was willing to sacrifice his honor in
order to gain financial security. Jesus said that His followers should sacrifice financial security in order to gain the honor of eternity. The people of the kingdom should hold lightly the money that the world values and instead use that wealth to accomplish eternal purposes in the lives of people. The world considers it shrewd stewardship to find ways to accumulate more money. Jesus called it shrewd stewardship to exchange temporal riches for riches that will last forever.

3) The shrewd choice (Luke 16:10-15). Jesus warned that the way people used money on earth would affect their eternal reward. A man who proved faithful with the wealth of the world could be trusted with eternal riches, but the man who was dishonest in his financial dealings on earth would not be entrusted with true wealth. A choice must be made to serve either God or money, for the two are completely incompatible as masters. Both demand total allegiance, and their wills are in opposition to one another. It is impossible to remain loyal to both. The Pharisees were guilty of trying to serve both masters, and in the eyes of men they were successful, but God knew their hearts. He hated the material things they loved, so they stood condemned.

Discussion:

1) Where do you see the world’s desire for money clash with God’s standard of righteousness? Give specific examples of financial practices the world permits that you have chosen to avoid because you serve God.

2) Read Luke 16:1-8. The manager’s philosophy could be stated as "use money to influence people." How do you see this philosophy at work in the world today? What problems do you see with it?

3) Read Luke 16:9. The philosophy of Jesus could be stated as "use money to serve people." How can you practice this philosophy in your finances? What did Jesus say would be the reward of this philosophy in Luke 16:9-10?

4) Read Luke 16:13. Why do you think it is foolish to serve money? What are the benefits of serving God?

Application:

At first, the parable of the dishonest manager seems to be applauding his deceitful plan, but Jesus is really illustrating the world’s desperate passion for wealth. The manager was not concerned about honesty or loyalty or
righteousness. He just wanted to make sure that his financial security was set, even if the price was his integrity. That is what serving money accomplishes. Material gain becomes the only good, and almost any means of obtaining it can be justified if not praised. Jesus wanted His followers to apply that same zeal to serving others and obeying God. The Pharisees, like many people today, tried to pursue money while holding on to the appearance of devotion to the Lord. Jesus condemned such duplicity and called His people to serve God wholly. Men may praise cunning schemes to accumulate wealth, but God declares them detestable in His sight. Not everything that is legal or acceptable to men is pleasing to God. Sometimes, our loyalty to His kingdom will be seen by what we choose to avoid as much as what we choose to pursue. The truly shrewd steward makes such choices with eternity in mind.

Life of Christ Study #75

Luke 16:16-31

Theme: The Rich Man and Lazarus

Summary:

Jesus apparently felt that the choice between wealth and righteousness was extremely important, for He continued to speak to His disciples and the Pharisees about it. He had rebuked the religious leaders for trying to have both, secretly loving and serving money while maintaining the appearances of righteousness (see Luke 16:14-15). Now Jesus challenged their belief that they could successfully do enough to please God and still build their material fortunes at the same time. He reminded them that the Old Testament law and prophets proclaimed the standards of what God required. Then, beginning with John the Baptist, the good news of the kingdom was announced, and the religious leaders came assuming that they were well qualified to enter it (Luke 16:16). But a partial keeping of the law was not sufficient, for none of it would ever be excused or set aside (Luke 16:17). For example, divorce and remarriage was an act of adultery according to the law (see Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9), no matter what new interpretations and escapes the Pharisees had added to it since (Luke 16:18). Righteousness could not be adapted to a desire for wealth and still qualify as righteousness before God. Jesus then told a story to illustrate the true importance of making a choice between material and spiritual status.

1) Material status (Luke 16:19-21). On earth, the rich man seemed to have everything. He dressed in purple, an expensive color usually reserved for nobility. Luxury was his daily way of life along with the respect and admiration which commonly go with it. In contrast, Lazarus embodied poverty and privation. He was a beggar, having no means of income, he was in poor health, and he was starving. He was placed by the gate
of the rich man in hopes that one with so much would take pity on one who had nothing, but only the stray dogs attended him, licking his sores as he lay. People probably passed him with expressions of disgust, and the rich man may have considered him a nuisance when he considered him at all. By all the material measures of the world, the rich man was successful while Lazarus was not.

2) Spiritual status (Luke 16:22-26). It took death to reveal the true conditions of the two men. The beggar, who in life had been touched only by the dogs, was escorted to Abraham's side in paradise, while the rich man, who had enjoyed comfort and ease, found himself in the torments of hell. These pictures would have held enormous significance for the Jewish audience of Jesus. The one was a picture of highest honor, the other a scene of agony and shame. Apparently, the rich man had carefully managed his wealth with no thought for his soul and eternity. Meanwhile, lowly Lazarus, despised by men, had found forgiveness and righteousness with God. The reversal of positions was complete, and in his torment the rich man saw Lazarus in paradise and begged Abraham to let him bring one drop of water to cool his tongue. Abraham replied that the time for pity had passed. The rich man had shown no pity to the beggar by his gate while he lived. Now the beggar was comforted and the rich man was without help or hope. A great chasm separated the two more completely than their social and economic differences ever had, for no one could ever cross the gap after death.

3) Choice of status (Luke 16:27-31). The rich man's thoughts turned to his five brothers, still living and careless of the fate that awaited them if they did not repent. He asked that Lazarus be sent back to warn them, but Abraham said that they had sufficient witnesses in the Old Testament writings of Moses and the Prophets. The rich man replied that the testimony of one who came back from the dead would gain their attention more effectively than God's written word, but Abraham answered that they would not be convinced by such a miracle if they would not listen to the truth God had already given them. The words of Jesus were prophetic, for the Pharisees knew the Old Testament yet ignored its standards of righteousness. Jesus Himself would return from death, but they would explain it away as a hoax or a trick. Their physical descent from Abraham and their knowledge of the law would not qualify them for the kingdom. Only through repentance could they escape the torment of hell. It was a choice that had to be made in life.
Discussion:

1) Compare Luke 16:19-21 with Luke 16:9. How did the rich man's philosophy of money differ from the teaching of Jesus? How could he have applied what Jesus said? How do you apply what Jesus said about worldly wealth?

2) Read Luke 16:20-25. What hope does the story of the rich man and Lazarus give believers who are suffering in life?

3) Read Luke 16:27-30. What new priorities did the rich man adopt after death? Why could he not see the importance of these things in life?

4) Make a list of activities you do to keep your finances in order, from earning money to keeping track of it to investing or spending it. Now, make a list of the things you do to keep your spiritual life in order. Which is really more important?

Application:

The Pharisees gave the appearance of righteousness and devotion, but they were more careful to account for their finances than their obedience to God's law. Like the rich man, everything about them looked healthy, satisfied, and in order. Meanwhile, by appearances, Lazarus was sick, impoverished, and hopeless. But appearances in life may be very deceiving, for a person's spiritual status cannot be measured by his material status. Death revealed the true condition of each, and the rich man was proved a beggar while the beggar was given great riches. Material prosperity and comfort can lull us into the assumption that all is well spiritually, both in ourselves and in the people we meet. But the day awaits everyone when the material trappings, prosperity and poverty, will be stripped away to reveal the position of the heart. Religious talk and forms will not stand the test of that day, and wealth will no longer provide any comfort. Both selfishness and suffering will be recompensed.

Life of Christ Study #76

Luke 17:1-10

Theme: Duties of Discipleship

Summary:

The story of the rich man and Lazarus (see Luke 16:19-31) led naturally into a discussion of what Jesus required from His followers. The point had been made clearly that they should not become caught up in a pursuit of riches to the neglect of their spiritual condition. They saw that the issue made the difference between the eternal joy of paradise and
the torment of hell. Obviously, His disciples wanted to firmly stand on the side of paradise, but they may have been a bit confused about where that line was drawn. Jesus had aimed the story as a warning to the religious leaders who loved wealth (see Luke 16:14-15), but possibly there were other dangers the disciples did not know about that might cause them to stumble and, like the rich man, be horribly surprised when they faced judgment. Therefore, Jesus took them aside to talk to them about the basic responsibilities that came with discipleship. His list of duties would both challenge them and reassure them as they sought to follow Him faithfully.

1) Duty toward others (Luke 17:1-4). Jesus knew that the world was filled with temptations and that no one would be free of them, but His disciples must be careful not to be a source of temptation to anyone. There is an accountability within the kingdom. Its members are to avoid sin themselves, and they are also called to help others to escape the trap of sin. Therefore, they should not encourage or engage anyone in anything that violates the standards of the King. Those who do lead others into sin would be better off to die by shameful execution than to face the wrath of the Lord. Furthermore, if another disciple sins against them, they should lovingly confront him in an attempt to lead him to repentance. If he truly repents, they are obligated to forgive, even if the offense is repeated again and again.

2) Duty of faith (Luke 17:5-6). The twelve must have been awestruck when they heard of the serious responsibility that accompanied discipleship. Their plea to increase their faith was probably an honest admission of the inadequacy they felt, yet their request was misguided. Jesus told them that a greater quantity of faith was not the issue, for even a very small amount was sufficient. Faith is the duty of every disciple, to approach the will of God trusting that He will provide all that is needed to accomplish it. The black mulberry tree was notoriously difficult to dislodge because of its extensive root system, but God would tear it up and cast it into the sea at the mere request of one of His disciples if that was necessary for him to fulfill what God wanted. The disciples did not need to find more faith. They just needed to direct their faith toward God who would give them whatever they required to obey Him.

3) Duty of service (Luke 17:7-10). There was a danger that the disciples might grow proud in their obedience to God. The Pharisees had made religious performance into a way of gathering honor and admiration to themselves, and Jesus did not want His followers to fall into that error.
He used the example of a master requiring his servant, who had already worked a long day, to wait on him at the table before eating his own meal. The master was not being cruel, for a part of the servant's duty was to care for his master's needs before addressing his own. No expression of thanks was necessary for a servant who had done what was expected of him. In the same way, disciples of Jesus should not expect applause every time they obey the Lord. They are not doing God any favors. They are simply doing what disciples are supposed to do.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 17:1-2. Why should these verses make you very careful about what you do and say around others? How could you apply the warning to issues of sexual sin?

2) Read Luke 17:3-4. What responsibilities do you have when someone sins against you? What is the problem with saying nothing and just trying to forget what another has done?

3) According to Ephesians 2:8-9, is faith something that you can produce? From where does it come? Read Luke 17:5-6. Have you ever seen God remove obstacles from your path as you obey Him? Give examples.

4) Read Luke 17:7-10. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Discipleship is not volunteer work."

Application:

Certain expectations come with the call to follow Jesus as members of His kingdom. Disciples owe allegiance to their King, and His will is not to be taken lightly or treated as optional. The Pharisees acted as if their good works were generous favors to God which should be praised and rewarded. But disciples are not volunteers who lend their help when they choose. Disciples are servants who are obligated to fulfill their duty when their Master calls. God promises to grant whatever we need to do His will, but He expects us to obey. We cannot treat other people as we please, for God has specified how we are to treat them, and if we lead or encourage any of them into sin, He holds us accountable. We are not free to ignore the sin of others, for we are called to confront it in love. We do not have the option of holding a grudge against those who hurt us, for we are commanded to forgive. In every life situation we must seek to obey, not to display our virtues and earn applause, but to discharge our duty to Jesus faithfully.

Life of Christ Study #77

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Jesus had the ability to see the broader perspective in the situations He encountered. Where most people tend to react based on fear or anger or sympathy, He considered the real needs of the people involved and responded in ways that would bring lasting results. He comforted those who were hurting, but He also taught them where to find comfort. He rebuked those who were wrong, but in the process He gave them the opportunity to turn and follow what was right. An incident that involved His friends Mary and Martha (see Luke 10:38-42) and their brother Lazarus provided Jesus with the chance to teach and care for them and His disciples. His actions and words seemed strange to those around Him because they lacked His perspective, but He applied the touch that was needed to each of their lives.

1) Delay (John 11:1-16). Jesus had a special affection for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and that love was returned, as Mary would demonstrate later when she poured perfume on Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair (see John 12:1-8). Given this relationship, it seemed strange that Jesus would delay going to Bethany an extra two days when He learned that Lazarus was gravely ill, but the broader perspective saw a chance for God to reveal His glory. When Jesus finally announced that it was time to go back to Judea, His disciples expressed surprise, for the Jewish leaders had attempted to stone Him there just a few months earlier at the Feast of Dedication (see John 10:22-33). They could not understand why He would expose Himself to their hatred again, but He saw that the time was coming for His final confrontation with the religious establishment. He walked toward the danger knowingly and not as one who stumbles in the dark. He explained that the death of Lazarus was the reason for going to Judea, but the disciples misunderstood His reference to sleep. The disciples obviously were still confused by all this, and Thomas summed up their mood when he invited them to come die with Jesus.

2) Compassion (John 11:17-37). Martha and Mary also found their Friend's actions perplexing. By the time He arrived, their brother had already been in the tomb four days. Martha's statement that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had come sooner begged for an explanation. Yet she also expressed her faith that even death was not too difficult for Jesus. He assured her that Lazarus would return to life, and she agreed that He would indeed live again in the final resurrection. Jesus, however, announced that He
was the source of resurrection and life, so that those who believed in Him would always live. Martha voiced her faith in Him as God's chosen Messiah without hesitation. Then she went back to the house and urged Mary to go to Jesus. Mary's initial statement was the same as her sister's, and when Jesus saw her grief, He was moved to tears. The gathered mourners recognized that Jesus loved this family, but even they wondered why He had not come sooner to possibly prevent the death.

3) Miracle (John 11:38-44). As He approached the tomb, Jesus was again deeply moved, probably not because of Lazarus, for He knew what was about to happen. It may be that He was moved by the grief of the mourners which revealed their helplessness in the face of death. He commanded the stone to be removed from the entrance to the tomb despite the protests of Martha who assumed that the body would have begun to decay. Jesus simply reminded her about what He had promised to those who believed (see John 11:25-26). Then He thanked God for the miracle which would prove His position as the provider of life to those who witnessed it. Jesus called into the tomb and commanded Lazarus to come out, and Lazarus came, still wrapped in grave clothes, but alive. The power of resurrection and life was Jesus.

4) Reaction (John 11:45-54). Many of those who saw the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus responded by putting their faith in Jesus. What they had seen confirmed His identity to them. Others, however, continued to react in their narrow religious perspective that would not allow anything to disrupt the status quo. They reported what had happened to the Pharisees who called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish religious leaders. They were worried that Jesus would gather a large following and provoke the Roman government to intervene, bringing about the loss of any Jewish autonomy and of their freedom to hold any position of authority. Caiphas, the high priest, declared that it would be better to kill one man than to let the whole nation die. Unknowingly, he stated the mission of Jesus very well. The Sanhedrin, therefore, determined officially to kill Jesus, so He went away to the wilderness near Ephraim, about fourteen miles north of Jerusalem.

Discussion:

1) Read John 11:1-16. What might the disciples have thought when Jesus delayed two days even though He knew Lazarus was sick? What might Mary and Martha have thought? Have you ever wondered why God did not answer your prayer for help right
away?

2) What reasons did Jesus give for the delay in John 11:4 and 11:14-15? What was included in His broader perspective that the others failed to see?

3) Read John 11:21-27. What was Martha's concept of resurrection? How did Jesus change her perspective?

4) Read John 11:45-54. Why do you think some people responded to the miracle with faith while others showed only hatred? What does this teach you about how people respond to the gospel today?

Application:

Jesus could have arrived in time to prevent the death of Lazarus, but He thought it was more important to use the occasion to teach His followers. He taught them that His power to give life was not just reserved for a future resurrection at the end of time. He has the power to give life now to those who believe. If He had not delayed His journey to Bethany, the disciples, Mary, Martha, and the others who witnessed the miracle would not have seen this. Yes, Jesus healed the sick, but more importantly, He held power even over death. If we follow Him, we have no reason to fear death, for life has been promised to us.

Life of Christ Study #78

Luke 17:11-19

Theme: The Ten Lepers

Summary:

In keeping with His pattern, Jesus did not stay away from the Jerusalem area for long. He remained in the village of Ephraim until the time of the Passover, at the end of March, A.D. 30. In Jerusalem, people were already gathering for the important Feast, and many of them were wondering if Jesus would make an appearance, for the religious leaders had given strict orders that His whereabouts should be reported to them at once so that they could arrest Him (see John 11:54-57). That is probably why Jesus took the route through the border region of Galilee and Samaria to approach Jerusalem from the east through Perea. His path would be less likely to be observed from that direction. But again, it must not be thought that He was afraid of the Pharisees. In fact, along the way, He found an occasion to send them notice of His coming. The final confrontation would occur at the proper time. In the meanwhile, Jesus continued to pursue His ministry of offering the kingdom to those who would understand.
1) Faith in His reputation (Luke 17:11-13). Ten lepers had banded together in the region, probably for mutual protection and care, since they were outcasts from the towns (see Leviticus 13:45-46) and easy prey for bandits. Their desperate need had even broken down the usual cultural barriers, for at least one of them was a Samaritan. They had apparently heard about Jesus and His miracles of healing, for they were waiting to meet Him on the outskirts of a village. The Old Testament law required them to call a warning to anyone who came near, so they addressed Jesus while He was still at a distance. They knew that He had displayed power from God before, and they appealed to Him as a person of authority for mercy. It is not clear whether they identified Him as the Messiah at this point. It is more likely that they saw Him as a prophet who had the ability to perform acts of God.

2) Faith in His words (Luke 17:14). Jesus tested their faith with His instructions. The law dictated that a diseased person should present himself to the priests when he was healed so that his health could be verified (see Leviticus 14:1-7), but Jesus told these men to go even though they had not yet been healed. It was similar to the instruction given to the royal official who came to Jesus about his sick son (see John 4:49-50). The lepers had to trust Jesus at His word or demand more immediate results. The ten decided to put their faith in the words of this man of God and began the trek toward Jerusalem to see the priests. Along the way, their leprosy disappeared and they were clean. The story they brought to Jerusalem was probably not received with joy by the religious leaders.

3) Faith in Him (Luke 17:15-19). One of the ten did not continue on with his companions when their healing took place. Instead, he came back to Jesus, praising God for the miracle as he went, and fell down at His feet in worship and gratitude. He was a Samaritan, but he recognized what the others apparently missed in their celebration. He saw that Jesus was more than just a prophet or holy man. By his act of worship, he showed that he accepted Jesus as God's anointed Messiah, for it would have been blasphemy to kneel before anyone but God. Jesus saw that the man's faith no longer rested on a reputation or words of instruction. His faith now focused on a person. Jesus remarked that this man alone, a foreigner, had grasped the truth, while the others, presumably Jewish by birth, had not. He told the man to get up and go, for his faith had made him well. Indeed, it had made him well both physically and spiritually.
Discussion:

1) What are some things that people have heard Jesus can do for them? What kinds of things are they looking for when they talk about knowing Him?

2) Read Luke 17:14. What risk did the ten lepers take in obeying Jesus' instructions before they were healed? What things does God call you to do without showing you proof that the results will be favorable?

3) Describe the differences between a person who
(a) follows Jesus as a miracle worker.
(b) follows Jesus as a great teacher.
(c) follows Jesus as God.

4) Read Luke 17:15-19. How was the faith of the one who returned different than the faith of the other nine?

Application:

The central point of the encounter between Jesus and the ten lepers is not simply a lesson on gratitude. All of the lepers were thankful to be healed from their awful condition. The one who came back had something deeper than appreciation on his mind. Jesus highlighted the fact that he was the only one who returned to "give praise to God." Gratitude is certainly important, but more important for this man was his realization that the one who had directed his healing was the Messiah, God Himself. Many people may be drawn to Jesus by what they think He can give them, and some are even willing to follow His instructions to obtain their goal, but only those who acknowledge and worship Him as the King will truly be made well. The Samaritan, the outsider, understood while the Jews remained ignorant. We must put our faith in Jesus and worship Him as our Lord.

Life of Christ Study #79

Luke 17:20-37

Theme: The Coming of the Kingdom

Summary:

Jesus made many references to the kingdom of God in His teaching, and He was presented as the King, the promised Messiah. It was a theme which captured the attention of His Jewish audiences, even the Pharisees, for they anxiously awaited the kingdom as a time of peace and justice when their enemies would be punished and they would be rewarded as the people of God. The religious leaders had made careful study of the issue in an effort to determine the time and location of the King's arrival. Many theories and false alarms had
already come and gone, and the whole subject had become rather confused and romanticized in the minds of most people. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jesus would be asked questions about the kingdom and that He would address the misconceptions so that His disciples could have a clear understanding about it. One such opportunity arose as He continued His journey back toward Jerusalem for the Passover.

1) Searching for the kingdom (Luke 17:20-21). The Pharisees may have been genuinely interested in hearing what Jesus had to say about the kingdom or they may have wished to compare His views with their own scholarly studies. Jesus answered their question by asserting that all their careful research and observations would not help them in determining the time or place of God's kingdom, for it was not the type which could be predicted through observed trends and events. In fact, the Pharisees, in the midst of their theories and charts, had missed the truth that the kingdom was already among them in the person of its King! They needed to set aside their preconceived notions and see the kingdom as it truly was.

2) Searching for the King (Luke 17:22-25). Jesus then cautioned His disciples about the near future when He would no longer be with them. He called Himself the Son of Man in keeping with the image in Daniel concerning His return (see Daniel 7:13-14). They would long to see Him again and would be tempted to listen to those who claimed to have seen Him. Jesus told them not to run after such assertions, for when He did come it would be in a way that would be plain to all. They were in no danger of missing the news when it happened. First, however, He would suffer and be rejected by the Jewish people who should have recognized Him as the King for whom they searched.

3) Unprepared for the kingdom (Luke 17:26-29). The generation that saw His miracles and would reject Him was compared by Jesus to the people who lived at the time of Noah. They went about their daily affairs, ignoring the warnings about the coming judgment of the flood until it was too late. In the same way, the wicked people of Sodom continued their routines oblivious to the fiery judgment that awaited them. Jesus saw the people of Israel following the same deadly path. They were so absorbed in the material, earthly concerns of life that they were unprepared for the spiritual events which were gathering around them. They cried for the kingdom, but they were not ready for its coming.

4) Unprepared for the King (Luke 17:30-37). Jesus predicted that on the day the King returned He
would find many people occupied in ignorance. When judgment comes it is not the time to worry about material goods. It is a time to run for safety even if it means losing everything else. Only by being willing to give up all the trophies and comforts connected with their present lives could people hope to actually save their lives. The King will bring judgment swiftly, so that people will not have time to prepare when it comes. Whatever the task they are engaged in at the time, judgment will interrupt. Those who are ready will be spared, but those who are not will be taken. The disciples wished to know where those unfortunate ones would be taken, and Jesus' reply indicated that they would perish. They cried for the King, but they were not ready for His coming.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 17:20-21. What signs do people attach to the coming of Christ today? What danger is there for those who try to interpret current trends and events to discover the time of Christ's return?

2) According to Luke 17:22-25, what should be your response to people who claim to have special insight or information about the return of Jesus?

3) According to Genesis 6:5-7 and Genesis 18:20-21, what traits did the people of Noah's time and the people of Sodom have in common? How would you apply this to the world today?

4) Read Genesis 19:12-17, 24-26. How does Lot's wife serve as a warning to people who hesitate to run to Jesus today?

Application:

The Jewish people talked a lot about God's kingdom and the Messiah who would bring it. It was a fable of dreams and hope for a people who were oppressed by the Roman Empire. Even the Pharisees spoke eagerly and expectantly about the kingdom, and they tried to discover when it would take place. Yet because of their pride and spiritual blindness, they did not recognize the King when He came to offer the kingdom to them. They were so attached to their routine activities and religious systems that Jesus did not seem to fit. When we understand that Jesus is the only source of salvation from judgment to life, we should be willing to drop everything connected with this world in order to gain entrance to the kingdom. There is no time to hesitate or delay. The King is coming and He will find us ready or horribly surprised.

Life of Christ Study #80

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Luke 18:1-14

Theme: Parables on Prayer

Summary:

Jesus had promised His disciples that He would return in the future to bring justice and judgment upon the earth (see Luke 17:22-37), but first He would suffer and die and leave them. This led to a discussion about prayer, for until the Lord would return, prayer would be the recourse available to His people who were in need of justice and forgiveness. Jesus had taught them about prayer before (see Matthew 6:5-15), and on at least one occasion they had specifically asked Him to speak to them on the subject (see Luke 11:1-13). They had seen the central role prayer played in the life of Jesus, but perhaps they had not yet put the lesson into regular practice, for Jesus was still with them, and they could turn to Him when they had a question or a need. That would soon change, so this was an especially appropriate time to make sure they could approach prayer with a correct attitude and understanding.

1) Constant (Luke 18:1-8). Prayer requires persistence because the answer often is not readily apparent. It may seem more effective to grasp for solutions through visible means than to pray to an unseen God, yet He alone can provide real solutions to the challenges of life. Jesus wanted His disciples to use prayer as a constant practice, so He told them a parable about a judge who "neither feared God nor cared about men." He was driven by selfishness over compassion and convenience over the needs of others. A widow, who probably had no one else she could turn to for help, kept petitioning the judge to protect her from an enemy and he kept refusing to do his job. Finally, however, he realized that he would have no peace from her entreaties until he granted her request. Jesus then asked His disciples whether they thought God would be as stubborn and heartless as that judge. He promised them that God would certainly bring about justice for His people much more expeditiously than the corrupt judge. All they had to do was to ask Him without giving up. It sounded so simple, yet Jesus asked whether He would find such faith on the earth. As the days grew shorter and darker before His return, He knew that perseverance would be sorely tested. Prayer is usually needed most when it seems the least sufficient.

2) Contrite (Luke 18:9-14). Apparently, there were some religious leaders listening to what Jesus said about prayer. They viewed His teaching with a kind of condescension, for they considered themselves beyond the instruction of anyone in matters of righteousness. Jesus, therefore,
addressed a parable to them. In it, two men entered the temple to pray. One of them was a Pharisee, highly respected as a pious man of God. The other was a tax collector, despised by most Jews as a cheat and a traitor, and probably considered unworthy to even be in the temple by the Pharisee. The Pharisee used his prayer as an occasion to recite his good deeds and character. He was happy to be in a different class than the common sinners like the tax collector. Meanwhile, the poor tax collector felt his own unworthiness keenly, and his prayer was a humble plea for mercy from God. Perhaps the leaders who heard Jesus nodded with satisfaction at this point. The parable was an accurate representation of the gap which they felt existed between themselves and sinners. But Jesus aimed the conclusion of the story directly at their self-righteous pride. He told them that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, left the temple that day in favor with God. Those who praise their own righteousness will be rebuked, while those who admit their sin will be forgiven and praised.

Discussion:

1) What causes you to sometimes give up praying before you receive God's answer?

2) Read Luke 18:6-8. What encouragement can you draw from the promises given in these verses? What challenge for your prayer life do you find?

3) Read Luke 18:9-13. How do you think the Pharisee in this parable would define righteousness? Which of the two men had better self-esteem? Which of the two was right in his evaluation of himself?

4) Read Luke 18:14. How do the following verses emphasize the points about the results of exalting or humbling yourself?
   (a) II Chronicles 7:14 (d) James 4:6
   (b) Proverbs 11:2 (e) I Peter 5:5-6
   (c) Proverbs 16:18-19

Application:

Prayer was to be one of the greatest tools Jesus would leave His disciples, for by it they could communicate their questions and needs even though He would no longer be with them in physical form. Persistent faith is necessary, for the answers do not always come quickly or visibly. But Jesus promised that God would not hesitate to bring justice to His people if they prayed. Prayer is not meant to be a time of self-exultation or comparison with others. It is an intimate time to lay our lives before God for Him to apply His strength and mercy. When we pray, our goal should not be to impress God or anyone else. It should be to honestly and humbly bring...
our requests and needs to the One who is able to deal with them effectively.

Life of Christ Study #81

Matthew 19:1-12: Mark 10:1-12

Theme: Directing Divorce

Summary:

Even though Jesus had purposely chosen a less traveled route, going between Samaria and Galilee (see Luke 17:11) and approaching Jerusalem from the region of Perea, the crowds found Him. As He came closer to the Jordan Valley, the number of followers increased to large proportions. Mark reported that Jesus took time to teach them (see Mark 10:1) while Matthew said that He also performed some miracles of healing among them (Matthew 19:1-2). With the crowds came the Pharisees who had been seeking Jesus since He had left the region after the resurrection of Lazarus (see John 11:54-57). Probably some of the Pharisees moved about with Jesus to keep an eye on Him until a favorable time would appear to arrest Him. As long as He kept drawing nearer to Jerusalem, they were content to simply watch, for they could spring their trap in the city. At times, however, they tried their old tricks of asking Him questions and opening debates to catch Him in some contradiction if possible. On one occasion, they approached Him on the subject of divorce, a subject as controversial then as it is today.

1) A debate (Matthew 19:3). The wording of the Pharisees' question was carefully constructed to draw Jesus into a debate. Even the religious leaders were divided on what constituted legitimate grounds for divorce. The Jewish school of Shammai held that divorce was permitted only for unfaithfulness while the school of Hillel allowed a man to divorce his wife for almost any real or perceived offense. No matter which side Jesus supported, His audience would be split and He would be plunged into a round of hopeless explanations and arguments. Every point made on one side could be answered with a dozen references and interpretations on the other. Meanwhile, Jesus would be reduced to the level of the Pharisees, endlessly debating issues in terms the common people could not hope to understand.

2) A definition (Matthew 19:4-9). Jesus brushed aside the speculations and traditions that the Pharisees wanted to discuss and instead pointed them to the Old Testament law itself. He cited Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as God's original plan for marriage in which the man and woman become one. Since God joined them together, they could not be separated by mere human law or preference. Only
God could regulate when and if such a union could be set aside. The Pharisees countered with Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as proof that Moses put the right of divorce into the hands of the husband, but Jesus replied that the certificate of divorce was a means of giving direction to the process because, without some document, the hard-hearted people would have divorced and remarried according to their own sinful desires. God still determined when a divorce was permitted. Then Jesus returned again to God's original plan and stated clearly that divorce was permitted only for unfaithfulness and that any other act of divorce and remarriage was adultery. Human interpretations were of no importance because God had already defined His will for marriage and divorce.

3) A declaration (Matthew 19:10-12). Mark revealed that the disciples were so astonished by this definition that they asked Jesus about it in private. He reiterated His statement that anyone who divorced his or her spouse and remarried committed adultery (see Mark 10:10-12). The disciples realized that this prohibited the common practice of putting an escape clause into a marriage agreement. The declaration of Jesus meant that a husband and wife were bound together even if they found they disliked one another. The disciples concluded that it would be better not to marry than to risk an unbreakable bond of misery. Jesus, however, said that remaining single was only meant for those who were physically unable or had chosen to forgo marriage because the work of God's kingdom demanded it. All others should pursue marriage as God intended it from the beginning.

Discussion:

1) Make a list of activities the world declares legal or acceptable but God says are wrong. Make a list of activities the world prohibits but God says are right. How should you respond to these issues?

2) Read Matthew 19:4-6. What was God’s original intention for marriage? Has His definition changed? How are the world’s present definitions of marriage different than God’s?

3) Read Matthew 19:7-9. What reason did Jesus give for allowing divorce? Does anyone have the right to add other reasons?

4) Read Matthew 19:11-12. Can you think of circumstances in which a Christian might choose to forgo marriage for the sake of kingdom work? Is the person who chooses marriage settling for
second best?

Application:

The Pharisees had turned the issue of divorce into a tangle of opinions, interpretations, and arguments. Jesus untangled the mess by returning to God's original plan for marriage and His clear directions for marriage and divorce. He dismissed everything else as the attempts of men to separate what God had joined. If God oversees marriage, then He alone has the right to declare when it can end, and men should not try to bend His will to meet their fears, desires, or preferences. The disciples recognized that this made marriage a very serious business indeed. The Pharisees claimed devotion to God, but were willing to negotiate when His standards imposed on their happiness. Jesus calls His people to obey God always, even when it means remaining in a difficult circumstance. He calls husbands and wives to obey, repent, and reconcile, not to seek ways to justify an action that He has not approved.

Life of Christ Study #82


Theme: Children and Rich Men

Summary:

A continual theme throughout the Gospels was that the people considered most ready by men for the kingdom were in the greatest danger of missing it, while those who were thought to be farthest from it responded gladly to the invitation Jesus gave. Part of the problem was certainly the Jewish belief that earthly treasures, such as wealth, prestige, and popularity were signs of God's blessing while Jesus maintained that they were often hindrances to receiving God's offer of eternal life. The Pharisees, of course, were most often caught by this truth, for they could not accept the insinuation that they needed to repent before they could enter the kingdom. The disciples, however, were not immune to a similar misconception about worldly treasures and the kingdom. Jesus had an opportunity to teach them about this once more as He was approached by an array of people during His passage through Perea.

1) Faith of a child (Mark 10:13-16). People brought little children to Jesus so that he might bless them and pray for them. There is no indication that these children were sick, so most likely the parents were motivated by a desire to see their children receive some spiritual blessing from Jesus. Luke emphasizes that some of the children were mere infants (see Luke 18:15). The disciples saw this delay as a waste of time. They were anxious for Jesus to arrive in Jerusalem and establish the kingdom, and young
children could be of little help in such a venture. Jesus, however, became angry when they tried to send the children away. He told them that children like these were the true residents of the kingdom of God. The kingdom would never be achieved through human strength or strategy. It could only be gained through simple, humble trust such as children showed. Then He turned His attention back to the little ones and blessed them.

2) Faith of a rich man (Matthew 19:16-26). Soon after, Jesus was approached by a young official who respectfully asked what good work he should do to gain eternal life. Jesus challenged him to think about what he was asking. Only God was truly good, so only works which matched His standards would qualify. Jesus told the man to obey God's commandments if he wanted to have life. The man asked Jesus to specify which of the commandments were necessary. Jesus cited examples from the Old Testament law, and the man replied that he had kept them. He asked if anything else was needed. Jesus told him to sell all that he had, give everything to the poor, and follow Him. The young man was very rich, and he was not willing to give up his wealth, so he sadly left. He did not mind adopting a set of rules and practices which would assure him of eternal life, but he loved and trusted his present riches more than he valued eternity. Jesus turned to his disciples and remarked that it was harder for a wealthy man to lay aside his faith in riches for the sake of heaven than it was for a camel to pass through the eye of a tiny needle. This shocked the disciples and they asked how anyone could ever be saved. Jesus replied that what was impossible from a human perspective could be accomplished by God.

3) A promise to the faithful (Matthew 19:27-30). The disciples were rightly concerned that they should not fall into the same trap as the rich young man. Peter spoke for the rest when he pointed out that the disciples had, in fact, given up their jobs, homes, and families to follow Jesus. They wondered what would be the result of their sacrifice. Jesus did not dispute their claim, but He promised that anyone who left property or people to follow Jesus would find that they were more than compensated when the kingdom would be fully established. Their faithfulness would be rewarded. Yet, for others, the kingdom would hold an unpleasant surprise, for they would find that in their striving to be first in the world, they had neglected what was really important and they would have no reward.
Discussion:

1) Read Mark 10:13-16. What role could children play in an armed battle for power? What role do they play in the kingdom of God? How can an adult receive the kingdom like a child?

2) Read Matthew 19:16-20. What was the young man's view of obtaining eternal life? What do some people today think they need to do in order to gain eternal life?

3) Read Matthew 19:21-22. Do you think Jesus requires you to give all your possessions to the poor? Why or why not? What do you think He was trying to teach the young man through such a requirement?

4) Read Matthew 19:27-29. What has following Jesus cost you? What can you learn from these verses when your commitment to Jesus means a loss of money, friends, or opportunities?

Application:

In the world's perspective, a small child is powerless while a rich man has influence and resources to get things done. On a scale of achievement, the child might be last and the rich man first. But Jesus reversed that perspective, for He presented a child as a model of those who would enter the kingdom while He proclaimed the entrance of a rich man a human impossibility. A child finds it much easier to trust Jesus, for he has not learned to put his trust in anything such as money. The rich man must lay aside his confidence in his treasure and submit his will and life to Jesus. The rich young man Jesus met was not willing to do this. He chose to hold on to the wealth he had accumulated rather than gain a treasure that he could never purchase with his own resources. It was a foolish choice, for if he had let go of his earthly riches, he would have been handsomely repaid in eternal currency. The best investment plan available cannot be measured by material goods.

Life of Christ Study #83

Matthew 20:1-16

Theme: Fair Wages

Summary:

The Jewish religious system assumed different levels of reward based on the amount, duration, and zeal of good works performed. This translated into the belief that wealth or poverty, influence or servitude, were signs of God's pleasure or displeasure. Gentiles were thought to be deserving of less reward than Jews, and religious officials were thought to be awaiting higher positions in the kingdom than the average
person. Jesus had dealt a blow to such thinking when He exposed the rich man's wealth as the main obstacle to his salvation (see Matthew 19:21-24). Now He told a parable to reinforce the principle that a person's rank in the kingdom could not be earned by some spiritual competition of accumulating points and achieving tenure. The Pharisees might look for ways to exalt themselves in the eyes of men, but their selfish efforts would not impress God. He alone would determine the appropriate wages for each worker in His vineyard.

1) Wages promised (Matthew 20:1-7). It was normal at harvest time for a landowner to hire extra workers. The day would begin about six o'clock in the morning and work would continue until six o'clock in the evening. In the parable, the first workers hired agreed to labor for twelve hours for one denarius. Three hours later, the landowner hired additional workers. At noon and in the middle of the afternoon he brought more to work in his vineyard. Finally, at about five o'clock the landowner engaged some more men to work the final hour. There was nothing very unusual about the story to this point, for it was important to complete the harvest quickly and there was often a scramble to find enough laborers to complete the job.

2) Wages given (Matthew 20:8-12). The parable took an unexpected turn, however, when it came time to pay the workers. The landowner told his foreman to give the workers their wages, beginning with those who had worked the least amount of time. This would have seemed insulting enough to the workers who had labored a full day, but the owner also gave those who had worked just one hour a full day's pay. Those who had been hired in the morning assumed that they would get a bonus for working twelve hours, but they also were given one denarius. Their indignation was expressed in a complaint to the landowner. Almost every Jew would have considered the owner's action unfair, for they believed that work, both physical and spiritual, should be repaid according to its length and quality.

3) Wages questioned (Matthew 20:13-16). The Pharisees especially looked forward to eternal rewards based on their piety and good works. If they did more than others, then by rights they should receive more from God. But the eternal life of the kingdom was not earned by works or length of service. The landowner in the parable reminded the disgruntled workers that they had agreed to harvest in the vineyard all day for one denarius, and that is exactly what they received. Therefore, they had not been cheated in any way. If the owner chose to give the same amount to people who had worked less time, that was his
prerogative. They really had no grounds to complain about his treatment of them. They were actually upset by his generosity to those they felt were less deserving. In the kingdom, those who were perceived as last on earth would be first and those who thought they ought to be first would find themselves last. Unlike the religious leaders, Jesus was ready to give full eternal life to even the most unworthy who repented.

Discussion:

1) What are some ways that the Pharisees tried to earn the first spot in the kingdom of God? How do people today try to earn God's special favor?

2) Does it seem fair to you that a person who trusts in Jesus on his deathbed after a life of rebellion might receive the same reward as you? Why or why not?

3) Read Matthew 20:13-15. What should your attitude be when an undeserving sinner finds salvation? What does it teach you about God? What does it reveal about your own perspective on pleasing God?

4) Read Matthew 20:16. What kind of person is generally seen as one who will be first in the kingdom? What kind of person is seen as one who will be last? What does Jesus want you to understand about such perceptions?

Application:

The Pharisees, and most common Jews, believed that good works would make God love them more or owe them more or be more pleased with them. Righteousness was measured by long hours, many activities, and deep knowledge. But Jesus taught that such efforts would not bring a person any closer to God's kingdom nor would they gain him a higher position in it. Hard work is no substitute for honest repentance and faithfulness to God. Every person who enters the kingdom, whether he found forgiveness early or late in life, will stand in the presence of God solely by His mercy and generosity and not by any resume of impressive exertion or accomplishments. Jesus promised His disciples that anything they sacrificed for His sake on earth would be amply repaid in the kingdom (see Matthew 19:28-29), but that did not mean that greater rewards could be earned by greater activity. God promises that He will reward each of us for faithfulness. He does not say that faithfulness will be measured by human standards of busyness and productivity.

Life of Christ Study #84

199

Theme: Ambition and Greatness

Summary:

Jesus was right to be concerned about the view His disciples held about earning rewards in the kingdom, for they were confused on the subject. He had told them before that suffering and death awaited Him in Jerusalem, and He had warned them that they needed to be prepared for suffering and death themselves if they wished to follow Him (see Luke 14:25-27), but ambition and dreams of glory are hard flames to suppress, and the recent talk about sitting on thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matthew 19:28) had fueled the fire. The disciples probably agreed with the condemnation Jesus leveled at the pride and ambition of the Pharisees, but they were guilty of it as well. They still believed that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to establish His kingdom, and their minds were occupied with hopes and visions of the roles they would be assigned in the new government. Jesus had tried to cool their ambition through the parable of the landowner (see Matthew 20:1-16), but now it was time to address the issue directly.

1) The path of suffering (Mark 10:32-34). Anticipation and fear ran through the crowds as Jesus crossed the Jordan River from Perea and began the ascent from the valley to Jerusalem. Some were probably amazed that He would dare to go back to the city in spite of the threats against Him by the religious leaders. Others may have wondered how He would emerge victorious from a clash with the Roman overlords. Meanwhile, Jesus took His disciples aside to explain to them clearly what was going to happen. He told them He would be betrayed and sentenced to death by the Jews. Then He would be abused and killed by the Gentiles. Finally, three days after His death, He would rise again. None of this should have been new to the disciples, yet Luke reported that they still did not understand what He said (see Luke 18:34). Suffering and death did not fit with their ambitions.

2) The path of ambition (Mark 10:35-41). The extent to which their ambition had blinded them to the facts became evident when two of them, James and John, accompanied by their mother (see Matthew 20:20-21), approached Him with a request for special favor when His kingdom was established. They wanted the two seats of greatest honor and authority next to Him. Jesus told them that they made their request in ignorance. They saw only power and reward, but the cup He had to drink was bitter and His baptism would be one of suffering. They expressed their readiness to join Him in whatever experiences were necessary to gain the positions they craved. Jesus promised them that they would indeed share His cup and His baptism,
but He could not grant their request for those places of honor were already reserved. The other disciples apparently overheard this conversation, for they became angry at James and John, perhaps fearing that they would be left out of race for honor.

3) The path of greatness (Mark 10:42-45). Ambition threatened to divide the disciples until Jesus called them together and exposed their selfish motives. They were acting like the pagan Gentiles who fought and clawed for positions of authority and then worked to keep those below them from rising above them. It was a system ruled by jealousy, manipulation, and intimidation. Jesus wanted no such desire for power among His followers. Instead, the path to greatness in His kingdom would be through humbly serving one another. The disciples were to look for ways to help others to rise above them and were to treat one another as masters rather than rivals. Jesus Himself set the example by coming from heaven to serve and not to demand service. His whole goal was to give His life so that many others might live. The path to greatness was the path of suffering, and only by enduring it would anyone be considered great in the kingdom.

Discussion:

1) Read Mark 10:32-34. Why do you think the people following Jesus were astonished and afraid when He began the final journey toward Jerusalem? What did they expect?

2) In Mark 10:35-40, the ambition of James and John blinded them to what really lay ahead. How can love for the following things blind a Christian to what Jesus really wants?
   (a) recognition  (c) ministry
   (b) comfort     (d) approval

3) Read Mark 10:41-42. List the qualifications of a ruler according to the system of the Gentiles. How does He go about gaining and retaining authority?

4) Read Mark 10:43-45 and Philippians 2:5-11. Now list the qualifications of a great person in the kingdom of God as modeled by Jesus. How did He use His authority?

Application: Jealousies and grabs for power do not belong in the kingdom of God. The goal is not to gain more authority and influence than others. Yet ambition, whether it appears as a desire for recognition or a critical attitude toward the work of others, is a constant danger in the Christian life. Jesus
did not want His kingdom to become just another place for people to vie for the top position. Instead, He wanted His followers to compete in humble service to one another. To do this, we must set the distribution of honor and rewards in God's hands and trust Him to be completely fair. We do not have to build ourselves up and hold others down in order to achieve greatness in the eyes of men. We are free to encourage, help, and celebrate the successes of others without fear of personal loss, for this is the true path to greatness.

Life of Christ Study #85

Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43

Theme: The Blind Faith of Bartimaeus

Summary:

Jericho lay on the road which climbed from the Jordan River valley to the plateau which held the city of Jerusalem. It would have been natural for Jesus to stop there for the few remaining days before the Passover celebration began. Perhaps He was already planning the timing of His arrival and did not want show Himself in Jerusalem too soon because of the watchfulness of the Pharisees (see John 11:57-12:1). Certainly, as always, He was motivated by an understanding of His mission and not by fear of any plans men might hold against Him. If a short stay at Jericho was necessary, then it was another opportunity to offer the kingdom to the crowds and to give instruction to His disciples. The disciples may have been eager for Jesus to get to Jerusalem and establish His throne, but Jesus knew that the real work of the kingdom was in presenting His message and identifying those who would respond in faith.

1) Silent hope (Mark 10:46). It was common for those physically unable to work to beg along the roads leading in and out of towns. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem would have been especially promising as crowds made their ways to the Passover observances, for charity toward the poor and sick was seen as a sign of righteousness. The Gospel writers seem to indicate that Jesus passed by the blind Bartimaeus and his unnamed companion (see Matthew 20:30) several times as He went in and out of the city accompanied by His disciples and a crowd of curious followers (compare Matthew 20:29, Mark 10:46, and Luke 18:35). Bartimaeus doubtlessly joined other beggars in crying for money, but when he learned that Jesus was the reason for the crowd, a silent hope began to form within him (see Luke 18:36-37).

2) Vocal faith (Mark 10:47-51). Finally, as Jesus came along the road and was identified to Bartimaeus by some people in the crowd, the blind
man shouted to Him for mercy. He called Jesus the "Son of David," a name used for the Messiah. Bartimaeus did not call on Him as just another kind stranger who might give him money. He cried out to the one he believed could address his needs in ways no one else could. Many of the people who heard him misunderstood his intentions, assuming that he wanted to draw attention to himself in order to gain contributions, and they warned him to be quiet. But the hope that had grown in his heart had found confidence in his belief that Jesus was the King, and so he shouted more urgently to Him. Jesus stopped in response to his cries and instructed that he be brought to Him. When Bartimaeus was told that he had gained an audience, he immediately tossed aside his cloak and came to Jesus. Jesus did not heal him right away. Instead, He asked the blind man to state his request clearly. Bartimaeus replied that he wanted his sight. Money he could beg from the average person, but he believed that Jesus could do far more.

3) Answered plea (Mark 10:52). Matthew said that Jesus touched the eyes of Bartimaeus and his companion (see Matthew 20:34), while Mark and Luke recorded the words He spoke. Jesus told Bartimaeus that his request was granted because of his faith. He had believed that Jesus was the Messiah so he would enjoy the benefits the Messiah brought. Bartimaeus followed Jesus along the road praising God for his new sight. When the crowds saw what had happened, they also praised God (see Luke 18:43), yet their awe did not match the wonder that Bartimaeus felt. They had witnessed the miracle from a distance, but he had received it directly. They were amazed by a display of power, but he saw his faith confirmed. The sight Bartimaeus found was more than just physical.

Discussion:

1) Read Mark 10:46-47. If Jesus passed Bartimaeus several times going in and out of Jericho, why do you think He waited for Bartimaeus to ask Him for healing?

2) What did Bartimaeus reveal about himself in the way he addressed Jesus in Mark 10:47? What did he understand about Jesus that others in the crowd missed? What did it mean to be called the "Son of David" according to II Samuel 7:12-16?

3) Bartimaeus identified Jesus as the Messiah. According to Isaiah 35:4-5, what did Jesus do to confirm that identification?
4) Read Luke 18:42-43. How was the praise offered by Bartimeus different than the praise offered by the people who saw him regain his sight?

Application:

Bartimeus was physically blind, but spiritually he saw far more than most people. He saw in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, who could offer him more than money. The ability of Jesus to heal Bartimeus and his companion proved the truth of their identification of Him. Once again, the miracle was not a random act of power. It was a confirmation of the message and claims of Jesus given to ones who responded to Him in faith. Bartimeus believed and experienced the power of God while the crowd only watched from a distance. If we only hear and watch Jesus, the reality of His power and blessing will never be experienced in our lives. He scans the crowds of those watching and listening to see if there is faith. He does not promise to heal all those who believe, but He does promise to provide everything we need. Our faith does not force God to act, but it positions us to receive what He wants to give.

Life of Christ Study #86

Luke 19:1-10

Theme: The Eager Faith of Zacchaeus

Summary:

Bartimeus was not the only man in Jericho who would respond in faith to Jesus. Jesus had earlier met a rich ruler in Perea who had been unwilling to trade his trust in wealth for trust in the Messiah. At that time, Jesus had commented on how hard it was for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (see Luke 18:22-25). Wealth was an important issue in a prosperous city like Jericho which controlled much of the trade to the east of Palestine. The city also had several natural springs to provide water for irrigation and it boasted a Herodian palace with the economic influence that accompanied high officials. It was among the most fertile ground in the land for a tax collector, for Jericho lay along the only passable road from the Jordan River to Jerusalem. Duty could be imposed on any and all imports, exports, and goods produced in the area, in addition to the fees required for official documents and political favors. Jesus was in the heart of the fortune hunters of Israel.

1) Eager to see (Luke 19:1-4). As the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have negotiated contracts for the customs and fees of most transactions in the city. He probably sold positions to collectors who would work under his direction. It must have been a very lucrative enterprise in Jericho, and Zacchaeus apparently added to his income by fraudulently overcharging
(see Luke 19:8). Money was his world, and he had become extremely good at acquiring it. Yet his wealth did not satisfy. When he heard that Jesus was in the city, he was eager to see and hear Him. Zacchaeus may have thought of Jesus only as a wise teacher or a prophet, but he was curious about who He was and what He said. Therefore, the tax collector left his offices to join the crowd waiting for Jesus. Because of the press of people surrounding Jesus, Zacchaeus, who was short, could not see, so he climbed a tree along the street to gain a better view.

2) Eager to save (Luke 19:5-7). The tax collector's surprise must have been great when Jesus stopped in front of the tree and spoke to him. He told Zacchaeus to come down and prepare for a personal visit at his house. This broke the rules of conventional etiquette, for rarely would a person invite himself to another's home. Furthermore, most Jews, especially religious leaders, would not enter the home of a tax collector. Such people were seen as political and religious outcasts because of their cooperation with the Romans and their reputation for unfair practices. Zacchaeus was delighted at the opportunity, but the people who witnessed the exchange were appalled that Jesus would go to the home of a sinner. Jesus, however, always responded to faith, and in Zacchaeus He saw more than curiosity and an evil reputation. He saw a man who wanted to hear answers for what was lacking in his life.

3) Eager to change (Luke 19:8-10). Zacchaeus made an astounding announcement when Jesus was at his house. The Old Testament law required a person who admitted fraud to repay the full amount plus one-fifth (see Leviticus 6:1-5). But Zacchaeus was repenting of more than just fraud. He was repenting of his whole way of life which centered around money. Therefore, he promised to give half of all he owned to the poor and to repay anyone he had cheated four times what he had taken. That is why Jesus pronounced that salvation had come to his house. Zacchaeus did not make restitution to satisfy the law. He made it out of a changed heart which renounced its former greed. The Pharisees might grumble about his status as a tax collector, but Jesus reminded them that Zacchaeus was also a child of Abraham just like them. It was the Messiah's duty to seek the lost sheep of Israel's flock (see Ezekiel 34:15-16), and in Zacchaeus a sheep had been restored to the fold.

Discussion:

1) Zacchaeus had built his world around money. What
are some other treasures that people place at the center of their lives? What did Jesus say about this in Matthew 6:19-21?

2) Read Luke 19:5-7. Why might Zacchaeus have been receptive to the teaching of Jesus? What needs was his wealth unable to address in his life? What needs caused you to be receptive to the gospel of Jesus?

3) Compare the response of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8 with that of the rich ruler in Luke 18:22-23. Which of the two had the more righteous lifestyle? What did Zacchaeus grasp that the rich ruler failed to understand?

4) Read Ezekiel 34:15-16. How did Jesus fulfill His mission in the life of Zacchaeus? How did He fulfill His mission in your life? Which sheep are promised His care?

Application:

Continually, the least likely people were the ones who responded to Jesus with faith. No Pharisee would consider Zacchaeus a candidate for the kingdom of God, much less would one go to his house to offer it to him. The religious people of Israel assumed that their commitment to the law and good deeds would qualify them, so they ignored the call to repentance. It was the poor, sick, and despised, who recognized their own sinfulness who received the good news of salvation with joy. They knew that they were not good enough for the kingdom, so they were willing to accept it as a gift, and no requirement or sacrifice was too great for them. Zacchaeus could have met the demands of the law and continued in wealth, but he renounced his heart of greed along with the practices it produced, and he was saved and changed. No one is ever too far from God to find forgiveness and eternal life through repentance and faith. And no one is ever so close to God that he can enter the kingdom through his own effort or deeds.

Life of Christ Study #87

Luke 19:11-27

Theme: Ten Servants and Ten Minas

Summary:

Cherished beliefs and long held hopes are not put aside easily. No matter how many times they are refuted they maintain an unshaken place in a person’s heart. Perhaps that is why Jesus, even at this late point in His ministry, still battled the speculation among the people that the kingdom of God would appear immediately upon His arrival in Jerusalem. He continually offered them membership in the true kingdom
through repentance and faith, but they clung to their
traditional belief that the kingdom would be political and
material. He had warned them that following Him would lead to
a cross and not to comfort and prosperity (see Luke 14:25-27),
but they would not relinquish their dreams of victory. Even
His disciples were blinded by such visions when He tried to
tell them plainly that He would suffer and die at Jerusalem
(see Luke 18:31-34). The preconceptions of the people gripped
their minds more than the words of Jesus, and so they
continued to anticipate the kingdom, unaware that they were
not prepared to enter it.

1) While the King is away (Luke 19:11-15). Jesus
used a parable to reinforce the message that His
audience needed to get ready for the kingdom.
Whether it would appear at once as they expected
or be delayed a while was not the main issue.
The real question was whether they would be able
to enter it whenever it did come. He told them
of a man who made a journey to another country to
be confirmed as king. The Jewish audience would
understand this, for some of their own rulers,
including Herod the Great and his son Archelaus
had made such trips to Rome to be confirmed.
This particular ruler left his business affairs
in the hands of ten servants who were each given
ten minas, enough money to conduct business for
several months. While he was gone, the ruler
expected these servants to produce an income just
as he would do if he were present. But his
subjects hated him and opposed his appointment as
king over them. Therefore, when the man
returned, having been made king, he called his
servants together to see how they had handled his
affairs. A good return would prove their
loyalty, but a poor showing would confirm his
suspicions about their devotion to him.

2) Royal accounting (Luke 19:16-21). The first
servant who appeared had multiplied his master's
money ten times through wise and careful
investments. The king was very pleased, and he
praised the servant for his faithfulness. He
rewarded him with a promotion to a greater level
of responsibility in his kingdom. Likewise, the
second servant, although he had not been as
successful as the first, had made a handsome
profit for his master. Again, the king rewarded
a servant who had proven trustworthy. A third
servant, however, had simply hid the money
entrusted to him in a piece of cloth. He had
done no work with it, perhaps counting on his
master not returning in light of the opposition
to his rule. The servant showed his contempt for
the master by accusing him of being a hard man
who used the labors of others to make a fortune
for himself. He apparently thought that his
opinion of the master justified his rebellion.
3) Royal judgment (Luke 19:22-27). The king, however, disagreed. He reminded the wicked servant that, even if his accusation were true, he was obligated to care for his master's property by placing it safely with the moneylenders so that it could at least earn interest. The servant's actions perhaps revealed his intention to take his master's money for himself by hiding it until the delegation had done its job (see Luke 19:14). He had been rudely surprised when the master returned as king and was caught in his dishonesty and treachery. The master commanded that the money be taken from the unworthy servant and given to the one who had been faithful. Rewards and punishments would be dealt according to the actions of the servants, and those who had opposed the king's rule were executed in his presence. The message to the listeners of Jesus was clear. Although they all clamored for the coming of God's kingdom, some of them would be condemned when it arrived, for they were secretly in rebellion against God, refusing to do His bidding and foolishly clutching their own desires and plans. If the kingdom did appear when Jesus reached Jerusalem, they would find themselves on the outside. A servant showed true zeal for God's kingdom by living according to its principles even before it came.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 19:13. What motivated the faithful servants to follow their master's instructions even though he was not there to watch over them? What motivates you to obey God when no one is watching?

2) Read Luke 19:14 and 21. What motivated the wicked servant to disobey his master's instructions? What did Jesus want His audience to learn from the example of the wicked servant?


4) As a servant of Jesus awaiting His return, what should be your goal until He comes? How will you do this?

Application:

It was easy for people to cheer for the coming of the kingdom when they thought they would share the rewards, but few were living as its subjects. Jesus challenged His audience to stop dreaming about the treasures of the kingdom and to start making sure they were ready to receive it. The
kingdom would not bring peace and comfort to every Jew who longed for it to come. For some, the kingdom would reveal the true condition of their hearts and would bring judgment. Soon, some of the same people who followed Jesus in anticipation of reward would call for His death when He failed to deliver what they wanted. Not everyone who talks and dreams about eternal life will enter it. It must be embraced on the King's terms of repentance and faith or not at all. Until He comes again, it is not our job to reshape or evaluate His instructions. It is our job to obey them.

Life of Christ Study #88

Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 11:55-12:11

Theme: Mary Anoints Jesus

Summary:

In the year A.D. 30, the Passover was set to be observed on Saturday, April 8. As the day drew nearer, people arrived in Jerusalem from all over the country to prepare for the celebration, and speculation ran wild about whether Jesus would come (John 11:55-56). It would have been unthinkable for a prophet or religious teacher to miss one of the most important days of the Jewish calendar, yet some wondered if the open hatred of the Pharisees and priests would prevent Him from making an appearance. The religious leaders had even gone so far as to demand that anyone who knew where Jesus was should report to them (John 11:57). The people knew that a confrontation was inevitable if He came, for the Jewish leaders had determined to kill Him, a threat that had prompted Jesus to leave the region of Judea three months before (see John 11:53-54). But Jesus had not left at that time out of fear. He simply did not want to provoke a final conflict until the appointed time for His death. Now that time had come, and so, six full days before the Passover, on Saturday, April 1, Jesus came to the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, barely two miles from Jerusalem.

1) A gift of love (John 12:2-3). Matthew and Mark tell of the dinner in Bethany after the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, but John seems to present the events in proper chronology. Therefore, the banquet given in honor of Jesus probably included only the disciples and a few close friends, for His arrival was not widely known yet. It was a very friendly dinner in comparison to some He had eaten at the homes of Pharisees. There were no traps laid for Him or experts waiting to baffle Him with their questions, only dearly loved friends. Martha served, Lazarus reclined with Him at the table, and then Mary entered. She carried a large jar of very expensive perfume. Usually, nard was sold in small vials of about one ounce, but she had purchased nearly eight ounces for the occasion. She opened the jar and
poured its contents upon the feet of Jesus and then wiped them with her hair. She also anointed His head with the rich fragrance in a deep expression of her love for Him (see Matthew 26:7).

2) A grumble of greed (John 12:4–6). Even among the familiar faces in Bethany there was a scowl of dissatisfaction, however. Judas Iscariot, who it seems was already toying with the idea of betrayal, objected to this use of the perfume, saying that it should have been sold so that the money could be given to the poor. Apparently, some of the other disciples went along with the grumbling of Judas (see Matthew 26:8). Judas, however, was not really concerned about the poor. He simply resented the waste of a treasure that could have put more money into the disciples’ collective purse which he kept and pilfered from time to time. The Bible does not give Judas’ motive for later betraying Jesus, but it may have been tied to his greed. Perhaps he saw the kingdom as a way to personal wealth and reward. Nevertheless, at this point, he could not see the value of Mary’s gift except in terms of monetary loss.

3) A preparation for death (John 12:7–11). Jesus at once told the disciples to leave Mary alone, for she understood something that they had failed to grasp. She had heard Him speak of His coming death and believed Him, so she offered the perfume as an anointing for His burial (see Mark 14:8). Helping the poor was fine, but the poor would still be there later. Jesus’ time was very short and He would soon be gone from them. He predicted that Mary’s act of love would be honored by everyone who heard the story (see Mark 14:9). Meanwhile, another group, the priests, were preparing for the death of Jesus in a much different fashion. Word had spread that Jesus was in the area, and many came to see Him and to see Lazarus whom He had raised from the dead. It was reported to the Jewish leaders who decided to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus since their presence was drawing some of the people to Him.

Discussion:

1) Read John 11:55–57. Why do you think the people were so interested in Jesus coming to Jerusalem for the Passover? What might they have been expecting to see? What were the Pharisees expecting?

2) Read John 12:3. Why do you think that Mary would pour our such an expensive jar of perfume just to anoint Jesus? What have you done simply to show your love for Jesus?
3) Read John 12:4-6. List ways in which the attitude of Judas was different than that of Mary. What thoughts and goals filled his heart? What thoughts and goals filled Mary's?

4) Read John 12:9-11. Mary loved Jesus. Judas loved money. What did the priests love? How were the attitudes and actions of each toward Jesus influenced by what he or she loved?

Application:

Jesus had entered the last week of His earthly life, and the responses of people to Him were still widely divided. His disciples were loyal but confused, unable to match His predictions of suffering and death with their hopes of victory and reward. Judas had already chosen his path. He would make money with or without Jesus, although his hopes were probably still placed in what he thought Jesus could accomplish. The religious leaders had decided that Jesus and His message must die, and they only wished to get Him where they could bring their plans to completion. In the midst of all these opinions and agendas, Mary stood apart in her understanding and sensitivity. She knew that the time was short, so expressing her love became a priority above considerations of expense and personal hopes. Sometimes, we can lose sight of the great value of simply loving Jesus in our rush of activities and plans. Other treasures can take our attention away from Him and cherished dreams can blind us to what He really says. Perhaps it is time to learn again how to express our love for Him.

Life of Christ Study #89


Theme: The King Enters Jerusalem

Summary:

Any doubts about whether Jesus would dare to attend the Passover were put to rest on Sunday, April 2, A.D. 30. The banquet at the home of Simon the Leper (see John 12:1-11) served as a final quiet gathering of His close associates before entering the storm of Jerusalem. It also stirred the crowds in the city to a heightened anticipation of what might occur next. The short road from Bethany to Jerusalem was now watched by many eyes, both friendly and hostile. Some were just curious to see the famous prophet. Some were eager to witness the beginning of a great rebellion. Some awaited the opportunity to rid themselves of Jesus and His message forever. The disciples probably awoke that morning after the banquet with more expectations than anyone. They had heard Jesus say that He would suffer and die in Jerusalem, yet they still held to their hopes of a political kingdom. This day could be a crucial step the fulfillment of their dreams. The
King was preparing to enter the city.

1) Preparation (Luke 19:29-35). The Mount of Olives stood just across the Kidron Valley from the Golden Gate, the main entrance to Jerusalem which opened into the portico which surrounded the temple grounds. Bethphage was a village on the southeastern slope of the Mount within a mile of Jerusalem. Jesus chose the site as a staging point for His entry to the city. He sent two of His disciples as emissaries to borrow a suitable mount for Him. He would not enter as a conquering king on a horse. Instead, He would come like an official bearing news of peace on a donkey. The disciples found the animal He had indicated and brought it, probably bringing its mother to help lead it (see Matthew 21:7). They placed their cloaks on it, Jesus mounted, and the procession to the city began.

2) Prophecy (Matthew 21:4-5). Perhaps the sight of Jesus riding on a young donkey did not fit the expectations of grandeur and pomp which were typically associated with the arrival of a king, but it fit perfectly with the Old Testament image of the Messiah. Zechariah had foretold that Jerusalem's King would come riding on the foal of a donkey to proclaim peace and to rule over the earth (see Zechariah 9:9-10). If the people expected a military leader who would drive out the Romans by force, they would be disappointed. If they looked for a political genius who would provide prosperity, they would not find him on the road that day. But if they waited for God's anointed King who would bring salvation and righteousness, they would recognize Him as He approached the city. Even the disciples did not understand the significance of the occasion, but they would remember it later after they saw Jesus taken up into heaven (see John 12:16).

3) Procession (Luke 19:36-38). As Jesus drew nearer the city, crowds of people lined the road. Some, having heard that He was coming and having heard of His miracles, came out from Jerusalem to meet Him (see John 12:12, 18). Others followed Him from Bethany and Bethphage because they had witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus (see John 12:17). The excitement and anticipation grew until some threw their cloaks on the road while others cut palm branches and spread them along the way in honor of the great teacher (see Mark 11:8). Then the people began to shout a song of deliverance that was usually sung at the Passover (see Psalm 118:26). They saw Jesus as a potential Messiah who could rescue them from the foreign overlords. All the hopes of the disciples seemed to be coming true as Jesus entered Jerusalem in front of a cheering crowd

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who wanted to make Him King.

4) **Prediction (Luke 19:39-44).** The people wanted to make Jesus the Messiah, but most of them failed to see that He was in fact the Messiah. The Pharisees, meanwhile, were livid about the procession which honored their enemy, and they called on Jesus to silence His followers. But Jesus replied that if the people did not call Him the Messiah, then the very stones of the temple would announce the fact. Yet in the jubilation, He felt deep sorrow, for He saw that the people still did not understand that He was offering them salvation. He wept over the city and lamented that it would not receive the peace He so wanted to give. As a result, it would be condemned to horrible siege and destruction, a prediction which would be fulfilled forty years later. Soon after His entrance, Jesus quietly left the city and returned to Bethany for the night (see Mark 11:11). The King had come, but, although the people welcomed Him, they did not really know Him.

**Discussion:**

1) What do you think were the expectations of the disciples as Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem? What were the expectations of the crowds? What did the religious leaders expect?

2) Read Zechariah 9:9-10. How was the arrival of Jesus different than what the people expected? What did He really come to offer?

3) Read Luke 19:39-40 and John 12:19. Why did Jesus refuse to silence the crowd? Why were the Pharisees so upset by what was happening?

4) Read Luke 19:41-44. What made Jesus weep in the middle of a joyful celebration? What was missing from the welcome of the people? Is it enough to just be excited about Jesus? What response does Jesus want from you?

**Application:**

It seemed like the perfect way for Jesus to arrive in Jerusalem. He was followed and greeted by enthusiastic crowds who shouted praises and wanted to make Him King. His sworn enemies, the Pharisees, could only watch in frustration as "the world" went after Him (see John 12:19). The disciples must have been thrilled by such a reception. Surely, this was the beginning of the kingdom! There was one who did not share their elation and that was Jesus. He saw the cloaks and palm leaves and heard the shouts of acclamation, but He knew that they still did not understand. They were welcoming a political Messiah and a military leader who would drive out the Romans and give them prosperity. But He was not a
conqueror on a white horse this time. He was a humble servant on a donkey, offering the peace of salvation. People today want many things from Jesus, but He most wants to give forgiveness to those who will repent. It is not enough to be excited about Jesus. We must be excited about His message as well.

Life of Christ Study #90

Matthew 21:12-22; Mark 11:12-26; Luke 19:45-48

Theme: The Tree and the Temple

Summary:

The day of triumphal entry had come and gone. The celebration that accompanied Jesus into the city had ended and most of the crowds probably were already looking for another Messiah. They had been caught up in the excitement the day before, but Jesus had left Jerusalem in the evening without organizing a rebellion or performing a miracle to establish Himself as King. When their political and economic dreams were not fulfilled, the people had no real interest in what Jesus offered spiritually. Prosperity and power were items they understood and craved, but salvation was not a gift they thought they needed. So, Jerusalem's opportunity had come, but the people had not grasped it (see Luke 19:41-42). The day that had started in promise had ended in disappointment. The people remained in their blindness and the Pharisees clung to their system of religious appearances and rituals. They chose their dreams and images of the Messiah over the reality of Jesus. He had predicted that the result would be judgment (see Luke 19:43-44), and on the next day Jesus gave His disciples a clear illustration of just how far the people were from the kingdom.

1) A bad tree (Mark 11:12-14). Typically, a fig tree would show its leaves in late March along with some early fruit which, although not the best, would be an indication of the harvest to come. If a tree did not produce any early figs with its leaves, then it would produce no fruit for the entire season. That is why Jesus was first attracted to the fig tree's leaves and then disappointed at not finding any fruit even though it was not the season for the full production of figs. Still, it must have seemed harsh to His disciples when He cursed the tree for its lack of fruit. He offered no explanation for His action at the time, but the disciples heard and remembered.

2) A bad system (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19). No crowds marked the entrance of Jesus into the temple grounds as they had on the previous day, so the money changers were taken unawares. Jesus had begun His public confrontation with the
religious system in a similar way at the Passover three years earlier (see John 2:13-16). Some buying, selling, and exchanging of currencies was necessary around the temple as people came from other regions and purchased sacrifices for the altar, but the temple court had been reduced to a marketplace where every sort of profiteer gathered to make money off of the people who came to worship. The house of prayer which God intended (see Isaiah 56:7) had become a den of robbers as in Jeremiah's day when the people went through the motions of worship while their hearts were filled with evil (see Jeremiah 7:9-11). The priests and religious leaders, of course, were outraged, but they were afraid to take any action against Him because the crowds were on His side. They listened to His teaching, and He performed miracles of healing for the blind and lame among them. Some children, amazed at what they saw, began shouting praise to Him as the Son of David. The religious leaders could not tolerate this, for this title belonged only to the Messiah, so they confronted Jesus about allowing the children to say such things about Him. He pointed them to Psalm 8:2 which predicted that God would use children to silence His enemies with words of praise. Then He left the city and returned to Bethany.

3) A dead tree (Mark 11:20-26). Like the unproductive fig tree, the Jewish religious system and its leaders had failed. The Messiah had every right to expect praise from them, but instead they refused to accept Him even when they saw proofs of His identity. The next morning, as Jesus went toward Jerusalem again with His disciples, they saw that the fig tree He had cursed on the previous day was now dead, withered from the roots. Peter was astonished by this new display of Jesus's authority, but He replied that even greater things would be accomplished for those who trusted God. The rituals of the Pharisees might be barren, but the disciples should pray, for it would be powerfully effective for them. Yet they should be careful to pray according to God's will. It was not to be used for personal gain or revenge. Instead, they should use it to obey God in areas such as forgiveness so that they too might be forgiven.

Discussion:

1) Read Mark 11:12-14. In what ways was the system of the Jewish religious leaders like the unproductive fig tree? What fruit would be expected from them?

2) Read Mark 11:15-17. What are some ways that people use religion for profit today? Is it
always wrong to be paid for religious services according to 1 Corinthians 9:7-12? Why was Jesus so angry at what He found in the temple?

3) Read Matthew 21:14-16. What was Jesus doing that upset the priests and teachers of the law so much? What message was there for these religious leaders in the verse Jesus quoted from Psalm 8:2? What did the children have that they lacked?

4) Read Mark 11:20-25. What power is available to you through prayer? What factors should you consider in deciding what to ask?

Application:

A fig tree is expected to produce figs, and if it does not, then it has no real purpose on the earth. In the same way, the religious leaders were supposed to lead people to the truth. Since they were not accomplishing that purpose, they were as useless as an unproductive fig tree. Even the children recognized the proofs that Jesus was the Messiah, but the priests and teachers of the law, whose business it was to know, were blind to the truth. They wanted to kill the very One they claimed to be serving. The barren fig tree wilted because it would not produce, and the same would happen to the Jewish religious system if it failed to acknowledge its King. But Jesus offers us a living faith by which mountains will be removed if they stand in the way. Faith can accomplish what the rituals of a religious system will never do.

Life of Christ Study #91

John 12:20-50

Theme: A Final Offer of Light

Summary:

God promised Abraham that all the nations of the earth would receive a blessing through his offspring (see Genesis 22:17-18). Centuries later, the prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would extend salvation beyond the nation of Israel, that He would be a light to the Gentiles (see Isaiah 42:6; 49:6-7). Centuries after that, an angel appeared to shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem to announce the birth of the King. The angel said that the good news he brought was for all people (see Luke 2:8-11). In the opening of his Gospel, John said that Jesus was the true light who gives light to every man (see John 1:9). Clearly, the mission of Jesus included the Gentile world, yet throughout His three years of public ministry, He had given His attention almost exclusively to the Jews. In fact, at times He seemed to purposely exclude the Gentiles (see Matthew 10:5-6; 15:21-26). At other times, however, He praised the faith of those who were not Jews (see Luke 7:1-9; 10:30-36). The offer of the kingdom was made to the descendants of Abraham first, but the
light was not intended for them only.

1) Request for the light (John 12:20-28). Among the throngs who came to Jerusalem for the Passover, there were some Gentiles. Although they were not Jewish by birth, they believed in the true God and had come to worship Him in the outer court of the temple as proselytes, Gentile converts to the Jewish faith. Some of them had heard about Jesus, and a few Greeks asked Philip, one of the twelve disciples, if they could talk to Him. Philip apparently did not know what to do with such a request, so he consulted with Andrew who advised that they bring the matter to Jesus. Jesus saw the request as highly significant, for it showed that beyond the borders of Israel was a Gentile world which also needed salvation. The only way that could be accomplished was through His death which would bring life to many. He wanted His servants to have the same attitude, willing to give their earthly lives to achieve eternal results. He promised that God would honor those who followed Him in this way. His own heart was troubled at the suffering which lay before Him, but He would not look for a way out of it, for He knew that His death was the core of His mission. He wanted only to glorify God by accomplishing His will, and God replied from heaven in an audible voice that He would indeed be glorified.

2) Receive the light (John 12:29-36). The crowd in the temple grounds heard the voice but apparently most of them did not discern its words. To them it was only thunder. However, others, who possibly caught the message, believed that an angel had spoken to Jesus. Jesus told them that the voice was speaking for their benefit more than His, to confirm what He was saying. Judgment was coming upon the earth and Satan's grip on men was about to be broken. Jesus, the Messiah, would be lifted up in death to draw men to Himself for life (see Isaiah 52:13-15). This puzzled the crowd, for they believed that the Messiah would never leave once He had come. Jesus warned them that the light He offered would be with them only a little while longer, so they must receive it before darkness came. If they trusted the light while they saw it, they would be saved, but if they did not take the opportunity, the darkness of spiritual blindness would overtake them. Jesus then removed Himself from the crowd and their questions, and they were left to consider His challenge.

3) Responses to the light (John 12:37-50). Sadly, most of the people still would not accept Jesus as the Messiah even though they heard His teaching and saw His miracles. Isaiah had
prophesied that the Messiah's offer of light would go largely unheeded by the people of Israel (see Isaiah 53:1-3). He did not fit their preconceived concept of the Messiah. Isaiah also foretold that God would leave the Jews to their blinded eyes and deadened hearts as judgment for their unbelief (see Isaiah 6:9-10). Yet, among the crowd were some who did put their faith in Jesus, even some among the religious leaders. They kept silent about their belief, however, for they feared the retribution of the Pharisees. They were more concerned with what men thought about them than what God thought. Jesus told them that He came as a light from God to free them from darkness. He did not come to condemn those who rejected Him, but they would be judged by their response to His words. God was offering light and eternal life through Him. It was the only offer they would receive, and it was the last time Jesus would address the crowds.

Discussion:

1) Read John 12:23-26. What did Jesus believe would be accomplished by His death? What will be the result if you follow His example of being willing to lose your life?

2) In John 12:34, the Jews expressed their belief that the Messiah could not die. How might the following verses from the Old Testament have shaped their belief?
   (a) Psalm 110:4  (c) Ezekiel 37:24-27
   (b) Isaiah 9:6-7  (d) Daniel 7:13-14

3) According to John 12:35-36 and Isaiah 6:9-10, what are the consequences for not accepting God's offer of light?

4) Read the final challenge of Jesus to the crowds in John 12:44-50. What did He want to give them? What will be the basis of judgment for those who have heard the offer of light but rejected it?

Application:

It soon became evident that the crowds who had welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem on Sunday with such enthusiasm were ready just two days later to cast Him aside because He did not meet their expectations. Even a voice from heaven would not convince them because they were losing their ability to hear through their continual hardness to the offer of light. Nevertheless, Jesus knew that His death would accomplish the salvation God intended, even if it would be among the Gentiles rather than the Jews. Questions and curiosity do not equal faith, and the time is growing short to receive the light. The consequences of refusing it are darkness and spiritual blindness. But those who receive it and are willing to set aside the agendas of earthly life will gain the full reward of
eternal life. The choice Jesus left with the crowds in Jerusalem is the same choice we are to present to the world today.

Life of Christ Study #92


Theme: A Question of Authority

Summary:

The priests, Pharisees, scribes, and other religious leaders had not enjoyed the return of Jesus to Jerusalem. The people had hailed Him as a great prophet, or worse, as the Messiah, so that the leaders feared that the whole world was following Him (see John 12:19). Then, the next day, He had publicly embarrassed them by disrupting and denouncing the commercial trade which they permitted in the temple grounds while they were powerless to stop Him because He seemed to have the support of the crowds (see Mark 11:15-18). They were determined to find some grounds of accusation against Him so that they could arrest Him and kill Him, but it had to be done in a way that would appear legal and righteous to the people. There were probably some late meetings among the religious leaders on Monday night as they debated and devised the best plans to discredit Jesus in front of the crowds. Finally, when Tuesday morning dawned, they waited for Him to come once again to the city so they could spring their carefully developed questions on Him.

1) A question to Jesus (Mark 11:27-28). That day, Jesus returned again to the temple and taught the people for the last time (see John 12:20-50). The religious leaders apparently came to Him as He finished and confronted Him publicly (see Luke 20:1). They demanded to know who gave Him authority to teach such things and to drive the salesmen from the temple grounds. They were the accepted authority in Jerusalem over these matters. Their question was designed to trap Jesus in a dilemma. If He told them His authority was directly from God, they could charge Him with blasphemy, but if He did not answer, they could command Him to leave and He would lose the respect of the people. Either way, they could accomplish their desire to silence Him.

2) A question to the leaders (Mark 11:29-30). Jesus had faced such traps before and exposed the hypocrisy of His antagonists. This time was no different. He responded to their question with a question of His own, a common and accepted tactic in a debate. He asked them to tell by what authority John the Baptist had called for repentance in baptism, for they had neither
silenced him nor had they believed him. If it were from heaven, then they should have been the first to obey it. On the other hand, if it were only the authority of a man, then they should have taken strong measures to stop it. Since Jesus asked this publicly, the religious leaders were now put in a position of having to defend their actions.

3) No answers (Mark 11:31-33). The priests, scribes, and elders were in trouble. They knew that if they answered that John's authority came from heaven, then they would condemn themselves for not believing and obeying his message. But they were afraid to say that his authority had been only human, for the people who had accepted John the Baptist as a true prophet would be angry, perhaps to the point of stoning them (see Luke 20:6). Pleading ignorance was the only answer which would justify both their lack of resistance and lack of response to John. However, when they replied that they did not know the answer, they revealed their unwillingness to even consider that what John and Jesus taught might be true and binding upon them. Therefore, Jesus simply refused to answer their original question about His authority, for what He said would not change their hearts.

4) A pointed answer (Matthew 21:28-32). Only Matthew records the parable Jesus then told to illustrate the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. They could see that the son who went to the vineyard, even though he initially refused, was more obedient than the one who agreed to work but then stayed home. Yet they had failed to see how they had played the disobedient son to God. They made grand statements about serving the Lord, but when John came to teach them about true righteousness, they disdained his message. Meanwhile, the despised tax collectors and prostitutes, who might be expected to ignore God, believed and obeyed the call to repentance. Those people, whom the religious leaders regarded as hopeless sinners, would enter the kingdom of God while the priests, scribes, and elders would be left outside the gate because of their refusal to repent.

Discussion:

1) In what ways were the words and actions of Jesus challenging the authority of the priests, scribes, and elders? How could a church today be guilty of guarding its religious turf too closely?

2) Read Mark 11:29-33. What concerned the religious leaders more than obeying God? What should they
have done in response to the question Jesus asked them?

3) What does it mean to your life that Jesus received His authority from God? What other authorities do you have over you? Which authority should you be most concerned about obeying? Why?

4) What is the difference between obedient talk and obedient action? Give some examples of both. According to Matthew 21:28-32, which does God value more?

Application:

The religious leaders thought they had found a way to make Jesus look bad in front of the crowds, but once again they were the ones who appeared foolish. In the question He asked, Jesus gave them another opportunity to repent of their hypocrisy and admit that they had not believed the message of God through John the Baptist. As usual, however, they were far more concerned with saving their reputations and power than living by the truth. It is a danger we must watch in our lives, for any religious system, even one which holds closely to the truth, can become more important to us than really hearing and following God. If we become too committed to our beliefs and practices, we can close ourselves to further lessons God wants to teach us through His word. We can become obedient talkers, declaring our dedication to God, without maintaining obedient actions, actually doing what God says is right.

Life of Christ Study #93


Theme: Parables of Warning

Summary:

The priests, scribes, elders, legal experts, and Pharisees had been against Jesus from almost the beginning of His ministry on earth. At first, they had been content to monitor His words and actions in skeptical silence, biding their time until they could build a strong case against Him. But as popular interest in Him grew, they became more vocal in their opposition and more relentless in their attempts to discredit or destroy Him. Finally, in this last week of His ministry, their hostility had led to concerted plans to arrest and kill Him. Only fear of the crowds kept the religious leaders from violently seizing Jesus at once. These men in authority, who should have been the first to recognize the King and to lead people to Him, had become open enemies of the kingdom of God which they claimed to await eagerly. They still considered themselves protectors of the truth, but they could not recognize the truth and would not accept it when it was presented to them. Jesus saw their real spiritual
condition, and He warned them through a series of parables that they were perilously close to judgment.

1) A landowner's due (Matthew 21:33-41). Jesus had just showed the religious leaders that they were not being obedient to God through the parable of the two sons (see Matthew 21:28-32). Now He went a step farther to warn them that they had become enemies of God. He told them of a landowner who spent a great deal of time and money preparing a vineyard. Then he rented the land to some farmers while he went on a journey. He returned at harvest time to collect his rightful share of the produce, but the farmers misused and even killed his servants. Finally, he sent his son, hoping that the tenants would at least respect his authority. However, the farmers decided to kill the son and take the land for their own. Jesus asked the religious leaders what they thought the landowner would do to such wicked tenants. They answered that his wrath would be swift and terrible and that he would find other tenants who would honor their agreement with him.

2) A stone's weight (Matthew 21:42-46). The religious leaders had given a correct answer, but they apparently did not see how the parable of the landowner applied to them. God had prepared His vineyard (see Isaiah 5:1-2) and entrusted it into their care, but they had not honored their agreement with Him. Instead, they had mistreated and killed the prophets He sent, and even now they were contemplating how to kill His Son. Without realizing it, they had pronounced judgment on themselves in their answer to the question Jesus posed. To bring that truth home Jesus reminded them of the Scripture which said that God would use the very stone the builders rejected to be the cornerstone, the one which directed the laying of all others, of His edifice (see Psalm 118:22-23). Because the religious leaders had rejected Jesus, the cornerstone, the kingdom would be taken from them and given to others who would recognize and embrace it. Meanwhile, the priests and Pharisees would feel the full weight of that stone in judgment (see Daniel 2:44-45). Then they understood that Jesus was speaking about them and they wanted more than ever to arrest Him, but they were still held back by their fear of the crowds.

3) A king's invitation (Matthew 22:1-14). While the religious leaders weighed the dangers of arresting Jesus, He warned them with yet another parable. He compared the kingdom to a king who invited his nobles to attend a wedding banquet for his son. But those who received invitations flatly refused to come, and when the king sent word to them a second time, they killed some of
his servants and continued with their own plans and activities. The king, enraged at such an insult, sent his army to kill the arrogant nobles and destroy their city. Then he sent his servants to invite all the common people they could find to the banquet. On the day of the celebration, the hall was filled, but the king noticed one man who had not bothered to dress appropriately for the occasion. When the man could offer no excuse for his negligence, he was thrown out of the hall. The religious leaders were like the foolish nobles. They had been given many invitations to the kingdom by the prophets, but they had ignored their words. Therefore, God's invitation had passed from them to sinners who would receive it. Yet even among those who followed Jesus there would be some who were not spiritually prepared for the kingdom. The invitation was given to many, but only a few responded in faith.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 21:33-39. How were the Jewish religious leaders like the wicked tenants in the parable?

2) Read Matthew 21:42-44. What warning do these verses hold for those who engage in religious activities for personal gain?

3) Read Matthew 22:2-6. How were the king's messengers treated? How does Jesus say you, as His messenger today, will be treated in the following verses?
   (a) Matthew 10:21-22
   (b) John 15:18-21

4) According to Matthew 22:10-14, will everyone who claims to follow Jesus enter the kingdom? What do you think the wedding clothes represent in verses 11-12?

Application:

The priests and Pharisees found themselves backed into an uncomfortable corner of their own making. Unable to trick Jesus with their questions, they were also unwilling to make any move against Him because they were afraid the crowds would kill them. Therefore, they had little choice but to listen as Jesus exposed their true spiritual condition. They had failed in the responsibility of their position and had rebelled against God, ignoring His warnings through the prophets and plotting to kill His Son. They portrayed themselves as guardians of the kingdom, but they were really its enemies, and unless they repented, judgment would come upon them soon. The kingdom cannot be reshaped to fit the wishes of anyone. It is either entered by God's chosen way or not at all. Anyone who rejects Jesus, God's select cornerstone, is an

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enemy of the kingdom.

Life of Christ Study #94


Theme: More Questions

Summary:

After listening to the scathing parables of warning Jesus aimed at them the religious leaders could only slink away in temporary defeat, for they were too scared of the crowds to take any direct action against Jesus (see Mark 12:12). However, they were far from finished in their efforts to find something to use against Him. Later, on that same Tuesday, they again sent delegations with questions designed to trick or trap Him in either a theological error or an expression of disloyalty to the Roman government. The one could be used to discredit Him with the people while the other could provide grounds for His arrest. It should have told the leaders something that after three years of public ministry they still could find no solid base for an accusation against Jesus. Yet they had long before determined that they would not believe Him. Their only goal was to destroy Him.

1) A question about taxes (Mark 12:13-17). It was unusual that the Pharisees and Herodians would work together, but Jesus so threatened the established leadership that they cooperated on a common goal of getting rid of Him. The Pharisees would be masters of Jewish law while the Herodians would be concerned with Israel's relationship to Rome. So, they assumed, no matter how Jesus answered their question, they would be able to catch Him in some error. If He supported the payment of taxes to Rome, the Pharisees would question His zeal for God's kingdom, but if He dismissed taxes, the Herodians would accuse Him of stirring rebellion. Jesus saw at once that their question was not honest. He requested a coin which bore the image of Caesar on it and asked them whose portrait they saw. Then, He instructed them to give Caesar his money in taxes but to give God what rightfully belonged to Him. Caesar's kingdom could demand their coins, but God's kingdom demanded their lives. They were obligated to pay both.

2) A question about resurrection (Mark 12:18-27). Next, the Sadducees took their turn at Jesus. They were probably secretly pleased that the Pharisees, whom they normally opposed in debates, had failed. They knew that Jesus sided with the Pharisees in teaching that a future resurrection would take place, and so they attacked that belief. They cited the law of levirate marriage
which dictated that a widow should not remarry outside of the family if her deceased husband had unmarried brothers so that the family line could continue (see Deuteronomy 25:5-6). They proposed a situation in which a woman successively married seven brothers as each one left her a widow without children. They asked Jesus whose wife she would be if all were resurrected. Jesus chided them for their poor understanding of the Scriptures and of God. Their question was ridiculous because marriage and marital relations would not exist in heaven. He then showed them from the writings of Moses, which they highly valued, that God spoke of having a present relationship with people who had physically died (see Exodus 3:6). Therefore, there must be a resurrection after death. Like the Pharisees and Herodians before them, the Sadducees were silenced by the truth.

3) A question about the law (Mark 12:28-34). Now it was the Pharisees' turn to enjoy the embarrassment of the other group (see Matthew 22:34). They agreed with Jesus but still wanted to discredit Him, so they sent one of their legal experts with the question of which commandment from the Old Testament law was the most important. Jesus replied that the command to love God and to love one's neighbor (see Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18) were essential to the whole law. The lawyer had to agree with Jesus, for he also believed that these commands were more foundational to obeying God than the whole system of rituals and sacrifices that the Pharisees meticulously practiced. Jesus saw that this man had not closed himself to the truth like so many of his peers, and He told him that he was close to an understanding of the kingdom of God. The religious leaders withdrew with their questions answered and their plans frustrated.

4) A question to the questioners (Mark 12:35-37). Having successfully answered the questions of the leaders Jesus now posed one to them in front of the crowds. The religious teachers identified the Messiah as a descendant of David, yet Jesus showed that David himself had referred to the Messiah as his Lord (see Psalm 110:1). Jesus asked them to explain how both statements could be true. They were not able to answer because their view of the kingdom went no further than a political king to take the place of David. They could not conceive of a Messiah who would be descended from David and still be greater than him. The thought of God Himself coming as the Messiah was an idea they did not grasp. The crowds were amused by the discomfiture of the religious leaders who were so embarrassed that
they gave up trying to catch Jesus with questions.

Discussion:

1) Normally, the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees would not have cooperated with one another. Why did they work together to oppose Jesus? Can you think of examples of how differing groups oppose God together now?

2) Read Mark 12:14. Why might the Jews have been reluctant to pay taxes to Rome? What kinds of objectionable things would the money be used to support? How do you apply the answer Jesus gave in Mark 12:16-17 today?

3) Read Mark 12:29-31. Why do you think Jesus cited those two as the most important commandments?

4) Read Mark 12:35-37. How did Jesus fulfill the statements of being David's son and Lord at the same time?

Application:

The Jewish religious leadership was itself divided on many political and theological issues. The various groups competed for power and favor with the people, yet they saw a common threat in Jesus. Suddenly, they presented a unified objection to Him. It was a coalition of hypocrisy and fear whose only goal was to destroy their mutual enemy. Little has changed, as the people of the world who cannot agree with one another on most matters still share a rejection of the truth, and personal differences, beliefs, even values are set aside to hold it at bay. Yet that does not make the truth of the gospel any less true or needful. It threatens the agendas of men who do not want their sin exposed or their ambitions questioned. But it offers life to those who will set aside their pride and desires to receive it.

Life of Christ: Study #95


Theme: More Woe to the Religious Leaders

Summary:

On one other occasion, Jesus had exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in direct, systematic terms (see Luke 11:37-54). It had been, in a sense, a private confrontation between Jesus and the members of the religious establishment meant to rebuke them and to lead them to repentance. However, now, nearly six months later, the Pharisees and scribes had demonstrated clearly that little had changed. They were still determined to protect their rank and system against anyone,
even if it meant opposing the truth. Therefore, Jesus now took His accusations against them to the people so that they might not follow their leaders into a religious swamp. Yet, even in His rebuke, Jesus respected the Pharisees' positions as teachers of the law God had given through Moses. He told the people to obey what the leaders said about the law, for that was from God. But He also warned the people not to follow their actions, for they did not obey the law themselves (Matthew 23:1-4).

1) They love attention (Matthew 23:5-12). The Pharisees had come to love their position for the social benefits it gave them, and their actions were motivated by a desire for attention. Because they were religious leaders, they were invited to banquets and given seats of honor, they filled important roles in the synagogues, and they were greeted respectfully in public. They loved to be called "Rabbi," for it made them feel superior. Jesus rejected such ceremonies and titles because they falsely promoted one man above his brothers. The true leader should be a humble servant, not one who seeks applause and influence.

2) They seek followers (Matthew 23:13-15). Jesus accused the Pharisees of binding people to themselves through their rules, regulations, and teachings. They led people to depend on them rather than on God and denounced those who honestly tried to serve the true kingdom. They made converts who looked and talked just the way they wanted, and the result was disciples even more entrenched in their hypocrisy and empty religion.

3) They redefine righteousness (Matthew 23:16-24). The Pharisees had rules for everything. Their policies and regulations gave them the appearance of being very concerned about justice and purity. In reality, however, they had developed an elaborate system which justified their desires and protected their interests. They spoke of keeping oaths, but they had ways of justifying broken promises. They focused on measurable standards which could be displayed but neglected the real issues of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Jesus compared them to a fool who plucks a tiny gnat out of his drink but overlooks the camel sprawling in his glass.

4) They manipulate behavior (Matthew 23:25-28). They worked hard to make people behave without ever teaching them about repentance and forgiveness. Jesus said it was like polishing the outside of a cup to spotless perfection while ignoring the stains and residue on the inside. And their own lives were even worse, like tombs painted white but still filled with death and decay. There was
no real righteousness in them.

5) They hate evaluation (Matthew 23:29-36). The Pharisees spoke glowingly of the prophets and built monuments to their memory, yet they were just like the people who had persecuted and murdered those messengers of God. Jesus used some of His harshest language at this point, for this hypocrisy was at the core of the Pharisees' system. They claimed to be guardians of the truth, but they would not endure having it evaluate their own lives. Jesus predicted that they would continue to hate and kill those who proclaimed God's messages, and He declared them guilty of the blood of every martyr killed for speaking God's words.

6) They destroy lives (Matthew 23:37-39). The example and hypocrisy of the Pharisees had so influenced all of Jerusalem that the whole city would share a coming judgment. Jesus longed to gather the people of the city to Himself to save them, but they were immersed in the system the Pharisees taught. Therefore, Jesus would leave them in desolation until a time when through repentance they would be ready to receive Him gladly.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 23:5-12. What cautions need to go with the giving of religious titles like "pastor" or "elder''?

2) Read Matthew 23:15. How could you apply this verse to modern ideas of discipleship? What cautions need to go with the practice of discipling another person? Whose disciple should you be trying to make that other person?

3) Read Matthew 23:25-28. Why is it easier to adddress the outside of the cup than the inside? How can you make sure you are addressing the inside of your life and not just the outside?

4) Read Matthew 23:29-32. Which of the following is a good measure of your attitude toward God's truth?
   (a) The number of verses you can quote.
   (b) Your ability to apply it to others.
   (c) Your reaction when you are confronted with the truth.

Application:

At one time the Pharisees had been truly zealous for God and His righteousness, but they had fallen into a terrible error. They had stopped seeing the truth and had become self-appointed guardians of the truth as they interpreted it.
At that point, growth stopped and hypocrisy began to take over. By the time Jesus came to the earth, they had become firmly entrenched in their system, so that they would not accept truth anymore unless it agreed with their interpretations. The result was greed, pride, and blindness under the guise of outward righteousness. Unfortunately, the error of the Pharisees is still very much alive among religious people. We must never assume that we are beyond evaluation or think that we have become better than others because of some title or honor. We must invite the tough questions about our lives and always assume their is much yet to learn.

Life of Christ Study #96

Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

Theme: A Poor Widow's Gift

Summary:

Apparently, the stinging rebuke that Jesus directed at the Pharisees (see Matthew 23:1-39) made people reluctant to come near Him for a while, for He was able to sit alone and observe some of the activity in the temple grounds. Perhaps His lament over the unwillingness of Jerusalem to repent prompted Him to study some of the people who had been so sadly influenced by the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. The spot He chose for His observations was an area which held receptacles for the offerings to the temple treasury. There, the religious leaders collected the funds which paid for their flowing robes and fine foods. In some ways, it symbolized the heart of their hypocrisy, for they had made religion a commodity for profit. God required the gifts in His law, but men had taken control of how they were spent. The size of the gifts were evident to all, but the motives which inspired men to give were locked in their hearts. Jesus looked beyond the law and the amounts as He observed.

1) Observing the rich (Mark 12:41). At another time, Jesus had denounced the practice of giving to be seen by men. (see Matthew 6:1-4), but it doubtlessly continued. He saw that some of the people who passed through the area were rich, and their gifts were correspondingly large. The copper coins would have clinked rather noticeably as they were poured into the receptacle and many would have taken note of who gave so generously. Since the Jews believed that prosperity was a sign of God's blessing, a large offering would be marked as a double indication of a person's righteousness and piety. The Pharisees would know who these people were and would treat them with special honor (see Luke 14:12). In effect, many of the Jews tried to buy God's favor through their contributions to the temple (see Luke 18:11-12), yet Jesus had stated that it was very
difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God because he trusted his wealth (see Luke 18:22–25). God and His kingdom were not impressed by the size of the gifts, so Jesus watched them go without comment.

2) Observing the poor (Mark 12:42). In contrast, the poor widow would have been largely overlooked by most of those who watched the offerings. She came quietly and alone and did not have much to contribute to the empire of the religious leaders. Yet she was one of the ones they should have especially noticed, for part of the temple offerings were intended by God to support people like her (see Deuteronomy 14:28–29). Instead, the Pharisees were guilty of taking money and property from widows in the name of God (see Mark 12:40). This woman had little to gain socially or materially by putting two nearly worthless coins into the receptacle. The faint tinkle of her gift might have invited more derision than appreciation, and no one was likely to honor her with a greeting or invite her to a feast. She could not hope to purchase God's favor with such a puny amount when others gave lavishly. From a human standpoint, there was no good reason for her to give, but Jesus observed something that caused Him to break His silence.

3) God's observation (Mark 12:43–44). Jesus called His disciples together and gave them God's observation of what they had been watching. The poor widow, who had put two measly coins worth very little into the treasury, had actually given more than the rich people. Certainly He did not mean more in monetary value, but her motives and attitude outweighed all of the other gifts. Jesus saw that her gift was a great personal sacrifice to God while the rich gave only as a payment on something they wanted to receive in return. They craved recognition, honor, and good opinions, but she just wanted to worship and obey God. They went home to the fortunes they had accumulated to keep themselves secure, but she went home with literally nothing except her faith in the Lord. The Pharisees were seen by men as righteous and holy examples of what it meant to walk with God. However, in God's eyes, a solitary widow, having no position or influence, was the true representative of His kingdom.

Discussion:

1) What is the usual response when a rich person gives a large amount to a church or charity? What are some good motives for a person to give such a gift? What are some selfish motives?

2) According to Deuteronomy 14:28–29, how should the
Pharisees have treated widows? According to Mark 12:40, how did they actually treat them? What did this reveal about the Pharisees?

3) Read Mark 12:41-43. Describe what a Pharisee might have thought when he saw the widow give her two coins. Now describe what God thought. What interests God the most about your giving?

4) Read Mark 12:44. What did the widow risk when she put her coins in the treasury receptacle? How might Luke 12:31-34 be applied to her? What can you learn from her example?

Application:

The entire religious establishment fell short of the faith and righteousness of one poor widow whom they would hardly notice. All of their rituals and rules and practices met with disdain from Jesus, but He praised her simple gift as an example of what true religion should be. The kingdom of God certainly operates by different standards than the systems of this world. The approval of men does not guarantee the approval of God just as rejection by men does not necessarily reflect God’s opinion. The Pharisees chose the applause of men while the widow placed her trust in God’s mercy and provision. Jesus saw that she was the one with true wealth that would never perish (see Luke 12:32-33). The testimony of quiet faith and obedience is more precious to God than any grand show of religion.

Life of Christ Study #97


Theme: Olivet Discourse: Signs of the End

Summary:

The religious leaders viewed the temple and its trappings as part of an eternal institution necessary for the proper worship of God. That was one of the reasons why they placed such a high priority on sizable gifts (see Mark 12:41-44). Such an edifice required a continual supply of money to maintain. Jesus, however, could freely praise the small gift of the widow because He recognized that her attitude was worth far more to God than any of the impressive stones and gold instruments of the temple. Unfortunately, His disciples shared the opinion of the religious leaders, and their attention was captivated by the beauty and grandeur of the temple structures. Jesus listened as they marveled over what they saw, then He challenged them with a prediction that the mighty temple would be utterly destroyed (Matthew 24:2). The disciples must have been stunned by this pronouncement. They followed Jesus out of the city and onto the Mount of Olives where they asked for a fuller explanation. To them, the destruction of the temple must be connected with the end of
all things, so they asked how they would know when the time was approaching (Matthew 24:3).

1) Signs of trouble (Matthew 24:4-14). There was much speculation about the coming of the Messiah. Many believed it would be marked by great earthquakes, wars, and famines. Some said that He would come at the nation's most urgent need, a time of intense persecution and suffering. Whenever such events did occur, the people were prepared to follow almost anyone who claimed to be the Messiah. But Jesus warned His disciples not to be deceived by the natural cycles of a wicked world. All of these disasters would be only the beginning of the pains the earth would experience (Matthew 24:8). Even the fall of the temple, which would happen in A.D. 70, would not be the important sign. He told them that the sign of the end will not be cataclysmic destruction. The sign will be the completion of the proclamation of God's kingdom to the whole world. That will happen in the great tribulation when God will send out 144,000 witnesses (see Revelation 7:1-4).

2) Trouble (Matthew 24:15-28). Jesus presented another sign which will mark the end. The prophet Daniel had foretold an "abomination that causes desolation" which would be set up in the temple by a world dictator in the middle of the final seven years of the nation of Israel (see Daniel 9:24-27). That future event will begin a period of severe trouble and persecution unequaled in world history. At that time, the people in Judea should flee without delay. If God did not limit the length of that horrible time, no one would survive, but for the sake of His people it will be made short. Even in that time of intense suffering, the followers of God should not believe reports of the Messiah's coming. Jesus warned them because some of the false Christs of that time will be able to perform miraculous signs, yet the true Messiah will come again in an unmistakably visible manner.

3) An end of trouble (Matthew 24:29-31). Jesus told His disciples that immediately after that future time of great trouble the end will come. Both in the sky and on the earth there will be disasters which will cause great fear (see Luke 21:25-26). The Son of Man, foretold by Daniel (see Daniel 7:13-14), Jesus Himself, will appear in the sky bringing justice and judgment upon the earth. He will send His angels to separate His followers from the rest of mankind. Then the end of all things upon the earth will come.

4) Ready for trouble (Matthew 24:32-41). By telling
His followers about these signs Jesus was preparing them to be ready for the trouble when it came. Just as a fig tree gives signs of the approach of summer, the signs He gave will be clear indications of the end. In fact, He promised that the generation which sees those signs will not grow old and die before the end. Jesus said that only God knows the exact date of the end. On earth, people will be going about their normal routines just as they did when they ignored the warnings of Noah until it was too late and the flood took them away to judgment (see Genesis 7:16-23). In a similar manner when the Son of Man comes, two people will be working side by side. One will be taken away to judgment and the other will be left to enjoy the reign of the King.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 24:1-2. Why would the disciples have been shocked by the prediction of the temple's destruction? What importance did they attach to that building?

2) Read Matthew 24:4-8. What should be your response to world events that people claim are signs of the end? What danger do you see in giving too much significance to such events as wars and earthquakes?

3) Read Matthew 24:32-35. In the context, which of the following generations was Jesus predicting would see the end? Give reasons for or against each one.
   (a) The generation alive in A.D. 33.
   (b) The generation alive today.
   (c) The generation which witnesses the signs listed by Jesus.

4) Read Matthew 24:36-41. In the context, what will be the fate of those who will "be taken"? What will be the attitude of many on the earth toward the coming of the Son of Man?

Application:

The temple had come to represent hope of God's coming kingdom to the Jews. It had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., then rebuilt under Zerubbabel around 520 B.C. That temple had fallen into ruins during the subsequent Greek and Roman dominations. Then, about 9 B.C. a new temple was completed by King Herod and the Jewish people eagerly anticipated a fulfillment to the promises of a Messiah and an eternal kingdom. Yet Jesus showed His disciples that God's kingdom was not dependent on the presence of any building. The temple could easily be torn down and raised again many times with no damage to God's plans. The kingdom will come at the time God has appointed, and we should not be taken in by
every human event or prediction that seems significant at the time. Jesus promised that He will return to judge the earth and to establish His kingdom. He did not give us an exact time schedule to identify the date. Instead, He calls on us as His people to be alert, so that whenever He comes, we will be found ready.

Life of Christ Study #98


Theme: Olivet Discourse: Be Ready

Summary:

Jesus did not want His disciples to be so concerned with determining the dates of future events that they missed the real message. He told them plainly that no one knew the time of His return except God (see Mark 13:32). Therefore, their focus should be on living in such a way that, whenever He returned, they would be found ready. Alertness was what Jesus desired. He compared His expectations to those of a property owner who goes away having left specific instructions for his servants. They do not know for certain when he will return, so they must keep constant watch (Mark 13:33-36). His simple instruction to His disciples about the future was to keep alert so they would be ready whenever the end came. Otherwise, they would be like another property owner whose house was robbed because he did not know when the thief was coming. Jesus will not announce His return ahead of time, so constant readiness is always required (Matthew 24:43-44).

1) Ready to meet the Master (Matthew 24:45-51). Jesus continued the illustration of a master who leaves his servants in charge while he is gone. He repeated a story He had used previously to show the responsibility placed upon those who have been entrusted with His work until He returns (see Luke 12:42-46). The Jewish religious leaders had been entrusted with the spiritual care of the nation and had failed miserably in their task. Instead of caring for the needs of the people, they had turned their positions to personal gain and power. The punishment for any who abuse the Lord's trust in such a manner will be severe. If the disciples wished to be faithful and wise servants, they must diligently do the will of the Master in their oversight of His property.

2) Ready to attend the wedding banquet (Matthew 25:1-13). Jesus told another story to illustrate the need to be ready for the future coming of the King. Ten young women were selected as bridesmaids. Their job was to await the coming of the groom in the late evening, escort him with lamps to the bride's home, and accompany the
couple back to the groom's home for the wedding ceremony. The torches, oil soaked rags on long sticks, would burn for only a short time before new rags and more oil must be applied. Five of the bridesmaids wisely carried extra oil with them in case the groom was late. They were prepared to rekindle their torches when he arrived. The other five, however, had not taken this precaution, and when the groom came they were embarrassed and begged the others to share their oil, but there was not enough. The five foolish bridesmaids were forced to search for someone to sell them oil at midnight. By the time they found the supplies they needed, the wedding banquet had begun and the doors were shut. The angry groom refused to admit them after they had disgraced him with their lack of preparation. Jesus knew that not everyone who claimed to await His coming would actually be prepared for it. His disciples had to understand that they must be ready for Him no matter how long they waited.

3) Ready to give account (Matthew 25:14-30). Jesus wanted His disciples to know that being ready meant more than having a relationship with Him and staying out of trouble. It also meant productive service for Him while He was gone. He told of a man who, before leaving on a lengthy journey, entrusted sums of money to three of his servants to invest and manage while he was away. He gave amounts to suit the abilities of each. While he was gone, two of the servants wisely invested his money and earned a profit, but the third simply buried it in the ground. When the master returned and reviewed the work of his servants, he was very pleased with the two who had increased his money, and he gladly rewarded their faithfulness. The third servant, however, compounded his lazy performance by calling his master unfair for wanting to make money through his efforts. The master rebuked his laziness and insolence and ordered him to be tossed off his property. Jesus had used a similar story to challenge the crowds to reflect on whether they were willing to give up their agenda for His (see Luke 19:11-27). In this case, He emphasized that faithful service would demonstrate a readiness for the kingdom.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 24:42, 44 and 25:13. What did Jesus give as the main reason to be ready for His coming? How might people abuse the knowledge if they did know exactly when He will return?

2) Read Matthew 24:45-51. How should an expectation of the Lord's coming affect your personal conduct
and the way you treat others?

3) Read Matthew 25:1-13. How should an expectation of the Lord's coming affect you when you feel like giving up because of weariness or discouragement? What is the benefit of staying alert in spite of those feelings?

4) Read Matthew 25:14-30. How should an expectation of the Lord's coming affect your use of the resources and abilities you have been given? Why were they given to you in the first place?

Application:

Since no one can know the exact date of the return of Jesus, there is only one sensible course to take. We must live each day as if it could be the one that brings us face to face with our Master. That is what Jesus repeatedly taught His disciples through the parables He told on the Mount of Olives. If a person is constantly ready, then he never needs to fear the coming of Jesus. Indeed, it is an event to be anticipated and eagerly awaited because it will bring honor and reward to those who are ready. Readiness involves our personal relationship with God, our relationships with others, and our use of time, abilities, and resources. Being ready is a complete way of life that shows that our hope is in the promises of Jesus and His kingdom.

Life of Christ Study #99

Matthew 25:31-46

Theme: Olivet Discourse: The King Will Judge

Summary:

The Jewish people anticipated that the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of God's kingdom would be preceded by a great judgment of the nations. They expected the proclamation of the year of God's favor to also include a day of vengeance against His enemies (see Isaiah 61:1-3 and Luke 4:14-21). They looked forward to the time when God's King would rule with an iron scepter and crush the nations and rulers who opposed Him (see Psalm 2:6-12) and set up His everlasting kingdom (see Daniel 7:13-14). Of course, when they spoke longingly about that day of judgment, they were assuming that they were ready and would be blessed by God. The nations which would be objects of God's vengeance were the Gentile kingdoms which oppressed Israel. What Jesus was trying to make clear to them was that everybody, not just the Gentiles, should heed His warning to be ready, for the basis of judgment will not be ethnic background or participation in a religious system. It will be personal relationship and commitment to the King Himself.

1) The time and place (Matthew 25:31-33). Jesus had
already revealed that the coming of the Son of Man will take place at the end of a future time of great distress identified as the final seven years foretold by the prophet Daniel (see Matthew 24:15-31). Now He further stated that He will judge the nations of the earth at that time. He will sit on a throne as the King, and all the people who have survived the great tribulation will be subjected to His evaluation. Sheep and goats might be permitted to graze together, but a shepherd would separate them into different pens at the end of a day. In the same way, Jesus will divide the people of the earth into two distinct groups when He comes in the full authority of His kingdom.

2) Sheep on the right (Matthew 25:34-40). At that great judgment, the King will speak words of welcome and commendation to those on His right. They will receive the inheritance that God prepared for them at the beginning of the world. The basis for His good opinion of them will be their love for Him as evidenced by their service for others in the darkest period of human history when such service will mean personal sacrifice and risk of death (see Revelation 13:15-17). Just as the servants in the earlier parables were judged by their treatment of others (see Matthew 24:45-51) and their faithful work (see Matthew 25:14-30), so the love of the sheep will be confirmed by their enduring obedience in the face of severe persecution. Their compassion and kindness for their fellow sheep will be counted as service rendered to the Shepherd, and they will experience the blessedness of the kingdom for which they suffered.

3) Goats on the left (Matthew 25:41-46). Then the King will turn to those on His left and pronounce a sentence of doom upon them. They will be forever excluded from the kingdom and assigned to eternal punishment in the lake of fire with Satan and his demons. The basis for this fearful verdict will be their disregard for the King as proven by their treatment of His people when the whole world will hate them. The goats will join the persecution of the sheep during those seven awful years, or they will simply turn their backs on their need. Either way, their indifference or oppression towards God's people will be counted as an offense against the King Himself. They will plead ignorance of crimes against Him, but their deeds will stand witness to their guilt. They will enter eternal punishment with no excuse and no chance for pardon.

Discussion:

1) How will the judgment of Matthew 25:31-33 fulfill
the following Old Testament prophecies?
(a) Psalm 2:6-12
(b) Isaiah 61:1-3
(c) Daniel 7:13-14

2) Read Matthew 25:34-40. What will the deeds of the sheep reveal about their relationship to the King? What will be their reward?

3) Read Matthew 25:41-45. What will the deeds of the goats reveal about their relationship to the King? What will be their punishment?

4) Read Matthew 25:46 and Hebrews 9:27. What will every person on earth face someday? What are the only two possible outcomes for them? What will determine which outcome they will receive?

Application:

The discussion began when the disciples talked to Jesus about how impressive the temple was (see Matthew 24:1). Jesus drew their attention away from buildings and religious systems and spoke to them about the way to truly be ready for the end when He will come to judge the earth. Religious structures and rituals will not save or condemn anyone at that time. Each person will stand alone with his or her deeds as witness to a relationship of faith or of enmity with the King. Spiritual talk and insincere acts of charity will not endure His evaluation, for He will search the heart. Being ready for the coming of the King is the most important issue in the life of every person. No earthly accomplishments can compare with the glory of the kingdom and no earthly sufferings can compare with the horror of eternal punishment. Our words and deeds matter because they give testimony to what is really in our hearts.

Life of Christ Study #100


Theme: Prelude to Betrayal

Summary:

It was probably on Wednesday evening of that final week when Jesus, for the first time, revealed to His disciples that His death would be by crucifixion (Matthew 26:1-2). He had told them on several occasions that He would be killed, but the prospect of a cruel, ignominious execution like a criminal must have shocked them anew. The week, which had begun with such promise when the crowds hailed Him as the Son of David (see Matthew 21:6-11), was to end with Him handing on a cross. The thoughts of the disciples must have been heavy as they continued their walk to Bethany on the Mount of Olives (see Luke 21:37). But other thoughts were also occupied with the death of Jesus, for back in Jerusalem, the religious leaders
were gathering for an urgent discussion of how to arrange to rid themselves of Him. Their hatred was at a peak, and they were determined to take action while He was still in the area of the city if they could devise a practicable plan.

1) A plot in need of a player (Matthew 26:3-5). The chief priests and elders were united in their desire to kill Jesus, but they had not been able to devise a way to accomplish it without arousing the crowds. Once Jesus was arrested and in their power, they could do with Him as they pleased, but they could not arrest Him publicly without a solid accusation, and all their attempts to create a charge through trick questions and controversial issues had failed. In the palace of Caiaphas the high priest they concluded that they would probably have to wait until after the Passover celebration to act. When the crowds went back to their homes, then perhaps they could seize Him before He left the city. Unless some unexpected opportunity presented itself, it was the best plan they could see.

2) A player in need of a plot (John 12:2-8). Even though John made it clear that the supper at Simon's home occurred the previous Saturday (see John 12:12-13), Matthew and Mark inserted it here, possibly to help explain the role Judas Iscariot was to play. While the religious leaders debated how to best accomplish the death of Jesus, there was already the makings of a traitor within the ranks of the disciples. Whatever passions and feelings may have motivated Judas, greed and discontent seem to have been among them. He had already become a thief, stealing from the money the disciples kept for food and other supplies. He was also a liar, claiming concern for the poor instead of admitting his true desire. Perhaps he was one who had attached himself to Jesus in hopes of reward when the kingdom was established. Perhaps he was upset because others among the disciples seemed to have a closer relationship to Jesus than he. The Gospels do not tell his specific reasons for becoming a traitor, but a heart nurturing discontent and self pity is always ripe for plots to its advantage.

3) Plotters and player bargain (Matthew 26:14-16). Luke says that Satan entered Judas (see Luke 22:3). It was the only piece missing from the tragic puzzle. Judas harbored and justified his private anger and longings until the devil was able to use them to influence his actions. As much as the religious leaders wanted to see Jesus die, Satan wanted it more, for it may be that he foolishly believed that he could stop God's plan by killing His Messiah. The rulers with their pride and blindness were his tools, inflamed to
rage by his lies. And now Judas also, following the impulses Satan had slowly developed in his heart, joined the plot. He went to the chief priests and offered to reveal a way to arrest Jesus apart from the crowds in exchange for money. The leaders probably considered thirty pieces of silver a bargain for the opportunity to achieve their goal ahead of schedule. From that time on, Judas became an enemy in his Master's circle, looking for a chance to betray Him.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 26:3-4. What obstacles did the religious leaders face in their plot to kill Jesus? What piece of information did they need to make their plans work?

2) Read John 12:2-8. What does this incident reveal about the character of Judas Iscariot? What are some attitudes and motives which could lead a person to rash actions if left unchecked?

3) How would you explain the fact that Judas witnessed the teachings and miracles of Jesus and still decided to betray Him? What warning does this hold for those who attend church today?

4) Read Matthew 26:14-16. Suppose one of the chief priests said to you, "See, God has confirmed that we are right in seeking to kill Jesus. He has provided just what we needed." How would you respond? Does success indicate that God is in favor of an idea or plan?

Application:

To the religious leaders the offer of Judas Iscariot presented a golden opportunity. To Judas the priests were a way to put his discontent into action. To Satan they were all tools to fulfill his scheme to destroy the King. In reality, regardless of their motives and secret thoughts, all those involved in the plot were simply bringing what Jesus had predicted to completion (see Matthew 26:2). They could plan and rebel and bargain, but they could not escape God's will for His kingdom and His King. Judas is a reminder to us that we must continually evaluate our motives and desires or they will twist our thoughts and actions. We will all be used to accomplish God's purposes in some way, but it is far better to be a willing participant than a blind role player.

Life of Christ Study #101


Theme: Lessons of the Last Supper I
Summary:

The observance of the Passover meal, eaten the evening before the actual Passover holy day, was a highlight of the Jewish calendar. It marked the event which was considered the birth of the nation, when God delivered His people from their long slavery in Egypt. The lambs required for the Passover could only be slaughtered in Jerusalem (see Deuteronomy 16:2), so the city was full as the day approached. Normally, rooms and services were reserved ahead of time to avoid the last minute press, but Jesus was essentially a hunted man, and a private dinner would have been the perfect chance for His enemies to arrest Him without the knowledge of the crowds they feared. Therefore, on Thursday, Jesus sent His disciples to make preparations for their Passover meal at the time when the lambs were being slaughtered (see Mark 14:12), just hours before the meal would be eaten. The disciples were probably expecting a significant but typical Passover meal with Him, but Jesus would use this particular observance in some unexpected ways to teach them once more of His true identity and mission before He died.

1) Preparing the Passover (Luke 22:7-18). Actually, it seems that Jesus had made arrangements for the Passover meal without telling His disciples. He knew that one of them would betray Him (see John 6:70-71), but He did not want it to take place before He had one last chance to speak to them about some very important matters. A man carrying a jar of water would be easily recognized, for this was typically work given to a woman. This man knew where Jesus had reserved a room and led Peter and John to the house where they could make the necessary arrangements for the Passover meal. That evening, Jesus and His disciples gathered together in the room. For Jesus, the meal had special meaning because He knew it was the last time He would eat with them before His death. He began the meal soberly, telling them that He would not participate in such a time of fellowship again until the great feast which will take place in the kingdom (see Matthew 8:11; Luke 13:29; Revelation 19:9).

2) Washing of feet performed (John 13:1-9). As Jesus approached the Passover, He knew that His time was very short. He gathered one last time with His disciples, and in that setting, He illustrated the full extent of His love through a very unusual action. It was a custom for a host to provide water so that his guests to wash their feet when they entered (see Genesis 18:4-5; Luke 7:44). Sometimes a servant would be assigned the task of assisting the visitors, but normally a person washed his or her own feet. Jesus took this familiar custom and gave it a new significance. He got up from the meal, brought water to the table, and began to personally wash the feet of His disciples as they reclined at the meal. Peter mistakenly thought that He was
simply assuming the role of a servant and tried to stop Him. Jesus told Peter that he would understand His action later, but Peter again insisted that He stop. Then Jesus said something that took the act of washing feet out of its customary meaning. Jesus said that Peter could have no relationship with Him if he did not permit Him to wash his feet. Peter must have been astounded, but he quickly invited Jesus to wash all of him if it meant gaining a closer relationship with Him.

3) Washing of feet explained (John 13:10-20). Jesus proceeded to explain what He had just illustrated in washing their feet. He pointed out that if a person has already bathed, he only needs to have his feet cleaned when he arrives at his destination. He told the disciples that they were already clean. The one exception was Judas who was planning to betray Him. The rest had been cleansed from the stain of sin by their faith in Jesus. They did not need another bath, just a continual willingness to come to Him for forgiveness (see I John 1:9). Jesus returned to His place at the table and told His disciples that, even though He had performed the act of a servant, He was still their Lord. As their Lord, He commanded them to do the same for each other, following His example, as a picture of His cleansing work in their lives. He promised they would be blessed if they obeyed Him in this, yet that blessing did not extend to the one who would betray Him. Judas sat at the meal, sharing bread and fellowship, yet his heart was set on treachery. Jesus reminded His disciples that they were to be His representatives. Anyone who accepted them and their message accepted Him and His Father.

Discussion:

1) Read Luke 22:7-12. Why would Jesus make arrangements for the Passover secretly? Why would He not want Judas to know the location ahead of time?

2) Read John 13:1-5. According to these verses, what motivated Jesus to wash His disciples' feet?

3) It was customary for a guest to wash his own feet at the entrance of a house before dinner. In what ways did Jesus depart from this custom? Why did He make those changes?

4) Read John 13:6-17. What did Peter think Jesus was doing? What did Jesus really want to teach Peter and the other disciples?
Application:

There were very few times when Jesus purposely avoided confrontation by doing anything secretly. The fact that He made arrangements for the Passover meal without telling anyone shows how important it was to Him that this be an uninterrupted time with His disciples. Before He faced the suffering and death He knew was necessary, He needed an opportunity to talk privately one more time with those who would be His representatives once He was gone. He wanted them to look forward to the certainty of a future celebration in the kingdom. He also wanted them to consider the foundations of their salvation. He took the Passover observance and gave it new significance and meaning related to His work and promises. It was a time of personal fellowship and instruction for His disciples and for us today. If we have been bathed in the forgiveness of repentance and salvation, we still need to seek the continual cleansing and renewal from sin that Jesus provides.

Life of Christ Study #102


Theme: Lessons of the Last Supper II

Summary:

Sharing a meal was considered an act of friendship and good will. It assumed a unity among the participants. The fact that the Last Supper was also a Passover meal deepened the bond between Jesus and His disciples, for by observing it they identified themselves as members of God's covenant people, delivered from bondage by His power and sharing in the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus made the evening even more intimate by introducing new covenant symbols such as the washing of feet. Of all His times spent with the twelve this was, perhaps, the most private and personal. Yet it was certainly not free from tensions. The shadow of His death lay upon Him and His betrayer was present in the room. In addition, the attitudes and words of the other disciples revealed that, even after more than three years together, there was still much to learn.

1) Bread and cup (Luke 22:19-20). Toward the end of the meal, Jesus took some bread from the table, gave thanks for it, and broke it into pieces, distributing them to His disciples. He instructed them to eat it and told them that it represented His body which was sacrificed on their behalf. Obviously, He did not mean that the bread was literally His body, for He was with them in full physical form. But the bread would serve as a reminder to them of His death for them. Similarly, He passed a cup of wine around the table and invited them to drink from it, for it represented His blood which ratified a new covenant with them. Just as the blood of the
Passover lambs had saved the Israelites from the plague of death (see Exodus 12:12-13), so the blood of Jesus would save people from the eternal death brought about by sin (see Matthew 26:27-28). The new covenant foretold by the prophets (see Isaiah 42:6; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 37:21-28) would be ratified by the blood of the Messiah Himself.

2) Treachery (John 13:21-30). Jesus was saddened as He looked around the table at His disciples, and for the first time He told them that His betrayer would be one of them who shared that intimate fellowship meal with Him (see Mark 14:18, 20). Such treachery was a violation of the worst kind. The suffering and death of the Messiah were part of God's plan, but the one who brought it about would be cursed (see Mark 14:21). The disciples were stunned and immediately they broke into questioning each other and Jesus about whom of them the traitor might be (see Mark 14:19; Luke 22:23). Finally, Peter prompted John, who was reclining closest to Jesus, to ask Him directly. Jesus replied that he would dip a piece of bread in the sauce and give it to the one He meant. Apparently, only Judas understood what was happening when Jesus handed the piece to him and told him to complete his intentions quickly. The others assumed that Judas was merely sent to buy supplies or to give a gift to the poor as was customary at the Passover. But when Judas accepted the bread from the One he was plotting to betray, his resolve hardened and Satan had his tool.

3) Dissension (Luke 22:24-30). From wondering who would betray the King, the disciples fell into an argument about which of them would be most deserving of reward in His kingdom. Jesus cut them off by reminding them again that in His kingdom greatness would not be measured in power and authority but in humble service (see Matthew 20:25-28). He was setting the example for them by serving them with the sacrifice of His very life. He then promised them that each of them would have a rich share in the kingdom because of their faithfulness to Him even in His trials. Each of them would sit upon a throne and judge the tribes of Israel who had rejected the King.

4) Denial (Luke 22:31-38). The defection of Judas and the tension between the eleven remaining disciples had already marred the evening. Jesus concluded His reminder about serving with an assurance that the suffering and death which would follow would result in His glory (see John 13:31-32). He would soon leave them, but He commanded them to love each other after He was gone. That would be the true mark of one of His
disciples (see John 13:33-35). Jesus then warned Peter that Satan was going to test him severely, but He also promised that He had prayed for Peter so that he might be an encouragement to the others when he recovered. Peter's pride was hurt by the intimation that he might fail the test, and he boldly proclaimed his courage to follow Jesus anywhere. Jesus calmly predicted that Peter would deny knowing Him three times before the rooster crowed the next morning. He told His disciples to prepare for action. At an earlier time, He had sent them out with nothing (see Luke 9:3-5). Now, however, they must take stock of their supplies, for Jesus would be branded as a sinner, and they would be seen as His accomplices. Yet they would not be called to fight. Two swords were enough for their own protection but hardly sufficient for a revolution.

Discussion:


2) Read Luke 22:24-30. What was still missing in the disciples' understanding of the kingdom? How do competitive attitudes hurt God's people today?

3) Read John 13:34-35. What is to be the testimony to the world that you belong to Jesus? List ten specific ways you can show love for other Christians.

4) Read Luke 22:31-34. What do you think motivated Peter's response in verse 33? Why should you be careful about making bold promises to God?

Application:

Sometimes we picture the Last Supper as an idyllic picture of Jesus and His disciples enjoying close fellowship. Although there was certainly some of that, the evening was more vividly marked by tension, confusion, and anger. It could have been very disappointing to Jesus. Yet He used each of the distractions to further prepare His disciples for what was to come. He patiently but directly corrected their misconceptions and misplaced motives. Hidden pride and competitiveness can destroy our testimony, so Jesus confronts it. His goal is not to embarrass or frustrate but to get us ready to be an encouragement and a faithful witness to His sacrifice for us. There is work to be done, and there is no room for petty jealousies and slighted egos when the souls of men are at stake.

Life of Christ Study #103

245
John 14:1-31

Theme: Upper Room: Assurances

Summary:

The Passover meal had ended in a somewhat negative manner with an argument between the disciples and a prediction of Peter's denials. Perhaps the companions of Jesus were disturbed by the realization that this really might be their last time with Him. The thought of His death carried all kinds of uncertainties and fears for these men who had followed Him for three years. He had taught them and guided them, defended them from the wrath of the religious leaders and protected them in storms and hunger. Soon they would be left on their own, commissioned to proclaim the kingdom, but feeling hopelessly inadequate to the task. After the meal, Jesus addressed their concerns and the work He had given them to do. If He was to leave them soon, He wanted to leave them with solid assurances and direction for the difficulties they would meet. The future might not look so bleak if they knew what He would provide for them.

1) Eternity (John 14:1-7). Trust would be necessary for the disciples when Jesus left them. Trust in God and in Jesus was the only anchor which could secure their troubled hearts. Jesus promised them that He was going to prepare a place for them with God and that He would someday return to take them there. Whatever else life threw at them, they had the assurance that eternal life waited at the end. Jesus told them that the way was known to them. Thomas voiced the concern that probably gripped each of the disciples. They did not know where heaven was, so they could not possibly know how to get there. Jesus assured them that He was the only map they needed. He alone could lead them on the path to God, provide them with the truth of God, and give them eternal life with God. Because of their relationship of faith with Him, they had all these things.

2) Access (John 14:8-14). Philip wanted the extra proof of seeing God, but Jesus replied that they had already seen the Father because they had seen Him. The two were the same, so the promises Jesus gave were already confirmed by the Father. If they had trouble believing such a statement, then they had only to look to the evidence of the miracles Jesus had performed which testified that He was God. That miraculous power would now be available to the disciples directly, for Jesus was going to the Father, but He would work His power through them as they requested it by His authority. Rather than watching Jesus do the works of God, they would ask Him in prayer and He would give them the ability to perform those works themselves as His representatives.
3) Help (John 14:15-21). In the Old Testament it had been prophesied that God would put His Spirit into His people so that they might be able to obey Him (see Ezekiel 36:27). Jesus told His disciples that when He returned to the Father, God would send the Holy Spirit to be their Counselor. The people of the world would not recognize Him, but He would live in the people of the kingdom. The disciples would not be left as helpless, abandoned orphans when Jesus departed, for the Holy Spirit would be with them and so their relationship to Jesus would be maintained. When this transition took place, they would understand the closeness of their association with God and with Jesus. They would show their love by obeying Him, and He would show His love by revealing Himself to them through the Holy Spirit.

4) Peace (John 14:22-31). Judas the son of James (also called Thaddaeus) wondered why Jesus would not reveal Himself to the whole world along with the disciples. Jesus stressed again that a love for God expressed through obedience was a requirement for entering a kingdom relationship with Him. The Holy Spirit, the Counselor, would teach His people truth and remind them of what Jesus had taught them. The result would be peace, an assurance of truth and eternal life, so that they would not have to worry or fear. The world could never offer such peace. Jesus went on to say that His disciples should actually rejoice that He was returning to the Father, for His going would make all these things possible and He would come back for them. His time was short, and Satan would accomplish His death, but the devil would not be able to hold Him. His death was necessary as a testimony to the world that He was fully obedient to God's plan and that He really was from the Father.

Discussion:

1) Read John 14:1-7. Why would these words have been especially comforting to the disciples as they approached the time when Jesus would leave them? What assurances do they provide for you today?

2) Read John 14:13-14. Do these verses say that God will give you whatever you want? How do the words "in my name" guard against selfish or foolish requests?

3) Read John 14:16-17 and I Corinthians 2:14. Why is the world unable to experience the work of the Holy Spirit? How do you think He makes His presence known in your life?
4) According to John 14:25-26, what is one of the functions of the Holy Spirit in your life? How could this help to provide the peace Jesus promised in John 14:27?

Application:

The disciples had followed and learned from Jesus like children from a parent. He was always available to answer their questions and interpret the world for them as they confronted new ideas and experiences. They probably did feel somewhat like orphans at the thought of going on without Him. But Jesus assured them that, even though He would not be with them physically anymore, their new situation would actually be better. The Holy Spirit would be with them continually, and their relationship with Him would be even closer than the one they had enjoyed with Jesus, for He would live within them. They would still have access to truth and power when needed through their new Counselor. In the meantime, Jesus would be preparing a place in eternity for them so that they could live forever with Him. All those assurances are given to us today as well. We may not see God around us physically, but His presence and help in our lives are consistently and effectively real. If we obey the truth He had given us, we will know His power and peace.

Life of Christ Study #104

John 15:1-17

Theme: Upper Room: Productive Branches

Summary:

The image of a vineyard was used in the Old Testament, especially by the prophets, to tell the story of Israel as a nation. The vine was brought out of Egypt to Palestine by God who cleared the ground of other people so that he could plant it there (see Psalm 80:8-11). God provided everything His vineyard needed to thrive, but it still produced bad fruit (see Isaiah 5:1-2). The more the vine prospered the more it became proud and greedy and made idols for itself (see Hosea 10:1), until God accused His people of rebellion (see Jeremiah 2:21) and decided to take away the protection and provision He had placed around His vineyard (see Isaiah 5:3-7). As a result, the vine of Israel lost its health and vitality and could only lament its fallen state (see Ezekiel 19:10-14). This was the image Jesus chose to teach His disciples about how to remain productive members of God's vineyard. Israel had failed, but God had established a new vine through Jesus, and the branches of that vine would grow and produce as long as they observed their relationship to three occupants of the vineyard.

1) Branches and the gardener (John 15:1-4). Jesus identified Himself as the vine, God as the gardener, and His people as the branches. The
gardener's work is to cut off any branch that does not show any life and to trim and prune the living branches so that they can grow to their maximum potential. Jesus said that those who are His disciples, those who have already accepted the message He gave, are living branches. Their responsibility now is to maintain a strong relationship to Him so that their growth will continue. The gardener will trim such branches, but He will never cut them off from the vine.

2) Branches and the vine (John 15:5-8). The branches are no longer identified by their relationship to the vine of Israel. Now they are marked by their connection to Jesus, the new vine. It is impossible for a branch to survive without being fastened to the vine, but with that bond solidly in place a branch can produce the fruit expected of it. The fruit Jesus spoke of cannot be measured in numbers or activity. It is the fruit of a changed life drawing its vitality from learning and applying His truth. Branches which do not show that source of life are useful only as fuel for the fire (see Ezekiel 15:1-5). But a branch which maintains its connection to Jesus and lives according to His words will receive from God whatever is needed to bear rich fruit.

3) Branches and other branches (John 15:9-17). A branch must share space with other branches on the vine. Because of this, there is always the potential for competition as each branch strives to get the sunlight and resources it needs, sometimes at the expense of others. For this reason, Jesus twice stated the simple command to love each other. A branch on His vine who lives in obedience will always be assured of His love, no matter how many other branches there may be. Complete joy is available for each, for there is more than enough for all. Therefore, the branches can safely serve and give to each other without fear of a personal deficit. Jesus modeled that love for the branches by giving His life for them. He called them His friends and revealed to them everything the Father had given Him. Then He chose them to bear fruit for Him. Jesus said that God will provide whatever the branches need to do His work. With such an assurance of individual provision, the branches can genuinely focus on loving each other, for they know that their own needs will be met.

Discussion:

1) What fruit would you expect to see on a healthy branch of a grapevine? What fruit would you expect to see from a healthy follower of Jesus?

2) Read John 15:1-4. Describe the work of the
gardener. How has God performed His work of pruning in your life? Did it feel good at the time? What were the results?

3) Read John 15:5-8. What does a vine supply to its branches? What does Jesus supply to your life? According to verses 7-8, what is the key to bearing much fruit? How are you addressing this in your life?

4) According to John 15:9-17, what is some of the fruit which should be seen in your life because of your relationship to Jesus, the vine?

Application:

God gave the people of Israel all that they needed to grow and thrive, but they did not remain connected to Him as their source of life. They grew proud and selfish and they chose their own ways, producing bad fruit. Therefore, God took away some of His gracious provision, and the nation withered. Jesus came as a new vine, a new source of life, and He promised that all who remained connected to Him would flourish. We have become branches on the vine through accepting the message of Jesus by faith. God prunes the unhealthy and unnecessary foliage from our lives and Jesus provides a continual source of life through His truth and instruction. But it is our responsibility to maintain our relationship with the vine through obedience so that we can continue to grow and bear fruit. Branches are expected to show the life they receive from the vine. If growth is not happening, it is not the fault of the gardener, who is always faithful, or of the vine, who is the source of true life. Growth stops when the branch ceases to draw its life from the vine. As long as the connection is maintained, every resource necessary for life is assured.

Life of Christ Study #105

John 15:18-16:4

Theme: Upper Room: The World

Summary:

Even with a close connection to the vine (see John 15:1-17), life would not be easy for the disciples once Jesus left, for they would still be living in the world system. The "world" was used by Jesus as a way of referring to the perspective on life that had resulted from sin. It includes all the people who live without a relationship with God and the ideas, desires, and beliefs that drive them. Satan is its ruler (see John 12:31; 14:30) and he holds the reigns of its wealth and human power (see Matthew 4:8-9). John would later write that no one can love the world and love God (see 1 John 2:15), and James would declare that friendship with the world amounted to hostility toward God (see James 4:4). It was not
a gentle place in which Jesus was leaving His followers, and He was very straightforward about the difficulties they would face in it. Yet He left them not as victims, but as His representatives, and the hostility of the world should not prevent them from accomplishing the task He had given them.

1) The world's hatred (John 15:18-21). The world offered many attractive benefits, but Jesus told His disciples not to even try fitting into it comfortably. The world hated Him and His message, so it would also hate them as they carried on His work. If they belonged to the world, sharing its values and perspectives, they would be accepted by it, but Jesus had called them into another kingdom with different values, so the world would hate them. The people who persecuted Jesus would also persecute His followers, and those who obeyed His words would also obey them as His representatives. The world did not acknowledge God so it would not respect His messengers.

2) The world's guilt (John 15:22-25). One of the reasons the world hated Jesus was that He had exposed its sin. If He had not delivered His message of repentance and offered forgiveness, the people of the world could not be judged guilty. Their refusal of Him left them without excuse for their sin. Through their hatred of Jesus they expressed their hostility toward God, for they saw the miracles which could only come from God yet they refused to believe what the miracles proved. If there had been no miracles, possibly their ignorance could have been excused, but their stubbornness in the presence of God's unmistakable power condemned them. Thus, they were guilty of rejecting not only Jesus but the Father as well. Jesus had given them no reason to hate Him, but they hated Him anyway, and so they would be judged by God (see Psalm 35:19-24).

3) The world's confusion (John 15:26-16:4). In spite of the world's hatred and guilt, Jesus still offered salvation to its inhabitants. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit would be to continually testify to the truth of Jesus. He would reassure His followers of the truth when they faced doubts and difficulties, and through them the testimony of Jesus would be presented again and again to the world. Jesus warned the disciples that the people of the world would banish them from the synagogues and consider it a service to God to kill one who proclaimed Jesus. In their confusion and ignorance the people of the world would use religious zeal as a reason to persecute God's messengers. It was not a comforting picture, but Jesus wanted His disciples to know what to expect ahead of time so they could be prepared. If they hoped to fit easily into the
world, they would be surprised and disappointed by the hatred that awaited them. Instead, they were told to be ready to go into enemy territory with the gospel of the kingdom.

Discussion:

1) Read James 4:4 and I John 2:15. What do you think it means to be a friend of the world? How do Christians sometimes try to fit comfortably into the world?

2) Read John 15:18-25. What reasons are given for why the world might hate you as a follower of Jesus?

3) Has God abandoned the world because of its rejection of Him? According to John 15:26-27, what plan does God use to offer truth to the world still?

4) Read John 16:1-4. What does Jesus say you can expect from the world? What should you do to prepare to be His representative in such a place?

Application:

Not long before, the disciples had argued about who should receive the most honor in the kingdom (see Luke 22:24). Now, they were told that they would receive hatred and persecution from the world. That should have crushed any competitive ambitions, for there was nothing to compete for but pain and suffering. Jesus gave them the harsh reality of the work He was leaving them to do. If they faithfully lived as members of His kingdom, the world would hate them just as it had hated Him. The truth they embraced would enrage those who had rejected Jesus, and their deaths would be approved by the religious authorities. That is the world into which Jesus has sent us as His representatives. We are not called to find a way to live comfortably within it. We are called to live by the values and truth of the kingdom even when it angers the citizens of the world. If we expect acceptance from the world, we will be quick to seek it. But if we expect resistance, we can prepare to meet it with the power God provides.

Life of Christ Study #106

John 16:5-15

Theme: Upper Room: The Holy Spirit

Summary: Jesus had already mentioned the coming of the Holy Spirit several times in His discussion with His disciples in the upper room (see John 14:16-17, 25-16; 15:26). The Holy
Spirit would, in many ways, take the place of Jesus when He left to return to the Father. He would be their new guide and Counselor to help them face the challenges and hostilities of the world successfully. He would give them truth to be able to navigate through the decisions and circumstances of life. Now Jesus went on to describe the Holy Spirit's work more fully. The disciples were still stunned at the thought of Jesus leaving. He wanted them to see the benefits of the new relationship they would experience and enjoy through the work of the Holy Spirit. There would be some great advantages to having the Holy Spirit within them over what Jesus had been able to provide with His physical presence. The coming of the Holy Spirit would open up new resources for obedience and effectiveness in their commitment to Jesus and His kingdom.

1) Comfort (John 16:5-7). Earlier, Peter had asked where Jesus was going (see John 13:36), but the disciples were now so worried and grieved over His departure that the question did not enter their minds. They had thoughts only for their own concerns. Jesus made a surprising statement in telling them that His leaving was actually for their good, for if He did not leave, the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, would not come. Their new relationship with the Spirit would be even closer and more beneficial than their present relationship with Jesus. Jesus lived with them, but the Holy Spirit would live within them (see John 15:17). Therefore, they could be comforted in their grief, for their position in the kingdom would be even more secure once the Holy Spirit came.

2) Conviction (John 16:8-11). Jesus declared the truth to the world, but the Holy Spirit would convict the world of the truth. Specifically, He would convict people of their guilt in sin because they had rejected the truth. He would be able to work beneath the defenses they might raise to the spoken word and convince them of their need for salvation. He would also convict them of righteousness because the world does not observe the standards of God. The Holy Spirit would confirm to the hearts of men that what Jesus taught and did was right. Finally, He would convict the world of the reality of coming judgment. Satan was already condemned and all who remained under his rule would be condemned with him. The Holy Spirit, then, would be a witness to the message the disciples had been entrusted to proclaim. They would teach the truth and He would plant it in the hearts and minds of people so that it might take root.

3) Communication (John 16:12-15). Perhaps what the disciples would miss the most when Jesus left was His availability to teach and talk with them. They had grown accustomed to asking questions and listening to His perspectives on the people and
events around them. Jesus promised that communication would go on even though He would not be physically with them. He told them that there were many other things He wanted to say to them, but time and their ability to absorb it all were limited. However, the Holy Spirit would continue the process, directing them into truth and telling them the things Jesus wanted them to know. He would not create new ideas, but He would give them the truth Jesus still wanted to communicate to them.

Discussion:

1) Read John 16:7. What advantages were gained by the coming of the Holy Spirit? How is His presence in your life better than the time the disciples enjoyed with Jesus?

2) What do people understand when they are convicted by the Holy Spirit of sin, righteousness, and judgment? Why is such conviction so necessary in the lives of people?

3) According to the following verses, how did the Holy Spirit fulfill the promise to reveal God's truth to the disciples?
   (a) Acts 10:9-20
   (b) II Corinthians 12:1-4
   (c) II Timothy 3:16-17
   (d) II Peter 1:20-21

4) How does the Holy Spirit continue His work of guiding you to the truth today? What do I Corinthians 2:9-16 and Ephesians 6:17 say about this issue?

Application:

Jesus continued to tell His disciples how their needs would be cared for after His departure. The key player was the Holy Spirit who would take Jesus' place as their teacher and companion in an even more intimate manner. He used the disciples to record God's revelation in the Bible for us today, and He continues to teach us using that revelation. We, like the disciples, are called to be messengers of the kingdom. We speak the truth and the Holy Spirit convicts men of the truth of our proclamation. We may face opposition to our message, but it has been given supernatural effectiveness through the Holy Spirit. We actually enjoy closer communication with God than the disciples had when Jesus was with them, for the Holy Spirit lives within us, unlimited by time or location. He is available to teach us at any time and to work through our obedience as the representatives of Jesus on the earth.

Life of Christ Study #107

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John 16:16-33

Theme: Upper Room: Proven Promises

Summary:

Jesus had given His disciples many assurances and promises to ease their minds about His departure from them. Yet there was still something lacking in their understanding, and they could not seem to see past that one huge, dark cloud. Jesus was leaving them, and they were confused and frightened. He told them that, although He would be with them only a little while longer, they would see Him again soon (John 16:16). This only added to their frustration, for it sounded like a riddle to them. They looked to each other for answers, but they could find no solutions (John 16:17-18). The fact still remained that the King was going to die and they would be without His presence. Jesus knew that unless they were convinced of the promises He was making they would continue to be paralyzed by doubts and fears. They desperately needed hope, and that hope could only come through faith in Him and His words. They needed more than encouraging ideas. They needed something that would replace their misgivings with solid confidence.

1) Joy (John 16:19-24). Jesus knew the questions that were troubling His disciples, so He answered them before they were asked to Him. He told them that they would indeed experience a time of loss and grief for a while. They would mourn while the world would celebrate His death. But their grief would soon be replaced with joy. Just as a new mother forgets the pain of the birth process when she sees her baby, the disciples would experience a joy that would supplant their sorrow completely, for they would see Him again, a reference to His resurrection from the tomb. At that time, they would no longer need to ask Him for anything. By His authority they could ask God directly and it would be given to them so that their joy would never fade.

2) Love (John 16:25-28). Jesus admitted that sometimes He used figurative language to portray truth to the disciples. Perhaps this was because they were not able to understand things of the kingdom which they could not see and had not experienced. But when the Holy Spirit would come, they would be able to receive truth about God in plain language, for they would understand. That is when they could begin asking God for what they needed under the authority of Jesus. They would ask directly, no longer needing Jesus to explain things and to voice requests for them. Because they loved Jesus and accepted His claim to be from God, the Father loved them and would show His love by giving them the things they
needed. Jesus came from God into the world and now He would leave the world and return to the Father.

3) Peace (John 16:29-33). At last, the disciples began to understand all that Jesus had been telling them about His departure and the new relationship they would enjoy through the Holy Spirit. The riddles were answered and the truth was clear. When they saw how Jesus answered their question even before they asked it (see John 16:18-19), they realized again that Jesus was from God and His promises could be trusted, even if He was not with them physically. Jesus rejoiced with them, for the faith they would need to face the world was finally taking hold. Yet there would be severe testing, and He warned them of one test which would occur that same night. They would be scattered and would desert Him. But, even when that happened, God would still be in control and His plan would continue. Jesus told His disciples that they could have peace in the midst of those times of turmoil, for, although the circumstances of the world would constantly give them trouble, they had the assurance that He had already won the victory over the world. Even in war they could find peace, for the outcome was already decided.

Discussion:

1) Why is it sometimes difficult to believe that God's promises are really true? What circumstances or events have made it difficult for you to believe at times?

2) Read John 16:20-24. How can these verses help you in times of doubt and uncertainty? What does God want you to do in those times?

3) How do some people try to earn God's love? According to John 16:27, what has placed you in the position of receiving God's love?

4) Read John 16:32-33. Does Jesus promise that life in this world will be easy for His people? What does He want you to understand when you have trouble in this world?

Application:

The disciples had received some wonderful promises and assurances from Jesus in the upper room after their last meal together. But those promises would be effective in their lives only if they believed them. At first, their concerns and fears about His departure filled their thoughts and they could not grasp the importance of what Jesus was saying. Finally, however, they returned to the trust in Him that had been built in their times together and they reaffirmed their
faith in Him. Circumstances and feelings can drown out the solid truth of God at times, and we can be overwhelmed with fear and doubts. But we must remember that the One who gave us His promises is not changed by the difficulties and pains of this world. He has already conquered them, and His joy, love, and peace are offered to us if we will trust Him. Trouble in this world does not alter the victory He has won and given to us. We can ask and God will answer.

Life of Christ Study #108

John 17:1-26

Theme: Upper Room: The King's Prayer

Summary:

The discussion in the upper room had reached a crucial turning point. The disciples had affirmed their faith in Jesus and His promises (see John 16:29-31). They could now face His departure with hope and the confidence of God's provision through the Holy Spirit. This being settled, Jesus shifted His role with the disciples from teacher to intercessor, the position He continues to fill for His people today (see Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). His prayer reflected this transition which would take place upon the completion of His work of securing eternal life for those who would trust Him. The King had not come to conquer and to rule. He had come to call, confirm, and prepare subjects who would do the work of His kingdom, so that it could continue to exist and spread without His physical presence. Therefore, it was natural that His prayer in the upper room should be directed toward the remaining work He had to do, the men who would be His representatives after He left, and those who would become part of the kingdom through the testimony they would set in motion.

1) For Himself (John 17:1-5). Jesus knew that His work upon the earth was almost finished, and He also knew that a cruel death awaited Him. But His thoughts went beyond the pain of the next day to the glory of returning to His Father in triumph. He had laid aside His glory to come to earth to purchase eternal life for those entrusted to Him. That life could be gained only through faith in Him as God's Messiah and could be accomplished only through His death. However, as He had told His disciples, His ultimate destination was to return to His Father and reclaim the glory He had temporarily relinquished. The cross must come, but afterward would come glory. He asked God to provide the glory as He faithfully accepted the death.

2) For His disciples (John 17:6-19). Part of the work Jesus had completed was the preparation of
His disciples. God had entrusted them to His care and He had revealed God and His plan to them. They heard and believed and obeyed, accepting Jesus as God's chosen King. Now Jesus prayed specifically for them, for although He was leaving the world, they would remain in it as His representatives. While He was with them, He had protected them from the hostility of men and the lies of the devil, but now He asked God to watch over them and keep them unified in their faith. Only Judas had fallen away, and even his desertion was used to fulfill God's plan. The rest would be hated by the world because of their commitment and identification with Jesus, so He prayed that they would have God's protection in the world from their great enemy the devil. They would continue to live in the world, but they would not be accepted as part of it because they were set apart as subjects of God's kingdom, living by His truth. Jesus sent them into the world as His representatives and dedicated Himself to completing God's work so that they could also be fully set apart for God.

3) For all His people (John 17:20–26). If the disciples remained true to their mission, then the result would be many more being brought into the kingdom through their testimony. Jesus anticipated this and prayed for those who would come later. He prayed that they would maintain unity so that the world could see God's glory through their lives. After the disciples, they would be His new representatives upon the earth. Then, they also would be taken to the glory that Jesus enjoyed with God. Until that time, Jesus promised that He would continue His work of bringing eternal life to people through them. His immediate work, now drawing to completion, could, in this way, go on through each successive generation of new disciples.

Discussion:

1) Compare the thoughts of Jesus in John 17:1–5 with those of Paul in II Timothy 4:6–8. What brought them comfort when facing death? How does this affect your view of death?

2) Read John 17:6–8. What had the disciples demonstrated that gave Jesus confidence that they were ready to be His representatives? Why are these items important for someone who is going to represent Jesus in the world?

3) Read John 17:15–19. To "sanctify" means to set apart for holy use. As a representative of Jesus in the world, what are some specific areas in which you need to be sanctified by His truth?

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4) Read John 17:20-23. Why do you think unity was such an important part of Jesus' prayer for His future representatives? What do you think it means to have unity among His people?

Application:

In His upper room prayer Jesus asked for God's power and protection upon the entire kingdom plan. His death would secure eternal life for those who believed, but it would be up to His representatives, beginning with the disciples and continuing with those who would believe their testimony, to take the message of the kingdom to the world. He knew that we, as part of that group, would face opposition and hostility from the world if we remain faithful to His truth. He also knew that our treatment of one another, our unity, will greatly influence the credibility of our testimony. He certainly did not promise an easy or comfortable road in this world, but we can go forward with the assurance that He has prayed for us and continues to intercede for us. He knows the difficulties and obstacles in our way, and He has already made provision for them so that we can complete the work He has left to us.

Life of Christ Study #109


Theme: Gethsemane

Summary:

Before leaving the upper room Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn of prayer together (see Matthew 26:30; John 18:1). Then they went out of the city through the Golden Gate which opened from the temple grounds. Crossing the Kidron Valley they went up the slopes of the Mount of Olives to the garden of Gethsemane which was nestled almost directly opposite the temple. Apparently, it was a favorite spot that Jesus often used when He was near Jerusalem (see Luke 22:39). It was probably late evening when they arrived, so the garden would have been empty of other visitors. Jesus had special need of this quiet place on that Thursday night, for the nearness of His suffering and death weighed heavily upon Him. The disciples probably could not fully understand the depths of His feelings. Even though they were present with Him, He had reached the part of His journey on earth which He had to travel completely alone.

1) Arrogance (Matthew 26:31-35). The heaviness Jesus felt became evident before they even came to Gethsemane. Along the way, He predicted that the disciples, His most trusted companions, would all desert Him that night. When the shepherd was struck down, the sheep would flee (see Zechariah 13:7). Yet He also promised that He would arrive
back in Galilee ahead of them after His resurrection. Peter, perhaps still stinging from the prediction that he would deny Jesus three times (see Luke 22:31-34), again boasted that he would remain with Jesus even if all the others deserted. Jesus repeated His forecast of three denials. Peter emphatically vowed that he would follow Jesus to death before disowning Him, and the other disciples, not to be outdone, voiced the same declaration. In their arrogance, they overestimated their own courage and underestimated the suffering that lay before Jesus.

2) Agony (Matthew 26:36-39). Jesus alone understood the pain that lay before Him. He would suffer physically and emotionally, but even more than this, He would suffer spiritually as He paid the price for the sins of the world. Upon entering the garden of Gethsemane He told eight of the disciples to remain behind while He went further in with Peter, James, and John to pray. To these three He revealed some of the burden which pressed down on Him. He told them that His soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Then He asked them to stay near Him and pray while He went a little farther to pray alone. Finally, He fell to the ground and asked His Father to complete the work in another way if possible, yet He committed Himself to obeying God's will and not His own feelings or inclinations. God answered by sending an angel to comfort Him as His agony became so great that sweat poured from Him like blood (see Luke 22:43-44).

3) Apathy (Matthew 26:40-46). It is a startling contrast that while Jesus agonized in prayer and chose to endure the suffering of the cross, the disciples could not even fend off a case of drowsiness. He asked Peter why they could not stay alert with Him for even an hour, an ironical question considering Peter's earlier boast of being willing to endure death for Jesus. Then He warned them to pray so that they might withstand the trial that was coming, for although He did not doubt their devotion to Him, their fear could easily overcome their commitment. Leaving them He went back and prayed a second time, again committing Himself to completing God's plan even if it meant this bitter cup of suffering. He returned once more to find the disciples sleeping again. This time He did not wake them but went back to His place of prayer. When He came back from His third session of prayer, the disciples were still asleep. He roused them with a gentle rebuke for their carelessness. They had vowed to stand by their King, yet even now, while they slept, His betrayer had come upon them with a
crowd of enemies.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 26:31-35. Have you ever made bold promises to God that you later failed to keep? What was missing from the disciples' commitment to stand by Jesus?

2) Read Matthew 26:38. What kind of suffering was Jesus facing physically, emotionally, and spiritually? Which do you think weighed upon Him the most? Why?

3) Read Matthew 26:39. Why do you think Jesus asked for the cup of suffering to be taken from Him? Why do you think He committed to accepting it if necessary to complete God's will? What example does this set for your life?

4) Read Matthew 26:40-41. What had happened to the bold promise the disciples made in Matthew 26:33-35? Are sincere promises enough to enable you to obey God? What else is necessary?

Application:

There is no doubt that the disciples genuinely loved Jesus and were committed to following Him. The promises they made of enduring death with Him were spoken in all sincerity. But they little understood the trial that awaited them nor did they evaluate their own weakness honestly. They could not even endure fatigue for Jesus in spite of their good intentions. At His moment of personal crisis they slept. Fortunately, Jesus did not require their support to choose to go through with God's plan, just as He does not need our perfection to accomplish His work today. He values our spoken promises but He also knows their true substance. Pride can lead us to overestimate our importance and ability. We must never forget that without God's help the actual moment of temptation may well prove more than we anticipated. Perhaps it would be wiser to follow the example of Jesus, committing ourselves to God's will and praying for His strength to do it.

Life of Christ Study #110


Theme: Betrayal and Arrest

Summary:

Arranging the arrest of Jesus was no simple task for the religious officials. They had centered their efforts on the Passover celebration since they knew He would be in Jerusalem (see John 11:55-57). But their frustration grew during the
week, for they could not take any action against Him for fear of raising the rage of the crowds (see Luke 20:19). Finally, Judas presented the opportunity they sought when he agreed to alert them when Jesus was alone and unprotected by the people (see Luke 22:1-6). When Jesus led His disciples from the upper room and out of the city to the garden of Gethsemane, the trap was already set. Judas, who had left the gathering early (see John 13:27-30), knew that it was a favorite place for Jesus (John 18:2). The priests and Pharisees apparently had a detachment of soldiers on call for the occasion, and they set out quickly for the Mount of Olives, probably feeling the first excitement of their triumph. Little did they realize that all their schemes had already been incorporated into God's plan and that their moment of victory was allowed only to accomplish His purposes.

1) God's work (John 18:3-9). The soldiers who accompanied Judas were probably members of the Jewish temple guard. Since the religious leaders wished to impose the death penalty on Jesus, there was most likely at least a representation of the Roman military as well. Some of the religious officials came also, to make sure everything went smoothly with their plan. The number of soldiers was unusually large for the arrest of one man and they were well armed (see Matthew 26:47). Jesus was expecting them and asked who they wanted. When they replied, He identified Himself and they were all swept back so that they fell to the ground. Jesus would not be taken by the numbers or weapons of men. He would go by choice to do His Father's work. Again He asked them who they wanted and again they told Him, probably trembling a bit this time. Jesus again identified Himself and requested that His disciples be allowed to go free. The work of God was His alone to do, and the burden did not fall on His disciples.

2) God's way (Matthew 26:48-54). Judas had told the officials that he would verify their prey by kissing Him. He greeted Jesus as his teacher and gave Him a kiss of friendship. Jesus chided him for using such an intimate gesture for such a wicked purpose (see Luke 22:48). Then the guards seized Jesus to lead Him away. The disciples at first did not grasp what was happening, but when they saw their Master grabbed by soldiers, they began to panic. Peter drew his sword and aimed a blow at the high priest's slave whose name was Malchus (see John 18:10). The stroke missed his head but sliced off one of his ears. Jesus immediately interposed before the fight could escalate. He commanded Peter and the others to put their swords away, for that way led only to their deaths. Then He touched the slave's severed ear and it was healed (see Luke 22:51). Jesus explained that He did not want resistance because His arrest was part of God's plan (see
John 18:11). If He wanted, God would send thousands of angels to His defense, but He gave Himself into the hands of the soldiers willingly because God had planned it that way.

3) God's will (Mark 14:48-52). By this time, it was clear to everyone that Jesus could stop the arrest at any time, but He chose not to do so. He admonished those who had come against Him for their method. They brought weapons as though He were a dangerous rebel or criminal, yet they had not dared to touch Him while He taught publicly in the temple courts. They saved their evil accusations and actions for the cover of darkness (see Luke 22:53). Then He submitted to the arrest, saying that it was solely because the word of God must be fulfilled. When the disciples realized that He was really going to allow the soldiers to take Him, they fled into the night. Only one young man, possibly Mark the writer of the Gospel himself, tried to stay near Jesus, but when the soldiers laid hands on him, he slipped out of his garment and ran away naked. Jesus was left alone in the hands of His enemies.

Discussion:

1) Read John 18:2-6. Why did the religious leaders bring so many soldiers with them? Why did they plan the arrest at night in a lonely place?

2) How did Jesus show them that their strength and secrecy were useless? Who was really in charge of the arrest? How does this illustrate the principle of Genesis 50:20 that God uses even the evil of men for His good purposes?

3) Read Matthew 26:51-54. Why does God sometimes choose to not do what He could do? Why might He choose not to do what you ask Him to do?

4) Read Mark 14:48-49. What do these verses suggest about the legality of the action against Jesus? If the religious officials really believed that He was a criminal worthy of death, what should they have done when He taught in the temple courts?

Application:

The religious leaders planned and schemed and plotted to find a way to safely bring charges against Jesus. They lied and hired a spy among His followers. They prepared a large force to surround Him and prevent His escape. They moved at night to avoid any intervention from the crowds who listened to Him. Then, at the end of all their careful preparations, when their desires are about to be fulfilled, they are told that all of their actions were known and permitted only because they furthered God's will. Such is the lot of anyone
who is motivated by greed or jealousy or selfishness. They will find that all their decisions and deeds were used to serve God's plan and that they have made Him their enemy in the process. Jesus could have stopped His opponents at any time, but He let them play their part so that His Father's will could be accomplished. No circumstance is ever outside of God's control, no matter what the people involved think. The disciples fled from Jesus because they could not see this. Will we also run?

Life of Christ Study #111


Theme: The Jewish Trial

Summary:

The central representation of the power of the Jewish religious leaders was the Sanhedrin, a supreme court of Jewish law. It consisted of three groups or tiers of officials which were named in Mark 14:53. The highest tier was the "chief priests", including the present and former high priests and certain temple officers. Next came the "elders", a set of influential citizens of Jerusalem. Finally, there were the "teachers of the law", also called scribes who were mostly Pharisees. This body decided on all matters of Jewish law with the permission of the Roman government. Yet its power was limited since Palestine was an imperial province. The Sanhedrin could not enforce the death penalty. Such cases had to be referred to the Roman legal system once they had been judged on the Jewish level. Thus, even though Jesus was in the hands of the religious officials, the road to His death still had to pass through certain stages. With the Passover quickly approaching and in their eagerness to deal with Him swiftly and finally the Jewish leaders wanted to travel that road in as little time as possible.

1) Interrogation (John 18:13-24). Annas had been deposed as high priest by the Roman government in A.D. 15, but his religious and political influence were still strong among the Jews. Apparently, he was one of the key players behind the arrest of Jesus, for the temple soldiers brought their prisoner to him first for some private questioning. Peter and another of the disciples, probably John, followed them to the house. John had some previous connection with the high priest and so was allowed to enter the courtyard and to bring Peter with him. It was there that Peter faced and failed his first test as he denied that he was a follower of Jesus. Meanwhile, inside the house, Annas tried to expose hidden motives behind Jesus' ministry. Jesus reminded him that He had always spoken in public settings where both friends and foes could
hear His teaching. He requested witnesses to be brought from those who heard Him to confirm that He was not a rebel or a blasphemer. An official hit Him in the face for questioning the priest. Jesus again appealed to legal justice and challenged His assailant to give evidence of what He had said that was wrong. A legal proceeding was supposed to be a place for testimony not for blows. Annas ordered Him to be sent on to his son-in-law, Caiphas, the presiding high priest.

2) Evidence (Mark 14:53-65). The religious leaders were so anxious to rush Jesus to trial before the Passover that Caiphas, who had already reached his own verdict (see John 18:14), called a hurried session of the Sanhedrin at his house late that Thursday night. Peter again followed the mob and sat in the courtyard with the guards. The Sanhedrin tried to gather evidence against Jesus that would justify the death penalty, but no real evidence could be found. Not to be denied their opportunity they resorted to false witnesses, brought in for the specific purpose of lying about things Jesus had done or said. There was not even time to coach these villains properly and their testimony was full of contradictions. Old Testament law would have demanded their lives for such perjury (see Deuteronomy 19:16-19), but the Sanhedrin accepted their ramblings as if they had been above reproach. Caiphas then stood and demanded that Jesus answer the charges made against Him, but He remained silent. Lies deserved no other answer. Caiphas asked Him if He was the Messiah, the Son of God, and Jesus replied that He was and that all those present would someday see the proof when He sat with God to judge the earth (see Psalm 110:1; Daniel 7:13). The high priest tore his clothes in rage and declared that no more testimony was needed. He called on the Sanhedrin for their decision, and the group condemned Him as worthy of death. Then they expressed their hatred for Him through insults and beatings.

3) Verdict (Luke 22:66-71). It only remained for the Sanhedrin to enter its judgment in formal session so that the proceedings might have the appearance of propriety even if they were empty of the substance. Therefore, early on Friday morning, the priests, elders, and teachers of the law came together in their official chamber. Again Jesus was asked if He claimed to be the Messiah. This time he expressed His contempt for their mockery of justice. Judges were supposed to be impartial, but they had already decided not to believe His words. A court was supposed to produce evidence for its accusations, but they would not answer His questions. Yet that could not change the fact that He would soon sit as
Judge next to God. They asked if He claimed to be God's Son, and He affirmed their statement. Then they pronounced their verdict.

Discussion:

1) In a legal trial, what is the significance of the role and personal character of each of the following participants?
   (a) The judge  (c) The witnesses
   (b) The accuser  (d) The jury


3) How would you evaluate the accusers and witnesses in the trial? What was the real motivation of the religious leaders behind the whole case?

4) Read Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14. When Jesus quoted these verses in Mark 14:62, what was He really telling the religious leaders?

Application:

The religious leaders of Jerusalem, normally so meticulous about keeping the details of the law, were driven by their hatred and fear in the trial of Jesus. They finally had Him in their power, and neither the upcoming Passover nor the limitations of their authority under Roman rule was going to stop them from seeing their objective of His death accomplished as quickly as possible. At each stage of the proceedings it was clear that the verdict and sentence were predetermined, but form must be observed, so meetings were called, sham witnesses were obtained, and formal decisions were recorded. All this time, Jesus could have stopped everything with a word, but He had committed Himself to completing God's will. Therefore, He endured the accusations and lies and blows and insults to give life to those who believe.

Life of Christ Study #112


Theme: Peter's Denials

Summary:

On the night Jesus was arrested, as He was led through the stages of the Jewish trial, Peter followed the proceedings from a distance. In the upper room, Jesus had predicted that Peter, in spite of his bold protestations, would have a crisis of faith and would deny Him three times before the rooster
heralded the coming of dawn (see Luke 22:31-34). A short while later, as they made their way out of the city toward the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had said again that all His disciples would desert Him that night. Again, Peter had declared the most loudly that he at least would follow Jesus to death (see Matthew 26:31-35). But strong proclamations are easy to make before the danger is seen, and in the actual moment of soldiers and swords, Peter, after one brave but foolish act of loyalty (see Matthew 26:51), had fled with the rest (see Matthew 26:55-56). The rest of his night was spent in the miserable state between wanting to keep his promise to stand with Jesus and fearing to come too close lest he also be dragged to possible execution.

1) At the house of Annas (Matthew 26:69-70). The Gospel writers seemed to be more concerned with recording Peter's denials than with specifying where each occurred. Thus, John alone mentioned that the first took place during the first stage of the Jewish trial at the house of Annas (see John 18:15-18). Peter had gained entrance to the courtyard through John, and he sat down among a group huddled around a fire (see Luke 22:55). The serving girl who had let him in now approached him and said that she recognized him as one of the followers of Jesus. Perhaps he feared that his attack on the servant Malchus would be punished (see John 18:10), or maybe he thought it prudent to avoid all association with the man the soldiers had arrested. Whatever the reason, Peter denied any connection with Jesus in front of the curious group.

2) At the house of Caiaphas (Matthew 26:71-74). John related that Annas sent Jesus on to his son-in-law Caiaphas (see John 18:24). Peter was probably terrified by his near discovery, but he was drawn to follow the procession. He could not desert Jesus entirely and wanted to see what would happen, so he again found a place in the courtyard among the servants (see Matthew 26:57-58). He got up to walk over to the gate and was met by another cluster of people who marked him as a disciple of Jesus. It seems that his denial of their questions was repeated more than once as he sought to disengage himself from their staring eyes and pointing fingers (compare Matthew 26:72, Mark 14:69, and Luke 22:58). But they continued to speculate among themselves until they approached him yet again with their charge. This time, a certain slave affirmed that he had seen Peter with Jesus in Gethsemane (see John 18:26). While false witnesses testified against Jesus inside, the evidence against Peter mounted outside. In desperation Peter vehemently denied his connection with Jesus with curses. At that moment, a rooster crowed.

3) At the depths of failure (Matthew 26:75). Peter
knew that he had failed the test in every aspect. His boasts of loyalty and courage were worthless. His comparisons to the other disciples mocked him. His true feelings and good intentions seemed empty. All that remained was the echo of the rooster in his ears and the sting of bitter tears as he rushed out of the courtyard. He had thought he was prepared to stand for the King, and that made his fall all the more painful (see I Corinthians 10:12). He remembered the prediction Jesus had made of his failure, but perhaps it was not as easy for him to recall that Jesus had also foretold his recovery and restoration (see Luke 22:31-32). Peter's story would not end in the depths of failure he now felt.

**Discussion:**

1) Read Luke 22:31-32. Does your failure ever take God by surprise? If God knows you will fail, why does He allow it to happen? What does He want to bring out of it?

2) Is personal failure the end? Can you think of examples in the Bible of people who failed God but later were used greatly by Him?

3) Read Matthew 26:69-75. What feelings and circumstances did Peter experience that might have overwhelmed his commitment to stand by Jesus? What feelings and circumstances sometimes cause your commitment to waver?

4) Read I Corinthians 10:12-13. How would you apply these verses to Peter's failure? What help do they give to keep you from falling?

**Application:**

There can be no doubt that Peter was truly committed to Jesus, but the events of that Thursday night proved too much for his good intentions and simple courage. He thought he could stand when the test came, but his pride betrayed him and he denied his Master three times to others. Shame, guilt, and sorrow weighed heavily upon him afterwards, yet they were to be the prelude to a new strength founded not on human bravery but on God's power. Failure is never pleasant, but it is often very necessary if we are to learn where our trust should be placed. God knows our weakness before we do, and He makes provision for it in the process of the growth He wishes to develop in our lives. It does not excuse our sin, but it places it firmly within the framework of His grace and mercy. Failure does not have to be the end. It can produce a new and better beginning.

Life of Christ Study #113

268
Matthew 27:1-10

Theme: A Traitor's Recompense

Summary:

Peter was not the only one of the twelve disciples who experienced a personal crisis that night that Jesus was arrested. While Peter withdrew to the bitter contemplation of his failure, Judas, whose deal with the religious leaders had precipitated the events of the night, stepped back into the swirl surrounding the trial and hurried meetings. The Gospels do not tell where he spent the hours after his treachery in the garden of Gethsemane just as they do not say clearly what motivated him to turn against His Master. He was without doubt a man unsettled in his heart, watching and participating in the fellowship of his peers while secretly stealing from their treasury (see John 12:2-8). He could leave a time of intimate sharing in the upper room to make the arrangements for betraying Jesus. He earned his thirty pieces of silver by revealing where the religious officials could find and seize Jesus away from the protection of the crowds. But the money was not the final payment on his disloyalty, and he would lose much more than he gained.

1) Realization (Matthew 27:1-2). Judas was part of the procession which took Jesus away from the garden that Thursday night. Whether he accompanied the prisoner to the various stages of the Jewish trial is unknown, but he kept informed of the proceedings if he was not there personally. When the Sanhedrin gathered early on Friday morning to confirm the verdict and sentence (see Luke 22:66-71), something apparently broke through to the mind of Judas. Perhaps he had not expected things to go this far or perhaps he simply saw for the first time his own guilt in the condemnation of an innocent man. He had hardened his heart through the steps of plotting, informing, and at the actual arrest, but no amount of hardness could prevent a realization of the horror of his deed from penetrating his thoughts. If Peter felt the accusing sting of failure, what agonizing reproach must have stabbed the soul of the betrayer! As Jesus was bound and led away to the Roman authorities, one man bore the awful weight of righteous blame.

2) Remorse (Matthew 27:3-5). Realization turned to remorse as Judas contemplated what he had done. He went to the chief priests and elders with whom he had made the bargain and gave back the thirty pieces of silver. He told them that he had sinned and that Jesus was innocent, but he was confessing to the wrong people. The religious officials did not care about guilt and innocence
or about the misery of their hired tool. The deed was done and they would not undo it now that Jesus was finally in their power. They offered Judas no comfort for his guilt but dismissed him as a nuisance to their gloating. Judas was a crushed man, but remorse is not the same as repentance. He had found no forgiveness from the religious leaders and he sought none from God. He threw the money down, went out from the city, and hanged himself. Apparently, before his body was found it fell from its gallows and burst open (see Acts 1:18).

3) Reprobation (Matthew 27:6-10). The treachery of Judas continued to repay him even after it caused his death. The chief priests were reluctant to put the thirty pieces of silver into the temple treasury, for they knew it was tainted and unclean. True to their shallow form of righteousness, they could condemn the life of the one it betrayed and coldly disown the one who had received it from their own hands, but they treated it as below their spiritual dignity. They were probably ignorant of the prophecy they fulfilled when they used it to buy a field from a maker of pottery (see Zechariah 11:12-13). The field would be used as a burial ground for those who were not part of the Jewish community. Ironically, the field they purchased was the one in which Judas had killed himself (see Acts 1:18-19). Perhaps he was the first one buried there, rejected by his people, cut off by his own deed from his companions, separated from God, and forgotten by those with whom he conspired.

Discussion:

1) Describe a time when you bought something only to discover that it carried some hidden costs. How is this similar to the way people are drawn into sin? What are some of the hidden costs?

2) Read Matthew 27:1-4. What do you think Judas had hoped to gain through betraying Jesus? Why do you think he was overcome with remorse?

3) What is the difference between remorse, such as Judas felt, and repentance? Why isn't feeling sorry for your sin enough?

4) If you had met Judas as he was leaving the temple and he told you what he had done, what counsel would you have given him?

Application:

There is nothing so hopeless as the utter desolation of sin without hope of forgiveness. Peter felt bitter shame and remorse when he denied Jesus, but that was light in comparison
to the terrible weight which fell upon Judas when he realized too late the depth of his crime. His despairing sorrow was no doubt real, yet when it came he could not or would not turn to God for mercy. He could not change what he had done and he was scorned by those who had helped him to do it. The cost of his sin was too bitter to endure, and so he ended his own life, abandoned by men and cut off from God by his own choice. It is a dismal picture of the blindness and despair sin produces in a person's life. It is a picture of remorse without repentance. No amount of sorrow can erase the stain of sin. Only the forgiveness and mercy of God through Jesus can bring hope to the guilty heart.

Life of Christ Study #114


Theme: The Roman Trial

Summary:

Pontius Pilate was appointed prefect of the Imperial Province of Judea in A.D. 26. In theory, since Judea was considered a trouble spot, the emperor himself ruled the area through Pilate. He was in charge of financial and legal administration as well as directing the military control. Upon taking the position he alienated the Jewish population through keeping the military headquarters from Caesarea to Jerusalem along with the banners which carried the image of the emperor. This was seen as a sacrilege by the Jews, and, after a tense confrontation, Pilate finally agreed to send the banners back to Caesarea. At a later time, he gave the orders which resulted in the deaths of some Galilean Jews who had come to Jerusalem for a religious festival (see Luke 13:1). Yet the Jewish officials were willing to set aside their mistrust and animosity for Pilate in order to gain his authorization for the execution of Jesus. The Sanhedrin had already pronounced the death penalty upon Him for blasphemy (see Luke 22:70-71), but without Roman sanction they could not enforce their decision. Therefore, Jesus was taken to Pilate.

1) Innocent by law. (John 18:28-38). Pilate was in Jerusalem to regulate the busy Passover festival. He stayed in the Praetorium, a palace built by Herod the Great inside the western wall of the city. When they came to the gates of the palace about daybreak, the Jews would not enter that Gentile structure for fear of defiling themselves during the festival, so Pilate came outside to meet them and asked what the charges were against Jesus. Blasphemy had been decided at the Jewish trial, but this was not a capital offense under Roman law, so they changed their accusations to inciting rebellion and declaring Himself a king (see Luke 23:2). Pilate was inclined to let the Jews declare their own sentence, but they
insisted on pressing for the death penalty. Then Pilate held a personal interview with Jesus about the charges. Jesus contended that if His kingdom were earthly, His followers would riot to prevent His arrest. He was a king, but His job was to testify to the truth not to build an empire. Pilate probably regarded Him as a philosopher, annoying but not dangerous. He reported to the Jews that he found Jesus innocent of the charges they brought against Him.

2) Endangered by fear (Luke 23:6-16). There was nothing a Roman prefect feared more than a riot. The Jewish leaders renewed their accusations against Jesus so vocally that Pilate called upon Him to answer their charges personally, but He refused (see Luke 23:5; Matthew 27:13-14). Pilate felt the difficulty of his position, for the crowd at his door was clamoring for action, yet he could find no legal reason to authorize an execution. When he heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he grabbed for a way out by referring the case to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, who happened to be staying nearby in the city. Herod, the same ruler who had imprisoned and executed John the Baptist for denouncing his sin (see Mark 6:14-29), was happy to have an opportunity to see Jesus, for he had heard of His reputation and hoped He might be persuaded to perform a miracle in his presence. He questioned Jesus at length, but Jesus refused to answer his shallow curiosity. Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders repeated their demands and charges to Herod. He probably did not want to deal with anything so substantial, so he mocked Jesus and sent Him back to Pilate dressed in a rich robe.

3) Convicted by mob (John 18:39-19:16). The matter was now back in Pilate's unwilling hands, but he saw one final way to avoid the responsibility of condemning a man he considered innocent. It was customary for him to pardon one convicted prisoner of the people's choice each year at the feast (see Matthew 27:15). Therefore, he presented them with a choice between Jesus and a known rebel and murderer named Barabbas (see Matthew 27:16-17). He proposed to release Jesus after punishing Him for being a nuisance (see Luke 23:13-16). While he awaited their reply, his wife sent word begging him to release Jesus, for she had dreamed about Him (see Matthew 27:19). But the religious leaders had done their work well, probably spreading the charges of blasphemy throughout the crowd and praising Barabbas as a Jewish hero (see Matthew 27:20). Thus, the mob shouted for the release of Barabbas and the death of Jesus. Pilate, fearing a riot, had Jesus whipped and then presented Him again as an innocent man! But the people screamed for His
death until Pilate took Him inside the Praetorium. There, in frustration he questioned Jesus again, but Jesus gave him no help. Meanwhile, the people began to accuse Pilate of harboring an enemy of Caesar. Finally, Pilate symbolically washed his hands of responsibility (see Matthew 27:24-25) and gave his authority for Jesus to be crucified.

Discussion:

1) Compare the accusations of the Jewish trial in Mark 14:58 with those of the Roman Trial in Luke 23:2. Why would the Jewish leaders change their charges?

2) Read Luke 23:15-16 and 22. Why would Pilate twice declare Jesus innocent yet offer to punish Him? What motivated him throughout the trial?


4) According to I Peter 2:19-23, how did Jesus serve as an example to us during His trial? What principles did He practice in handling insults and unjust suffering?

Application:

Pilate was more concerned with keeping peace than with justice, and Herod Antipas cared for little other than his own selfish fancies. Yet these two men were the human judges who decided the fate of God's Son. Pilate found Him innocent under examination but condemned Him anyway out of fear of what the crowds, incited by the religious leaders, might do. Jesus would find no fairness or truth that day, yet He knew His life was in far greater hands than those of weak and capricious men (see John 19:11). Today, people look for stability in institutions governed by similar motives and weaknesses, but they will not find it there. God still reigns above the decisions and desires of human rulers. He alone is worthy of our trust.

Life of Christ Study #115


Theme: The Crucifixion I

Summary: Crucifixion was a means of capital punishment designed to maximize the pain and humiliation of its victims. It was usually reserved for those guilty of the most hated crimes.
Among these was inciting revolution, the charge presented to Pilate against Jesus (see Luke 23:2). In such cases, crucifixion served as a display of Rome's wrath against any who would defy the empire's authority. The execution was intended to be violent, ugly, and agonizing to warn any who might be inspired by the example of a rebel. The nails were placed to avoid death by blood loss but to ensure severe pain from the severing or crushing of important nerves in the wrists and feet. Along with an upright post and a crossbar, a Roman cross usually included a horizontal block as a rough seat. Its purpose was not to relieve suffering but to prolong it by providing an extra bit of insufficient support to the body. A victim could linger on the cross from as little as a few hours to as much as a few days. It was a public mockery in which the victim was displayed nearly naked in physical weakness and suffering while the soldiers customarily encouraged insults and ridicule from the onlookers. This was the death to which Jesus was condemned.

1) Before the cross (Mark 15:15-19). The Romans wasted no time in beginning the enactment of the sentence. Scourging was actually a typical part of the crucifixion process, for the pain and blood loss would add to the agony of the cross. Jesus, who had already been beaten at least once (see Mark 14:65), was stripped and tied to a post where a whip of leather thongs interlaced with lead balls and bone fragments was applied to lay open his back and legs. Then the soldiers gathered to mock and abuse Him further by placing a robe and a crown of thorns upon Him to deride His claim to be a king. They struck Him on the head with a wooden staff and spit on Him while others knelt before Him and called upon Him in pretended worship.

2) On the way to the cross (Luke 23:26-33). Then, Jesus was made to carry His own crossbar, weighing about 100 pounds, to the site of execution. But the excessive harshness of the scourging had rendered Him too weak to bear the burden, so a man named Simon of Cyrene was pressed into this service. A crowd followed the spectacle, and among them were some women who wept for Him. He told them to shed tears for themselves rather than for Him because a time of great trouble was coming upon all Jerusalem, a prophecy that would be fulfilled in the brutal suppression of A.D. 70. If the Romans treated an innocent man so, their judgment would be even more terrible when the Jews actually rebelled. The procession ended at Golgotha, the Place of a Skull, where Jesus and two other victims were offered a mild analgesic in the form of wine mixed with myrrh, but Jesus refused it (see Mark 15:23). He would bear the full force of His suffering.

3) The first three hours on the cross (Luke 23:34-
43). To the Romans, it was just another schedule of executions, three men condemned to die for their crimes. They set to their work, and by nine o'clock that Friday morning Jesus hung on the cross. Long nails had been driven into his wrists, the crossbar had been lifted and attached to the upright post, and his feet had been affixed with another spike. Yet His first agonized words were far from typical from one so treated. He called on God to forgive the men who did their grim work in ignorance of who He was. They divided His clothing among themselves, not realizing that they were fulfilling Scripture (see John 19:23-24; Psalm 22:18). A placard was placed above the head of each victim proclaiming their crimes. The one above Jesus called Him "The King of the Jews." The religious leaders complained of this wording, but Pilate, already upset by the proceedings, refused to make any change (see John 19:20-22). The crowds taunted the victims, and the rulers especially mocked Jesus as one who claimed to be King and Messiah but was powerless to save Himself, much less His people. Even one of the dying criminals joined in the ridicule. But the other saw the difference that the soldiers and crowds missed. He recognized Jesus as an innocent man and furthermore believed that He was the Messiah. He asked Jesus to remember him in His kingdom and was promised entrance to Paradise with Him. Others were standing by who had also believed, and among them was Mary the mother of Jesus. He honored her to the last by entrusting her to the care and protection of His disciple John (see John 19:25-27).

Discussion:

1) Read the warning Jesus spoke to those who mourned for Him in Luke 23:27-31. His words referred to two Old Testament prophecies found in Isaiah 32:9–14 and Hosea 10:8–10. According to these, what should have been the concern of the people of Jerusalem?

2) Read Luke 23:33-34. Who do you think Jesus was forgiving? For what was He forgiving them? What example does this set for you in your relationships with those who hurt you?

3) Read John 19:23-24 and Mark 15:27-28. Why is it important that these prophecies were fulfilled during the crucifixion? What do they confirm to you about Jesus?

4) Evaluate the responses of each of the following to the crucifixion. What did each think of Jesus and His death?
   (a) Roman soldiers (d) Jewish leaders
Application:

Execution by crucifixion was not a rare occurrence around Jerusalem. Many had been condemned, scourged, mocked, and killed before, and many more would follow. The form of death was not unique, but the one who died was. He was an innocent man, manipulated to a cross by the hatred and zeal of His enemies. Instead of confessing His crimes from the cross, Jesus forgave the crime of those who unjustly accused and punished Him. To the Romans, He was a revolutionary to be tortured as an example and a warning. To the religious leaders, He was a blasphemer who threatened their cherished beliefs and structures. In reality, the inscription placed above Him on the cross told the truth. He was "The King of the Jews." Only those who recognize that fact experience the blessing of His sacrifice. He died with a purpose, no matter what the opinions of men may be, and that purpose was to save His people.

Life of Christ Study #116


Theme: The Crucifixion II

Summary:

A victim of crucifixion was not meant to die quickly. It was supposed to be a lingering, painful death in which the victim sometimes begged to be killed long before the execution was completed. The person was fixed to the cross in such a way that exhaustion and suffocation were the typical causes of death. In the meantime, each breath was an ordeal of physical and mental anguish. Breathing required the victim to push his body upwards, causing searing pain from the damaged nerves in his wrists and feet and chafing his back, which had already been laid open by scourging, against the rough wood of the upright post. Fatigue, extreme thirst, and muscle cramps added to the total experience of agony. After the first three hours on the cross, Jesus would have been wracked with pain even as He began to feel His life ebbing. Yet around Him, the religious leaders and soldiers mocked Him and reveled in His suffering.

1) The last three hours on the cross (Matthew 27:45-50). Even if Jesus found little sympathy among His torturers, God caused creation to mourn over Him. At noon, when the day should be brightest, darkness fell across the land, and it remained dark for the final three hours of the crucifixion. Those were three hours of silence, broken only by the groans of the dying and the taunts and tears of the onlookers. Near the end
of that time, Jesus suddenly cried out in an agony deeper than His physical pain. The One who had never sinned felt the awful separation from God that sin brings (see II Corinthians 5:21). His voice was probably distorted by gasps and effort so that some of the onlookers mistook His words as a cry to Elijah. They dipped a sponge in a jar of sour wine, placed there for the refreshment of the soldiers, and gave Him a drink. Then they waited to see if Elijah would respond to His plea. But Jesus spoke again, quoting David in committing His spirit into the care of God (see Psalm 31:5; Luke 23:46). Then He cried out once more that His work was done (see John 19:30), and so He died.

2) Around the cross (Matthew 27:51-56). When Jesus breathed His last, none of the groups of people watching was left untouched. While the religious leaders congratulated themselves on their victory, the heavy curtain which separated the holiest place in the temple from the area of general service was ripped from top to bottom. The system which the priests and Pharisees represented was rejected, and every person was given the opportunity of direct access to God. An earthquake shook the city and tombs were thrown open, releasing the risen bodies of many of God's people as death was crushed even as it claimed Jesus. These resurrected saints were seen by many people in the city. One of the Roman soldiers who, along with the others, had witnessed many executions, observed these events and the manner in which Jesus died (see Mark 15:39) with amazement. As a result, he concluded that Jesus was innocent (see Luke 23:47) and that He was truly the Son of God. The mass of people who had gathered to watch the crucifixion out of curiosity or spite were overcome with fear and grief as they saw what happened. Only those who had followed Jesus, including the faithful women who had been with Him all the way from Galilee, watched in relative calm.

3) After the cross (John 19:31-37). Then the scene returned to normal. The Jews did not want the bodies hanging on the cross during the Sabbath, so they requested that the legs of the criminals might be broken to hasten their deaths. The soldiers carried out this procedure on the two criminals next to Jesus, but when they came to Jesus, they found that He was already dead, an unusual occurrence after only six hours on the cross. To be doubly sure, they thrust a spear into His chest and blood and water came out, indicating that the stab had penetrated the heart. John the Gospel writer added his personal assurance that he had seen these events with his own eyes, and he cited the early death and the
spear wound as the fulfillment of prophecies about the Messiah (see Psalm 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10).

Discussion:

1) The Romans would have seen the crucifixion of Jesus as an execution. What does God call it according to Romans 3:25-26 and Hebrews 10:12-14?

2) According to Matthew 26:28 and Hebrews 9:22, why was the death of Jesus necessary in God’s plan to save men?

3) Read the following verses and list what the death of Jesus accomplished for those who put their faith in Him.
   
   (a) Romans 5:8-9
   (b) Ephesians 2:13-14
   (c) Colossians 1:19-22
   (d) I Peter 2:24


Application:

Others have suffered as much as Jesus did physically, but who can tell the agony He experienced when He became sin for us and was separated from God? Today, we who know Him and His salvation celebrate His death as a victory. But it was not celebrated on April 7, A.D. 30 except by His enemies. In the eyes of most that day Jesus was a pathetic, beaten corpse, crushed by the Roman powers and cast off by the Jewish establishment. Only a few, like the centurion, saw any deeper. Yet God would not let the event pass unnoticed, so He witnessed through darkness and earthquake, a torn curtain and empty tombs, that something great was accomplished. For us who have received forgiveness and eternal life, that Friday stands as the day that made all the difference. He died that we might live.

Life of Christ Study #117


Theme: The Tomb

Summary:

Once the crucifixion was over and Jesus was dead, most of the people hurried back to their preparations for the Passover Sabbath. Only a few hours remained until the darkness of night, and there was much to be done. For some,
however, the period of daylight left was still spent upon matters relating to Jesus. No work, especially having to do with death or burial, could be performed on Saturday, so if Jesus were to be buried, it would have to be done quickly. Normally, the body of a criminal executed by crucifixion would be thrown into a common grave and left unmarked. The Romans were especially emphatic about this when the person had been charged with rebellion. They wanted to make an example of such a felon with a cruel, public death and an ignominious burial. However, on occasions the body could be claimed by a friend or family member, provided the petitioner had sufficient influence with the governing authority.

1) Permission (Luke 23:50-52). Acting swiftly a prominent friend of Jesus gained an audience with Pilate and asked to be given custody of the body. Joseph of Arimathea was a rich member of the Sanhedrin, but when that group had voted to condemn Jesus, he had withheld his approval. He was a godly man among the hypocrites, a disciple of Jesus who had kept his loyalties secret before because he feared reprisal from his peers (see John 19:38). But after the crucifixion he boldly presented himself to Pilate, even though such an action would become known to the rest of the religious leaders. The prefect, who had not attended the execution, was at first surprised that Jesus had died so soon, but when the death was confirmed by the centurion, Pilate agreed to Joseph's request.

2) Preparation (Luke 23:53-56). Joseph was soon joined by Nicodemus, another one of the religious leaders who had believed in Jesus (see John 3:1-21). Nicodemus brought the spices and perfumed oil that would normally accompany a burial of honor (see John 19:39). Together they wrapped the body in strips of linen and placed it in Joseph's own family tomb (see Matthew 27:60). According to Jewish practice, the body would lay in a small chamber of the tomb for one year, until the flesh had rotted off the bones. Then, the bones would be placed in a box which would fit into a slot in the side wall of the tomb. The fact that Joseph and Nicodemus applied spices in preparing the body indicated that they were not thinking of Jesus' promise of resurrection. They only wished to honor the one who had taught them about God's kingdom. Some of the women, who had followed Him in His travels and witnessed His death, also watched as the body was taken into the tomb. Then they went to prepare more spices and perfumes to bring after the Sabbath was done. A large disk shaped stone was rolled across the entrance of the tomb and the kindly attendants went home.

3) Precaution (Matthew 27:62-66). One other group, not nearly as friendly toward Jesus as the others
and not so concerned about keeping the Sabbath, was also interested in His burial. The chief priests and Pharisees remembered that Jesus had predicted He would rise again after three days. They did not believe His prediction, of course, but they suspected that His disciples might plot to steal His body and claim that He had risen. So, even though it was by now the Sabbath, they also went to Pilate, and they asked him to assign a guard to the tomb until the end of the third day. Pilate gave them a group of soldiers along with his authority to make the tomb secure. They stationed the guard, inspected the stone, and placed a seal upon its edges so that, even if someone managed to elude the guards, any movement of the stone would be detected.

Discussion:

1) What proofs do you find in the following verses that Jesus was really dead? Why might the Gospel writers have felt it was important to offer these proofs?
   (a) John 19:33-34  (c) John 19:40
   (b) Mark 15:44-45  (d) Matthew 27:62-64

2) What do you think the following people felt when they realized that Jesus was really dead? What doubts and concerns might each have had?
   (a) The Pharisees  (c) Pilate
   (b) The disciples   (d) Peter

3) Read Luke 23:50-52 and John 19:38. How would you describe Joseph's commitment to Jesus before the crucifixion? What did he possibly risk by asking for the body?

4) Read Matthew 27:62-66. What did the religious leaders fear might happen if the body of Jesus was stolen?

Application:

In the aftermath of the crucifixion, it seemed that no one was really preparing for a resurrection. The enemies of Jesus were concerned about plots and frauds, but they did not seriously entertain the idea of a true escape from death. Joseph and Nicodemus and the women were genuinely grieved by what had happened and they wished to honor their Lord in His death, but theirs were acts of farewell and not expectation. The death had been witnessed by many and confirmed by military and religious officials. The possibility of a return to life was too much to hope. Even people of faith can struggle with promises that are outside their experience. We can look back on the crucifixion and burial with knowledge that the resurrection was soon to follow, a luxury those grieving witnesses of His death did not have. The challenge is for us to trust in the promises we have not yet seen fulfilled. That has always been the furnace where faith is tested and
Life of Christ Study #118


Theme: The Empty Tomb

Summary:

From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, the tomb would have remained quiet except for the guard which had been posted to watch over it. The women, who had witnessed the crucifixion and burial and had prepared spices and perfumes for the body, had to wait during the Sabbath. So, the body of Jesus lay in the tomb, and the Pharisees still congratulated each other on their victory, the friends of Jesus still mourned and wondered, and the guards still made sure that nothing out of the ordinary happened. But something was about to happen which was far beyond any human plot or precaution, for death had no legal claim upon the One who had died. The authority of death is through sin (see Romans 5:12), but Jesus had committed no sin. Therefore, the sentence of true death, eternal separation from God, could not be enacted against Him. The grave had no right to hold Him. What came next had to happen to preserve the justice of God's laws, and those who had confirmed the death and burial would now see and hear the triumph of the King's work.

1) The guards (Matthew 28:2-4). Sometime in the night, probably shortly before daybreak, the guards assigned to the tomb were disturbed by a severe earthquake. This alone might have been attributed to an aftershock of the tremors felt on Friday (see Matthew 27:51), but the appearance of an angel descending from above signified that it was no natural occurrence. The guards did not dare to intervene when the angel broke the seal and rolled away the stone which covered the entrance of the tomb. Apparently, they were somewhat blinded by the brightness of his appearance, and their fear prevented them from making any movement other than trembling until they were struck down in a faint. The angel sat upon the stone he had moved as if to guard the tomb from the guards who most likely fled as soon as they recovered sufficient strength (see Matthew 28:11).

2) The women (Luke 24:1-8). Joseph and Nicodemus had already applied spices to the body of Jesus when they buried Him (see John 19:39-40), but the faithful women who had followed Him from Galilee wanted to add their tribute as well. They had prepared some spices and perfumes before the Sabbath (see Luke 23:55-56), and, as soon as the
shops opened Sunday morning, they purchased more to take to the tomb (see Mark 16:1). As they approached the area of the tomb, they were concerned about how they would be able to anoint the body since the entrance was closed (see Mark 16:3). But when they arrived, they discovered that the stone had already been moved. They went in to search for the body, but it was gone. Suddenly, they were frightened by the appearance of two angels next to them. One of the angels told them that Jesus had risen and invited them to examine the place where His body had been laid (see Mark 16:6). The angels reminded them that Jesus had said He would rise from death on the third day (see Luke 9:22), so there was no point in looking for Him among the dead. They instructed the women to take the good news to the disciples so they could prepare to meet Him in Galilee (see Mark 16:7). The women ran from the tomb, filled with fear and joy (see Matthew 28:8; Mark 16:8).

3) The disciples (John 20:2-10). The women went straight to the disciples with their incredible news, but it was too much for them to comprehend. They would not believe that Jesus had really risen (see Luke 24:10-11). Mary Magdalene talked especially to Peter and John. She was distraught, not sure what to believe herself, and wondered if someone had stolen the body. Perhaps she thought the Romans or Jews had removed the body to a criminal's grave. Finally, Peter and John ran to investigate while Mary Magdalene followed. John arrived at the tomb first, but when he paused at the entrance to look inside, Peter pushed by him and actually went in before him. The linen wrappings were lying in a heap and the face cloth was rolled up by itself at a little distance. It was not the work of thieves, for they would hardly have unwrapped the body before taking it. John entered to see the evidence with Peter and then he believed what the women had reported and what Jesus had predicted. The two went away convinced of the resurrection but still uncertain of what to do next.

Discussion:

1) Read Matthew 28:2-4. What do you think were the expectations of the guards when they were assigned to watch the tomb? How did their presence lend support to the fact that Jesus arose from the dead?

2) Read Mark 16:1-3. What do you think were the expectations of the women when they walked to the tomb that Sunday morning? When has God's work far exceeded your expectations?
3) Read John 20:1-2. What was Mary's conclusion about the empty tomb? Why do you think she did not immediately believe that Jesus had risen? How does Hebrews 11:1 apply to her situation?

4) Read John 20:6-9. How did the presence of the grave clothes help to convince John and Peter that Jesus was alive? Why had they not understood His predictions of resurrection? How does Hebrews 11:1 apply to them and to you?

Application:

Today, we see the empty tomb as a symbol of victory because we know that it signified the resurrection of Jesus. But to the disciples and the women who came to anoint His body that morning, the sight of the stone rolled away and the discarded grave clothes brought a mixture of fear, hope, joy, and confusion. They wanted to believe, but it was so far out of their experience that they were not sure what to trust. An empty tomb meant that the body was not there, but whether it had been removed through a miracle or an awful trick was more than they could say. Even the message of the angels did not completely take away their doubts and hesitations. The resurrection was too much for them to hope for, and they looked for clearer proof. Faith is supposed to trust in God's promises even when it cannot see, but it must sometimes grow through disbelief and uncertainties. If we are honest, we realize that we are often not much different in our responses than those who first saw the empty tomb. We want to believe, but we find it hard to look past our experiences and circumstances to see God's power.

Life of Christ Study #119


Theme: Jesus Appears

Summary:

The empty tomb raised hope in the followers of Jesus, but it did not answer all their questions and doubts. Even the women, who had been assured by angels that Jesus was alive (see Luke 24:4-7), wavered between joy and fear. The one thing they knew for certain was that the body of Jesus was not in the tomb. If He had truly risen, they did not know where to find Him or what to do next, and if He had not risen, then His body had been taken by unknown people to an unknown place. Perhaps their attitude could best be described as one of heightened expectancy, hardly daring to hope yet unable to confirm or deny the hope that churned within them. The tomb was empty, but where was Jesus? The Jewish leaders handled the question by bribing the guards to say they had fallen asleep and the body had been stolen by the disciples (see Matthew 28:11-15). They did not want to face the issue
honestly, but the followers of Jesus needed to know. It was an uncertainty that would soon be swept away by the King Himself as He appeared to His followers alive and bringing words of comfort.

1) To the women (John 20:11-18; Matthew 28:9-10). Mary Magdalene had been especially upset after her visit to the empty tomb. She had heard the angels' message with the other women (see Luke 24:10), but she was convinced that a horrible theft and not a miracle had occurred (see John 20:1-2). Apparently, she followed John and Peter back to the tomb when they ran to investigate the women's report, but when they went away to their homes, she stayed behind at the tomb weeping. Probably, she looked into the cave many times, but on one occasion she saw two angels where the body had lain. They asked her why she cried, and she explained that the body of Jesus had been stolen. She turned and saw a man whom she assumed was one who tended the burial grounds. He also asked why she was upset and again she mentioned the body of Jesus, hoping that the gardener might know where it had been taken. But the man was Jesus Himself, and when He greeted her by name, she recognized Him. She reached out to embrace Him, but He told her to go at once to the disciples and tell them He was going to ascend to the Father soon. Mary returned to the disciples with the confirmation that she had seen and spoken to Jesus Himself. The other women also, whether along with Mary or at a separate time, were met and greeted by Jesus. He told them to instruct His disciples to leave for Galilee with His promise to meet them there.

2) On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). That same day, two followers of Jesus, one named Cleopas, were walking and discussing the recent events when Jesus joined them on the road, but they did not recognize Him. He asked what they were talking about and Cleopas told Him about the crucifixion and about their despondency over His death. He also related what the women had reported after their first visit to the tomb. Jesus explained to them that the Old Testament prophets had predicted the death of the Messiah as something that was necessary. When they reached their destination in Emmaus, they begged Him to stay there with them. As they shared a meal, Jesus blessed and broke the bread, just as He had done in the upper room. Then they recognized Him and He disappeared. They agreed that they should have realized who it was when He spoke to them on the road. Then they hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples, but by then Jesus had already appeared to Peter.

3) To the disciples (John 20:19-31). That Sunday
evening, the disciples, with the exception of Thomas, were gathered. The doors were closed because they feared the Jewish officials, but suddenly Jesus stood in the room. They thought He was a ghost until He showed them the wound marks on His hands and side and ate some food in front of them (see Luke 24:39-43). Then they believed and rejoiced. He repeated His intention to send them as His representatives with the power of the Holy Spirit. Later, when Thomas returned, he did not believe what the other disciples told him. He said that he must see Jesus personally. A week afterwards, Jesus appeared again to the disciples and Thomas was present. Jesus invited him to examine the evidence for himself and Thomas believed. Jesus remarked that physical evidence should not be necessary for faith and those who did not fall into such doubts were blessed. Thomas could see and touch Jesus, but John recorded the event for those who would not have the same opportunity.

Discussion:

1) When have you received news that was "too good to be true"? Why were you reluctant to immediately accept the news? How can you apply this to the followers of Jesus when they heard of the empty tomb?

2) Read Matthew 28:11-15. What did the plan of the Jewish leaders reveal about their characters? What did they value more than the truth?

3) Read Luke 24:25-27. How might Jesus have used the following Old Testament verses in His explanation?
   (a) Deuteronomy 18:15-18
   (b) Isaiah 9:6-7
   (c) Isaiah 11:1-5
   (d) Isaiah 53:2-12

4) Read Luke 24:36-43 and John 20:26-29. What physical evidence of His resurrection did Jesus offer to the disciples? Why is the person who does not require physical evidence blessed?

Application:

The empty tomb by itself raised cautious hopes, but the appearance of Jesus confirmed those hopes. There could be no doubt that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. It is ironical that while the religious leaders wished to blame the empty tomb on a plot by the disciples, the disciples themselves were too despondent to even accept the good news when it came. They were in mourning, not in conspiracy! Yet their grief turned to joy when they saw and touched Jesus and knew that He was alive. The testimony of the Old Testament, the promises of Jesus, and the witness of the angels should
have been enough to stir their faith, but God was patiently willing to give them as much evidence as they needed to believe. He still provides evidence today through the witness of His people, the testimony of the Bible, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. No one rejects Jesus because of lack of evidence, but those who believe and trust Him are truly blessed.

Life of Christ Study #120

John 21:1-25

Theme: The Restoration of Peter

Summary:

There could be little doubt among the disciples now that Jesus had actually risen from death. They had all seen and heard Him and been shown proofs that He was really alive (see Luke 24:36-43; John 20:26-28). Peter, in particular, had received a private visit from the resurrected King (see Luke 24:33-34; 1 Corinthians 15:8). Nothing is recorded of that interview, but Peter probably needed it more than any of the others. He had boasted of his willingness to follow Jesus to death on at least two occasions (see Luke 22:31-34 and Matthew 26:33-35), but when the test came, he had failed miserably (see Luke 22:55-62). Most likely, Peter was still a bit unsure of his status among the disciples. He was happy that Jesus was alive, but the memory of his denials raised doubts about his fitness to be counted with His followers. But Jesus had predicted his restoration along with his failure (see Luke 22:31-32), and He would not leave His disciple languishing in regret and uncertainty.

1) Waiting (John 21:1-4). Jesus had told the disciples that after His death and resurrection He would return to Galilee before them (see Matthew 26:32). The women who found the empty tomb were instructed, first by an angel and then by Jesus Himself, to tell the disciples to meet Him in Galilee (see Matthew 28:7 and 28:10). It may be that a month had passed since those instructions were given that Sunday in early April. Now, the month of May had come, and some of the disciples had returned to the familiar banks of the Sea of Galilee where they soon practiced their old trade of fishing while they waited for Jesus to give them new directions. On one particular night, Peter and six others fished for many hours without success. Then a man appeared on the shore, but they did not recognize Him as Jesus.

2) Wondering (John 21:5-14). The man asked if they had caught any fish. When they replied, He advised them to try their nets on the right side
of their boat. Since they had caught nothing, they probably decided they had nothing to lose by complying. Suddenly, the net was teeming with so many fish that they could not pull it into the boat. John, perhaps recalling a similar occurrence some three years earlier (see Luke 5:1-11), was the first to realize that the man on the shore was Jesus. He voiced his conclusion to Peter who immediately jumped into the water and swam towards shore leaving the others to manage the nets and boat. When they arrived, Jesus already had a fire going with fish and bread prepared. He told them to bring some of their fish to the fire. Peter helped them drag the net which was filled with 153 large fish. Jesus invited them to breakfast and they ate in silent expectation. He had kept His appointment with them in Galilee.

3) Willing (John 21:15-25). After breakfast, Jesus led Peter a short distance away from the others and spoke with him alone. Three times He asked the disciple if he loved Him, once for each of his three denials. When Jesus persisted in asking him a third time, Peter was troubled. He knew that he genuinely loved Jesus, but he also realized that his denials had not shown it. Therefore, he appealed to Jesus to answer the question for Him, for Jesus could see what was in his heart, beneath the fears and weaknesses that sometimes influenced his actions against his convictions. Apparently, this appeal was sufficient, for Jesus did not ask the question again. Each time Peter answered, Jesus told him that the way to demonstrate his love was to care for His people. Jesus also told him that there would come a time when he would indeed face death for his Master. Then He simply repeated the words He had used to call Peter to service the first time (see Matthew 4:18-20). In spite of his failure, Peter was commissioned once more to represent the King. Looking around Peter saw John close by and he asked Jesus what would happen to him. Jesus told him that John's fate was not his concern. Peter's only responsibility was to follow Jesus.

Discussion:

1) Read John 21:1-3. Why do you think the disciples went back to fishing? Were they wrong to pick up their old trade while waiting for Jesus? Had He given them any other instructions that they should have been following?

2) What do the following verses tell you about the value of waiting for direction from the Lord?
   (a) Psalm 37:3-9  (c) Proverbs 3:5-6
   (b) Psalm 46:10-11  (d) Isaiah 40:29-31
3) Read John 21:17. What thoughts run through your mind when you know that your actions have not been consistent with your claim to love Jesus? What comfort do you find in Peter's reply?

4) Read John 21:20-22. What can you learn from these verses about making comparisons with other Christians? What is your primary responsibility as a disciple of Jesus?

Application:

Peter may have worried that his usefulness to the kingdom was over when he denied Jesus, but God's mercy reached deeper than his fall. Peter had been unable to keep the bold promises he had made about following Jesus even to death, but that did not change the fact that he sincerely loved the Lord. Jesus wanted him to understand that he was accepted on the basis of his commitment, even though he was subject to fears and weaknesses. Sometimes the only thing in our lives that reflects a love for Jesus is our hearts. We do not want to fail Him with our words and deeds, but when we do, He is able to read beyond the sad external script and to see the genuine desire that lies within. He does not scold us for being imperfect, but He wants us to confess our imperfections and then to resume following Him.

Life of Christ Study #121

Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:3-12

Theme: The King Ascends

Summary:

If the resurrection took place on Sunday, April 9, A.D. 30, then Jesus returned to heaven forty days later about May 19 (see Acts 1:3). During that interval, He appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem, met them again in Galilee, and gathered them back to Jerusalem. The visit to Galilee may have been due to the fact that most of His ministry had been spent there, and therefore most of His followers lived there. Also, the regions near Jerusalem may have still been somewhat unsafe for His followers because of the continuing hostility of the religious leaders. Any sizable gathering certainly would have aroused suspicions and interference. Jesus used the forty days to meet with His subjects individually and in groups and to reinforce what He wanted them to do. The victory over sin had been accomplished on the cross and the conquest of death had been won through the resurrection. Now the message must be taken to the people of the earth, and His followers would be the ones to take it.

1) Commission presented (Matthew 28:16-20). The meeting in Galilee bore the marks of a royal departure. The King was leaving for an extended
time and wanted to meet with His subjects one more time. The eleven disciples were the focus of His attention, but it is quite probable that this occasion was attended by more than 500 followers of Jesus (see I Corinthians 15:6). They gathered to a mountain and worshipped Him, though there were some who still doubted because the kingdom, even at this point, did not match their expectations. There was still no throne or political dominion. Yet Jesus told them that all authority belonged to Him, a reference to Daniel's vision of the glory of God's eternal kingdom (see Daniel 7:13-14). His authority was not yet recognized on earth, but it was real nonetheless, and based on that authority He instructed His followers to carry on His work of making new disciples among all the people of the earth. They were to baptize these new followers in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit to show their new identity and relationship, and they were to teach them obedience to all that Jesus had said. The responsibility of declaring the kingdom was passed from Jesus to His people.

2) Power promised (Acts 1:3-8). Later, at the end of the forty day period, Jesus met one last time with His eleven closest associates in Jerusalem where they had traveled to await the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost which was little more than a week away. He explained to them again how everything that had happened fit the prophecies about Him in the Old Testament (see Luke 24:44-46). Now the work that remained was to proclaim the message of repentance and forgiveness to the world, beginning in Jerusalem (see Luke 24:47). He told them to remain in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit, whom He had promised to send (see John 14:15-17), would come upon them in just a few days. Then they would receive the power they needed to fulfill the task He had given them (see Luke 24:49). They asked if that event would bring the restoration of Israel as God's kingdom on earth, but He told them that time would come according to God's plan. Their primary responsibility, once they received power through the Holy Spirit, was to testify to the message of salvation to the people of Jerusalem and Judea, the non-Jewish people of Samaria, and even to the ends of the Gentile world.

3) Return predicted (Acts 1:9-12). Jesus then led the disciples out of the city toward Bethany on the Mount of Olives. He gave them a parting blessing and was taken up into a cloud until they saw Him no more. Suddenly, their attention was drawn back to earth by the presence of two angels who stood beside them. The angels told them that Jesus would someday return to the earth just as
they had seen Him leave it. Then the promises of Daniel 7:13-14 would be completed as the Son of Man returned in the clouds to judge and rule upon the earth. With this glimpse of the future ending of the story the disciples went back into Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit as they had been instructed by Jesus. The transition He had labored so long with them to accomplish was completed on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them with His power and the church, the earthly representatives of His kingdom, was born (see Acts 2:1-4, 40-41).

Discussion:

1) According to Matthew 28:18-20, what right do you have to tell others about salvation in Jesus? How might this help you when you face opposition to the gospel message?

2) How might Acts 1:6-8 apply to a Christian who is constantly studying and talking about future events? According to II Peter 3:11-14, what effect should a knowledge of future events have in your life?

3) Notice that Acts 1:8 is a promise and not a command. What has God made you because the Holy Spirit lives in you? How far do you have to go to be a witness?

4) Read Acts 1:10-11. What encouragement would the disciples have gained from the prediction of Christ's return? How does that promise help you as you follow Jesus today?

Application:

The moment had finally come. The work of Jesus on earth had really focused on two goals. The first was obviously to accomplish victory over sin and death so that salvation could be given to those who believe. The second was to prepare a group of witnesses who would proclaim the message of salvation after He returned to heaven. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 was the official investment of authority by the King to His subjects. The work was given into their hands with the promise of His enabling through the Holy Spirit. Today, we who have found forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus are the sanctioned representatives of the kingdom of God. We are witnesses of the life and work of Jesus, commissioned to proclaim the message until His return.