

The Teachings of Jesus

Introduction

It has been estimated that more has been written about Jesus Christ in the last twenty years than in the previous nineteen centuries. Interest in him remains high. Every few years Jesus shows up on the cover of *Time* or *Newsweek* and we learn the latest academic ruminations as to his identity. Recently, scholars of naturalistic liberal persuasion have postulated that Jesus was a psychic, a sage, a cynic, or even a magician. To think along these lines the Gospel accounts must be purged of the supernatural. It seems that in recent generations no one is happy with Jesus found in the Gospels.

The result has been to remake Jesus in our own image. The 1960's musicals "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Godspell" portrayed a confused pretender that bore faint resemblance to the bold Messiah found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Artists have painted Jesus as Black, Asian, Aryan, and Hispanic. In the middle ages Jesus was portrayed as thin, weak, even effeminate. Often he was pictured subordinate to his mother Mary. More recently Liberation theologians have attempted to make Jesus out to be a kind of first century Che Gevara revolutionary. It seems that Jesus has suffered from our own ideological presuppositions which have overridden the historical evidence found in the Gospels. Shakespeare's dictum that "thinking doth make it so," has been fulfilled.

The end result of this attempt, whether conscious or unconscious, to remake Jesus along lines more palatable to our tastes is a domesticated Christ. Dorothy Sayers laments that in our remaking of Jesus we have "very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies." In this study, as we attempt to unwrap Jesus and understand his teachings, every effort must be made to set aside our biases and look honestly at the historical record found in the Gospels.

To do this will take work. The teachings of Jesus are at times crystal clear and all that is really needed is the courage to put them into practice. At other times the words of Christ are opaque and difficult. In [The Jesus I Never Knew](#), Philip Yancey points out the enigmatic nature of Jesus.

The more I studied Jesus, the more difficult it became to pigeon-hole him. He said little about the Roman occupation, the main topic of conversation among his countrymen, and yet he took up a whip to drive petty profiteers from the Jewish temple. He urged obedience to the Mosaic law while acquiring the reputation as a lawbreaker. He could be stabbed by sympathy for a stranger, yet turn on his best friend with the flinty rebuke, "Get behind me Satan!" He had uncompromising views on rich men and loose women, yet both types enjoyed his company.

Jesus is neither tame nor predictable. His teachings confound, comfort, challenge and ultimately compel us to live a new life, the life of Christ.

It is rather obvious that Christians should be people who know what Jesus taught and then make an attempt to live out these instructions. Sadly this is often not the case. Dallas Willard writes in the [Divine Conspiracy](#); "[The] most telling thing about the contemporary Christian is that he or she simply has no sense that understanding of and conformity with the clear teachings of Christ is of any

vital importance to his or her life, and certainly not that is in any way essential.” As a church we are going to spend seventeen weeks studying the teachings of Jesus because we believe it is of “vital importance”. We will not cover all that Jesus taught but rather some of the highlights. Our goal is to understand and implement in our lives the instructions of Christ.

Our study will be divided into four sections.

I. The Sermon on the Mount - Matthew 5-7

The Sermon on the Mount was delivered at the height of Jesus’ popularity. Jesus forgoes his normal pedagogical technique, the parables, and teaches the crowd in a straightforward manner. It is an extreme sermon. At times we will find ourselves wishing it were less clear! As you study these teachings of Christ you will realize that they lie at the core of his message. If we are to understand Jesus we must begin to make sense of this sermon. Over the years there have been numerous attempts to soften the rhetoric found in this sermon and wiggle out from its stern demands. None of these attempts have proved completely satisfactory. The plain words of Jesus stand. Applying them to our lives and church will be the challenge.

II. The Parables

Jesus’ primary method of teaching was the parable. A parable is a story that attempts to drive home a point by illustrating from a familiar situation in everyday life. The word parable originates from the Greek word *paraballein* which literally means to throw one thing down alongside another. Jesus, we will see, was the master of teaching through parables. Matthew’s gospel goes so far as to say; “Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Matt. 13:34). A few of the parables have allegorical elements in them, for the most part, however, the parables of Jesus are not allegories. Parables are a part of what make Jesus’ teaching fun, interesting and challenging. We will not study all the parables that Jesus taught, but rather a selection. At the beginning of this section there is more help and background in understanding the parables. For the sake of clarity we have grouped some of the parables together along thematic lines. We will spend five weeks studying;

- 1) Kingdom Parables
- 2) Salvation Parables
- 3) Wisdom / Folly Parables
- 4) Christian Life Parables
- 5) Judgment Parables

III. The “I Am” Statements in John’s Gospel

In our culture it is fashionable to believe that Jesus was unclear as to his identity. Nothing could be further from the truth. The “I Am” statements found in the gospel of John are clear and concise. Jesus claims to answer some of our deepest questions in an unequivocal manner. What about eternal life? “I am the bread of life” (Jn. 6:2-50). How can a person know God? “I am the good shepherd” (Jn. 10:1-21). Who was Jesus? “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12-58). Is Jesus the only way for

people to know God? “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6). These four studies should not only encourage us in our relationship with Christ, but will help equip us to present the claims of Jesus to a world which is confused as to who he is.

IV. The Upper Room Discourse

Shortly before Jesus’ death on the cross he gathered his disciples with him in the “upper room.” He knows this will be his last opportunity to instruct them in person. These teachings are one last effort by Jesus to prepare his followers for their ministry in the world. He acts out a parable by washing their feet. Jesus goes on to tell them that it is actually a good thing he is leaving for only then will they have the “Comforter” or Holy Spirit with them. They are reminded that outside of a vital spiritual union with himself they will be able to do nothing. He is the vine, they are the branches. After leaving the upper room Jesus and his disciples go the Mount of Olives where Jesus delivers his last teaching. These instructions, called the Olivet Discourse because it was given on the Mout of Olives, describe the end of the age.

To be a Christian literally means to be a “little Christ.” It is crucial that followers of Christ know what their Lord taught. Study, pray, struggle and contemplate the teachings of Jesus. If you do, you will be changed.

This study guide is a first for SBCC in that it was written by four people. Kelly Soifer wrote studies 1-4, Matt Rhodes wrote the introduction to the parables and studies 5 and 8, Reed Jolley wrote studies 10-13 and Steve Jolley wrote the general introduction and studies 6, 7, 9, and 14-17.

Thanks to our artists! KC Kemp’s work can be found in the introduction and in study 14, 15, 16, 17. Jessika Leonard supplied the pictures for studies 1, 2, 3 and 4. Mary Anderson’s drawings can be found in studies 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12 and 13. Scott Anderson’s art is in studies 10 and 11. Heidi Palladino supplied the cover.

We hope that this study will guide our church into the teaching of Jesus. More important, may these pages compel us to love Jesus more and obey him earnestly. May Jesus be both our teacher and the recipient of our praise during this season of our church life. When all is said and done, all, indeed, is said and done “to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:11-12). Let this study be a means to that noble end.

The Teachings of Jesus

Study One: The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

“The Sermon on the Mount haunted my adolescence. I would read a book like Charles Sheldon’s In His Steps, solemnly vow to act ‘as Jesus would act,’ and turn to Matthew 5-7 for guidance . . . Now that I am an adult, the crisis of the Sermon on the Mount still has not gone away. Though I have tried at times to dismiss it as rhetorical excess, the more I study Jesus, the more I realize that the statements contained here lie at the heart of his message. If I fail to understand this teaching, I fail to understand him.”

Philip Yancey

Matthew 5:1-12

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) contains the most well-known sayings of Jesus. From Augustine to Ally McBeal, people over the centuries have pondered these deep words and argued with animation over their ultimate meaning and application.

Read Matthew 5:1-12 and write down your immediate reactions to these pithy statements:

John Stott best describes the ponderous power of the Sermon on the Mount: “The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do.” (p. 15)

Let us consider what others have written about this sermon:

- “Lutheran orthodoxy often understands the Sermon on the Mount as an exposition of law designed to drive men to cry for grace.” (Carson, p. 126)
- “Existential{ism} finds . . . a summons to personal decision and authentic faith but jettisons the personal and infinite God who makes the summons.” (Carson, p. 127)
- “Probably nobody has hated the ‘softness’ of the Sermon on the Mount more than Friedrich Nietzsche . . . {as he wrote}, ‘What is more harmful than any vice? Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and the weak — Christianity.’” (Stott, pp. 54-55)

Before we examine the Sermon on the Mount ourselves, it is important to understand the context in which it was given.

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses in Matthew (Chapters 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). It is the longest one. From our study of the Book of Hebrews this year, and our study of Genesis before then, we must recall how God set aside the people of Israel for himself, to be “a *holy* people, set apart from the world to belong to him and to obey him; and that its vocation is to be true to its identity, that is, to be *holy* or *different* in all its outlook and behavior.” (Stott, p. 17) In other words, they were called to be the unique Kingdom of God. Unfortunately, the Old Testament is a faithful record of the inability of God’s people to live out their end of this covenant relationship.

In that light, consider where the Sermon on the Mount appears in Matthew’s gospel. It is found near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. After his baptism and temptation (Chapters 3 & 4), he begins to proclaim the good news, that the Kingdom of God is coming. Matthew 4:17 says,

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

What soon follows is the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon is a description of what this kingdom of heaven is to look like! As Stott says, “it describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God.” (p. 18)

At the same time, we cannot forget Jesus’ audience. The Jews had experienced centuries of oppression and suffering from the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and now the Roman Empire controlled them tightly. They firmly believed that Messiah would come and liberate them from a history of pain.

As Philip Yancey writes, “To a downtrodden people yearning for emancipation from Roman rule, Jesus gave startling and unwelcome advice. If an enemy soldier slaps you, turn the other cheek. Rejoice in persecution. Be grateful for your poverty.” (p. 107)

Knowing this about the expectations of the Jews regarding the Messiah, what might they have thought after hearing this teaching?

In studying the opening section of the Sermon on the Mount, listen with both ears - one that considers how this message speaks to the entire world – think of places like Kosovo, Honduras, the Sudan - and another that embraces its relevance for our own lives here at Santa Barbara Community Church.

Re-read Matthew 5:1-12. These are classically known as the “Beatitudes”, or “Good Sayings.” In Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* he renders the beginning of each beatitude with “You’re blessed when. . .” J.B. Phillips, in his paraphrase from the sixties, wrote “How happy are. . .”

The word “Blessed” is *makarios* in Greek and means “happy”. John Stott tells us that “Jesus is declaring not what they may feel like (*happy*), but what God thinks of them and what on that account they are: they are *blessed*.” (p. 33)

He goes further: “Just as the eight qualities describe every Christian (at least in the ideal), so the eight blessings are given to every Christian . . . The eight qualities together constitute the responsibilities, and the eight blessings the privileges, of being a citizen of God’s kingdom. This is what the enjoyment of God’s rule means.” (p. 34)

Before we try to understand each quality, try something. List each quality, and come up with a word that you think best describes its opposite:

Beatitude

“Anti-Beatitude”

- poor in spirit
- those who mourn
- meek
- those who hunger & thirst for righteousness
- merciful
- pure in heart
- peacemakers
- those who are persecuted because of righteousness

John Stott tells us that “the first four beatitudes reveal a spiritual progression of relentless logic. Each step leads to the next and presupposes the one that has gone before.” (p. 46) To see this is to help us understand the characteristics themselves. Note the progression:

1. To be *poor in spirit* is to recognize our spiritual bankruptcy, that we have nothing to offer God.
2. In turn, we *mourn* the cause of this bankruptcy, our sinfulness.
3. From there, we are then to be *meek* (humble, gentle), acknowledging and accepting our spiritual poverty in our actions with others.
4. Finally, we seek a solution to our condition by *hungering & thirsting after righteousness*.

With that in mind, how do these verses speak to you now?

From there, Stott tells us that the next four characteristics turn us outward, from our attitude toward God to our attitude toward others. Re-read verses 7-10 again. Do you see this? How?

In verse 8, we are told that the *pure in heart . . . will see God*. Carson tells us that to be *pure in heart* is twofold in its meaning. It is both an “inner moral purity” (as opposed to merely an external piety) *and* a singleness of purpose, where we desire nothing else but to serve and know God. Philip Yancey explores the practical experience of this by reflecting on the writings of Francois Mauriac:

Mauriac concluded that self-discipline, repression, and rational argument are inadequate weapons to use in fighting the impulse toward impurity. In the end, he could find only one reason to be pure, and that is what Jesus presented in the Beatitudes . . . In Mauriac’s words, “Impurity separates us from God. The spiritual life obeys laws as verifiable as those of the physical world . . . Purity is the condition for a higher love — for a possession superior to all possessions: that of God. Yes, this is what is at stake, and nothing less.” (p. 119)

Discuss as a home group: What is one way that each of you can seek purity of heart this week?

Blessed are the peacemakers . . . two historic figures sought to live out these words: Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King had studied the principles of non-violent protest taught by Gandhi, who in turn had been informed, at least in part, by the Sermon on the Mount. Most of Dr. King’s messages hammered this message home:

“Christianity,” he said, “has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.” (quoted in Yancey, p. 122)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God . . . How are you a peacemaker? How can you grow in this aspect of discipleship?

Finally, read verses 10-12. Amazingly, we see that to be persecuted is as much a mark of being a follower of Jesus as being merciful, pure in heart, and so on. We then realize that to pursue the Beatitudes will inevitably bring opposition. We cannot forget what happened to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, not to mention Jesus himself! As Stott tells us, “the values and standards of Jesus are in direct conflict with the commonly accepted values and standards of the world.” (p. 54)

Have you ever experienced persecution for your beliefs?

In verse 12 we are told to “rejoice and be glad” when we are insulted and persecuted for our faith. How is that possible? What does it look like?

The eight core Beatitudes begin and end with the phrase “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” At Santa Barbara Community Church, we seek to *be* the “kingdom of heaven”, albeit imperfectly, from now until Jesus returns. Praise God as a home group for such a privilege, and pray for yourselves and the body as we pursue this high calling.

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Study Two: Salt & Light

Matthew 5: 13-16

“There is a fundamental difference between Christians and non-Christians, between the church and the world . . .this theme is basic to the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon is built on the assumption that Christians are different, and it issues a call to us to be different.”

John Stott

Matthew 5:13-16

In last week’s study of the Beatitudes, we examined the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven and ourselves as its inhabitants. This week we will start fleshing out the implications of our heavenly citizenship.

Read Matthew 5:1-16. Zero in on at least one or two of the characteristics of the Beatitudes. How can qualities such as poverty of spirit, or meekness, or hunger & thirst for righteousness, serve as salt and light in a world that does not want to know God?

John Stott tells us that “If the Beatitudes describe the essential character of the disciples of Jesus, the salt and light metaphors indicate their influence for good in the world.” (p. 57)

Pliny the Elder, an ancient historian from the 1st century who is known for his one surviving work, the monumental *Natural History* (c.77), an encyclopedia devoted to the earth and planetary sciences, wrote, “Nothing is more useful than salt and sunshine.”

Salt is a condiment and a preservative. It does not exist for itself. As Dale Bruner says, “Salt a centimeter away from food is of no use; Christians who do not live for persons outside themselves are worthless.” (p. 160)

Light is indispensable. Our need for it is obvious. It provides energy and illumination. Jesus’ reference to us as light contains a promise — it will be impossible for us to be useless as a result.

Condiment . . . preservative . . . energy . . . illumination. How are you functioning as these things in your daily life? How do you want to grow in these characteristics? Get practical!

Re-read 5:13-16. Dale Bruner tells us that “Jesus does not say that disciples should be, ought to be, or must be salt; he says . . . ‘You are.’” (p. 160) Not only that, but “the one who lights us will also put us on the table.” (p. 162) We cannot aspire to be salt and light; they are natural by-products of Jesus’ presence in our lives.

In other words, we are not challenged to *become salty* or *become light*. Rather, we are encouraged to *remain salty* and allow our light to *remain visible*.

How do we make sure we do not “lose our saltiness” or “put our light under a bowl”?

Who has the Lord used as “salt and light” in your life? What was the outcome?

Many commentators note these two “You are” statements are as emphatic as the “I Am” statements that Jesus makes about himself in the Gospel of John.

Nevertheless, though we received these gifts of God freely, at no cost, it is not for nothing that we have received them. We are to take these gifts and share them freely. We are now to live for other people. Otherwise, as salt of the earth we are “no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.” (Matt. 5:13)

As John Stott says, “Rather, we are to be ourselves, our true Christian selves, openly living the life described in the Beatitudes, and not ashamed of Christ.” (p. 62) The church as a “city on a hill” that “cannot be hidden” has profound implications not only for the immediate world around each Christian, but for the world as a whole.

What impact can Christians have on our culture in terms of politics, the environment, academia, the arts, the business world, etc.? Stay close to Matthew 5:1-16 — how can these impacts occur?

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)

Perhaps the NASB translates it best: *Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.* Dale Bruner tells us that “Christian works are to be transparent, revealing less their agent than their source.” (p.162) As the Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us,

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

The word “glorify” comes from the Greek *doxa*, from which we derive the word “doxology”. It signifies our call to give praise and worship to our God. In the midst of our discipleship, we cannot forget that to be salt and light should ultimately bring glory to God, not ourselves. Through being salt and light, others will see God and hopefully acknowledge him as Lord!

Read through your responses to the questions from this study. Pray as a home group about how you, both personally and globally, want to be salt and light in the world.

Also, spend time bringing “doxa” to God. Use Psalm 96 as a guide to worship and praise of our generous and gracious Creator.

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Study Three: Fulfilling the Law

Matthew 5: 17-31

“In the last resort, what we want to know is not, what would this or that man, or this or that Church, have of us, but what Jesus Christ himself wants of us Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it. His commandment never seeks to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Matthew 5:17-31 - Fulfilling the Law

OJ Simpson and Nicole Brown . . . JonBenet Ramsey . . . Prince Charles and Princess Diana . . . Bill and Hillary Clinton . . . Monica Lewinsky . . . Sean Penn & Madonna, Bruce Willis & Demi Moore, Dennis Rodman & Carmen Elektra . . . the list goes on and on and on. *Murder!!! Adultery!!! Divorce!!!* The headlines scream at us from the tabloids as we wait in line at the grocery store. Even worse, they grace the front pages and covers of seemingly reputable publications. We cannot escape the incessant gossip and innuendoes. Welcome to 1999.

Yet some 2,000 years ago, these issues were also pressing. While Palestinian Jews were not being subjected to *The Jerry Springer Show*, they were nevertheless dealing with these struggles. And Jesus has some truly remarkable things to say about them!

The entire Sermon on the Mount is a meaty text, and in many ways it will take a lifetime to study and embrace. Nevertheless, we run into a danger if we break it up, because we can lose the flow of Jesus’ message. Each section builds on the ones previous to it. So *before* you dive into this week’s study, take a few moments, to flip through the previous two studies, and jot down some of the main points you took from these studies to refresh your memory:

Note that the Sermon on the Mount contains three types of material:

1. The Beatitudes, i.e., declarations of blessedness (5:1-12)
2. Ethical admonitions (5:13-20; 6:1-7:23)
3. Contrasts between Jesus’ ethical teaching and Jewish legalistic traditions (5:21-48)

This study will highlight three of Jesus’ challenging contrasts — What does Jesus have to say about murder, adultery and divorce?

Let’s set the scene again:

In Matthew 4, Jesus’ ministry began, and it seems to have taken off rather quickly. Soon he is mobbed by crowds, and slowly he takes on some closer friends and followers, the disciples. In 5:1,

he appears to pull away from the throngs that were continually surrounding him, and sits down like a good Jewish rabbi to teach his closest students. Nevertheless, by the end of the sermon (7:28-29), it appears the crowds have worked their way up to Jesus again.

We cannot forget that the Sermon on the Mount, like all of Jesus' teachings, was addressed to a group, a body of believers. Hear the plural *you* as he speaks!

Read Matthew 5:1-20, especially focusing on verses 17-20. Five times Jesus refers to the *kingdom of heaven* in this section, with three references coming in the space of those last four verses. This inaugural sermon, where his ministry starts taking shape, announces the coming of the *kingdom of heaven* (referred to as the *kingdom of God* in the rest of the New Testament).

What do you think of when you hear the term "Kingdom of God"?

Entire books have been written about the Kingdom of God! John Bright, in his aptly titled book *The Kingdom of God*, tells us that

The concept of the Kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible...To grasp what is meant by the Kingdom of God is to come very close to the heart of the Bible's gospel of salvation. (p. 7)

In Matthew 4:17 we are told "From that time on {after his baptism and temptation in the desert} Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" The Jews had very distinct ideas about how this kingdom of God was to look; their expectations included an end to Jewish oppression and a re-establishment of the Jewish nation. We have to keep in mind that the shock of the Sermon on the Mount for the Jews was in how differently Jesus portrayed the kingdom of God to his Jewish listeners!

As we examined in our study of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), Jesus was calling this Kingdom of God to live in complete contrast to the ways of the world. John Stott tells us that "the Sermon on the Mount is the most complete delineation anywhere in the New Testament of the Christian counter-culture." (p. 19) Jesus will now play out the ramifications of these overarching concepts in the rest of the sermon.

Therefore, in verses 5:17-20, Jesus tells us that this new kingdom he is announcing should actually be nothing new to the Jews. As John Bright says, Jesus "did not come to inform Judaism of a new and unknown God." (p. 196) Instead, Jesus came to enlighten the Jews as to the *true intent of the Old Testament law*: The kingdom of heaven will be distinguished by *transformed lives*, not mere knowledge about God. In the following section, Jesus will be challenging his listeners to be not as concerned with the letter of the law as much as the spirit behind it. As Jesus makes each of his bold statements, keep in mind that he is *not* rejecting the Jewish law; instead, he is rejecting the *legalistic rabbinic interpretations* of the law.

Read Matthew 5:21-32. Do your best to read this section in as many translations as possible —

especially Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. Try to read this text with new eyes.

Each contrast that Jesus introduces begins with "You have heard that it was said . . ." He is referring to the Old Testament commandments here. In verse 21, Jesus addresses the sixth commandment of the Ten Commandments, "You shall not murder." (Exodus 20:13) Rabbinic interpretation had been splitting hairs over what sorts of murder were "allowable" under this commandment. Instead, Jesus demands that believers bring the commandment closer to home. He widens the understanding of the commandment in playing out three examples of anger: abusing someone verbally, holding on to unresolved conflict as you continue your worship of God, and facing down someone publicly through legal action.

What does anger have to do with murder?

Look up the following verses to explore this further:

- James 1:19-20
- Ephesians 4:25-27
- John 3:11-16

Murder does not occur spontaneously; it grows out of anger and resentment and selfishness. As Stott reminds us, "If we want to avoid committing murder in God's sight, we must take every possible positive step to live in peace and love with all men." (p. 86)

Take a few minutes to consider: Do I have any anger that I need to deal with? Do I take communion each week at church in the midst of being unresolved with someone? Write down the implications of this text on your immediate circumstances, along with some steps to bring resolution. Try to share these things with your home group.

From there, Jesus explored the seventh commandment: "You shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:14) One cannot help but be shocked by the extremity of Jesus' words! Before we explore it in depth, consider how you would explain these verses to a non-believer:

Keep in mind the context of the time in which this was spoken: In Middle Eastern culture, to have sexual relations with someone else's wife was a capital offense (this is still true in some parts of the Middle East today). The penalty was stoning to death.

Significantly, Jesus gets us to the heart of the matter immediately. Where else does sexual immorality start but in the heart and mind? As John Stott explains,

If to look lustfully is to commit adultery in the heart, in other words, if heart-adultery is the result of eye-adultery (the eyes of the heart being stimulated by the eyes of the flesh), then the only way to deal with the problem is *at its beginning*, which is our eyes. (p. 88)

We find the Old Testament character Job saying,

“I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.”

Have you ever made a covenant with your eyes? How did this affect your life?

Turn to Job 31. Recall that Job was “blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” (Job 1:8) Satan doubted Job’s resolve, and stated that Job would curse God to his face (1:11) if he lost all of his blessings. The rest of the book is an amazing, and at times troubling, look at the responses of Job and his friends to his dreadful plight once he loses everything. Throughout, Job never wavers in his devotion to God. He understands the consequences of disobedience, and how it starts.

Read through the entire chapter, and itemizes with Job the different ways that we give false witness to our relationship with God through our actions.

In all these things, we see how a lack of congruity between hearing and doing undermines our relationship with God. This is the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. If our hearts are changed, then that will be evident in our actions; to truly “hear” something is to have it bear fruit in our lives.

How does Job’s walk with the Lord relate to the Sermon on the Mount as we have read it so far?

What are some specific areas where is God working on your heart?

Through Job 31, we are reminded why God hates sin so much. Jesus’ statements are bold proclamations to get us to hate sin this intensely. Therefore, we are to go to whatever lengths possible to fight the encroachment of sin into our lives (which explains the extremity of his statements in verses 5:29 & 30). Clearly, Jesus is not teaching self-mutilation here — even a blind man can lust! But he is emphasizing, dramatically, that we should deal with sin at its root before it can take hold. As Stott says,

“Behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away, and were now blind and so could not see the objects which previously caused you to sin.” (p. 89)

Once again, take time to consider: Are there certain books, magazines and films that I should avoid because of what they will do to my thought life?

Finally, re-read Matthew 5:31-32. John Stott writes a stirring introduction to his exegesis of this text:

I confess to a basic reluctance to attempt an exposition of these verses. This is partly because divorce is a controversial and complex subject, but even more because it is a subject which touches people’s emotions at a deep level. There is almost no unhappiness so poignant as the unhappiness of an unhappy marriage, and almost no tragedy so great as the degeneration of what God meant for love and fulfillment into a non-relationship of bitterness, discord and despair. Although I believe that God’s way in most cases is not divorce, I hope I shall write with sensitivity, for I know the pain which many suffer, and I have no wish to add to their distress. Yet it is because I am convinced that the teaching of Jesus on this and every subject is good — intrinsically good, good for individuals, good for society — that I take my courage in both hands and write on. (p. 93)

Once again, context is of utmost importance here. First of all, at this time in the Middle East, women were nothing more than property. Secondly, we must know that rival rabbinic schools at the time were at odds as to the grounds for divorce. The Pharisees were anxious to find out which “side” Jesus was going to take in this debate. Would he be rigorous or lax in terms of divorce?

Coupled with Matthew 19:3-9 (take a few moments to read this section also), we see that Jesus is more concerned with protecting the institution of marriage than with the legalities of divorce. Much of the rabbinic interpretation was working from Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Read this passage, and you’ll see it is full of conditional “if” clauses that speak to very unique situations, and not to the general topic of divorce. We learn a great principle of biblical interpretation here — we cannot make the passage say more than it actually says to accomplish our own ends and agendas.

Jesus is challenging the Pharisees to take their eyes off the tedious legal points of divorce and see the bigger picture: God cares deeply about the sanctity of marriage, an institution that he created for his people. In 1999 America, where the divorce rate is abysmally high, it is well worth considering what we can learn from this passage. Jesus is confronting the problem of easy divorce, where Jewish men could divorce their wives merely with a written certificate, over trivialities! As in the previous two sections on murder and adultery, Jesus wants us here to consider how we can preventatively avoid sin (in this case, divorce) by seeing where its seeds are sown: in the foundations on which marriages are built. As John Stott says,

So, speaking personally as a Christian pastor, whenever somebody asks to speak with me about

divorce, I have now for some years steadfastly refused to do. I have made the rule never to speak with anybody about divorce, until I have first spoken with him or her about two other subjects, namely marriage and reconciliation . . . this principle of pastoral priorities is, I believe, consistent with the teaching of Jesus. (pp. 98-99)

Discuss as a home group: What elements are crucial to building a successful marriage? How can marriages be protected?

How can unmarried people prepare themselves for marriage?

A great deal of material was covered in this section. Jesus has taught us how to establish “pastoral priorities” in our lives; not focusing on our problems as much as our commitment to God and our citizenship in heaven. Take time to pray for each other about all of these things — anger, lust, and love. Bring all things under the umbrella of his Lordship and rejoice at his infinite patience with us!

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Four: Two Options

Matthew 7:13-29

“The worst tragedy would be to turn the Sermon on the Mount into another form of legalism; it should rather put an end to all legalism . . . Thunderously, inarguably, the Sermon on the Mount proves that before God we all stand on level ground: murderers and temper-throwers, adulterers and lusters, thieves and coveters. We are all desperate, and that is in fact the only state appropriate to a human being who wants to know God. Having fallen from the absolute Ideal, we have nowhere to land but in the safety net of absolute grace.”

Philip Yancey

Matthew 7:13-29 – Two Options

It’s a Wonderful Life. A Christmas Carol. Groundhog Day. Sliding Doors. Many movies have toyed with the idea of “What if? . . .” All of these films allow the protagonist to get a second chance, to see how their possible decisions will play out. In Garth Brooks’ song *Unanswered Prayers*, he reflects on how his life would have gone if he had married the woman that he’d hope to marry when he was in high school.

We all wonder “What if?” at times, don’t we?

Jesus takes the stakes of this daydream to a much higher level in this section. *What if* we do not choose the narrow path? *What if* we listen to the wrong spiritual teachers? *What if* we fake it spiritually, and try to deceive others? *What if* we build the house of our lives on sand?

In this week’s study we are faced with the only truly important choice in our lives. As John Stott tells us, our choice is between “the kingdom of Satan or the kingdom of God, the prevailing culture or the Christian counter-culture.” (p. 193) Jesus is leaving us, as the Sermon on the Mount ends, with a clear choice, a challenge to take his calling truly to heart.

As we start, flip through the last three studies on the Sermon on the Mount. Even better, sit down and read through the entire Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) to get the flow of the text. What points in Jesus’ sermon have stood out to you these past few weeks?

D.A. Carson tells us in his commentary on Matthew, “The Sermon on the Mount ends with four warnings, each offering paired contrasts: two ways (vv. 13-14), two trees (vv. 15-20), two claims (vv. 21-23), and two builders (vv. 24-27).” (p. 188)

Read Matthew 7:13-14. What decision do you think Jesus is presenting to us here?

Jesus is cutting to the chase. He says there are only two options: the narrow way leads to the kingdom of heaven, the broad way leads to destruction and separation from him. While this may seem harsh to 1999 ears, where we revel in a multitude of choices in life, Jesus' statements are really nothing new.

Read Psalm 1. Write down the parallels between Psalm 1 and Matthew 7:13-14 (see also Jeremiah 17:5-8).

Jesus is merely expanding on the imagery of Psalm 1. In actuality, the options are not as narrow as they seem; there is plenty of room on the broad road for a multitude of options and choices. No real decisions about life have to be made here. As Stott tells us, "Travelers on this road follow their own inclinations, that is, the desires of the human heart in its fallenness." (p. 194)

In contrast, the narrow road does offer limitations. Its boundaries are clearly marked.

John Stott tells us that

It is a fact that revealed truth imposes a limitation on what Christians may believe, and revealed goodness on how we may behave. And in a sense this is "hard". Yet in another sense, as Chrysostom pointed out centuries ago, Christ's hard and narrow way is also to be welcomed as his "easy yoke" and "light burden." (see Matthew 11:28-30) (p. 194)

It is worth the effort to grapple with this text. Take some time to write these two verses in your own words.

Ask yourself: have you chosen to follow the narrow road? If you have, what will keep you on it? If you are on the broad path, do you want to stay there? Why or why not?

Read Matthew 7:15-20. Recall that Carson told us that this section of our study would examine several “two’s”. We just looked at the two paths we can follow. Now we will look at two trees. Stott is instructive once again:

It is surely not an accident, therefore, that Jesus’ warning about false prophets in the Sermon on the Mount immediately follows his teaching about the two gates . . . for false prophets are adept at blurring the issue of salvation. (p. 199)

While it is not known for sure whom Jesus was speaking about at the time, it is clear that there were “false prophets” at the time. Who are the “false prophets” today?

Stott gives us 3 tests by which we can evaluate the “fruit” of a teacher:

- Character & conduct
- Actual teaching
- The effect their teaching has on others

Scripture is helpful elsewhere – look up

- Titus 1:10-16
- II Timothy 4:1-5

By these standards, are you confident in the teaching that you receive? Why or why not?

In the spirit of the “two’s”, we go on to “two claims”. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase is especially powerful here:

Knowing the correct password – saying “Master, Master,” for instance – isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience –*doing* what my Father wills. I can see it now – at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, “Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.” And do you know what I am going to say? “You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don’t impress me one bit. You’re out of here.”

What is Jesus getting at here?

Look up

- Romans 10:9-10
- 1 Corinthians 12:3

Certainly verbal profession is important. Yet we have to keep the whole message of the Sermon on the Mount in mind. In this section (7:21-23), that all-important term, *kingdom of heaven*, reappears. It is the driving theme of the sermon. Indeed, Jesus is Lord of this kingdom, and as Lord he is asserting how its citizens are to enter it.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 7:21)

In a nutshell, the Sermon on the Mount addresses this simple question: What is the will of the Father? In this sermon we receive a profound answer: To live transformed lives from the inside out. To truly claim (remember, we are looking at the "two claims" here) Jesus as "Lord" is to have it be evident in your life. Otherwise, to proudly claim "Lord, Lord" is to pursue public acclaim (see Matt. 6:1-4) more than true discipleship.

We see this as we review what has been covered in the Sermon on the Mount so far:

- In the Beatitudes, we are blessed as we recognize our profound need for God:
 - As we come to God empty, aware of our need for him, he fills us up, enabling us to be merciful (5:7), pure in heart (5:8), and peacemakers (5:9) with others. In turn, this may cause us to be persecuted (5:10-12).
 - As God lives in us, we are salt and light (5:13-16), preserving and enhancing and illuminating the creation, all to the glory of God.
 - All of this is in fulfillment of God's laws, given to the Jews (5:17-20). As they incarnated these things as God's people, they were to change the world for God and establish the kingdom of God.

From 5:21 until 7:12 then, Jesus explores the implications of truly living out the heart and soul of God's laws, not merely following the letter to gain public approval. Instead, as God lives in us as kingdom people we will be able to live out his commands. Dallas Willard describes it in this way:

All of this is the same as saying that, in actually doing what Jesus knows to be best for us, we build a life that is absolutely indestructible, "on the Rock." (p. 276)

What new insights has your study of the Sermon on the Mount brought to your life in Christ in the past few weeks?

Jesus brings this point of his sermon home, as he often does, with a parable. Read Matthew 7:24-27.

D.A. Carson tells us that

A wise person represents those who put Jesus' words into practice; they too are building to withstand anything. Those who pretend to have faith, who have a merely intellectual commitment, or who enjoy Jesus in small doses are foolish builders. When the storms of life come, their structures fool no one, above all not God.

Our final "two" is about foundations; will you build the house of your life on the shifting sands of independence, or on the rock of Jesus Christ? Dale Bruner gives tremendous insight to this parable:

The story of the Two Houses is about two kinds of Christians, not about Christians and non-Christians. The house that crashes is not the house of pagans or of those who did not hear Jesus' words. The house that crashes is the house of Christians who find Jesus' words important enough to hear but not realistic enough to live. For such Christians the Sermon on the Mount is not practical enough for modern life, or it is dispensationally limited, or it is too naïve for contemporary fast-lane business, or too spiritual for the national struggle, or perhaps most commonly of all, it is just too hard. For whatever reason, Jesus' Word is only heard; it is not done. And Jesus sees this chemistry of hearing plus non-doing as forming a compound of sand. (p. 290)

Think both practically and theologically here. (Hint: review the Sermon on the Mount!). What makes a foundation of rock? What makes a foundation of sand? Be specific.

D.A. Carson shows us why Jesus used this metaphor: “Palestine is known for torrential rains that can turn dry wadis into raging torrents. Only storms reveal the quality of the work of the two builders.” (p. 194)

Bruner brings additional insight:

Nor are we told that life built on the foundation of Jesus’ words will be *spared* rains, floods, or winds, as though Jesus’ teaching were a talisman {lucky charm} against trouble. Realistically, Jesus says the same storms hit thoughtful disciples as hit thoughtless ones: Obedience to Jesus’ words, then, is not a protection from troubles as it is a protection **in** them – just as rock under a house does not shield from storms, it supports during them. (p. 289)

Share with your home group – how has God been a rock foundation in life’s storms? Have you ever suffered from having a foundation built on sand?

It’s almost time to end our study of the Sermon on the Mount. Read Matthew 7:28-29.

“Authority” in the Greek, *exousia*, embraces both power and authority. This is crucial to understanding the effect of his teaching here. The teachers of the law quoted other rabbis to support their own teaching, but Jesus spoke with divine authority. As D.A. Carson tells us, “The central point is this: Jesus’ entire approach in the Sermon on the Mount is not only ethical but messianic . . . he alone fully knows the will of the Father.” (p. 195)

Some people want to write off the Sermon on the Mount because its standards are so impossibly high and seemingly unrealistic. Yet Jesus is making it clear here that he alone has the right, the authority, to call us to such standards. He is not making ethical “interpretations” that can be debated; *he is telling us what to do!*

Recall that he is speaking to us as members of the kingdom of the heaven. As such, we have the Holy Spirit equipping us to live the way we are called to live in this sermon.

Look up these verses on God’s power working in us:

- Philippians 1:3
- Ephesians 3:7, 16
- 2 Corinthians 12:9
- 2 Peter 1:3

- Colossians 1:9-11

It is important that we see that the high calling to follow Christ, as articulated in the Sermon on the Mount, is only possible through the power of God working through us.

Significantly, the name “Matthew” comes from the Greek “mathetes”, which means “lifelong disciple”. The Sermon on the Mount, recorded by Matthew, gives us a “mission statement” by which we can shape the rest of our lives. Spend time praying for each other in the specific challenges taken from the sermon. Set up some ways of measuring how you are growing in these things in the months to come!

A Short Guide to Unraveling the Mystery of the Parables

In a recent television commercial comedian Jerry Seinfeld takes his stand-up routine to England where his jokes are met by the audience's blank stares. While we'd be laughing at the punch line, they're left wondering what was so funny. Many of us have an experience similar to that of the British audience when it comes to the parables. While Jesus' original audience usually got the meaning of the parables, we're often left scratching our heads.

Parables are one of the most distinctive features of Jesus' teaching. Whereas the Old Testament records only a handful of parables, Jesus uses scores of them.¹ In fact, about one-third of his teaching is in parables. Clearly, if we are to understand the teaching of Jesus, we must grasp the meaning of his parables. Yet, as New Testament scholar Gordon Fee notes, "for all their charm and simplicity, the parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to Revelation." (Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 135)

Before turning to questions of interpretation, let's first answer the question: "What is a parable?" Here Wessel gives us helpful guidance:

"The Sunday school definition of a parable — 'an earthly story with a heavenly meaning' — is good as far as it goes. Many parables are stories taken out of ordinary life, used to drive home a spiritual or moral truth. But they are not always stories. Sometimes they are brief similes, comparisons, analogies, or even proverbial sayings. The Greek word *parable* (lit., "something placed along side") includes all these meanings." (Wessel, p. 647)

Seems simple enough, right? Why, then, are the parables so often misunderstood and misinterpreted? Here the comparison between jokes and parables is helpful.

The reason that the British audience didn't get Seinfeld's jokes is that they do not share common points of reference with him. His jokes are meant for an American audience with whom he shares a common set of experiences, stereotypes, customs, idioms, etc.

Like Seinfeld's audience, we face a similar hurdle when we listen to Jesus parables, which were meant for a different audience. Because they shared a common culture, language, customs, and idioms, Jesus' audience would have readily connected with the point that he was making in his parables while we are left stupefied.

Well, don't despair. Below are some helpful suggestion to get you started on your way to "getting" the parables.

1. Read them out loud.

Like jokes, parables are more effective when they are heard than when they are read. Try reading them aloud from several versions including a contemporary translation like "The Message."

2. Identify the audience.

Our task in understanding and interpreting the parables is to "get into the heads" of the original audience. In order to "get inside their heads" we first have to know who they are. Is Jesus talking to his disciples, the Pharisees, the scribes, the crowds?

3. Try to understand the cultural differences.

Our goal is to hear the parables as the original audience heard them. Easier said than done, but this is really the key to understanding the parables. Pay attention to the cultural background provided in the study guide.

4. Look for clues in the context.

At times the Gospel writers will give important clues in the context in which they set the parables. For instance Matthew and Luke set the parable of the lost sheep in different contexts and thus interpret it differently. In Luke (15:3-7) the parable is used to explain why Jesus “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1-2): they are the “lost sheep.” In Matthew 18:12-14, on the other hand, the parable is used to encourage Christians to search out the “lost sheep” who had strayed from the community. In Matthew the “lost sheep” is not a sinner but a wayward Christian disciple. While these contextual clues can be helpful also realize that the context of many of the parables has not been preserved.

4. Avoid the temptation to allegorize.

“For centuries parables were interpreted allegorically; i.e., each element of the story was assigned a specific meaning. Thus Augustine found in the parable of the Good Samaritan references to Adam, Jerusalem, the Devil and his angels, the Law and the Prophets, and Christ and the church! Now we are more apt to look for one main point a parable teaches. This is not to say that all Jesus’ parables have only one point to make. Some clearly have more than one, but the principle is generally a valid one.” (Wessel, p. 647)

Although a few of the parables do have some allegorical elements, each parable generally makes a particular point. For instance, the parable of the sower in our first study is interpreted by Jesus himself in a mildly allegorical way, yet the main point of the parable is clear. While details can be significant, we should avoid reading too much into them. Not every single item has an esoteric meaning. Attaching an arcane meaning to every single item in a parable is as ridiculous as attaching an hidden meaning to the door in a “knock-knock” joke.

5. Pay attention to the end of the parable — the punch line and the response.

Just as jokes are told to evoke laughter, parables are told to get a response. And like jokes, the “punch line” in parables often come at the end. To get the punch line, think about who would have been “caught” by such a parable; that is, who is the joke on? For example, the meaning of the parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:33-45 becomes clear when we see the infuriated reaction of the chief priests and Pharisees. They realize that they are the evil tenants of Jesus’ parable. Remember, parables are meant to elicit a response. Identifying the response can also be useful in understanding the meaning of the parable.

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Five: The Parables of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:1-52

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 4:17). This is the message that Jesus proclaims throughout his ministry. The long-awaited kingdom proclaimed by the prophets of the Old Testament has finally arrived and it calls for a response. Jesus invites his listeners to be participants in this new reality called the Kingdom of God that has broken into human history. One of the primary ways that Jesus uses to invite his hearers to respond to this new reality is through the parables. As Boice observes:

“Other sections of the Bible give us grand theology. Some move us to grateful response to God. But the parables break through mere words and make us ask whether there has indeed been any real difference in our lives. Isn’t that what we should expect, since the parables come from the lips of Jesus?” (Boice, p. 10)

All the parables in Matthew 13 revolve around the theme of the Kingdom of God. In fact, many of the parables we will be exploring here are those that expressly say, “The kingdom of heaven is like. . . .”² This expression literally means, “It is like this with the kingdom of God. . . .” Before exploring these parables of the Kingdom, first do some homework in the Old Testament in order to understand the Jewish expectation of the Kingdom of God. Look up the following verses:

- Dan 2:44
- Daniel 7:13-14
- Psalm 145:13
- Micah 4:1-7
- Isaiah 9:6-7

After reading these passages, how would you describe the Old Testament understanding of God’s coming Kingdom?

New Testament scholar George Ladd reminds us that the Kingdom of God “refers to His reign, His rule, His sovereignty, and not to the realm in which it is exercised.” (Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 20). He summarizes the Old Testament understanding of the coming Kingdom this way: “In

the Old Testament perspective, the coming of God's Kingdom is viewed as a single great event: a mighty manifestation of God's power which would sweep away the wicked kingdoms of human sovereignty and would fill all the earth with righteousness." (Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 53).

Apparently, Jesus' contemporaries understood the coming Kingdom in much the same way. Read Matthew 3:1-2, 7-12. How does John the Baptist's expectation compare with the Old Testament perspective?

Though Jesus came preaching the arrival of God's Kingdom, many people were not convinced by his words or deeds. In the chapters leading up to Matthew 13 we discover that many people were expressing considerable doubt concerning Jesus' identity and the validity of his message. Read the following verses and write down how each person or group responded to Jesus' ministry.

- John the Baptist (11:2-3)
- The crowds (12:22-23)
- The Pharisees (12:14, 24)

Jesus presented a problem for John, the crowds, his critics, and even his own disciples. He didn't act in accordance with the Old Testament expectation. Questions loomed large in their minds: How can the Kingdom have arrived when sin and sinful institutions remained unpunished? How could this simple carpenter with his ragtag group of disciples actually be the one to inaugurate God's Kingdom? If Jesus is indeed the Bearer of the Kingdom, then why do some reject him and his message?

Now that we have explored this variety of responses, turn to Matthew 13. Jesus tells these parables of the Kingdom in response to those who found his work insignificant. He didn't perform the events that they associated with the Kingdom of God. As you read this chapter of parables think about how they answer the people's questions concerning the validity of Jesus' claim that he has inaugurated the Kingdom.

Parable of the Sower and the Soils (Matt. 13:1-23)

Read both the parable and its explanation.

What does the seed represent?

Who is the sower?

Assuming each soil type represents a condition of a person's heart, describe the four types of soil.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

How does this parable explain the varied responses to Jesus' ministry?

Look again at 13:22. What practical steps are you taking to insure that the word is not choked by the "worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth?"

In 13:11 Jesus explains that the purpose of the parables is to reveal the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven. The word translated "secrets" is *mysteria* (from which we get the word "mystery"). Paul uses this word often (cf. Rom. 16:25f.; Eph. 1:9f.; Col. 1:26f.). As it is used in the New Testament, *mysteria* does not refer to some esoteric secret meant only for a select few. Rather, as Ladd explains,

"Here is the Biblical idea of a mystery: something which has been kept secret through times eternal but is now disclosed. The parables set forth the mystery of the Kingdom of God which was not revealed in the Old Testament but which is at last disclosed in the earthly ministry of our Lord. What is this mystery? The mystery of the Kingdom is this: The Kingdom of God is here but not with irresistible power. This is the mystery of the Kingdom: that the Kingdom of God has come among men and yet *men can reject it.*" (Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 55).

How does this parable inform how we go about "sowing the seed?"

Parable of Wheat and Weeds with Explanation (13:24-30; 13:36-43)

Read this parable along with its interpretation.

The weeds sown by the enemy were likely darnel, a poisonous plant that was practically indistinguishable from wheat until its ears appeared. By that point, however, its roots would be so intertwined with those of the wheat that to uproot them would cause significant damage to the crop.

How does this parable respond to the question concerning how sin can coexist with the advent of the Kingdom?

What kind of attitude are believers encouraged to adopt in light of this parable?

What role does the “evil one” play in the Christian life and how are we to respond?

Parables of Mustard Seed and Yeast (13:31-33)

Recall the Old Testament images associated with the coming of God’s Kingdom. In the eyes of his disciples and critics how does Jesus’ ministry measure up?

Both the mustard seed and yeast were used proverbially in Jesus’ day for a very minute amount. The parables of the mustard seed (13:31-32) and the leaven (13:33) essentially make the same point. Both of them yield results far beyond what one would expect from such a small origin.

By comparing the Kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed and yeast, how does Jesus answer his critics’ (and perhaps even his disciples’) doubts about the validity of his proclamation that he has ushered in the Kingdom?

These parables of growth both focus on the contrast of an insignificant or hidden beginning and a triumphal climax. Like the mustard seed planted in the ground and yeast hidden in a lump of dough, the kingdom of God (his redemptive reign in individuals’ lives) has insignificant and inconspicuous beginnings but eventually grows into something that far surpasses its original size.

Respond to the following quote:

“For the disciples there was the natural impatience to see God’s Kingdom in all its glory, and the total eradication of all that opposed it. To them, and to us today who may expect God to act dramatically and without delay, Jesus points out that the full growth (harvest, mustard plant, leavened dough) is assured from the moment the seed is sown, however unpromising its appearance and whatever opposition it may meet in its development. The way of God is not that of ostentation but of ultimate success. Little is great where God is at work.” (France, 228)

How do these parables change your understanding of God's Kingdom?

What do they teach you about how God accomplishes his purposes?

How do these parables effect your vision for ministry?

Parables of Hidden Treasure and Pearl (13:44-46)

The point of these two parables is the same: the Kingdom is of such inestimable worth that anyone who discovers it would be crazy not to give up everything to have it.

Of course these parables are not teaching that a person may buy salvation or that God sells his favors. Rather, the point is that these men willingly gave up everything else because the value of their discovery far surpassed anything they possessed. Though it cost them everything, they made the deal of their lives!

How do the reactions of the two men in these parables compare to that of the man in Luke 18:18-30?

What are the things that you tend to hold as more valuable than the Kingdom of God?

What are some practical ways your homegroup can help you shed these hindrances?

Parable of Dragnet (13:47-50)

A dragnet was a net drawn between two boats or by ropes from shore which collected all the fish and other creatures within the area it covered. Because this method was indiscriminatory in what it caught, the fishers had to sort out their catch to remove the bad, that is, those unsuitable for eating. (Fortunately there are no dolphins in the Sea of Galilee!)

What is the meaning of this parable?

What does this parable have in common with the parable of the wheat and weeds (vv. 24-30)?

In what ways is it different?

Disciples as Scribes (13:51-52)

Jesus concludes his parables of the Kingdom by calling his disciples “scribes.” Among first-century Jews the scribes were the educated elite who used their learning to preserve, interpret and teach the Law. The disciples, having been trained by Jesus’ instruction, have in a sense displaced the old scribes and are now called scribes of the Kingdom. By designating them as such, Jesus is “challenging them to fulfil a role: they have received ‘treasure’ through his instruction; now they are to ‘bring it out’ in teaching others.” (France, 231).

As a “scribe of the Kingdom” how are you sharing the treasure of Jesus’ teachings with others?

Sermon Notes. . .

parables in this study give you additional information in answering this?

As Jesus begins to answer this question he uses the Greek word *agonizomai*, from which we get our word “agonize.” It means to “strive” (KJV) or to “make every effort” (NIV). What is Jesus’ point? How do you “make every effort”?

In Luke 15 we get 3 rapid fire parables about being lost. We see the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Among the twenty-seven or so parables that Jesus taught these are particularly well known. Bishop J.C. Ryle once said of them, “There is probably no chapter of the Bible that has done greater good to the souls of men.” (as quoted in Boice, p.49) For each of the three parables answer these questions:

1. What is the value of the lost object?
2. What is the attitude of the owner (father)?
3. What is the nature of the recovery?

Which of these three lost parables do **you** most identify with? Why?

These three parables in Luke 15 can be looked at from different perspectives. Stuart Briscoe comments:

So far we have considered the participation of the lost person both in his lostness and his discovery, and the involvement of the heavenly seeker and His ultimate joy in discovery and

reconciliation. But the thrust of the three parables is surely that God's people should be intimately concerned with the condition of lost people and practically involved in reaching them. (Briscoe, p.132)

In reading and thinking about the words of Jesus are you motivated to share your faith? What in particular about these parables should encourage us to be concerned for the lost?

We must also look at these parables from God's viewpoint. James Boice helps us to see things from God's perspective.

So often we consider them from the point of view of the lostness of the sinner. We think of the misery of the sheep, the hopeless condition of the lost coin, or the degradation and bondage of the son. But Jesus begins, not with the objects loss, but with the loss sustained by the owners or father, that is, by God. William Taylor says that in this alone do we find the infinite pathos of the parables. God 'is the shepherd whose sheep has wandered off; *he* is the woman whose piece of money has disappeared in the darkness and debris of the house; *he* is the father whose son has gone away, and become lost to him.' (Boice, p.50)

How does reading these parables from God's perspective help you understand them differently?

Our last parable of salvation in Luke 18:9-14 was undoubtedly drawn from Jesus' experience in first century Israel. We find a contrast between a religious elite confident of his own righteousness and common tax collector equally sure of his despicable condition before God. William Barclay tells us about Pharisees:

One was a Pharisee. The name Pharisee literally means "the separated one." The Jewish Scribes and Rabbis, beginning from the great principles of the Ten Commandments, had amplified the Jewish law until it included thousands of petty regulations covering every moment and every action of life; and they considered that the keeping of these regulations was a matter of life and death. (Barclay, p.99)

Barclay goes on to give us an idea of what it was like to be a tax collector in the first century.

Rome had a curious method of collecting taxes. Generally speaking she assessed an area at a certain sum and then let out the right to collect its taxes to the highest bidder. So long as the contractor paid to Rome the sum agreed he was free to keep the rest to himself. And since there was no ready means of spreading information in the days before newspapers, radio or television, few knew how much they were compelled to pay and the tax collector could make

a handsome profit. So then this tax collector must have been one of the most hated men in town. (Barclay, p.101)

A corrupt tax collector and a self-righteous Pharisee. Think through these questions.

Are they both in need of salvation?

Why are they at the temple?

Characterize their prayers?

Why is humility necessary for salvation?

In what ways do you identify with the tax collector? In what ways do you identify with the Pharisee?

In light of all the parables in this study how has your understanding of salvation changed? Summarize the teaching of all these parables in just a sentence or two and read your summary to your group.

Sermon Notes. . .

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Seven: Parables of Wisdom and Folly

Matthew 25:1-13, Luke 12:13-21

There are quite a few parables that could come under the heading “Wisdom and Folly.” Put more crudely they could be called, “Smart and Dumb” parables. In these parables Jesus is pointing out that many of his hearers tended to act foolishly in their own self-interest. We are reminded of many of the Old Testament Proverbs that encourage a wise course of action. Read these two parables. Write down initial thoughts and questions you have of the stories. What is the common theme in the two parables? What differences do you see?

Matthew 25:1-13 - The Ten Virgins

Luke 12:13-21 - The Rich Fool

The cultural setting for a wedding in Palestine was much different than what we experience at weddings in Santa Barbara! First of all many marriages were arranged. The exact time and even day when the wedding festivities were to begin was not precisely established. Evidently the bridegroom in our parable is either tardy or intent upon surprising everyone in that he arrives at midnight!

Normally the bridegroom with some close friends left his home to go to the bride’s home, where there were various ceremonies, followed by a procession through the streets-after nightfall-to his home. The ten virgins may be bridesmaids who have been assisting the bride; and they expect to meet the groom as he comes from the bride’s house, though this is uncertain. Everyone in the procession was expected to carry his or her own torch . Those without a torch would be assumed to be party crashers or even brigands. The festivities, which might last several days, would formally get under way at the groom’s house. (Carson, p. 513)

In what ways are all ten virgins the same? In what ways are they different?³

Why were five of these young women singled out as “foolish”?

Why do you think that in this parable the banquet door is shut? (vs. 10)

Parables teach spiritual lessons. What lessons are taught in this parable? (You should be able to see three or four!)

Many have had a field day with this parable and allegorized each element of the story. “oil” = Holy Spirit, “ten virgins” = Christian community, “shut door” = final judgment, etc. In understanding the parables we must be careful to not try and assign a meaning to every element of the story. The idea, however, of the Messiah as the bridegroom is found in many passages of scripture. Read the passages listed below to see the rich history of this wonderful metaphor. Notice how in the Old Testament selections Yahweh is portrayed as the “husband” of his people. How do these verses shed any light on our parable?

- Isaiah 54:4-6, 62:4-5
- Hosea 2:19
- John 3:27-30
- Matthew 9:15
- Mark 2:19-20

The parable ends with a command to “keep watch” (vs.13). What does it mean to “keep watch”? How are you doing this?

Our second parable for this study, found in Luke 12:13-21, is unlike the parable of the Ten Virgins in that it does not present a contrast between wise and foolish people. Instead the emphasis is on the folly of one who is preoccupied with his own wealth. This theme, the dangers of wealth, is one that Jesus talked about often. His famous saying, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24) graphically points out the peril of riches. Many working through this particular parable may not think it has much to say to them since they are not rich. Think again! Pastor Stuart Briscoe reminds us that whether or not we are rich we all tend toward greed.

...we should never forget that it is perfectly natural to be greedy! If we do overlook this fact we may slide into a life of self-centeredness and not even be able to recognize it. See yourself as a basically egotistical, materialistic individual and be on your guard for every evidence of it. (Briscoe, p. 72)

What is the problem with the thinking of the rich man in the parable?

Why was he foolish?

Many of the comments in the Bible concerning wealth point out its danger. Read and comment on the verses below.

- I Timothy 6:10
- Matthew 6:19
- Colossians 3:5
- Luke 18:18-30

The parable points out that this man was a fool not only because he gave undue attention to his wealth, but because he was soon to die! The point is, he will leave it all behind. Read Ecclesiastes 2:17-23. How had the writer of Ecclesiastes made the same discovery that Jesus is pointing in this parable? Have you made this discovery?

How does one go about being "rich toward God" (vs. 21)? Is it possible to be "rich" in terms of temporal wealth and "rich toward God" at the same time?

It is quite possible to live a foolish (dumb) life, even as a Christian. How have these parables enlightened you as to this potential pitfall? What ingredients can you put in your life that would be a safeguard against foolish living?

Sermon Notes. . . The Teachings of Jesus

Study Eight: Parables of Discipleship

Luke 14:25-33, Luke 17:7-10, Luke 10:25-37

The Cost of Discipleship

Parables of the Tower Builder and the Warring King (Luke 14:25-33)

Drive to the corner of East 42nd Street and McKinley Avenue in South-Central Los Angeles and you will find Jefferson Elementary School. Yet the only kids you will see there are the ones who slip through holes in the chain-link fence that surround the building. The fence is meant to keep the children away from the school. The reason? The school remains only partially built. Construction of the new school was halted almost two years ago due to architectural flaws, contract disputes and insufficient funds. Miscalculations concerning what it would take to complete the project led to failure. The new school that once promised to ease the overcrowded schools in the area now simply stands as an eyesore in the neighborhood.

This present-day example is comparable to Jesus' parable concerning the nature of discipleship. Read 14:25-33.

To whom are these parables addressed?

In your own words summarize the thrust of these two parables.

According to the context of these parables (vv. 25-27 and v. 33), what are the costs of discipleship?

What do you find among these verses that is hard to understand or difficult to accept?

Jesus uses strong words in v. 26 to make his point. What do you think he meant by "hating" one's family and even one's life?

What aid does Matthew 15:1-9 offer in understanding this difficult verse?

Commentator Darrell Bock offers us some help here:

“The call to ‘hate’ is not literal but rhetorical. Otherwise, Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor as oneself as a summation of what God desires makes no sense (Luke 10:25-37). The call to hate simply means to ‘love less’ (Gen. 29:30-31; Deut. 21:15-17; Judg. 14:16). The image is strong, but it is not a call to be insensitive or to leave all feeling behind. Following Jesus is to be the disciple’s ‘first love.’ This pursuit is to have priority over any family member and one’s own life, which means that other concerns are to take second place to following Jesus (Luke 8:19-21; 9:59-62; 12:4, 49-53; 16:13).” (Bock, p. 1285f.)

One must understand this passage in the context of its cultural setting. For a first-century Jew to decide to follow Jesus would inevitably mean alienating his or her family. Thus, the desire to maintain family ties could easily prevent a person from becoming a disciple. Casual devotion to Jesus in the first century was unknown since a decision to follow him automatically came with a cost. (Contemporary comparisons may be seen in Muslim countries or close-knit Asian families.)

Wealth presents another major obstacle to discipleship. (Recall the story of the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-30.) Though this may seem like a difficult teaching recall parables of hidden treasure and the costly pearl from our previous study (Matthew 13:44-46). The emphasis of both those parables was the great joy associated with discovering the Kingdom. The men in these parables considered it the bargain of a lifetime to give up everything in order to gain the Kingdom! Bock summarizes their attitude in this way: “If Jesus offers what he says he offers, then there can be no greater possession than following him.” (Bock, p. 1290) How does your attitude toward the Kingdom and your possessions compare with theirs?

Bock goes on to conclude this passage with this observation, “Jesus is not a minimalist when it comes to commitment. It is not how little one can give that is the question, but how much God deserves.” (Bock, p. 1290)

Which of the following tends to edge out Jesus as top priority in your life: family, self, or possessions? In what ways?

How can your homegroup help you realign your priorities so that Jesus is at the top?

The Obedience of a Disciple

Parable of the Owner and His Servant (Luke 17:7-10)

Read this parable in Luke 17:7-10.

Using a first-century institution, Jesus compares the disciple to the slave.⁴ A slave was someone who because of debt or for some other reason had been sold and had become the property of a master. While slaves had few rights of their own, the Old Testament protected Jewish slaves and masters were typically benevolent to their slaves. Wenham observes, “Although conditions of employment were harder and hours of employment longer in the ancient world than in modern industrialized countries, there is no need to think of the master in our parable as being particularly harsh or callous in his expectation. He had paid for his slave (perhaps when the man was in debt), and he has a right to expect him to work.” (Wenham, p. 191). Obedience to the master’s will is expected of the slave.

What kind of service are you currently rendering to your Master? What is your attitude toward service? What do you expect to get in return for your service?

What kind of attitude and action does this parable indicate that disciples are to have?

Look again at 17:10. The Greek word translated “worthless,” (NRSV) or “unworthy” (NIV) literally means “without need.” This is an idiom which means one is “owed nothing.” The sense then is that the slaves who have done their duty have no favor coming since nothing special is owed them for having done what is expected.

In what areas of your life do you find it easiest to submit to God? What areas are more difficult to relinquish?

What are some practical ways you can live out the teaching of this parable with regard to your work, the way you make decisions, the way you handle your finances, etc.?

The Mercy of a Disciple

Parable of Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

The parable of the good Samaritan is perhaps one of Jesus’ most well-known parables. As you read this parable respond to the following questions:

To whom is this parable addressed?

To what question is Jesus responding with this parable?

What is the motivation behind the question?

To help us understand the impact of this parable we need to know a little cultural background. First, the man who asks Jesus the question was a lawyer, that is, an expert in the Old Testament Law. He was probably a Pharisee (or at least closely associated with them). The two men who pass by on the other side of the road are priestly types. The Pharisees and lawyers (or experts in the law) were politically and religiously at odds with these priests. Second, almsgiving to the poor was the Pharisees' big thing. This was how they loved their neighbors as themselves.

With this cultural background, notice how the story unfolds. When the man falls victim to bandits, it is the two priestly types who avoid contact with him and pass on the other side of the road. To maintain ritual purity a priest would not touch a presumably dead body. At this point the lawyer was probably thinking to himself, "Of course! What do you expect from priests? Just wait for a Pharisee to show up and save the day." But he's been set up, for here we come to the twist in the plot. The next man down the road turns out not to be a Pharisee (the expected hero), but a Samaritan! (Boo! Hiss!) Samaritans were viewed contemptuously as half-breeds by the Jews because they had inter-married with Gentiles. There existed a legacy of long-standing mutual hatred between the two groups. The lawyer disdains Samaritans so much that he can't even bring himself to use the word in the end.

Jesus goes out of the way to stress the kindness this hated Samaritan shows to the Jew. List the ways that his compassion⁵ is translated into practical action.

Gordon Fee explains how Jesus catches this lawyer off guard with his parable:

"The second commandment is to love one's neighbor as oneself. The lawyer had neat little systems that allowed him to love within limits. What Jesus does is to expose the prejudice and hatred of his heart, and therefore his real lack of obedience to this commandment. "Neighbor" can no longer be defined in limiting terms. His lack of love is not that he will not have helped the man in the ditch, but that he hates Samaritans. In effect, the parable destroys the question rather than answering it." (Fee, How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth, p. 142)

For whom would this parable have been good news?

If you were to retell this parable in an American context, who would you use to fill the roles of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan?

What prejudices do you secretly hold onto?

What limits do you set on your love to others?

What practical steps can you take to overcome these limits?

Study Nine: Parables of Judgment

Matthew 18:21-35, 21:33-46, 25:14-46

Christians often tend to ignore portions of the Bible that they either don't understand or understand but don't like. The same is true with the person and teachings of Jesus. It is quite easy to fashion a Jesus that is comforting, always loving and gentle and never judges. The Jesus of the Gospels is not so benign. He has no problem calling the hypocritical religious elite "white washed tombs" and a "brood of vipers." In apparent righteous anger he clears the temple of those who turned the temple into a place of crass commercialism. The parables of judgment fall into the *difficult to understand* category. They are not easy or comforting. They shock us as we see a side of Christ that is often ignored.

Read our three sections of scripture that contain four parables of judgment. Our last section contains two parables that come in succession and highlight the same principles. Look for similarities and differences in each of the parables.

Matthew 18:21-35 - The Unmerciful Servant

Matthew 21:33-46 - The Wicked Trustee

Matthew 25:14-46 - Unprofitable Servants and Unprofitable Goats

Which of these parables do you enjoy the most? Why?

In the parable of the unmerciful servant it is Peter's question (vs. 21) about forgiveness that provokes the telling of the parable. Before telling the parable Jesus give a direct answer to Peter's question; "I tell you, not seven times but seventy-seven times." What is Jesus saying? How is the parable an illustration of this answer?

The parable teaches us about God's forgiveness and our need to also be forgiving. We are supposed to be shocked at the actions of the unforgiving servant. D. A. Carson comments;

The servant's attitude is appalling. The amount owed is not insignificant: though worth but a few dollars in terms of metal currency, a hundred denarii (v. 28) represented a hundred days' wages for a foot soldier or common laborer. Yet the amount is utterly trivial compared with what has already been forgiven him. The similarity of his fellow servant's plea (v.29) to his own (v.26) does not move this unforgiving man. (Carson, p.406)

Can you think of times in your life when you have acted something like the unforgiving servant? Why is forgiveness easy to receive and difficult to give?

What is the specific judgment Christ gives at the end of the parable (vs. 35)?

The parable of the wicked trustee in Matthew 22:33-46 is much different from the unforgiving servant story, yet still ends with a very strong word of judgment. Read the parable again. What point is Jesus making?

It is quite obviously an indictment against the religious leaders of the day. Scholars disagree over whether or not this parable should be read as an allegory. Most of Jesus' parables make one key point. Jesus did on occasion, however, use allegory (Mark 4:13-20). The problem with allegory is that you can go wild assigning every detail in the story meaning. Wessel takes a level headed approach:

Its allegorical features, however, seem fairly obvious: the vineyard is Israel; the owner is God; the tenants are the Jewish leaders; the servants are the prophets; and the only son and heir is Jesus. Other details of the parable such as the wall, winepress, and tower have no separate significance. (Wessel, p.731)

Normally Jesus does not answer his own questions. In this parable he follows his question (v.9) with his own answer. What is it?

Why does Jesus quote Psalm 118:22-23? Who is the "capstone?" (cf. Acts 4:11, 1 Peter 2:7)

What specific judgment does Jesus give at the end of this parable (vs. 43 & 44)?

In our last two parables, the unprofitable servant and the unprofitable goats, we find the strongest of Jesus' judgments. Some cultural background will help us understand the first story.⁶

Slaves in the ancient world could enjoy considerable responsibility and authority. The man going on a journey entrusts his cash assets to three of his slaves who are understood to be almost partners in his affairs and who may share some of his profits. (Carson, p.516)

What is the response of Jesus to the servant who does nothing with his talents (vs. 26)? Why do you think he is so harsh?

What is the specific judgment that Christ gives (vs. 30)?

Strictly speaking Matthew 25:31-46, the story of the sheep and goats, is not a parable. But because of proximity to the parable of the unprofitable servant, the similar judgment rendered and its "parabolic elements" it is usually included in studies of the parables. What is the difference between the sheep and the goats?

What is the standard by which the goats are judged (vs. 41-43)? How seriously does God take our involvement with the poor?

What specific judgment does Jesus give at the end of this parable (vs. 41 & 46)?

Try and summarize all four judgments we have looked at in this study. What do they tell you about the character of God? The seriousness of the Christian life?

All of these parables place an emphasis on works, performance, deeds. Is Jesus saying that we are saved by what we do and not by God's grace? Pastor James Boise explains;

Does that mean we are saved by works after all? Does it mean that the theology of the Reformation is wrong? No, but it is a statement of the necessity of works following faith- if we truly are regenerate. It is the point made in our study of the of the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt. 18:21-35). As we said there, an unbreakable connection exists between what we believe and what we do....We are not justified by works. But if we do not have works, we are not justified. We are not Christians. (Boise, p.204)⁷

How has this study challenged your Christian lifestyle? Do you find yourself comforted, bothered, challenged or _____ by these parables?

Sermon Notes. . .

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Ten: I Am The Bread of Life

John 6:1-71

In the 1970s, pop icon Bruce Springsteen sang, “Everybody’s got a hungry heart.” His words capture the human predicament. We find ourselves longing for something beyond ourselves, beyond anything this world has to offer. In John 6 Jesus addresses our fundamental yearning, our hunger for fulfillment.

In John’s gospel the teaching of Jesus takes a different shape than the material found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John we find no parables, no “Sermon on the Mount,”⁸ or “Olivet Discourse”⁹ outlining the end of the age. In John the emphasis of Jesus’ teaching is on himself. Jesus is the one in whom we are to place our trust. Notice “I am” statements found in John’s gospel:

6:35	<i>I am the bread of life</i>	Will you eat?
8:12	<i>I am the light of the world</i>	Will you see?
10:7	<i>I am the door</i>	Will you come in?
10:14	<i>I am the good shepherd</i>	Will you follow?
11:25	<i>I am the resurrection and the life</i>	Do you want life?
14:6	<i>I am the way</i>	Are you on it?
15:1	<i>I am the vine</i>	Are you connected to me? ¹⁰

John chapter 6 marks both the high point of Jesus’ popularity and the beginning of Jesus’ long procession to the cross. The feeding of the 5000, which sets the stage for Jesus’ claim in 6:35, is the only miracle which occurs in all four gospels. It marks the turning point in our Lord’s ministry. Jesus’ popularity is at its apex. John the Baptist has been executed (Matt. 14:12-13), and now the people want to make Jesus a king. Rejecting the crown, Jesus calls for a greater commitment on the part of his followers (John 6:53ff.; Matt. 16:24ff.; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) and sets his course toward the cross in Jerusalem. At this his followers begin to abandon him.

This is a long, rich chapter. Read these 70 verses. What questions arise in your mind as you think through this passage? Look for the following details as you read:

When do the events of this chapter take place? What are we to learn from this?

Where do the events take place?

Where is Jesus' discourse (vss. 26-59) given? Do you think John has a purpose in giving us the location of Jesus' sermon?

How does the teaching of Jesus interpret the miracle he has performed?

Notes and Questions:

Notes:

6:14 After the people eat and are satisfied they become exuberant. "Could this be the prophet foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15?"¹¹

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.

Moses had provided food in the desert (Exodus 16:11-36, etc.). Now this Rabbi was doing the same.

6:15 Jesus' adoring crowd may have intended to kidnap him and force him to be king. Instead, Jesus eludes their grasp and spends some time in solitude.

6:16-21 The disciples have a five mile trip across the Sea of Tiberias.¹² In the evening it was common for the wind to increase. They are making headway, but they still have almost half the lake to cross.

Notice John points out, “It was dark.” (vs. 17). This is probably his way of pointing out the spiritual struggle going on during and after the miraculous feeding.¹³ The disciples are discouraged. When the disciples see Jesus walking on water they are, understandably, more “terrified” of him than they are of the storm. Here Jesus utters another veiled claim to deity. “It is I,” or, “I, I am.”

The dialogue/teaching which takes place “on the other side of the lake” (vss. 25-59) interprets the miracle of the feeding and is, perhaps, the most significant part of John 6. This narrative takes the place, in John’s gospel, of the “Last Supper” in the synoptic gospels. Chapter 6 contains some of the most vivid, almost macabre, teaching we find from the lips of Jesus (see especially verses 53-58).

Why, according to Jesus, did the people pursue him (6:26)?

In what ways do you find yourself thinking like a “Galilean” with regard to Jesus?

What are the implications of vs. 29? How does this verse summarize the entire gospel? Can you think of statements by Paul or by Peter which correspond to these words?

6:35 contains the first of the Jesus’ great *I am* statements.

The saying enshrines the essence of Jesus’ message — he is the answer to the needs of the human heart. *The bread of life* implies the fundamental, elemental role Jesus claims to fulfil in relation to the yearnings of the human spirit. For Jesus’ audience bread was the ‘stuff of life’, the primary source of nourishment, as it continues to be for millions in Third world countries. But since bread is a basic food universally, there is also the implicit claim that he fulfils this role for everyone. Caviar, like cake and confectionery, is for the few, but bread is for all. He is ‘the Saviour of the world’ (4:42). (Milne, p. 111)

Read and re-read John 6:35. Emphasize different words as you re-read this famous teaching. What does this verse mean to you personally? In what ways has this “bread of life” been the fulfillment of your hunger?

Complete the following sentence and share it with your group. “Jesus is the bread of my life in that he _____.”

We live in a very affluent society. Ironically, in spite of our great wealth, we always want a little bit more. We think that one more technological gizmo, one more piece of sporting equipment or one more exotic vacation will produce satisfaction. How should John 6:35 shape our view of these desires? What do we learn about our own Christian lives if we, as first world, wealthy believers find ourselves constantly striving for more things and experiences?

What does 6:36-40 teach us about the nature of our salvation? Jot down some specific truths taught by Jesus in these verses.

Consider the words of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin on these verses:

So Christ is not the guardian of our salvation for just one day, or even for a few days, but he will take care of our salvation to the end. He will accompany us, as it were, from the start to the finish of our journey, and so he mentions here the final resurrection. This promise is most necessary for us, as we labor wretchedly under the great weakness of the flesh, about which we are all fully aware. Indeed, the salvation of the whole world might be in jeopardy at any time if believers were not supported by Christ’s hand and so able to boldly advance to the day of resurrection. So let this become fixed in our minds, that Christ has stretched out his hands to us, that he will not desert us in mid-stream, but that as we rely on his goodness we may confidently raise our eyes to the final day. (Calvin, pp. 161-162)

In 6:48ff. Jesus seems to go out of his way to be offensive to the Jews listening to him in the synagogue. In vs. 51, for the first time, he connects “I am the bread of life,” with actually “eating” his flesh. Why is this offensive? To eat flesh and, especially, to drink blood was unthinkable for the Jew (Lev. 17:10-14). It was against the law of Moses and would alienate the participant from Israel.¹⁴ The offense is intensified with the tense Jesus uses for “eat.” The past tense (aorist) of the verb means “to consume” with decisive action. But in vss. 54 and 56 Jesus uses the present tense which means “to gnaw,” or “to chew” or “to munch upon.”

What does it mean to “eat the flesh” of Jesus? What did Jesus have in mind with this figure of speech? Does the use of the present tense lend help here?

Why is this a “hard teaching”? (vs. 60) Is it “hard” for you? In what ways?

This is a long, and rich, chapter. What have you learned about Jesus from your study? Who is he? What does he offer? What does he demand?

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Eleven: I am the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-42

A shepherd was a highly valued member of the Palestinian world. Shepherds worked hard and long as they endured a work environment threatened by the elements, by animals looking for a meal and by thieves looking to increase their fortunes. Their labor was skilled and produced a good income. It is no wonder that the biblical writers used shepherd imagery to refer to God (Ps. 23:1ff.; 77:20; 95:7, etc.) and to their own rulers and prophets.

Before looking into John's gospel read Ezekiel 34:1-16 (notice especially vss. 11-12).¹⁵ Here Ezekiel prophesies against the false (and weak) prophets of his era. Clearly, God's people need a *good* shepherd!

Now read John 10:1-42. The setting is the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah), a few months after the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus, with startling boldness, claims to be the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy! All that Israel yearned for is standing in Jerusalem talking with his followers and his detractors.

The chapter is divided into two sections. First, we read Jesus' sermon (vss. 1-18). He is the "good shepherd." Second, we read of the Jews' divisiveness over Jesus' teaching and their ensuing dialogue with him (vss. 19-42). This is the last of the acrimonious interactions Jesus has with the Jews in John's gospel. John again forces the reader to take a position. Who is this Jesus? There is no middle ground. Is he "one" with the Father as he claims (vs. 30)? Or has he committed the sin of blasphemy which is punishable by death (vs. 33)?

There are three main figures in Jesus' sermon/parable: the shepherd, the sheep (always plural in the Greek) and the hired hand. As you read this chapter make a note of what you learn about each figure.¹⁶

The Shepherd

The Sheep

The Hired Hand

From your lists above, what deductions can you make? What is Jesus teaching us about his role as shepherd?

What do we learn about our role as sheep? What does it mean to “hear his voice” (vs. 3), to be “called by name,” to be led by the good shepherd?

Our era stresses the autonomy of every individual. We admire the “individual,” someone who “makes it on her own.” What does Jesus’ shepherd/sheep imagery say about our notion of the “self” as an independent unit? Do you mind being likened to a sheep in a flock? Are you a good sheep?

Consider vss. 7-10. What does Jesus have in mind when he claims to be the “door” (vs. 7)? What do these verses say about other religions and messiahs? (Compare John 14:6 and Matt. 7:13-14)

Notice the richness of vs. 10. The NIV’s “life to the full” is rendered as “abundant” life in the NRSV and other translations. The shepherd came to provide the life God intended his creatures to live.

... life. . . to the full suggests fat, contented, flourishing sheep, not terrorized by brigands; outside the narrative world, it means that the life Jesus’ true disciples enjoy is not to be construed as more time to fill (mere ‘everlasting life’), but life at its scarcely imagined best, life to be lived. (D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John, 1991, p. 385)

Do you understand the Christian life as a “full” life? Are you ever envious of the non-believer who “gets to” indulge in certain vices which appear gratifying?

In 10:11 we find something unique to John’s gospel in that the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This fits with John’s presentation of Jesus as one voluntarily destined for the cross, his moment of glory (cf. 10:17-18; 12:27ff.; 15:13 and especially 17:1-5).

Look carefully at vss. 17-18. Here Jesus tells us of his self-sacrifice. What do we learn about the crucifixion from these verses?

Jesus' teaching about his role as our good shepherd is not complete at the end of the dialogue in 10:21.

10:22-39 are set specifically around the Festival of Dedication. This was not a biblical festival. Dedication looked back to the time when Antiochus IV, who named himself Epiphanes¹⁷ attempted to *Hellenize* the temple. The Greeks were ruling the world¹⁸ and wanted to establish uniform worship throughout the empire. Antiochus usurped the priesthood, erected an altar to Zeus, and even sacrificed pigs in the temple. Faithful Jews were devastated and began to revolt under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus. This revolt succeeded in December 164 B.C. The following year saw the first observance of Hanukkah, a memorial celebration looking back to the time when Judas Maccabaeus purified the temple.

Is John making a point here? Does he point out the obvious, "It was winter," (vs. 22) to show the darkness of the times? The reader will learn in chapter eleven that Jesus' "hour" is fast approaching. Does the darkness of the season, the shortness of the day in winter, portend the crucifixion of our Lord? Is Jesus "purifying" the temple in the same way Judas Maccabaeus did in 164 B.C. The debate which ensues in these verses centers around two titles, "Messiah" (vss. 24-30) and "Son of God" (vss. 31-39). The conclusion of the first debate comes when Jesus utters the dramatic claim, "The Father and I are one!" (vs. 30). One commentator calls this the "shattering statement" which is parallel to the conclusion of an earlier debate when Jesus declared, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (8:58).¹⁹ In both cases the claim is so alarming that Jesus' opponents want to destroy him. Michaels clarifies the intent of Jesus' claim.

The point of issue for Jesus is not the title **Christ** (v. 24), or **God's Son** (v. 36), or even **God** (v. 33), but the relationship between himself and **the Father**, a relationship displayed in such miracles as the healing of the blind man. More even than mutual knowledge (cf. v. 14), this relationship is one of mutual indwelling: The Father is **in** Jesus and Jesus is **in** the Father. (Michaels, p. 189, emphasis Michaels')

10:27-29 Often Christians debate the possibility of one losing his or her salvation. Once saved is it possible to become un-saved? Jesus promises what we might call a "double security" with regard to our salvation. Our security in Christ is sure indeed!

Commenting on these verses Bruce Milne says, "No profounder security is conceivable for the follower of Jesus." He then adds the following quotation by Emil Brunner from The Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation:

Christ declares that his people 'will never perish'. Weak as they are they will all be saved. Not one of them shall be lost and cast away: not one of them shall miss heaven. If they err, they shall be brought back; if they fall, they shall be raised. The enemies of their soul may be strong and mighty, but their Saviour is mightier; and none shall pluck them out of their Saviour's hand. (from Milne, p. 153)

Jesus makes many “shepherd” promises and in John 10. Which one(s) do you find most encouraging to your walk in Christ? Why?

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Twelve: I am the Light of the World

John 8:12-59

John chapters 7-10 contain teaching from the mouth of Jesus which is unique to the fourth gospel. The setting is the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast (Tabernacles or Feast of Booths) was held in late September or early October.²⁰ This feast, one of the three most important annual feasts, began five days after the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).²¹ Historians agree this was the most popular of the feasts. It was a liturgical party which celebrated, non-stop, the miraculous provision Yahweh had made for his people as they wandered through the desert after the exodus.²² A family would, literally, build a small house (booth) outside of Jerusalem and live in it for the week. These humble dwellings were to remind the people that they were once a nomadic people who had now been granted the land of Israel as a permanent home. Joy and thanksgiving, therefore, marked this feast from beginning to end. Originally, the feast lasted seven days, but an eighth day was added so that the participants could rest after all the festivities of the previous week.

In these chapters we find three sermons punctuated by:

I. Feast of Tabernacles: Sermon One: Is Anyone Thirsty? (7:14-39)
Postscript: (7:40-52)

II. Interlude: The Woman Caught in Adultery (7:53 — 8:11)

III. Feast of Tabernacles: Sermon Two: I am the Light of the World (8:12-59)

IV. Jesus heals a man born blind (9:1-41)

IV. Feast of Tabernacles: Sermon Three: I am the Good Shepherd (10:1-21)

Read our passage in context. Read vss. 12-59, but concentrate especially on vss. 12-30.

Make a few notes of those things which stand out and those which are confusing. How many claims can you find that Jesus makes about himself?

Questions

Highlights

Jesus' words in John 8:12 are astounding! The Feast of Tabernacles contained two great ceremonies, the pouring of the water and the festival of lights. The water ceremony looked back to God's miraculous provision in the desert. The Festival of Lights remembered Yahweh's guidance of Israel through the desert in the form of a pillar of fire. Each night during the Feast there was the lighting of the four golden candlesticks in the Court of Women in the temple. Each of the candlesticks had four golden bowls in which wicks were floating. It was said that all of Jerusalem was in the glow of these lights. As the Feast of Tabernacles draws to its conclusion, and the lights are extinguished for another year, Jesus claims to be the light of the world. This claim incites the discussion/discourse which will take us through the chapter.

Why did the Pharisees object so strongly to Jesus' claim? Undoubtedly they understood the messianic allusions in both of Jesus' pronouncements.

On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there will be no light, no cold or frost. It will be a unique day, without daytime or nighttime—a day known to the LORD. When evening comes, there will be light. On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter. (Zech. 14:4-8)

Read the following passages. In view of these texts what does it mean for Jesus to be the "light of the world"?

- Exodus 13:21-22
- Psalm 27:1
- Isaiah 49:6
- Isaiah 60:19-22
- I John 1:5-7
- John 1:8-9
- Revelation 22:1-5

Recall John 1:4 and 1:9

... in him [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

In what sense is Jesus the light of all people? What do you think John has in mind in these verses? How would the world be different if Jesus did not exist?

Now consider your own life. What are the practical outworkings of Jesus as the light of the world? In what ways is Jesus the light of your life?

8:13 shows the response of the Pharisees. Rabbis of Jesus' day attained their authority by quoting other rabbis and making a small addition of their own to the already vast body of teaching. They would become legal experts, not so much in the Old Testament itself, but in rabbinic interpretation of the law of Moses. Jesus comes to the temple and quotes no one. He simply teaches.²³ When questioned, Jesus does make a case for his authority. Notice the four areas Jesus points to to defend his authority:

1. Vs. 14

2. Vs. 16

3. Vs. 23

4. Vs. 28

In vss. 14-30 Jesus addresses the Pharisees who don't trust him. Notice the ironic interplay between Jesus and his detractors.

	Jesus	Pharisees
vs. 14	"I know"	"You don't know"
vs. 15	"I judge no one"	"You judge"
vs. 23	"I am from above"	"You are from below"
vs. 23	"I am not of this world"	"You are of this world"

Nevertheless, at the end of this section (vs. 30) “many believed in him.” Why? What is it that attracted them to Jesus? Make a short list of the things which attract you to Jesus and share this with your group.²⁴

What is the distinguishing mark of discipleship in 8:31?

In 8:32ff. Jesus turns some of our notions of freedom upside down. We tend to think of freedom as a synonym for permissiveness. How does Jesus view freedom? What does Jesus mean in vs. 36? What is the relation between “truth” and freedom? What does it mean to know the truth?

The pride of the Pharisees was deeply wounded in vs. 32. “We are descendants of Abraham and we are free. As a matter of fact, we have never been in bondage to anyone.” There is deep irony in their assertion because, in fact, the Jews had been in and out of bondage throughout their history. They were in bondage to the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks (Antiochus Epiphanes, 175-163 B.C.) and now the Romans.²⁵ This leads to a discussion of Abraham as the father of the Jews (vss. 39ff.).

Why is this discussion so explosive? What is the climax of the discussion?

At the end of this chapter when Jesus utters the words “I am” (vs. 58) his listeners want to kill him. In uttering these words, *ego eimi* (εγω ειμι), Jesus claims to be one with Yahweh.²⁶ Elsewhere in John’s gospel these words can be ambiguous.²⁷ But here there is no doubt, “no clearer implication of divinity is found.” (Brown, I, p. 367).

G. Campbell Morgan exults,

[This] is a supreme claim to Deity; perhaps the most simple and sublime of all the things He said with that great formula of old, the great "I AM." (The Gospel According to John, 1933, p. 161)²⁸

Jesus, the *light of the world*, and the great *I am*. Think about his teaching for a moment. Jesus is either a deceiver (egotist), crazy, or telling the truth. His teaching should compel worship or scorn. A middle ground is nonsense.

Respond to the following quotation about this chapter.

Words which in a human being would inevitably look like exaggerated arrogance, can take no other form in the mouth of [Jesus] who alone has brought knowledge of the Father (cf. 1:18). This applies to all the sayings of Jesus in this section: he can speak in no other way — and non-believers cannot understand him (cf. vv. 25, 43, 46-47). Anyone looking for a picture of the earthly Jesus will be offended by the uncompromising language of [John's] Christ. (Rudolf Schnackenburg, The Gospel According to St. John II, 1982, p. 193.)

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Thirteen: I am the Way

John 14:1-14

*I do my thing, and you do your thing,
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine,
You are you and I am I,
And if by chance, we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped.*

So said Fritz Perls, father of Gestalt psychotherapy. The free verse makes us snicker and laugh a bit at the mentality of the 1960s. But Perls does capture the spirit of pluralism which permeates the thinking of our era. "Truth" is understood as something personal and subjective. One of the leading philosophers of our era is Dr. Richard Rorty.²⁹ Rorty insists that he refuses "to believe in the existence of Truth, in the sense of something not made by human hands, something which has authority over human beings." What a contrast Jesus is to Fritz Perls, Richard Rorty and to the thinking of the twentieth century!

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me!

John 13 through 17 are unique to the fourth gospel. Here we find Jesus' intimate farewell address to his disciples. Throughout these chapters the reader finds himself "listening in" on a conversation between a man who is about to be executed and a group of followers who are fearful, perplexed and deeply disappointed.

In John 14:1-14 we sample a few verses of this lengthy conversation. Read these verses from at least two translations (if you have them). Read one of these translations aloud. Jot down any initial thoughts which come to mind as you read.

We might think of 14:6 as the only shocking verse in this section. Look carefully at 14:1. This verse shows the obvious state of the disciples' hearts. Jesus is troubled (12:27, 13:21). The disciples know he is leaving them. They are distraught. Here he offers them comfort. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," (14:1) is followed by one of John's favorite verbs, "believe."³⁰

The Greek verb can be translated either as an imperative, "Believe in God!," or as an indicative "You believe in God. . ." The NIV translates with a double imperative, "Trust in God, trust also in me."

No matter how we take this verb, the verse again shows the startling (from the disciples' perspective) truth that Jesus and Yahweh were of the same stuff. Both are worthy recipients of the disciples' faith and trust. Jesus will return to this truth later in his conversation.

How do you understand Thomas' question in 14:5? What is Thomas looking for with this question?

When Jesus responds to Thomas' question he makes the second to last of his "I am" statements in John's gospel.³¹ As noted above, our Lord's claims are stunning in light of our age of pluralism and anti-exclusivism. We pride ourselves in "finding our own way." Jesus claims not to point to the way, not to enable us to find the way, but to be the way!

Think about the marketplace of ideas in our time. First we have what has been called "inclusivism." This is the notion that salvation is possible to adherents of other faiths, but somehow Jesus is the agent of salvation. Vatican II, an official statement of the Roman Catholic Church was inclusive when it said that Christ's salvation was "not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way."³²

Second, we have what is called "pluralism." This is the belief that many (or all) religions point the way to God. The Christian faith is one faith among many. "Unlimited growth is cancer, and so would be an ever growing single Christian religion all over the world."³³

Against both inclusivism and pluralism stands Jesus in John 14:6. He makes an exclusive claim about himself.

In 1963 Karl Barth was speaking at Princeton Seminary. One student asked, "Dr. Barth, don't you think God has revealed himself in other religions and not only in Christianity?" The Swiss theologian replied, "No, God has not revealed himself in any other religion including Christianity. He has revealed himself in his Son. In Jesus Christ God has spoken for himself and we must hear that speech."

Compare the following verses as you reflect on Jesus' claim in John 14:6:

- Acts 4:12
- Hebrews 10:19-20ff.

Respond to Thomas á Kempis as he reflects on this passage.

Follow thou me. I am the way and the truth and the life. Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living. I am the way which thou must follow; the truth which thou must believe; the life for which thou must hope. I am

the inviolable way; the infallible truth; the never-ending life. I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated. If thou remain in my way thou shalt know the truth, and the truth shall make thee free, and thou shalt lay hold of eternal life. (The Imitation of Christ, 56.1)

How has John 14:6 given shape to your life? How does the pattern of your life reflect your conviction that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life”?

We know from Scripture that salvation is a gift from God based on what Jesus did on the cross. On the cross Jesus paid the price for our sins. We receive this gift of salvation through faith. In this we can be certain that Jesus is the only means of salvation.

John Stott asks the question which is found on many of our lips: “Is there no hope of salvation, then, for those who belong to other religions, and who may never even have heard of Jesus?” He answers that we need to be very careful to distinguish what we know from what we don’t know. We know that salvation is not possible apart from Christ. We don’t know those questions which the Scriptures leave unanswered. Think about and respond to the following quotation.

What we do not know. . . is exactly how much knowledge and understanding of the gospel people need before they can cry to God for mercy and be saved. In the Old Testament, people were certainly ‘justified by grace through faith’, even though they had little knowledge or expectation of Christ. Perhaps there are others today in a somewhat similar position. They know they are sinful and guilty before God, and that they cannot do anything to win his favour, so in self-despair they call upon the God they dimly perceive to save them. If God does save such, as many evangelical Christians tentatively believe, their salvation is still only by grace, only through Christ, only by faith. (The Contemporary Christian, p. 319)

Surely one implication of this bold statement (14:6) is that Jesus—his honor, his glory, and his message—is to be our top priority in life. The focus of the Christian life is not ourselves (what he can do for us). The focus is to be on Jesus himself.

How does your Christian faith reflect this priority? Does our worship as a church reflect this priority?

One of the themes, if not the dominant theme, of the Gospel of John is the presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament Judaism. We find this in Jesus' reply to Philip (vss. 9ff). In his anguish Philip says, "Show us the Father, Jesus. Yeah. We want to see Yahweh." How does Jesus respond?

Review these verses along with John 10:38; 14:20 and 17:21. Think about this on a practical level. "God" is not some vague unfathomable deity. God has become one of us! To know Jesus is to know God the Father. While images of God were strictly forbidden in the Old Testament, we have his likeness in a real man, Jesus of Nazareth!

Consider 14:12-14. What are the discipleship implications of these verses?

There is a question as to what Jesus has in mind when he promises that the disciples will do "greater" works than he did. When we consider the feeding of the 5000 and the raising of Lazarus from the dead it hardly seems possible that Jesus had in mind "more sensational" when he said "greater" works.

What Jesus means we may see in the narratives of the Acts. There are a few miracles of healing, but the emphasis is on the mighty works of conversion. On the day of Pentecost [Acts 2] alone more believers were added to the little band of believers than throughout Christ's entire earthly life. During his lifetime the Son of God was confined in His influence to a comparatively small sector of Palestine. After His departure His followers were able to work in widely scattered places and influence much larger numbers of men. But they did it all on the basis of Christ's return to the Father. (Morris, p. 646)³⁴

What are the boundaries around the prayer promise in 14:13-14? What does it mean to pray in the name of Jesus? Should we end our prayers with the words, "In Jesus name a-men"?

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Fourteen: Washing Feet

John 13:1-17

John chapters 13 through 17 are unique to the fourth Gospel. To this point in our study of the “Sayings of Jesus” we have focused on the public ministry of Christ. In John’s gospel the focus now shifts to the disciples. Jesus wants to prepare his most intimate followers for his emanate death.³⁵ These chapters, referred to as the “Upper Room Discourse” find Jesus giving his last instructions to the disciples preparing them for the ministry in the world. The word “world,” or cosmos, occurs over 40 times in these chapters. Soon this ragtag group of disciples will be alone without the physical presence of their master.

Chapter 13 takes place on the last night of Jesus’ life. John’s narrative in chapter 12 takes place on Sunday. In chapter 13 we have jumped ahead to Thursday night. The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) fill in the details of Holy Week. Luke gives us some humorous insight into what was transpiring shortly before the foot washing in John 13. It seems that the disciples were more interested in competition than learning to serve. “A dispute also arose among them, which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” (Luke 22:24) As the disciples bicker in selfish ambition Jesus proceeds to set a stunning example.

Read John 13:1-17. Jot down some of your initial thoughts. Try and put yourself in the place of the disciples. What would have been going through their minds?

If you were to have your feet washed by Jesus how do you think it would make you feel?

This was a particularly humble task, included in a list of works which a Jewish slave should not be required to perform. As they commence the meal with feet as yet unwashed, since apparently none of the disciples are prepared to fulfill the duty (one does not wash the feet of peers!), Jesus himself rises, divests himself of his outer clothing, girds himself with a towel, and proceeds to wash and then dry his disciples feet. (Milne, p. 196)

Why doesn't Peter want his feet washed? The Greek text is strong and, perhaps, comical. Literally it reads, "Lord, you? of me? wash the feet?" Is Peter's reluctance due to pride? A fear of vulnerability? Embarrassment due to his own sinfulness?

Throughout the story we are reminded that Judas is about to betray Christ (vss. 2, 11, 18, 19). Why does John insert this recurring theme so often?

As we have seen in this study, Jesus often gives a theological answer to a practical question. At times these answers were very cryptic and must have left the disciples scratching their heads. How do you make sense of Jesus' answer to Peter in vss. 8ff?

- In what sense are the disciples clean?
- What is the first bath which had previously cleansed the disciples (vs. 10)?
- What is the theological lesson we are to learn from foot washing?

Some Christian churches literally practice Jesus' admonition in vs. 14, "...you also should wash one another's feet." Many years ago at a SBCC retreat we washed each other's feet. Yes, it felt odd! Should we continue to do this from time to time? What would the point be?

In this simple act Jesus taught his followers that the way of discipleship involves servanthood. Consider this passage in light of your own life. Is your life characterized by serving? How? When?

We live in a tremendously selfish age. We are encouraged to look out for number one. Followers of Jesus are to take a different path in life. M. Scott Peck points out the radical nature of Jesus' actions:

Until that moment the whole point of things had been for someone to get on top, and once he had gotten on top to stay on top or else attempt to get farther up. But here this man is already on top—who was rabbi, teacher, master—suddenly got down on the bottom and began to wash the feet of his followers. In that one act Jesus symbolically overturned the whole social order. Hardly comprehending what was happening, even his own disciples were almost horrified by his behavior. (quoted in Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew, p.191)

How are you stimulated to be a servant? Are you growing in your willingness to be a foot washer?

Read and comment on the following verses on servanthood. How do these texts give additional insight into servanthood?

- Matthew 20:25-28
- Romans 12:10
- Galatians 5:13, 6:2
- Ephesians 4:23, 5:21
- Philippians 2:3
- Colossians 3:13
- I Peter 4:9-10, 5:5

Who are some of your favorite foot-washers? What do you appreciate about their servanthood? As a group spend some time encouraging each other in this area.

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Fifteen: The Promise of the Holy Spirit

John 14:15-31, 15:26-27, 16:5-16

The disciples must have been in shock. After nearly 3 years with Jesus and grand hopes that he would be the one to re-establish the Kingdom, he tells them he is leaving them! (Jn. 16:5) Imagine the confusion they must have felt. Jesus however, has good news. They will not be left alone as orphans. In his place will come the Holy Spirit. At the very beginning of the Gospels, during John the Baptist's ministry, there is a looking forward to coming of the Spirit.

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt. 3:11).

“I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8).

“I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on who you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit’” (John 1:33).

Read John 14:15-31, 15:26-27, 16:5-16. In his last instructions to his disciples Jesus returns to the theme of Holy Spirit several times. Indeed it is the central concern of this upper room discourse. As you read write down some of your initial thoughts and questions. Why is this teaching on the Holy Spirit so prominent the night before his death?

Make a list of the benefits of the Holy Spirit based on just these verses here in John. What does Jesus promise the Spirit will do for the disciples?

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit a “counselor” (NIV). The Greek word is *parakletos* which means, “one who is called alongside to help.” Our English translations have a wonderful time trying to capture the meaning of this word. The GNB renders the word “helper,” the KJV, LB and AV “comforter,” the NRSV and NEB use “advocate,” while the Message renders it as “friend.” How has the Holy Spirit been a counselor, advocate, helper, comforter and friend in your life?

When Jesus promises “another Counselor” he is referring to one exactly like himself. Martin Luther termed this *alter Christus*, “another Christ.” In other words, though Jesus was physically departing from the disciples he would, in fact, be present in his Spirit “forever.” In light of this marvelous truth, should Christians feel short-changed spiritually because they are not with Christ physically?

Why does Jesus say that it is good that he is going away? (cf. 16:7)

One of the works of the Spirit is the imparting of “peace” to the followers of Jesus (14:27). How do you understand this “peace?” Describe for your group how you have experienced “peace” that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (14:27). Is this accomplished by an act of the will or by the help of the Holy Spirit? If you find yourself troubled and afraid what does this tell you? Compare:

- Colossians 3:15
- Philippians 4:6-7

Think through your experience of the Holy Spirit. When do you feel closest to the Him? When does the Spirit seem most distant from your daily life? Does this comment from Michael Green help you in thinking through your answer?

In a word, it is the task of the Paraclete to universalize the presence of Jesus. In the days of his flesh Jesus was limited by space and time. His physical departure made possible the coming of the Spirit as Paraclete and there would be no barriers of space and time to prevent the disciples being in intimate contact with him. Indeed, they would find the relationship even closer than companionship with Jesus in the days of his flesh. He has dwelt *with* them, but the one whom he promises as another Paraclete will dwell *in* them. (Michael Green, I Believe in the Holy Spirit, 1975, p.43)

In 16:8 Jesus uses a legal term to describe the prosecuting ministry of the Holy Spirit. The word, *elencho*, is translated “convict” in the NIV and “prove” in the NRSV. Tenney writes,

The Spirit does not merely accuse men of sin, he brings them to an inescapable sense of guilt so that they realize their shame and helplessness before God. This sin applies to three particular areas: sin, righteousness, and judgment. The Spirit is the prosecuting attorney who presents God’s case against humanity. He creates an inescapable awareness of sin so that it cannot be dismissed with an excuse or evaded by taking refuge in the fact that “everybody is doing it.” (Tenney, p. 157)

Does this quote from Tenney ring true in your experience? Can you describe what it was like for you when the Holy Spirit created “an inescapable awareness of sin”? Has this awareness increased or lessened since you became a Christian?

In 16:13 Jesus says the Spirit “will guide you into all truth.” Is it possible to understand spiritual truths apart from the help of the Holy Spirit? How have you experienced the Holy Spirit guiding you into truth?

Read I Corinthians 2:6-16. What further insights do these verses give you concerning the Spirit's role in communicating to us truth?

Sermon Notes. . .

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Sixteen: Vine and Branches

John 15:1-17

John 14-17 comprise what is referred to as the “upper-room discourse.” Probably the most well known section of Jesus’ conversation with his disciples is the discussion of the vine and branches. At the end of chapter 14 we read, “Come now; let us go” (14:31). While not entirely clear, it may be that Jesus uttered the words in John 15 as the disciples were walking away from the last supper in the upper room on their way to the garden of Gethsemane. Earlier in the evening Jesus had shown them the way of servanthood by washing their feet and then comforted them by assuring them he would be with them in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Undoubtedly the emotions of the evening were intense. Jesus is leaving. The disciples are perplexed. Jesus is giving his trusted followers some parting instructions. As they walked toward the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane they crossed the Kidron Valley. During this walk the disciples undoubtedly would have looked up at the bronze temple doors which were embossed with a great golden vine, the national emblem of Israel.³⁶ Jesus had built his teaching on symbols that were a part of his listener’s lives. The vine/grape symbolism is common from the Old Testament. Read Psalm 80:8-9 and notice how Israel sees herself as the “vine” of Yahweh.

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.

Notice how Isaiah employs the same imagery:

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit... The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight (Isa. 5:1-2, 7a).³⁷

But the vineyard in Isaiah is a grave disappointment. Fruit is not produced. In Psalm 80 the vineyard is “burned with fire” and Israel misses out on God’s intention for the nation. As Jesus talks with his disciples he teaches them that he is the vine and they are to be the branches. Once again Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of Judaism. The disciples are to carry on with his mission.

Start with the big picture. What do you learn about fruit-bearing in John 15:1-17? What does this teach about the Christian life?

What is fruit-bearing? Does Jesus have the conversion of souls in mind here or does he have in mind things like the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5)? Pastor and commentator Earl Palmer places the emphasis on a changed life. He comments, “The fruit of the branches is not more branches (souls won) but fruit—the good results of being with Christ. Indeed, those good results do win others.”

Assume, for the purposes of group discussion, that Palmer is correct. Write down and be ready to share with the group the fruit in your life. How has being connected with Jesus changed you?

Now get ready to affirm those in your group. Pick several group members and jot down a sentence or two describing fruit you have observed in their life. As a group spend a few moments reading these comments to one another.

In 15:2 Jesus uses the illustration to point out something that every farmer knows. Fruit trees or vineyards must be pruned if fruit is to be produced. A victorious viticulture in the summer demands pruning in the winter. Respond to Tenney’s comment.

Dead wood is worse than fruitlessness, for dead wood can harbor disease and decay. An untrimmed vine will develop long rambling branches that produce little fruit because most of the strength of the vine is given to growing wood. The vine-grower is concerned that the vine be healthy and productive. The caring process is a picture of the divine dealing with human life. God removes the dead wood from the church and disciplines the life of the believer so that it is directed into fruitful activity. (Tenney, p. 151)

Have you experience pruning in your life? What was it like? (cf. Heb. 12:11)

It is interesting that in this passage the disciples are not commanded to “bear fruit.” What does Jesus command? (vs. 4)

A great deal has been written and said about what it means to abide in Christ. How do you understand Jesus' command (15:4)? How would you explain to a new Christian what it means to "remain" or "abide" in Jesus?

In 15:4-5 Jesus points out quite strongly that it is impossible to bear spiritual fruit apart from a vital connection to him. Tenney summarizes the flavor of Jesus' teaching succinctly. "The effectiveness of the believer depends on his receiving the constant flow of life from Christ." (Tenney, p. 151) Respond to Milne's commentary:

Fruit-bearing for God is *not* a human possibility; it is Christ's work through us. The alternatives are starkly expressed: separate from Christ, 'no fruit'; united to Christ, *much fruit* (Milne, p.221, emphasis Milne's)

Why is it that we so often get this idea backwards in our Christian lives? Why do we tend to believe and act as though we can produce fruit on our own abilities independent from the vine?³⁸

In 15:15 Jesus refers to the disciples as "friends." What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus? (cf. James 2:23) What is the difference between being the "friend" of Jesus and the "buddy" of Jesus? How do you reconcile being a "friend" of Christ with an understanding that he is also the glorified Lord of the universe! (cf. Rev. 1:12-17)

In 15:12 Jesus commands that the disciples, "Love each other as I have loved you." What is the connection between abiding in Jesus, being the friend of Jesus and then loving each other?

In conclusion think through 15:1-17 again. In what ways does all that we are encouraged to be and do in this section of Scripture go against our normal ways of approaching life? How is it countercultural spiritually? How will you live your life with Christ differently this week?

Sermon Notes. . .

The Teachings of Jesus

Study Seventeen: The Olivet Discourse

Mark 13:1-37

No study of the teachings of Jesus would be complete without considering his instructions concerning the end of age. Jesus' most important teaching on this subject is found in all the Gospel's except John: Matthew 24:1-51, Mark 13:1-37, Luke 21:5-38. The discourse begins as the disciples admire the beauty and grandeur of the temple. By all accounts it was a magnificent building and courtyard area that dominated the city of Jerusalem. What a shock when Jesus predicts its destruction! ¹ In Mark 13 between v.2 and v.3 the location shifts to the Mount of Olives, which has a commanding view of Jerusalem and especially of the temple. The teaching is hence called the Olivet Discourse.

For the sake of simplicity we will focus primarily on Mark 13. It is the longest and without question most difficult discourse of Jesus. Interpreters have a field day, so we might as well too! Read the chapter looking for the forest and not the trees. Get the big picture and then the details will not seem so troubling. As you read keep in mind that this discourse of Jesus is "apocalyptic" in nature. "Apoca... what you say!" Wessel gives us help when he writes:

This kind of literature was well known in the first century, especially to the Jews. Daniel in the OT and the Revelation in the NT are examples of entire books that are apocalyptic in nature. These books, as well as the noncanonical apocalypses, are full of fantastic imagery and are highly symbolical. All of them purport to reveal information about the End. Mark's apocalypse is no exception. It has all the above characteristics, but in addition it has a distinctive exhortative character. The entire chapter is filled with exhortation and admonition. There are nineteen imperatives in vv. 5-37. This makes it abundantly clear that the main purpose of the discourse is not to satisfy curiosity about the future but to give practical, ethical teaching. (Wessel, p.742)

Now that you've read the chapter you have undoubtedly formed some preliminary opinions. What are they? The chapter is obviously about the end of the age and the second coming of Jesus. Barclay says that, "The difficulty about the doctrine of the second coming is that nowadays people are apt either completely to disregard it or to be so completely unbalanced about it that it becomes for them practically the only doctrine of the Christian faith." (Barclay, p.303) Into which error do you tend to fall?

Whenever discussions come up about the end times, whether it is the 1st or 20th century, everyone wants to know, “When will these things happen?” (v. 4) Does Jesus ever tell the disciples when the end will come? See Acts 1:6-7. What is the primary concern of Jesus in this discourse?

Beginning in verse 5 we are given signs concerning the end of the age. Make a list of these signs.

Jesus warns his listeners to:

- “Be on your guard” - (v.9)
- “Stand firm” - (v.13)
- “So be on your guard” - (v.23)
- “Be on your guard! Be alert!” - (v.33)
- “What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!” - (v.37)

Make these warnings practical in light of the signs of the end of the age. How should you be ready to respond? How should SBCC be alert corporately, on guard, and watchful?

In light of these warnings do you think a more detailed map of the future would be a help or hindrance to living the Christian life in the end times? Why? Why not?

Verse 14 is one of the most difficult in the entire New Testament. The phrase, “abomination that causes desolation,” is an expression from the OT book of Daniel (cf. Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Interpretations abound. Many see the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy in 168 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes captured Jerusalem, and desecrated the temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and sacrificing a pig on it! Since Jesus uses the same expression here, however, it is clear that its fulfillment is not limited to those events. It is probably best to see the “abomination that causes desolation” as having fulfillment in both the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the end of the age.

The language of verses 19-27 probably refer to the period of time known as the Tribulation (cf. Dan. 12:1, Jer. 30:7). This will be a terrible time of “distress unequalled from the beginning when God created the world” (v. 19).

What does Jesus have to say about false Christs and false prophets? (v. 21 & 22) Should we be impressed if someone appears to have miraculous powers?

It is very popular in many circles to come perilously close to predicting when Jesus will return. Hal Lindsey’s book, The Late Great Planet Earth, was one such attempt. It was the largest selling book, religious or otherwise, of the decade of the 70’s! In light of vs. 32-37 how should we respond to such teaching? Why is it important to avoid “date setting?”

We live in distressing times. As we approach the year 2000 we are hearing a great deal of speculation concerning the end. Some pundits, both Christian and non-Christian, are predicting mass chaos due to the Y2K problem, global climate changes, genetic engineering and new strains of medicine resistant diseases. Much of this chapter sounds very contemporary. What spiritual guidance do you find here? How do Jesus’ words affect how you will live your life this year?

Read II Peter 3. Since everything will ultimately be destroyed by fire what type of people ought we to be? What is the practical outworking of all this end time teaching?

¹ Scholars disagree as what precisely constitutes a parable. The Gospel writers explicitly label thirty parables, yet among these are proverbs, riddles, short sayings and questions. According to a more restrictive definition there are at least forty parables. However, if one adopts a more liberal definition to include some of Jesus' short sayings, then there are as many as sixty-five.

² Although Matthew typically employs the term "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God," the two are synonymous. Out of reverence Jews traditionally refrained from pronouncing the name of God. Instead they substituted another word. For instance, when reading aloud from the Old Testament, they would say Adonai (Lord) instead of YHWH when God's name appeared in the text. Here Matthew, who is writing to a Jewish-Christian audience, substitutes God's name with his dwelling place (heaven). The meaning, however, is the same.

³ To refer to these young women as "virgins" was another way of saying they were not yet married.

⁴ This is the same term that Paul often uses to describe himself (cf. Rom 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1)

⁵ Jesus uses the same word in vs. 10: for the Samaritan's compassion as he does to describe the compassion of the father for the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the compassion of the king in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:23-35).

⁶ Modern English uses the word "talent" for skills and mental powers God has entrusted to men; but in the NT times the *talanton* ("talent") was a unit of exchange. (Carson, p.516)

⁷ Lutheran believers have been found of saying, "We are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith which is alone."

⁸ Matthew 5-7.

⁹ Matthew 24, Luke 21, Mark 13.

¹⁰ There are three more "I am" statements in John. In 6:30 Jesus simply says, "I am. Don't be afraid." In 18:5 Jesus says "I am" and the Roman soldiers fall down. In 8:58 Jesus says, "Before Abraham was born, I am!"

¹¹ Josephus records the fact that "messianic pretenders" during the first century tried to emulate the miracles of the Old Testament to gain fame and notoriety. Obviously the feeding of the 5000 was more than pretense!

¹² Normally this lake was called the Sea of Galilee. The body of water is six hundred feet below sea level and was renamed in 26 A.D. by Herod Antipas to honor the new emperor of Rome, Tiberias.

¹³ John's references to "darkness" and "night" are too carefully placed to be understood as simple details. These references make a point, the light has come and is conquering the darkness. See 6:17; 12:35; 20:1; 3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30; 21:3.

¹⁴ Eating flesh and drinking blood was what Israel's oppressors would do (Isa. 49:26) when Yahweh judged them.

¹⁵ For extra credit read Jeremiah 23:1-4. Here Jeremiah uses the same imagery and looks forward to the same Messiah.

¹⁶ One commentator says, "There are not less than eighteen statements made about the shepherd between vss. 1 and 29."

¹⁷ Epiphanes was a vague claim to deity.

¹⁸ After the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.) his kingdom was split into four parts. Antiochus Epiphanes ruled Palestine after his successor, Antiochus III, defeated the Egyptians (198 B.C.).

¹⁹ B. Lindars, cited in Bruce, p. 236.

²⁰ The Old Testament background for the feast is found in Lev. 23:33-43 and Deut. 16:13-15.

²¹ The other two were the Passover, which celebrated the deliverance of Israel during the exodus and Pentecost, which celebrated the giving of the law in the desert. It was mandatory that all the people of Israel attend these three feasts.

²² The feast also had associations with the fall harvest.

²³ This was the same shock at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:29).

²⁴ This chapter contains a number of difficulties. One of them is reconciling vs. 30 with what follows. Is John pointing to a group who believes and then changes its mind? Or, is he showing us different reactions to Jesus in the temple?

²⁵ Paul points out again and again that the Jews were in bondage to the law of Moses (cf. Gal. 3:10ff.; Romans 7; II Cor. 3:7, etc.).

²⁶ The two words are the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *ani hu* first encountered in Exodus 3. "Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?'" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exod. 3:13-14)

²⁷ With the woman at the well, for instance (4:26), the reader has to decide whether to supply a predicate, “I am *he*,” (as most translations) or to understand his response to the woman as a claim to deity.

²⁸ Indeed, the commentators are exuberant over these words. Ethelbert Stauffer says “[T]he phrase harbors within itself the most authentic, the most audacious, and the most profound affirmation by Jesus of who he was.” (from Jesus and His Story, 1959, p. 174, quoted in Tenney, p. 99)

²⁹ Rorty is the grandson of the famous theologian and pastor Walter Rauschenbusch.

³⁰ cf. John 1:50; 3:12, 15; 4:21, 41; 5:24, 44, 46; 6:29, 35, 47, 64; 7:38; 8:24, 45; 9:35; 10:38; 11:25, 41; 12:37, 44; 13:19; 14:1, 11; 16:31; 17:20; 20:27.

³¹ cf. p. 53.

³² cited in John Stott, The Contemporary Christian, p. 298.

³³ from Raimundo Panikkar in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness, cited in Stott The Contemporary Christian, p. 298.

³⁴ Morris quotes J. C. Ryle who wrote, “[G]reater works’ means more conversions. There is no greater work possible than the conversion of a soul.” (Morris, p. 646)

³⁵ New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann calls this section of his commentary, “The Revealer’s Farewell to His Own.”

³⁶ The first century historian Josephus tells us that this vine had “clurster as large as a man.”

³⁷ cf. Ps. 80:1-16; Isa. 5:1-7, 27:2ff.; Jer. 2:21; 12:10ff.; Ezek. 15:1-8, 17:1-6; Hos. 10:1-2.

³⁸ This section in John 15 coincides with Jesus’ teaching in the synoptic Gospels: “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt. 7:20; cf. Luke 6:43-44).

¹ This prediction was fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Roman general Titus finally took the besieged city. The ancient historian Josephus tells us that 97,000 were taken captive and 1,100,000 died by the starvation and the sword. (Barclay, p.311)