



MARY'S GIFT

Jesus – The Son of God The Storyline (Part 25)

Texts: Matthew 17, 21; Mark 8-12, 14; Luke 9, 22; John 7-8, 11-12

I

This past week I did what many of you already have or will do today in person, on the phone, or maybe only in a prayer toward heaven: I thanked my mom for all she'd given me. She got all embarrassed and told me that she was proud of me and that who I am is thanks enough. "You don't need to do anything else," she said. But I sent off a card to her, anyway. It seemed utterly insufficient.

How do you adequately honor the person who gave you life itself? I think of the endless nights she bore with my colic as a baby, and then with almost every other childhood disease short of the swine flu. I recall how mad and then forgiving she was that time I tossed a snowball through the window of an unmarked police car. I remember the comfort she gave when two successive girlfriends dumped me for other guys. I think of the countless meals she made, the skills she taught me, and the social graces she imparted so that one day some girl might finally stay with me. Thank you, Amy, for staying with me and for now being the wonderful mother of our children.

My mom gave me a lot of gifts, but the greatest of all was helping me to discover who Jesus is and who I am called to be before Him. As many of you know, I didn't make a personal commitment to Christ until later in life; but it was when I was a child that my mother prepared the ground for that. She took me to church, even when I didn't want to go. She enrolled me in Vacation Bible School and helped me memorize Scripture. I saw her reading the Bible on her own and going off to a neighborhood Bible study. She prayed with me at the table and sometimes before bed. She read to me from the *Narnia* Chronicles, till the character of the lion, Aslan (C.S. Lewis' figure for Christ), became someone I wanted to meet. As shaky as she'd say her own faith and character has been, God used my mother to plow furrows in which the seed of faith would finally settle, and one day come to life, and start to bear fruit.

II

I want to suggest to you this morning that the greatest gift that any mother, grandmother, or mentor can give to a child at any age is a knowledge of who Jesus really is and who they are called to be before Him. There is a lot of confusion about this in our time, even as there was in His.

Luke chapter 9 tells us that ¹⁸ **Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"** ¹⁹ **They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."** In other words, there are a bunch of theories about you, Jesus. Some say you are a spiritual guru, like **John the Baptist**, somebody good because you stir people to look at the condition of their soul. Some say you are a political activist like **Elijah**, somebody good because you



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speak truth to power and unveil corruption. Others say that you are a great ethical teacher, Jesus, like the **prophets of long ago**, somebody good because you provide principles by which people can lead a more just and loving life.

Most people still feel this way about Jesus. They appreciate His spiritual insight, His political courage, His social ethics. Most people consider Jesus very good. But this is far short of who Jesus really is. As Greg Ogden reminded us recently, Jesus was no ordinary man – not even an extraordinary man. He did not seek to be admired as good. He sought to be followed as God. And so, after hearing His disciples describe the popular theories about his identity, Jesus put the question to them bluntly: **"What about you?" [Jesus] asked [his disciples]. "Who do you say I am?"** (Luke 9:20) **Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ."** (Matt 16:16).

It was a title loaded with meaning from centuries of God's dealings with the Hebrew people. In using the title "the Christ," Simon Peter was saying, "I believe you are the One long-promised by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You are the Anointed King, the Messiah we've been waiting for, Suffering Servant by whose stripes we will be healed. You are the Holy One of Israel, the Hope of all Nations, the Savior of Humanity." **"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."** And Jesus said: "That's right, Simon. Blessed are you for knowing who I am. Stand firm on that conviction, Peter, and I tell you that the very strength of Hell itself will not be able to overcome you.

III

If you read the Gospel texts assigned for today's portion of our study of the Bible Storyline, then you will know how Jesus confirmed the truth of this confession. He took Peter, James, and John up on a mountainside and gave them a glimpse of his full glory as He was suddenly transfigured into a being of pure light. The name that God had given to Moses for him was "Yahweh," literally "I AM WHO I AM." In a variety of famous statements and corroborating signs, Jesus brashly declared that He was the great I AM himself, come to earth to offer humanity everything it needed for new life. Jesus gave his disciples a window into his immense power to overcome evil by casting out demons from tormented people. He displayed his power to overcome even the scourge of death by raising a man from the dead.

But Jesus also made it clear that the way to ultimate life paradoxically involved a certain kind of dying. He said that our version of wealth – however we define and cling to it – has to be crucified so that a new and greater kind of treasure can be formed in us. A rich man who'd been following Jesus thus far, gave up the journey with Jesus at this point. He could not see that the kingdom of God is not accessible to those who put their hope in their possessions and performance, but only to those who surrender all to God in humble trust like children. It was very hard for even the disciples to take this in.



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But Jesus patiently taught them that the true pathway to greatness lies not in getting but in giving, not in being served but in serving.

And then, to prove that it was divine LOVE itself that called for this surrender, Jesus declared that he Himself was about to make the greatest sacrifice. Three separate times, He told his disciples that He planned to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die in order to pay the price for human sin and display the towering love of God for human beings. And so, at the end of the Storyline for this week, we see Jesus outside Jerusalem, sending His disciples to fetch a donkey colt – the symbolic mount of a King who comes to bring peace.

We watch Jesus riding triumphantly through the gates of the ancient City of David, as throngs of people lay down their coats and palm branches before Him, shouting Hosannas at the arrival of the long-awaited Savior. But the people still do not understand what salvation requires. Ironically, it is the most religious people that want the God that Jesus represents, dead and buried. And it is there – as Holy Week rushes towards its climax on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem – that this portion of the Storyline ends, until we rejoin it next week.

IV

I said at the start that the greatest gifts a mother or anyone else can give to another is the knowledge of who Jesus is and who we are before Him. There is a profound need today for a renewed dedication to the passing on of that vision. As Josh McDowell suggested recently and every day confirms, we face a profound crisis in our world today. Millions have come to believe that our most pressing problems are economic, political, and military ones, when in fact it is the collapse at our spiritual center that most imperils our individual, family, and national life.

Without a revival in the soul of humanity, renewal at every other level will be unimaginably hard and certainly short-lived. Now, more than ever, we need Christian mothers and mentors of every kind who teach our kids and own for themselves the simple truths proclaimed and modeled by Jesus. And so, at the risk of sounding simplistic, let me remind all of us of just a few of the particular things that Jesus teaches us.

The truth, Jesus tells us, is that we do not own this earth but are simply stewards for a season in the Master's vineyard. The truth is that the biblical God speaks far more of responsibilities than He does of rights. We do not have a *right* to sex, comfort, health, or even a certain lifespan. In the midst of a Universe that is primarily darkness, void, and vacuum, that we have the opportunity to breathe the air of this life for even ten minutes is an amazing gift of grace. Jesus tells us that the truth is that service and sacrifice for the sake of others isn't a tax strategy, a loathsome burden, or an



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emergency measure in a time of national crisis; it's a privileged opportunity to do what God does gladly and daily.

The truth, Jesus tells us, is that the least, last and lost people in our schools, cities, prisons, wombs, freezers and enemy camps matter to God and to those who are truly of God. The truth, according to Jesus, is that those who throw stones, bombs, or barbs to judge others are going to stand one day before the Supreme Court themselves. The truth is that the greatest wealth is wisdom and love and it's foolish to spend ourselves chasing something less. The truth, says Jesus, is that not all roads lead to the same place and just because the majority of people are traveling a bad road, doesn't make it a good road – unless you like to be a lemming.

Jesus tells us the unpopular truth is that God is far more interested in making us holy than in making us happy. The truth is that no harvest comes, no race is won, without hard work and deliberate preparation. The truth, Jesus says, is that God sees who we are when no one is looking and that his patience, though great, is never to be taken for granted. The truth is that the Ten Commandments are still *commandments*, and that our welfare still depends upon us not just posting them on our walls but praying them into practice. And, finally, the truth is that all of us owe a lot to the gift of a mother named Mary. It was through her body that the great I AM came to the earth in the person of Jesus to teach us these truths.

Let's give thanks, shall we, that there are other mothers – many here today -- who keep passing that gift on.

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