

Read Matthew 1

“and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the Father of Jesse.” Matthew 1:5

Have you ever wished you could go back in time and talk to yourself? How often I've wished that my thirty something self could visit with my 15 year-old self for about an hour. What kinds of lessons would I want to pass on to that young man? I'd definitely tell him that most of what he worries about doesn't matter. He needs to understand that the most important label on his life isn't popular, athlete, or boyfriend. I'd tell him that what God says about him is most important and that living a life of standards will bless him beyond measure.

Reading through Jesus' family tree we see the name of a former prostitute (Rahab) and a former pagan (Ruth). However, neither of these ladies are labeled by their past. So many of us focus on who we used to be, and the mistakes we made before we met Jesus. Maybe we even have some major ones that have occurred since our salvation. We focus on mistakes and heartbreaks. But we must remind ourselves...it doesn't matter who we were yesterday in our sin and mistakes, but who we are today in Jesus Christ. **Who labels you? Are you allowing the words of others to have more weight than the words of your Creator? Do the burdens of past sins feel inescapable? Ask God for the peace that comes from knowing your past is overcome by the blood of Jesus and your eternity is secure. Focus on the next chapter of our story instead of the chapters you couldn't change if you tried.**

Read Matthew 2

“And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.” Matthew 2:23

I have often been a poor delegator. My wife says it's because I can be very particular about the way certain things are done, which I supposed is part of it. But it also comes from the times I have seen delegated tasks go undone. You likely know the frustration of hearing someone say, “You can count on me”, only to find out you can't. We want people to live up to their word, but we live in a fallen world where people don't always keep their promises. And if we're being honest, we'd have to admit we're those people too.

I love finding the word “fulfilled” throughout the gospels. God's not an accidental God, and He never leaves a plan unfinished. The beauty of such a simple action as coming to Nazareth is that most people would consider it inconsequential. If God had hit every promise about Jesus for this one, most of us would have given Him a pass. But God never makes any promise without a definite intention of following through. He always keeps His word and sets a standard for us as His children that we should willingly follow. **We need to ask ourselves today: am I fulfilling the obligations I have taken on for God and others? We must always follow through on what we say we will do because God does. And consider the plans God wants to fulfill in your life. If you're feeling unfulfilled in your work or family life, it's not because God hasn't been offering you something better. We've probably been trusting in our own solutions and missing that God has something that blows it away!**

Read Matthew 3

“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Matthew 3:8

After years of wishing I could lose weight, I finally made a commitment during Christmas of 2010 to make this a priority. Many of my friends in the ministry were taking care of their church body, but neglecting their own. My fear was hitting 40 with type 2 diabetes and an inability to play outside with my kids. So I started exercising, but my eating habits didn't change much. I'd enjoy periodic victories with my weight, only to allow those victories to become my excuse to splurge. I soon realized that if I wanted to make a significant change in my life, simply changing a few parts would never be enough. I needed a complete change of heart for the sake of my health.

John the Baptist is making the point in Matthew 3 that salvation through Jesus makes you different. And for Christians to bear the fruit of salvation, regular repentance is necessary. For me to lose the weight, I had to be repentant every day of the habits and decisions that got me to an unhealthy place. The same goes for our walk with Jesus. While we have been given an eternal salvation, it's necessary that we regularly live a life of repentance that trades the rotten fruit of our past from the fresh fruit of the Holy Spirit. Those who want eternal life, without honoring Jesus in this life, will not find it. Not because we earn salvation, but because we honor salvation. Same old life = same old eternity. **Have you said yes to Jesus as Savior, but not as Lord? Romans 10:9 challenges us to trust Jesus as both in order to be saved. And if you've accepted Jesus, what is the fruit that proves the new life? A life that is repentant of sin is not perfect, but is changing for the glory of God.**

Read Matthew 4

“And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’” Matthew 4:19

For years, I've had no interest in fishing. So it was somewhat disappointing that my son is extremely interested. After a few unsuccessful fishing outings, we turned to an experienced fisherman from our church. For the most part, his bait recommendations and knowledge of the lake have led to better results. But in spite of the improvements, we don't always catch a lot. On days like those, my friends like to say, That's why they call it fishing and not catching!”

When Jesus called His followers to be fishers of men, He wasn't making any promises. Sometimes we hear a great message about witnessing, and then we go out the doors and remember that it's not always easy. There is a great ocean of humanity, much of it still in need of the salvation that only Jesus offers. And no matter how badly I may want to see those people become Christians, I can't be a fisher of men if I never cast a line in the water. Hanging out around the fish is not really fishing. **You and I must ask ourselves: Do I really care if people are saved? If so, where's the proof? When's the last time you cast the line of the Gospel towards someone? If you can't remember, it's probably been too long. So pray today that God would give you an opportunity to share Jesus with someone, and let's be ready!**

Read Matthew 5

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Matthew 5:14

Have you ever been shocked to hear someone claim to be a Christian? I was halfway through basic training, and Pvt. Mayberry was once again in classic form. I had been talking to another guy about

reading his Bible and Mayberry responded with a snide remark. Of course I was a bit snarky back and commented that reading the Bible probably wouldn't hurt him either. That's when Mayberry said he was a Christian, even revealing that his father was a pastor. After several weeks of knowing Mayberry, there was absolutely nothing I had seen out of his life to indicate he was a brother in Jesus Christ.

If people you know are surprised to find out you're a Christian, you're doing it wrong. Jesus said we are the light of the world. We have been set apart to demonstrate the difference between light and dark and our light is something that must not be hidden. In fact, even when we're not living as intentionally for Jesus as we could be, the difference He makes in us should still be evident. **So the question is: would your Christianity be shocking or confirming to the people around you? Are you living as the light of the world? Living for Jesus is living in the open and making the impact of Jesus in our lives as obvious as the impact of a lamp in a dark room. Stay on guard to protect your testimony and allow it to be an inspiration that draws other people closer to Jesus.**

Read Matthew 6

“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:6

A church member was showing me their newly constructed home, but saved “the best for last”. Upstairs was small, windowless room with just a chair. She told me this was her prayer closet, so she could obey Jesus’ command to get in a room and shut the door. My first thought was, “This looks like a cell for a mental patient,”, but I instead gave a much more pastoral answer along the lines of wishing I had one. In reality, I can’t think of a worse place for me to pray.

So obviously I must not care about prayer, because I am disobeying the command of Jesus. But in reality, Jesus isn’t emphasizing the physical place we occupy in prayer, but the heart space. He’s been denouncing those who use prayer as an opportunity for a “humble brag”. He condemns in verse 5 those who pray in public, not so God can hear them, but so that people will see how devout they are. So Jesus isn’t necessarily calling for a prayer closet, but for prayer that is for God alone. Yes there are times we can pray together, and those are very valuable, but each of us needs a time of individual time alone with God. In addition to some very private places, I also pray in my car or on neighborhood walks, but never in such a way that people think I’m praying. My desire isn’t for people to know I pray, but to connect with God in a serious time of conversation. **When you pray, do it for God. Not because your pastor told you to, but because it’s an amazing privilege with the Lord. It doesn’t matter if that works best for you in a room or in the woods. Find a place where you can pray for the sake of your relationship with God.**

Read Matthew 7

“Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” Matthew 7:20

Are you familiar with the term stolen valor? It is an actual crime to impersonate a military veteran and sadly, there is a tremendous amount of video evidence available of these situations. Often the offenders are able to even receive gifts and benefits from well-meaning civilians because of the unearned uniform they wear. That is, until an actual veteran shows up. Many times, the real veterans have begun calling out the imposter for wearing contradictory medals, unit patches, and citations. Those veterans have been around long enough to know the real thing.

Jesus is challenging his audience to evaluate both messages and messengers. If someone is preaching or teaching a message that doesn't match their personal life, or the Bible, you need to evaluate them honestly. And not only do we have to examine the message of others, but of our own life as well.

What is the fruit that helps those around you recognize your faith? Are you more patient than your co-workers? Are you less of a gossip and more of a support? God has called us to produce fruit (see Galatians 5:22-23 for a list). If you can't identify your own fruit, it's likely those around you can't either.

Read Matthew 8

“And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.” Matthew 8:26

Worry weakened me for much of my young life. My mother has been married 4 times, which left me with many times of uncertainty as a child, both during and in between her marriages. More than once I chose to drop hobbies or interests because I worried that my mom couldn't afford them. I worried about how long the current marriage might last. I worried about how long it would be before we moved again. My life was dictated by worry. But then I met Jesus, and I realized that the Father and Friend I had always been looking for had been waiting for me all my life. He was present and ready to bring calm to my chaos.

Worry is not an unnatural emotion. We all face it, but as Christians we must remember this truth: worry is always a faith problem. We worry when we forget who God is and what He's already done. This is why scripture constantly admonishes us to give thanks to the Lord. It's not just for His praise, but to remind us of how God has acted before. The disciples had seen Jesus work many times before. Jesus is both chastising their faith and their faulty memories. **Are you consumed with worry? Remember that worry is often disproportionate to our faith. The more we trust in the unseen, but ever-present God, the less we worry. So to work on your faith, is to work on your memory of the ways God has faithfully worked in your life before. We must learn to turn our times of worry into times of prayer and praise.**

Read Matthew 9

But when he heard it he said, “Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick.” Matthew 9:12

When I tore the meniscus in my knee, I discovered a whole realm of medical professionals I had never fathomed before. It began with my primary doctor who sent me onto an orthopedic doctor. He provided a diagnosis and set me up with an orthopedic surgeon. And after my surgery, I was then forwarded to an orthopedic physical therapist. All three of these men did important work to help me in my recovery and return to activity. But they weren't guys I had ever visited before, and don't plan on visiting again. The only reason I came to them was because I had a need.

Jesus is not saying there are some people who don't need his forgiveness. He is making the point that there are many who are overconfident regarding their own righteousness, generally because of their works and not their heart. Jesus didn't come to pat the rule followers on the head. He came to set every person free from the weight of the old life. And just as Jesus sought out those who weren't the classic churchgoers, and who had baggage and problems, we too should seek out not the “healthy” to fill our

churches, but the sick. **Where are the sick that you can reach? We haven't been called to fill our churches with our kind of people, but with those who know they need the salvation of Christ. Are you willing to get a little uncomfortable in order to reach the people that aren't exactly like you?**

Read Matthew 10

And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Matthew 10:38

“There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.” This quote comes from 17th century monk Brother Lawrence, whose teachings on intimacy with God was compiled into a book called The Practice of the Presence of God. The first time I heard the title I thought it odd to think we have to practice our faith. However, the more consistently I make my prayer life a regular habit, the better I become at it. Not at simply saying words at God, but learning to have a conversation with Him. I must invest as diligently in my relationship with God as I do with any other person.

For Christians, Sunday is often “gameday”. We find our Bibles, get ourselves ready, and head out to church. But when Jesus tells us to carry our cross, Sunday's aren't enough. The life of a believer is a life of living everyday for Jesus and for His purposes in your life. Why should we read the Bible and pray on a daily basis? Because it forces us to carry our cross of submission, realizing how great our need for Jesus continues to be past the moment of salvation. **How is your spiritual practice going? Are you devoting yourself to the practice of regular connection with God? Are you living “worthy” of Jesus? Those are His words, not mine. We should remember that we are called to daily take up our cross, dying to self and placing our relationship with God at the forefront of our lives. We are supposed to die to ourselves. So where are you dying poorly?**

Read Matthew 11

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. Matthew 11:20

Sharing the gospel with younger children can be difficult, but should not be ignored. Jesus said to allow children to come to Him, and so my challenge is to ensure they truly understand their decision. So when parents bring their spiritually inquisitive child to me, I ask the child to turn and walk away from me across the room. Right before they run into the wall I tell them to stop (usually). Then I ask them to turn completely around and being walking back towards me. I use this as an illustration to them of repentance: you were walking one direction in your sin, and because of your faith in Jesus you choose to walk the opposite way.

We find Jesus naming cities where He performed great works in order that the people would believe and repent. There were many people who recognized God was at work, and perhaps even felt sorry for their sin. But sorry isn't good enough. God calls us to repentance, to turn around and renounce the sins that Jesus died for. As I read this passage, I see miracles that would have been celebrated if they occurred in our local churches. And yet, Jesus says that without repentance, no amount of celebrating is of any meaning to Him. **Are you repentant in light of what Jesus has done? He has offered us forgiveness and a new life. So we must ask ourselves: am I sorry for the old life, but continuing to live in it? Or am I repentant of the old life and walking in the new one Jesus has offered me? Only one pleases Jesus and we must be willing to take an honest, constant look at our thoughts, words, and actions.**

Read Matthew 12

Knowing their thoughts he said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.” Matthew 12:25

People didn't think much of Dr. Cox as a preacher in our seminary. He was highly educated, but his goofball personality sometimes turned people off. One day in chapel, he spoke powerful words to us as future preachers of the gospel. He told us to start listening to the heart of the messages we were hearing. He overheard us spending so much time tearing apart or overanalyzing the messages of many of our chapel speakers, we missed the change we were being called to. In all honesty, it was a bit of a pride issue that led us to talk poorly of fellow brothers in Christ because of one weak point or statement in a Spirit-empowered message. It's a lesson I never forgot and that has blessed me as a pastor since learning it.

Today, Jesus warns us that division is a killer. We all have gifts and talents given to us by God and we must learn how to embrace what God has called us to do. At the same time, we must learn to celebrate what God does through our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. When we learn to cooperate instead of competing, the gospel is put on full display. Every nation, every church, and every family who allows division to prevail, will not prevail themselves. **Where are you allowing division? What hurts do you refuse to heal with others? Are you taking actions that only deepen the divide with a fellow Christian? Look for your chance today to overcome division and to honor Christ with what you have, while celebrating His work in others.**

Read Matthew 13

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. Matthew 13:23

My growing up years split a good amount of time between city and farm life. Hanging out with my cousin on their family farm, brought an increased understanding of how hard it was to bring a crop to harvest. Placing a seed in the dirt can bring results, but in order to improve those results it's important for a farmer to choose the right seed for the conditions (drought or pest-resistant), and to even add additional nutrients to the soil prior to planting. Simply improving the soil or planting conditions that only brings 1% increase in the yield, that can still equal thousands of additional dollars in revenue.

We are soil and we all have the potential to be good soil. But our receptivity to the gospel and trust in Christ means that not everyone gives the same results. The Bible makes it clear that the seed is the Gospel and that it can bring amazing harvest in our lives. While Jesus has brought forgiveness of sins to His children, He has also brought the potential for each of us to live a vibrant life of faith. Only in Him can you produce a life that brings the kinds of yields that would make a farmer do back flips! **So the question is this: are you happy with what's being produced from your faith now? Are you making disciples? Are you sharing the gospel? Are you growing in God's Word? If yes, look at how you can continue to produce greater yields. And if not, never forget that you can start today. The Christian life is supposed to be fruitful and life-changing, if we're willing to truly allow Jesus**

to be the Lord of our daily lives!

Read Matthew 14

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Matthew 14:31

Worrying and praying are not the same thing. You might say “Duh”, but take a moment on this idea. Have you ever begun to pray on something, but then found yourself simply thinking or worrying about the request? I know I have, and I'm reminded how I need to completely give my worries to God. There is no value in choosing to hold onto what God has challenged me to let go of. I have to trust that the God who holds my eternity in my hands, also holds the car repair bill I can't afford and the health concern I can't fix on my own.

Now before we bash Peter too hard for sinking in this passage, let's take a second and remember that he's the only one who even asked to come out of the boat!. Sometimes we're like Peter. We know that God has presented us with a challenge and we want to take it on. We want to trust that God can do it, even when the world says it can't be done. But we allow our worries to begin overshadowing everything God has done before. Worries create spiritual amnesia. **So today we are challenged to trust. Have faith! Know that God hasn't formed a plan for a few parts of your life. He has plans for the whole thing, and if you'll have faith and trust Him, He will bless your life even in the hardest of times. Worry and doubt will crush your spirit and blunt your witness. Allow moments of great faith to testify of your great God.**

Read Matthew 15

“Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” Matthew 15:14

We've all done it, so just admit it. My moment occurred trying to register for classes during my freshman year in college. I went up the stairs, as directed, and found myself at the end of a huge line. There were no specific indicators, but I was pretty sure this was where I was supposed to be. After several minutes of silently, slowly, shuffling forward, I saw signs that broke us up by last names. And sure enough as I saw must shorter line where I was supposed to be, several others began to abandon the line we had all so quickly resigned ourselves to.

Why do we get in the wrong line? Because we followed the lead of someone else, not knowing who they were or if they had any more information than we did. Jesus warns us against that today. We need to pay attention to who we're following. People who claim a relationship with God, without publicly living a relationship with God, should not be influencing our decisions. **This is why remaining close to God through prayer and personal Bible reading is so important. When you are in close communication with God, you will know wisdom when you hear it, as well as foolishness. Be sure of those you follow. And stop following people who are content to remain in a distant relationship from God. You'll follow those people right into pits of sin and shame. And be sure that you're not leading people into the wrong line by choices you know shouldn't be a part of your life.**

Read Matthew 16

He said to them, “But who do you say I am.” Matthew 16:15

“He’s not my President!” As a student of presidential history, it pains me to hear a statement like this. Our nation seemingly becomes more divided every election cycle, and statements like these become more common. The problem is, they’re completely wrong. The office is bigger than the man, and the President serves as the leader for every American citizen, whether that citizen recognizes his authority or not. Personal preference doesn’t supersede reality.

Jesus was well aware of the rumors surrounding him. It’s likely there were times he overheard the disciples talking about it amongst themselves. So he asks them a deeply important question: “Who do YOU say I am?” Jesus’ desire wasn’t to get the tabloid gossip, but to challenge his disciples in a personal way. The time was soon to come that he would no longer be them, and they would minister in the basis of their own convictions. It was important they answer for themselves. **Our answer to Jesus’ question doesn’t change the reality of who He is, but indicates how we live in that reality. It’s not a matter of who our pastor, parents, or friends say Jesus is. The matter at hand is who do I say Jesus is? And if I claim him to be the Son of God, shouldn’t that lead me to ask others the same question?**

Read Matthew 17

He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” Matthew 17:20

I love bubbles; always have and always will. When I was in elementary school, I began taking my turn to wash the dishes. The first few times, I had the sink so completely full of bubbles, I could barely find the dishes. My mom quickly realized I was using way too much dish soap. Little did I realize that just a small drop of that concentrated soap could clean a sink full of dishes. Certainly I could use more soap, but it didn’t take much at all to make a big impact.

Having stood on the peak of a mountain myself, hearing Jesus speak of moving mountains seems daunting! He uses this example in response to the disciples telling Him they were unable to cast a demon out of a young boy. Jesus did so instantly, leading the disciples to wonder why they had failed so miserably. Ever felt that way? Jesus made clear their failure wasn’t one of effort, but of faith. They tried hard, but hadn’t truly believed they could succeed. It doesn’t require 25 years of walking faithfully with Jesus to have your prayers answered. **Faith is faith, so stop selling yourself short because of your past or because you aren’t the first pick for the Bible Trivia team. Identify your mountains and pray for God to act on your behalf. He never called on you to move those mountains alone.**

Read Matthew 18

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Matthew 18:22

We are ruled by numbers. When we’re at work, we watch the clock counting down the hours until quitting time. A bad diagnosis leads to the question, “How much time do I have left?” Our dwindling checking account puts us on edge for upcoming expenses. We are constantly thinking about the

numbers. And while they certainly have a bearing on our lives, we have the choice to be ruled by numbers or to approach life with a completely different attitude.

Now some would grab onto the idea of church discipline in verses 15-17, but this statement of Jesus is not far removed from that idea. Peter is concerned that as he forgives his brother, that the brother may take advantage of Peter's mercy. So Peter asks how many times he has to forgive someone and he gives Jesus a number. You and I should rejoice that Jesus' forgiveness is not attached to any number! Time and again we have proven our "I'm sorry" wasn't genuine, and we've asked Jesus to once again show us forgiveness and mercy. Did you deserve it? No, but He gave it anyway. And that's the point Jesus is making now. Don't forgive with conditions. Forgive freely, praying that the mercy you have shown will impact the offender to change with a willingness to no longer abuse such compassion. **So don't get caught up in the numbers game when it comes to forgiveness. Remember what you deserve from Jesus, and compare it to what He gives. Are you applying the same standard to those who seek forgiveness from you?**

Read Matthew 19

Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Before accepting Jesus as my Savior, I spent a week in VBS and heard a teacher ask, "Is there anything you wouldn't give up for Jesus?" I didn't fully know what that meant, but I was starting to think this Jesus guy had something to do with me getting into Heaven. And as I thought about it, my mind drifted to my baseball cards. I had an impressive collection that I poured over constantly, thinking it would be my path to riches one day (boy did I have that wrong). While I ultimately decided I'd give it up for Heaven, looking back it's silly to think what a big choice it seemed like.

Jesus met a young man with more than baseball cards. He had wealth and authority and wanted to add eternal life to the investment portfolio. And Jesus didn't tell him to pray "the prayer" or any of the common ways we often express the gospel. Instead, Jesus told the young man to sell all his possessions. Does this mean we must take on poverty to be saved? Not necessarily, but it does mean Jesus wants us to examine if there's anything we love more than Him before committing to Christ. Because if so, that will be the love that leads you astray. **Is there something you know Jesus is calling you to give up, but you are refusing? If so, that is what you love. God doesn't just call us to love Him, but has proven His love first by giving sinners His Son as Savior. So examine what is holding you back from Jesus in a greater way and experiencing the blessings that come by giving up our idols.**

Read Matthew 20

even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. Matthew 20:28

"It's better to give than receive." That's not an easy statement to process when you're six. Let's be honest...six is selfish! Let's be more honest...36 can be pretty selfish too (guess what age I am currently?). How often do I see the selfless acts of others on the news towards the homeless and destitute and I realize how little I do? More often than I would like. I consider how I hope for people to do unto me, and how poorly I do unto others.

Jesus didn't come to get, but to give. And if Jesus, the Holy God, could set that example, so must I. It's amazing the simple acts we won't take time for or lower ourselves to, and yet we don't see Jesus arguing about who He could or would serve. We see Him readily presenting Himself as both servant and sacrifice, showing care to people regardless of what they could give Him. I admit, that humbles me. **What kind of servant are you? And not just the “big” visible things like reaching out to the homeless. How are you at serving your spouse? How are you at humbling yourself in service to your kids? How willing are you to throw your plans out the window to serve someone else. Definitely rough questions for all of us, because no matter how much we do, we can always do more.**

Read Matthew 21

He said to them, “It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer' but you make it a den of robbers.” Matthew 21:13

Why does IHOP have waffles? Or chicken strips for that matter?! It's called the International House of Pancakes, and they do that very well. So when I took my family there a few months back, I was disgusted to see my son ordering chicken strips with onion rings. He said they were good, but that's not the purpose of IHOP. The purpose is to load yourself with carbs, butter, and sugary syrup and then regret your choice for the rest of the day.

A church that is not a house of prayer is like ordering chicken strips at IHOP. Jesus was not just dismayed, but angry to see the church's purpose forgotten. If people are not praying, they are not communing with God, which was the big purpose of the temple. For us today, we don't have to be in church to pray, but when we come together as a family of faith, it needs to be empowered by prayer. A church that fails to pray, fails. Regardless of the ministries, the attendance, or the money, prayer empowerment displays a truly effective and meaningful church. **Is your church a house of prayer? Are you contributing to prayer both as an individual and by praying with and for the membership? Are you supportive of prayer efforts in your church? If you answered no to any of these, become part of the solution! Pray for your church to be a house of prayer!**

Read Matthew 22

But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures, nor the power of God.” Matthew 22:29

What's the worst insult you've ever received? If it includes someone saying, “I'm rubber, you're glue”, then you've lived a fairly charmed life. Being called a terrible pastor is probably the toughest insult I've ever faced. To give your life to something, only to be told that you are awful at it, is a blow that was tough to recover from. I did give an honest examination of my life as a result, and while I recognized some areas I could improve, I'm not certain that comment was warranted.

Jesus dropped a bombshell burn on the Sadducees when He accused them of knowing neither God's Word or His power. For religious leaders, I can't think of a worse accusation to come from the Son of God. These men had put more time into strategy and planning than scripture and praying. And the takeaway for us is the time you're having right now. **Will you remember this in an hour? Later in your day, will you be able to recall the point of God's Word in your life? If not, then you need to take a more serious approach to this devotional time. Learn God's Word, and thereby learn the full power of God and all that He is capable of accomplishing in your life. Don't allow the**

ignorance of the scriptures and of God's power to become your greatest insult. Consider how you can deepen your comprehension and attention towards what you are learning from the Bible.

Read Matthew 23

so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach but do not practice Matthew 23:3

Doesn't it seem like Hall of Famers would make the best coaches? More often than not, it's the less heralded players who guide teams of various sports. When you're playing, talent certainly trumps everything. But in coaching, an understanding of the fundamentals is important, especially when training others. And perhaps this is why these everyday players are such good coaches. They didn't have the superstar talent, so they learned the little things and they did them, not counting on their own abilities apart from the fundamentals.

And that certainly describes the situation in Jesus' day. The Pharisees saw themselves as the religious superstars. They could spout off the fundamentals of the faith, but they weren't as faithful to fulfill them. So Jesus says to respect the messages these men shared from the Bible, but not the lives they lived that were vastly separated from the messages they preached. **And for us as Christians, we must be people who: say it, do it, prove it. Unbelievers don't need to just hear the gospel, they need to see it. They need to see you doing the things you say are so important, thereby proving the gospel to them. Someone once said, "Unbelievers are trying to determine if the Bible is fiction or non-fiction, and they base their decision on how Christians live." So are you telling others how to live, or are you showing them?**

Read Matthew 24

And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. Matthew 24:12

My wife and I both grew up living in rural areas and enjoy the peaceful atmosphere and slower pace that comes with living outside of a city. Our current pastorate is definitely in the city and we have grown accustomed to sirens at all hours of the night and the more aggressive drivers. In spite of loving the country life, we have both commented how nice it is to have a grocery store right down the street. Or our doctor. In fact, while we love the country life, we realize we were so far away from everything that we sometimes felt cut off.

Jesus is teaching about the end of the world. While He speaks of many signs, he says in verse 12 that distance from God and from people will increase. This makes sense when you think about the nature of God and people. The 10 commandments were all about our relationship to God (1-4) and to people (5-6). When Jesus gave the greatest two commandments, He said to love God and love people. So when Jesus connects lawlessness and love, the pattern continues. Lawlessness shows a disregard for God and a love that has run cold leads us to disregard people as well. **Do you understand that when you become distant from God, you will become distant from people? It may be out of guilt over your fruitless faith, or the sinful choices you have made that have hurt those you love. Don't think that your relationship with God has no bearing on your relationship with the people God has put around you. If you're close to Him, you'll be close to them...whoever that is.**

Read Matthew 25

His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” Matthew 25:23

A video of a man asking homeless people for money recently caught my eye. He would walk up to the homeless and ask to borrow 50 cents or even a dollar to get on a bus ride. Time after time, they willingly gave him the amount, seemingly without hesitation. Once they did so, the man returned it and also gave them a gift card to McDonald's in appreciation of their willingness to help. There are literally hundreds of video like this constantly showing the willingness of those who live on the kindness of others, often showing that same kindness when they have a chance.

In this parable of Jesus, he shares how three different servants were entrusted with money from their master to invest. The first two servants were given different amounts, and returned having added to their master's original investment. In both cases, the master praises them for their faithfulness. And the servant who had less to work with, receives no less praise for his willingness to use it effectively. **Often we make excuses for why we can't be more of a help to people. Whether it's giving towards a special need at church or supporting someone going on a mission trip, we all can help in some way. One person may give \$5 and one person may give \$50. The point is not in the size of the gift, but the willingness to give. We must realize as believers it's not about how much we have, but what we do with it. Let us live as generously with others as God has with us, whether gifts of money, care, or even forgiveness.**

Read Matthew 26

Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Matthew 26:42

“Go find Apollo.” My step-dad's request had me completely flummoxed. I started dutifully walking around the house trying to find Apollo, even though I had no idea what he was talking about. I walked up the stairs trying to figure it out. I checked the bedrooms. I checked downstairs. Finally I went back to my dad and said, “What's Apollo?” My step-dad looked at me like I had lost my mind, and then he said, “the dog.” In my defense, we named the dog Laser when we brought it home (my idea), but apparently he had changed it since and never told me.

Being specific is important, and it's important in our prayers as well. Matthew tells us that twice Jesus prayed that if there was another way for mankind to be saved, let the Father show it now. Jesus was specific as He asked for the cup to pass from Him. However, Jesus was ultimately willing to let God set the course of His life and even His death. Jesus demonstrates to us that we should pray for God's will, but that it's not ungodly to pray for specifics. **Adrian Rogers once said that most people pray such generic prayers that if God were to answer them, they'd never know! So be specific when you pray, but be ok if God chooses to change the specifics. Make your desires known, but always be ready for His desires to influence and change you. Many things I've prayed for specifically, God has done for me. Others, He answered in a different way for my good. In either case, God's attention to my prayers never wavered.**

Read Matthew 27

“You who would destroy the temple and rebuilt it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Matthew 27:40

Vaccinating animals is not one of the easy things you'll ever do in your life. One Fall day, I had the opportunity to help vaccinate cattle at research farm in college. Anytime you begin to herd beef cows towards a barn, they can get a bit skittish. Maybe they can smell the bbq sauce...kidding! So we herded them from the holding area into a chute inside the barn. Once the animal was secured, my job was to pinch back on the neck, jab in the needle, and administer the vaccine. And in all my time there, in spite of helping protect these cattle from a myriad of diseases and ailments, I didn't get one "thank moo!"

To call us cattle doesn't seem like such a stretch. The Bible indicates that we are no better than livestock, often acting like sheep that want to go our own way (Isaiah 53:6). This crowd failed to believe the Son of God could save himself from the cross not realizing he was trying to save them instead. If He had come down off the cross, our souls would have no hope of salvation from an eternity in Hell, separated from God. **And while it's easy to point out the shortsightedness of this crowd, we must remember that we were the crowd. We once stood opposed to Jesus, and only stand with Him thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit and faithful servants of the gospel. So when you run into current members of the "crowd", remember that their faithlessness once defined your life as well. Don't be so quick to condemn spiritually dead people, but instead work to encourage them to receive Jesus and come to life!**

Read Matthew 28

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Matthew 28:19

My friend Robert had model plans and cars all over his room. As a young boy, these were really impressive to me, and I begged my parents for a model Ford Mustang. After opening the box, I realized this was going to be an incredible chore! There were pieces everywhere, not to mention tons of instructions. I gave it a shot, and eventually threw the model away in great frustration. Robert told me later that his dad gave him a lot of help in getting his models completed, or he would have ended the same way.

Jesus has told us to build models. Not model cars, but models of Jesus. To be called a Christian is to be a "little Jesus" becoming an imitation of our Savior and Lord. And like model cars, it's hard work and requires some help. Jesus has not only called us to make disciples, but to recognize that it's a work of God. He is calling us to build up these disciples for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and not for the reputation of our churches. Churches can build attenders through a number of attempts: upbeat worship, coffee bars, and a thousand other efforts. But this mentality simply creates consumers, and not disciples. **Is your church working to build disciples? Are people becoming mature believers who make an impact on their families, workplaces, and schools? Are you helping to make disciples by introducing people to Jesus and helping them grow in Him? Making disciples isn't easy, but when you make the effort, you'll have models of Jesus that will be greater than anything Robert and his dad ever built.**