

John 12:12-19

Will the Real Jesus, Please Stand Up

Customizing players in video games is nothing new. I always enjoyed creating a football player that was, by far, the tallest, strongest, and fastest player on the field. Now, however, younger generations seem to spend more time modifying their players than playing the game itself. They're constantly changing characters, attributes, settings, and everything else. By the time they decide on hairstyles and dance moves, I'm exhausted!

We do the same thing with God. If we don't like who God is or how he presents himself, we simply try to change him. We try to update his teachings, pick and choose his attributes, and often ignore his commands. The problem, of course, is that God is not subject to human opinion or our preferences. This is all seen at the Triumphant Entry which ushers in the final week of Jesus while simultaneously demonstrating how we, even now, tend to fashion God in our own image.

The narrative opens with **The Herald of the Crowd** (vs. 12-13). Much of the imagery in this scene carries significant meaning. For example, the crowd waves palm branches. Between the Old and New Testament, the Maccabees managed to liberate both the Temple and Jerusalem from the Greeks. They celebrated by laying down palm branches (1 Maccabees 13:51). The plant, therefore, became a national symbol representing liberty and victory. Following the Maccabean revolt, for example, coins in Jerusalem had palm branches stamped on them. Therefore, the waving of these branches was a call for Jesus to do to the Romans as the Maccabees had done to the Greeks. They were not looking for salvation from their sins, but liberation from their oppressors.

Likewise, they sang "Hosanna" as Jesus entered the city. The quotation stems from Psalm 118 which originally referred to the pilgrim on his way to worship in the Temple. Interestingly, that is precisely what Jesus was doing. Upon his arrival, he entered the Temple for worship but was forced to cleanse it due to its desecration caused by gross consumerism. The crowd, however, have reinterpreted the song to reference the King of Israel marching toward conquest. The greeting underscores the point that the crowd was welcoming Jesus with nationalistic interests. It is no accident, then, they call him the "King of Israel." Clearly, the crowd want revolution and see in Jesus the figure who will finally liberate them.

The scene then shows **The Humility of Christ** (vs. 14-16). It is not accidental that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. Just as the palm branches were rich in symbolic meaning, so was Jesus's choice of riding companion. Donkeys were royal animals (see, for example, 1 Kings 1:38) as were (and still are) horses. Stallions were symbols of war, especially in the Roman world. Often, triumphant generals were paraded in Rome on a beautiful stallion to the praise of the city. Jesus,

instead, choose a donkey which was a royal symbol of peace. By choosing the donkey, Jesus subverts the crowd's expectations. He is their Messiah, but he will not submit to their manmade expectations.

Thirdly, the scene shows **The Hope of the Congregated** (vs. 17-18). At this point, the narrative camera transitions from the crowd expressing their hope in a political savior to those following Jesus seeking a healing savior. Behind Jesus are those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus (John 11) which defied all explanation given that Lazarus had been dead for four days. They followed Jesus telling others he was a miracle worker. Their interests wasn't in the political, but in the physical.

This, too, is a common adjustment we make for Jesus. Survey your prayer life. Is it dominated by supplication or adoration? Do you spend more time seeking physical healing than anything else? It might even be true we only pray when we have certain needs.

Many, therefore, seek for God to fix and to protect them from problems. We want, more than anything, that promotion we think we deserve, the perfect marriage, financial security, happiness, and ease. Having been raised in a world dominated by materialism, we often prioritize the physical over the spiritual. No wonder our faith is often fickle. When life is good, we love Jesus. When bad things happen, we start to question his eternal love. This is no way to live.

The West's failure to consider the supernatural has had detrimental effects. We become nothing more than our bodies, careers, wants, and desires. Surely, we are more than that. Even if you had perfect health, an ideal marriage, an abundance of wealth, and a quiver full of children, still we would be missing something. We are more than our bank accounts and our medical charts. We are image bearers made for worship. We, therefore, need more than a healer, we need a Savior.

The story concludes with **The Hunger of the Critics** (vs. 19). Considering all that was happening, the religious leaders became angrier. Earlier John revealed they were actively seeking to kill Jesus along with Lazarus since an increasing number were following him and, thus, abandoning them (John 12:9-11). The Jewish leaders feared Jesus's growing popularity threatened their security. If the Romans heard about a "king," they may come in and destroy them. To them, the death of Jesus was worth the protection of their way of life. Even more, Jesus threatened them with irrelevance. Christ challenged the religious leaders openly and threatened their power. Removal seemed the best policy moving forward.

Thus, the stage is set for the final week of Jesus. He enters with one crowd seeking a revolutionary followed by another demanding safety and ease. Then there was another crowd who resented it all. Each group preferred Jesus to image them rather than falling before him in repentance and faith.

Things haven't changed. We often want Jesus on our terms. Some want a Jesus that agrees with their politics. Others want a protective Jesus who makes their life easier. Some want a genie who does all we ask him. But we do not get to define who he is. Our choices are simple – either we crown him as king or crucify him again. The problem with the latter is that he has already conquered the grave.



**CAPITOL
COMMISSION**

Reaching Capitol Communities for Christ

Kyle McDanell
457 Versailles Rd.
Frankfort, KY 40601
(502) 750-1490

<https://capitolcom.org/state/kentucky/>

Mark 11:12-19

Jesus Mean and Wild

This entire passage seems like an overreaction. What if we did the things Jesus did here? Would it be celebrated? Either Jesus has anger issues or something more is going on.

The passage opens with **The Cursing** (vs. 12-14). While returning to Jerusalem from Bethany, he becomes hungry. In the distance he sees a fig tree and naturally assumes it will alleviate his hunger. Seeing the tree, he goes to collect food and finds it fruitless cursing it as a result.

The problem is that fig trees were not in season at this time of year. So why curse it? It is important to remember that for fig trees, fruit precedes leaves. Mark explains the tree “was in leaf?” (vs. 13) thus Jesus would have rightly assumed, from a distance, the leafy tree possessed fruit. So, although it looked healthy, it was diseased.

For Jesus, this became a profound illustration for the state of Israel in his day. One can imagine the pilgrim, suffering in a broken world and living a broken life see from afar the Temple of God thinking that there he would find his answers. And what does he discover? Leaves. Just leaves. A fruitless tree. A diseased tree. Such trees deserve destruction. They are only good for fire. Likewise, dead religion is good only for judgment, which Jesus turns his attention to next.

After cursing the tree, Jesus **Cleanses** the Temple (vs. 15-19). Maybe the cursing of the Fig Tree wasn't an overreaction (it clearly was a diseased tree), but surely his violence in the Temple was, right? The Temple had become desecrated by filthy religious consumerism. The religious system was profiting off worshippers.

One area of corruption centered around the Temple tax. During Passover, Jewish males paid a temple tax of ½ shekel (Exodus 30:13). Since most coins at the time contained idolatrous images on them, only the Tyrian silver ½ shekel was accepted. This required exchanging coins which came with a rate of 4-8%. So, to exchange a ½ shekel for another would cost an additional 4-8%.

The more egregious corruption came in the selling of sacrifices. Originally, the Temple offered a helpful service for pilgrims by providing acceptable sacrifices for a price. However, this service become an opportunity for corruption. Doves, for example, outside the temple sold for about a nickel or dime (in American currency), but inside the Temple they would cost about \$10! This is worse than modern movie theaters!

This issue alone is reason enough to make us angry. Manipulating religion for filthy profit and power is wicked. Unfortunately, it remains a significant problem even today. Far too many religious leaders in the West profit from the faith and spiritual needs of others, many of whom are poor.

The problem, however, isn't limited to religious leaders, but also of worshipers. American consumerism has crept into the church. The average Christian is not a worshiper, but a consumer. We choose churches off preferences, not biblical standards. Programs, popularity, perception, etc. For far too many pastors, platform matters more than the pulpit. What we sell is more important than who we proclaim. If we are to have a pure church in America, the idol of consumerism must be crucified.

No wonder, then, Jesus is angry. It's not an overreaction, but righteous anger. Noticed that Jesus chases away both sellers and buyers. What Jesus does here is precisely what he did to the Fig Tree. This is why Mark sandwiches the cleansing between the cursing. They are clearly connected. The tree lacked fruit. Israel lacked faith. Thus, Jesus is publicly, even violently, judging religion. Religion became nothing more than a formula for gaining God's favor while simultaneously extorting people of faith.

It is imperative we articulate the differences between the gospel and religion. Religion depends on what I do. The gospel depends on what Jesus has done. Religion says, "I obey; therefore, I'm accepted." The gospel says, "Because I am accepted, I obey." Religion has good people and bad people. The gospel has understood we're all bad, but Jesus is good. Religion is very aware of other people's sins. The gospel is very aware of my own. Religion values a birth family. The gospel values a new birth. Religion preys on fear and insecurity. The gospel is based on joy and assurance. The Religious have an uncertainty standing before God. The gospel bases assurance on the finished work of Christ. Religion says, "I obey God in order to get things from God." The gospel says, "I obey to get God – to delight in and resemble him." Religion is about me. The gospel is about Jesus. Religion sees Jesus as the means. The gospel sees Jesus as the end. Religion says that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life, thus when bad things happen, we become angry at God or at ourselves. The gospel reminds us that all my punishment fell on Jesus and when life go wrong, I am free to struggle openly knowing that while God may allow this for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial. Religion drives us to perform. The gospel drives us to love. Religion ends in pride or despair. The gospel ends in humble joy.

The same can be shown in contrasting law and grace. The Law is the first word, Grace is the last. The Law exposes us, while Grace exonerates us. The Law diagnoses, but Grace delivers. The Law accuses, but Grace acquits. The Law condemns the best of us, while Grace saves the worst of us. The Law says "cursed," Grace says "blessed." The Law says "slave," but Grace says "son." The Law says "guilty," but Grace says "forgiven." The Law can break a hard heart, but only Grace can heal it.

In the end, Jesus finds religion fruitless because it is faithless. And it isn't limited to Israel in the 1st century. Paul had the same battle with the Judaizers in Galatia. John had the same battle with the early Gnostics in Ephesus. Augustine had the same battle with the Pelagians.

What is often forgotten in this story is that Jesus does not merely knock over the tables and raise his voice. He cleanses the temple. He restores it to proper order. In Matthew's parallel account, we discover "And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them" (Matthew 21:14). Jesus didn't just come to wipe out the corrupt system of religion in his day. He cleansed the temple. More than that, he restored proper worship.

Mark 11:27-12:12

Who's In Charge Here?

Who do you think you are? The question is one of authority. Perhaps the fundamental issue that keeps people away from, or at least dilute, the gospel is the issue of authority. Who is Jesus? Who is in control? Where do I fit in this puzzle?

The narrative opens with a look at **The Villains** (11:27-33). Following Jesus's cleansing of the Temple, he was confronted by the religious elites who questioned his authority. "You can't just walk in here and act like you're the boss," they argued. "We all graduated from Princeton and Harvard!" The issue of authority had lied under the surface in Mark's Gospel (see, for example, Mark 1:22, 27, 2:10-13) only to be brought center stage here. Who does Jesus think he is? Its inverse is equally valid. Who do I think I am?

The great debate of our time is over the same issue. Americans believe there is no legitimate authority outside of the self and those I approve. So, when Jesus comes along and demands complete submission, we hesitate to accept him. In Scripture, there is no concept of redemption apart from surrender. We cannot enjoy grace without first sacrificing the self.

The rise of moralism in America should concern us. Although there are signs of a renewed appreciation for Christianity there remains an unwillingness to submit to Christ. What we want are the benefits of Christianity (equality, human rights, strong marriages, loving neighborhoods, racial cohesion, functional families, etc.) without the Christ of Christianity. In essence, we are unwilling to fully submit to Christ.

Jesus responds by calling the bluff of the religious leaders by exposing their cowardice. Jesus answers their question with a simple multiple-choice question. Was John the Baptist sent from heaven or from man? Remember that John claimed to be a prophet of God foretelling of the imminent arrival of the Messiah and then publicly identified Jesus as that Messiah. This is a dilemma for the religious elites. If they say, John is "from heaven," they'll be proven frauds because they rejected him. If they say he was "from earth" they'll run the risk of proverbially dipping in the polls. In the end, they decided not to answer the question leading to their public embarrassment and anger. But Jesus doesn't just embarrass them, he warns them.

This leads to the story of **The Vineyard** (12:1-12). There is nothing unique about the setting of this story. The vineyard owner buys the property, plants the vineyard, builds a fence, digs a pit for the winepress, and constructs a tower. He does all of this himself. He then leases it out to workers while he is away. This, too, would have been common practice. Large tracts of land were often foreign owned. This required them to lease the property and collect the profits from their farm. The owner, then, is not surrendering his rights of ownership, but entrusting it to tenants.

Shockingly, the caretakers turn hostile. At the appropriate time, the vineyard owner sends servants to collect from the vineyard. Despite hiring these tenants and paying their wages, they turn greedy. They beat the first servant and send him away empty-handed. They strike the second servant in the head and treat him shamefully only to finally kill the third servant. The owner decides to send his only son believing they will respect him. As the heir, he has a unique authority and enjoys a special relationship with the owner. Yet the opposite happens. Perhaps the tenants assumed that the arrival of the son meant his father, the owner, was dead. Thus, once the son was no more, the land would then go to the workers as was the custom of the time.

Clearly this is a warning to Israel and her leaders. Jesus is the rejected stone which will become the chief cornerstone. To their credit, the religious elites know this parable was about them.

The parable, then, is a warning to those rejecting Jesus and his authority. Jesus warns us about where rejection leads knowing it will not be a silent one. They will crucify their Messiah because no authority can trump their own. No one, even today, rejects Jesus with indifference. Most Americans reject Buddha, but don't get worked up about it. The same could be said regarding Joseph Smith, Mohammed, Confucius, and countless other religious leaders. Yet no one gets too worked up about it. Tell a sinner to repent and follow Christ and see what happens.

There is no greater authority in American than the Self. Consider how this manifests itself culturally. The first is *Self-Fulfillment*. In our search for self-fulfillment, life becomes a quest, and the self becomes a project. We must "find ourselves" and cut out "toxic people" who prevent us from being "our true self." This is why so many are turning to psychology rather than faith.

The second is *Self-Definition* wherein we define who we are even if it contradicts reality. In a Christian world, our personal feelings and emotions must conform to reality. Now, however, the opposite is true. Such Gnosticism had radically transformed every aspect of our lives and experience. It is worth noting, however, that in the self-definition project, no one ever identifies as a sinner in need of a Savior.

The third is *Self-Transcendence*. People are spiritual but not religious for the simple reason that spirituality is vague enough that it can be molded to satisfy the self. Religion, on the other hand, is too rigid to reshape into my image.

All of this makes evangelism difficult. How does one address sin in a world where selfishness is a virtue? How does one address repentance in a culture of victims? How does one preach faith in a post-truth world where the feelings of spirituality trump the reality of doctrinal fidelity?

We began with the question, "who do you think we are?" The question was directed at Jesus, but maybe we should direct it at ourselves. Who do I think I am? Throughout Scripture, when people stood before a holy God, they were in awe of his beauty, power, and authority. They were simultaneously confronted with their sin, shame, and guilt. Despite that, God came down to be one of us to rescue us. Who am I? I am but a sinner saved by the grace of God. All I want is to be like him, to know his love, and to live for his glory. What about you?

Matthew 22:15-21

Rendering to God What is God's

Taxes have always been controversial. This is not news. One beloved church member once confessed that after a life which spanned an entire century, she had but one regret, she was born on April 15! I still remember the day I got my first paycheck at a real job. I held it in my hands and just studied it. What a glorious moment. The first thought I had after looking at all those numbers were, "Jesus was wrong about rendering to Caesar what was Caesar's." For us, taxes are a matter of policy where we debate percentages and types of taxes. In Jesus's day, taxes were about much more.

The scene opens by introducing four groups of **Characters** (vs. 15-16). The first is Jesus, whom we know well. The second are the Pharisees introduced in verse 15 who loathed Roman rule. To them, Israel suffered under the oppressive tyranny of Gentiles. Israel, then, was under the active judgment of God as they were under the Babylonians. The solution was religious fidelity and strict obedience to the Mosaic Law in hopes of liberty. The third is the Herodians introduced in verse 16. This group loved Rome and supported its system. Rome placed Herod in power over Palestine and their connection to him was the source of their own power and influence.

The final group, though not mentioned directly in the text, lies in the background. They were the Nationalists. Jerusalem was filled with nationalists who agreed with the Pharisees that Rome was a threat, and God would one day liberate Israel. The problem with the Pharisees, in their humbled estimation, was they were too soft. Only violence, not religion, would solve the Roman problem. Remember how Jesus's Triumphant Entry had echoes of the Maccabean revolt. Most Jews prayed for another moment of liberation even if it came by violent rebellion. The most extreme of these nationalists were the Zealots who murdered Romans and their sympathizers. Although not every Jew in Jerusalem favored how the Zealots sought liberation, no doubt animosity of Rome permeated Israel.

All of this sits in the background of this simple question. Taxes were about more than infrastructure and public schools. They were about loyalty. One could either be loyal to Rome or loyal to the Lord. They could not be both. Render your loyalty to Caesar or render it to God.

This leads to **The Question** (vs. 17). They begin by asking if it was lawful (according to Moses) to pay taxes to Caesar. The crowd had a specific tax in mind known as the Poll Tax which had to be paid by every man between ages 14-65 and woman between ages 12-65. What launched the first Zealot revolt after the resurrection of Jesus was the Poll Tax resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem.

To the Jews, paying this tax was a sort of litmus test for how one truly felt about Rome. For many, God did not recognize Roman rule over Israel. Therefore, to pay the tax was to defy God. And it is this very tax that Jesus was asked about. It was loaded with cultural, religious, and political fires.

This leads, finally, to **The Answer** (vs. 18-21). Jesus opens by calling out their hypocrisy. Despite being appalled by the tax, its presence in the Temple showed they were not too bothered by it. A denarius was a day's wage and, on the dime-size coin, was an image of Caesar Tiberius with the captions, "God and High Priest," and "Son of the divine Augustus." The coin would have repulsed the Hebrews who considered it blasphemous.

Jesus's answer is two-fold. First, render to Caesar what is his. In short, pay the tax. If his answer concluded here, these groups would, no doubt, accuse Jesus of being a Roman sympathizer and traitor. Nevertheless, Christians have developed a basic understanding of how we are to relate to government. Clearly, followers of Jesus have a responsibility toward their government.

In the early church, Justin Martyr wrote an apologetic to Caesar explaining the Christian faith and why Christianity was good for the empire. In his argument, he reminded Caesar of Christ's command for believers to pay their taxes and to be good citizens. In general, Christians are commanded to obey all civic laws including taxes, regulations, speed limits, etc. There are two main exceptions to this rule. First, Christians are to resist when the state demands Christians do something that God has commanded not to do. Secondly, they are to resist when the state demands they defy what God has commanded.

The more significant command is the second. Not only are we to render to Caesar what is his, but we are also render to God what is his. For most my life, I thought Jesus was talking about tithing. Pay taxes to Caesar. Pay tithes to God. However, the standard by which the denarius belongs to Caesar is important. Coins belong to Caesar because they bear his image. But what bears the image of God? We do.

In a masterful stroke, Jesus turns the question on the head of each group and draws them to repentance. They think the most difficult command is rendering to Caesar, but each prove they fail in rendering to God. The Herodians gave their loyalty to a political system shaped by a dynasty with innocent blood on its hands. The Pharisees rendered their worship to a system that prioritized the appearance of righteousness without its actuality. The Nationalists may have been patriotic but forsook the Lord's clear commands regarding violence and even murder. In one sense, all of them were more like Caesar than they might want to admit.

Rendering to Caesar is significantly easier than rendering to God. Caesar demands a portion, but God demands the whole. Caesar requires a tax, God requires our hearts. It's easy to shout about the controversies of the day, especially in a divided nation wherein online rhetoric is confused with the real world. It is significantly more difficult to "crucify the flesh," (Galatians 5:24) and "pursue righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). The former requires a CPA and a quarterly report, the latter, however, required the cross.

Don't just render to Caesar. Render to God.

Mark 12:28-34

Close, but No Cigar

In 2025, the Kansas City Chiefs failed to win their third straight Super Bowl. Although winning two in a row was a rare achievement, a three-peat would have been historic. They would have gone down as one of the greatest sports dynasties in history. Yet before them there was another team with similar success. Between 1991 and 1994, the Buffalo Bills played and lost in four straight Super Bowls. This is a different kind of dynasty. They were near, but still too far. This passage is about falling short of the end zone. It's about drawing near but never entering the Kingdom of God.

The passage opens with **The Principle of Love** (vs. 28-31). So far, Jesus has been challenged about authority by the Pharisees, loyalty by the Herodians, and theology by the Sadducees. Now he's being asked about the law by the Scribes. In each instance Jesus is expected to measure up to expectations of others. The Pharisees want him to match their credentials. The Herodians want him to share their politics. The Sadducees want him to have their worldview. The Scribes want a Jesus that agrees with their interpretations. We do the same thing. No one has a problem with Jesus so long as we get to define him. As a result, we miss the real beauty and power of Jesus in our lives.

The question asked by the scribe was a common one at the time. The scribes estimated there were 613 commandments. With so many rules, they debated the hierarchical structure of the Old Testament Law. Some argued one could accurately rank all the laws in order of priority. We do this too. We all agree that some crimes are worse than others. So called "white lies," may be immoral, but when compared to more "serious" crimes, we tend to ignore them. In sports, there is a debate between the "letter of the law" and "spirit of the law." When a referee makes a call because that is what the rules tell him to say, fans will often complain that it violates the spirit of the game. There is something similar going on here.

Jesus answers first by quoting the Shema as recorded in Deuteronomy 6:5-6. We are familiar with the command to "love God," but I suspect we are reading it incorrectly because of our soft definition of "love." Love is largely tied to self-interest and sentimentally. The Shema describes a life lived in worship. What does it mean to love something with your entire being? Your heart? Your soul? Your mind? Your strength? When our entire being is directed toward another, that is the very definition of worship. Worship is not just what we do, it is who we are. To love the Lord like this is to worship him faithfully.

Jesus then adds a 2nd law suggesting each is inseparable (vs. 31). Although true worship lies at the center of life's purpose. Life lived in worship is incomplete without its horizontal aspect. In fact, the genuineness of one's worship is easily measured by our love of neighbor.

This leads to **The Person of Love** (vs. 32-34). The story now takes a surprising turn. Previously, confrontations concluded in disagreement. This time, however, the two men agree. The scribe verbally reaffirms everything Jesus had said adding that God desires wholehearted love, more than mere religion (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16-17; Hosea 6:6). Notice that what the scribe adds demonstrates the connection between love and worship. To love God with our entire being is to worship him and no one else. Therefore, God desires our whole selves in worship more than religious ritual.

No one wants a romantic relationship whereby both parties just go through the motions. Rather, we want a marriage that is vibrant and dedicated whereby both parties express their love as part of their being. So too, worship that is only a ritual, is not genuine worship. It is not genuine love for God.

Despite this, Jesus suggests the man is only *near* the Kingdom of God. In the late 19th century, cigars were common prizes for carnival games. When a contestant failed to win, the operator would shout, “close but no cigar.” This man was close, but he gets no cigar. He is near the proverbial goal line, not over it. He is at the door, not through it. He is so close, yet so far away. How is that possible?

Despite having the right answers, he still lacks the right relationship. He was orthodox but lacked genuine love. He loved the law but failed to love the Lord. He loved the rules, but not the Redeemer. He loved the system, but not the Savior. The fulfillment of the law is worship-driven love. Love, then, in both its vertical and horizontal expressions is not just a Principle, it is a Person. The man *knew* that faith was deeper than religion, yet he lacked a deep relationship with the Lord. He was, therefore, in violation of the greatest commandment.

We can conclude, first of all, that *Love Runs Deeper Than Knowledge*. I took a class on marriage and relationships in college. I foolishly told myself that the professor must have the perfect marriage. After all, he could diagnose every conversation (or lack thereof) and correct he and his wife toward greater godliness. I now realize that such a person I imagined would make for a terrible spouse. Love is deeper than knowledge.

One of the worse things I ever did for my own spiritual growth was attend seminary. It’s easy to turn the Bible into an academic project. It’s easy to study theologians and still miss the Lord. Knowledge is good, but knowledge apart from love is empty. How many know what is right but choose the wrong? How many know about our Creator-Redeemer, but lack a deep relationship with him?

Secondly, *Love Requires Knowledge*. For all his knowledge about the Law, the scribe is rather ignorant when it comes to the Lord. The God he is called to surrender to is standing right in front of him and he is blinded by his ignorance. This scribe’s problem is that he neither knows the Lord nor does he *know* the Lord. He was close, but not close enough.

Are we any different?

Luke 21:1-4

Layered, Like Onions

One of the best parts of studying the Bible is the discovery of its endless layers. Scripture is, in essence, meditation literature. More than a book of morals, it draws us to contemplate on its content and, in so doing, rediscovering its Author. This relatively well-known vignette is a good example. On the surface there is one meaning, but just below is something completely different.

The first layer of meaning regards **Sacrificial Generosity**. Just like the other Synoptic Gospels, Luke follows a similar order of events. In Luke 20:1-26, Jesus's authority is questioned by the Pharisees, his loyalty is challenged by the Herodians, and his theology is contested by the Sadducees. In each instance, Jesus's worth is measured by his agreement with critics and, as such, they are incapable of truly meeting their Messiah. The old saying is true; it is impossible to hear the voice of God when we have already decided what he is going to say.

After these encounters, the story takes a surprising turn by introducing us to a lowly widow. She isn't powerful or influential, but quiet and weak. She isn't debating Jesus. She is simply worshiping in the Temple and overlooked by everyone but Christ.

The widow is among other worshipers who place their gifts in the "offering box" (vs. 1). The priests had organized several coin boxes throughout the women's court where people could pay their tithe. The reader's attention is drawn to the gifts of the wealthy whose coins echo throughout the Temple. Jesus, however, focuses on a specific woman. Widowhood was difficult in the ancient world as marriage and family were crucial to survival. The two small bronze coins she used were worth 1/100th of a denarius – a day's wage. Some have suggested that with these two coins, she could only buy a small meal or maybe a handful of flour.

Jesus then elevates her gift above the others and rightly so. After all, worship requires sacrifice. Giving out of one's abundance is easy enough, but to give sacrificially reflects one's faith. We all make sacrifices, but what we give the most reflects our deepest affections. In fact, one of the best ways to expose idols of the heart is to audit one's expenses. What requires the most of your resources, time, attention, and desires? That is likely your true god.

This surface-level reading is, by far, the most common approach. However, a closer examination suggests something radically different. It is not just a story about generosity; it is ultimately a story about the **Condemnation of Religious Corruption**.

When we read this familiar text, we often smile and think, "what a nice poor woman. We need more nice poor women like her in our world." Though true, we're missing the real sting of the passage. Remember that a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. This is an easy text to

spiritualize and, as a result, miss the point. This passage is not primarily a lesson on generosity. It's a warning. This poor widow is a victim.

This story is sandwiched between two passages whereby Jesus condemns the religious system of his day. In the final three verses of the previous chapter, Jesus condemned the religious elites for their lust of influence and power. In their corruption they “devour widows’ houses” (Luke 20:46). It is not an accident that immediately after this warning, we meet a widow who donates her final pennies and goes home to die. Think about it, how would you feel if an American preacher took money from the poor on the pretense that God would bless them? No wonder Jesus proclaimed that “they will receive the greater condemnation” (Luke 20:47b).

After the widow's gift, the narrative focuses on the Temple. While many were marveling at its structure and décor, Jesus proclaimed its destruction. The crowd only saw marble, gold, and the faith of their ancestors, but Jesus saw injustice, corruption, and the oppression of wicked religion. They honored the gifts of the wealthy whereas Jesus honored the sacrificed of its victims. “If you're looking for God,” Jesus seems to be saying, “You won't find it here.” It's an astounding statement for a 1st century Jew. Do not forget that a few days prior, Jesus cleansed the place of this sort of exploitation. In essence, what God will do to this Temple is what the Temple had done to this woman's home.

Corrupt systems prey on the poor often in the name of spirituality, charity, or justice. Religion, in particular, has a way of abusing the weak and the vulnerable. If we are not careful, we can be guilty of the same. Even now, corrupt religion refuses to die. How often are well-dressed preachers promising divine blessing at significant cost? At the same time, consumer religion is equally corrupt. It's easy to condemn greedy religious figures, yet it is harder to condemn consumerism in God's house. Often, we gather to be entertained, not to worship.

Yet the corruption of religion remains a temptation. After all, giving is easier than serving. No doubt, Americans in general and American evangelicals in particular, are the most generous people in the history of humanity. This is good and right and ought to be celebrated. However, giving is only part of the equation. Giving to missions is vital to missionary work, but it cannot replace personal evangelism. Supporting ministries is vital to advancing the gospel, but it cannot replace sharing one's faith. Meeting needs is an important aspect of living by faith, but it cannot replace discipleship. We cannot simply settle for being generous, we must also serve the Lord with gladness.

Ultimately, we must see how grace comes by faith and not by works. The system condemned by Jesus in this brief passage remains a persistent thorn because we naturally trust in works above grace. We want to believe that hope lies in what we do rather than in what God in Christ has done. Religion requires action in the hopes of mercy. The gospel offers mercy because of the actions of Christ. Soon, Jesus will be crucified outside the city of Jerusalem. While there, he was ridiculed by the crowd and the elites, “you who would destroy the temple and rebuilt it in three days,” they screamed (Mark 15:29). The answer to corrupt religion is not reform, it is redemption.

In the end, however, Christ restores the Temple by conquering the grave. Consider the conclusion of Luke's Gospel, “And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and *were continually in the temple blessing God*” (Luke 24:50-53, emphasis mine).

Mark 13:1-27

It's the End of the World as We Know it ... Or is it?

Our youngest child was born an hour away from our home. In those final days, we were on edge about making it to the hospital in time. One night we rushed to the hospital thinking my wife was in labor, but she wasn't. She was experiencing Braxton Hicks. This continued for a few days until, finally, we welcomed our daughter into the world. Braxton Hicks is frustrating for many reasons; the worst part is the delay of its glorious conclusion. So, it is with birth pangs. No wonder Jesus compared the end times with labor. Things may get progressively worse, but its end is glorious.

Mark first presents **The Setting** (vs. 1-4). After witnessing a poor widow donating her last pennies, the Disciples marvel at the beauty of the Temple spurring a surprising note from Jesus. Instead of marveling at the marble, he announces its destruction. Understanding the Olivet Discourse requires us to keep this exchange in the background. Everything Jesus announces has the destruction of the Temple in mind. It is natural, then, to expect the Disciples to ask when "these things" will come to pass (vs. 4). This is what makes this passage so difficult. The context regards the destruction of the Temple which happened in AD 70. At the same time, Christians have historically seen this passage to be a reference to the final return of Jesus (vs. 26). Let us, then, accept both interpretations. There are parallels between the apocalyptic experience of Israel when Rome finally sacked Jerusalem and the future return of Jesus.

This is followed by **The Signs** (vs. 5-23). Jesus first unveils a series of generic signs which include apostasy (vs. 5-6), violence (vs. 7-8a), disasters (vs. 8b), persecution (vs. 9-11), and injustice (vs. 12-13). What should we do with these signs? Many well-intentioned Christian leaders and students have spent an inordinate time trying to connect headlines with these birth pangs. We must be careful here. That is not the main point of the passage. In truth, we can look at every era of humanity and find believers connecting these birth pangs with contemporary events. Wars are all too common. Persecution is all too widespread. Injustice, disasters, and apostasy have always been present.

What Jesus wants us to do is more than observe and anticipate the fulfillment of the signs. But in knowing what to look for, how are we to live our lives? By knowing what to expect, Jesus is giving us the tools to persevere through both trying times and periods of apostasy. Regarding suffering, we are often tempted to question God's love and power. In these signs, Jesus assures us that he, as the Sovereign King, remains in absolute control. Faith prevents us from surrendering to a lifetime of uncertainty, doubt, fear, anxiety, and needless pain. The first temptation during suffering is to

believe we have been abandoned. Don't be so led astray. Christ remains sovereign, even over our sufferings.

Without faith, we will by no means persevere. Perseverance requires both *preparedness* (see vs. 5, 9) and *hope* (see vs. 19, 13). Knowing tribulation is coming ought to stir us to prepare all while we walk with hope. Labor concludes with glory.

Jesus then unveils a particular sign called the Abomination of Desolation which is a clear reference to Daniel 9:27. Most scholars agree that Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled in 175 BC when Antiochus Epiphanes IV erected a pagan altar in the Holy of Holies. He set up a Greek god (Zeus) in the temple and then made the Jewish priest eat the pig he sacrificed on the altar. Over 80,000 people were killed in Jerusalem as a result.

Jesus, then, is looking back at the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy as a model of something to look forward. That is to say, Jesus is prophesying another Abomination of Desolation that will take place. Without a doubt, the destruction of the Jewish Temple in AD 70 fulfills that prophecy. However, others see a rebuilt temple which will be desecrated. It is possible, therefore, this abomination is a reference to the Temple Destruction while simultaneously a reference to a final fulfillment.

Despite all of this, Jesus does not want the reader to lose hope. The misery of this world full of suffering and violence is temporary. Be on guard. Possess hope. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

The climax of the Olivet Discourse is **The Savior** (vs. 24-27). In describing his final return, Jesus borrows imagery, frequent in the Old Testament, known as "The Day of the Lord" (see Joel 2:1 for one example). Generally, the Day of the Lord describes a dramatic earthly intervention by God. The Hebrews Prophets tell us what to expect on the Great Day of the Lord which includes judgment, kingship, and even astronomical signs (see Joel 2:31; Amos 8:9).

Although there remains some debate regarding what the Prophets had in mind by the Day of the Lord, Jesus borrows some of the same imagery in describing his future return. So, although some of what Jesus describes here is evident in the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, Jesus's prophecies are only partially fulfilled on that day. Ultimately, Jesus directs our attention to his future return. That is the Great Day of the Lord whereby Christ returns, gathers his elect, judges the nations, and sits upon his eternal throne.

I do not know how to interpret every detail regarding the future. But I do know what will happen at the very end. Christ will return. Christ will triumph. Evil will cease. Death will die. And we will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

In 2018, residents of Hawaii received an ominous text message, "Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill." They were understandably panicked, but Christians know a day of judgment is coming. I don't know what it will look like in detail, but Christ will come and establish his throne. No need for us to panic.

Come Lord Jesus. Come.

Mark 14:1-11

A Different Kind of Influencer

A 2017 study revealed that given the choice, Generations Z and Alpha would prefer being an Influencer over a doctor, lawyer, or some other career. Before that, generations desired to be celebrities, rock stars, famous actors, or influential entrepreneurs. Although the aspirations may have a different name, it is all essentially the same. Deep down we want to be known. To be remembered. To have a legacy. Whether that involves eating Tide Pods on YouTube or inventing something that changes history, we all want to matter. Here, we meet a lady whose has been forgotten by history, but not by God.

We begin with **The Surrounding** (vs. 1-2, 10-11). A common literary tool throughout the Gospels is to bookend a narrative between two statements, events, characters, etc. To open Mark 14, we continue to march quickly to the cross. Each narrative prepares the reader for that significant event. That is made explicitly clear. The religious elite are conspiring to execute Jesus without being attached to it. The irony here is that although they tried to hide their part in the conspiracy, they fell into God's plan. They are not the ones ultimately in control.

Compare this with the conclusion of this narrative. The religious elite are looking for a way to have Jesus killed without looking responsible. In walks Judas. In the narrative it looks like Judas's motive is financial. Thus, Judas's bribe is laid in contrast to that of the woman worshiping at the feet of Jesus. Ultimately, what Mark manages to do is surround this beautiful scene with ugliness. While she is engaged in an intimate worship, she is surrounded by treachery, betrayal, and corruption. Such is the work of the gospel.

The main section of the text shows **The Surrender** (vs. 3-9). We now go back in time to Saturday, the day before the Triumphal Entry. This is made clear in John's Gospel who places this event between the resurrection of Lazarus and the Triumphal Entry. Remember that in ancient narrative, chronology matters less than it does today. It does help us see its placement as significant. Between two statements regarding the conspiracy to kill Jesus, we meet a woman locked in worship. What a contrast!

First, we meet *The Woman and Her Contribution* (vs. 3). It is in this context that an unnamed woman comes to Jesus, armed with "an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly," and pours it over Jesus. This costly perfume was often used as a dowry and for burial. Either way, she was pouring out her future. Don't miss that detail. She breaks the flask to ensure that there was no going back. So, then, this vital gift is surrendered at the feet of Jesus. In fact, every time this character shows up in the Bible, she is seen at the feet of Jesus. What a testimony of faith! Although Mark does not identify her (unlike Simon the Leper), John does. She is Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. She is engaging in this act of worship following the resurrection of her brother.

This leads to *The Men and Their Condemnation* (vs. 4-5). We are not told, by Mark, who is criticizing this woman, but John does. It is Judas Iscariot. More than blaming Judas, Mark wants us to indict the rest of the disciples. Judas, then, is more of a ringleader. One of their concerns was that Mary hated the poor. Despite this being an example of Bulverism, it was custom for the Jews, on the eve of Passover, to pay alms to the poor. If this woman really was so eager to waste this perfume, she could have sold it for a year's wage and fed 300 people in a single day or a person for a whole year! The Disciples pretend that if they had been given the opportunity, they could have formulated the perfect plan to help the maximum amount of people.

To be fair, there is nothing wrong with being careful with God's blessings or giving to the poor. Those are good things as the Olivet Discourse demonstrated. But these are merely excuses. In truth, the critics want the perception of righteousness. They want others to think they are good and generous. Mary, on the other hand, is offering her best to her Savior. That is worship and that trumps everything. Worship precedes humanitarianism because it is the foundation of true justice.

We then meet *The Savior and His Commendation* (vs. 6-9) In contrast to all the noise makers, Jesus celebrates Mary. We learn several things from Jesus. First, poverty is perpetual in a fallen world. To be clear Jesus is not against the poor (see Mark 10:21, 12:42-43), but rather their hypocrisy. Why are they so eager to rob an innocent woman of her worship? Are they not perfectly capable of giving to the poor? Can they not give themselves? Generosity is easier when it is not your money being used.

Secondly, we discover that worship is always the priority. It's worth noting that her anointing was an intrusion (vs. 3). Despite the social inconvenience, Jesus celebrates her and calls her act "beautiful" (vs. 6). How we desperately need to hear this. We're all busy. We just make poor priorities. Nothing should ever replace our need to worship – both corporately and personally.

Thirdly, the heart of the worshiper matters. In praising this woman's sacrificial act of worship, Jesus applauds her heart. Mary does not see worship as a duty, but a delight. If we view worship as mundane and something we must suffer through, then our view of God is too small. By breaking the alabaster jar, she expresses her heart. To her, Jesus is more valuable than the most precious thing she owns. Ultimately, Jesus cares more about the heart than the rituals of the worshiper.

Finally, the cross is the main thing. Jesus's interpretation of this event is significant. It is not only an act of surrender and worship, but also a picture of the cross. Jesus directs our attention to the crucifixion. Theologians and commentators debate the specifics of what Jesus says here. What did this woman understand about Jesus's mission and death? Etc. What matters is how Jesus interprets this scene: she has prepared him for death. At the core of worship and devotion is the cross. As Jesus surrenders his very blood, so true faith understands worship as surrender.

If we were to isolate this passage, it seems odd that the host, Simon the Leper, is named, but the story's main character isn't. We know it's Mary because of John's Gospel, but Mark strangely leaves her unidentified. Isn't that strange? What makes her great is not that her name is memorable, but her sincere worship is. What makes her great is not her notoriety, but her faith. You and I will die and be forgotten. The aim of the Christian walk is not to be remembered by men but welcomed by Christ. We seek the glory of God in all that we do. May we decrease so that he can increase. Jesus praises sincerity, not celebrity; surrender, not ceremony.

Luke 22:24-30; John 13:1-17

The GOAT Below the Rest

Men are notorious for engaging in pointless debates often taking them very seriously. Often sparked when bored, they'll debate who the athletic G. O. A. T is or who would win in some fictional fight (the answer is always Batman!), or something as random as which is harder, hitting a 400-foot home run, kicking a 40-yard field goal, or running a 4-minute mile? The debate between the Disciples almost reads like one of these common disputes, but Luke won't allow us to write it off so easily.

The story begins with the **Conflict** (Luke 22:24). Luke alone records this narrative. That is not to suggest this was a new debate; it was, in fact, an old one (see Matthew 18:1; Mark 9:33-34; Luke 9:46). Despite being repeatedly corrected by Jesus, they continued to engage in an ongoing debate as to who was the greatest among them. On the surface, we might assume this boys being boys (the Disciples are probably teenagers). But when put in its proper context, we discover this argument is really a protective measure against failure.

At the Last Supper Jesus unveiled, once again, that he was going to die. Jesus repeatedly predicted his death (Luke 9:21-22, 43:45a, 18:31-34a) which were written off because they believed they could protect their Rabbi (see Matthew 16:21-23). Now, however, Jesus explains how it'll happen – he will be betrayed by one of them. This is shocking news. They first respond with incredulity and then try to identify the traitor. Notice they are looking at each other, not themselves. That's the genesis of this discussion. They weren't bored, but scared. They were angry. "It can't be me," they reasoned, "I would never do anything like that. It must be you."

The Disciples seem to believe their arrogance is a defense against failure. Jesus, however, shows it will be the cause of their failure. This text isn't about the danger of pride (though it's there), but about the beauty and power of meekness.

This leads to Jesus's **Correction** (Luke 22:25-30). Jesus responded by correcting them in two ways. The first was a verbal correction. While the world chases after power, prestige, and titles, his disciples must pursue service. The Kingdom of Men is dominated by self-serving ego. The Kingdom of God, on the other hand, must be dominated by selfless love. History is littered with countless examples of violence, murder, torture, and tyranny all stemming from self-serving ego. Humans love to expand their brand, dominate others, and conquer kingdoms. And so, we invade, colonize, threaten, abuse, enslave, fight, dox, and ask to talk to the manager.

This approach, however, is doomed to fail. Getting to the top by pushing everyone away can be lonesome. Besides, ruling with fear may subdue a kingdom, but it hardly makes you great in the eyes of those you rule. Jesus offers something better. Something more glorious. Effective leadership

begins with humble service and sacrificial love. To lead effectively, you must always have those in whom you're leading in mind. Their needs must trump yours. Government leaders must prioritize the needs of the community above the self. Business owners, directors, and managers must prioritize the needs of the business, the customer, and the employees. Pastors must prioritize the church while domestic leadership must prioritize the family. By submitting ourselves for the sake of others, we achieve real greatness.

Jesus doesn't just verbally correct them; he shows what Kingdom meekness looks like. Turning to John 13:1-17, we discover the famous story of Jesus washing the Disciple's feet. Although some of the streets throughout Palestine were paved, most were dirt. Usually, it would be the responsibility of the host to make sure their guest's feet were washed. He usually enlisted the help of the lowest slave because it was the lowest job. Washing someone's feet was so menial that Jewish slaves were exempt from the task. Only Gentiles performed the service. When Mary anointed Jesus with costly perfume, she first washed Jesus's feet. She was assuming the posture of the lowest slave (John 12:3). This helps explain why Peter refuses to let Jesus wash his feet (John 13:6, 8). This was a clear act of genuine humility. By this act of service, Jesus quiets the rhetoric. It's amazing that Peter goes from "I'm the greatest," to "I'm not worthy."

But return back to Luke 22. In verse 27, Jesus directs us to the greatest act of humility in history. Luke does not direct our attention to the washing of the Disciple's feet, but to the cross. In the mystery of Calvary, we see the faux power of man whimpering before the mighty power of God. In that moment, the power of men proved ineffective against the power of God. Jesus's humility is the source of his exaltation. His suffering lies at the root of his glory. That's the mystery, and the beauty, of the gospel.



**CAPITOL
COMMISSION**

Reaching Capitol Communities for Christ

Kyle McDanell
457 Versailles Rd.
Frankfort, KY 40601
(502) 750-1490

<https://capitolcom.org/state/kentucky/>

Mark 14:32-42

He Goes to the Garden Alone

Would you like to know your future? There would, no doubt, be benefits to that. Predicting basketball brackets in March would be helpful as would investing in the right stocks. At the same time, knowing impending sorrow would be overwhelming. Jesus, no doubt, knew what awaited him and yet he willingly marched toward Calvary.

The scene opens with **Christ's Sorrow** (vs. 32-34). Shifting from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus pauses to pray. Gethsemane means "olive press" reflecting the prevalence of olive trees. The specific garden was likely privately owned and a common retreat for Jesus. While such gardens were designed for beauty and rest, Jesus is battling Hell.

Accompanied by his inner three (Peter, James, and John), Jesus became "greatly distressed" and "troubled." Facing the certainty of death, the weight of the world's sins upon him, and the abandonment of his friends, the humanity of Jesus is on full display. It is strange how the same man who could cure sickness and calm storms can also suffer so greatly. Although Jesus was no defenseless martyr, he did come to seek and to save others, not himself.

Jesus's sorrow is so extreme he sweats blood (Luke 22:44) and fears despairing "even to death" (vs. 34). Though fully divine, Jesus was equally human which was on full display in the Garden. This is good news. Jesus does not merely stand above us as a divine figure, but with us as a fellow sufferer amid our pain. Long have Christians found comfort in Gethsemane for there they find Christ waiting for them.

Amid his sorrow, we see **Christ's Supplication** (vs. 35-37). It is no accident that Jesus's first response to sorrow was prayer. Prayer allows us to cast our burdens upon the Lord, rest in his sovereign grace, and find comfort. But far too many of us neglect this spiritual discipline. As we gaze upon the Savior, we ought to consider what he teaches us about prayer. First, Jesus shows the *Posture of Prayer*. Scripture describes an abundance of prayer postures including standing, sitting, lifting hands, looking to heaven, and bowing the head. So overwhelmed by the weight he was carrying; Jesus collapsed while crying out to God. Of course, "posture" describes more than the body, but the heart. His physical posture reflects the honesty of his prayers.

Jesus also shows *The Content of Prayer*. His prayer is a bold one. He requests that the cup of God's wrath pass over him. The "Cup" was established earlier in Mark as a metaphor for God's judgment (Mark 10:38). To drink from the cup was to suffer God's wrath which awaited him at the cross.

Finally, Jesus shows us *The Humility of Prayer*. Prayer is, by nature, an exercise of humility. We are approaching the sovereign God confessing our weakness and limitations. Prayer exalts God and humbles us. Jesus began by acknowledging God's omnipotence ("all things are possible for you") and submitting to his divine will ("Yet not what I will, but what you will"). The challenge of prayer is not requests, but submission. It is likely why so many of us abandon it. In prayer, we are seeking the will of God, not telling God how to do his job. Affirm God's power and his goodness. In so doing we can submit in obedience and faith. Remember, it is impossible to listen to God when we tell him what to say. It is difficult to obey the Lord when we tell him what to do.

We finally see **Christ's Strength** (vs. 42). There are two choices regarding despair. Either we can make misery our permanent home or courageously move forward. The latter requires courage. Things like returning to a daily routine, cleaning out that closet, and wrestling with emotions are tough enough. Forgiving those who have hurt us, reconciling with our enemies, renewing our way of thinking, reevaluating our behavior, and readjusting to new realities is more difficult and requires spiritual courage.

Jesus demonstrates that for us. The Disciples are portrayed as weak ("the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak") whereas Jesus, the one agonizing in prayer, is strong. He doesn't run from his arrest, but stands. The man who surrenders to the good will of God is stronger than those who resisted.

This familiar scene, of course, isn't about us. Certainly, there are great applications to gain from it, but we ought to marvel at Christ. It is no accident that this infamous scene takes place in a garden. Scripture opens with one. In Eden, a Cherubim drew a sword to keep humanity out while in Gethsemane, Jesus ordered swords be removed. In Eden, Adam's life began while in Gethsemane, Christ's ended. In Eden, Adam's work broke the world while in Gethsemane, Christ restored it. In Eden, Adam's sin brought sorrow, while in Gethsemane, Christ's sorrow conquered sin. In Eden, Adam is naked and ashamed. In Gethsemane, Jesus is arrested and stripped taking our shame upon himself. In the Eden, Adam enjoyed fellowship with God which he broke by sin, but in Gethsemane, Jesus was broken by sin so we can again enjoy fellowship with God. In Eden, Adam was tested and failed, while Christ was tested and triumphed. Adam step toward the Tree and brought forth death while Jesus stepped toward the cross and brought forth life. Adam prayed, "Not your will but mine be done," but Jesus prayed, "not my will, but yours be done." From Eden, Adam was cursed with sweat upon his brow while in Gethsemane, Christ suffered with sweat drops of blood.

Jesus is the promised Messiah whose suffering cleanses us from sin, conquered death, and crushes the serpent's head. It is no accident that this scene happens in a place called Gethsemane. The ancient Hebrews frequently anointed others with olive oil and yet here, in this Garden, stands *the* Anointed One surrendering to the will of the Father to rescue us.

What Adam lost; Jesus, the Anointed One restored. The last garden mentioned in the Gospels is not Gethsemane, but the empty tomb. Remember how Mary initially confused Jesus with a gardener? The story doesn't end in Gethsemane where the Savior agonized over his impending death. The story of Jesus ends in the empty tomb where Jesus triumphed over the grave.

Matthew 27:1-10

The Folly of “Almost” Repentance

Have you interrupted yourself? Maybe you’ve introduced a new character and trail off to tell something else about them. Maybe it’s a geographical change or some other scenario. It is not uncommon for our brain to switch from one narrative or memory to another. It would seem, on the surface, Matthew does the same. If the reader were to skip verses 3-10, the narrative flows naturally as these eight verses interrupt the story of what happened to Judas. But Matthew is chasing rabbits. He is a great storyteller.

The text opens with **The Counsel** (vs. 1-2). Following Jesus’s arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin in an illegal court. They, however, do not have the legal authority to carry out executions, but must, instead, pressure Pilate. Although Jesus was condemned for blasphemy, his charges were changed to insurrection when presented before the governor. Clearly, their concern isn’t justice, but maintaining their influence and power.

This leads to **The Condemnation** (vs. 3-10). The narrative is suddenly interrupted with this vignette regarding the fate of Judas. According to Matthew, Judas’s remorse came after Jesus was condemned. We can only guess what Judas’s motivation for betraying Jesus was. Perhaps he wanted to lead Jesus toward violence and revolt resulting in taking his throne. Perhaps he believed Jesus would exonerate himself and even win over Jewish leadership. Surely, he may have thought, they’ll see that Jesus was their Messiah. Perhaps it was just about the money. We just don’t know.

The response of the religious elites, however, is despicable (vs. 4b). They couldn’t care less about Jesus nor his humanity. Their hatred blinds them to injustice. To them, Judas was nothing more than a tool. The reader should recoil at their statement. They are despicable people and the fact that they are *religious* leaders charged, by God, to uphold the Law is shameful. According to the Jewish law, this action should have forced a retrial for Jesus. But they don’t care. After returning the coins, Judas, full of regret, goes out and hangs himself. The leaders decide to buy a field to bury Gentiles whom they deem unclean. The irony is rich. In essence, they use unclean money to buy an unclean field to bury an unclean people.

This leads to **The Crucifixion**. It is tempting to see this passage as Matthew simply updating the reader on what happened to Jesus’s betrayer. “He got his just desserts. The end.” But more is going on here. Matthew is a good storyteller. He is an even better theologian. The key is juxtaposition.

The first juxtaposition is that of *Innocence*. In Matthew’s telling of Jesus’s crucifixion, Matthew goes out of his way to present Jesus as innocent. Pilate will wash his hands of Jesus’s guilt. The thief on the cross will confess faith. The centurion will declare him to be the Son of God. This begins with

Judas who declared Jesus's innocence as he returned the money. Theologians call this the Impeccability of Christ. Jesus is like us in every way except without sin. He is the perfect, spotless Lamb of God.

Despite his innocence, Jesus is condemned as guilty. This will become more apparent in the exchange with Barabbas. But compare this scene with other parties. Judas, for his part, *knows* he has betrayed innocent blood. He has turned over the Messiah to the mob. The religious elites, however, are guilty but believe they are innocent. This is what makes the purchase of the field so egregious. While pretending to be unstained, they reek of uncleanness. They claim to keep Israel pure from blasphemers like Jesus but prove to be wicked and unclean.

The second juxtaposition is that of *Repentance*. Matthew purposefully juxtaposes the Denial of Peter with the Remorse of Judas. By doing so, we are given insight into what true repentance is. Peter demonstrates genuine, saving repentance while Judas does not. The difference is not over their regret, but where they turn for healing. Peter runs to Jesus and is cleansed. Judas runs to the religious leaders and is condemned.

Repentance is more than mental regret; it is also spiritual transformation brought about by surrendering our sin to Christ. Repentance is the first step of faith. It is acknowledging that my sin robs me of intimacy with my Maker and either he cleanses me through forgiveness or I die in my sin. Judas chose to die in his sin. Peter chose to live in righteousness.

Finally, there is the juxtaposition of *Death*. Why did Judas die? In the Mosaic Law, false accusations were punished by suffering for the crime the accuser made (see Deu. 19:18-19). So, if you falsely accuse someone of a capital crime, then you must be executed. But what if you betray an innocent man and he is condemned of a capital crime?

But, more specifically, why did Judas choose to hang himself? Why is *that* detail so important? The Mosaic Law, again, makes it clear that "a hanged man is cursed by God" (Deu. 21:23). Judas, sinking in guilt, makes himself a curse by hanging himself from a tree.

The reader is encouraged to juxtapose Judas's death with Jesus's. Both die on a tree. Just as Judas dies under the curse of God, then so does Jesus. The New Testament is aware of this implication often choosing the word "tree" over "cross" (see Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29; 1 Peter 2:24). The Apostle Paul makes this abundantly clear when he declares, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13).

On the one hand, the guilty man dies because he betrayed the innocent. On the other hand, the innocent man dies because he loves the guilty. Judas died for himself. Jesus died for others. The ultimate point of the narrative: Jesus is the spotless Lamb of God who dies in the place of sinners like you and me. Will you come and repent?

Mark 15:1-15

I Am Barabbas and So Can You

There once was a boy who struggled with math and so parents enrolled him in a Catholic school. After the first day of school, the boy returned home and immediately went to his room to study. He continued this routine each night for nine weeks when he returned home with an “A” in math on his report card. His mother was perplexed. Why the sudden change? “Is it the nuns?” she asked. “No,” he responded. “Was it the school, the principal, the administration, the books?” “No,” he answered again. “Then what was it?” “On my first day of school,” he explained, “I walked into my math class and saw a man hanging on a plus sign. At that moment I knew these people took math seriously!”

Clearly that the little boy misunderstood why there was a man on a “plus sign,” but, sadly, most of us don’t quite understand the meaning of the cross either.

The passage opens with **The Characters** (vs. 1-8). The ecclesiastical trial of Jesus is now over and thus they hand Jesus over to the civil authorities. We are then introduced to Pontius Pilate (vs. 1b). Governors like Pilate had one primary job: keep the peace. The Roman system didn’t want to keep putting down riots and outbreaks. Judea was full of both. Most agreed, Judea was the worst place to serve as governor.

Pilate loved annoying the Jews repeatedly seeking to convert Judea to the religion of Rome. For example, Pilate once set up imperial standards with the image of Caesar in Jerusalem. A blasphemous act to the Jews. A mob surrounded Pilate’s house in Caesarea for five days. Despite threats to have them slayed, they remained fearless and so, in the end, Pilate relented.

Later, Pilate placed golden shields on Herod’s Palace in Jerusalem which included the inscription “son of divine Augustus” in reference to Tiberius. Pilate knew this would offend the people as even the sons of Herod the Great petitioned to remove them. When he refused, they complained to Caesar Tiberius who reprimanded Pilate.

Another incident involved Pilate using the temple treasury to pay for a new aqueduct to Jerusalem. The construction of this aqueduct was a good thing, but it was financed by blasphemous means. Another mob formed wherein the governor ordered his troops to beat the mob. Some suspect this event happened months prior to Jesus arriving bound and delivered by the Jewish authorities.

The Jewish authorities brought Jesus to Pilate because they could not legally execute him. Roman law allowed the Jews to follow their religion generally, but capital crimes were limited to Roman authority. Pilate wanted to know the answer to only one question, “are you the king of the Jews?”

(vs. 2). Those who claim royalty stir trouble and violence. If Jesus thought he was a king or, even worse, the Messiah, Pilate had an obligation to remove the threat.

We are then introduced to another character named Barabbas (vs. 6-8). Combined, the Gospels suggest that Barabbas was a rebel who led an insurrection culminating in murder. What likely happened was that Barabbas, perhaps the leader of the group, tried to overthrow Roman rule in Judea. This was not uncommon. Inspired by the Maccabees, many sought to overthrow Rome by violent means.

Clearly not convinced Jesus was a threat, Pilate tried to manipulate the ecclesiastical authorities and the mob assembled outside by letting them choose the worse criminal for the innocent. To his shock, the crowd chooses to liberate the violent insurrectionist over the carpenter's son. In a cowardly act, Pilate gave in to the mob and allowed the injustice to continue (vs. 12-15).

The scene concludes with **The Cross** (vs. 15). It is worth highlighting who Jesus was crucified next to. No doubt, the two men crucified with Jesus at Golgotha were part of the Barabbas's insurrection. It could be said that he was the chief of criminals. If this is true, then what we have here is Jesus taking the place of a guilty man.

That is the gospel!

The gospel, in essence, is simply Jesus paying a price he did not owe because we owe a price we cannot pay. At Calvary, Jesus died upon a cross reserved for Barabbas. He does the same for us today. Christ paid the price of our sin while we go free. The reason that Jesus had to die on the cross was to bear the burden and judgment of our sin so that we wouldn't have to. God couldn't overlook sin because then He would cease to be God. Therefore, judgment must be laid on the guilty but Jesus intervened taking the burden and judgment of our sin on himself.

The story goes that a little boy had a sister who desperately needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor. "Would you give your blood to your sister?" the doctor asked. The boy hesitated. His lower lip trembled as he thought about the question. He eventually agreed saying, "Sure, for my sister." Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm the boy watched the blood flow through the tube. With the ordeal almost over, his voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated. He thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. Fortunately, the brother didn't have to die to save his sister. Each of us, however, has a condition more serious than that little girl, and it required Jesus to give not just his blood but his life.

Luke 24:13-35

Those With Eyes to See, Let Them See

I suffer from an incurable condition which came immediately after our wedding. I cannot see what is in front of me. From what I can tell, this is a universal experience for married men. If our wives ask us to grab something from the refrigerator, we'll see everything, but what we've been asked to grab. This, of course, isn't just an epidemic among husbands. It is a universal problem when it comes to spiritual things. Somehow, the truth of Christ and his saving gospel can stand right in front of us, and yet, somehow, we still miss it.

This post-resurrection experience begins with **Blind Eyes** (vs. 13-27). Verse 16 is key to the entire passage. Normally, the Gospels tell the story of how the blind came to see, but now we meet disciples who once could see but were now blind. While wrestling with the rumors of Jesus's resurrection, a third party joins two disciples. The humor of the story is obvious. While talking about Jesus, they do not realize he is walking beside them. They must have been married men!

This detail strikes me. How could they have been so blind? To be fair, Cleopas and his colleague are not the only ones who saw Jesus but didn't recognize him (see John 20:15, 21:4). The reason is a simple one: they were not looking for him. They were, indeed, blind to his presence and power.

Not much has changed. Modern man is equally blind. One of the main explanations against the gospel is the claim that RESURRECTION IS IMPOSSIBLE. Modern man believes in a closed system. As a result, we disregard all miracles as impossible, illogical, and unscientific, thus shutting off the divine. Even Christians can be guilty of this presupposition. We are not the first to think like this. The ancients understood that the dead do not return. As a result, history is littered with explanations of what happened. Perhaps, some would argue, Jesus never died either surviving the cross or someone else was mistakenly executed. Though creative, it is highly improbable. Others claim the first eyewitnesses visited the wrong tomb or the body was stolen. All these efforts fail to explain what truly happened.

Another reason why people reject the gospel is DESPAIR. Notice the disciples were both grieving (vs. 17) and disappointed (vs. 21). To them, Jesus was a man who was a mighty prophet, but his death took all of that away. They were gripped with strong emotions and frustration. Nothing rocks our faith more than sorrow and tragedy.

Another cause for rejecting the gospel is MISINTERPRETATION. When it comes to spiritual truth, we often imagine the God of fantasy above revelation. We all believe in a loving God who overlooks our sin but skip all the other stuff. In short, we fashion God in our own image. The ancient Jews had no category for a Suffering Messiah. It is for this reason, Jesus walks these disciples through Scripture showing how it all pointed toward the cross and the resurrection. We all wish

Luke recorded exactly what Jesus taught, but, in reality, we already know. Every page of Scripture points to the suffering and triumphant Savior. For example, Jesus is the true and better Adam who triumphed in the Garden of Temptation. He is the true and better Abel who died at the hands of sinners, yet cries, not for our condemnation, but for our acquittal. He is the true and better Noah who does not escape the wrath of the Father but suffers it on behalf of the guilty. He is the true and better Abraham who is the head of an eternal Kingdom, the true and better Isaac who was sacrificed in obedience to his Father, the true and better Joseph who was betrayed by his brothers but now sits at the right hand of the King and forgives those who betrayed him. Jesus is the true and better Moses who rescues, not with plagues, but by becoming a curse and now mediates a new covenant. He is the true and better Joshua who fights on our behalf, not with a sword or an army, but with a cross and an empty tomb by which he welcomes us to a better land of promise. Jesus is the true and better David who defeats our greatest enemies, not with a stone, but with his blood, the true and better Jonah who enters the heart of the earth, not for his own disobedience but for ours only to be raised on the third day. Jesus is the true and better Esther who did not merely risk death, but willingly suffered it to save the lost.

Likewise, Jesus is the true and better Rock where we hide to stand in God's presence. He is a true and better Sin Offering who pays for our transgressions once and for all on the cross. He is the true and better Peace Offering who reconciles us to God. The true and better Prophet who not only speaks the very word of God but is the very manifestation of the Word. The true and better Priest who examines our skin, our homes, and our hearts in order to present us holy before the Lord. The true and better King who rules in righteousness while defeating man's greatest enemies. The true and better Rock of Moses who was struck with the rod of God's justice. The true and better Lamb whose sacrifice grants eternal forgiveness. The true and better Temple who dwelt among men and the true and better Bread who not only feeds us for a time but satisfies us forever.

It is incredible how many people fail to see this because they miss the Jesus of Scripture. For so many, it's not that we are blind, but that we have closed our eyes. God can and does intervene.

The passage concludes with **Burning Hearts** (vs. 28-35). The good news is that these disciples, lost in confusion and sorrow, did not stay blind for long. The risen Lord opened their eyes. After walking some distance, Jesus and the two disciples arrive at an unnamed village. Jesus indicated he was going to continue, but the disciples insisted he stay with them. This would have been common practice in the ancient world where hospitality was the social norm.

It is at the breaking of the bread that the disciples finally see. We are not told how they were able to recognize Jesus. Maybe they finally saw the mark of the nails. Maybe it was the way he blessed the meal or the way he spoke to the Father. Regardless, their eyes are suddenly opened only for Jesus to vanish. This seems to be something Jesus did after his resurrection (see John 20:19).

Interestingly, we are not told they were shocked, frightened, or confused. Perhaps that was their initial reaction. Luke zeroes in on something else; their hearts burned within them. This does not describe anxiety or fear, but excitement and awe. Christ *is* risen. The claims of the women are true. The testimony of Peter and John are true. He is risen! And now it all makes sense. God's Kingdom had come. Sin had been cleansed. Satan had been crushed. Death had been conquered. Christ now rules and reigns. Never let the gospel become so normal that it fails to open your eyes and burn your hearts.

It is at this moment these disciples marveled at God's grace and become evangelists. Christ's resurrection meant that salvation was secured for all who come to Christ. No wonder they are quick to announce their experience with the other disciples. There is no secret to evangelism. What matters is the story we tell and the people we love. Yes, relationships are essential to effective evangelism, but we must not forget that Christianity is not a religion rooted in law, but in a story about God invading humanity to save sinners like you and me.

Our story is simple: Christ is risen, and he has opened my eyes.

Although it is probably apocryphal, the story goes that one night in the late 1950's, Elvis Presley visited a steakhouse he had frequented before he came to fame. On this night, they were hosting an Elvis impersonator contest. The famous singer decided to enter even singing his hit song, "Love Me Tender." Elvis Aaron Pressley finished third.

It is amazing how easy it is to miss what is right in front of our eyes, often choosing the lesser. May we not do the same regarding the death conquering Savior.