

Distill'd Thoughts on the Parables of Jesus

Table of Contents

The Sower, part 1.....	4
The Sower, part 2.....	5
The Sower, part 3.....	6
The Sower, part 4.....	7
The Hearing Ear.....	8
The Leaven.....	9
The Mouth and the Tongue, part 1.....	10
The Mouth and the Tongue, part 2.....	11
The Mouth and the Tongue, part 3.....	12
The Mouth and The Tongue, part 4.....	13
The Mouth and the Tongue, part 5.....	14
The Mouth and The Tongue, part 6.....	15
The Mustard Seed, part 1.....	16
The Mustard Seed, part 2.....	17
The Mustard Seed, part 3.....	18
Treasure Hid in a Field.....	19
The Pearl of Great Price.....	20
Sheep and Goats, part 1.....	21
The Bridegroom.....	22
Old Garments.....	23
New Garments.....	24
Old Wineskins.....	25
New Wineskins.....	26
Old and New Garments.....	27
Old Wine and Old Garments.....	28
Changing our Garments.....	29
Weeds Among Wheat.....	30
The Ten Virgins, part 1.....	31
The Ten Virgins, part 2.....	32
The Ten Virgins, part 3.....	33
The Talents, part 1.....	34
The Talents, part 2.....	35
The Ten Pounds, part 1.....	36
The Ten Pounds, part 2.....	37
The Lost Sheep.....	38
The Lost Coin.....	39
The Prodigal Son, part 1.....	40
The Prodigal Son, part 2.....	41
The Sea and the Net.....	42
Laborers in the Vineyard, part 1.....	43

Laborers in the Vineyard, part 2.....	44
Laborers in the Vineyard, part 3.....	45
Laborers in the Vineyard, part 4.....	46
Specks and Beams.....	47
The Good Samaritan, part 1.....	48
The Good Samaritan, part 2.....	49
The Good Samaritan, part 3.....	50
Made in God's Image.....	51
The Wedding Feast, part 1.....	52
The Wedding Feast, part 2.....	53
Salt.....	54
The Two Sons.....	55
The Hijacked Vineyard, part 1.....	56
The Hijacked Vineyard, part 2.....	57
The Two Debtors.....	58
Dressed for Action.....	59
The Steward of Unrighteousness, part 1.....	60
The Steward of Unrighteousness, part 2.....	61
The Unforgiving Servant, part 1.....	62
The Unforgiving Servant, part 2.....	63
Ask, Seek, Knock.....	64
Knowing a Tree by its Fruit.....	65
The Rich Man and Lazarus, part 1.....	66
The Rich Man and Lazarus, part 2.....	67
The Danger of Anger.....	68
The Unjust Judge.....	69
Giving up Everything.....	70
Counting the Cost.....	71
The Fig Tree, part 1.....	72
The Fig Tree, part 2.....	73
Building on the Rock.....	74
The Lowest Room.....	75
Selfish Treasure.....	76
Mercy and Sacrifice.....	77
Become as Little Children.....	78
John's Question, part 1.....	79
John's Question, part 2.....	80
Children in the Marketplace.....	81
Foot Washing, part 1.....	82
Foot Washing, part 2.....	83
The Narrow Gate.....	84
Sight and Light, part 1.....	85
Sight and Light, part 2.....	86
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector.....	87
Blind Leaders of the Blind.....	88
The Rich Young Ruler.....	89
Serpents and Doves.....	90
Spiritual Swine.....	91
Spiritual Dogs.....	92

Spiritual Wolves.....	93
Servants of the Master.....	94
Burying the Dead.....	95
The Sign of Jonah.....	96
The Temptation of Christ, part 1.....	97
The Temptation of Christ, part 2.....	98
The Temptation of Christ, part 3.....	99
The Temptation of Christ, part 4.....	100
A House Divided.....	101
Not Peace, but a Sword.....	102
Treasures in Heaven.....	103
Vipers.....	104
Written in Heaven or Earth.....	105

The Sower, part 1

"Behold, a sower went out to sow. And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the side of the road, and the birds came and devoured them up." (Matthew 13:3-4)

"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the wicked one comes, and catches away that which was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the side of the road." (Matthew 13:19)

The parable of the sower is where Jesus shows us the parallels built into nature to explain to us why we were created, and what the purpose is for living exactly the life we're living right now. Jesus said, in quoting Psalm 82, "Does it not say you are gods, to whom the word of God came? And the Scripture cannot be broken." So this is the parable built into sowing seeds in the earth. It's God showing us that He wants to plant a truth in us that's going to transform us into children of God, the way a good seed planted into good ground grows a beneficial plant, beneficial to the earth, beneficial to the plant itself, and beneficial to the grower.

The word of God provides us an upgrade to our conscience, so that we can tame our heart and our tongue the way we transform a wilderness into a field of food, or the way we tame a dog to be a loyal member of our family. (John 7:37-38, Psalm 119:9-16) The parable of the sower explains to us things that can go wrong in our thinking to keep us from becoming children of God.

Jesus explains that the sower is the Son of Man, and the seed is the Word of God. The first place Jesus mentions the seed being scattered is by the side of the road. The road represents the way of the world. (Matthew 7:13, Proverbs 14:12) If we're already fully indoctrinated by the way of the world, and it agrees with us just fine, our hearts will be like a hard road that can't receive seeds. The Old Testament often refers to people being hard-hearted, and that's what will happen to us if we live under the logic of the world, and decide we're just going to have to "be a bigger fish," or "carry a bigger hammer," or just "toughen up" to make it in this life. (Exodus 7:14, Deuteronomy 15:7-8)

The book of Isaiah records the Lord saying, at the end of Isaiah 51:12-23, "I am going to put the cup of My fury in the hand of them that afflict you, those who said, 'Lay down here so we can walk over you,' and you laid yourself in the ground as the street for them to walk over." If you have vengeance in your heart today, and your conscience is saying "what else can I do in this dog-eat-dog world other than try to be a bigger dog?," wait on the Lord, and let Him show you that He's good to His word. (Psalm 34:8, 1 Peter 4:19) Instead of trying to get your own justice, put it in God's hands, take care of it the way the Bible says to, and watch what happens. God wants to show you His love for you, and soften your heart. (Deuteronomy 32:35, Luke 18:1-8) This is not an experiment for those who can't hold out for God's best, or who want to shake their fist at the sky and see if God will really deliver. That's just like the people of Israel in the wilderness who said "Is the Lord really with us or not?" (Exodus 17:7, Psalm 95:7-11, Matthew 4:7) It's a faith-building exercise for those who will get into God's word, and patiently, thankfully receive what God has promised.

The Sower, part 2

"Some seeds fell on stony places, where they didn't have much earth, and they sprung up quickly, because they had no depth of soil. And when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away." (Matthew 13:5-6)

"But he that received the seed into stony places, this is he who hears the word, and quickly receives it with joy. Yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, soon after he is offended." (Matthew 13:20-21)

The second heart condition that Jesus warns us about in the parable of the sower is similar to the first, in that we may have a hardened heart, but we're hiding it, maybe even from ourselves, with a friendly but shallow character. We look good on the surface, and we've got just enough of God's Word to see how it makes sense. And so receiving it isn't a problem, it's living it.

Luke tells us in his version of the parable that the shallow soil lacks moisture. (Luke 8:6) If a shallow person takes any heat for his beliefs, he decides that it's not really worth it to him to sacrifice what he is in order to become something else. Over and over in the Old Testament, moisture represents teaching. (Deuteronomy 32:1-2, Isaiah 55:10-11) And Paul asks us rhetorically, "You who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who say people shouldn't steal, do you steal?" (Romans 2:21) So if we're surface-level Christians, we look good until a real test comes along. When it comes time to choose whether we're going to deal with our trouble God's way or the world's way, we end up choosing the world's way. (Psalm 55:12-14) Consequently, we never allow God to unite with us and materialize something beautiful in our lives. (Isaiah 58:3-4, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18)

Peter says in 1 Peter 4:1, "He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin." So if you find yourself today identifying with the shallow Christian who's lacking moisture, there are two things you can do. Get in the word of God, and let the joy of the Lord be your strength to face your trials the way God says to. (Nehemiah 8:8-10, Colossians 3:16-17) Let Him be God in your trial. Because yeah, it's going to look like you're losing, but we're not here to gain the world. (Matthew 16:26, Psalm 49:6-9) We're here to learn what it takes to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

The Sower, part 3

"Some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprung up, and choked them." (Matthew 13:7)

"He that received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word. He becomes unfruitful." (Matthew 13:22)

In the parable of the sower, the third situation Jesus warns us about, He compares to seeds sown among thorns. This is a direct reference to a passage in Jeremiah, which says, "Break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns." (Jeremiah 4:3) The thorns of this life threaten to take center stage and keep us from giving God first place in our hearts.

The Bible warns us about money more than any other thorn bush that can take root in our lives. It can have us tending to it rather than kingdom matters. Proverbs 27:18 tells us, "He who tends the fig tree shall eat the fruit of it. So he that waits on his master shall be honored." We cannot serve God and money. Paul warns us in 1 Timothy 6:10, "The love of money is the root of all evil, which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." In Ecclesiastes 5:10, Solomon says, "He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver." In Mark 4:19, Jesus warns us when explaining this parable that the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in will make the word unfruitful in our lives. So when we come to the Lord, we can't expect these thorns that we've let overgrow the garden of our lives to continue to be tolerated. Heaven's not going to be full of people with big bank accounts. That's not a qualification for being allowed to live forever.

A wise man once said, "Failure is succeeding at something that doesn't matter." If we believe in God, and we believe there's an afterlife, and we would like to be part of the age to come, we're going to have to redefine success, and redefine ourselves in order to attain it. There are so many things in life that are not only unspiritual, but spiritually foolish and damaging. (Matthew 15:18-20, Galatians 5:19-21, Psalm 1:1) They are not worth risking our time to mess around with - they will bring pain to ourselves and those around us. They will derail our ability to fulfill our purpose of loving God and loving each other. If we will make pleasing God more important than pleasing our boss, our spouse, our parents, or anyone else, then we'll have the strength to start uprooting things God never intended for us to have planted. (Mark 10:29-30, Jeremiah 4:3-4, 1 Samuel 16:6-7)

The Sower, part 4

"But other seeds fell into good ground, and produced fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Matthew 13:8-9)

"He that received seed into the good ground is he who hears the word, and understands it. These people produce fruit, some of them a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." (Matthew 13:23)

The final example Jesus gives us of the kind of heart God's word can be sown in, He refers to as good ground. In Luke's version of the parable, He describes good ground as a good and honest heart, that receives God's word, keeps it, and produces fruit with patience. (Luke 8:15) Keeping God's word alive in our hearts is just as important as the patience to wait for God's timing.

We are the guardians of God's will. We pray "His kingdom come and His will be done on earth," (Matthew 6:10) because we're asking for Him to come and unite with us, and use us to bring His will into the world. The angels are doing His will in heaven, and we're His messengers on earth. (Mark 16:15, Deuteronomy 4:9-10) If we're too busy, drunk, or distracted to even remember the word of God, there is no way we're going to keep that fire burning in order to see what to do next. (Matthew 24:48-51, Deuteronomy 29:19-20) His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. (Psalm 119:105) We have to hear the word, and we have to guard it with our lives, keeping it alive in our hearts. (Proverbs 4:23-27) The best way I know to do that is psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, just like the Apostle Paul tells us. (Colossians 3:16)

In the book of Nehemiah, Ezra tells us to let the joy of the Lord be our strength. (Nehemiah 8:10) James tells us to be doers of the word, and not hearers only, because then we'll deceive ourselves. (James 1:22) The verse that comes to my mind is Hosea 10:12, "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy. Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, until He come and rain righteousness upon you."

The Hearing Ear

"Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear." (Matthew 13:9)

Jesus used these words often after sharing a parable. This rather poignant call to action started out back in the book of Ezekiel. God explains that Ezekiel is going to use this sentence with the people of Israel because "they are a rebellious house." (Ezekiel 3:27) Jesus tells us that the words He speaks to us are "spirit and life." (John 6:63) They're meant to change our hearts and put us back on track so we can walk with Him. Having ears to hear doesn't just mean you have your auditory function intact. It means, if you can admit to yourself the truth of this parable, then take time to digest it, make it part of you, and live accordingly from now on. (Ezekiel 3:1-3) What good is truth if we don't plan a way to use it in our daily life?

Job tells us, "The ear tests words just as the palate tastes food." (Job 12:11) If you hear something you don't like, it's easy to reject it. The thing about the parables, however, is they make something easy to understand and remember once you are able to accept it. Likewise, they make what is ungodly in our thinking glaringly obvious. At first, God's logic will convict us on an individual level, and then as a culture. (Isaiah 6:1-5) A person has to be willing to say, "I'm wrong, and not only am I wrong, but I'm very wrong, and when I change my life to be what's right with the world, everybody's going to hate me." (Judges 6:25-32, John 15:18) It's not an easy thing to take Jesus' words and unite with them so that your conscience can get an upgrade. Paul encourages us, saying, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) Paul also says in Romans, "Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the Word of God." (Romans 10:17) Isn't that beautiful? God is providing the spiritual food we need to grow into His likeness. The work set before us now, is just to receive it and believe it. (John 6:26-29, Psalm 17:15, 1 John 3:2, Matthew 11:27-30) That's what it means to be saved by grace, through faith. All you have to do is trust the milk of God's word enough to drink it. (Ephesians 2:4-10, 1 Peter 2:1-3, Isaiah 55:1-3)

Having ears to hear may feel like a curse at first, because you realize accepting truth is going to cost you, and it's going to cost you dearly. Remember Jesus' words, "Which of you intending to build a tower does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?" (Luke 14:28) Just know that, what you're trading away to have eternal truth that gives eternal life; it's more than worth it. (John 16:20-22, Psalm 126:5-6) There is great peace knowing you are in lock-step with your Creator. Knowing you're a child of God, because you've chosen to humbly love God and others, that's where the assurance of salvation comes from. (Psalm 133, Philippians 4:6-7, Psalm 37:11, Micah 6:8)

The Leaven

"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened." (Matthew 13:33)

Not all leaven is bad, as evidenced by the fact that this parable compares the kingdom of heaven to leaven. In the parable, we are told that the woman took and hid the leaven in three measures of meal. That word "hid" is "encrypto." And it made me remember something wise that St. Francis of Assisi once said. "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." Our lives can communicate the Holy Spirit in so many ways other than words. Peter says, "Let not your adorning be outward, braiding of hair, wearing gold, and putting on clothes. But let it be the hidden person of the heart, a meek and gentle spirit, which is of great value in the eyes of God." (1 Peter 3:3-4, Micah 6:8) What we teach our children, how we teach our children, and why we teach our children, these are some ways that we can communicate the Holy Spirit in a delicate but tangible way. (Proverbs 22:6, Mark 10:13-14)

Jesus said, "Behold, I send you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matthew 10:16) A serpent's wisdom is in staying hidden. You don't ever risk shoving the good news down someone's throat if you're trying to be discreet. And we are among wolves every day. The flesh that our spirit is constantly at war with is something all humans have in common. And unfortunately, as an adult trying to live the Christian life, you've probably come to realize as well as I have that everyone's got an inner sheep, and an inner wolf. What we don't want to do when we're teaching our kids is provoke their inner wolf. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me, and another they simply will not follow." (John 10:4-5, Proverbs 1:10-19) We cannot encourage our children to love and do good works with anything less than the heart of our great Shepherd. Their inner sheep will not hear us if we are not fair and merciful. They have to know we have their best interests in mind while we're pursuing eternal life for them and for ourselves.

The Mouth and the Tongue, part 1

"Nothing that goes into the mouth defiles a man, it's what comes out of his mouth... The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man, for out of the heart proceed all the evil things conceived there." (Matthew 15:11, 19)

Our mouth is the conduit for our heart. The way a heart bears spiritual fruit is by bringing what it has conceived into the world. If you've ever listened to children, you know that they can only say words they've heard. When the Israelites in the wilderness were tuned into the flesh instead of the spirit, and spoke rebelliously against God, He spared people under 20 years old. This is because what was coming out of their mouth was put there by someone else. (Numbers 14:26-31)

Our mouth is our spiritual seed planter. Our spiritual seed planter is not a toy. What we plant in our kids is what they're going to accept as truth. (Proverbs 22:6) Our words "propaganda" and "propagate" come from the same root. When we're being propagandized, we're being seeded with information that we're then encouraged to accept as true. So we have to be really, really careful about what's coming out of our mouths, in order to not grieve the Holy Spirit and mislead our fellow human. Words that are true, kind, and necessary are the ones that qualify as good fruit. When the apostle Paul says, "God is not mocked - whatever you sow, you will reap," he's talking about our actions, sure, but he's also referring to our words. (Galatians 6:7) Proverbs 18:21 says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue. If you love using your tongue, you'll be eating the fruit of it." But James tells us, "No man can tame the tongue - it's an unruly evil full of deadly poison. With it we bless God and curse men made in His image. My brothers, it shouldn't be this way." (James 3:8-10) We can make a meaningful difference in the world just by how we talk to each other, and by the kind of things we let come out of our mouths as topics of conversation.

Maybe you've had this experience before, where someone does something so morally repugnant to you, that years later, they can ruin your day without even being there. (Genesis 26:34-35) All you have to do is start talking about them. God understands that sins cause harm. He doesn't ask us to pretend that we're not in pain. (1 Kings 19:9-10, Matthew 26:38-39) Speaking the truth in love is a responsibility we have to each other. But it's also our responsibility to not give those negative experiences the power to ruin our day through our own mouth. It's our responsibility to ourselves, to our homes, and to our children, to let God have control of what we say so that we continue to bring life to the world even when we're suffering. That's what Jesus did. It's one way we can daily take up our cross and follow His example. James tells us our tongue is like a ship's rudder. (James 3:4) When we let God's direction control our words, our tongues can keep us on course instead of derailing our lives and wasting our time.

The Mouth and the Tongue, part 2

Jesus taught us that the mouth is the organ of the heart. (Mark 7:14-16, Matthew 15:18-20) The mouth can be used to reveal or disguise its master. We see the Lord praise Nathanael for being "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." (John 1:47) There are also psalms that promise a blessing to those who are not deceitful. (Psalm 32:2)

The Lord warns us, "first and foremost, to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod." (Luke 12:1, Mark 8:15) Luke tells us this leaven is hypocrisy; to say one thing and be something else. (Proverbs 11:9) Jesus says those who sit in Moses' seat are to be listened to, but not followed as an example, since they use their tongues to disguise what's in their heart. (Matthew 23:1-7)

There are two types of hypocrites, and we'll talk about the first one now; the unjust Pharisee. He invites you to a banquet with his words, but when it's time to deliver, he has nothing to offer. (Matthew 23:27-28) He's like the fig tree that looked healthy and full of leaves, but when Jesus came to it hungry, there was nothing for Him. (Matthew 21:19) This is a warning to us not to make promises we can't keep. Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire realized is a tree of life." When we use our words to offer something we can't deliver on, we are that fruitless tree, calling others to come to us and eat, when we don't have any good fruit. We're like a rich preacher who says you'll be blessed when you give your money to him, rather than helping your family or the poor. (Mark 7:9-13) Jesus says, "Either make the tree good and the fruit good, or make the tree bad and the fruit bad." (Matthew 12:33) The punishment for people who pretend to be helpful, when really they're harmful, is greater than it is for those who are openly evil. (Matthew 23:14, Psalm 55:19-23) Proverbs 18:9 tells us, "He who is slack of hand is brother to him who destroys."

People are tempted with hypocrisy when they believe they must lie to gain something. That's why the Lord calls it the leaven of Pharisees. A Pharisee, is a partisan; one who sets himself apart from others. It's an elitist spirit that is empty and unsustainable. If you fill something with enough hot air, eventually it will pop. Our hot air is a thing of nothing. It doesn't materialize good for others, and it isn't going to do good for us in the end. (Isaiah 26:17-18) We're only fattening ourselves for this life, and making ourselves too wide for the narrow gate that leads to eternal life. (James 5:5, Luke 13:23-24, Psalm 37:9-10) This reminds me of Jesus' words, "What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? What will he give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26) If you look around you, you'll see that people will give up their soul for 50 bucks! But I guarantee you that 50 dollars won't buy it back. Don't be the guy who trades his eternal existence for a temporary pleasure.

The Mouth and the Tongue, part 3

The second type of hypocrite is the Herodian. He appears heroic to the world, but makes no contribution to the kingdom of heaven. Peter refers to them as "the ones who promise people liberty, but are themselves slaves to sin." This person's smooth words will drag off "those who had clean escaped them who live in error." (2 Peter 2:1-19) They want you to come and feast with them, and forget about all the "trappings" of your religion, and stop "living in fear." They make the world sound good and hide the fact that they're miserable and continuing to burn their life down. (Psalm 28:3) They use their words to control others in order to feel powerful and superior in the midst of their weakness and humiliation.

What we need to always keep in mind is that feasting our eyes and ears on the world *is* eating and drinking with the drunkards. (Matthew 24:48-51) Just listening to these people corrupts a spirit. Their words are an influence, even if you think you know better, even if you think you've already been there and tried that and it didn't work. We're not safe allowing their lies and corruption to be the music that's going in the back of our minds. "Do not be deceived - bad company corrupts good morals." (1 Corinthians 15:33, Psalm 1:1) These people do not try to drag you off innocently. They want you to feed on their logic somewhere nice and dark so they can devour you. They think you are their road out of the hole that they've dug for themselves. They're only trying to pull you in so they can have power, so they can prove to themselves that you're no better than they are, and so that if you do find your way out, they'll ride out "on your coattails." If you take them along on your journey, they'll use your relationship and reputation as a cover for their bad behavior. (Proverbs 7:6-27)

"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." (2 Corinthians 6:14-16) If you have to work with this kind of person, get a new job. If you have to work for them, get a new job quickly. (2 Corinthians 6:17-18) These people produce a lot of spiritual fruit with their mouths, but it's all bad; it's all poison. (Matthew 7:16-18, Psalm 55:21-23) If a hypocritical person like this is your right hand man, do what Jesus said, and cut that right hand off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your nearest and dearest members, than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:30, Psalm 75:10)

The Mouth and The Tongue, part 4

Jesus talks about the tongue being ruled by the heart. (Luke 6:45) Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" So that's ground zero. The verse continues, "I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings." (Jeremiah 17:10) Jesus tells us, "The kingdom of heaven does not come with observation, nor will they say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' for the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21) So we build the kingdom of God within ourselves and each other by filling ourselves and each other with God's Word. Our Father's logic of love works like living stones that we can use to build each other up. That's what our mouth is for.

This is a hard concept for me to wrap my mind around, because I always thought the thing people used their mouth for was getting help from God and other people. I thought the guy who would include his buddies in what he was trying to get was the good guy, because he wasn't just out for himself. But unless we let the truths in God's word transform our heart, we're still going to be tempted with hypocrisy. We need that guileless heart Nathanael had. (Psalm 32:2) Nathanael hadn't even met Jesus yet, but he was sold out to God, and I know it because Jesus praised him for being guileless. (John 1:47) To be without deceit, is to be without hypocrisy.

Another way we can build the kingdom is by refusing to tear it down. In the book of Jeremiah 15:19, God tells the prophet, "If you will turn back to me, I will guide you again, and if you will extract the precious from the vile, you will be as my mouth. They may return to you, but do not return to them." That's a good word for us today. We can take out the precious from the vile by refusing to repeat things that should not have come into the world to begin with. Ephesians 5:8-12 says, "For you were once in darkness, but now you have light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth.) By this you will prove what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead, reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret." Galatians 5:14-15 says, "All the law is fulfilled in one directive, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, stop or you'll only consume each other."

James tells us that if we let God get ahold of our tongue, we'll be able to control our entire body. (James 3:2) When the Bible talks about being perfect, that's what it means. Wholehearted - being completely sold out to God's purpose for your life, like a fruit that's finished maturing and is ready to be plucked from the tree. (Genesis 6:9-14) Jesus said, "Go into all the world, preach the good news to all creation." (Mark 16:15) That's the good purpose of our mouth.

The Mouth and the Tongue, part 5

Proverbs 18:21 tells us, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love using their tongue will have to eat what it produces." This reminds me of the verse, "God is not mocked - whatever a man sows, he will also reap." (Galatians 6:7) But it also reminds me of the verse where our heavenly Father says "I kill, and I make alive," (Deuteronomy 32:39) and where Jesus says "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:37) So our mouths are our spiritual seed planter, and whatever our words plant today, we're going to have to eat tomorrow. This reminds me of the verse that says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." (Proverbs 14:12) Our cursing, flattery, and sarcasm is sowing seeds of death into the world we and our children have to live in.

James says, "With our tongue we bless God, and curse men made in the image of God. My brethren, it ought not be this way." (James 3:8-10) So if I'm going to use my tongue correctly, what's that look like in real time? Well, Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24) I guess we have to be doing what God's doing, the way Jesus was. (John 5:19) Jeremiah was told that he would become as God's mouth (Jeremiah 15:19), and if our blessing and cursing has that much power already, why not hand it over to God and make it a force for good? It seems like the only reasonable thing to do with that much power, especially when it's so easily abused.

If we have a lot of Scripture memorized, it won't be hard to draw on God's words and use them. "The word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the division between soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12) If I'm going to get my tongue under control, I have to get my heart under control. God knows my heart, and he's the only one who can make it make sense to me. (1 Samuel 16:6-7) If we care about producing life with our words, having an understanding as to why we're not will be helpful. God's word isn't something that's there to be rebelled against, it's the information we need for success. I want to succeed in using this superpower for the kingdom.

God made us to be keepers of our brother, to be keepers of the covenant, and to be keepers of earth. (Luke 10:36-37, Leviticus 19:35-37, Genesis 2:15) The only way to do these things is to be guardians of His will, and His will is in black and white in the Bible, and acted out for us in great detail through the life of Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord, Savior, and Messiah. The way we're going to harness this power is to do what the kings of Israel are told to do in Deuteronomy 17:18-20. We're going to get into the Bible every day, and we're going to read it, believe it, and write down how we're going to live it. That way, as the Scripture says, "our heart will not be lifted up above our brothers." We'll be able will speak to others the way we want to be spoken to, in truth and love.

The Mouth and The Tongue, part 6

In the book of John, Jesus said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you may ask what you will, and it will be done for you." (John 15:7) Jeremiah 15:19 is where the Lord explains to Jeremiah why things are not going his way. He says to the prophet, "If you will come back to Me, I will guide you again, and if you will extract the precious from the vile, you will be as My mouth." This is, I believe, the essence of what Jesus is saying to all of us as His students. Because, what's the flip side of that coin? If we don't remove the vile from the way we speak, who's mouthpiece are we? 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 asks us rhetorically, "What fellowship does righteousness have with unrighteousness? What communion does light have with darkness? What friendship does Christ have with Belial?" We cannot serve two masters, not with our way of life, and not with our words either.

Isaiah says, "Woe is me, for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." (Isaiah 6:5) We cannot imagine that we're going to use our culture as an excuse for being the devil's mouthpiece. James tells us in James 3:10-11, "Bitter water and fresh does not flow from the same spring, and blessing and cursing should not be coming out of the same mouth." And then in James 4:4, "You adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world divides you against God? Therefore whoever will be friends with the world is the enemy of God."

We are committing adultery against God when we allow the words of the father of lies to be born into the world through our mouths, rather than letting God's life-giving words flow to us and through us. Many of the unclean things we may let out of our mouths are lies, even if we don't realize it. For instance, when you hear someone in the world call on God to condemn something as a figure of speech, do they actually think God will condemn it? Do they even want God to condemn it? Are they trying to call down fire from heaven like Elijah did to defend himself in 2 Kings 1? If they're not really requesting God's assistance to condemn something for good reason, how are they not lying? And how is lying to God and about God not taking His authority in vain? There's a reason Jesus says we will have to explain every idle word we've spoken in the day of judgment. (Matthew 12:36) Do we really want to forfeit the promise Jesus makes to those who will allow Him to use their mouths to speak life into the world?

From experience, I can tell you that degrading speech, especially when it's mindless or against myself, is effortless and often unconscious. Having an accountability partner to let you know when your tongue has slipped is very helpful. When we abuse ourselves with words like, "fool" for example, we're practicing patterns that come out accidentally toward those under our authority. That's not really fair to them, is it? (Matthew 5:22, Proverbs 18:21) If you ever wished you'd stop making your kid cry with words you can't take back, now's the time to do something. Everyone will like where this road goes.

The Mustard Seed, part 1

"The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of the seeds sown in a garden, but when it's grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air can come nest in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32)

This parable is explaining mankind's first spiritual ability, thankfulness. If we learn to be thankful for our helpful higher power when we're young, we'll aspire to be like them, and we'll more easily trust them even when things are going wrong. This trust we have for our parents, and our desire to be like them, can eventually grow into trust in, and desire to be like, our Creator. The Psalmist shows his trust for God when he says in Psalm 17:13, "Arise, oh Lord, disappoint the wicked, and cast him down. Deliver my soul from the wicked, who is your sword." And then in verse 15, his desire to be like his Creator is expressed, when he says "As for me, I will behold your face in righteousness. I will be satisfied when I awake with your likeness."

The best thing we can do for our children is cultivate a spirit of thankfulness between us as their helpful higher power. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." We love our children and care for them, but we're also thankful to have them in our lives, even when they can't do anything to repay us for being their helpful higher power. Children naturally see adults, and want all the power and freedom that they have, because they have no ability to meet their own needs. When they see us meeting their needs cheerfully, they want the joy we have as well. A spirit of thankfulness is a foundation for a faithful life. Jesus tells us in John 14:15, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Just as a mustard seed is guaranteed to grow a mustard plant, if our kids want to be like us when they grow up, they will emulate our responsible behavior.

Anyone who's been the parent of a thankless child knows how difficult it can be to remain thankful in the face of their child's demands and spirit of entitlement. But even if a child is not born with the level of empathy we hope for, they can be reminded of their situation when they were younger, through helping with younger children. They can be shown that power isn't forever by being allowed to help with the elderly. They can learn to be thankful for their power to do good for those who no longer can do anything for themselves. (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7)

The Mustard Seed, part 2

The adage that says "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree" is somewhat misleading. Our children get to pick what information they accept or reject. Our kids are like fields being sown, and a parent is not the only sower in the field. If television or the babysitter get more air time with your child than you, they may be seeded with things that aren't helpful in their spiritual life. Paul tells us, "Don't be deceived - bad company corrupts good morals." (1 Corinthians 15:33) And Proverbs 27:18 says, "Whoever keeps the fig tree shall eat the fruit of it. So he that waits on his master will be honored." If we let the world teach our children that they can master it, our children will honor it. If our kids aren't learning to master eternal thinking, this temporary world will become their master.

In part 1, we talked about the importance of thankfulness. But even thankfulness can be tainted by a thirst for pleasure or power. It's of paramount importance that a child's thankfulness not be based on how much money he can earn or how much attention he can get for being helpful. If doing our duty is not its own reward, we're doing nothing but breeding a hireling's spirit in our children. Trying to serve the spirit and the flesh at the same time is not possible. Our Lord assures us, "You cannot serve God and money." (Luke 16:13) If you pay someone to act like a Christian, all your kid needs to leave it behind is to have someone else pay more. If we leave our children to be raised by the world and the flesh while we labor for the food that perishes, our efforts to take our kids into eternity with us will be derailed. (John 6:27) Peter reminds us of this danger, saying, "Be sober, be vigilant, for your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, looking for whoever he can devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

I think the most important thing we can do spiritually for our kids is to teach them to be thankful to God for the strengths, talents, and abilities they've been given while they still have them. When they are thankful for the time they've been given to serve others, they're less likely to waste it. Learning to be thankful that we can give, and thankful to receive, combats the majority of life's spiritual ills. (Psalm 50:16-23, Ephesians 5:17-21)

The Mustard Seed, part 3

"Pay attention to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turns again to you saying, 'I repent,' you will forgive him.' And the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith.' And the Lord said, 'If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be plucked up by the root, and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.'" (Luke 17:3-6)

A mustard seed of faith is the truth we have. A seed contains everything it needs to become like the plant it originated with. This represents our conscience. (Jeremiah 31:33, Romans 2:14, Luke 8:11) We only have a tiny amount of truth in the beginning, but if we will live by what we know, God will bless us. (Isaiah 58, Matthew 24:42-47) Whatever we do from a place of truth and love is safe to bless. If something is standing in our way when we want to do something charitable, we can ask the Lord to remove those things. (1 Chronicles 4:10, James 5:16) Some things that might stand in the way of good deeds are pride, selfishness, and unforgiveness. Our mountains represent anything that rules over us; those things we can't overcome on our own.

John 15:5 is where Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He that abides in Me, and I in him, is the one who bears much fruit. Apart from Me, you can do nothing." Our human frailty and individual weaknesses can't help but get in the way when our spirit wants to do something charitable. (Deuteronomy 15:9, Galatians 5:14-17) If we're tending that spark of God within ourselves by obeying our conscience even when we don't understand, we'll keep our faith strong enough to have our prayers answered.

Treasure Hid in a Field

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hid in a field. When a man has found it, he hides it, and because of his joy over it, he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field." (Matthew 13:44)

Just a bit earlier in Matthew 13:38, Jesus tells us that the field is the world, while explaining the parable of the wheat and the tares. Exodus 19:5 tells us, "If you will actually obey what I tell you, and keep My covenant, then you will be a unique treasure of Mine above all people, for all the earth is Mine." And in Malachi 3:17, we are told, "They that fear the Lord shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels, and I will spare them, as a man spares his son that serves him." We can see clearly from these verses that "buying the field" is what Jesus did for the world in order to save those who were His treasure. He didn't buy only just the treasure, He bought the world and everything in it. All of our debts to each other are now owed to Him. This is why He can justly forgive sins and condemn those who aren't repentant. (Mark 2:6-12, Luke 12:45-48)

This is also a parable describing what those who treasure Jesus do to show themselves worthy of His sacrifice. The wisest thing we can do is trade the temporary for the eternal. Jesus showed us how to do this by his life, death, and resurrection. (Matthew 16:24, Isaiah 28:16-17) When we prove to be His children, we are His treasure, and He is ours. Those we love are also our treasure, just as much as they are His, but if we love anyone more than following God's path, we'll only ruin us and them. To love our neighbor more than God elevates them to an idol in our lives. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Mark 12:28-31, Exodus 20:1-3) This is why Jesus tells us, "If any man comes to Me, and does not love his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even his own life less than he loves Me, he cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26) He wants us to be able to take our family to heaven with us, and loving Him more than anything else is the best thing we can do to make that happen.

Our directive is to go into all the world, and preach the good news of salvation to everyone. We are called to sell everything we have, and count all our loss as gain for the love of obtaining Christ, the greatest treasure of all. (Matthew 28:18-20, Philippians 3:7, Luke 12:33-34)

The Pearl of Great Price

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking goodly pearls. When he found one pearl of great value, he sold all that he had, and bought it." (Matthew 13:45-46)

The merchant seeking precious pearls is a person who values sound wisdom to live by. Proverbs 23:23 says, "Buy truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom, instruction, and understanding." We "buy into God's way of thinking" when we trade away our old logic to do things God's way. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus tells us, "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you." We can ask our Father to give us wisdom, and He will grant our request. (James 1:5, Proverbs 2:3-6)

An oyster creates a pearl because of an irritation. In the same way, we seek for pearls of wisdom when chronic irritation in our lives proves difficult to remove with our current logic. Our upbringing, mistakes, weaknesses, and failures are things we live with every day. The harm we give and take brings us pain. Some things have left indelible scars on our lives and the lives of those we love. For me, the pearl of great value is God's grace through Jesus Christ. Grace is free favor. God has shown me free favor by forgiving my mistakes and failures, making me square with Him. When I allow the love and healing of forgiveness to flow to me and through me to others, I become like the pearl oyster. I've found a way to turn the pain into peace. My Messiah's sacrifice strengthens me to give up my rights and comfort in order to stay united with those I love. (Proverbs 17:9) He gave up everything so I could be united to Him. This miraculous gift lifts me out of my despondency, so I can do the same for others. Living this truth lets me raise my fellow man up when I reach out to him, rather than accidentally or vengefully pulling him down. (Galatians 5:14-15, Leviticus 19:18) Our Father's plan is to work with us to make our trials materialize something beautiful in our lives. (Proverbs 17:3, James 5:10-11)

Our Savior tells us not to cast our pearls before swine. (Matthew 7:6) This is a warning not to try to share truth with those who have rejected truth and are willfully harmful. (Matthew 18:15-17, John 1:9-11) We must love our enemies and forgive them from a safe distance. (Matthew 5:43-45, Matthew 6:12-15) We recognize they are not our brothers in the Lord. (Mark 3:31-35, 1 John 2:19, Psalm 55:12-23) Those who are not sorry for their crimes repeat them. (Proverbs 26:11, 2 Peter 2:22)

To sell all we have and buy this pearl, we release everyone from their debts to us. In Luke 6:37, Jesus tells us, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." The sacrifice Christ made for us is what makes Him so valuable to us. His obedience made it possible for the way of life He teaches to actually work. Without Him buying our debts by paying for them with His life, He wouldn't have the authority to say, "forgive and you will be forgiven". If Jesus were just another "wise man," His teachings would have far less value. It's because of His sinless, divine nature and His death and resurrection that He is our pearl of great value. It's why He is worth selling everything to have.

Sheep and Goats, part 1

"When the Son of man returns in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All nations will be gathered together before Him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left." (Matthew 25:31-33)

If you've ever owned sheep and goats, you're going to understand the rest of this parable. Most sheep know they need each other, and most goats have horns that they're not afraid to use. The sheep are portrayed as the ones who inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Jesus just said a mouthful in a very few words. He's told us the meaning of life. We were created by Him, for His good pleasure. (Revelation 4:11, Genesis 1:31) We're meant to inherit the kingdom. Our Lord says, the sheep are inheriting the kingdom because, when He was hungry, they fed Him. When He was thirsty, they gave Him something to drink. Jesus lists all these physical needs that we humans have, as being met by this group called "the sheep." (Isaiah 58:6-12) Here's something you may have noticed, though; they don't even know what He's talking about. This should disturb every Bible believer. They say, "When did we see You and feed You?" How could these people not know they had cared for the Son of God? To my thinking there's no way that those sheep ever read this parable. Otherwise, they would know! Jesus told us, "He who is not against us is on our side," (Mark 9:38-40) So at least some of the sheep fulfilled their purpose without direction from the New Testament. (Habakkuk 2:4, Hebrews 10:38, Romans 2:14) Sadly, the goats have not. (Mark 4:18-19, Numbers 14:22-23)

Having personally raised both of these animals, I will tell you that horns rightly represent power in the parables. A flock of goats who all have horns, they use this advantage to get what they want. The Lord calls the goats, "cursed ones." They're cursed because they're so preoccupied with getting what they want, they fail to meet the needs of others. (Hebrews 6:7-8, Deuteronomy 15:7-9) This is why God has to be so careful about who He blesses with power. The temptation is far too great to use power selfishly. Goats have very poor boundaries, which means anything that comes between them and what they want is going to be damaged; their fence, their neighbors, your garden, you name it. I'm convinced that God created these creatures with so many obvious character flaws just to teach us why it's wrong to abuse power. When you're the caretaker, and you want peace on your little farm, you realize very quickly who the troublemakers are.

If you're listening to this, and you're thinking, "I have a lot more in common with a goat than with a sheep," I have good news. A goat who humbly trusts his Shepherd's logic and is thankful for his Shepherd's care can be a great benefit as well as a great companion. The Word puts it like this: "Godliness with contentment is great gain." (1 Timothy 6:6, Proverbs 16:8) A person with power who works with the Shepherd, is not a goat anymore. He's a ram, able to protect and defend the Shepherd's flock. (John 15:5, Psalm 95:6-11, Job 29:15-17)

The Bridegroom

"Can the children of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." (Luke 5:34-35)

The parable of the bridegroom was Jesus' response to His religious community. They wanted to know why His students didn't fast. Fasting had become an outward show of piety for the Pharisees of Jesus' day. (Matthew 6:16) Regular fasting continued to be a way of life for the students of John the Baptist. (Luke 5:33) So when Jesus' students didn't hold the same traditions, they were offended. How can this man be the Messiah when His students don't even fast? Jesus responds with three parables - The Bridegroom, Old and New Garments, and Old and New Wineskins.

This first parable makes a profoundly Jewish statement. When Moses was given the law at Mount Sinai, the Jews considered it their marriage contract with God. (Jeremiah 31:31-32) The Almighty is the Bridegroom and the people are the Bride. Jesus clearly says in Matthew 23:10 that He is the Christ and their only master. He tells the apostle Peter and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well that He is indeed the Messiah. (Matthew 16:15-17, John 4:25-26) Here, He's just said He is the prophesied God-man in a way every Jew could understand.

Moses prophesied that God would give them a man to share the covenant with them, because they were terrified of the voice of God at Mount Sinai. (Deuteronomy 18:15-19) Jeremiah prophesied that God would bring in a new covenant, in Jeremiah 31:31-34. That's the wedding contract. After explaining why Jesus' students don't fast, Jesus says "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." So it's not that fasting had been done away with, it's that a wedding is a celebration and a feast. It was time for rejoicing because their Messiah had come.

Jesus points out that fasting is an act of mourning, especially when a person is working to show their desire for God to change something, like their heart. That makes perfect sense for the students of John the Baptist, since repentance was the main purpose of his ministry. (Mark 1:1-4) Jesus' purpose was to fulfill the needs of those who had already turned their hearts toward God. (Malachi 4:5-6)

As Christians, we want to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn, in order to support each other. (Romans 12:15) Jesus' parable shows that it's not always appropriate to support the world this way. When people make arbitrary laws against when we can eat, or where we can quietly pray, they rejoice in their power over us. We don't rejoice with them. We mourn for them and pray for them in secret. (Jeremiah 13:15-17, Matthew 6:6) When we refuse to act in ways God would disapprove of, we often become the target of slander, abuse and excommunication. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:11-12 that when the world deprives us of fair treatment, it's time to rejoice, because heaven is going to repay us. (Joel 2:25, Romans 8:18) All heaven is rejoicing over you! Are you ready to walk in the Spirit and rejoice with them?

Old Garments

"No man sews a piece of a new garment onto an old one. If you do, the piece you take will mar the new garment, and the patch won't agree with the old." (Luke 5:36)

This is the second parable Jesus uses to explain why fasting is not appropriate for His students. The marred new garment represents how self-denial is viewed by the world when taken out of context. You may already know that natural fibers shrink when washed the first time. If I took a piece of new fabric and sewed it onto an old garment, washing it would cause more damage in the end, due to this shrinking. Jesus is explaining what happens if we try to put a spiritual bandage on a carnal disease. The old garment represents this disease. It's what we do to cover up and look good to the world if we care about what men think more than what God wants. (Malachi 2:16) Zechariah 3:3-4 reads, "Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the angel. And the Lord said to those that stood before him, 'Take away the filthy garments from him.' And He said to Joshua, 'Look, I have caused your unfairness to pass from you, and I will clothe you with a change of clothes.'" Joshua had to get rid of his old, filthy garments entirely, not try to fix them with the new garments. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 6:14, "What does righteousness have in common with unrighteousness? Or what communion does light have with darkness?" If we try to blend one pious habit with a harmful lifestyle, we make matters worse for ourselves spiritually. The world and the flesh will still get us into the same filth that caused us to need cleansing from sin in the first place. Whether it's our job, our non-spiritual ambitions, our spouse, or even our own bodies that come against us, something will prove Jesus right when He says in Matthew 6:24, "No man can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or he will cling to one and despise the other."

Fasting is part of mature faith as a lifestyle. It helps us stop tuning into the flesh in order to receive forgiveness and bring about change. Daniel fasted when he saw, in scripture, that it was time for Jeremiah's prophesy to occur regarding Israel's return from captivity. (Daniel 9:1-3) King David fasted for his sins and his child in 2 Samuel 12:15-16. Our Messiah explains that fasting is not for those who are just coming out of "old garment" thinking. Jesus' students were babes in the faith. They were still learning how to trust their heavenly Father's way of doing things. He asks us not to worry about our needs and to live our ministry. Simon Peter shows his beautiful, but tiny faith, after our Lord does a miracle for him in his fishing business. He says, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." But Jesus comforts him, saying, "Don't be afraid, from now on you will catch men." (Luke 5:4-10)

New Garments

"No man sews a piece of a new garment onto an old one. If you do, the piece you take will mar the new garment, and the patch won't agree with the old." (Luke 5:36)

We see from this parable that we can't be truly spiritual and keep one foot in the world. So what does it look like to take off the old garment and put on the new? In Matthew 6, immediately after warning us that we cannot serve two masters, Jesus says, "Do not be anxious for your life, what you will eat, or drink, or wear. Isn't your life more than food, and your body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air - they don't plant, harvest, or store food, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you much more valuable than they are? Which one of you can make yourself live longer by being anxious? And why are you worried about clothes? Think about how the lilies of the field grow - they don't work or spin thread, and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. So if God clothes the grass of the field, which exists today and is used as fire fodder tomorrow, won't he clothe you much more, you who trust so little? So don't be anxious saying 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we be clothed with?' The nations of the world seek all of these things. Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask Him. But make God's kingdom, and His fair and right ways your highest priority, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:25-33)

Proverbs says more than once that God's wisdom is better than gold, which makes sense if you think about it. (Proverbs 3:13-15, Proverbs 8:10-19, Proverbs 16:16) How is something good if you aren't using it to bring life? Gold can certainly be used to bring life to others if you use it to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and in prison (Matthew 25:34-40), but you can also use it to cause permanent harm to yourself and those around you if you're not careful. God's wisdom will always bring life to you and those around you if you listen to it and share it lovingly with those who see they need it. That's the new garment - the eternal way of life that covers us with God's righteousness when we make godliness our highest priority. Paul tells us in Colossians 3:10, "Put on the new man, whose understanding has been remade to match his Maker's." Once our spirit is working in unison with the Holy Spirit, we will be able to live a loving, godly life without the world and the flesh tearing us apart spiritually.

Old Wineskins

"And no man puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the new wine will burst the wineskins, and be spilled, and the wineskins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both will be preserved. And no man who has drunk old wine immediately wants new wine, for he says, 'The old is better.'" (Luke 5:37-39)

After the parable of the old and new garments, this is the third parable Jesus gives regarding fasting. An old wineskin is what we are when we've been stretched to capacity by the spirit of the world, and have figured out how to contain it. Luke 21:34 tells us "Pay attention to yourselves, so that your hearts are not filled up with drunkenness and the cares and pleasures of this life." Old wineskin thinking is not able to hold the new wine of the Holy Spirit because anything that expands our mind threatens our flesh. When Jesus says, "Take no thought for what you will eat or drink," (Matthew 6:31) the flesh says "That's unreasonable." But the Holy Spirit can't lead us through the wildernesses of life and feed us the hidden manna if we are too focused on the flesh to bother with anything spiritual. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3, Matthew 4:3-4) We don't want to be like the person in Deuteronomy 29:19 who says "I shall have peace, even though I walk in the imagination of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst."

When life shakes us up, our cup "runneth over" with whatever we're filled with. If that happens to be intoxicating junk, it's going to pollute us and risk those around us being polluted too. Jesus warns us in Matthew 15:18-20, "The things that come out of your mouth come from your heart, and they defile you. For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things that make a man impure." It's in no one's best interest for us to be a conduit for an unclean spirit of old wine. Our fellow man needs us to be a resource for the new wine of the Holy Spirit.

Becoming a new wineskin means a whole different way of life. Jesus says, "No one after having old wine immediately desires the new, because he says 'The old is better.'" Well, being intoxicated with the world is still toxic. And God is trying to give us rest and comfort that's far better than distraction or inebriation. He wants us to have life, and that more abundantly. (John 10:10)

New Wineskins

The parable of the new wineskins gives us a picture in nature of how the Holy Spirit of Truth can transform a person's life. A wineskin starts out as the nearly complete skin of a sheep or a goat. It is a thing of flesh, but the beast it came from is no longer living. The apostle Paul says, "For I am crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me." (Galatians 2:20) The empty skin represents the chronically empty state of our flesh. After the world has knocked the life out of us and robbed our faith in the power of love, we're left empty and we begin to change our minds about our purpose. Wineskins are scraped clean, dried and smoked, which is not something pretty to look at, as evidenced by Psalm 119:83, "I have become like a wineskin in the smoke; yet I do not forget Your decrees." Once it's ready, the wineskin has been changed so dramatically that it's former use is barely recognizable.

How we decide to deal with the emptiness of stress and disappointment is illustrated by old and new wine. We may become the satyr or the stoic. If our choices are self-serving, diverting, and overcome with the spirit of the world, we will be like an old wineskin; too drunk with power, pleasure or worry to care that we're being used by a toxic spirit. Just as an old wineskin can't be filled with new wine without dire consequences for both, we're not safe to hold the power of the Holy Spirit of Truth until we can empathize with the needy enough to want to relieve them. That way we understand what the blessing of the Holy Spirit is for. Like new wine expands a wineskin, the truth can expand our mind, but it also makes us responsible for it. You can see by the unhappy ending of king Saul and king Solomon that God takes a calculated risk when He blesses a person. (1 Samuel 15:22-29, 1 Kings 11:1-13)

Suffering under injustice is an opportunity to become a new wineskin. It can help us see the truth of why evil is bad. Hopefully it will help us identify with others who suffer. Just as a well-prepared wineskin is safe to fill with new wine, we can ask for the Holy Spirit once we are prepared for His use. (Proverbs 25:4) Jesus tells us in Luke 11:11-13, "If one of you has a son who asks him for bread, will you give him a stone? If he asks for a fish, will you give him a serpent instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will you offer him a scorpion? So if you know how to give good things to your children, despite your selfish nature, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" God wants to fill our emptiness. He hopes to give us purpose and meaning for our lives, by sharing His power with us; power to restore our fellow human. Our Lord tells the apostle Peter, shortly before He was betrayed, "I have prayed for you, that your faith would not fail, and when you are converted, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32) And in John 7:37-38, Jesus says "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He that believes on me, as the scripture has said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."

Our Father in heaven, your authority is over all. We invite you to make us into what you want us to be. We thank you for your Holy Spirit and ask that you would fill our emptiness with Your presence, so we can bless the needy with Your love, In Jesus' name.

Old and New Garments

Luke 5:36 tells us no one takes a patch from a new garment to mend an old one. Yet we do something similar when we decide to go to church for things we need in this life, without wholeheartedly investing in eternity. We might need more honest clientele for our business, or more responsible friends for our kids, or a faithful spouse. We want just enough Jesus in our lives to make things work the way they should, not a new Christ-centered life. The things we want are good, and often accompany a spiritual life, but they aren't things a worldly person can just go out and pick up, like a bottle of shampoo.

Religious gatherings in Jesus' day were similar to many of ours. They're a social club. Instead of paying dues, you pay tithes that cover the minister's living expenses. You find one where people's clothing, hair and politics match yours, and settle in. But if you're hungering for spiritual renewal, it'll cost you. That's not what church is supposed to be. This is why Jesus says that taking just a little patch of a new garment and not the whole thing is just marring the new garment. It makes us look bad to leave helpless people without their spiritual and physical needs met while our leader is driving a new car.

Another problem arises when you don't actually fill up the hole on your old garment. That little bit of Jesus you hoped would fix things, ends up being a smokescreen for some of the best looking, worst people you'll ever wish you never met. Jesus calls them "wolves in sheep's clothing," (Matthew 7:15) and, "whitewashed tombs full of the bones of the dead." (Matthew 23:27) A preacher can easily use the word of God to make himself look like his life has been transformed. Jesus said in Matthew 23:2-3, "Do as they say, not as they do, for they don't do what they say." And a bit later in Matthew 23:14, He says, "Woe to those who devour widows' houses and as a cover make long prayers." This is the "reverend" that sounds so spiritual you're not sure if he's speaking English. The same one says you'll be blessed with a wonderful marriage if you just spend your money on their couple's retreat. That minister, who's getting paid for your attendance, he's patching his old garment with pieces of your old garment, and that's why you feel ripped off. He will gladly take the widow's last two cents and use it to tip the guy who washed his new car. (Mark 12:38-44, Micah 3:9-12, Ezekiel 34:2-10)

Jesus made a whip and drove the moneychangers out of His Father's house of prayer. I want to remind you that you are the temple of God, and you need to drive those moneychangers out of your life. Jesus said, in Matthew 23:13, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut people out of the kingdom of heaven. You neither go in yourselves, nor allow those who are entering to go in." If we continue to invest our trust and resources in temporary people, we're going to lose everything, even ourselves. We need a gathering of people who are eagerly waiting on God; people who will hold our hand and walk with us through the narrow gate.

Old Wine and Old Garments

The old wine of Luke 5:37 represents how people are easily trapped in a circular lifestyle that can never result in lasting satisfaction. If we spend life engaged in things that result in death, or don't result in life, we're too drunk on the world to see eternity. If we live only to meet our own needs and desires, we've missed the point of living. We end up like the leech's daughters from Proverbs 30:15-16 - we just can't get enough. Trying to obtain fulfillment from worldly pursuits is like patching an old garment with old pieces of cloth. It looks passable at first, but after awhile the holes in the arguments I use to justify my dual lifestyle are getting bigger. Some things just don't line up. The old garment doesn't cover me anymore. I start to feel ashamed, and people are complaining about the smell. If I tried to clean it up at this point, it would fall apart. I don't see another way to keep it together. I realize I need something new.

The thing we may fail to realize at first, is that patching an old garment with a new piece of cloth isn't going to work either. We'll be pulled apart faster than ever if we continue seeking the world's goods by making self-sacrificing choices. John 15:5 is where Jesus explains that we need God's Word to flow through us in good works, forgiveness and mercy, in order to produce satisfying, spiritual "new wine" for ourselves and each other. He says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who remains in Me and I in him, the same bears much fruit; for without Me, you can do nothing." (Psalm 68:35)

The message of the parable is our Heavenly Father's invitation to invest completely in God's Word. Jesus said, in John 10:10, "A thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy. I've come so that My sheep might have life, and that more abundantly." (Job 24:14) Though time, like a thief, steals away the years of our lives, there's another life ahead. Our Father wants to put us on the road toward this new life and true happiness. It's a road that can make us new again. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away, behold, all things have become new." (Ezekiel 18:31-32) Eternity starts with the choices we make today.

Changing our Garments

The most beautiful thing about the parables is that they make something obvious as soon as a person is able to accept it. John 16:12-13 is where Jesus says, "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." God wants to transform us by the renewing of our minds in order to make us worthy of the afterlife.

The Bible encourages us to be made new by allowing scripture and the Holy Spirit to teach us the logic of God. Renewal is an act of God. Being transformed from a person led by our flesh, to one led by God's Spirit, requires that we take time to be spiritually fed by God's truth. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7) Paul tells us in Titus 3:5, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Again, in Romans 12:2, "Don't conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may be the evidence of what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God." He says in Ephesians 4:22-24, "Put off the way you lived as the old man, which is corrupt like the fleshly lusts which deceive you, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind. Put on the new man, which is created in the image of God's fairness and true holiness." Submitting to God's transforming power by reading and living by His Word is how we "change our garments" and put on God's "garments of salvation," so we don't bring our polluted logic into the next life. Isaiah 61:10 says, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as groom puts on regal attire, and as a bride decorates herself with jewelry."

According to Matthew 22:11-13, putting myself and my old garment on the altar is a daily sacrifice I cannot afford to neglect. I don't want to be the one who shows up to the wedding in his old unholy garment. Malachi 1:6-7 is where God says, "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. So if I am a father, where is my honor? If I am a master, where is my fear? This is what the Lord of hosts say to you, O priests, who despise my name. And you say, 'How have we despised your name?' You offer polluted bread on my altar." Our Father is fed by the good we do for each other. (Isaiah 5:1-4, Matthew 13:24-30) We don't want to adhere to our polluted way of life and make Him eat that. 2 Corinthians 10:5 says, "Cast down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. Take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." (Exodus 20:1-3, Deuteronomy 6:4-5) This is the only way to guard what we are given and avoid having our thought-life hijacked by the world again. Jesus' words in Luke 12:35 remind us, "Keep your garment around you and your lamp burning!"

Weeds Among Wheat

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men slept, his enemy came, sowed weeds among the wheat, and went his way. When the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then the weeds appeared also. So the servants of the homesteader came and said to him, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where have these weeds come from?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, otherwise when you gather up the weeds, you might uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. When harvest time comes, I will tell the reapers, first gather together the weeds, and bind them in bundles to burn them. But gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

Jesus' parable about the wheat and the weeds explains the problem of evil in the world. It also explains why God doesn't just remove it. Jesus says that the field is the world. The good seed is the Word of God, and the wheat is the children of the kingdom. The weeds are those whose hearts are sown by the father of lies. (Matthew 13:36-39) God didn't create the lies we believe, yet all of us believe something that's wrong at some point. Proverbs 14:12 tells us "There's a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." Believing lies causes people to sin, and as the Apostle Paul so eloquently put it, "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Peter agrees, saying "If the righteous is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (1 Peter 4:18)

It's not in everyone's best interest that people who believe lies be taken out of the world. Then we'd all be taken out. There comes a time, however, when a person is clearly bent toward good, or only does good when they feel like it. A wise person once said "You can't know who your friends are when you're prosperous, but when you're in trouble, your enemies won't stay hidden." So until people show what they really are, we might think God's being excessively harsh for removing them from our lives. That could uproot our love for God and for good.

On the other hand, if we're feeling impatient with God regarding the harmful people in our lives, it helps to be thankful that we've personally benefited from His patience. (Romans 2:4, Psalm 86:14-17) We can and should still keep praying to be delivered from perverse and evil people. (2 Thessalonians 3:2, Luke 18:1-8, Psalm 22:11-13) We can still trust that God has a plan to deal with the weeds we face, whether they're in our fellow man or in ourselves. (Psalm 37:32-37, Psalm 71:4, Psalm 51:6-7, Matthew 13:22, Matthew 13:40-43, Romans 12:2)

The Ten Virgins, part 1

"At that time, the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were wise, and five were foolish. The ones who were foolish took their lamps, but took no oil with them. But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps." (Matthew 25:1-4)

This introduction shows us that Jesus is talking about the church, those of us who regard the laws of heaven in our hearts. The wise virgins take oil in vessels along with their lamps, but the foolish do not. The oil is the work and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The vessels are our memory. (John 14:26, Isaiah 61:1-3) It was a failure to remember the miracles in Egypt that caused the people of Israel to doubt God could feed them in the wilderness. It was a failure to use his memory that caused Balaam to reject his own advice to King Balak, "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." He decided instead to help plot to derail Israel's blessing by tempting them to sin. (Micah 6:5-8, Numbers 31:16, 2 Peter 2:15)

The most important things we can do are memorize scripture, and take Communion together in remembrance of our Messiah's sacrifice. (Luke 22:19-20, John 15:7, Deuteronomy 6:6-9) We need the truth of the crucifixion, the miracle of resurrection, and the words of Jesus to stay alive in our hearts. In dark times, these can be brought back to our memory by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that part of the Holy Spirit's job is to remind us of His words. But we can't be reminded of what we don't know. If we never put God's words in our mind to begin with, we won't know what our next course of action should be in the midnight of the soul. (Matthew 25:5-10) Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Proverbs 6:20-22 says, "My son, keep your father's commandments, and do not forsake the law of your mother. Bind them on your heart all the time, and tie them around your neck. When you're on the road, they will lead you. When you sleep, they will protect you. And when you awake, they will talk with you."

Our Father in heaven, your authority is over all authority. Lord, help us to be wise enough to make time for Your word. We know that whatever we invest in You, You will invest in us again. (Luke 19:16-17) We ask that Your words would come alive to us in our times of need, and help us see clearly how to stay in Your will, how to be good for our fellow man, and how to build the kingdom. We pray Your kingdom would rule in our hearts today, and that we wouldn't have our interests divided. Thank You for hearing our prayers. Your word says that when we know You've heard us, we know we have received whatever we asked for. (1 John 5:15) We thank You ahead of time for answering our prayer for wisdom. In Jesus name, Amen.

The Ten Virgins, part 2

"While the bridegroom delayed, they all slumbered and slept. At midnight there was a shout, 'Look! The Bridegroom! Come out to meet Him! Then all those virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us of your oil, for our lamps are out.' But the wise answered, 'There is not enough for us and you. Go instead to the dealers and buy for yourselves.'" (Matthew 25:5-9)

All ten virgins fall asleep while waiting for the Bridegroom. When we get caught up in worldly distractions, we're asleep to the concerns of the kingdom of God. The more we take our eyes off of Christ's return, the more susceptible we are to being spiritually hijacked by the world's chaos, pleasures, and business. It takes a midnight of the soul and a spiritual awakening to put us back on God's path. The ten virgins all trimmed their lamps, cutting off their dead works so that the light of Christ could shine through them again. (John 8:12, Matthew 5:14, Isaiah 42:6-7)

The wise virgins had invested time in ruminating on scripture. This allowed the Holy Spirit to show them what to do. It was time to trim off their dead works and press on toward the goal. That goal is the Cross we each must bear in order to support equality. (Hebrews 12:1-3, Hosea 10:12)

When the foolish virgins say, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out," they are asking that the wise defend their logic. They can't see why they should have to let go of the world. It makes the foolish look bad to have their companions deny themselves pleasures that they still wish to indulge. This combative "gimme" spirit is what we're warned against in Proverbs 30:15, "The leech has two daughters, and both cry 'Give!' There are three things that are never satisfied, yes, four things never say, That's good enough." fWhen someone doesn't want to lay down their idols, they can't take up their cross. (Matthew 16:24) To convince their companions to follow the path of sacrifice, the wise virgins tell them, "Our logic is good enough for us, but it won't be good enough for you. Go instead to the dealers, (someone they will listen to) and buy for yourselves." A person with a title in the church would be an example of one who deals in the scriptures. The story hearkens back to the proverb, "Buy truth and do not sell it." (Proverbs 23:23)

If you've ever tried to explain your trust in God to someone void of the Holy Spirit, you know they would rather believe that you are psychic or insane, than to accept that your Creator did something miraculous for you. They are opposed to sacrificial living. They will try to convince you to let go of your spiritual beliefs. "Do not cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them, and turn again and tear you to pieces." (Matthew 7:6) We cannot expect unbelievers and idolaters to understand our sacrifices for a God who sacrificed everything for us.

May we be strengthened by God's Spirit. May we do all we need to in order to be found worthy to escape the things coming upon the earth and to stand before the Son of Man, Jesus our Messiah. (Luke 21:36, Hebrews 2:3, 1 Kings 1:52)

The Ten Virgins, part 3

"And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage, and the door was shut. Afterward, the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open the door for us.' But he answered and said, 'Truly I say to you, I don't know you.' Stay on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour when the Son of man comes." (Matthew 25:10-13)

When there is division in the Body of Christ, it's because the members can't agree on what is truth. The wise virgins knew they needed to make sacrifices in order to live by the equality God requires. The foolish virgins thought they still had time to gather more information before they could buy that truth. (Proverbs 23:23) But while they were making up their minds, they ran out of time, whether through death, or Christ's return.

Being a person of fairness has to happen on this side of time. Once we're born into eternity, there's no changing what we are. If we're not walking with the Lord in this life, He won't be our Father in the next. He won't even know us. Many will say to Him on that day, "Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, and in your name do many mighty works?" And He will answer, "I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of injustice." (Matthew 7:21-23) We take excess so lightly in our culture. We even wear it as a badge of honor. Yet, scripture repeatedly warns us that if we have two coats when other people still have none, we're doing it wrong. (Luke 3:7-11, Proverbs 3:28) We're warned to not be like the man whose graineries were filled, who thought he was finally ready to relax, only to discover that his soul was required of him that night. (Luke 12:16-21) Our "American Dream" would have us strive for excess in this life, even though we can't take it with us into eternity. (Psalm 49:16-20, 1 Timothy 6:7) Our lives are not measured in the things we possess. Our lives are valued by the love we share and the souls we save. Daniel 12:3 says, "Those who turn many to righteousness will shine like the stars for ever and ever." (Matthew 13:41-43, Proverbs 11:30, James 5:20, 1 Peter 4:8)

God deserves our trust. It's a lack of faith that causes us to hang onto those excesses we believe are necessary. The Holy Spirit could use what we let go in order to show love to a person in need. Any excess is a misused stewardship or a counterfeit for God's best in our lives. Excess is never a reward from God. Let's be good stewards with the time we still have, and be the light of the world God calls us to be. (Matthew 5:14, Isaiah 58:6-8) Although our peers may not agree with how we live, those we love by meeting their pressing needs will see the value of doing what the Lord told us to do. (Luke 17:10, Job 29:11-13, John 15:4-5, Titus 3:14, James 1:27)

The Talents, part 1

"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man comes. It's just like when a man goes into a far country. He called his servants, and gave them his goods. To each servant he gave according to their abilities. To one servant, he gave five talents, to another servant two, and to another servant one. Then he immediately went on his journey. The servant who had been given five talents went and traded with them, and earned another five talents. In the same way, the one who had been given two earned another two. But the servant who had been given one went and dug a hole in the ground, and hid his lord's money." (Matthew 25:13-18)

Because we don't know how long we have to prove ourselves worthy of God's investments, it's wise for us to stay on task. (Genesis 27:1-2, Luke 12:15-21) He's invested a lot in us, and He expects us to work with it. Maybe we've been given all five senses, or all ten fingers, or a spiritual gift of some sort. 1 Corinthians 12:8-11 tells us, "One is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom, another is given the word of knowledge by the same Spirit. Others are given faith, the gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues, and the ability to interpret tongues. But in all of these gifts, the same Spirit works, giving to every man different gifts as he will."

When we consider that everything we have and all we are is from God, we realize He's supporting us. (John 1:3, Psalm 50:10) We're expected to be doing His business with His talents. If eat our Master's food, live in His house, breathe His air, and then fail to do the job we're being paid to do, how can we imagine this is going to go over well? Yet this is what the servant with one talent did. He'd already been given the easiest job. He only had one talent to invest. His approach didn't work out for him, and it won't work out for us either.

We bury our talents in the earth when we only use them to make money, get attention, and indulge ourselves and our loved ones with worldly excesses. God wants us to invest our talents the way Job did. He was eyes to the blind, feet to the lame, and a father to the fatherless. (Job 29:15-16) That's an important part of what we're called to do. (Luke 10:36-37) We also build the kingdom of God when we fill ourselves and each other with God's word.

Mark 16:15-18 says, "Go into all the world, and preach the good news (of salvation through repentance and the blood of Christ) to every person. He who believes and is cleansed by his belief shall be saved; but he that does not believe shall be damned. And these signs will follow those who believe; In my name they will cast out devils, speak new languages, and take up serpents. If they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

We prove we are worthy of Jesus' sacrifice when our time is spent being profitable to our Master. (Psalm 49, Matthew 24:42-51) Let's not waste another minute!

The Talents, part 2

"After a long time, the lord of the servants came back, and determined how profitable they were. The one who was given five talents came, and brought the other five talents, saying, 'Lord, you gave me five talents, and look, I've gained another five talents.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful while in charge of a few things, so I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He that had been given two talents came and said, 'Lord, you gave me two talents, and look, I have gained another two talents.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful while in charge of a few things, so I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

"Then the servant who had been given one talent came, and he said, 'Lord, I knew you, that you are a hard man - you reap where you did not sow, and gather where you have not scattered. I was afraid because of this, and went and hid your talent in the earth. Look, you have what is yours.' His lord answered him, 'Wicked and lazy servant! You knew that I reap where I didn't sow, and gather where I have not scattered. You should have given my money to the exchangers, and then when I came I could have been given what was mine plus the interest. Take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. But from him who has not, even what he thinks he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" (Matthew 25:19-30)

Jesus shows us that it's not about how much we can do, but how much we can do with what we're given. Our gifts and opportunities are an investment from God. The last servant didn't even qualify for his own excuse. He'd been invested in. He seemed to think not working for God at all was safer than using what God had given him for God's glory or God's children. (Job 31:17-22, Micah 3:11-12) I've heard people say they think it's better not to learn the Bible because you can't be held responsible for what you don't know. But that's only for people who can't hear and can't read. If you have the ability to read, or hear the Bible, you already have a talent that you can use to build the kingdom within yourself and in your world today. (Colossians 3:23-24, Proverbs 20:11)

Our Father in heaven,

Your authority is over all. We thank you for trusting us with the talents you've invested in us. Please help us to remember that we work for You, and that these talents are for Your glory. Show us where to invest our talents for the benefit of your kingdom. Give us the wisdom and opportunity to be a blessing to You and to others. Show us how to use our gifts and opportunities to love and meet the pressing needs of those you bring into our lives.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Ten Pounds, part 1

"A nobleman went into a far country to receive a kingdom for himself, and return. He called his ten servants, and gave them ten pounds, saying to them, 'Trade with these until I come.' But his citizens hated him, and sent an embassy to him, saying, 'We do not want this man reigning over us.' After the man had received the kingdom, he returned, and commanded the servants he trusted with his money to be called to him, so he could learn how much they had gained by trading.

"The first servant came and said, 'Lord, your pound has gained ten pounds.' And the nobleman said to him, 'Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful with a very little, have authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Lord, your pound has gained five pounds.' And similarly the nobleman said to him, 'You be over five cities.'" (Luke 19:12-19)

We're given one life on earth to invest in each other. (Hebrews 9:27, Ecclesiastes 12:5, Job 7:9) When we follow the example of our helpful higher power, we meet the needs of those who can't meet their own needs. This gives them a reason to be thankful; to admire the power of love, to trust it, and want to emulate it in their own lives. Thankfulness is the remedy for the spiritual ills we face today.

We all get our share of good and bad in life. How we deal with it proves what we believe. (Luke 16:25, Job 21:13, Jeremiah 25:34) Using what God has given us to meet others' pressing needs, can win them to the kingdom. (James 5:19-20, Ruth 1:16-17) This helps us understand the servants' reward of ruling over cities. If we cared for others in this life, we're trusted to continue caring for others in the next. If we live as our brother's keeper now, we're competent to ensure everyone's needs are met in the millennial reign. (Luke 16:10-12, Jeremiah 22:15-16, Isaiah 58:3-14) Not everyone gets a fair share of good in this life. The Bible tells us that God will make sure things are fair when we enter eternity. (Luke 16:25, Proverbs 19:17) By living sacrificially today, we leave room for our Father to reward us in the end.

People who don't acknowledge their Creator's kindness and sacrifice, don't appreciate making sacrifices for the weak. They want to use their strength to make sure they always get what they feel they deserve. (Luke 6:24-25) If everyone thought like that, babies would all starve to death, and parents would get a great night's sleep! That's a world where people end up extinct! Moral sensibility and equality for the weak is how the human race becomes strong and eternal. But we can look around at our culture and see that God is hated, especially the name of Jesus. Why? Because He tells us we must sacrifice our desires for what mankind requires. (Matthew 16:24-27)

Our Father in heaven, we acknowledge You as our helpful higher power. We thank You for coming to us in our low estate and teaching us to love as You love. Please make us worthy of the love You've shown us through Your Holy Child, Jesus the Messiah. If not for His sacrifice, we would still be wretched and blind. We praise You, Father, for drawing us to Yourself through the Cross of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Ten Pounds, part 2

"Another servant came, saying, 'Lord, look, here is your pound, which I have kept aside in a handkerchief. I feared you, because you are a rough man - you take up what you didn't lay down, and you reap what you didn't sow.' And the nobleman said to him, 'Out of your own mouth I will judge you, wicked servant. You knew I was a rough man, taking up what I didn't lay down, and reaping what I didn't sow. So why didn't you put my money in the bank? When I came back I could have had my money with interest.' And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the pound from him, and give it to him who has ten pounds.' (They interjected, 'Lord, he has ten pounds!') 'For I say to you, everyone who has [been faithful with what he's given] will be given more, and anyone who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. And those who are my enemies, who did not wish for me to reign over them, bring them here, and kill them before me.'" (Luke 19:20-27)

What God has given everyone is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for their sins. (John 3:16, Isaiah 53:5) Trusting His love gives us strength to keep His commands. Our thankfulness keeps us loving our neighbor. Our temptations are easier to bear because we trust they will work out for our best in the end. (Romans 8:28, Proverbs 3:11-12)

The servant who did nothing with his talent kept his thankfulness for Jesus' sacrifice in his heart, but failed to share it. I've talked with people who don't share their faith, even with their own family. They say they don't want to be their child's only moral compass, or they don't want to shove religion down their kids' throats. But really, they're not investing in eternal things. Their kids are living like everybody else in the world - without hope, purpose, or even a church where someone else might invest in them. They don't tithe so that someone could be blessed by them, and use that blessing to lead someone else to trust in the power of God's love. 1 Timothy 5:8 warns us, "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." (Proverbs 27:8) Just because we don't rebel against the Ten Commandments ourselves, doesn't mean we won't be held accountable for not teaching them to our children. If we don't point our kids to God, we've either set ourselves on His throne in their lives, or left it empty; ripe to be hijacked by our culture. (Exodus 20:3, 1 John 5:21)

Those who don't want God reigning over them are those who reject the Ten Commandments. "You adulterers and adulteresses, don't you realize friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God?" (James 4:4) Our lack of self-control has given us abortion, disease, single-parent families, and children who feel unwanted. Our culture abuses the holy thing meant to bond married people, and turned it into a sport. Sins that harm and mislead children are the greatest sins in God's eyes. Jesus says, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matthew 18:6) Exodus 20:5 tells us that God will avenge the sins that the fathers (teachers) have committed against the children (students), examining those sins as far as three or four generations later. (Ezekiel 18)

The Lost Sheep

"Then the publicans and sinners drew near to Jesus to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners, and eats with them.' And He spoke this parable to them, saying:

"If any of you had a hundred sheep, and lost one of them, would he not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness, and go after the lost one until he found it? And when he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me! For I have found my sheep which was lost.' I say to you, that in the same way there will be joy in heaven over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety nine just persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:1-7)

The religious leaders of Jesus' day didn't like His choice of company. Jesus' response at one point is to tell them, "It's not the healthy that need a healer, it's those who are sick. I didn't come to call those who are right with God, I came to call back to God's path the people who see their ways are harmful." (Luke 5:31-32) In Luke 15, Jesus defends Himself with three parables, describing three types of sinners and how they can come back to God.

The first is the lost sheep. This is the person who, without malice, has drifted away from God. The last verse of Psalm 119 reads, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments." Lost sheep are people who have been distracted by physical needs and worldly worries. Their sins are not rebellious, they're accidental. Worries, anxiousness, faithlessness, fear of man, excessive time with business, and not enough time with the Lord are all examples. (Matthew 6:25-34, Psalm 118:5-6) We end up just like a sheep who is busy getting his belly full and forgets to see which way the shepherd's going. If you find yourself in this condition, you can call out to the Lord, and He will come get you. "He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the day when Israel provoked and tested God in the wilderness." (Psalm 95:7-8)

The Lost Coin

"And if a woman has ten pieces of silver, and loses one piece, will she not light a candle, and sweep the house, and look for it carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls her friends and her neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me! For I have found the coin which I lost.' In the same way, I tell you that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:8-10)

The second type of person Jesus came to call back to God's path is compared to a lost coin. This person has lost a sense of his value to the kingdom. He's lost in the filth of the world. His gifts are no longer available to meet the needs of those he should be connected with. This is the state David was in when he wrote Psalm 51, which starts by saying, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness. According to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my law-breaking. Wash me thoroughly from my unfairness, and cleanse me from my sin."

The woman in the parable represents the Church. She will have a harder time fulfilling her purpose without the one who is lost. (Genesis 2:18) The candle she lights is the Word of God. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." The broom she sweeps with is the Holy Spirit, who alone can remove the filth, the lies, and the blindness of the world that has hidden the lost coin's value. Psalm 51:10-11 reads, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me." James 5:20 says, "He who turns a sinner from the error of his way saves a soul from death and covers a multitude of sins." Instead of sitting in the seat of the scornful when a fellow Christian falls into temptation, it's important that we "stay prepared for action and keep our light burning", and go out and bring them back. (Luke 12:35, Psalm 1:1) Let's show them their value, and get them plugged back in again, where they can experience the joy of being reunited with the Body of Christ. We can give heaven a reason to rejoice.

Our Father in heaven, Your authority is over all authority. We come before You today, to humbly ask that You would remind us of our value in the kingdom, so that we can stay on Your good path, and not get lost in the filth of the world. Lord, if there's someone who needs us to show them their value, please lead us to them, and give us words of comfort and reassurance that you will welcome them back with open arms. Your word says, "All who the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me, I will in no way reject." (John 6:37) Thank You, Father, in Jesus name. Amen.

The Prodigal Son, part 1

"A certain man had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me what I'm supposed to inherit when you pass away.' And the father divided to them his living. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together, and journeyed into a far country, and wasted what he had with partying." (Luke 15:11-13)

The last parable Jesus uses to describe a sinner is the rebel. This parable has been explained many times from the perspective of the overt rebel who the parable describes literally, and that explanation still certainly applies. But the parable also applies to the covert rebel that Jesus is talking to face-to-face in Luke 15. Jesus explains to the Pharisees why they alone are responsible for coming back to their senses and walking with God again. Many of them have taken the form of the younger brother, who's inheritance is a place of honor over their nation, and the ability to enforce God's laws. (Matthew 23:2-12) Their far country is the world. They wasted their inheritance by replacing God's commands with men's traditions, making themselves wealthy and well-fed with the sacrifices of others. (Mark 7:6-13, Matthew 23:13-33) They've lived under a spirit of harlotry by forsaking God and loving money. (Luke 11:42-54, Hosea 4:17-18)

In John 11:47-50, we see the Jewish authorities planning to kill Jesus. "Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council, and said, 'What will we do? This man does many miracles. If we leave him be while he does this, all will believe on him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. And one of them, named Caiaphas, who was the high priest that year, said to them 'You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is best for us that one man should die for the people, so the Jews are not destroyed.'" They tried to avoid losing what they had by getting rid of their Messiah, only to lose everything in AD 70, when the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem. This is exactly what was prophesied in Micah 3:11-12, which says, "The heads of Zion judge in exchange for a reward, their priests teach for hire, and their prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord, and say, 'Is not the Lord among us? No evil can come upon us.' Therefore, for their sake, Zion will be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem will become heaps, and the mountain of the house will be as the high places of the forest." For the Jews, this was the mighty famine in the land described in this parable. (Luke 15:14, Luke 19:42-44) The only hope for the wasteful son is that he come to his senses. God is in the famine that works to stir up the rebel's hunger for righteousness. Matthew 5:6 tells us, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to be right with God, for they shall be filled."

Just as the lost son found no fulfillment in feeding pigs, we won't get the spiritual food we need from a church without the Holy Spirit. Our spiritual needs won't be met until we come into a community that's safe to bless, where our heavenly Father is the head of the house. When we realize we've squandered God's blessings, it requires humility and self-awareness to admit our foolish elitism that got us into trouble in the first place. We must renounce the spirit of entitlement that would keep us from being content with where we really belong. (Micah 6:8) If we can do those things, we can find our purpose again, and take back the joy of the Lord that's been missing in our lives. (Nehemiah 8:9-10)

The Prodigal Son, part 2

"Now the father's elder son was in the field, and as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants, and asked what was going on. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' The elder son became angry, and would not go inside. His father came then, and tried to reason with him. And he answering said to his father, 'Look! All these years I've served you. I never acted against your commandment, and yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But this son of yours, who devoured your living with harlots, you've killed the fatted calf for him as soon as he arrives!' The father replied, 'Son, you are always with me, and all I have is yours. It's right that we should make merry, and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost, and is found.'" (Luke 15:25-32, see also Ecclesiastes 3:1-4, Romans 12:15)

- The father is God. (Jeremiah 3:19, Matthew 6:9)
- The fatted calf who is killed, is Jesus our Messiah. (John 1:29, Isaiah 53:7)
- The eldest son is the faithful person, who questions God's choice to take back sinners. He is also the devout Jew who rejects the Messiah because he cannot agree with God's acceptance of the repentant. (Luke 7:36-39, Ezekiel 18:20-23)
- The field is the world. (Matthew 13:38, Proverbs 8:20-26)

Jesus said in Matthew 11:6, "Blessed is he who is not offended in Me." Those who stay true to God's laws may feel they deserve more favor than those who've strayed, and then returned. Instead of choosing envy and focusing on the past, we can choose to celebrate a life saved. The Bible shows us that being right with God makes us fit for the afterlife. Righteousness comes from either forgiveness or obedience. (Psalm 32:1-2, Romans 4:7-8) Willful selfishness keeps us in debt to God. (Deuteronomy 30:19, Mark 9:38-40, Matthew 25:31-46) 1 John 3:7 tells us, "Little children, let no man deceive you. He that does righteousness is righteous, just as God is righteous." Jesus agrees in Matthew 12:50, saying, "Those who do the will of my Father are my brother, and sister, and mother." In Matthew 7:21, He says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom. Only he who does the will of my Father in heaven." Our real problem is that our idea of "righteousness" is so far off! (Isaiah 55:9, 1 Corinthians 1:25) We are all in the world. We may have clean hands, but the field of the world gets our feet dirty. We all need forgiveness. (Matthew 5:26-28, Luke 7:47, John 13:4-10, Deuteronomy 18:15-19)

If there is envy in your heart toward a forgiven sinner today, stop and think on the times God has been patient with you. "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23, Psalm 143:2, Malachi 1:6-7) Yes, we may have suffered loss because of their sin, but our Father intends to make things right for us. (Joel 2:21-27, Proverbs 19:17, Luke 16:19-26) If we can love as God loves, we'll enjoy the feast He's called us to. (Matthew 22:1-8, 1 John 3:15) The whole kingdom belongs to us! Let's be thankful and not lose sight of the goodness of God. (Matthew 20:15, Deuteronomy 15:9-10) Jesus' words of comfort remind us, "Fear not, little flock! It's your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32, Jeremiah 3:19)

The Sea and the Net

"The kingdom of heaven is like a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, they drew it to shore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into vessels, but the bad fish, they cast away. So will it be at the end of the world. The angels will come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13:47-50)

The sea is the realm of men. (Isaiah 17:12-13, Revelation 17:15) The net is truth. The message of the kingdom of heaven draws us to become people of truth. All who acknowledge the truth are accepted and offered forgiveness. The full net is the fullness of our days on earth; the day of death. (Ecclesiastes 9:12) Those who obeyed truth, did helpful deeds in preparation for death. That day comes like a trap on the bad. (Proverbs 13:14, Matthew 24:42-43) Jesus explains in this parable that the end of the world is like death. Those who prepared themselves to be saved are given eternal bodies. (Jeremiah 17:10, Matthew 16:27, Revelation 22:11-12)

This parable helps us understand how important it is to lead our lives in a godly way after accepting Christ's sacrifice. Peter says, "Add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control patience, to patience godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity... He who doesn't have these is shortsighted, and has forgotten he was washed from his former sins." (2 Peter 1:5-9) It's our responsibility to choose life-sustaining behavior. (Deuteronomy 30:19) This keeps us connected to God. We can't choose to be wicked and expect Christ's sacrifice to continue absolving us. (Isaiah 59:1-2, John 15:10)

Our Creator made us alive, and He wants us to stay that way. The only way for this to work safely is if we live in a way that keeps everyone cared for. In Micah 6:8, the prophet quotes Balaam as saying, "The Lord has shown you what is good, and what He needs from you. Make things fair, love mercy, and walk with God humbly." God's word tells us what to do (make things fair), the life and teaching of Jesus Christ show us how to do it (mercifully), and the Holy Spirit living inside us makes it possible (allowing us to walk with God humbly). We need all three in order to live this way. (John 3:5, John 15:5-7, 1 John 5:6-8, Psalm 82:1-4, Deuteronomy 18:15-19, Isaiah 11:1-2)

To be considered worthy of eternal life, God requires a person to love Him enough to value their own well-being. He then directs us to love others in a way that values their well-being just as much. Leviticus 19:18 says, "Do not avenge yourselves, or bear a grudge against the children of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." (Mark 12:29-31, James 2:8) Paul tells us in Romans 14:17, "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." If our mode of life is purposefully harmful, we show ourselves incapable of love. (Jeremiah 18:9-17, Luke 19:27) Love is what makes eternal life worth living.

Laborers in the Vineyard, part 1

"The kingdom of heaven is like a homesteader who went out early in the morning to hire workers to tend his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the workers for a day's wage, he sent them into his vineyard. He went out about the third hour, (or 9:00 AM) and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard also, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why are you standing here all day doing nothing?' They say to him, 'Because no man has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go also into the vineyard, and whatever is right, you will receive.'" (Matthew 20:1-7)

Those of us who grew up with religious morals and values are those hired early in the morning. (Proverbs 20:11, Romans 11:24-26) We've always had the opportunity to learn and share our faith. We may not realize what a blessing and privilege we've been given. Proverbs 22:6 explains that a parent's mouth is always teaching their child's mouth and setting the course for the rest of their lives. (James 3:2-5) Ephesians 6:4 reads, "And, you fathers, don't provoke your children to rage, but bring them up with gentle correction and the teaching of the Lord." If you barely received good while raised in the faith, imagine how much worse off a person's upbringing could be without it. People who leave the faith don't often realize that their children's morality and sense of duty has no foundation to build on without thankfulness toward a helpful higher power. A parent's efforts may be misinterpreted for selfishness at best, and mocked as weakness at worst. Proverbs 30:17 says, "The eye that mocks at its father, and despises to obey its mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it." One of the many things this proverb shows us is that, if a person loses sight of all men being created equal, they may never regain it.

Those called early in the morning are contrasted with those called at the 11th hour, who are raised with the spirit of the world and only discover a purpose and calling on their life near the end of it. I appreciate the vineyard owner's question, "Why are you idle?" He ensures that the people he hires want to be working for the good of the kingdom. If we are praying for our Father to send laborers into His harvest, we can also prepare ourselves for the opportunity to be sent by reading and believing God's Word. (John 6:29) The most important job we have in the kingdom is producing good fruit ourselves. Proverbs 11:30 says, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise." (John 15:1-5, Proverbs 18:21) Once we are people with "good fruit," we will know how to help others overcome their idleness and harmful ways. Jesus says, "Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, yet cannot see the beam in your own? Hypocrite! Take the beam out of your eye and you will see clearly to remove the speck for your brother." (Luke 6:41-42, 2 Timothy 2:6) We can only effectively preach the truth and love we practice.

Laborers in the Vineyard, part 2

"So when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and give them their hire, beginning with the last hired, to the first.' And when those who were hired about the eleventh hour came forward, each one received a day's wage. But when it was time for the first ones to be paid, they assumed they would receive more, and they likewise received every man a day's wage. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, 'These last people only worked one hour, and you've made them equal to us, who bore the greater part of the burden and the heat of the day.'" (Matthew 20:8-12)

In the parable, those who "worked all day," were dissatisfied with equal pay. This is the evidence of their "evil eye," a spirit of entitlement. (Matthew 15:18. Proverbs 28:22) They represent people who've figured out how to see themselves as better than others. These people also enjoyed the fruit of the vineyard all the while that they worked in it. (Deuteronomy 23:24) This represents the community and support system people with a lifelong church have access to. The workers hired last lacked opportunity to keep themselves fully cared for. Without the vineyard owner's compassion, they would have had to shoulder that burden alone. (Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Joel 2:25, James 5:4) The laborers who complained were so blinded by their greed and envy they didn't realize that they had already been given more. Their lack of thankfulness blinded them to the extra opportunities and blessings they had benefited from. (Isaiah 5:7, 1 Timothy 6:10) As Proverbs 14:30 says, "A sound heart is the life of the flesh, but envy is rottenness in the bones."

The grumblers continued to "work" their Master with their discontented words when the time for working was over. Jesus tells us in John 9:4, "I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day. The night comes, when no man can work." Ultimately, the evening that comes to us all is the day of justice. (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, 2 Corinthians 5:10) What we must work on while we can, is our ability to love our neighbor as ourselves. (Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:29-31) There was nothing the grumblers could do to change their spirit now. No amount of complaining could make them worthy of the new Jerusalem. The only thing their complaining changed was their employer's desire to work with them any more.

The work of life is not paid by the hour. It's paid by completing the job. (Luke 17:7-10) We are not only here to gather others into the kingdom, we are to become the good fruit of God's harvest. (Isaiah 5:4, Romans 6:21-22) Matthew 9:35-38 says, "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest, that he will send out laborers into his harvest.'" God desires to work with people who share His compassion.

Laborers in the Vineyard, part 3

"But he answered one of them, and said, 'Friend, I have not wronged you. Didn't you agree with me to work for a day's wage? Take your share and go your way. I will give this last one what I've given to you. Isn't it lawful for me to do what I choose with my own?'" (Matthew 20:13-15)

I don't know about you, but the thing I do NOT want to hear our Lord say to me is, "Take what's yours and go away." The laborers who complained had a proud spirit. (Habakkuk 2:4-6) They didn't see the justice in everyone having their needs met. They valued their time with money, not saved souls. "Their end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things." (Philippians 3:19) It is shameful to do the Lord's work without sharing His love.

Proverbs 16:26 tells us, "He that labors works for himself; for his mouth demands it of him." But the person whose labor is love, doesn't experience labor as work. (Genesis 29:20) Jesus says in Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, all who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light." Our Lord's rest comes when we do His work with His Spirit of love and humility. (Micah 6:8) That's true whether we're sharing the good news of salvation, or a cup of cold water. (Matthew 10:42, 1 Corinthians 13:1-3) John 13:35 says, "By this all people will know you are My students, if you have love for one another."

Those who were chosen to receive a day's wage for an hour's work were shown that their new employer cared about their needs being met. They would be ready and willing to come back the next day. This is a picture of the forgiven. (Luke 7:39-47, Psalm 32:1-7) The next day is eternity. (Psalm 84:10-12) The man on the cross next to Jesus proved, with his dying words, that he believed in Him and understood God's love through Jesus' sacrifice and forgiveness. He asked to be part of the kingdom where Jesus would reign. His request was accepted with the words, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

Laborers in the Vineyard, part 4

"Are you envious because I am good?" So the last will be first, and the first last: for many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 20:15-16)

Jesus tells us why we should not think of ourselves more highly than others, when he says in Matthew 7:2, "You will be judged with the same judgment you judge with, and the measure which you give out will be given to you again." (Psalm 109:17) The complainers had earned a day's wage for a day's work, but their judgmental words proved the entitlement in their heart. (Matthew 12:37, Luke 6:45, Proverbs 18:21) Entitlement has no place in the Kingdom of God. The vineyard owner saw that they weren't willing to work in unity when they complained against the fatherly way He treated all His workers. Their scorn of the vineyard owner's compassion proved that they did not understand their Master or the community He was trying to build. He desired mercy more than sacrifice. (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 12:7) If they had questioned him, instead of judging and complaining against him, they would not have been rejected. Luke 7:20-23 relays the time some men came to Jesus and said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, Are You the coming One? or should we look for someone else?" And in that same hour Jesus cured many of their maladies and diseases, and evil spirits; and many that were blind He gave sight. Then Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard, how the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news of salvation preached to them. And blessed is he, who is not offended by Me.'" John was in prison for doing God's work God's way. He didn't expect to get out. Asking hard questions helps us when we're tempted to feel that God is being unfair. (Proverbs 2:3-5)

The vineyard owner joyfully ensured that everyone who worked for him had their needs met. The Lord loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7, Exodus 25:2) If we make ourselves out to be better than others, or if we belittle people while meeting their needs, we misrepresent God to the world. Moses made this mistake, recorded in Numbers 20:7-12. He shamed the people, calling them rebels, and then intimidated them, striking the rock with his rod, when he was told only to speak to it and receive water for the people. If even our beloved Moses could fail at this, we're wise to hold on to the Holy Spirit for dear life. Jesus warns us in Matthew 5:20, "Unless your righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no case enter the kingdom of heaven." (Leviticus 19:2) Jesus showed us how to faithfully work for God and our fellow man. He held to love and patience until the very end. Jesus teaches us in Luke 8:15, that those with an honest and good heart, can hear the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience. (Galatians 5:22-23) John 15:5 quotes Jesus as saying, "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that lives in Me, and I in him, the same produces much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing." (Isaiah 27:5) The reason we can do nothing without Him is because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8, Proverbs 10:12)

Specks and Beams

"Judge not, so that you are not judged. For with the judgment you judge, you will be judged, and what you measure to others will be measured to you again. Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but not consider the beam in your own eye? How will you say to your brother, 'Let me pull that speck out of your eye,' when, look! a beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first get the beam out of your own eye. Then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5)

Judgment and recognition are two different things. When I recognize that something is harmful, I should want to help. If I look at my brother's flawed logic and start preaching my own, or if I decide he is too far gone for truth, I will only bring pain. Job's "friends" were an example of this. They didn't provide healing or comfort, which is our calling. (Job 16:2, Isaiah 50:4) They only directed, reprimanded and judged. Truth without love is like justice without mercy. Pointing the way to the tree of life isn't the same as pulling some fruit down for a fallen brother.

I didn't understand this parable until I realized that the things people did to me that annoyed me most, were things I was doing to God. Because of the worldly pollutions involved in what others did, I thought I had the high ground. I was sure the law of God backed me up when I was morally repulsed by them. When the parables started coming to life for me, I could then see how my spouse's diversions and neglect paralleled my time with YouTube instead of with God's word. (Psalm 50:21) Now if the speck in someone's eye is troubling me, I try to figure out how I'm guilty of the same thing in my relationship with God. (Matthew 5:6, James 4:8, Deuteronomy 18:13) I'm not saying abuse or neglect are simply a speck in one's eye. I'm saying, any amount of suffering we go through is there to show us God's will.

If we've resorted to condemning someone because of our suffering, it's time to repent of that judgmental spirit and then look for similarities in how we speak to, blame, or ignore God. That's where change is needed. Next, we need to look at the relationships between us and our fellow man, especially those under our authority. That's the second most likely place we're behaving in the same way. Finally, we have to work with our heavenly Father to remedy our unfriendly behavior. This is the beam in our eye. Once we have it cleared out, we'll have perspective and, hopefully, some empathy toward the one who is offending us.

Without empathy, we won't have compassion. If we're still judging ourselves at the end of this road, we're still unfit for helping someone else. If the speck in our brother's eye is going to be helped by us at all, it's going to have to be humbly and carefully approached. (Matthew 18:15, Galatians 6:1, Psalm 51:17) Pointing out someone's flaws or false beliefs can never provide them the Holy Spirit's power to help. If we don't have successful experience, permission, humility, and compassion, we have no business sticking our fingers in our brother's eye. We need all four of these things to truly be our brother's keeper.

The Good Samaritan, part 1

"And I saw a certain lawyer stand up, and testing Jesus, he said, 'Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus asked him, 'What is written in the law? How do you read it?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.' Jesus said unto him, 'You've answered right. Do this, and you will live.' But he, willing to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' And Jesus answering said, 'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, which stripped his clothes from him, beat him and left him between life and death.'" (Luke 10:25-30)

In Hebrew, the name Jerusalem is symbolic for "whole teaching." Jericho means "fragrant." Our clothes are what we do to cover our shame. When we leave the high road of truth for something pleasurable, we take a dangerous road. We've all been there. Maybe it was unintentional - we listened to bad advice, or followed someone we thought we could trust. Maybe we just weren't paying attention, or maybe, like King David, we thought we had the power to make things turn out the way we wanted, but we were wrong. The robbers that come into our lives are those negative consequences we didn't plan on while off God's path. These may rob our faithfulness, hope, and love. They can steal the joy and peace God wants for our lives. (Isaiah 42:21-24, Daniel 11:33-35) Our robbers may come from the outside, such as false friends, false teachers, or false prophets/advisors. Our robbers may come from within ourselves. We may be dealing with faulty logic, stressful circumstances, foolish or harmful self-talk, habitual sins, or addictions. We're all at risk of becoming distracted from the truths that support life and make it worth living.

The Bible shares many ways to defend against robbers in our spiritual life. One of the best ways is to remember to be thankful to God for what He has given us, and praise Him for it. (Psalm 50, Psalm 69, Psalm 107:20-22, Ephesians 5:19-21). We can also continually feed on the good news of God's love, keeping His promises and commandments alive in our hearts. (Psalm 36:5-10, Psalm 91:4, John 1:1, John 6:33-37, Proverbs 6:20-22) Once we have God's word in us, we can seek ways to apply His logic to our situations through meditation on His word and prayer. (Psalm 119:9-16, John 15:7, James 1:5, Ephesians 6:14-17, Romans 12:1, John 4:25-26, Matthew 16:16-17) Keeping only godly people in our inner circle is also vital, so that we have encouragement to stay on the path and don't have peer pressure dragging us off the path. (Proverbs 13:20, Proverbs 14:7, Proverbs 22:24-25, Psalm 36:1-4, 1 Thessalonians 5:25-26)

Our Father in heaven, we're so thankful that Your authority is over all authority. We come before You today, broken and in need of Your healing touch in our lives. Lord, You know what it's like to have the world crucify you. I pray that the strength You gave Jesus to endure the cross would come mightily upon us now, through the power of Your Holy Spirit. I pray we would find our purpose through these trials, and that we would not ever be complacent about working for you again. I pray that this fire that's burning off our impurities would light our path, and give us new fire within ourselves to serve Your kingdom. Please raise us up from this miserable place, where we've been left for dead by our spiritual robbers. Give us new life, as we find Your will and fulfill it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Good Samaritan, part 2

"And by chance, there came down a certain priest that way, and when he saw the robbed man, he passed by on the other side. And in the same way, a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him. And he went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him." (Luke 10:31-34)

Sadly for the Jew in this story, he wasn't able to fend off the robbers. He was exposed, he was wounded, and he couldn't help himself. He needed someone with compassion, opportunity, and resources to get him to safety and help him be healed. When even two of his own brothers in the faith didn't feel he was worth their investment, he needed a miracle. The third person to see the man in his abject state was a Samaritan, someone that Jew would not have even eaten a meal with, even though they had the same values. (John 4:9) The Samaritan, knowing this, still used what he had to save this man, because he had compassion.

It's so much easier to abstain from excess if we remember that it takes preparation and good management of our time and resources to be someone else's miracle. Being a good Samaritan isn't an event, it's a lifestyle. This man had enough time, enough money, his first-century first-aid kit, and his animal available to help. He was like the tree planted by the waters in Jeremiah 17:7-8, who didn't care that he was in the middle of a desolate and dangerous wilderness. He was fully prepared to take care of himself and others whether it was convenient or not (2 Timothy 4:2), and he still produced fruit for his fellow man in his time of need. He saw his opportunity to do what we're put here to do. It didn't matter to him that this man might not have done the same in return.

Jesus told us that His will is for us to love God, and love our neighbor as ourselves. (Matthew 22:36-40, Leviticus 19:18) He also said, "The servant who knew what his Lord expected from him and did not prepare, or do it, will be beaten severely." (Luke 12:47) The most important resource for us to prepare ourselves with is compassion. Without it, all the goods in the world still have no benefit to the person who needs them most. If the Jew who fell among robbers had been helped by a hater, the lack of kindness that accompanied the help would only bring more pain to him and to God. (Proverbs 17:22, 2 Corinthians 9:7) When we guard our hearts, so our love for others doesn't grow cold, we are equipped to be the hands and feet of God. (Matthew 24:12-13, Proverbs 4:23, Exodus 25:2)

The Good Samaritan, part 3

"And he went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine. And he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he left, he took two days' wage, and gave them to the innkeeper, saying to him, 'Take care of him, and whatever you spend more, I will repay you when I come back.'" (Luke 10:34-35)

The good Samaritan was a miracle for the Jew who had been left for dead. This reminded me of how the book of Revelation seems to refer to the messengers over the churches as "angels." It also reminded me of Hebrews 13:2, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." This made me think of the innkeeper, who was paid to take over for the Samaritan while he finished his business abroad. The innkeeper was asked to break away from his business in order to do what the Samaritan had taken upon himself freely.

I couldn't help but think that this Samaritan is a type of Christ, and the innkeeper is like us when we are given the opportunity to help someone in need. "He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and what he gives to Him, He will repay him again." (Proverbs 19:17) The Samaritan said to the innkeeper after giving him two days' wage, "If it costs you anything more to care for him, I will repay you when I return." That's what Jesus says to us. "Whatever you've done for the least of these, you've done for Me." (Matthew 25:40)

Jesus was born in a stable for animals because an innkeeper had no room for His family at his inn. The innkeeper in Jesus' circumstance was offered the opportunity to do good, but neglected it, due to the complications the world had thrown at him at the time. (Luke 2:7) We have to choose which innkeeper we'll be. If we, like Cain, have to ask if we are our brother's keeper, we've already murdered him in our hearts. Since Jesus paid the price for all our sins, we can trust Him to take care of us when we expend ourselves like the good Samaritan. Whatever it costs us to make things fair will be repaid to us when He returns. "Let him who has two coats give to him who has none, and let him who has provision do likewise." (Luke 3:11)

Made in God's Image

"Hoping to catch Jesus in His own logic, they asked a question, saying, 'Master, we know that you say and teach what is right. You don't reinterpret the law for anyone out of favoritism, but you teach the way of God truly. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?' But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, 'Why do you test Me? Show me a denarius. Whose image and name is on it?' They answered, 'Caesar's.' And he said to them, 'Then, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and give to God the things that are God's.'" (Luke 20:21-25)

Long before Jesus died for the sins of all mankind, the Jews recognized that they were a people purchased by God. They had been ransomed from Egypt by God's investment of time and resources; the plagues and miracles that took them from the house of slavery into the promised land. Jesus explains here that we who are created in God's image have always belonged to Him, and we're robbing Him when we fail to behave as His children. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Jesus knew the taxes of His day to be unfair, and yet, because they are required by government, He said they must be paid in order to avoid offense. (Matthew 17:24-27) Jesus also confirms the Old Testament teaching that human authority is ordained by God, and obeying it (whether it's fair or unfair) is part of our training on earth. (Proverbs 14:35, Proverbs 24:21-22) Only when it comes to matters that conflict with what God requires of us are we ever to disobey government. Peter tells the authorities over him in Acts 4:19-20, "Whether it be right to listen to you or to God, you be the judge. We cannot stop telling others what we've seen and heard."

If we're going to inherit eternity, we need to remain in God's household and behave like God's children. Romans 10:21 quotes our heavenly Father, saying, "I have spread out My hands all the day to a rebellious people who walk in a way that is not good, after their own thoughts." (Isaiah 65:2) Our Father stretches out His hand to provide for us, giving us the ability to have food, clothes, shelter, and even the air we breathe. How painful it must be for God to have us deny Him even the smallest things! But it hurts Him even more to have us do small things for show only to neglect the greater matters of God's law; fairness, mercy, and faith. (Matthew 23:23)

When I look in the mirror, I don't want to see how well I fit in with the world. I want to see the image of Jesus. The only way to do that is through obedience to God's word. God is a Spirit, and if my spirit doesn't line up with His, I'm not His child. (Romans 8:9, Joshua 24:15-18) The spirit we conceive determines whose child we are. I can be hijacked by the spirit of my workplace, or my favorite music, or my favorite video game or sport. But friendship with the world makes us enemies of God. (James 4:4, Romans 12:1-2) Peter says, "Don't let it be your outward appearance that makes you 'beautiful.' Let it be the hidden person of the heart, a meek and peaceful spirit, which is of great value in the eyes of God." (1 Peter 3:3-4)

The Wedding Feast, part 1

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king, who made a marriage for his son. He sent out his servants to call them who were invited, and they would not come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those invited, 'Look, I've prepared my dinner. The best of my cattle are already killed, and everything's ready. Come to the wedding.' But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his business. The rest took his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. When the king heard this, he was furious. He sent out his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city." (Matthew 22:2-7)

This parable hearkens back to the giving of the Ten Commandments. All the people of Israel came to Mount Sinai to enact a marriage covenant with God. When they saw God and were terrified, they asked Moses to speak with them in God's stead. Moses prophesied that God would send them a man like him, and that they must listen to Him. (Deuteronomy 18:15-19) Peter shows us how this prophecy was interpreted by the Jews of his day when he calls Jesus "the Son of God." (Matthew 16:15-16) It's a common Jewish belief that the Jews became married to God at the giving of the Ten Commandments. They accepted the covenant and its rules then, but God says they broke that covenant, although He was a husband to them. (Jeremiah 31:32) Friendship with the world had become more important to them than uniting with God. (James 4:4)

In Deuteronomy 8:10-20, the people were warned not to forget that they had been slaves in Egypt, so they wouldn't become proud and self-serving. We still are wise to be mindful of our weakness, and thankful for God's strength. The people of Jesus' day, however, had forgotten their need for God. When Jesus offered them freedom from slavery to sin, they misunderstood and replied, "We are Abraham's offspring, and were never slaves to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free?'" (John 8:31-33)

Making time for communion, and gratefully remembering what our Lord has done for us, is so important. He's inviting us to be part of His family, and come under His protection. If we don't acknowledge His value, the requirements of the wedding contract seem restrictive, rather than helpful. If we're only looking out for ourselves and our ability to pursue pleasure, then things like the Sabbath and honoring our parents with support seem burdensome. What could be so important at a business that would cause a person to ignore any of the Ten Commandments? You might decide to put your business first, work on the seventh day, leave your parents to fend for themselves, or covet. No wonder the guy with the business didn't show up. In America, all this is perfectly normal! This bothers me. I hope it bothers you as much.

John the Baptist and Jesus our Messiah were given to us, to call us back to God. They were both killed for it. God sent an army led by the Roman general Titus, slew those murderers, and burned up their city in AD 70. May we learn from history, and pray that we may be delivered from the wicked, who is God's sword. (Psalm 17:13-15, Luke 21:36)

The Wedding Feast, part 2

"Then the king said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go into the highways, and whoever you find, invite to the wedding.' So the servants went out and gathered together everyone they found, both bad and good. And the wedding was filled with guests.

"When the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man who was not wearing a wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:8-14)

For God to prepare such a great sacrifice for only a few guests, it was a travesty! So, He invited anyone who would forsake their harmful, idle, and unfair behavior and just show up. This is what happened when God sent His Son to cover the sins of the whole world. Deuteronomy 32:21 says "I will make (my people) jealous with a no-people, and will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation." That foolish nation is us gentiles. Jesus explains why Christianity looks like a mix of good and bad. Anyone willing to accept His sacrifice and forsake wilful sin is welcome in. (Luke 16:16, Matthew 25:1-2) We're all given the wedding garment our Messiah bought for us on the Cross, just as God gave Adam and Eve clothes of animal skin to cover their shame; and just as God provided Abraham a ram in place of Isaac. (Genesis 3:21, Genesis 22:7-13) Our job is to accept our "robe of righteousness," put it on, and keep it clean. (Job 29:14, Revelation 3:18, Revelation 16:15) We do this by remembering the Cross and taking up our own. We prove our belief in His forgiveness by showing thankfulness. Our love and forgiveness are evidence of our thankfulness for Jesus' sacrifice. (Luke 7:47, John 13:14-15)

The man who came in without a wedding garment represents the person who thinks his shame doesn't need to be covered and doesn't change his actions. Peter says, "Add to your faith virtue... and he who does not do so has forgotten that he was washed from his ****former**** sins." (2 Peter 1:5-9) Even if you're covered by the sacrifice of Christ, if you just go out and get your new garment filthy, you'll still be unfit for the wedding. (Zechariah 3:1-4, Isaiah 64:6) 2 Peter 2:20-22 warns us, "If someone has escaped the world's pollutions through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and then is entangled in and overcome by those pollutions again, their end is worse than the beginning. For it would have been better for them to have not known the way of righteousness, than to have known it, and then turn from the holy commandment they were given. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'The dog has returned to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to wallowing in the mire.'" (Proverbs 26:11)

Jesus tells us in Luke 12:35, "Stay dressed for action and keep your lights burning," The way we stay dressed and illuminated, is to daily wash in God's word and live by it. That way the righteousness God gave us still looks like righteousness when we show up in heaven. Keeping our wedding garment requires us to live by a spirit of unity and equality with our fellow man. (John 17:21-24, Isaiah 58:6-8) When our heavenly Father says, "love your neighbor as yourself," He really means it!

Salt

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt has lost its savor, what will you season it with? It is from then on good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be walked on by men." (Matthew 5:13)

Salt has a lot of significance in the Bible as a necessary part of every offering, and a preservative for food. (Leviticus 2:13), Where refrigeration doesn't exist, food is salted while it's fresh so that it will be safe and nourishing during the seasons meat is not harvested. In a similar way, if our spirit is salted with grace (free favor) toward others, then even when we're too stressed or sickly to naturally produce good words for our neighbor, we still preserve the relationship and support it. (Colossians 4:6) God's word is this salt. It comes into us and provides us a recharge for our spiritual batteries. His grace flowing into us provides us something to give our neighbor. However, if we use God's word in an unloving way, we have not shown discretion or grace. We've lost our savor. (Psalm 50:16-17)

In the same way, if we keep unhealthy relationships, what's flowing into us from them will not season us. It will just deplete us, and fill us with drama, toxicity, and negativity. That word "savor" in the parable is "taste," or "discretion." If we are not using our senses to discern good character, we will foolishly work to preserve unhealthy relationships. It's like salting rotten meat. (1 Kings 22:2-32, specifically verses 30 and 32) Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:16-18 that we can't expect to get good fruit from an evil tree, any more than we can expect to pull grapes off of a thorn bush. People who bear the spiritual equivalent of thorns and thistles generally isolate us from God's word and God's people. All your free favor toward a person of disturbed character is going to make you ineffective and walked all over.

If we're blaming God for what the "salt-stealers" bring into our lives, then our prayers, that should be like incense to God, will instead be like smoke in His nose. God is not responsible for what others do with their free will, nor is He responsible for what we do with our own. He's clearly told us, "bad company corrupts good morals." (Proverbs 13:20, 1 Corinthians 15:33) Our salt is a gift from God that's meant to be returned to Him. Our interactions with God should work to preserve that relationship. No matter how good we want to be perceived by our "friends," we can't keep working to make things OK with pigs and dogs. It's like putting pearls before swine - they will trample them and tear us to pieces. (Matthew 7:6)

James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men liberally, and does not scold, and it will be given to him." May God give us discernment regarding people's character, and may we have the good sense to use it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Two Sons

"But what do you think? A certain man had two sons. He came to the first, and said, 'Son, go work today in my vineyard.' The son answered, 'I will not.' But afterward, he repented, and went. And the man came to the second son, and said the same thing to him. And his son answered 'I go, sir.' But he did not go.

"Which of the two of them did his father's will?" They said to him, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you believed him not. But the tax collectors and the harlots believed him, and you, when you had seen it, did not repent and believe him.'" (Matthew 21:28-32)

The parable of the man with two sons is Jesus' way of reasoning with the men who were trying to have Him arrested and destroyed. They were so worried about keeping the worldly things Jesus is trying to free them from, that they can't see what's going on right in front of their faces, which is something of great spiritual importance to them.

Jesus explains that John's ministry was the fulfillment of prophecy, that he would prepare the people's hearts for the Messiah. (Malachi 4:5-6, Isaiah 40:3-5, Mark 1:1-5) John clearly said, "One comes after me who was before me. I'm not even worthy to unlatch his shoe. He will wash you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire." (John 1:15, Luke 3:16) John himself refers to Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) The Rabbis of his day knew very well that their "Messiah son of Joseph" would suffer and die for them as a sacrifice. This is referenced once in the Bible (John 11:47-53), and several times in the Babylonian Talmud.

Jesus knows these men are trying to get Him to say that He is the Messiah, so they can have Him executed for blasphemy. And yet He is still pleading with them to consider their souls. They can see the transformation in tax collectors and harlots, that they repented and are doing God's will, and He tries to encourage them to do the same. They are the son who agreed to do God's work, and now they're working for the devil. (Jeremiah 3:19-20) May we learn from our Messiah's example when our enemies want to see us destroyed for nothing more than being truth and light. May we remember their souls. It's far better to see someone repent, than to see them suffer the consequences of their sin. (Ezekiel 18:32)

The Hijacked Vineyard, part 1

"Hear another parable. There was a homesteader, who planted a vineyard, fenced it in, dug a winepress in it, built a tower, and then rented it out to vinedressers. He then went into a far country. And when the time was near for there to be fruit, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, so they could receive the fruit of the vineyard. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed another, and stoned another. The owner sent other servants, more than the first, and the vinedressers treated them the same way.

"But last of all, he sent to them his son, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir! Come, let us kill him, and let us take his inheritance.' And they caught him, cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him." (Matthew 21:33-39)

Jesus is describing God's many attempts to bring His people back into covenant with Him after they had been unfaithful. The first servants are the prophets they killed. (Luke 11:47-51, Jeremiah 26:20-23) He then prophesies that He also will be killed by them.

This parable is remarkable because it shows that the religious leaders know exactly what they're doing while they're plotting against the life of their Messiah. In John 3:1-2, a Pharisee named Nicodemus admits they know who He is, and later on in this parable, the religious leaders know they are the vinedressers who hijacked God's vineyard. This is the kind of blindness that sin causes in us humans. How could they know they were talking to the Messiah, and think they could escape the wrath of God that He prophesied?

John says, "He came to His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as did receive Him, to them He gave the power to be sons of God." (John 1:11-12) We are badly mistaken if we think we can reject Jesus' teaching, knowing exactly who He is, and still be in Him. (Isaiah 58:1-4) Jesus said, "Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, I will be ashamed of Him before My Father." (Mark 8:38) His plea for our forgiveness on the cross was, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing." (Luke 23:34) Judas and the religious leaders who rejected Jesus knew exactly what they were doing. If you today are in willful sin, you're despising the sacrifice God made for you. You're despising the Son of God. (Hebrews 6:4-8, Numbers 15:30-31) God gave us work to do, to bring people into the kingdom, to bring good fruit to our Master, love, joy, and peace (Galatians 5:22-26, Proverbs 11:20). If we're just living however we want, we've cast the Son out of His vineyard, our hearts, and we're not giving Him His fruit.

Don't fall for the lie that says, "Being good is just a fable, I just can't, 'cause I'm not able." If you can look at what Jesus did for you on the cross, and want to continue doing the things that required Him to die for you, you are not receiving that gift with thankfulness. (Psalm 50:16-23) 1 John 3:9 says, "Whoever is born of God does not commit sin, for His seed remains in him. He cannot sin, because he is born of God." We know too much to ignore it. Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily trips us up. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus to give us the strength to do it. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

The Hijacked Vineyard, part 2

"When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" They say to him, 'He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will rent out his vineyard to other vinedressers who will give him the fruits at the proper times.'

"Jesus says to them, 'Did you never read in the scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?' For this reason I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you, and given to a nation who will bring out the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken, but on whoever it falls, it will grind him to powder.'" (Matthew 21:40-44)

God wanted to share the joy of loving and being loved with His creation, which is why He gives us all strengths and weaknesses so we can care for one another. (Genesis 2:18-23) The vineyard needed vinedressers, so instead of being the only helpful higher power, God gave the duty to men who were trained to fulfill that need.

When we bring good into the world, it pleases God. When we only bring good to ourselves, we don't bring the fruits of kindness, gentleness, and self-control into the lives of others. The kingdom of God begins with our training in eternal things on earth. (Matthew 28:19-20, Proverbs 6:20-23) When we use our power to be helpful only to get what pleases us, we're like the vinedressers who thwart God's plan to bring us into eternity. (Matthew 23:13, Micah 2:11) It would be like loving the classroom so much that you forget you're not the teacher, and that you need to do the things necessary to graduate. Jesus' miracles and His message were their wake up call, but they didn't want to wake up.

This reminds me of a song I once heard, Newsboys "Lost the Plot." "I heard a rumor that the end is near, but I just got comfortable here." Jesus said, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses it for My sake will preserve it." If we're worried about what it's going to cost us to serve God, we've forgotten who owns us, and what it's going to cost us if we don't hand over what God created, bought, and paid for. (Malachi 3:8-9) Galatians 5:22-23 says that good fruits are love, joy, peace, patience... Doesn't that sound like a world we want to live in? Why would we deny God the joy of seeing us produce these things for ourselves, our children, and our fellow man? He wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He showed us how much He loves us by buying back His own creation from slavery to sin, by paying for every sin anyone could possibly commit. He suffered the worst kind of death penalty so you and I could look at each other and say, "What Jesus did is enough to satisfy justice, so that He could see us produce mercy for each other when we fail." He deserves that much from us. (Isaiah 53:4-12, John 13:34-35)

The Two Debtors

"There was a certain creditor which had two debtors. One of them owed five hundred days' wage, the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay the debt, the creditor freely forgave both of them. Tell Me therefore, which of them will love him most?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one who he forgave most.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged correctly.'

"And he turned to the woman, and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered into your house. You gave Me no water for my feet. But she has washed them with tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not stopped kissing my feet since she came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But whoever is forgiven little, the same loves little.'" (Luke 7:41-47)

This parable explains why God opted to take the risk of giving mankind a free will. At least twice in the Bible, He's deeply regretted this (Genesis 6:5-8, Jeremiah 32:35), and several times the Bible mentions that God will only be patient with bad behavior for so long. Here He explains to Simon two important things. Firstly, understanding the level of God's mercy is what finally brings us to produce the fruit of love. We understand His mercy through forgiveness. The word says, it's His kindness that leads us to repentance. (Romans 2:4)

The other important thing is that, our works prove that we've turned from our bad behavior. You can't be forgiven for something you're still doing. When we're still doing evil, the Bible calls this "causing our sins to be remembered." (Ezekiel 21:24) If I don't want my sins put back together in God's mind after He's forgiven them, I have to stop doing them. What our lives are producing is evidence of what we are. The love we show is evidence of how much we are forgiven. Paul says in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." The Old Testament agrees, saying "For there is not a man who does good, and never sins." (Ecclesiastes 7:20, 1 Kings 8:46-52)

I've seen this in nature, where you rescue an animal's life, and it becomes the most loyal, loving pet you will ever have. When we're stuck in sin and can't get out, and the Lord comes along and frees us from the mud pit we've dug ourselves into, it produces fantastic love. Simon the Pharisee is not just being shown why he should stop judging the woman who he had known previously as a sinner. Jesus is also telling him why he should stop judging God for forgiving sinners. Simon could probably use a good dose of the healing power that brought Mary of Bethany to repentance.

If you feel today like your love is growing cold, thankfulness and communion can bring you back faster than anything I know of. It's forgetfulness of what God has done and continues to do for us that causes us to fail to love Him and one another. (Romans 1:21, Deuteronomy 8:10-18) Thankfulness and communion are exercises that strengthen the memory. If we use our mouths to share the truth of what God has done for us, we'll re-energize our heart and start bringing the power of the Holy Spirit into our lives, our relationships, and our direction.

Dressed for Action

"Stay dressed for action and keep your lights burning. Be like men that wait for their lord to come back from the wedding, so that when he comes and knocks, they may open for him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the lord finds watching when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will prepare himself, and make them to sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. And if he comes in the second watch, or in the third watch, and finds them so, blessed are those servants." (Luke 12:35-38)

What I'm understanding from this is, when your garment is loose, you're ready for relaxing. But when you put a belt on a first-century garment, you're ready for work. Paul tells us that truth is the belt that keeps us ready to do God's work. (Ephesians 6:14) When Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit, he calls Him the Holy Spirit of Truth. (John 14:16-17, John 14:26) Jesus told Pontius Pilate, "All those who are of the truth hear my voice." (John 18:37) And Proverbs tells us, "Buy truth, and do not sell it," (Proverbs 23:23) meaning that we shouldn't give up living by the truth for any reason.

Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." To keep your lamp burning, you have to have two things. You have to have the lamp, which is the word of God, and you have to apply it to how you discern truth. If you see things differently than how God sees things, you're holding a different truth. (Luke 11:34-35) For example, God feels everyone deserves to have their needs met. If we're the guy who fulfills other's needs, and we only fill the needs of those we consider worthy, then some people will be neglected. (Deuteronomy 15:9) This mindset ultimately leads to death. (Proverbs 14:12) We need God's eyes so we can see things the way He sees them, and we can have God's eyes by reading His word, meditating on it, and talking about it with others, especially our kids. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9) This helps make sure we don't forget what's written, and gives us the chance to plan how to live by it.

Being ready in the second or third watch is what we do when we stay on guard against the world's junk even when things are hard or scary. Even when we're too sleepy, speedy, sickly, or stressed to stay focused on the truth, we need to exercise caution. Spiritual sleep causes a person's mind to drift off onto thoughts that could include slander, revenge, and worldly distraction. (Isaiah 56:10-11, Romans 13:11-14) In those dangerous times, we may conceive things in our minds that are not God's will, and upset the course of our lives. It's important to have some strategies to stay awake so this doesn't happen. The Jews have a lot of outward things to help keep God's word in mind. My understanding is that we need spiritual weapons for a spiritual battle. Colossians 3:16 tells us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and encouraging each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Some things my son and I use to keep each other on track are, "I'm not sure that's Shabbat-y," "I'm not sure that's any of my business," and "Focus on the light, focus on the light, everything will be alright!" (Isaiah 54:17)

The Steward of Unrighteousness, part 1

"There was a rich man who had a steward, and the rich man heard that the steward had wasted his goods. He called the steward, and said, 'How is it that I hear this about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you may no longer be steward.' Then the steward said within himself, 'What will I do? My lord is taking away my stewardship. I cannot dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I know what to do, so that when the stewardship is removed from me, people will let me live with them.'" (Luke 16:1-4)

God gives some of us a lot of gifts. We can see, speak, hear, walk, and meet the needs of ourselves and others. We've been made stewards of these valuable gifts, and all too often we spend them on things that don't contribute to equality or eternity. Job was considered the most righteous person of his day. He gave witness of himself, saying, "I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame, and a father to the fatherless." (Job 29:15-16) He used his stewardship well.

The Steward of Unrighteousness shows us a man who has not done so nobly. When he discovers his stewardship is going to be taken away from him, he represents a person who finds out how long they have to live. (Psalm 90:12, Ephesians 5:15-16) He doesn't have enough time to make up for his mistakes, nor does he have the strength to dig through the dirt of his past and beg others for forgiveness. He's ashamed to, because he doesn't deserve it. He can't dig into the grave and apologize to those who are no longer with us. But he is still the steward of one thing - the debts owed to him.

We've all been bought with a price, and those who have wronged us have wronged God. (Matthew 25:41-45, Psalm 51:4) Jesus made us stewards of the crimes committed against us. He said, "Whoever's sins you remit, they are remitted to them, and whoever's sins you retain, they are retained." (John 20:23, Proverbs 18:16) To forgive sins is to be faithful with what our Lord has entrusted to us. Jesus says the way to bring people into the kingdom and make friends doing it, is to show them your willingness to forgive. (Luke 16:9, Proverbs 19:11) When we find it hard to forgive, it helps to remember our own failures and weaknesses. That way we can offer others the forgiveness we hope to receive from our Master. (Luke 6:37-38, Genesis 50:15-21)

The Steward of Unrighteousness, part 2

"So he called all of his lord's debtors. He said to the first, 'How much do you owe my lord?' And one said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And the steward said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty.' Then the steward said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And the steward said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' And the lord congratulated the unjust steward, because he had done wisely, for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. I say to you, make friends for yourselves with the riches of unrighteousness, so that, when you fail, they may receive you into everlasting dwellings. He that is faithful in the least is faithful also in much, and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If you have not been faithful with the riches of unrighteousness, who will trust you with the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with that which is another man's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one, and love the other, or else he will cling to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches." (Luke 16:5-13)

All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) The steward has an inroad with people who've sinned against him. He convinces them of what they owe God, and then shows them God's love by forgiving them himself. We can only forgive people for what they've done to us, not to others. This is why the steward only releases his Master's debtors from part of their debt. It's the part owed to him. When others see God's love through us, they can trust God to forgive the rest when they ask. The steward tells them to "write their bill quickly" so they can avoid their stewardship being wasted in the way his was. (Proverbs 11:4, Ecclesiastes 8:8)

It's a wise investment to trade a debt for God's love. Why hold a grudge rather than win a friend for the kingdom? When we become stewards of someone's injustice against us, the most important thing we can do is forgive. (Luke 6:37, Proverbs 17:9) It proves we recognize that Jesus already paid for those sins. We're not going to ask Him for more than the cross, are we? That's what it is to be faithful with the riches of unrighteousness, and trustworthy with what belongs to someone else.

We're warned here that if we can't be faithful with the temporary life God has lent to us, we won't be safe to be trusted with an eternal life. Paul says, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded, than to take someone to court? But no, you do wrong, and defraud even your brothers. Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Corinthians 6:6-9)

Jesus finishes the parable, saying, "You cannot serve two masters." One master already paid for the debts of all mankind. If we're exacting those debts from our fellow man, who is our master? Why give unforgiveness the power to separate you from your Creator, when you could show love and forgive; bringing yourself and your fellow man to your Creator? As Proverbs tells us, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins." (Proverbs 10:12, 1 Peter 4:8)

The Unforgiving Servant, part 1

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king, who wanted to evaluate how profitable his servants were. And when he had begun this job, a servant was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But, since the servant couldn't pay the debt, his lord commanded that he, his wife, his children, and all that he had be sold, and the money used to pay the debt. Because of this, the servant fell down and worshiped the king, saying, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and he let the servant go, and forgave the debt.

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, who owed him a hundred days' wage. He laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe.' And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and begged, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' But he didn't, and instead had his fellow servant put in jail until the debt was paid." (Matthew 18:23-30)

It's my understanding that Jews believe God takes account of His people once a year, between the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement. To evaluate the profitability of your workers seems like a reasonable thing to do if you're going to keep everything running smoothly. The man who was in great debt to his king was probably not keeping this in mind. Maybe we're so caught up in what we think needs to be done that we don't realize who we're going into debt to when we overstep the boundaries of others.

Those of us who consider ourselves God's servants don't usually get into debt with God on purpose. We get tunnel vision looking at what needs to be done, and we miss how it needs to be done. The irony is, our interactions with people should be the top priority, since people are the only things we can take with us into the afterlife. (1 Timothy 6:7, James 5:19-20, Job 1:21) The servant portrayed here is not only unprofitable, he's a liability. When it comes to his attention just how much he's costing his king and his entire family, he repents and is forgiven. It occurs to me that, if he had acknowledged how unworthy he was of such a generous gift, his thankfulness alone would have produced some compassion for others.

But the story continues that he went out and found another servant of the king, and punished him to the full extent of the law. Mercy was planted in him, but it didn't take root and bear fruit. (Hebrews 12:14-15) It's our human tendency to recognize injustice, and to feel entitled to justice. But that's what the cross is for. As Christians, our duty to our brother is to remember the sacrifice Jesus made to pay all our debts. Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him." (Luke 17:3) As for overt injustice, Jesus encourages us, saying, "Blessed are you, when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, because of Me! Rejoice, and be very glad, for your reward in heaven is great." (Matthew 5:11-12) By loving our enemies, we prove ourselves the children of God. (Matthew 5:44-45, Proverbs 19:11)

The Unforgiving Servant, part 2

"When his fellow servants saw what was done, they were distressed, They went and told their lord all that happened (between the two servants). Then the servant's lord called him, and said, 'You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you asked me. Shouldn't you have had compassion on your fellow servant, the same way I had pity on you?' And his lord was furious, and handed the unforgiving servant over to the tormentors, until he had paid everything he owed his lord. So will my heavenly Father do to you also, if you do not forgive the sins of your brothers from your heart." (Matthew 18:31-35)

Have you ever seen your fellow Christian take another Christian to court for a debt? That's what we're doing when we pray against our brothers and sisters in the Lord instead of praying for them. Matthew 5:43-48 helps us see that our heavenly Father wants us to act as a force for good, even with our enemies. Jesus says,

43 You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy."

44 But I say to you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you, and persecute you;

45 That you may be the children of your Father in heaven: for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

46 For if you love them which love you, what reward have you? Even tax collectors do the same.

47 And if ye greet your brothers only, what do ye more than others? Even unfair people can do that.

48 Be whole, complete, and unified in mind, just as your heavenly Father is.

A lot of times, the person who gets the lion's share of our negativity is someone we trust to take it without retaliating. That seems pretty unfair, don't you think? If I were to guess at the unforgiving servant, I would say he was angry with himself for getting into a position with God that caused him to have to grovel and beg. He was so distracted by his humiliation that he just wanted to feel powerful again. How often I've seen nice people be overly controlling when something happens in their life that made them feel powerless, like a death or an unexpected job loss.

Part of mercy and forgiveness is leaving room for God's vengeance. (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19-21) God knows what's really needed to turn a person around. We humans are not equipped to deal out perfect justice. All we know is how bad we feel in the moment. (Psalm 7:9, Hebrews 4:12) Psalm 50:14-15 encourages us to be thankful to God for everything He's done for us. 1 Peter 5:6 tells us, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may lift you up in due time." Humility and thankfulness offer a person the ability to be a positive force in the lives of others. When we avoid blame, and focus on using our trials to burn off our impurities, it's a lot easier to be patient with one another. God wants us to show mercy instead of taking justice into our own hands.

Ask, Seek, Knock

"Say you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight, and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves. For a friend of mine in his journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' Which of you has a friend who will say in response, 'Don't trouble me - my children are in bed with me and the door is shut. I can't get up to give to you.' I tell you, even if your friend won't get up to give you anything because you are his friend, because of your shameless begging, he will get up and give you as much as you need.

"And I say to you, ask, and you will be given to. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. He that seeks, finds. And to him that knocks, the door will be opened. If your son asks you for bread, will you give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will you give him a serpent? Or if he asks for an egg, will you offer him a scorpion? If you know how to give good gifts to your children despite your selfish nature, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:5-13, Psalm 10:17)

When someone I care about is in the midnight of the soul, if they come to me for advice, comfort, or support, and I don't have what they need, the best thing I can do is go to God. (James 1:5, Isaiah 50:4) Maybe their problems are too much like my problems, or maybe it feels like more than I can handle. Maybe I've got a judgmental spirit about it. Sometimes we know better than to "bite and devour one another," but we don't know what should be done instead. (Galatians 5:14-15, Psalm 143:10) That's time to go to God for His Holy Spirit to give us what we need. Maybe we need words of comfort, or the finances to help, or empathy. Proverbs 11:14 tells us, "Where there is no counsel, the people fall, but there is safety in many counselors." How much more safety there is in the counsel God gives!

This parable tells us that, as God's friend, we can go to Him for those who may not be God's friend. People in the world can get into a lot of seriously messed up trouble. We need to be able to show them the love of Christ. God is more than happy to share His Holy Spirit with us, and to give us what we need to be healers in a hurting world. (Hosea 14) When we find we're not prepared, or we're incapable of providing for others, God is there to be the strength in our weakness. Our Father wants to help us provide for our neighbors in their time of weakness. (Jeremiah 17:8, John 15:4-5)

Knowing a Tree by its Fruit

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside, they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but every corrupt tree produces evil fruit. A good tree cannot produce evil fruit, nor can a corrupt tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down, and cast into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them." (Matthew 7:15-20)

It's common for people to say they're good and turn out to be otherwise. (Proverbs 20:6) In Biblical times, a prophet was a poet. Today, we have a lot of false prophecy coming to us through the music we hear on the radio, in public places and on YouTube. We also have countless "advisors" telling us what they project will happen if we buy their products, listen to their sermons, follow their financial advice, or otherwise obey their commands. Jesus shares the secret of how to know who you're really dealing with.

Good fruit is real and it looks like what it tastes like. That's truth. Truth is the most necessary thing in adult relationships. If you feel refreshed, nourished, and uplifted by a person's speech and company, that's the equivalent of good fruit. If you feel pained, drained, constantly judged or put on the defensive, that's a thorn in your side. If your boundaries are being pushed, pushed aside or flat-out crossed, you've got a spiritual thistle in your life. It doesn't matter how many Bible verses they can quote or how many pet names they call you by. (Isaiah 29:13-14, James 1:23-24) When someone assumes that what's yours is theirs, that isn't intimate, it's a red flag. (Philippians 2:4, 1 Kings 21:1-4) Your whole system knows when you're being bled out, and good fruit doesn't do that.

If we're hoping to be the kind of friend we want to have, we can work to ensure we're giving to the relationship more than we're getting. But if we're already doing it right, it's equally important to not let draining people into our inner circle. "Like a bad tooth or an unsteady foot, so is confidence in a faithless person in time of trouble." (Proverbs 25:19)

The Rich Man and Lazarus, part 1

"There was a rich man, who wore purple and fine linen, and ate richly every day. And there was a beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate, full of sores. He desired to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table, and the dogs came and licked his sores. It came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died, and was buried. And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom." (Luke 16:19-23)

According to Ecclesiastes 5:19, God is the one who gives us the power to create wealth. The writer also says it's given to one man to heap up, because he doesn't know how to give. (Ecclesiastes 2:26) Our strengths are supposed to complete each other's weaknesses. Oftentimes, however, the more popular strengths (that of getting riches, for example) are generally celebrated among those who have them, rather than fulfilling the needs of those who don't have them.

The most striking thing about this parable is that, all the comforts the rich man lavished on himself did not prolong his life. (James 4:13-14, Proverbs 11:4) Instead of investing his talents, he indulged and consumed them. In today's world, it's hard to convince a person that their own parents and children are their responsibility. How much harder then is it to convince a person to be their neighbor's keeper! (Genesis 4:9, Mark 7:9-13)

Jesus says those who are invited into heaven shared with the needy. He said, "I was hungry and you fed Me. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you took Me in, and was naked, and you clothed Me. I was sick, and you visited Me. I was in prison, and you came to Me." When those invited in heard it, they didn't know when they had done it. But Jesus said, "Whatever you've done to the least of these, My brothers, you've done to Me." (Matthew 25:34-40) As Proverbs 19:17 says, "He that has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and that which he has given Him, He will repay."

The Rich Man and Lazarus, part 2

"And the rich man cried, and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue. I am tormented in this flame!' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you received your good things in your lifetime, and Lazarus received evil things. But now he is comforted, and you are tormented. And besides all this, there is a great chasm between us and you, so that no one here can come to your side, and no one on your side can come to us.'

"Then the rich man said, 'Then father, please send Lazarus to my father's house to testify to my five brethren, so that they don't come to this place of torment also.' Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them.' The rich man said, 'No, father Abraham. If one went to them from the dead, they will repent.' Abraham said to him, 'If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't be persuaded even if one rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:24-31)

We're shown here that God is determined to see every human being receive an equal share of good. When the rich man failed to relieve Lazarus' suffering in this world, he brought about his own suffering in the next. God will make up to each one of us for the years the locust has eaten. (Joel 2:25) Though Lazarus had no one to show him compassion in this life, Abraham knew his name, that he was one of his children. Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of My Father is My brother, and sister, and mother." (Matthew 12:50)

It's unfortunate that the rich man didn't see himself as being responsible for Lazarus, but in his own suffering, he understood exactly what a neighbor is for. Strength can be blinding, power can be corrupting. God allows our weakness to show us His will, because we must understand that power is given to support the weak. Otherwise, we won't be safe to bless with eternity. (Mark 10:17-21, Proverbs 28:27)

The last point this parable makes is that the wisdom of the Ten Commandments becomes obvious as we age, even without religion. If it does not, it's because we are blinded by our own selfishness. A person who will not hear the Old Testament won't have any use for the New Testament either. (Ezekiel 3:27) The scripture says, "But when the time was full, God sent His Son, made of a woman, made under the law." (Galatians 4:4) We'd had enough time under the law to see why it was good, and that even knowing this, we still failed to keep it. The Holy Spirit gives us strength in our weakness. It gives us a reason to love because of how deeply we are loved. The cross shows us a reason to forgive others because we have been forgiven so great a debt. May we be thankful for the time we're given to love and forgive, and not waste any more of our days blind to the truth.

The Danger of Anger

"You have heard that it was said by the ancients, 'Do not kill, and whoever kills will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother without a cause will be in danger of the judgment. Whoever says to his brother, 'You empty one' will be in danger of the council. But whoever says 'You fool' will be in danger of hell fire.

"Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and remember there that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the road with him, lest at any time the adversary hand you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be cast into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there by any means, until you have paid the last cent." (Matthew 5:21-26)

I think the thing we miss about this passage is that the penalty for killing in the Old Testament is the death penalty. (Deuteronomy 19:16-21, Numbers 35:16-18) And here, Jesus is telling us that unreasonable anger toward a fellow Christian is worthy of the death penalty in heaven's eyes, because you have murdered your brother in your heart. John says this in 1 John 3:15, "He who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life present in him." (Genesis 4:3-8)

This parable shows us that we have greater things to fear than the death penalty if we are not walking in love. Calling your brother emptyheaded is judging with your mouth. Our mouths are our spiritual seed planters. Our words are our fruit, and if we have thorns instead of fruit, we're bleeding people out instead of building them up. (Leviticus 17:10-11, Hebrews 6:7-8) The way I'm understanding this is to say, a person who belittles his brother in this way is guilty enough in the afterlife to have that torment repaid to him. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15) If I'm trying to teach someone how to fish (which should be a good thing), and they go too fast and do something different than what I'm showing them, and I call them names, I've just made a lasting good into a puff of smoke. My reward in eternity is not going to materialize, and I am going to suffer loss. Why? Because my brother is the only thing I can take to heaven with me. Teaching him how to support himself in this life, but wounding his spirit, is doing him no eternal good.

We see almost no difference between calling someone an emptyhead and calling someone a fool. But Jesus shows here that this evil fruit is enough to make us a bad tree. Not only is the work spoiled, but we've corrupted ourselves, and we'll have to have that impurity burned off. Blaming our impatience on another person's level of intelligence shows a gross lack of character, and a deadly lack of God's logic. How we conduct our relationships is of utmost importance to God. Isaiah 50:4 says that the reason God works to fill us with His word is so we can comfort the weary with a word. He calls the Holy Spirit of Truth, "the Comforter." (John 14:26)

The Unjust Judge

"And he spoke a parable to them, that men should always pray, and not lose heart, saying:

"There was in a city a judge, who did not fear God or respect men. There was a widow in the city, and she came to him, saying, 'Avenge me of my enemy.' And he would not for a while, but later he said within himself, 'Though I don't fear God or respect men, I will still avenge this widow because she is bothering me. I'll give her justice so that she doesn't come to me constantly and wear me out.' And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unjust judge says. Won't God avenge his chosen ones, who cry day and night to him? And he patiently endures along with them. I tell you he will avenge them speedily. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'" (Luke 18:1-8)

If we believe the Lord's words here, then we will continue to pray and trust His love and His fairness even when it looks like nothing is happening in the physical realm. Jesus shows us the nature of humanity, in that even people without love will give you what you want if you ask and keep on asking. How much more will your heavenly Father act on your behalf, when He loves you and wants to see justice done? (Matthew 7:7-11, Psalm 3:5-8) We don't stop fighting in the middle of a war unless we lose faith in our power to win. When the King of Angel Armies is our power, our strength is to call on Him, trusting Him to fight our battles. We don't turn the oven off halfway through cooking time! That would be refusing to let its power work for us. So when we need justice, we should not stop praying until we have it. Ask and keep asking, seek and keep seeking, knock and keep knocking. Prayer is the work that proves our faith. (James 2:14-26, James 5:16-18, Psalm 50:14-15)

If we stop praying, we start fretting and end up doing things the way the world wants us to. (Psalm 37, Matthew 26:69-75) When we pray for God's intervention, instead of fighting for our own justice, we make room for God's power to accomplish more than we could imagine. (Ephesians 3:20-21, 2 Kings 7, Romans 12:19-21)

Giving up Everything

"If any man comes to Me, and does not love his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even his own life less than he loves Me, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not carry his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26-27)

Because God is love, He is the only safe choice of authority over what is right and wrong. If something else is telling us what is right and wrong, it will be influenced by the flesh and the world. (Proverbs 12:15, Deuteronomy 12:8) To put a son or daughter on the throne of our hearts is to displace God. We were put here to bring life to everything and everyone, and if we love any one of us more than we love our duty to the universe, we'll fail our purpose. To give up everything means that everything we own is also dedicated to our directive to love. (Colossians 3:23, Leviticus 25:35-38) "Let him who has two coats give to him who has none." (Luke 3:11) If we obey this ourselves, but let our children disobey it (by, for instance, buying them two coats when they don't actually need that), we'll teach them that it's OK to worry about tomorrow, rather than to invest in their neighbor. This is squarely against Jesus' directive to take no thought for what we will eat or wear tomorrow, and to love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 6:25, Mark 12:29-31)

It's a harmful belief that we can have one vice or one small area of selfishness. As Paul so wisely put it, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." (Galatians 5:9) What you cultivate in your character will grow, and what you cultivate in your child's character will grow also. It's very helpful to do what James says, to visit orphans and widows in their time of need (James 1:27), in order to keep our priorities straight. When we remember why God wants us to do something, and how important it is, it's easier to not be led off the path by excess. (Proverbs 2:10-22, 1 Timothy 6:6-10) My mother would take me to nursing homes as a child, so I could sing for people. At first, I thought this would be terribly embarrassing. Then one elderly lady came over and patted my head, and thanked me for coming out to them. I was probably five years old, and I won't forget that.

Counting the Cost

"If any of you intends to build a tower, don't you sit down first and count the cost, to see if you have enough to finish it? Otherwise it's possible that, after you've laid the foundation, you're unable to finish it, and all that see it start mocking you, saying, 'This man began to build, and wasn't able to finish.' Or what king, going to war against another king, doesn't sit down first and determine if his 10,000 can meet the king that comes against him with 20,000? And if he sees that won't work, he sends ambassadors while the other king is still far away, and asks how to make peace. Likewise, if any of you doesn't forsake all that he has, he can't be my disciple." (Luke 14:28-33)

To build a life with others, a person needs to be mature enough to consider the sacrifices one must make to preserve and protect a family. If I want to be married, and have children, I need to ask myself if I'm capable and prepared to take responsibility for their needs. If my spouse or child becomes disabled, our relationship may not end up like I planned it. Am I able to sustain the relationship, or am I really only interested in the ideal experiences I imagined having? Do I understand what it takes to truly love someone else as much as I love myself?

Jesus our Messiah teaches that unless we can deny ourselves and take up our cross daily, we're not mature enough to learn how to be like Him. (Luke 9:23-24, 2 Samuel 22:27, 1 John 3:2, Psalm 17:15) To know and understand God's love makes us want to be like Him. (Luke 6:40, Jeremiah 31:33) When I embody God's love for others, self-sacrifice is a gift I give, rather than a risk I take, or a burden I bear. (Hosea 6:6, John 10:11-18) To deny ourselves is to sacrifice. (Matthew 16:24-26) What we truly love is evidenced by what we will sacrifice life and limb for. We can only willingly die for what we truly love. That's what our Savior did for us. (John 15:13, Isaiah 53:4-12)

Even if we look at ourselves honestly, and don't sign up for a family, we're still part of the human race. What we do, or fail to do, is still a debt we owe to justice. The world we leave behind is our children's future. We have to ask, "How much do I owe justice for my failures, mistakes, and offenses?" Maybe we think that so many people owe us for their offenses that we're rich, or that we've done more good than bad, and so it'll work out in the end. With our skewed sense of justice, we might think we'll only need ten thousand to pay off our debt, when God's idea of justice is that those who have eyes should be eyes to the blind. How many of us can say, like Job did, "I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, I never ate my bread without sharing it?" (Job 29, Job 31) That's God's sense of justice. He is going to meet us with His twenty thousand. If we don't have Jesus' payment for our debts, we are going to be weighed in the scales and found lacking. (Daniel 5:25-31) "For every idle word men speak, they will be judged." (Matthew 12:36) The good news is, Jesus Christ paid a price when He didn't owe a debt. That sacrifice will be our condition of peace, if we'll accept it and pay it forward in forgiveness.

Jesus said that the way you can know someone is forgiven is by how much they love. He deserves that love. Just pour the love you have for this amazing Savior onto everybody you see. When we show others the love of Christ, we prove He's real, and God willing, they'll accept His sacrifice too. (John 14:6, Isaiah 27:5, John 13:35)

The Fig Tree, part 1

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but didn't find any. Then he said to the gardener, 'Look, I've come looking for fruit on this tree for three years, and haven't found any. Cut it down, why is it taking up the ground?' Then the gardener answered, 'Lord, let it be here for the rest of this year, while I dig around it, fertilize it with manure, and see if it will bear fruit. If after that it still doesn't bear fruit, then cut it down.'"
(Luke 13:6-9)

Jesus' allegory here shows us God's thoughts toward us when we don't produce good for others. (Psalm 5:8-10) Whatever we've done for the least of Jesus' brothers, we've done for Him. (Matthew 25:34-40) It also shows us how powerful our prayers are for those who are living in a way that displeases God. (James 5:14-18) When a friend or loved one is behaving selfishly, they don't have love, joy, peace, or patience to give to others. They only love themselves, have patience with themselves, and give themselves joy. They've made themselves enemies of both us and God. When we see this happening, and intercede in prayer for our enemies, this is right in God's eyes. (Matthew 5:44-45, Job 31:29-30, Job 42:9-10)

The way we can work to bring about good fruit in our fellow man is to get down to the root of the problem by truly getting to know them. (Proverbs 20:5, 1 John 3:18) We can also help them see the other side of adversity. Like dung, we naturally know it stinks, but it gives us a greater understanding of why bad is so bad. This can help motivate us to bring good into our world. (Deuteronomy 8:3, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Isaiah 59:16 tells us, "The Lord looked, but He found no man to stand in the gap for the people." Jesus showed us how it's done. God is looking for people to tend His garden, and help His fig trees grow fruit. We shouldn't ignore someone just because they look unproductive on the outside. They may not have been given the insight and the perspective they need to see that it benefits them spiritually to help those in need. They may not see that it provides them fulfillment and purpose that you just can't get any other way. We can stand in the gap for others just like Jesus stood in the gap for us.

The Fig Tree, part 2

"Now in the morning, as Jesus returned into the city, he was hungry. And when he saw a fig tree next to the road, he came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves. He said to it, 'May no fruit grow on you anymore forever.' And immediately the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they were awestruck, and said, 'How soon is the fig tree withered away!' Jesus responded, saying, 'Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you will do not only what has been done to the fig tree, but if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed, and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, trusting, you will receive.'" (Matthew 21:18-22)

These words remind me of when Jesus said, "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree evil and its fruit evil, for the tree is known by its fruit." (Matthew 12:33) Jesus could tell from a distance He was looking at a fig tree with green leaves, healthy. Leaves ensure that rain comes toward the root system of a tree, and they soak up the sun. The roots in the ground take nourishment from the earth. And yet, despite everything its Creator had invested in it, when Jesus was hungry, it had nothing to offer. This should be a warning to us to take the opportunities we are given to serve others. (Hebrews 13:1-3, Genesis 18:1-8) It's our purpose, and if we miss our moment to shine, it may never come again.

The thing I notice about this parable is that Jesus didn't tell the fig tree to wither and die. He only said, "May no fruit ever come from you again." It's as if suddenly it's purpose was removed, and so self-fulfillment was no longer fulfilling. (1 Samuel 25:1-38) How many times I've heard rich people say their money didn't make them happy. But maybe they were just investing it in the wrong things. Jesus said those who seem to be good, but in reality are worthless, have the greater condemnation. "Woe to you, Pharisees, who rob widow's houses, and cover up your offense with long prayers!" (Matthew 23:14)

Another confusing part of this parable is, when the disciples are astonished at the withered tree, Jesus talks to them like it's a miracle that they might like to perform! If you've ever had someone who looked so great in the beginning become your enemy, and harm you and your reputation, you might want to pray for them to "be uprooted and cast into the sea."

Oftentimes mountains in the Psalms represent those in positions of power. (Psalm 30, specifically the title and verse 7, Psalm 72:1-3) And so today, if you need your mountains removed, pray and have faith, and speak to those mountains, that you may be free of them. (Ephesians 6:12)

Building on the Rock

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter into the kingdom of heaven. He who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter in. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name? And in Your name have cast out demons? And in Your name done many wonderful works?' And then I will inform them, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who live unfairly.'"

"For this reason, if anyone hears these words, and lives accordingly, I will compare him to a wise man, who built his house on a rock. The rain came down, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house, and it did not fall, because it had a rock as a foundation. And if anyone hears these words, and does not live accordingly, he is like a foolish man, who built his house on the sand. The rain came down, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house, and it fell, and it's downfall was great." (Matthew 7:21-27)

When Jesus tells healed people that their faith has saved them, He's explaining that God is there for anyone who trusts in the power of the love of God. Joseph knew he wasn't the one interpreting dreams, and likewise Daniel. (Genesis 41:15-16, Daniel 2:27-28) But these men who've come to Jesus saying they did mighty works obviously did not understand that even Jesus said, "My Father in Me does the works." (John 14:10) These people didn't have the love of God.

Living unfairly means to treat yourself better than you treat others. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself." (Mark 12:29-31) It's hard as an American to think that just because you earned it doesn't mean it belongs to you. Ecclesiastes says it is God who gives the power to create wealth. (Ecclesiastes 5:19) Ecclesiastes also tells us, "It is given to one man to heap up, but it's so that he may give to him that is good before God." (Ecclesiastes 2:26) Proverbs 28:8 says, "He who gathers by making interest does so for him who will pity the poor." Not everything God gives us is for us, and we will be called to account for what we've been made stewards of. (Romans 14:10-12, Job 19:23-27) Building a life on the shifting sand of our ever-changing desires is no different than building a house on sand. (Ezekiel 13:10-14, Proverbs 14:14)

To know these things is to be equipped to avoid making the same mistakes. May we become trustworthy vessels of God's mercy, so He can work through us, and make us stewards that faithfully share and help to remedy the burdens of others. (Galatians 6:2, Numbers 11:11-17)

The Lowest Room

"Jesus spoke a parable to the people who had been invited to eat at one of the chief Pharisees' house, when he saw how they chose the highest rooms. And He said to them,

"When someone invites you to a wedding, don't sit down in the highest room. A more honorable man than you may be invited also, and he who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man room.' Then you will begin to move to the lowest room with shame. Instead, when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest room, so that when he who invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher.' Then you will have glory in the sight of them who sit at dinner with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humiliated, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:7-11)

Our Lord is inviting us to His wedding. (John 3:25-29, Isaiah 61:10) He describes the event as a feast. He tells us in John 6:63 that the words He speaks to us are spirit and life. If we're to live in a way that proves us worthy of the invitation, it's important we stay humble. The word says that God teaches His secrets to the meek, and that the meek will inherit the earth. (Psalm 25:9, Psalm 37:11, Matthew 5:5)

To take the lowest room in life positions us to receive God's guidance, find God's path, and understand God's logic. Amos 3:3 says, "Can two walk together, unless they have agreed to do so?" God agrees to walk with the meek. When we accept His directive to be meek, we can walk with Him. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him. (Genesis 5:24, Hebrews 11:5) That's what we want to be, worthy of being taken with Him to the wedding feast.

Selfish Treasure

"And one of the people in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Master, tell my brother that he should divide the inheritance with me.' And Jesus said, 'Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?' And we said to them, 'Pay attention, and beware of covetousness, for a man's life does not consist of the many things he owns.' And he spoke a parable to them, saying,

"A rich man's farmland provided him much fruit. He thought within himself, saying, 'What am I going to do, since I have no room to store my fruits? Here's what I'll do. I'll demolish my barns, and build bigger ones, and I'll store all my fruits and my goods there. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have lots of goods stored up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool, this night your soul will be demanded back from you! Then who will own the things you have prepared?' So is he that lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21)

Covetousness is a type of envy. It's an inability to see your neighbor as your equal. At it's mildest, it can still cause death by neglect. Deuteronomy 15:9 says, "Don't let your eye be evil toward your poor brother, thinking, 'The year of release is at hand,' and so you give him nothing." God sees all people as a family, and someone who can't make their own living today needs to be helped by the family members who can. If you've ever been in a family, you know this is reasonable.

Covetousness at its worst looks like the man in this parable. He's judged himself better than everyone, and doesn't share his good fruits with anyone. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us that the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. If we're so judgmental of others that we can't give them these things, we might think we're giving them to ourselves. (Hosea 10:1, Luke 18:10-14) But as Jesus shows here, we've robbed ourselves just as much as our neighbor. A tree that makes itself tall, green, and beautiful, but never produces fruit, hasn't fulfilled its purpose. What purpose do we serve as trees in God's garden if all we do is suck up resources and never give anything back?

Every breath we take is a gift from God. How much do we owe Him for that? Envy will rob you and your relationships of every good thing they have the potential to bring into your life. Empathy unites us, but envy is the greatest weapon the devil has against unity. It was envy of God's position and power that caused Eve to sin. (Genesis 3:6) It was envy that moved the people of Jesus' day to crucify Him. (Mark 15:6-11) It was envy that led Nabal to humiliate David, a misstep that cost him his life. (1 Samuel 25:10-11, 36-39) Do not waste your time with envy. Proverbs 14:30 says, "A healing heart is the life of the flesh, but envy is rottenness to the bones." If you have a competitive spirit, the Lord gives us a healthy way to channel it. We only compete with ourselves in order to be better spiritually tomorrow than we were yesterday. We also compete to be the greatest servant of God and our fellow man. (Matthew 23:8-11, Mark 9:33-37)

Mercy and Sacrifice

"At that time, Jesus went through a field of grain on the Sabbath day. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck the ears of grain, and eat them. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing something that isn't lawful on the Sabbath day.' But Jesus said to them, 'Haven't you read what David did, when he and those with him were hungry? He entered into the house of God, and ate the showbread, which was not lawful for him or those with him to eat, but only the priests were allowed to eat it. Or haven't you read in the law that, on the Sabbath days, the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are innocent? But I say to you, in this place there is one greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day.'" (Matthew 12:1-8)

It's interesting that Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 when he says, 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.' He's proving that what He's telling the Pharisees here has always been true, it just wasn't spelled out clearly. Much of what is in the Old Testament is like this because of our human weakness. There were just some things we weren't ready to hear. (John 16:12, Deuteronomy 18:15-19) While some rules have changed in the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, God hasn't changed, and neither has His truth. (Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8) He has always desired mercy, and not sacrifice.

God lets us go through suffering so we'll understand that suffering is not His will. Animal sacrifice shows us that sin always hurts the innocent, and it's our fault. The death, burning, and consumption of the sacrificed animal makes us look at it. The people who accused Jesus of breaking the law had lost sight of this, and had lost sight of their God of mercy. Moses said in Deuteronomy 30:14, "The word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it." Yet the laws at the time of Jesus were anything but easy to keep. Fasting was prohibited on the Sabbath, but so was harvesting. The Mosaic law allowed you to eat out of your neighbor's field while you walked through it (Deuteronomy 23:25), but the Jews of Jesus' day had decided that eating out of a field was harvesting, and so prohibited it on the Sabbath. The Pharisees could have invited Jesus and His disciples in for a meal. This would have let them keep their requirements, but instead, they told them to go hungry, which still wouldn't have been allowed.

All of this shows us that man's judgment is a satanic replacement for mercy. Mercy makes any sacrifice an act of love. It preserves a relationship when sacrifices have to be made for one another. It blesses the receiver rather than demeaning them. It's like the salt that was always supposed to be on every meat offering, preserving it and making it taste good. (Leviticus 2:13) Judgment takes something that could have been an act of love and makes it a sacrifice, or even a weapon. May we always remember to have salt in ourselves, and have peace with one another. (Mark 9:50) In Jesus' name, Amen.

Become as Little Children

"The disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And Jesus called a little child to Him, and set him in the middle of them. And He said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you are turned around, and become as little children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself as this little child, that one is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives a little child like this in my name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and that he was drowned in the depth of the sea.

"Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! For it is necessary that stumbling blocks come, but woe to that man by whom the stumbling block comes! For this reason, if your hand or your foot cause you to stumble, cut them off and cast them from you! It is better for you to enter into life limping and maimed, than to have two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from you! It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. Pay attention that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven, their angels always see the face of My Father which is in heaven. For the Son of man came to save that which was lost." (Matthew 18:1-11)

In Matthew's recording of this event, Jesus doesn't answer the disciples' question right away. Instead, He answers the question they should be asking, which is, how do I get into heaven? (Matthew 5:20, Deuteronomy 30:19) Their question didn't come from a place of humility. Jesus says, "Whoever will humble himself as this little child, that one is greatest in the kingdom." Then He explains how important it is to not offend one another by crossing each other's boundaries, sinning against each other. He explains that even if we think we can't escape some sins because they're part of our nature, they still need to be cut off. Even those of our own family, if they are an offense to faith, hope, love, kindness, and the like, we must separate from them, or risk our eternal souls. (Luke 14:26-27, Deuteronomy 13:6-11)

Jesus finishes this passage by saying that having a low regard for the weak puts us in conflict with heaven. It's easy to imagine that we can take justice into our own hands when we have the power to do so. (Romans 12:19-21, Deuteronomy 32:35) But to become like a child is to trust our Father to take care of the justice end of life when it comes to ourselves. We just keep our eyes on the goal of becoming vessels of mercy. He says even thinking against a child is a sin that heaven will hear about and take into account. As adults, we might know more, think more clearly, and have more control over our emotions. That doesn't make us better, it makes us more equipped to be a helpful higher power. Despising the weak is completely contrary to that purpose. (Ezekiel 34:2-4, James 5:4-6) If we want to be on the same team with our Messiah, we want to protect the weak, and save the lost.

John's Question, part 1

"John the Baptist sent two of his students to Jesus. They were told to ask, 'Are you the one to come, or should we look for someone else?' They arrived and asked Jesus this question in John's name. In that same hour, Jesus cured many people from their injuries, sickness, and demons. He also gave sight to many who were blind. Then Jesus answered John's students, saying, 'Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard, how the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news of the Kingdom. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.'

"When John's students had gone, Jesus spoke to the people about John, saying, 'What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What went you out to see then? A man wearing soft clothes? Look! They who live in luxury are in kings' courts. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? I say to you, yes, and much more than a prophet. This is the one of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' For I say to you, among those who are born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than him.'" (Luke 7:19-28)

Even John the Baptist wondered if he knew anything at all when he was in prison awaiting death for speaking truth. He saw the Spirit descend like a dove upon Jesus, had to be convinced to baptize the One he felt should be baptizing him, heard God Himself bear witness of Him, and announced to all his students that Jesus was the Lamb of God who would be sacrificed for the world's sins. Yet in his trial, he had to ask, "Are you the coming one?" It's OK to ask God questions. He wants us to, so He can reassure us. (Judges 6:36-40) Jesus reassures John by the evidence of His love and power. He promises a blessing to John, if he will not be offended that it's time for his death. John gave up most worldly pleasures to ensure he could complete his ministry. Now his life was about to end, but all his investment in the kingdom was soon to pay off. He would be faithful unto death, and would be given a crown of life. (Revelation 2:10, Psalm 116:15)

Jesus asked the crowd to consider why they went out to see John in order to open their minds to truth. He was not just a reed shaken by the wind. (Isaiah 42:1-3, Matthew 12:20, John 3:8, Ezekiel 37:9-14) This phrase reminds me of things said about the early Quakers, as if they were driven mad by the Spirit, as Paul was accused of being during his trial. (Acts 26:24-25) People flocked to John like he was royalty, even though he had nothing in his life resembling worldly affluence. Then Jesus bears witness of John, as the fulfillment of prophesy. He made the people ready to receive Jesus. (Malachi 4:5-6) It proves that John's questioning didn't offend God in any way. When you ask God questions, resolve to only let respectful wisdom out of your mouth. Let your thoughts support love and truth. (Revelation 6:9-11) Proverbs encourages us to seek for answers so we can give a voice to intelligence when others have questions. We're encouraged to ask for wisdom, which only God gives. (Proverbs 2:1-9, James 1:5) If we work to understand the parables of life's trials, we will have light in our darkest hours. (Psalm 49:4-5) Remember that trials are meant to purify us, and once we are purified, we will be safe to bless with every good thing God has for us.

John's Question, part 2

"Truly I say to you, among them who are born of women, there has not risen any greater than John the Baptist. But he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you will accept it, this is Elijah, who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Matthew 11:11-15)

Jesus points out that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6. It said Elijah would return first, and restore the hearts of the fathers to their children. Why is anyone still waiting for Elijah?

When Jesus talks about John the Baptist, He says something profound. We think of Jesus as being born of a woman, and yet He's excluded Himself from that group, since Jesus was first born in heaven as the Word of God. (John 1:1-14, Genesis 1:3)

John's ministry allowed any repentant person to come into the kingdom. While John was baptizing, he recognized that some people were only there to be part of the crowd. They weren't truly repentant. (Luke 3:7-9, Isaiah 56:10-11) You can see from the parable of the ten virgins that the kingdom of heaven Jesus speaks of in parables isn't the one in the realm of heaven. God's will is done in heaven, but not always in the hearts of men. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, saying, "Your kingdom come," we're asking for His kingdom to reign in our hearts. (Matthew 6:10, Luke 17:20-21, Jeremiah 31:33) "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," is asking Him to empower us as His servants to obey Him, just as His angels obey Him. There are five wise virgins and five foolish virgins in the parable of the kingdom of heaven on earth, and in the same way, since the days of John the Baptist, we have everyone coming in, both good and bad. In the parable of the net, both good and bad fish are collected. They're sorted out at the end of the age, when we must give an account for what we did in the body. (Matthew 13:47-50, Ecclesiastes 9:12)

The kingdom of heaven doesn't allow violence, but it is experiencing violence. (Galatians 5:13-15) Not everyone who professes to be part of the kingdom is working to be good. (Isaiah 29:13, Acts 20:28-30) When John said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?," he's talking to violent people, the same violent people who crucified Jesus. A lot of what's wrong with religion today isn't Christianity's or Judaism's fault. Humans are free agents, and not all humans are people of truth and peace. (Mark 9:50, Psalm 34:14)

If you're drained by the misbehavior of your fellow Christian, understand that not all these people are being saved, nor do they all represent the kingdom of God reliably. (Jeremiah 23:21-22, 1 John 2:18-19) Please don't take offense at God when people who call themselves Christians break God's laws. God made rules against what they're doing. He's given us a new covenant that shows us how to be supportive; nourishing and cherishing each other with the good fruit of love. (1 John 4:21, Galatians 5:19-26, Matthew 7:15-20, Micah 7:1-4)

Children in the Marketplace

"And all the people that heard him, and the tax collectors, saw that God was righteous, as they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected what they heard was God's will for them, as they had not been baptized by John."

"And the Lord said, 'What then will I compare the men of this generation to? And what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace, calling to one another, and saying, 'We have piped to you, and you have not danced! We have mourned to you, and you have not wept!' For John the Baptist came eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by all her children.'" (Luke 7:29-35)

It's common for envious people to want to pull the strings and make us all their puppets. It's almost as if the Lord is saying that John the Baptist was sent to us living a life of strict abstinence just so He could show these people for what they were. John's way of life set him free to minister, and proved he believed in what he was doing. (Matthew 3:1-4) But men who wanted the command and admiration of his crowds mocked him for his abstinence. Our Messiah was sent to a different crowd, and the people who wanted to feel superior to His crowd didn't appreciate His acceptance of them. (Mark 2:16-17)

Jesus shows us that if we're finding fault with others, rather than seeking to understand them, we're missing out on wisdom and unity. (Proverbs 20:5, Galatians 5:15) Back in Deuteronomy, the people had asked to hear the law from a man, and not God, for fear that they would lose their lives. (Deuteronomy 18:15-19) When He came, they only wanted a man that would conform himself to their group, and make himself acceptable to their way of thinking. It was impossible for them to recognize their Messiah because they didn't remember what He had come to do.

To gain wisdom from someone else, we have to be able to support the logic of others. How much more when the other person created you? If they had been willing to try and understand, they would have seen Jesus as more than just a man. (John 14:10-11, Isaiah 28:9-13) Not only was God backing up Jesus' claim to be the Messiah with miraculous works, Jesus was living Psalm 1. "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly." Not the man who just never talks to the ungodly at all. "Nor supports himself the way sinners do, nor sits in the seat of scoffers." And that's what these men were being. No matter what kind of prophet they received, they scoffed. May we be on guard against such a spirit in ourselves, lest we miss the messengers God sends into our lives. (Hebrews 13:2, Luke 10:16, 1 Kings 22:15-29)

Foot Washing, part 1

"Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that it was time for him to leave this world and go to the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them to the end. Supper was now over, and the devil had put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him. Jesus rose up from supper, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God, and was going to God. And He laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel He was wearing." (John 13:1-5)

Having clean hands and a pure heart doesn't make us perfect. We still make mistakes, and fail others without premeditation. We spiritually "get our feet dirty" because we're in the world, even if we're not of the world. We still need Jesus' sacrifice and the forgiveness of others. 1 John 2:1 says, "My little children, I write you these things, so you will not sin. And if any man sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (1 Kings 8:46-52) To be righteous is to be right with God. Because Jesus is always right with God and we are not, we need His logic straightening us out, showing us a better way to talk to one another, and showing us how to meet one another's needs. Learning what the word of God says and agreeing with it purifies our thinking, and washes us from our uncleanness, so we don't bring it into our homes and our relationships. This is why it's so important for us to stay in the word daily. (Ephesians 5:25-26, Jeremiah 2:25) John 15:3 says, "Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken to you." And Psalm 119:9 tells us, "How will a young man cleanse his way? By guarding it the way Your word says to." God is love, and He wants to create our hearts in His image for the good of ourselves and each other.

Foot Washing, part 2

"Then Jesus came to Simon Peter, and Peter said to Him, 'Lord, are you about to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, saying, 'You don't know what I'm doing now, but you will know after this.' Peter said to Him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.' Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.' Jesus said to him, 'He that is washed doesn't need to wash anything except his feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, but not all.' (For He knew who was going to betray Him, which is why He said, 'You are not all clean.')

"So after He had washed their feet, and had taken His garments, and rejoined them, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Master and Lord, which is good, because I am. So if I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also should wash each other's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do what I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, the servant is not greater than his lord, neither is he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. I do not speak about all of you - I know who I have chosen. But that the scripture may be fulfilled, he that eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me. Now I tell you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe that I AM. Truly, truly, I say to you, he that receives whoever I send receives Me, and he that receives Me receives Him that sent Me.'" (John 13:6-20)

Being united in purpose with Jesus Christ doesn't make us perfect. We're all still frail humans in a broken world. The filth of our culture and our own weakness is going to cause us to make mistakes and missteps. Our ability to forgive one another is an integral part of our salvation. (Mark 11:25-26, Leviticus 19:18) Judging one another is counterproductive to the work forgiveness can do in the hearts of those who give it and receive it. (Matthew 7:1-2, Psalm 7:14-16) Forgiveness is an act of love. For those who are sorry for their mistakes, it shows love toward them, and for those who are not sorry, it shows love toward our Creator and acknowledges that His sacrifice paid for the sins of the whole world. (Proverbs 10:12, 1 Peter 4:8)

Jesus already knew who would betray Him, and after washing his feet, He knew that Judas would go out and commit a crime, not one that would just get his feet dirty, but one that would put innocent blood on his hands. Judas thought betraying Jesus was worth the money he made by doing so, and probably assumed that Jesus would escape it like He had done so many times before. (John 8:58-59, Luke 4:28-30, John 7:43-46) He was not washed by the word, and so his condemnation was just. (Luke 16:13, Ezekiel 13:19)

To forgive costs us something. But if we love, that cost means nothing to us in comparison to the joy we have when we can restore those we love to our family, the family of God. (John 16:21, James 5:19-20, Job 42:7-10) Forgiveness communicates that the one forgiven is more valuable than what forgiveness costs us.

The Narrow Gate

"Enter in at the narrow gate. For the gate is wide, and the road is broad, that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in there. The gate is narrow, and the road is thin, that leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matthew 7:13-14)

"And Jesus went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. Then a person said to Him, 'Lord, are there few who are saved?' And Jesus said to them, 'Strive to enter in at the narrow gate, for I say to you, many will seek to enter in, and will not be able to. Once the master of the house has rose up, and has shut the door, if you stand outside and knock saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us,' and he answers, 'I don't know you or where you came from,' you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I don't know you or where you are from. Depart from me, all you who live unfairly.' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you are thrust out. And they will come from the east, the west, the north, and the south, and will sit down in the kingdom of God. And behold, there are those who were last who will be first, and there are those who were first who will be last.'" (Luke 13:22-30)

Jesus' answer shows us that there are many who are saved, but there are many, many more who cannot be. Excess is the greatest enemy we face when striving to live lives worthy of the coming kingdom. Excess makes us puffed up with pride, judgmental through a sense of entitlement, and unforgiving because of our tendency to focus on our loss and bereavement, instead of Christ's sacrifice that paid for the debts owed to us. The world praises us when our worldly treasure is large enough for them to see we're rich, or in charge, or of a "strong spirit." But all these things will keep us from fitting through that narrow gate. (Luke 16:9-13, Matthew 18:28-35, Judges 9)

Luke 16:15 says, "You are they who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts, for the things that men highly esteem is abominable in the sight of God." The word of God can help us tell the difference between what the world finds honorable, and what God finds honorable. (Galatians 5:19-26, Proverbs 6:16-19) God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, (Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8), and so we can learn from the Old Covenant as well as the New. The boundaries God shows us in the word help us to live without excesses, and make us safe and worthy of the age to come.

We all have different strengths and weaknesses. Each one of us is going to find a few (or maybe more) of these boundaries uncomfortable. But when we know what we're suffering for, it makes it worth the cost. (Psalm 34:14, Matthew 13:44-46) When we regard God's logic in our hearts, we guard the kingdom within, we protect the innocent in the world, and we prove to ourselves and those watching us that God's ways are truth, and they are best. (Isaiah 55:9, Romans 11:33) In this life, striving for the narrow gate will provoke resistance. But praise God, we have our Messiah's example and His Spirit so we can overcome the world. (John 16:33, John 14:15-18)

Sight and Light, part 1

"You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel. They put it on a candlestick, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine like this before men, so they can see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16)

We learn from John 9:3-5 that Jesus is the light of the world. When we live by His words, we are the light of the world. (Matthew 4:3-4, Deuteronomy 8:3) We become part of Christ's body on earth. (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, Jeremiah 3:14) If we're living for ourselves, speaking vanity, dressing immodestly, and enjoying excess, we're living in the dark. (Luke 13:25-28, Ezekiel 18:4) If our Christianity is hidden from the world and from God, how will people find the truth through us? If we really are Christians, our light won't go unnoticed by those who need it. (John 15:5-8, Matthew 21:18-19, Proverbs 20:11) In John 18:37 we read, "Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

Jesus warns us not to do good deeds in order to be noticed. It's the fastest way to have your candle put out. (Matthew 7:6, Matthew 6:1-6, Proverbs 21:4) If you get any glory for God's work through you, the people who fiend for attention will come against you. This isn't to say that we should stop doing good works when we're surrounded by the world. Humility and anonymity will keep us safe and able to do God's work of caring for and defending the weak. (Matthew 10:16, James 1:27, Proverbs 28:28)

It is our heavenly Father who does good through us. (Matthew 10:19-20) If we're promoting ourselves with our good works, we're like a candle that takes credit for the flame. This is the fastest road to hypocrisy, since only God's word shining through our lives can make us the light of the world. (Luke 12:1-5, Isaiah 42:8) Jesus said, "If I bore witness of Myself, My witness would not be true. But I have One who bears witness of Me... for the works which the Father has given me to finish, these works that I do bear witness of me, that the Father has sent me. And the Father Himself, who has sent me, has borne witness of me." (John 5:31-37) And we read in John 14:10, "The Father that dwells in me, He does the works." You can know a hypocrite by his glorifying of himself. Jesus says, the one who glorifies the one who sent him is the truthful one. (John 7:18, Proverbs 27:2)

To be effective, our inner circle should be free of mockers, chronic skeptics, habitual sinners, and anyone who wants the place of God in our lives. (Psalm 1, 1 John 2:18-19, Ezekiel 34:2) Our purpose is to use our strengths to fill in each other's weaknesses. Everyone with pressing needs, even our enemies, should be supported when they cannot support themselves. (Proverbs 25:21-22, Matthew 5:44-45) It makes us children of God to be helpful to the hurting. When we focus the bulk of our other efforts on people who are driven by purpose and meaning (rather than pleasure or power), we promote unity and won't burn out easily. (Galatians 6:10, Jeremiah 17:7-8) Let your light shine! (Galatians 6:2, Job 29:15-16)

Sight and Light, part 2

"No man who lights a candle puts it in a secret place, or under a bushel. He puts it on a candlestick, so that they who come in can see the light. The light of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is single, your whole body is also full of light. But when your eye is evil, your body is also full of darkness. So pay attention that the light which is in you is not darkness. If your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole will be full of light, like when the bright shining of a candle gives you light." (Luke 11:33-36)

Just as we don't light a candle only to hide it away, God doesn't illuminate our lives just to leave us in our self-made prisons or our circumstantial dungeons. (Isaiah 55:10-11, Matthew 10:27) If we have no one to minister to, we may be at a time of life where we're being purified, and that's time to work on ourselves. To have the light in us be darkness means that we plan covert actions, things we don't want to be seen by others because they are selfish. Selfish acts don't take into account the wants and needs of others. Proverbs 4:19 says, "The way of the wicked is as darkness - they don't know what they're stumbling over." (1 Thessalonians 5:5-8) The problem with keeping others in the dark is that we keep ourselves in the dark as well.

Living in a way that loves our neighbor as ourselves keeps us both safe. To be filled with light is to be honest and loving. When we walk together in the light, the things of the world aren't able to trip us up. (Luke 8:15, Micah 6:8) Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." God's word not only shows us the best way to care for one another in actions, but also in supportive words, (Proverbs 18:21, Colossians 4:6) God's word can transform our hearts so that the light is there for us when the world goes dark.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

"Jesus spoke this parable to some people who trusted in their own righteousness, and despised others. 'Two men went up into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed with himself, 'God, I thank you, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and give tithes of all that I own.' And the tax collector, standing at a distance, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but hit himself in the chest, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, not the Pharisee. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted.'

"And they brought to Him infants, that He would touch them. But when His disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, 'Allow the little children to come to Me, and do not forbid them, for the kingdom of God belongs to people like this. Truly I say to you, whoever will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will not enter into it in any way.'" (Luke 18:9-17)

Whatever we trust in outside of our Messiah to make us God's chosen people is just a prideful counterfeit. To trust in our own righteousness is like imagining that a family's oldest child is always the favorite, and the baby is less deserving of love. It's so important that we remember God is no respecter of persons. He doesn't take pleasure in the legs of a man, or anything else that a person would prop himself up on so that he feels more grand than his fellow human in God's eyes. (Psalm 147:10-11, Acts 10:34-35, 2 Chronicles 19:4-7) The Bible talks a lot about being "puffed up," and this is what it's referring to. (1 Corinthians 13:4, Colossians 2:18, 1 Corinthians 8:1) This kind of elitist pride divides the people of God and sets us up for failure. "Pride comes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18)

Psalm 51:17 says, "A broken and contrite heart You will not despise." The person who's doing the best he can in the situation he's given and who wants to do better, is the one accepted and supported. Not the self-sufficient person who's assurance of eternity only exists in his mind. Jesus says here that God isn't listening to the proud. (Proverbs 6:16-19) If we're proud, we end up rejecting God's promises to answer our prayers, rather than looking to Him for help so we're safe to bless. The tax collector didn't come before God with excuses or complaints. He just came asking for mercy. We're wise if we follow his example.

Like the tax collector, children are acutely aware of their need for a helpful higher power. To receive the kingdom like a child is to be thankful, knowing that we don't have the ability to attain it on our own. (Psalm 50:14-15, Ephesians 2:8-10) Admiring the One who freely meets our needs guides us to desire to be like Him. Rather than seeking pleasure and power, a thankful child longs for the day he can be the greatest servant, like the One who serves him. (Psalm 17:15) Jesus tells us in Mark 10:42-45 that this is exactly how the kingdom works. Those who take hold of love, duty, and purpose will reign with Him.

Blind Leaders of the Blind

"And Jesus spoke a parable to them, 'Can the blind lead the blind? Won't they both fall into the ditch? The disciple is not above his master, but every one who is fully trained will be as his master.'" (Luke 6:39-40)

Because we're human, we're limited in knowledge and strength. Still, many people believe they can lead others out of sin with human instruction. No one of us has overcome our humanity, even when we're filled with the Holy Spirit. We still only know in part, and have weaknesses. (1 Corinthians 13:9-10, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, 1 Kings 8:46-50) Since the best we can do is lead others to Christ so He can lead us out of sin, it seems unreasonable to judge others and tell them how to live the Christian life when we can't do it perfectly ourselves. (Matthew 7:3-5, Job 42:7)

Jesus refers to the religious leaders of His day as "blind men who try to lead blind men." (Matthew 15:12-14) At one point, He says "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing. But whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor.' You fools, and blind! Which is greater, the gold, or the temple that makes the gold set apart to God?" (Matthew 23:16-17) They were using the world's logic to create a loophole to justify swearing falsely. You can imagine how outrageous this is to God, because His Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit of Truth, not loopholes. (Isaiah 11:2, John 14:16-17) Finding ways to justify lies and other unholy behavior keeps everyone in the dark, including ourselves. As Proverbs 4:19 says, "The wicked are like those who walk in darkness - they don't know what they're tripping over."

If your brother is irritated by guilt because of something in his life, finding a way to justify that thing is not helpful. Guilt is a way our conscience warns us that we're outside of God's will. Dismissing it as "silly," "overkill," or "religious OCD," detaches us from our conscience and sears it shut. (1 Timothy 4:1-2, 1 Kings 13:1-24) When we close off our conscience to God, we can't learn anything from Him. His ways are so much higher than our ways. (Isaiah 55:9, Romans 11:33) If we're feeling guilty because we're rich, it's not just because we're rich. It's because our conscience knows that someone we could help doesn't have their needs met, and we know it's unfair to indulge ourselves while others starve. (Deuteronomy 29:18-20, Luke 16:19-31) Our excess can be used to help others have what they need, bringing us fulfillment and relief from guilt. (Proverbs 19:17, Luke 3:10-11) Guilt isn't meant to be silenced, it's meant to be turned into joy and wisdom by following God's word.

Jesus warns us that learning from spiritually blind men will only teach us how to wind up in a spiritual ditch. He says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You cross land and sea to make one convert, and when he is made, you make him twice a child of hell as yourselves!" (Matthew 23:15) But if we look to our Lord for wisdom, not only will we do the works that He did, but greater works, because He has gone to the Father. (John 14:12)

The Rich Young Ruler

"When Jesus began His journey again, a man came running, and knelt to him, asking, 'Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus replied, 'Why do you call Me good? There is only one who is good, God. You know the commandments. Do not commit adultery. Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother.' And the man answered, 'Master, I have followed all of these from my youth.' Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, 'You lack one thing. Go back, sell what you have, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, take up the cross, and follow Me.'

"The man was sad when he heard this, and went away distressed, for he owned much. And Jesus turned, and said to His disciples, 'How hard it is for those with riches to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus replied again, 'Children, how hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' And they were utterly astonished, saying among themselves, 'Who then can be saved?' And Jesus, looking on them, said, 'With men it is impossible, but not with God, for with God all things are possible.'" (Mark 10:17-27)

People who had the Mosaic Law kept asking Jesus this question in one form or another. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is the greatest commandment?" (Matthew 22:35-40) It's as if they knew something was wrong because of a twinge of conscience. Keeping laws doesn't necessarily mean our heart is in the right place. God sees mankind as a family. The imbalance of power between people has created much injustice. I think deep down our conscience knows this.

Riches are a surplus that is meant to fill a deficit. Not everything God gives us is for us. (Isaiah 58:6-8) Faithfulness requires a level of maturity. God takes a calculated risk when He trusts a person with riches. We're to take care of those with pressing needs, but having excess can change a person's heart. The one trusted to be responsible may choose to indulge himself, shirking his responsibility. In our culture, it's become acceptable to look out for ourselves and refuse to be our brother's keeper. (Genesis 4:9, Acts 5:1-10) Most people barely take care of their parents and children anymore. How much less do they love their neighbor as themselves!

When we indulge excess, we lose our capacity for suffering. It's hard to climb out of the spiritually empty pits we create with our excess. The rich young ruler was very sad imagining life without his comforts. He had a long way to go to learn what life was like bearing a cross. If we don't recognize God as the giver of our wealth, we'll be tempted to believe that our surplus is for our own relief, rather than the relief of those who have a deficit. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Luke 16:19-26) Our Lord is trying to recruit people who will allow blessings to flow through them, not just to them. Everything we're directed to do for the kingdom either promotes benefit or stops harm. When I turn the other cheek, I ensure that the negativity stops with me. (Matthew 5:38-39) When blessing comes into my life, and it's more than I need, I'm to be a conduit for that positivity. (Luke 12:33, Isaiah 58:9-12) That's what God wants to see from us as those created in His image.

Serpents and Doves

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. For this reason, be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matthew 10:16)

To be wise as a serpent is to stay out of sight and out of mind when doing the Lord's work. (Matthew 5:16, Ecclesiastes 12:13-14) There is no reward in heaven for things we are paid for on earth, even if we're only paid with attention. Matthew 6:1-4 says, "Remember not to give charitably to be noticed by others, otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. When you give charity, don't call attention to yourself as a hypocrite does, so they may have glory from men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so your gift may be in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly himself." Another reason our good works shouldn't call attention to us is because it reduces the likelihood that someone will try to stop us out of bias or envy. (Mark 15:9-10) When we do things God's way, we get more mileage for the kingdom. (Psalm 25:9)

The Bible makes a difference between a harmless garden snake and a venomous viper. (compare Matthew 23:33 with Matthew 10:16) To be like the shrewd serpent in this parable, we should abstain from venomous speech such as cursing and lying. (Psalm 109:17, Ephesians 4:25) It's also wise to avoid vain and foolish talk. (Ephesians 5:3-4) Being shrewd as a serpent also involves being silent. This can mean keeping the secrets of others (Leviticus 19:16, Proverbs 11:13), or keeping your problems with others confidential. (Proverbs 25:9-10, Matthew 18:15) Being silent due to your immediate surroundings is another good way to protect yourself from the wolves. (Luke 23:8-11)

To be innocent as a dove is to respect the boundaries of others, and to be harmless. Doves are also known to be helpful, like the one that brought Noah an olive leaf to show him that the waters of the flood were subsiding. (Genesis 8:11) To be innocent as a dove includes our dress and our speech. If we're provoking others to vain and immoral thinking with immodesty or dark, crude humor, we're tearing the kingdom down rather than building it up. (Proverbs 14:1, Proverbs 7:6-23, Galatians 5:19-23) The world we create is the one we leave for our children. It's important that we leave the earth better than how we found it.

The beautiful balance Jesus shows us between being wise and being harmless will help us stay on the path regardless of the world and our own flesh coming against us. As Paul says in Romans 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Spiritual Swine

"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and don't cast your pearls before swine, otherwise they will trample them under their feet, turn around, and tear you to pieces." (Matthew 7:6)

The kosher laws teach us what kind of logic is safe to digest. Pigs are "unclean" because though they "part the hoof," they do not "chew the cud." (Leviticus 11:7) Jesus draws us a spiritual picture of those who know the law and can discern between good and evil, but who don't ruminate on truth in order to make it part of their core being. It's just an outer layer of pretense, which, like fat, will make them too puffed up for the narrow gate that leads into the coming kingdom. (Matthew 7:13-14, James 5:4-5, Micah 3:11-12)

One way people fatten themselves with the truth rather than strengthening themselves with it, is to skew it just enough that it works in their favor. The religious leaders in Jesus' day were teaching that only God forgave sins, and that it required making a sacrifice in the temple. This was convenient for them, since they were supported by the purchase of these sacrifices, and ate from them after performing the sacrificial rites. (Numbers 18:9-10, Mark 2:6-7, 1 Corinthians 9:13, Ezekiel 22:25, Matthew 23:14, Matthew 21:12-13) They didn't honor the law of Moses enough to admit that it required them to forgive. (Leviticus 19:18, Hosea 6:6, Proverbs 19:11)

Jesus said, "It's not what goes into a man that makes him unclean, it's what comes out." (Mark 7:9-15) Our words prove what we have accepted as truth in our hearts. (Psalm 19:14) When we withhold some of God's word from our way of life, we can't help but be imbalanced and unjust. (James 1:22-25, Isaiah 58:1-8) If you feel convicted by this parable, there's a way to correct it! Stop feeding your inner pig, and start feeding your inner sheep. When you find a truth, instead of telling everybody about it, get yourself to do it first. Go through the process of incorporating that truth into every aspect of your life, whether it's listening to your conscience, being careful about giving all your tithe, making sure all your business is honest, or making sure that your humor is clean. Whatever truth you discover, use it to build the kingdom in your life. That will give you a strong foundation under everything. That little bit of leaven that leavens the whole lump can be a good thing! (Matthew 13:33, Galatians 5:9, Proverbs 6:20-23) The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Life that you can make part of how you think, how you speak, and how you interact with people.

So many of us are brought up to believe things that are opposed to God's beautiful logic of equality. The most deadly belief is thinking that if we are able to control what others do, we don't need to control ourselves. (Matthew 23:1-12, Ezekiel 34:18-19, Romans 2:21) Living the truth, instead of just teaching it, helps us to have compassion for others when they fail. 1 Corinthians 8:1 says "Knowledge puffs us up, but charity builds us up."

Spiritual Dogs

If you've ever been the companion of someone who's always straining at the leash, asking you if something is "alright" when they want a pleasure, knowing it will cause some harm, then you see what it's like to be with someone who fits the description of a spiritual "dog."

The kosher laws tell us that the dog is unclean because he "doesn't part the hoof," nor does he "chew the cud." Additionally, he is a four-footed beast that "goes on his paws", which also makes him unclean. (Leviticus 11:26-27) Animals that don't divide the hoof represent those who don't discern good from evil using the rule "avoid harm and pursue benefit." Those lines are blurred by avoiding pain and pursuing pleasure. (1 Timothy 5:6, Jeremiah 2:23-25)

This is how most of us begin life. A carnal man without God's Spirit is not much different than a dog. Until we trust our Master, we don't accept training, and can't be trusted with too much responsibility. (1 Corinthians 3:2-3, Exodus 32:7-9) Animals with paws don't naturally have clean hands. (Psalm 24:3-4) If you let them cross a boundary once, you may never be able to train them to respect it.

Even in ancient times, dogs have been used to help guard sheep. Those of us who identify with a dog's nature more than a sheep's can see in creation that even a dog can love his Master enough to accept His logic, and become an important member of the kingdom of God. When we understand God's Spirit toward the harmless and the weak, we can make that Spirit our own and overcome the temptation to use our advantages selfishly. (Psalm 82, Luke 7:21)

Because a dog is so much like a wolf, he can predict how and where they will attack. So in the same way, those of us who were raised by spiritual wolves can use our advantage to guard the kingdom with a little more savvy than your average sheep. (Psalm 124, Deuteronomy 29:14-18, Philippians 3:1-7)

A Phoenician woman once came to Jesus. and asked that He heal her daughter. Jesus replied, "Let the children be fed first. It's not right to take the children's bread, and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:24-27) His statement seemed adversarial, but the woman only agreed with Him, calling Him "Lord," and saying, "Yet even the little dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs." (Mark 7:28, Proverbs 12:10, Matthew 6:26) If you identify with a spiritual dog today, you can see from this woman's example that humility and agreeing with truth go a long way with our Master. (John 18:37, Micah 6:8)

Spiritual Wolves

"Beware of deceptive advisors who come to you in sheep's clothing, but on the inside they are ravenous wolves. You can tell what they really are by what they produce. Do men gather grapes from a thorn bush, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:15-16)

Spiritual wolves are not easy to spot. They stay camouflaged in the tall grass of their tall tales. (John 8:44) They pretend to be just like you. They praise themselves. (Proverbs 20:6) They offer false admiration to lure you close enough to be devoured. They give untrue reports of their friends in order to isolate them from their loved ones. Their advice is only given to put them in power over your life. They use their mouths to hurt others with blame and judgment, usually just inside the shadow of a vague or fake compliment. They reveal secrets as easily as a wolf tears open its prey. Virtue signaling, gossip and flattery are the tools of their trade. (2 Peter 2:3)

One difference between a dog and a wolf is that a wolf is never the sheep's friend. (Matthew 10:16, Micah 7:2) A wolf is not unified in spirit with people of faith. (Habakkuk 2:4-5, 2 Peter 2:12-17) A wolf doesn't distinguish between what is family and what is food. (Ezekiel 22:25-27, Romans 1:28-32) When the Apostle Paul warns the Philippians to beware of "evil workers," he's referring to the type of people who would be considered wolves. (Philippians 3:2, Micah 3:2-5) A wolf has often been predatory all his or her life. (Psalm 58:3-5, Proverbs 20:11) Wolves revel in how clever they are as they sneak up on easy prey. (Isaiah 10:12-17) Adulterous women are compared to wolves and other beasts who devour their fellow human. (Proverbs 6:26, Proverbs 7:21-27)

Those who share God's word for social position, attention, and money, are the most deceptive kind of wolves. They have no problem teaching the widow to fatten their wallets with her last two cents. (Mark 12:38-44, Ephesians 5:5-6, Micah 3:5-7) They may feed on God's Word with us, but in reality it's us they're looking to feed on. They steal wise sayings from their victims. (Matthew 12:34, Psalm 50:16) Some even hire sheep to write their speeches. (Romans 16:17-18) If we would refuse to feed the pigs and dogs our pearls of wisdom, we would not have so many of them becoming wolves with convincing sheep clothes. (Psalm 39:1, Matthew 7:6, Matthew 25:8-9) Wolves talk the talk, but they don't walk the walk. (Matthew 23:1-3, Isaiah 56:10-11) Some get into your inner circle by what they claim is, "special knowledge." Their special knowledge either has no bearing on how a person lives, or it directly contradicts Jesus' teaching. (1 Timothy 1:7, Colossians 2:18, Jeremiah 23:21-22) They don't promote the truth with love. (1 Timothy 6:3-5) Your "inner sheep" isn't brought out by their teaching. (John 10:1-5, Psalm 95:6-8) It's chased away and destroyed. (Matthew 23:15, Matthew 24:12-13, Jeremiah 50:17, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Proverbs 13:20)

When you realize you see a spiritual wolf, don't ignore it. Jesus gives us directions for how to navigate and expel our own inner wolves and those of others. (Matthew 18:7-9, 1 Corinthians 10:13) Do not let them lure you into their trap by baiting you into behaving like a wolf yourself. Whether they're provoking or encouraging you, just be silent. (Matthew 12:36, Isaiah 53:7, Luke 23:9, Psalm 34:13, Psalm 39:1, James 1:26)

Servants of the Master

"But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say to him as soon as he comes in from the field, 'Go and sit down to eat?' Won't he say to him instead, 'Make ready my dinner, and gird yourself, and serve me, until I have eaten and drunk, and after this you shall eat and drink?' Does he thank that servant, because he did the things that were commanded him? I don't believe so. In the same way, when you have done all those things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done that which was our duty to do.'" (Luke 17:7-10)

The purpose of Biblical slavery is completely separate from the atrocities people have committed against one another in American slavery. What Jesus is showing us here is what it takes for the apprentice to become like his Master. (Luke 6:40, Matthew 5:48, Psalm 17:15) When we're in training meant to transform our spirit, we have to stick to the program. Becoming people of love, duty, and purpose requires our undivided attention. Through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:21-22, Job 19:21-27)

Spiritual plowing is understanding how to soften a man's heart to receive the Good News of God's forgiveness. (Jeremiah 4:3-4) There are many ways to do this, but one of the best ways is through words that convict and inspire each other, breaking through our stony hearts and stuffy minds to prepare us to bear good fruit for God. (Proverbs 20:5, Luke 3:7-11) Isaiah 2:4 says, "They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore." That's what we need to do with our mouths. Most of us start out using our mouths to stab and slice those around us when we get frustrated or angry. (James 3:6-8, Psalm 64:2-3) We need to beat that sword into a plowshare that can reach into ourselves and our neighbor and make us both able to receive God's Spirit. (Acts 2:36-41, Isaiah 2:3, Hebrews 4:12)

Tending cattle is overseeing that people's physical and spiritual needs are met. (1 Peter 5:1-3, Ezekiel 34:2) We do these jobs for the Lord, and when we do them in a spirit of love and duty to our Master, we've provided Him the refreshment that comes from having a dedicated student. (1 Samuel 15:22, James 2:23-24) God needs us to be servants who don't waste life doing things our own way while He's trying to make us ready to inherit the kingdom.

To recognize ourselves as unprofitable, is to admit our need for the Spirit of love and free favor that God provides, so that those we serve are blessed, and not lorded over or made to feel lesser because they need help. (Mark 10:42-45, Psalm 119:176, Proverbs 11:2) In Luke 12:36, Jesus says, "Be like men who wait for when their lord returns from the wedding, so that they can open to him immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the lord finds watching when he comes. Truly I say to you, He will invite them to the dinner table, and gird Himself, and serve them." May we always remember that this life of self-sacrifice has a very blessed ending. (Psalm 37:37-40)

Burying the Dead

"And Jesus said to another person, 'Follow Me.' But he said, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.'" (Luke 9:59-60)

The words that Jesus speaks to us are spirit, and they are life. (John 6:63) We're told in 1 Timothy 5:6 that those who live in pleasure are dead while they live. Our purpose on earth is to promote life, not simply pleasure, at any price. (Luke 10:25-37, Proverbs 19:17) Jesus is calling this man out from his worldly family and into his heavenly family. For those of us who experience natural affection and familial bonds, this can be very hard regardless of how damaging our families can be. But Jesus knows when someone's crossed over from ignorance to willful foolishness, and when those people put our souls at risk of death. (1 Samuel 16:6-7, Hebrews 4:12-13)

To have the river of life (which is God's word) flowing out of us, we have to let it flow into us. If what's flowing into us is the logic of people who live lusting for power and pleasure, we're like a polluted spring. We'll only harm others with our logic and our advice. As 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "Be not deceived - bad company corrupts good morals." (Ezekiel 34:18-19) Jesus explained to us that our true family is with those who do the will of our Father in heaven. God's will is that the world should know Him, and be united with Him in love, in purpose, and in truth.

Proverbs 13:20 says, "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed." If we're going to fulfill our purpose, we need to stay connected to God and each other. The New Covenant is like the old, and even like the Garden of Eden, in that two choices are always before us - life or death. God pleads with us to choose life, that we and our children may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19, Genesis 2:16-17, John 3:16-21)

The Sign of Jonah

"Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, 'Master, we wish to see a sign from you.' But Jesus answered, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and will not be given any, except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'" (Matthew 12:38-40)

Jesus says a wicked and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, and no sign will be given it. They don't receive a sign because only faith allows one to believe a sign. It's our faith that saves us. (Luke 7:47-50, Genesis 15:3-6) These men were unfaithful to the covenant of Mount Sinai. (Exodus 20:12, Mark 7:9-13) They didn't care that one born blind was made to see, or that the crippled were made to walk. (Matthew 11:4-6) They wanted their own evidence. James tells us in James 4:3, "You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, that you may spend it on your lusts." (Isaiah 58:3-4)

God is not a cosmic candy machine. (Isaiah 1:13-15) He wants to see us avoid harm and pursue eternal benefit. Our culture is more interested in pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. If you've ever seen a newborn baby slapped so he'll take his first breath, you understand that sometimes pain helps us avoid harm. These men who wanted a sign were asking Jesus to prove He was the Messiah before they would listen to Him, in spite of all the miracles He did for others in full view of them. They wanted a free favor, in much the same way Judas was looking for a quick thirty pieces of silver when He betrayed our Lord. (Matthew 26:14-16) Jesus despised being manipulated by people with selfish motives. (Matthew 22:15-18) Here He calls them "wicked and adulterous."

The world has been given the sign of Jonah through the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. (Isaiah 52:10-53:12) Still however, some will not believe. In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus told us of a rich man who found himself in hell, because he was self-indulgent and neglected his duty to his neighbor, Lazarus. When the rich man is told why he's in hell, he realizes his five brothers will also suffer his fate. Then he asks that Lazarus be sent back for their sake! The rich man tries to convince Abraham, his ancestor in heaven, that if someone goes back from the dead to warn them, his brothers will be reformed. Abraham says, "If they will not hear Moses and the prophets, they will not repent even if someone returned from the dead."

From the beginning of His ministry to the end, it was proclaimed that Jesus would die and rise again. When it happened, His closest disciples took up their cross and followed Him. There are still a few people who won't acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth ever walked the earth, but if you look at the evidence, it's clear that He did, and that there were many people of His day who gave up everything in order to inherit the promise of heaven that they knew He could deliver on. (Mark 10:28-31) If you're breathing, you still have time to open your heart to God in truth and humility. If you've never seen His work in your life, know that Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe." (John 20:29, Job 23:8-10) Tell Him you're sorry for not listening to the conscience He gave you. Thank Him for all your blessings. If all you've got to thank Him for is your life, thank Him for that, and let His peace transform your heart. (Colossians 3:14-17, Isaiah 26:3)

The Temptation of Christ, part 1

"Then was Jesus led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He was afterward hungry. And when the tempter came to Him, he said, 'If you be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.'"
(Matthew 4:1-3)

Our Messiah went through a time of temptation immediately after His baptism. The book of Matthew tells us this came after He was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. Matthew 4:1-10 reveals the four major temptations of the Christian.

Self-promotion for the Christian is different from self-promotion in the world, in that it often doesn't stem from pride. This first temptation came to Jesus in the enemy's statement, "If you are the Son of God..." This reminds me of the Pharisees seeking for a sign, because it didn't matter what Jesus was doing for anybody else, they wanted Jesus to obey them. (Matthew 12:38-39) When someone holds our reputation suspect, or suggests we are unworthy, we want to prove our abilities. If we do this in a way that goes against what God wants from us, we've become obedient to the adversary. (Proverbs 6:1-5, Proverbs 11:15) Adversaries don't deserve our obedience. It's not going to prove us righteous to back up something foolish. In attempting to stand up for ourselves against the naysayers, we inadvertently give them power over us, and that power belongs to God. 1 Corinthians 10:13 reminds us, "No temptation has overtaken you but those common to men. God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted more than you're able to bear, but with the temptation will also make a way of escape, so you may be able to overcome it." The apostle Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time." Jesus assures us in Luke 14:11 that everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Micah 6:8)

There's a form of manipulation that's even more subtle, and it often happens in the home. It's where the Christian is encouraged to be "helpful" by exercising their abilities that would "prove them a true Christian." If you're being asked to sin or support sin just a little in order to make it easier for the wolf to not sin greatly, you have to realize that feeding yourself to a wolf will not help him be less of a wolf. You're the sacrifice on the altar of his god, and God will still not be glorified. (Jeremiah 32:35) Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them, and turn, and tear you apart." (Matthew 7:6) As much as we'd like to be helpful, even a little sin will not help a person have the clear conscience he needs in order to connect with God.

The Temptation of Christ, part 2

"The tempter came to Jesus, saying, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.' But Jesus replied, 'It is written, man will not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:3-4, see also Deuteronomy 8:3)

The tempter tried to trick Jesus into obeying him through His appetite. Our love is like food to God. It satisfies His desire to see love in the world. When there's no one good, and God is starving for children to bless, but we're busy hating one another, the temptation is to either consume us or save us anyway. (Micah 7:1-2) Neither of these were God's plan. (Matthew 5:17, Ezekiel 11:19-21) To turn "stones to bread," would be to consume the stone tablet covenant under Moses. (Exodus 24:12, 2 Corinthians 3:3, Luke 19:37-40) The destruction of the Mosaic Law would absolve even Satan himself from guilt. As the Son of God, Jesus could also enforce the conditions of the covenant and consume the people for their sins. (Leviticus 26:15-16, Malachi 3:6, Luke 9:52-56) As parents, we also have to be on guard against the temptation to neglect or overly enforce the rules that keep our family safe and sane. Our Messiah came to offer Himself in sacrifice in order to show us how to love. (Isaiah 53, John 13:15, John 15:13) Romans 12:1 says this is also wise to do. Jesus is the Word of God incarnate. He came to change the stone tablet law into the Bread of Life. (John 6:35) That's why He can say, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life." (John 6:54) We learn how to love by consuming His logic, making His heart our heart, in order to nourish and cherish each other and our world. When we take damage in order to show mercy, rather than demanding our rights, we prove that we trust God to meet our needs. (1 Corinthians 6:7, Deuteronomy 32:35) 1 Peter 4:1 tells us, "He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin."

When only Noah produced anything for God's enjoyment, God swept everything evil off the earth by flood. Jesus once said, "if the mighty works, which have been done in you (Capernaum), had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day." (Matthew 11:23) I'm certain we're far worse today, and I'm sure that's why open miracles are so rare in our country. (Matthew 5:8, 1 Samuel 3:1, Exodus 33:20, 2 Peter 2:20-21) The pandemic alone qualifies us for the passage in Ezekiel 14:12-20 that says, "If they sin so that I send a plague on the land, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness." Jesus says that when He returns, one will be taken and one will be left. Though He may spare our city while we're in it, He fully intends to bring us out. (2 Peter 3:9-14, Luke 17:26-37)

If we give God our mouths through the holiness of a changed heart, we can rule with Him. (Jeremiah 15:19, James 3:2) Remember God's words to Abraham, that He would not destroy Sodom if there were ten righteous people in the city. (Genesis 18:32) Our duty to our fellow man is to stay holy and humble so our prayers for them can be answered. (Isaiah 1:15, 1 Peter 3:7, John 9:30-31, Acts 2:40) If we're consuming God's word and making it one with us, He will not consume us. Our love is evidence to our fellow man that they can taste and see that the Lord is good. (Psalm 34:8, John 13:35). God is counting on us to show our neighbors the path of love and mercy, so they can follow it and be saved.

The Temptation of Christ, part 3

"Then the devil took Jesus up into the holy city, and set Him on a pinnacle of the temple. And he said to Him, 'If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down, for it is written, He will command His angels concerning you, and in their hands they will bear you up, to keep you from dashing your foot against a stone at any time.' Jesus said to him, 'It is written again, you will not tempt the Lord your God.'" (Matthew 4:5-7)

This third temptation is one the enemy uses to lead us in the wrong direction. In the world, we feel significance and belonging when we're praised for our external gifts and abilities. But as Christians, we may just want God to pay attention to our basic physical and emotional needs. When we're kids, if we don't crave the center of our parents' attention, we're liable to die or accidentally kill ourselves. As adults, if this craving doesn't subside to make room for everyone's need for significance and belonging, we may be tempted to threaten to kill ourselves as a form of manipulation. Jesus was taken to the pinnacle of God's temple, and the pinnacle of this temptation. This lets us see exactly what the devil is up to when he gets a person desperate for attention. Our Messiah's hungry flesh was screaming that He didn't matter to God. The devil tempted him to take extreme action to get God's attention. Jesus' need for food was neglected in order to strengthen His ability to trust that even without physical blessings, He could be fed on God's word and live. (Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3, Habakkuk 3:17-19)

We all have an emotional need for evidence that we matter. Once the beast has grown beyond the boundaries of love, though, its hunger never stops. (Proverbs 6:26, Ecclesiastes 5:10, Mark 15:9-14) It becomes a gnawing emptiness which a person will do just about anything to try and fill. This isn't healthy for anyone involved. When attention is our god, we will degrade ourselves and anyone in our company to feed it. Everyone gets ripped off except the devil.

Matthew 6:1-4 reminds us that this hunger to be the center of attention can also lead us to forget that love is the job we were made for. It's the purpose for our existence. Even our good deeds, if they are done to serve our desire to be the center of attention, will cause us to lose the rewards of being truly loving. Love connects us to people. It makes life fulfilling, and makes eternal life worth living. Worldly attention glorifies one person over another. When we're the person being glorified, it can lead us into hypocrisy. According to Jesus' words in Luke 12:1, even well-deserved attention from our peers can feel so fulfilling that hypocrisy can become a temptation in order to keep a constant supply. Jeremiah 9:23-24 says, "This is what the Lord says. Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich glory in his riches, but let him that glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, who acts with gracious love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, says the Lord."

The Temptation of Christ, part 4

"Again, the devil took Jesus up into an exceedingly high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them. And he said to Jesus, 'I will give you all these things, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Get away, adversary, for it is written, you will worship the Lord your God, and Him only will you serve.'" (Matthew 4:8-10)

The temptation of seeking personal power, is one that we humans have the worst time with. Power tempts the human mind to think that one is elite, chosen, or somehow better and therefore more deserving of good. The rich man in Luke 16:19-20 is one example. He cheered himself daily, even though his neighbor Lazarus was suffering to the point of death. Luke 18:10-14 shares another instance of the elitist of the ancients. The partisan, or Pharisee, is said to pray to himself, "God, I thank you, that I am not like other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector here. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess." Proverbs 26:12 reads, "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." When our Lord said we were to "love our neighbor as ourselves," He was teaching us what God wants to see in His family. He tells us in Matthew 25:40 that whatever good we do for "the least of these, His brothers," we've done for Him. Glorifying in our own nature, nurture, or opportunity is like the person who is proud of a gift, and ignorant of the giver. (Hosea 10:1, James 1:17, John 3:27, Romans 12:3) 1 Corinthians 4:7 says, "For who makes you different from another, and what do you have that you did not receive? Now, if you received it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" 1 Peter 4:10 encourages us to use our gifts to serve others rather than to imagine ourselves as better than others. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

Understanding what tempts us to sin can also help us see why someone is sinning against us. Rather than judging our fellow man, these truths can help us know how to pray, and how to get the beam out of our own eye so we can see clearly to help our brother with the speck in his. (Matthew 7:3-5, Ecclesiastes 7:21-22)

However, there are people who are prone to lead us into temptation. Jesus gives us this warning in Matthew 24:12-13, "Because lawlessness abounds, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be saved." If a person who sins against us is allowed to continue without us confronting it, he not only risks hell, but he may take us with him. (2 Peter 2:18, Proverbs 2:10-19) The parable in Matthew 5:29-30 teaches us that people who encourage us to sin should not be part of our inner circle. The words of our Messiah here say, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out, and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members, than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off, and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members, than that your whole body go into hell." Even if a person is so necessary as to be considered your "right-hand man," if this person encourages you to unholy behavior, they are putting your soul at risk. Anyone who knowingly does this is not truly a part of the body of Christ, and needs to be removed from our company and our service. (Deuteronomy 13:1-11) It may be hard, but from experience, it's worth it. It's much easier to stay on God's path and experience His joy once we're free of people who try to lead us into sin. (Nehemiah 8:10, Proverbs 22:24-25, 1 John 5:2-4, Matthew 4:11)

A House Divided

"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a house divided against itself falls. If Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say that I cast out demons through the prince of demons. And if I, by the prince of demons, cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if I with the finger of God cast out demons, no doubt the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man armed keeps his palace, his goods are in peace. But when one stronger than him comes upon him, and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor that he trusted in, and divides his goods. He that is not with Me is against Me, and he that gathers not with Me scatters."
(Luke 11:17-23)

Jesus is explaining to us our condition in regard to ourselves and the spirit realm. As people of flesh, we enjoy rest more than work, fullness more than emptiness, and pleasure more than pain. You can see how we're already in conflict with ourselves. Though Satan's objectives and desires are certainly as misguided as our own, it's ludicrous to think he would oust himself from property he'd worked to conquer. Satan's in the business of conquering human lives. (1 Peter 5:8, Job 1:6-12) I can only imagine this is from envy.

Regardless of how strong and resolved a person is, we all have weaknesses, and Satan exploits those weaknesses in order to hijack our lives. We may think we're the strong man guarding our house, but eventually we're tempted in a way that leads us off the path of life. The good things about us are destroyed. Satan plunders our house so that we're of no earthly good either to ourselves or to our loved ones. (1 Corinthians 10:20, Jeremiah 32:35) For those who are taken over in a way that keeps them from doing what they want, like the woman who hates herself for buying heroin instead of her children's food, they know they need a helpful higher power. For those who sell their soul and lose their inner sheep to the wolves of pride, lust, pleasure, and power, they feel their unity with the enemy is the strong man guarding their house. (Isaiah 28:14-19) They should understand that on the day of judgment, one stronger than them will plunder their house. (Jeremiah 25:30-33, Luke 17:26-30)

Jesus said that all who came before Him were thieves and robbers, but that He came to bring us life, and that more abundantly. (John 10:7-10) Our Creator's objectives are not misguided and divided, and so we can trust Him to promote what's best for us, and be the strength in our weakness. (Isaiah 55:6-9, Mark 10:18, Philippians 4:13) To become like little children is to recognize our need for this helpful higher power God offers us through His Holy Spirit. We unite with the Holy Spirit by believing God's word. Uniting with the Holy Spirit helps us behave like members of the family. We look out for more than just ourselves, so that we are safe to bless with God's power, and worthy of His protection. (Isaiah 58:6-8, John 15:7-11) All of us fail to stay on God's path at some point, but what makes us worthy is showing mercy to others when they fail, and humbly seeking forgiveness when we fail. (Psalm 51:10-11, Proverbs 19:11, Luke 6:37, James 5:19-20)

Not Peace, but a Sword

"Don't think I came to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I have come to divide a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's foes will be they of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me isn't worthy of Me, and he who loves son or daughter more than Me isn't worthy of Me. He that does not take up his cross and follow Me, isn't worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." (Matthew 10:34-39, see also Matthew 12:25, Micah 7:6)

It's hard to imagine that you could dedicate your life to doing what's best for everyone, and have the world come against you for it. But when we put spiritual needs above worldly desires, everyone's flesh, even our own, begins to rebel. (Romans 7:21-25, Psalm 51:1-3, Galatians 5:17-26) Our lifestyle, our financial choices, the people we hang out with, everything changes. Our loved ones who are not on board with our changes begin to pull in the opposite direction.

I heard a wise parent once say as he was having such a conflict with one of his children, "I know you hate me now, but you're going to love me for this ten years from now." As Christians, we have to be willing to sacrifice short-term peace and pleasure (without sinning in doing so) in order to keep ourselves and our children on God's path. (Proverbs 22:6, Ephesians 6:1-4) We have to think about our own and our children's character development. Bad company corrupts good morals, which is why we have to keep ourselves from being bad company, and why we have to be willing to let go of those who are a bad influence on us. (1 Corinthians 15:33, Proverbs 13:20)

It's God's will that we love our precious family as much as we love ourselves. Still, our Messiah tells us that we must love Him even more than all. This is because of the conflict we humans have with our flesh. (Romans 1:28-32, Matthew 10:37-38, Micah 7:2-5) If we give in to our loved ones' fleshly lusts, and disregard their spiritual needs, we will keep causing harm to God's creation. We'll be irresponsible with everything God's invested in us; what we let ourselves see, hear, think, speak and indulge. Jesus wants us to stop being the source of suffering, especially for the good of the world's children. In the book of Jonah, God spared Nineveh when they repented, since He only needed them to stop hurting each other. There were children and animals counting on them. (Jonah 4:10-11, Ezekiel 18:32, Matthew 18:10-11) Our Father takes no pleasure in causing suffering. Suffering consequences helps us see what is outside of God's best for our lives.

Proverbs 20:6 says, "Many people will say they are loyal, but who can find a trustworthy man?" (Jude 1:3-13) It's important to look at what a person does, not just what they say about themselves. If you feel unreasonably drained, angry, embarrassed or flattered while you're talking with someone new, a relationship with them is probably not going to be healthy. Also, a trustworthy person doesn't give out anybody's secrets. They offer empathy rather than criticizing those in the wrong. If you've been the target of abuse, seek and support those who help you feel nourished and cherished. Don't be so allergic to pity that you reject sympathy. A faithful person can ask for and receive a faithful friend. (Mark 10:29-30, Psalm 37:4) You can trust the Lord for that. (Matthew 21:22)

Treasures in Heaven

"Don't lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in or steal. For where your treasure is, your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

God's word reminds us that we came into this world with nothing, and we can take nothing out. (Job 1:21, 1 Timothy 6:7) But human souls are not things. The book of Daniel says, "Those who turn many to righteousness will shine as the stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:3) James also tells us, "If any of you strays from the truth, and someone converts him, let him know that he saves a soul from death, and hides a multitude of sins." (James 5:19-20) Peter and Proverbs tell us that love covers a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8, Proverbs 10:12) To cover sins is to pay for them so the debt is no longer owed. Proverbs tells us, "He who pities the poor lends to the Lord, and that which he has given, God will pay him again." (Proverbs 19:17)

We aren't going to be free of making mistakes in this life. They are part of our human frailty. If we love one another in spite of this, we become the meek that will inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5, Psalm 37:11) Our lives admit that "there but for the grace of God, go I." (1 Corinthians 15:9-10) Whatever strengths and material things we have are gifts from God. Our surplus is for filling another's deficit. God sees us as a family, and he's made us to work together. (Job 29:15, Philippians 2:4)

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God has told us to give to the poor to earn treasure in heaven and make up for our unfairness, or "iniquity". When asked how to obtain eternal life, Jesus says to do this in the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:25-37) He says almost the same thing to the rich young ruler as well. (Mark 10:17-21) Giving is what king Nebuchadnezzar was told to do when the clock was ticking on his kingdom. (Daniel 4:27) The tithes were shared with the widow, the fatherless, and the Levite, and those who gave tithes in this way were blessed. (Deuteronomy 14:28-29) No greater love has a man than that he lay down his life for his friends. Jesus said, "You are my friends, if you do what I say." (John 15:13-14) If our blood is shed in the process of striving against sin, we've taken up our cross, and followed Jesus, just as He directed us to. (Matthew 16:24, Hebrews 12:4, 1 Peter 4:1, Leviticus 17:11)

Jesus warned us to beware of covetousness, because a man's life does not consist in what he owns. (Luke 12:15, Ecclesiastes 5:10) No one on their death bed says, "I wish I'd have spent more time making money." Our friends, neighbors, and loved ones, are true treasure. (Luke 23:39-43, Proverbs 31:10, Isaiah 19:23-25) Jesus says that the servant who invested his gifts best will be over ten cities. (Luke 19:16-17) If you care about ten cities worth of people in this life, doesn't it make sense that you would be the one to make sure their needs are met in the next? Jesus is showing us our opportunity to pour our hearts into those we love, so that when He comes back for us, our homes are not divided, where one is taken and one is left. (Luke 17:34-37) Let's not waste the time we've been given. We don't know how much time we have left. (Psalm 90:12, John 9:4)

Vipers

"You children of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For the mouth speaks what the heart is filled with." (Matthew 12:34)

Our mouth is our spiritual seed planter, and a viper is someone who harms others with their words. When you're listening to a hypocrite, you're not hearing what's really in their heart. You're hearing what's in the heart of their last victim. If you get anything good from a viper, it's because he picked it up for free somewhere else. (Jeremiah 23:30) Jesus saves this special term "viper" for those who mimic what is good, when in fact they are deadly. We have snakes that have no venom (Matthew 10:16), and we have the serpent on the pole (Numbers 21:9), but these people are mimics because they look like they're just going to "keep the mice out of your yard," but really they could take your life. You don't know that until they open their mouth. (Isaiah 59:4-5)

People's words are rarely shared solely for another person's benefit. We humans don't take great offense at this because we can love our neighbor as ourselves with our words. But we absolutely must beware people whose words are only for their own benefit. Proverbs 30:15 says, "The leech has two daughters, and they only know one word, 'Give!'" Jesus says the people that are going to be guilty of the greatest condemnation are those who pretended to be something helpful when in reality they were harmful. (Matthew 23:14)

When we're desperate due to whatever circumstances life has thrown at us, it's difficult to see why it's wrong to tear other people down with your words. I'm not suggesting that we be untruthful and let other people be harmed by the vipers that have harmed us. What I am saying is that Jesus shows us the guidelines as to how to approach being sinned against by someone we believe is our brother in the Lord. He says first, go to them in private and tell them how they've sinned against you. If your brother listens, you have won him back for the kingdom. We can't go around willfully sinning against each other, or even accidentally sinning against each other. Otherwise, someone's going to be accumulating damage, and too much damage equals death. It's our responsibility to confront people who sin against us, especially when they are part of our Christian family. But if our brother will not listen, then we should take one or two more. That's one or two more who will become acquainted with how we're being sinned against, and by who. We're not having a gossip session, we're having an intervention so that there's no friendly fire in God's army. And if that doesn't convince the person who has sinned against you, tell it to the church, and if he doesn't listen to the church, then you can know you are dealing with a viper. (Matthew 18:1-17, Proverbs 13:19) If someone hurts you and they're not sorry, staying to be hurt again is not a ministry. It's failing to love yourself. If we love our neighbor more than ourselves, we've put him in the stead of God. That's not good for anybody.

Written in Heaven or Earth

"They said to Him, 'Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us that this deserves stoning, but what do you say?' This they said, tempting Him, that they might accuse Him to the Romans. But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground." (John 8:4-6)

This woman's accusers expected Jesus to enforce the law of Moses, and the Jews at that time were not allowed to enforce the death penalty. (John 18:31) Yet here they were, asking for this woman's death in order to have something to accuse Jesus of. Jesus' response is to write in the ground, and then to stand up and say, "He who is among you without sin, cast the first stone at her." The Bible tells us in Exodus 34:6-7 that God is merciful, and Jeremiah 17:13 says, "Oh Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake you will be ashamed. They that depart from me will be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters."

There's a tradition in Judaism that if God knows your name, you will be saved for the age to come. This is noted in the Babylonian Talmud, when R. Jehoshua b. Levi speaks with Elijah after meeting the Messiah. Elijah explains that Jehoshua was assured a share for himself and his father in the world to come because the Messiah knew his name. When Jesus' disciples are rejoicing in the fact that they have authority over demons, He says "Rejoice not in this, but that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:17-20) In Biblical times, a name was a title of authority. It said what you did, where you came from, or who your parents were. To have your name written in heaven is to be remembered by God. (Malachi 3:16) But to have your name written in the earth is to have been released from His memory. In Luke 13:24-28, the ones who try to enter into the kingdom too late are told twice, "I do not know where you are from." We can also see in the story of Lazarus, that the rich man's name is not remembered. (Luke 16:19-31)

It's wise for us to give God power over our hearts and mouths every day, so that we're always choosing life with our words, and not death. (Proverbs 18:21, Colossians 4:6) God desires mercy, and not sacrifice. (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:10-13) Every time we open our mouths, we make a choice between the kind of spirit we're going to deliver our message with. We choose either the spirit of truth and love, or the spirit of lies and judgment. Thankfully, there's still time to choose life, and bring good into the world with our words.

Psalm 124:8 says, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." In Acts 4:10-12 we read, "There is no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved." It's in God's power to forgive us, and so He has the authority to write our names in heaven or in the earth. Taking God's logic into us and living by it marries us to Him, and He gives us His name. When we share God's logic with others, it's wise to remember that we're marrying them to Him. It's why we need to be gracious. We're not inviting them to a funeral, or trying to start a war. We're inviting them to the wedding feast. Isaiah 54:5 says, "For your maker is your husband. The Lord of armies is His name, and your rescuer, the Holy One of Israel, the God of the whole earth." (2 Corinthians 11:2)