



*Happy New Year!*

*I look forward to reading the New Testament with you this year. I encourage you to put your focus on Holy Scripture and read my thoughts with a secondary mindset. You will get the most benefit from the Word of God.*

*Feel free to reply to me with any questions you may have and, yes, I would like you to read the opening genealogy. Try to identify names you may know from your previous reading of the Bible. Just realize that Matthew is establishing Jesus' link to Abraham and then to David to establish His legal right to the throne of David predicted and promised in 2 Samuel 7.*

*I hope this year is full of rich blessings.*

*God's word is a goldmine of precious spiritual jewels,*

*Pastor Steve*

# Matthew



Day 1

## "...through the Holy Spirit"

January 1 - Matthew 1: 1-25

**H**ello and Welcome to the World of the New Testament, I have found that getting acquainted with God is both an adventure and a privilege. As we turn the pages of the New Testament we will be confronted with the words and works of God. There we are exposed to writing unlike any other in world history. On every page we are face to face with our Creator. What we do with that information will determine the kind of impact it has on our day to day lives. Those of you who already believe that God is working in your life know about the unusual experience of coming into contact with God. His Word is His vehicle to bring to you true spiritual experience. I hope you enjoy the ride.

From the time I was quite young I had wished that God could be known. I ignored the thought most of the time, thinking it was kind of a silly idea. I did have a Bible, but had no idea where to begin. Most begin in the beginning and make it a few chapters and then quit. Somehow I knew the Bible was a special book but honestly didn't know how to use it myself. In the mid-'70s I attended a church where the Bible was taught and, at that time, God turned the light on for me.

There are keys to understanding the Bible and I hope I can adequately communicate them to you. God's Word is like a lamp or a light and will bring you illumination like you would never believe could happen. Just the fact that God gave us His Word as a special letter to us is an eye opener and will deepen your appreciation for the blood, sweat and tears that

went into its production.

Essentially, the Bible is God's self-portrait. God reveals Himself in the leaves of His holy book. In it we are introduced to God's history, and we also find that God showed up on the planet in order to reveal Himself in flesh and blood. That's why the events in the opening chapter of Matthew's gospel entail such out of the ordinary circumstances. Here we have a virgin with child, angels, and the entrance of the Holy Spirit. In a book about God we should expect to meet language and characters that transcend our world. Jesus would later say that God is a Spirit and that those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and in Truth (John 4:24). It is the Holy Spirit who leads us down the pathway of spiritual life.

Right out of the gate we meet the three Persons who are revealed to us as the one true God. Take a look at verse 22 and allow me to comment within the verse as we read it: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord (here a reference to God the Father; whenever the generic name Lord or God is used apart from a definite connection with Jesus or the Holy Spirit, then we are talking about the Father) had said through the prophet, 'The virgin (Mary, the espoused wife of Joseph) will be with child and will give birth (through the Holy Spirit, verse 18) to a son (The Son, Jesus), and they will call him Immanuel' -- which means, 'God with us.'" Luke said: "And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.'" (1:35)

How could God do that? He's God, that's how. We

should expect God to be doing things that amaze us and surprise us. He wouldn't be God otherwise. We also ought to remember that an absolute knowledge of God is not a reasonable expectation. There is a sense in which God is incomprehensible.

He is way beyond us in every way -- in intellect, in power, in love, in scope, and so on. I ought to be thankful for what God has helped me to know about Him, but shouldn't presume that I will somehow have enough knowledge to fully understand the ways of One who has existed through all eternity. I hope that makes sense.

The exciting news is that the same Spirit who orchestrated the virgin birth is the same Lord who desires to inhabit our lives. We depend on the Spirit to

make the life and words of Jesus clear to us. He is like a matchmaker who desires to draw us close to Jesus. He is like an intercom so that we can hear the words of Jesus. And He is like a spotlight that puts the emphasis on Jesus. Hebrews 1 says: "God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the world" (1:1,2).

Right away Jesus is the subject of our reading. He will be from here on out.

God's blessings come in the power of the Holy Spirit,

Pastor Steve



Day 2

## "A Voice Is Heard In Ramah"

January 2 - Matthew 2: 1-18

**I**'ve never been a news junky like some people are. I know someone who flips back and forth between one news channel and another constantly. He loves to hear about the ins and outs of the day's news. Me? I can get along with the highlights. Whether it's the day's events or the sports, I am content with just snapshots of the day.

Much of the time, the Bible is written in snapshot form. We get the highlights of what was a very busy time in the life of God and the world. Think about the way the creation days are recorded: Day 1 -- light; Day 2 -- expanse; Day 3 -- land, etc. But think for a moment about all the variety and diversity in creation. Think about God's crowning achievement -- us. There was much more going on from God's perspective than meets the eye.

Some read the Bible and get the idea that the Christian life should be one miracle after another. That is not the way it is. We have many miracles recorded because they were the highlights of what was

otherwise an ordinary life for those who walked in the Bible days. We need to keep in mind as we read that the events were recorded so that we can know God, understand what He has done historically, and what He may, in the same character do today. The Apostle John said, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" (21:25). What we do have is sufficient for many purposes, but it is not an exhaustive record of all that God is or does.

Similarly, we need to be careful that we do not minimize the snapshots of the recorded events. As a matter of fact, we need to use other parts of the Bible that parallel what we are studying so that we can get as full a picture as possible. Some people like to say, flippantly, that the Bible is chock-full of errors and inaccuracies, but the truth is that the Bible is a wonderful tapestry of unified truth which leads to a unique relationship with the living and true God.

When we come to small passages it will be necessary for us to explore their meaning and application so that we can see them in the light of the whole Bible. This year as we explore the New Testament we need to keep in mind that the New Testament rests on the back of the first 39 books. Jesus Himself said that not one Old Testament verse would be left unfulfilled, and that you could trust the canon of Scripture without hesitation. It is up to us to follow Jesus and rest our faith on the truth of Scripture rather than the whimsies of men.

After Jesus was born, some came to worship Him and others sought to destroy Him. These attitudes would characterize the life and ministry of Jesus -- up to and including our present day. Even this past Christmas season there was much said about including or excluding Jesus from the festivities. Jesus continues to be the dividing line.

With the entire hubbub around the birth of the Savior, King Herod began to envy the Christ child. He decided to take care of the matter in his own barbaric way -- by slaughtering all of the youngsters 2 years old and younger. God intervened and He sent the young couple and their infant to Egypt. God had predicted that this would happen way back in Old Testament days (see Jeremiah 31:15 for the cross Bible reference).

"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel (Israel's wife) weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they were no more." Matthew 2:18

The loss of a child is always the hardest tragedy to handle. In this case many, many children were taken. Little did the parents know that they were the victims of a man bent on finding and killing the gift of God, the Lord Jesus. This event is described in Revelation

graphically: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars; and she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon...and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations..." (12: 1-5).

This small snapshot at the beginning of the gospel tells us so much: God is orchestrating the events all around the birth of His greatest gift to mankind.

Hundreds of years before the tragedy in Bethlehem area, God foretold that there would be an event like this.

The victims are called "Rachel's children" and are obviously Jews living in the days of Herod in the region of Bethlehem, the location of Rachel's death at the birth of her youngest son, Benjamin.

This event highlights the dangerous times in which Jesus was brought into the world. The same kind of violence that you might find on the streets of L.A. or Portland today existed back then, too.

The contrast between the Peace Child and the Wicked King puts us face to face with the same kind of world we live in today.

Do you hear a voice? Do you hear the weeping? Can you hear the marching of the soldiers as they search for the small children? Jesus was on His way to Egypt. God had a plan for Him. In the meantime, there was no comfort for the mourners in Judah. Already, a Savior was needed. Come, Lord Jesus.

God's blessings often come out of tough times,  
Pastor Steve



## "Holy Spirit and Fire"

January 3 - Matthew 2:19-3:17

**B**aptism has always had quite an impact on people. I know that I will always treasure the memory of my baptism. I was scared to death. Then I got in the baptism tank and it was really a very peaceful and spiritual experience. I think that those who haven't been baptized wonder what baptism is all about.

Have you been baptized? What was it like for you? Who was there that day? What type of impact did it have on your spiritual development? Afterwards, were you closer to God? Did you have an experience like Jesus and find yourself in temptation shortly after you were baptized? If so, why do you think that happened?

Baptism is first introduced in the New Testament by John the Baptist. He was quite a character. Jesus describes him further for us in Matthew 11: "What went you out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went you out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in king's houses. But what went you out for to see? A prophet? Yes, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, which shall prepare your way before you" (verses 7-10). Matthew goes on to say that John is the greatest man alive, but he is not as great as he will be one day when he reaches the kingdom of God. He says that John is considered a holy man by most and he is, truly, the coming of the prophet Elijah (a man in the Old Testament who never died but was raised from earth to heaven in a fiery chariot. The prophet Malachi predicted that Elijah would come before the great day of the Lord).

The Baptist, like any other spiritual man or woman, was humbled to even be around Jesus. He said about Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). He only baptized Jesus at His urging. He

acknowledged that Jesus was more powerful than he was, and that he wasn't even worthy to carry Jesus' sandals. To John, Jesus was the ultimate authority and he was thankful to have the privilege to be around Him. Think about how significant this is in the light of what an austere man Matthew portrays John to be. He was a rugged man who feared nothing and was not afraid to tell it like it was. Yet, when he was around Jesus he was reduced to a little child, mesmerized by the Man.

Are you a self-made man or woman? Are you a big shot in some arena? Do you have authority over others and think pretty highly of your station in life? Can you wield your wallet like a sword? If so, what difference has it made for you to come in contact with the Man from Galilee? Knowing Him is very humbling. Why would He have anything to do with me? This is the way John the Baptist felt. Jesus had a life-changing impact on his life. In this we can clearly see a barometer for evaluating how spiritual we really are. Are we humble? Do we think of others before ourselves? Do we seek to serve rather than be served? Do we often give up our rights so that others can be promoted ahead of us? If so, then we are becoming more spiritual.

Is there someone in your life who is hard for you to serve? Is there a family member or friend whom you'd like to teach a lesson? Are you avoiding someone because it seems too difficult to confront your own responsibility in a situation that has resulted in some tension? Remember, He must increase and I must decrease. Would Jesus be honored if you approached the person whom you consider a problem right now? A few chapters from now Jesus will say that it is good to try and seek reconciliation before a matter gets out of hand. I encourage you to go and seek a friendly solution to a tough problem by first humbling yourself in Jesus' presence. Oh, my gosh, I'll

write later; I just remembered that I needed to go and talk to someone I've been avoiding lately.

Timeout .....

John the Baptist says that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire." Because God is good and He loves us, He doesn't leave us helpless in our spiritual progress. Even regarding salvation Paul said, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Then, after saving us, God continues to give us help by means of His Spirit in our lives. Again Paul says, "And hope makes not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us" (Romans 5:5).

To have baptism in the Spirit means that the Spirit is in residence in our lives and He continues to live in us and work in us to do what will make us more like the Lord Jesus. I believe that this is where the fire comes in. God will often bring us through fire or difficulties in order to make us like Jesus. "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestine to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn

among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). And so like Jesus we learn obedience through the tough times in our lives, in the times when the heat is on.

Is the heat up in your life right now? This is God's discipleship process and it is there for a purpose. God is making you like His beloved Son. You are the object of His affection and He knows what's best for you and what will help you to mature.

Sometimes it is hard to understand why things happen in our lives, but God understands. He knows what He's doing by creating in us what we couldn't do on our own. There will be many times in our lives when we will have to trust that God knows what He is doing when we cannot see the forest for the trees. Think about these applications:

What can I do today to show humility and love for others? How did my baptism impact my life? Let's tell someone how our baptism had an impact on our lives. Identify the temperature in your life right now. If it's fire-hot, think about ways you see God changing you in His refining fire.

God's blessings attend the humble,  
Pastor Steve

dence in your understanding of the Bible.

First, all Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, points to Jesus Christ. John 5:39 says, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me." A bit later we will read Luke 24 where Jesus makes it clear that the whole Bible is about Him.

Second, and so important: Scripture builds upon itself from Genesis to Revelation, culminating in the Kingdom Age when Christ will reign over all. Hebrews 1:1,2 says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." Therefore, we must interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. And the events of the Gospels must be understood in the light of the letters that follow them. Paul and Peter and John and Jude and James are the interpreters of Christ. Their interpretation can be trusted and should become the rule for our own understanding of what Jesus did and said.

Third, Scripture interprets Scripture. That's what I have already been speaking about, but here I'd like to point out that Jesus was able to give the correct Scripture for the occasion because He was well aware of what the entire Bible taught. He could see through the devil's self-centered approach and instead moved the conversation to a God-centered approach. In other words, Jesus was more interested in honoring God than he was in establishing an alliance with the devil or promoting Himself. This is a good reason for us to stay committed in our reading of the whole Bible. That

way we will be less apt to misquote the Bible or take verses out of context.

This subject will be picked up again and again in our journey through the New Testament. Let's make a couple of applications before we end.

The devil worked from the angle of tempting Jesus to do His own will rather than God's will. He appealed to His physical needs ("stones to bread"), His spiritual needs ("cast yourself down;" if you are really spiritual you'll be able to do this supernatural feat) and His ego needs ("I will give you all of these;" you'll be in charge of it all if you worship me, the devil says, so go ahead and sell out to me and I'll reward you).

What angle does the devil most often use in your life?

Jesus responded to each temptation with a Bible verse in order to thwart the devil's attack. What Bible verses help you when the chips are down and you are being tempted to do something you know is not God's will? You could label the temptations as: Pleasure, Power, and Possessions. Which of these has the greatest pull for you? What can you do today to steer clear of the grip that one or all of them might have on you?

God's blessings are realized when we see the whole of Scripture,  
Pastor Steve

P.S. The devil will always challenge the validity of God's Word in your life. He did with the first man and woman and he continues to do so. Let's have ears to hear the Word and the courage to resist the lies of the evil one. Remember, Jesus prayed that we would be kept from him in John 17. If that chapter is new to you, why not take a few minutes to read it today sometime.



## "Did God Mean That?"

January 4 - Matthew 4: 1-22

**W**hat was the devil's aim in the temptations of Jesus?

Was it to try to move Jesus away from God's purpose for Him?

Was it to try and use the Bible, from which he quoted, to possibly trick Jesus into doing his bidding?

Was it just plain old temptation to cause Him to do something wrong and prove who had the upper hand -- the devil or Jesus?

The answer is probably a combination of all three. The devil is a liar and the father of lies. He's bad to

the bone. He wants what he wants and doesn't care what is good for others (take a look at John 8 and 10 for more thoughts on this issue). Surprisingly, he will even use Scripture for his own goals.

Scripture is misused all of the time. Even in our day it is twisted and turned to prove a point or create another religious sect. So how do I know that I'm interpreting the Bible correctly and am not also being led astray somehow?

Good question. Let me give you several answers to this question so that you can begin to gain confi-

**“What Christ Finished”**

January 5 - Matthew 4:23 - 5:20

**B**e Open To The Lord Today!

What parts of the Bible apply to us today, what parts were for them back then, and what parts are future?

Jesus gives us some help with this question in Matthew 5:17.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

For example, the sacrificial system in the Old Testament was fulfilled when Christ offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice. Should we offer sacrifices like they did in the Old Testament, even though they are mentioned in God’s Word? No. They are fulfilled in Christ.

What about all of the dietary rules? These were the rules God laid down while the Israelites were in the desert of Sinai. God told them what kinds of animals they could eat, such as beef and fish with scales, and not eat, like pork. These were rules God instituted because of the conditions they lived in while they were trekking through the desert. God was protecting these Moses’ followers by steering them away from food that would be more apt to carry disease and cause problems for the whole group. Jesus later would say that it’s not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out of his heart. So are we under the dietary regulations? No.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were God’s chosen people and they were supposed to bring His light to the world. All of their national agenda is fulfilled now in the church of Christ. In Galatians, Paul identifies God’s church as the Israel of God. In Romans, Paul will introduce the church as the Spiritual Israel. Therefore, God’s temple is now us and not a building in Jerusalem. We are all one church in Christ, not members of a tribe of people like the Jews were from their beginning. Jews and Gentiles are now one

in Christ and the wall that separated them crumbled when Jesus gave His life for all.

Paul makes this clear when he writes in Ephesians, “Wherefore remember, that you being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called uncircumcision by that which is called the circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world;

But now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were far off are made near by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in Himself of two one new man, so making peace” (2:11-15).

So does Christ’s fulfillment of the Old Testament make it irrelevant for us today? No. It helps us to appreciate all the more what Christ came to do. He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. He is the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament. So keep on reading and appreciating all that God has done by bringing His Son into the world.

Also, the Old Testament reveals the holy character of God, all the way through. Therefore, it reminds us of the nature of God and the holy and righteous ways of the Lord. For example, in the first Psalm the writer extols the virtue of abiding in the law of the Lord and delighting in it. Or if you take a look at Psalm 119 you’ll see that the Old Testament encourages us to meditate on the Scripture so that we can be built up in our faith in God. So even though we are making our way through the New Testament this year, I would like to encourage you to take a look at the Old Testament readings when you can. They will apply to you and encourage you in your walk in Jesus.

Another example would be the Ten Commandments. They are there to lead us to Christ. We need Christ’s forgiveness for all of the ones we have broken. But they are also a good measuring tool of the will of the Lord. Jesus summed them up by saying that love is the fulfillment of the law. And if we have love, we will love God and put Him first, and love our neighbor and put him before ourselves. Therefore, the Old Testament very much applies to us today, minus the areas already fulfilled in Jesus.

God’s blessings come through the entire Bible,  
Pastor Steve

P.S. Note that in contrast to the devil’s lure towards pleasure, power, and possessions, the Sermon on the Mount shows a much different road to happi-

ness. God’s ladder is down rather than up. God’s plan is for self-denial and not self-aggrandizement. The happy ones are the humble, the truly sorry, the gentle, the spiritually hungry, and the persecuted. The happy ones are too busy living for God to place pleasure, power and possessions as the focus of their lives.

P.S.S. In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul makes it clear that all Scripture is profitable. So let’s seek to appreciate all of the Scripture and not ignore those parts that are difficult or offensive to us. The Bible covers all areas of life and can be very blunt at times. I hope that these sections will encourage you and help you with matters that have been difficult for you to express in the past.

**“I Say To You’ - The Harder Sayings Of Jesus”**

January 6 - Matthew 5: 21-42

**G**od Is For You Today!

Let’s think together about some of the more difficult sayings of Jesus. When we got into following Jesus we knew it was going to be different than anything we had ever experienced in our lives. This is especially true for those of you who came to Christ at a later age, maybe as a teen or older. But at the same time, I am still amazed at some of the things God’s Word says. They just seem to run so counter to what I learned at home, in school and in society growing up.

For example: Hatred of another person = murder. The idea underlying all of these teachings is that sin and righteousness originate in a person’s heart. The heart is the control center of our lives. Proverbs says, “Keep your heart with all diligence because out of it are the issues of life” (4:23). Jesus equates hatred of another person with murder. If someone says, “Well,

at least I have never murdered anyone,” it really isn’t true, is it? Rather than harbor hatred, Jesus wants us to go out of our way to reconcile with people we have been struggling with. 1 John says much more on this subject. Check it out.

Lust = adultery. Treating people as objects or toys is not healthy. We dehumanize them and ourselves. God wants us to see others as people made in His image and not as sexual objects. Have you ever seen a good result from lust? The outcomes usually involve a whole truckload of pain and suffering, both emotional and physical.

Divorce = adultery. Jesus takes the hard line on divorce. Except for the reason of marital unfaithfulness, a person is not supposed to break the bonds of marriage. If they do, and marry another, they pull that person into adultery. Paul goes into this in some detail in I Corinthians 7.

Love your enemies. Don't seek revenge. Look for ways to express God's love to those who mistreat you. Be careful when applying these verses. Jesus is not saying, "Don't protect your family" or "stop working for social justice" or "let evil people do all the harm they want." He is saying that within our social sphere, we ought work with those who are difficult, the ones who are mean or who are trying to take advantage of us.

Stand up to them but do not stoop to their level by returning evil for evil. Take a look at what Romans says about this at the end of chapter 12 into chapter 13.

I welcome your comments on these verses. I have been working with them for many years and they are still tough; tough but good.

God's blessings are attached to His ways,  
Pastor Steve



## "Where Your Treasure Is"

January 7 - Matthew 5:43 - 6: 24

**W**hat do you treasure in your life?  
What is the most special thing to you?  
What goes through your mind at the thought of losing or having that special thing stolen?  
Is it unbearable? Would you go out of your mind?  
Is it unbearable? Would you go out of your mind?

Things break and people let us down. What then?  
Is it wrong to have goals to acquire things?  
Is it wrong to build relationships with people who may disappoint us?

I believe the answer to each of these last two questions is an emphatic "No!"

Then what does Jesus mean when he says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also... you cannot serve God and Money?"

I think Jesus is talking about security and investment.

Where does our true security lie?

What can we invest our time, talents, and treasure in that will bring a lasting result?

Remember the story of the three fellows who had each received a certain number of talents (money, in those days) to spend wisely. God had given abilities to each of them and they were to use their noodle and their energy to be productive. The first two fellows

did well, but the third guy sat on his hands. He did not even seek to know what his purpose in life was, so he ended up doing nothing.

Investing what God has given us by way of talents and money can make life an exciting adventure. To spend our resources on selfish pursuits that amount to self-promotion will have no lasting value and will not be satisfying in the long run.

Secondly, too often money becomes the means of a person's mental well-being. "The more I have the more secure I feel." This, of course, is a false security. No matter how much we have, we will always be a dollar short of having enough.

On the other hand, if we purposely put our confidence in the Lord and invest thoughtfully in the things He endorses, our lives will be rich indeed. He promises people with this attitude that He will meet all of their needs (Matthew 6:33).

Where does your confidence lie today?

Can you name a few avenues that you are investing in for heaven's sake?

Don't get me wrong, we ought to be concerned with sound financial investment and planning for the future here on earth. At the same time, we need to constantly remind ourselves that the most important place for investment is in heaven and in the

God-things that will last forever. That's why I do this through the Bible work, because "heaven and earth will pass away" Jesus said, "but My word will never pass away."

Here are a few suggestions:

Go to your primary checking account and take a look at the entries there. What adjustments would you recommend? The money area has always been a tough one for me. I grew up in the school of materialism, and I sometimes find it hard to be a giver. If you

have the same problem, then start slowly, but begin to give rather than hoard. This will set you free, especially if you tend to equate money with security. If the money area is like an albatross around your neck, go to Amazon and find a series on money management from God's viewpoint. Believe me, you will be glad you did.

God's Blessings change our hearts,  
Pastor Steve



## "The Frustration of the Sermon on the Mount"

January 8 - Matthew 6:25 - 7:23

**T**oday Is God's Day,  
How's your New Year going so far? The experts say it takes 21 days to learn a new habit. You are one-third of the way there. Keep up the good work.

If you miss a day, don't fret. Go ahead and do the day you are on and mark the missed day somehow so that you can come back to it at a later time. The key is not to lay a guilt trip on yourself for missing a day or two. Habit is the important thing. Good habits are worth working on and bad habits are worth giving up.

Okay, let's discuss the topic of frustration caused by the Sermon on the Mount. What do I mean by that? Jesus says several things in this short sermon that are disconcerting. He says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). And He wraps up the first part of the sermon by saying, "Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (5:48).

How do I respond to these verses? Those Scribes and Pharisees were pretty religious folk, weren't they? And what does He mean regarding perfection? I thought no one was perfect in this life. How can He

expect so much? I quit, I give up...I'll never make it.

Before you despair, let's talk. Jesus' primary purpose is to move people to put their faith in Him. He invites men and women to believe in Him, trust Him, receive Him, follow Him, put their faith in Him, abide in Him, and walk with Him. Why? Because people are changed internally when they sincerely turn to the Lord.

What we need to understand is that in and through Christ, a person is more righteous than the religious Scribes and Pharisees. God declares that person perfect in Christ. It is our identification with Him that gives us a Christ-centered righteousness. Faith in Christ is the mechanism that triggers a new kind of life, a life where Christ is on the throne of your heart.

Just a note on the word "perfect." Some people read this verse and then seek to be error-free, perfect, and self-righteous. They may work and work and work, trying over and over to be without sin. They lose. In I John, it says that the person who says he is without sin is a liar and the truth is not in him.

In Greek, the word for perfect can also be translated as "complete," or "mature." It doesn't necessarily mean finished without any imperfection. No human

but Jesus can fit that bill. Thankfully, He does it for us. That's why we boast in our Leader, Jesus, who is our righteousness (see I Corinthians 1).

God's blessings declare us perfect in Christ,  
Pastor Steve



## “What would God be like?”

January 9 - Matthew 7: 24 - 8:22

**G**od Is Good, Think with me for a minute about what you'd expect God to be like if He came down to earth. Wouldn't you expect him to act, well, like God?

**Really Smart:** Smarter than everybody else, in as much as the manufacturer of a thing is smarter than the thing He creates.

**Very Creative:** Since we can already look around and see the complexity and diversity of living things around us.

**Extremely Powerful:** Since He could make things out of non-existent material, you would suspect that He could do anything He desired.

**Unaffected by popular opinion:** He would know what was true because He Himself would have created all that is true. He would not need to be instructed by anyone since He is the source of all things.

**Highly Industrious:** Just look at what He has already done. Look at all of the colors and designs and shapes of what he has already made.

**Exceedingly generous:** Why would God create such a perfect environment for people who are, by and large, unappreciative of it? He gives and gives.

**Unusual:** More interesting than kings or queens, more provocative than comedians or rock stars, more fascinating than magicians.

How about you? What can you add to my short list? Now let's look for these qualities in the person and life of Jesus. Here are a few examples:

1. **Smart:** When Jesus was questioning Peter about his love for Him, Peter responded, “Lord, you

know everything...” (John 21:17).

2. **Creative:** John said, “All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3) And in Hebrews, the writer says, “For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses -- as much more glory as the builder of the house has more honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God” (3: 3, 4).

3. **Powerful:** The Bible says about Jesus, “Then He rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey Him?’” (Matthew 8:26).

4. **Unaffected by popular opinion:** “In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.’” (John 2:14f.)

5. **Industrious:** Jesus prayed, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (John 17: 4).

6. **Generous:** After Jesus had cast many demons out of a man He said to him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19).

7. **Unusual:** “And when Jesus finished these

sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:28, 29).

When we see Jesus, we see God. Jesus said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

In our reading today, Jesus touches and heals a leper-- a man who was the pariah of his day. God is loving. He touches us in our imperfection, He reaches us at our lowest point and speaks with dignity into our lives.

This is our God. Let's worship Him.

Let's talk to God today in appreciation for who He is and what He has done. The more we understand Him, the greater the respect we will have for who He is. God is known in Jesus. Jesus came to make the Father known. In John 1:18 it says that Jesus came to “explain” the Father. Let's enter into His classroom today and hear a lesson that we will never forget.

God's blessings are real in Jesus,  
Pastor Steve



## “It Is Not The Healthy Who Need A Doctor”

January 10 - Matthew 8:23 - 9:13

**H**ave you ever had a doctor with a good bedside manner? I had a doctor years ago whom I enjoyed going to see. I knew that he would get right to the heart of the issue and take care of whatever was ailing me. He had been practicing medicine for decades and was able to reassure me that the procedure needed was the right one. Fortunately, I have been pretty healthy most of my life, but there have been times when I needed to hear Dr. Hall's diagnosis. Funny, it wasn't just the diagnosis, but the way he said it that made the most difference.

When my wife and I were first married, I'll never forget one weekend when she was suffering from a sinus infection. It began on a Friday evening and progressively became worse. We probably should have taken her into the emergency department by Sunday, but she wanted to wait until Monday to see Dr. Hall. By the time we got in to see him, you could tell he was very concerned by the look on his face. Normally he is very calm, but we sensed an air of anxiety. He told my wife that she would need to go on some strong antibiotics right away in order to fight the infection. He told us that it had gotten pretty bad, and that the worst case scenario was that if the infection broke through the na-

sal lining, only brain surgery would save her. You know what? When we left his office we were stunned, but at the same time his reassurances that the antibiotics could kick in and help right away took the edge off what could have been a very alarming situation. She ended up fine.

It must be difficult for doctors when people look to them as gods. Their words of comfort or impending doom end up having a tremendous emotional impact on the patient. In some cases there is nothing they can do, and they have to do their best to comfort people in their loss. At other times, they do all they can and yet the results are up in the air until a solution or conclusion is reached. You probably view the medical community either positively or negatively depending on what kind of results you have had in the past. Some of you are like me and would only go to the doctor if you were on your last leg. Either way, we are all looking for the same thing -- wholeness and relief from pain.

As we said yesterday, Jesus is the most remarkable man. He is like no other. To be with Him meant that you would experience the out of the ordinary. When I first came to Him I was enveloped by His love. In Revelation it describes His eyes as a “flame of fire.” I picture

that as a penetrating love that is so pure it burns. It is a love that cannot be matched by even the love of a man and wife deeply in love. I knew I had met someone who would love me like no other.

Jesus' love motivated Him to reach out to the spiritually sick. Truly, we are all spiritually sick. Paul makes this crystal clear in the first three chapters of the book of Romans. But there are those who are sick and know it and will admit it, and there are those who are sick and have devised a bandage for their sickness. They simply deny that they need to go to the doctor.

Jesus is responding to the Pharisees, a Jewish religious class who thought they were righteous based on their obedience to the law. They were put off with the way Jesus hung out with "sinners," who were "lawbreakers" in their minds. Later, in John's gospel, Jesus would say, "For judgment I am come into the world, that they which see not might see; and they which see might be made blind. And some of the Pharisees which were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, Are we blind also? Jesus said to them, If you were blind, you should have no sin: but now you say, We see; therefore your sin remains" (9:39-41).

People will not come to Christ if they do not believe they need Him. You can talk their ears off and give them every good reason to be saved and they will go their own way and say something like, "I'm really glad for you, but I don't need that religious stuff." They usually identify Jesus with some divisive, hurtful or powerless experience they had some time ago.

Remember the Sermon on the Mount as it applies to this. The "blessed" ones would be those who humbly accept the fact that they are spiritually sick and need a forgiver who can make them well. They mourn because they realize that they are unable to save themselves or heal themselves or forgive themselves. Interestingly, in pop psychology there is some emphasis placed on the need to "forgive yourself." The problem with that is the guilt factor. You can say you forgive yourself all day long and still wake up with the guilt pangs caused by your sin.

It was the people who were not trying to justify their sins who really warmed up to Jesus. Jesus was there like a doctor with an awesome bedside manner. He healed the demon possessed men, two lost souls who had been in bondage to the devil for who knows how long; and he healed a paralyzed man by first healing his sin problem and then giving him the ability to walk. The Pharisees were upset with that too, because they knew that only God could forgive sins. Maybe they should have taken a look at the credentials after Doctor Jesus' Name -- Dr. Jesus Christ, G.I.H.F. (God in human flesh).

When you talk to Jesus today, remember to whom you are talking, and remind Him of how much you think you need Him. You are walking with an unrivaled man and He is listening to your every prayer. Your prayers are like sweet incense to Him. Lift them up!

God's blessings come when we are in need,  
Pastor Steve

I believe reading is to the mind as  
Fuel is to a car.

I believe reading is to the mind as  
Water and light is to the growth of a tree.

You get my drift. Reading is so important. But I think it is the quality of our reading that really matters. Just as it's the quality of food or the kind of fuel or the right kind of water that makes our lives work.

Years ago I read a book called How to Read Slowly, by James Sire. It emphasized the importance of really understanding what you were reading by going over a paragraph or chapter again and again until it was living in your mind.

Try it on the reading for today. Picture Jesus teaching, when a man comes who is expecting Him to raise his daughter from the dead. Can you see the intensity in the man's face? Can you hear the inflection of his voice? Have you ever been with someone when they were desperate about an impossible solution? Then you can feel with this man.

Jesus gets up to go and help him. Wonder for a moment what the people in the crowd were saying. What would you have been doing if you were a face in that crowd? How might the healing of the woman along the way have encouraged this grieving father? He already believed in Jesus, no doubt, but can you imagine the anticipation as they got nearer to the house of mourning?

Listen to the mockers and doubters in the crowd. "No one can raise the dead!" Jesus enters in and raises her. The Bible then records that the news of this event spread. But think about the jubilation on the part of the parents. I wonder what happened subsequently with the relationships in this family with Jesus. Did they become disciples? You would imagine so, but the Bible says nothing about it. What happened to the doubters in the crowd when they saw the child alive? Did they believe or did they think it was all a big practical joke? Later, some would accuse Jesus of healing by the power of the devil. Were there some with this opinion already?

Imagine the conversations the family must have had later on. I would have loved to talk to the girl about the afterlife. "What was it like to be dead?" We don't know though, do we?

Think about the smells in the house. What did it smell like? Had neighbors brought broth over to comfort the saddened family? Were there candles or oil lamps burning? Were the tears on their faces still wet when Jesus raised her?

Work on improving your reading skill by being more and more imaginative when you read. Let the words of Christ dwell in you richly. Treasure them.

God's blessings need to be savored,

Pastor Steve



## "Really Read"

January 11 - Matthew 9: 14-38

**L**et's Engage Our Minds Today,  
Do you like to read?  
Reading came naturally for some of you and was a struggle for others. I have always been a slow

reader. I always envied those who could gobble down a book in half the time as I could.

I believe reading is to the mind as  
Good nutrition is to your body.



## "Following Jesus; Fear this...not this!"

January 12 - Matthew 10:1-31

**H**ow about taking a second look with me in Matthew 10.

"If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of the household! So do not be afraid of them....do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the

soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

Not everybody is going to like your decision to give your life to Jesus Christ. Have you ever had someone down play your commitment to Him?

"That's a phase I went through as a child. You'll get over it."

"A little bit of religion never hurt anyone."

"The church is full of hypocrites and money-grabbers."

I heard some of these comments when I was in the decision phase of receiving Jesus Christ. But you know what? Nothing compared with the surpassing value of knowing and walking with the Lord. Nothing.

I grew up with a high regard for my dad. When he spoke I usually listened. I trusted him fully. He was my hero. I remember taking a trip once to Prescott, Arizona. Down came a monsoon. It was like having buckets of water poured on you. At the time, we were on a windy mountainside. From the back seat I couldn't see out the front window, but I knew that somehow my dad could; I trusted that he would be able to get us where we were going. And sure enough, he made it!

Fearing God the Father is kind of like that. We see His word as more important than all competing voices in the world no matter how loud they may be.

Our fear of Him is rooted in love. We need not fear what man can do to us, because God cares for us. His will is being played out in our lives. When a bird falls to the ground, God is there; when men ridicule us for our faith, God is there; when we feel like our circumstances are overwhelming, God is there.

"The Lord is my Light and my salvation- whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life- of whom shall I be afraid?" Ps. 27:1

I trust that as you remain in God's Word, your love and respect for God will grow. He will never let you down, even when others do. He remains consistent, loving, encouraging and fathering.

God's blessings can be trusted,  
Pastor Steve

P.S. Another really good cross reference for this subject is the end of the eighth chapter of Romans. If you need more assurance of God's love and care for you, go there and read it a few times. Make sure to underline some of the phrases that stand out. For example -- "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Take a look and enjoy the Word.

should look as if we hate others.

Let me give a similar parallel here. Earlier Jesus said that if our right hand offends, cut it off; if your eye offends you, pluck it out. Did Jesus mean that we should literally cut off our hands and pluck out our eyes? Of course not. However, He wants us to act as if we have made such a commitment to purity that it would be as if we had cut off a body part.

Jesus is the Master Teacher. He uses a variety of styles to make His point. That means that there will be times when people will not get His point because they will only hear part of His teaching. Later on when we are introduced to the Apostle Paul, we'll see the importance of teaching the "whole counsel of God." This is essential because you could go off on quite a tangent by taking some corner of the truth and not examining it in the light of the whole. Jesus will begin to teach in parables in chapter 13 of Matthew. He comes right out and says that He is speaking in parables in order for the ones with spiritual eyes to be taught and those who are in darkness to be confounded.

In the lesson here, our commitment to Christ will appear to others to be division with our own family members. Now, can this be literally true as well? Absolutely! Many of you know firsthand what it means to be turned away by your family because of your commitments to Christ. I can still remember my

beloved grandma telling me how disappointed she was that I had chosen to serve Jesus in the ministry. That was tough for me. But it didn't push me away from Christ. I'm sure you have a story too. These are tough times, but also defining times. It is part of the baptism with fire we learned about earlier. Such times feel uncomfortable at the moment but end up driving you closer to the Lord.

Comparison is usually a bad thing. But when we compare our love for the Lord with our need for people's approval, we will understand who we are as believers. That is a good thing because it reminds us of the key place Christ plays in our life.

Are you a pleaser type? If so, there will come many points in your spiritual journey when this mentality will be challenged. There is no way for you to please everyone on the face of the planet. You can try and try, but it will lead only to frustration. Remember that a pleaser mentality is usually a self-centered approach because we do it so that others (all others) will think well of us. God would rather that we loved and had empathy for others for God's glory. Then when we are not accepted or we are even rejected, we can draw near to God. There we will always be received with open arms.

God's blessings cause division,  
Pastor Steve



Day 13

## "Comparisons Are Sometimes Good"

January 13 - Matthew 10:32 - 11:15

**I**t's Good To Be Alive,  
Some verses in the New Testament are unique. Some don't fit the mold of the neat and tidy Jesus who is sometimes portrayed to us by some people.

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law -- a man's enemies

will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:34).

Is Jesus against peace? I thought he said that He would leave us His peace when He left. I thought God wants us to live at peace with all men if possible. What gives with the above verse?

As usual, the key to understanding these verses is to read on and focus on the lesson Jesus teaches in this context. The lesson is that of comparison. In comparison with our love and commitment to Him it



Day 14

## "Soul Care"

January 14 - Matthew 11: 16-30

**T**he control center of our lives is the soul. Within every man, woman and child is a living soul. This soul is so tied to who we are that you could say the soul is the person. The Apostle Paul calls the soul "the inner man" and the "spirit of a man." In other places it is called the heart. Proverbs says, "Keep your heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues

of life" (4:23). That non-material part of your being is the real you, the center of all your emotions and the chalkboard for all of your thoughts.

The soul is that part of us that most resembles the image of God in which it was created. It is also the part that has been most affected by sin. The Psalms say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within

me bless His holy name" (103: 1). The believer cries out to God from deep within because he wants to make his God happy with his praise and service.

Before coming to Christ, the soul is twisted inward and wants only to promote selfish interests. The godless soul seeks to be enthroned on the seat of its own pride. It is a restless soul because it must watch out for itself and protect itself from anyone who would seek to dethrone it. Self-interests rather than God-interests are its banner.

The restless soul searches for something to quench its thirst. It constantly has to justify itself and promote itself. On the other hand, if it doesn't receive the kind of ego massage it needs it may attempt to self-destruct. At that point it finds life to be utterly meaningless. A person may turn to a number of reality-altering methods to deal with the emptiness of life, like alcohol and drugs and illicit sex. A psychologist friend of mine calls it "medicating the emotional pain." The soul wanders, seeking refuge from the purposelessness of reality until it returns to the source of its origin and discovers the meaning for which it was made.

I will never forget a student of mine years ago at a Christian school where I taught a freshman Bible class. We were talking one day about the meaning of life; I asked the class to write down why they thought life was worthwhile. One boy, a tall and lanky young man with short greasy hair and acne, simply said, "Life is worthwhile because we can collect things." I have thought about that statement from time to time over the years. I think he was into baseball cards, if my memory serves me correctly. That was before the Internet. Can you imagine how much collecting this guy must be doing today? The collection of stuff is what made his life worth getting up in the morning. Why do you think that was true for him? Maybe it's because we have a thirst for discovery and the hope for what we don't possess yet. My wife loves to go to Goodwill and garage sales because of the thrill of what "treasure" she might find. Maybe this boy saw

collecting that way. Maybe collecting gives a certain amount of security. It is a diversion from some of the harsh realities of life. Maybe it absorbed his mind away from the futility of other pursuits. Or, possibly it put him just one pack of cards away from finding the one golden card that would complete his collection.

In the midst of a soul's unrest, Jesus invites a person to find rest in Him. He invites us to come to Him. In John 7, Jesus says that if a person believes in Him, that out of his innermost being will flow rivers of living water. Here in Matthew 11 He invites us to find relief from our burdens by connecting with Him. Remember the woman who touched Jesus' robe and was instantly healed? Here, Jesus says that we will find soul rest if we connect with Him. Unlike the legalistic rules of the Pharisees, the disgusting excesses of the libertines (those who promote hedonism as a means to happiness), and the austerity of the stoics (those who promote the minimization of emotion and the acceptance of fate) Jesus offers fulfillment and rest in His arms. He says learning of Him would mean losing our excess burdens and heaviness of heart. He would be the source of freedom for the worn and weary soul.

For us today the message is the same. When we come to Jesus and receive His peace and strength we too will be unfettered from the tyranny of the restless soul. We will find a Friend who will gently teach us a different way to live. He will loose us from the restrictions of people who lay heavy burdens on men's shoulders when they are unwilling to bear those burdens themselves. Jesus, on the other hand, will bear your burdens.

What is weighing you down today? Is it someone's opinion? Is it a past failure? Is it the perceived need to be perfect so that you will find relief from the soul's wandering? "Come to me," Jesus says, "and I will give you rest for your soul." -- Lord, we come to you today!

God's blessings give true rest for the soul,  
Pastor Steve



## "Interpreting Prophecy"

January 15 - Matthew 12: 1-21

**Y**ou Are On God's Heart Today,  
So much has been written and taught about prophecy (prediction of future events). This is the area that I have found to be the fuzziest in the world of Biblical interpretation. Why do I say this? Because there has been such a great diversity of opinion when it comes to understanding prophecy.

I am mainly talking about End Time prophecy. The over 300 prophecies that speak of the first coming of Jesus are pretty clearly laid out. But how things will wrap up before the second coming is not as clear.

We will say much about this in the year ahead, but now let's look at a passage of Scripture in our reading:

"Many followed him, and he healed all their sick... This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their trust" (12:16-21).

How is Jesus' healing ministry a fulfillment of this prophecy?

Healing reflects God's love. It is love for the most

disadvantaged, the smoldering wicks and the bruised reeds. According to this prophecy Jesus is:

- 1) Loved by God the Father
- 2) Just or fair
- 3) Unobtrusive: His actions will speak louder than words
- 4) Trustworthy

He is a healer. What did that do for those who were healed? Do you think they could put their trust in Him? What about people from "all nations?"

Prophecy sometimes points to the future, but when Matthew says "this" fulfills "this" then let's take it straight and try to interpret it as it is. In Jesus, God's kingdom had come to earth and the result was that crowds of people were healed of their afflictions. Matthew says that this graciousness by the Lord was a fulfillment of what Isaiah predicted would happen.

Our great hope is that Christ will return to take His church to live with Him forever. In the meantime, let's pattern our lives after Jesus who quietly demonstrated the love of the Father to those who were hurting. I like the fact that Jesus was not a show-off. He could have been. Rather, He acted out of love for others and was quick to divert attention from Himself. Such is the humility of Christ.

God's blessings make our future secure,  
Pastor Steve



## “What is the Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?”

January 16 - Matthew 12: 22-45

**F**rom time to time I will attempt to address subjects that might be controversial or difficult. The question of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is one of those subjects.

The Bible is very clear about what it is and what it isn't.

It is not using the Lord's name in vain. But that is a bad sin.

It is not murder, or adultery or lying, or greed. But those aren't good either.

It is not something you have done if you now love the Lord and want His forgiveness. He is quick to forgive those who sincerely ask for it.

It is not something a believer in Jesus could do. Simply impossible.

Both here in Matthew 12 and in Mark 3, the Bible says you have committed blasphemy when you obstinately attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil. The Pharisees here say, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” In Mark it says, “He said this because they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’”

In the context of Jesus' day, Jesus points to the religious Pharisees as the ones who denied that Jesus was who He said He was. They were obstinate in their

refusal to accept Jesus as God's Son and God the Son. Jesus battles with this religious sect over and over (if you're interested, read Matthew 23 and John 8).

The apostle John goes into this directly. Let's read: “But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him...Therefore, they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with their eyes, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.’ These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.”

Do you know anyone who mocks the works of the Holy Spirit, speaks ill of the church, and minimizes anyone who puts God first in their life? This could be a person who is on their way to blasphemy, with no hope of salvation. In Hebrews 6 and 10 it is the person who minimizes the work of Christ on the cross. Jesus, I believe, alludes to this in Matthew 5 when he says, “Don't cast your pearls before swine.” Mockers run the risk of being hardened and losing any opportunity for eternal life.

I hope this helps!

God's blessings keep us trusting in Jesus,  
Pastor Steve



## “Parables”

January 17 - Matthew 12:46 - 13:17

**J**esus spoke many PARABLES. In a parable Jesus describes a daily real-life occurrence and sets it alongside a spiritual truth. He's saying essentially: “Look at this -- a common thing, and see this -- a spiritual thing.” That's why Jesus makes such a big deal about being able to understand them. Those with spiritual eyes can see what they mean and those without light are still unable to make heads or tails of how a parable applies to them. Make sense?

It is no wonder that the first of the parables is one dealing with the Word of God. Spiritual truth is defined by the Word, as we have already emphasized. Parables are a good reminder to us that we need to approach the Bible with prayer, because it is a spiritual book. We will get so much more out of it if we talk to God before opening it and diving in.

In regard to the Parable of the Soils, Jesus said in Mark 4:13 - “Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?” Therefore, for some reason(s), this first parable in the Bible is an important one because it has a bearing on all the others.

The Parable of the Soils sets the pace for the rest of the parables. How so? Before I take a stab at it, go back and re-read it and come up with a few ideas of your own. How would this parable be the starting point for the rest? Ask yourself what the parable means. Fortunately in tomorrow's reading the mean-

ing is explained. Go ahead and check that out.

Now, do you understand?

Let's talk about it for a moment. Doesn't this parable express the goal of all parables, which would be to encourage spiritual growth? The sincere follower of Jesus craves the good soil and does what it takes to have the kind of soil that will welcome the seeds, God's Words. Peter said later, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

On the other hand, the believer in Jesus will be upset when he sees some of the influences of the other soils (hard, shallow, thorny) in his life. He will get back to the pure milk of the Word so that he can grow. Once he's growing and bearing fruit, his fruit will multiply, as Jesus said.

Thank God that He has given us knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God. Enjoy them. Believe them. Think about them. They are truth. They are real life. They are like diamonds, jewels, and the most precious antiques. They will enter our hearts and change us forever. If you cherish His Word, you will never regret it.

God's Blessings come in tasty fruit,  
Pastor Steve

**“The Soils”**

January 18 - Matthew 13: 18-35

**L**isten to these miscellaneous verses on the subject of the Word of God:

“Then said Jesus to those Jews who believed in Him, ‘If you continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’ (John 8: 31,32).

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7).

“Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world, Amen” (Matthew 28: 19, 20).

The focus on continuing in God’s Word is a clear key to true spiritual life. Those who forsake God’s Word, for whatever reasons, do so to their own peril. Also, the way we personally handle the Word of God will determine how much spiritual fruit we can expect in our lifetime. If your heart is crying out to be used by God and to know God and to love God, then pay extra-careful attention to His Words. They will guide you no matter what the weather of life is like.

Life is like a voyage at sea. There is always the hope of smooth sailing, but the reality is that storms are constantly on the horizon. A dear friend of mine took me out on his deep sea fishing boat one sunny, summer day. I had been up at 2 a.m. to get ready and make the trip to the coast. I didn’t eat much, had a couple of cups of coffee and was thinking that I’d fare well because I had done so in the past. So I didn’t take any Dramamine, and off we chugged, about 16 miles from the coast. When he stopped the engine the vessel was being tossed in washing machine fashion, up and down and back and forth. I wasn’t feeling so good. By the time we had the rigging ready I was reeling. My friend could see I was a mess and tried to

distract me with the fishing, but I could see my own turmoil reflected in his empathetic eyes. We caught a few salmon -- the wrong type to keep -- and he suggested that we head for dry land. I didn’t argue. Once I stepped on the dock, I was fine. We went to lunch and then parted each other’s company. I realized that because I hadn’t made myself ready for the trip, I spoiled the day for both of us. My friend was gracious, but I know that his expectations were disappointed. I wasn’t adequately prepared for the voyage.

Are you adequately prepared for the voyage of life? One of the key elements of that preparation is a working knowledge of God’s Word. Let’s look for a moment at Jesus’ interpretation of His own parable. Thankfully, He takes the guesswork out of understanding it. He makes it clear what each surface was about.

Some surfaces are hard. The seed makes no penetration and bears no fruit. The devil comes along and steals any hint of the truth.

Some are shallow. The seed is received with selfish intent. It can’t take solid root and withers when the sun beats against its futile attempt to sprout. Shallow hearers of the word are really not interested in making Jesus the Lord of their life. To them the church is no more than a club to find social connections and meet personal needs.

Some are weedy. The seed is planted but the plant is choked by enemies of the soul, like worry and wealth and cares. No true spiritual growth can happen because the weedy person is planted too deeply in the world’s ways to bear any spiritual fruit.

Some are proportionately fruitful. The seed is planted in good soil and bears a crop. Depending on the richness of the soil, the crop is greater or lesser. This person delights in God’s Word and is eager to be a doer of it. He continues in the Word and attempts to see its application on a daily basis.

Some might be saying, “I am hearing the word but feel like I’m not bearing much fruit in my Christian life, what should I do?” Psalm 1 says, “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he does shall prosper” (verses 1-3). Any questions?

God’s Blessings make us fruitful,  
Pastor Steve

**“Don’t Pull Them Weeds”**

January 19 - Matthew 13: 36-58

**G**race to You,

Do you like pulling weeds? Most of us loathe the job. They can be thorny and entangling. I have a hedge that is a big mess. It is a conglomeration of every kind of bush that you can imagine. It’s a pain to keep trimmed, and when I do trim it I inevitably end up scratched.

In the parable of the weeds, Jesus tells His disciples not to pull the weeds out. That would be a kid’s dream. “See those weeds over there? Go ahead and leave them alone; I’ll get them later.” In this case the weeds are supposed to stay.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell a believer from a nonbeliever in God’s church. Eventually, I think the differences are made pretty clear. But this parable is a warning to us to not be so quick to exclude someone from the church. On the other hand, it is a reminder that not all people who go to church or say they are believers truly are.

John says in one of his small letters at the end of the New Testament that those who leave the church will often do so because they are not believers in the first place. He says, “They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19). They get tired of playing the game when their

heart is not in it because going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald’s makes you a hamburger. I personally couldn’t imagine being involved in a church as a non-believer. It’s hard to hang around with people you have very little in common with. But there are people who do this, for one reason or another.

Until Jesus comes again there will always be impostors in the church. In the meantime there are some rules in the New Testament to deal with those who say they are believers but refuse to give up sins that mark them as unreal.

For example, in 1 Corinthians the Bible says, “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortionist -- not even to eat with such a person” (5:11).

The purpose of the exclusion is to provoke him to do the right thing and turn to the Lord and find salvation. The idea is not to express a “holier than thou” attitude which reaches no one.

On the other hand, if a believer falls into sin we are to treat him as a brother and warn him about his behavior. So Paul writes to the Thessalonians to continue to work hard and not be lazy because the day of the Lord is near. He concludes the second letter

by saying, "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3: 13-15).

I know of people who have been horribly disappointed with some people who say they are Christians but act with the kind of morals and ethics that belie their confessions.

Let's strive to be honest about who we are and turn to the Lord so that we can be lights in this dark world.

Peter encourages us to examine ourselves to verify that we are in the faith. Before we point out the sins and failings of others we need to take a long look in our own mirror. Am I a believer? Do I love the Lord?

Do I want to do what God wants me to do? When was the last time I had a good talk with God? Or, do I know that I haven't really committed my life to Christ but want to hang out around the church for other reasons. Am I a true seeker or am I in the church to use it for my own purposes?

A Note to the Tenderhearted: Are you the type of person who always doubts, struggles with a sensitive conscience and tends to always question whether God could love you? Don't be too hard on yourself. For you, self-examination can end up being an exercise in futility because you are overly self-critical. I encourage you to talk to God about the way you feel and ask Him to give you confidence in Him and His Word.

God's blessings make smooth hands; leave the thorny weeds right there,  
Pastor Steve



## "Motivation Is Key"

January 20 - Matthew 14: 1-21

Over and over again a parent will do tasks for her child that the little one is oblivious to. This is especially true from birth to about 4 years old. The little ones are totally dependent on the love and good will of their parents for all of their needs.

The most essential ingredient in the nurturing of any child is the affectionate love of his parents. Sometimes that role is filled by grandparents. You'll have parents consumed by their responsibilities and unable to spend the time with them required to communicate love, and so the grandparents step in and give the children the nurturing they crave. Either way, usually kids get loved by someone and learn that true love is one of the key ingredients of life.

My grandma from Oklahoma, Grandma Rena, doted on me from the time I was born. Anytime we were together was special. She transferred love to me

in so many ways. She would tell me stories and read to me from the Bible. I loved her scary tales. One, about the "Big Toe" was especially among my favorites. I'm not going to tell you the whole story here but let me just say that "Big Toe" scared the dickens out of me. I used the same story to put junior high school students to sleep when we were at camp. I remember one night telling it, and when I was done you couldn't hear a peep. The story represented so much more than just a thrilling tale to me, though. It was another way Grandma paid undivided attention to me. She loved me from the heart. Grandma's gone now, probably yodeling in heaven, driving all them angels crazy. She is something else!

Being loved by a person like Grandma Rena can provide a powerful motivation for a person. Motivation is a subject that has always fascinated me. I want

to know why people do the things that they do. What makes us tick? What I have learned is that love is a gift from God and that when a person experiences unadulterated love he is changed in a number of positive ways.

I believe we were made to love and be loved. When we give and receive love we closely reflect the nature of God, because God is love, according to the Apostle John. You can have a multitude of motivations in your life to do a multitude of things, but no motivation or goal will ever outweigh the significance of love.

One of the fundamental questions people ask is "Does anyone love me?" Some search for love their whole lives, and not finding it, substitute a number of love counterfeits. Sex is the biggest culprit. People indulge the flesh and think their appetite will be satisfied. What they end up with is a thirst for more and an attitude of consumption rather than love. Power is another deceiver. People think they can demand love. What they are doing is forcing others to kiss their feet. They feel the submissiveness of others and mistake their loyalty for love. Also (the Beatles were right) money cannot buy love. It may feel that way because people are drawn to the rich man for his riches, but in the end money takes wings and flies away.

"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick," (Matthew 14:14). By the way, Jesus was in a boat; they didn't have planes in those days.

It is so easy to mistake pleasing others for true spirituality. Some "pleasers" are busy doing a lot of

stuff for everyone because they live to please. They translate their good works into leverage against God and others. "I do for everyone else so I deserve something in return." Pleasers usually will not express this demand, but they are thinking it. Why? Because they please others not for the other's sake but for their own sake. Real it. Why? Because they please others not for the other's sake but for their own sake. Real love and true spirituality serve others from compassion. True love puts itself in the shoes of others and reaches out to meet them where they are.

Many years ago I got as sick as I had ever been. Even when I had scarlet fever as a kid I had healed faster than I did from whatever I got my first year in Oregon. At some points I thought it was all over.

Most of the time for about three months I didn't feel like I had an ounce of energy. One day, during the second week, I lay in shambles on the couch when there was a knock on the door. It was a man with a hatchet. He introduced himself and asked if there was any wood that he could cut for us. What an angel! I didn't have the energy to pick up a toothpick, let alone an ax. He had compassion on me. He reached out to my family when we were in need. He was a God-send.

You and I can be a "God-send" today. "God, use us today and give us compassion for others. Lord, maybe you better give us compassion first and then we will be prepared to lend a hand to someone in need. In Jesus' name, Amen."

God's blessings flow from a compassionate heart,  
Pastor Steve

**“Short Prayers From The Heart”**

January 21 - Matthew 14:22 - 15:9

Jesus taught that the optimum place for prayer is in a secluded place where only you and God can talk. He said this to contrast the habit of the Pharisees, which was to make a public display of their praying. I think most people are afraid to pray in public. It took me a long time to feel comfortable doing that. The Pharisees, though, were more interested in people recognizing their “spirituality” than they were in really talking to God.

I assume that you are not in the shoes of a Pharisee and that you would rather keep your spiritual practice more private. So tell me where you go to spend time alone with God? Where is that special place where you retreat to refresh your soul by honest dialogue with the Lord? Do you have a place like that? If not, let me encourage you to look for one.

Carl was a young man studying to be a pastor when I first met him. In a round-about way he was like a brother to my girlfriend when we were seniors in high school. It was right at the end of my senior year when Jesus came into my life. Kitty (yeah, that was really her name) and I took a weekend and drove up to San Francisco to spend some time with Carl and his wife Ronda. In the course of our visit, Kitty and Ronda weren't getting along. One morning the tension reached a peak. Where was Carl? He was nowhere to be found. There I was in the middle of a cat-fight and my new friend was AWOL. Ronda told me that when tensions were high, it was Carl's practice to go to a place at the park and spend time praying. That was his special place where he talked to the Lord about the situation at hand. At that time in my life I was a bit taken aback by this behavior, but I also thought that somehow it was the best course of action. And interestingly enough, the girls did resolve their conflict. Ironically, on the way home Kitty and I broke up. Such is life!

One of the key verses describing Jesus' life is

found in Mark 1:35. It says, “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.” Jesus always set the pace by doing what He asked others to do. Jesus even said, “Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it,” (John 14:12-14).

Even though the ideal is to spend concentrated time in prayer in a secluded place, God accepts prayers on the run, or on the water, as the Apostle Peter found out. His prayer, “Lord, save me” is one of the shortest recorded in the Bible. Jesus answered his prayer. Peter's intentions were great and he had even taken a step in the right direction, but then he was overwhelmed by the sight of the waves. All of the sudden, his faith wavered and he began to sink. Jesus responded not with sarcasm or a scolding, but with help.

Prayers are most effective when they are sincerely prayed from the heart. That's why the best prayers are prayed when the need is great. The prayer doesn't have to be long and drawn out, it simply needs to be sincere. Sometimes, just pray short meaningful prayers like:

“Lord, give me courage to face this...”

“God, give me love for \_\_\_\_\_.”

“God, I'm stepping out in faith; strengthen me.”

“God, use me.”

“Jesus, help me to act like you right now.”

“Lord, would you heal \_\_\_\_\_?”

“God, I need you right now, please God.”

“Lord, guide my steps.”

“Lord, open my eyes so I can see your word clearly.”

The Pharisees could pray lengthy and fancy prayers, but Jesus said their hearts were far from Him. People may have been impressed, but not the Lord. Because God knows our heart already, He is more inclined to hear us reflect back to Him where we truly are and not some made-up version that might sound grand, but is really only lip service. He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes

of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight,” (Luke 16:15).

“Pray in the Spirit” Paul told us in Ephesians. Let's join him.

God's blessings make prayer a joy,  
Pastor Steve

**“Out Of The Heart”**

January 22 - Matthew 15: 10-39

Praise The Lord,  
It's funny about our hearts. We seem to be most in touch with them when we're hurting. Those who have been through a good deal of suffering will sometimes have a deep capacity to feel for others. They can empathize with others. I think that maybe this is because their hearts are softened. They are less proud. They are more vulnerable. They are more reliant on Divine Grace.

Jeremiah said a long time ago, “The heart is deceitful above all else, who can know it?” Sin has had a big impact on mankind. I have heard over and over for years the comment, “I'm a good person,” or “He's such a good person.” “Good” is a relative word when it comes to describing the heart. Compared to God, no one measures up; both Jesus and the apostle Paul say that there are none good, not even one. So if we say someone is good, we need to qualify what we mean.

It seems to me that each time neighbors or associates of a person who is convicted for some horrible crime are asked to talk about him, they usually say what a nice person he was and how they just can't comprehend his actions. Remember the Columbine murderers in Colorado? One of the kid's neighbors said that he was quiet, but seemingly harmless. This person simply did not know him.

I believe we are so quick to think people are good

because we hope that it is true. The truth is, that by nature none are good. So, acts of goodness should be attributed to the general grace of God who enables sinful people to do some kind things. Left to our own inward inclinations, we all would be guilty of heinous crimes. That's why Jesus makes it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that all men are guilty of the most horrible sins because the heart is corrupt.

Jesus said, “For out of the heart come:

1. Evil thoughts
2. Murder
3. Adultery
4. Sexual immorality
5. Theft
6. False testimony
7. Slander”

Jesus makes it clear that religious traditions like hand washing or, in the Pharisee's case, a whole lot of rules they made up to establish their own righteousness, will not prevent them from falling into a spiritual ditch. They are spiritually blind, even though they think they are okay because they keep their own man-made rules.

For these reasons Jesus would tell the Pharisee Nicodemus that a person would have to be born anew in order to enter the kingdom of God (see this in John 3). There needs to be an internal work of the Spirit in

a person's heart in order for him to stake any claim to heaven or to think that he can comprehend spiritual things.

It is too easy to take for granted the miracle of new birth a Christian has experienced. Jesus says it's like the wind, in that it is mysterious as to its origin but has a dramatic impact on those it touches. Until then a person could clean up his act all he wanted and still not change the sin in his heart. Only Christ can make

a clean heart.

Has Jesus changed your heart? If so, you will experience ongoing cleansing through the Word. John 15:3 says, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." There's another good reason to continue reading, studying and thinking about the Word of God.

God's blessings change our heart,  
Pastor Steve



Day 23

## "Jonah, Yeast, and a Spiritual Answer"

January 23 - Matthew 16: 1-20

**T**here are at least three very important lessons in this chapter. Let's spell them out and then try to apply them to our lives. The fact that Jesus was seemingly in a constant tussle with the Pharisees and Sadducees should give us some encouragement if we too are rubbing people the wrong way with our Jesus talk. Like we've already pointed out, Jesus is the dividing line and it just may be that you find yourself in tension right now with someone who'd like you to "keep your religion to yourself."

To date, what has been the number one spiritual lesson that you have learned since coming to Jesus? A lesson must first be heard and digested before it can be put into practice. Many times we will hear the words of Jesus and find them difficult to swallow. At the end of John chapter six Jesus told his listeners that they would have to eat His flesh and drink His blood if they wanted any part with Him. The Bible there records that many heard this and left Him. Sometimes we have to see the lessons lived out in others before we can understand how they might be applied to us. This was, of course, true for the first disciples as they walked with Jesus.

When I was just a baby Christian I met Rodney. He had long hair, a beard and a smile that could light

up a room. He was also an ex-Hell's Angel. To me he was one of the coolest brothers in Christ I had run into. I met up with him one Saturday evening at church, the night before Easter that year. He asked if I wanted to hang out and then go him to a sunrise service at a local football stadium. Absolutely, I did! We ate at Denny's, drove around for awhile, and ended up outside the stadium, sometimes talking and then nodding off, but enjoying each other's company all the time. Probably about 5 a.m. a drunk staggered past us, bottle in hand, looking like he wasn't sure which way he was headed. I remember saying, "Look at that, it's Easter morning and that guy's as drunk as a skunk -- can you believe that?" I looked to Rodney for recognition. He bowed his head and prayed for the man. After he finished praying he didn't say anything about it; he didn't have to. That was 40 years ago; it seems like it happened yesterday. It was a powerful lesson to me.

Jesus taught many lessons and performed many signs, but pointed to one as the ultimate -- the sign of Jonah. Matthew doesn't explain what that meant here because Jesus had already brought it up back in chapter 12. It is about His burial for three days which implies his resurrection. That is the sign of all signs:

that He would rise.

The second lesson is the warning not to be taken in by the teaching of the religious brass of the day. So many people simply took for granted what the religiously esteemed person said. It would have been counter to the nature of some of the disciples to question their words. That was true except for the fact that Jesus spoke with so much more authority. That authority was recognized by the disciples as well as the crowd.

Thirdly, Jesus' identity as the Messiah and the Son of the living God is given to Peter not because he was extraordinarily smart but as a gift from the Father in heaven. God was speaking through Peter unbeknownst to him.

Who doesn't want to see a sign from heaven or be able to receive spiritual insights? In our day and age so many claim that they are spiritual people in some sense or another. They claim to hear God speaking or they profess to have deep spiritual insight and so they write books about how you can be like them. The "spiritual" new age movement in our time has adherents all over the country. The Pharisees and

Sadducees were the spiritual leaders of their day. I believe Jesus is telling the Pharisees and Sadducees that as easy as it is for them to predict that a storm is coming, it should be as simple for them to realize who He is by His works and words. But they don't; they reject Him from start to finish. They do not believe He is their Messiah. And even though He is standing right among them, they cannot see Him, so to speak. They are blind.

Jesus did not want his disciples to be taken in by these blind guides. He uses the illustration of yeast to make it clear that their teaching spreads and negatively permeates the whole person. We, today, need to take this to heart and be careful who we listen to and follow. Let's respect good Christian teachers and listen to their thoughts on Scripture, but at the same time we ought not to become their disciples. They are merely servants guiding us closer to the Lord. We will get the most out of Scripture and learn the greatest lessons by anticipating that God will teach us out of His Word.

God's blessings teach us many new lessons,  
Pastor Steve



Day 24

## "I Forfeit"

January 24 - Matthew 16:21 - 17:13

**F**rom the very beginning of time it has been man's temptation to try and live in an independent, self-satisfied, and materialistic way. From time eternal these have been the goals to shoot for if a person wanted "the good life." It's the banner I grew up under and it's the temptation that knocks on my door quite often.

The crazy thing is that the more I have, the less satisfied I seem to be. On the other hand, the more I am able to give to others the richer I feel. Jesus taught in another place that "life does not consist in the abundance of the things that a man possesses."

The more we take a possessive attitude, the more we get possessed by our possessions. And if they don't suffocate us Visa and MasterCard will sure try.

Jesus said, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" Rhetorical question. Of course the answer he expects is "No good at all. This is a question that applies in our day more than ever. When we give ourselves to the materialism monster, he eats a bit of our soul. The more we buy, the more we accumulate, the more false security and distraction we experience. Jesus knew that materialism would rob the joy from the soul.

That kind of gain, the accumulation of possessions, is actually loss.

This gain Jesus refers to probably also applies to position or status as well. So many people spend so much of their lives trying to please or impress others. Do you tend to live for the praise of others? Can the least bit of criticism bowl you over? Do you think a lot about others' opinions? Are you concerned that others might be talking about you? Is it hard for you to watch a football game because you are concerned the quarterback is talking about you in the huddle? Just kidding.

Gaining wealth or status is often the result of selfish ambition. When I put the focus on me and my well being I tend to not be satisfied unless things in "my" world go well. Unless I have money or status or power then I'm not happy. But the truth is that God did not put me on this planet to please me. He has a plan for me -- a game plan so to speak -- which will end in a guaranteed victory. Those who follow God's game plan will never have to forfeit. They are winners already because Jesus won the spiritual victory for them by dying on the cross and defeating every spiritual foe against us. Those who pursue material gain and self-promotion risk the possibility of forfeiting their lives.

If you have ever been on a team that had to forfeit for one reason or another you know the frustration that it caused. You didn't even get into the game. You went home early. You may have practiced hard and have psyched yourself up for the contest, but in the end there was no contest, only a long, sad, ride home. Sometimes when a game has been forfeited,

the other team will lend you a player or two so you can have a practice game. It would be a meaningless game because you have already lost because of the forfeit, but at least you'd get in a little workout. What would it be like to work hard your whole life and find out in the end that you were never in the game because you had forfeited it all?

What would it be like to get to the end of your life with great wealth, popularity and a retirement that others envied, but learn on judgment day that you had lost your soul?

What would a man give in exchange for his soul?

What would it profit to miss Jesus and pour your life into every other pursuit that will one day end in a forfeit? There is no advantage in that whatsoever.

After Jesus comes into your life, in reality, you have everything that you will ever need.

David made it clear: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1).

I could live without a cell phone and still be in the game of life.

I could live without a 60-inch TV and still be in the game of life.

I could live without a new car and still be in the game of life.

I could live without the praise of others and still be in the game of life.

I could live without luxuries and still be in the game of life.

I could live without Jesus and forfeit everything.

God's blessings are realized in a life surrendered to Jesus,

Pastor Steve



## "Frustration, Failure and Fear"

January 25 - Matthew 17:14 - 18:9

It's tough to be human. Sometimes it's tough to be God, no doubt. Much of life is about the way we respond to our own humanity. We are limited in so many ways and are bound by our limitations. Even the actor who played Superman died recently although he had been hopeful that he would walk again despite his severe spinal cord injury from a horse riding accident in the mid-90s. We are frail. Remember the "Iron Man," Lou Gehrig? Now the debilitating disease that took his life, ALS, is named after him. In his final speech at Yankee Stadium in New York, Gehrig said that he was the luckiest man on the face of the earth. He may have been made of iron, but he died a young man.

If you have been feeling the restrictions of your humanity lately, that is a perfectly normal thing. Don't feel sorry for yourself; instead, join the rest of us who are struggling alongside of you. My wife's grandpa used to tell perfect strangers on the street, "Today's a good day for a race!" They'd look at him cross-eyed and then he'd finish, "The human race." Then they got it. "This guy must be some kind of a nut," I could see them thinking. But he was right, wasn't he? Why sit around and mope and complain when there is a race to be run and a fellow runner who needs encouragement?

I think my Dam Theory will help us here.

Dams regulate the flow of water in a lake. Before the rainy season the engineer opens the dam's spillways to let out some of the pressure the high water level causes. Regulating the amount of water protects the safety of those who live downriver and prepares the lake to take on the upcoming rainy season. Make sense so far? What does this have to do with anything? Be patient.

Just as the dam determines the amount of water pressure against its wall, our minds and hearts will determine the amount of pressure in our lives. Let

me illustrate. Picture three rivers running into a lake. Can you visualize them? Okay, now picture a good-sized dam at the other end standing firmly against the awesome amount of pressure all of that water brings. The amount of pressure is determined by the amount of flow from the rivers that are feeding the lake. What would happen if the amount of water coming in overtook the amount of outflow from the dam? Well, either the dam would crack or the water would overflow the dam, or both.

Now think about this from a different perspective. Let's say that the rivers represent the emotions: fear, hurt and frustration. The dam represents our minds and hearts. The homes downriver represent all of the people in our lives. Depending on our ability to open our dam, we will be able to regulate the amount of pressure we are having to contend with from day to day. Our inability to open the dam will determine how much increasing pressure will build up against us. If there is no mechanism to open the dam, sooner or later there will be a break. Now you're with me, aren't you?

Every single human being has pressure in his life. Without exception this is true. Jesus had pressure and so do we. Why is it that some people are better able to cope with the pressure in their lives? Are they superhuman? Are they the lucky ones? Do they have it easier than others so that they do not even feel the kinds of pressures that most of us feel? Really, pressure doesn't discriminate from one class to another. The rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the ones who look like they have it all together and the ones who don't, have all had their dams broken. Pressure is a universal reality. You have it, and I have it, and our kids have it.

A reasonable amount of pressure is motivational. The goal is not to release all pressure from our lives. People who have that goal are being too idealistic.



And those who retire with the hope of having a care-free life usually end up disappointed. Have you ever seen a lake with no water in it? It's not too pretty, is it? This pressure and the stress that it causes are in some ways an indication that we are alive. It forces us to use our minds and hearts to deal with the daily cares we are confronted with.

There is a multitude of ways to open your dam and let the pressure of the water in your lake flow. There are probably as many ways as there are people. No two people are exactly alike and so each person has to find the mechanisms to open those big outlets and relieve the pressure. At the same

time, I believe there are a few universal switches that can be instrumental in opening the dam. I'd like to share a few that have helped me the most.

1. It helps me to identify the particular emotion that is dumping the most water into my lake. Once I have identified the source of the problem I can begin to work on the problem and can usually -- not always -- find a way to deal with the rush of watery emotion that is flowing from that river. I am the king of frustration. Because of my perfectionist tendencies I will quickly cut my own head off to spite my face with unmet unrealistic expectations.

2. Next, it helps to pray about the particular event that is the source of the flow. "God is our refuge and strength..." (Psalm 46:1). Also, in prayer we can cast our care upon the Lord because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

3. I have found that it is extremely helpful to have a quiver of well-used Bible verses or Bible chapters to quote or read when under pressure. I love Psalm 27. Take a look at this jewel-filled chapter. Also Psalm 37 has a lot of help.

4. Music. Music is the balm of the soul and can open the dam very quickly when you can identify with the lyrics of the songwriter. Put on your favorite

music and watch the fear, hurt and frustration flow down stream.

5. Talk to a friend. Get it off your shoulders. We all need a confidante to spill our guts to. "Bear one another's burdens and fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6).

And the list goes on. Maybe you can take some time today to personalize a list for yourself. Remember, these will be the actions we take when the emotions of fear, frustration and hurt are pressing against our lives and causing such undue stress that we feel like we are going to explode.

Let's apply this to our reading today.

Jesus is frustrated with the disciples and his generation because they lacked simple faith. Jesus deals with this frustration by stating it clearly with the expectation that He wants His disciples to have faith. He makes it clear that they will need it because He will not always be with them physically. When the disciples hear Jesus talk about His death, grief fills their hearts. They are hurt. How could this be that their Lord, whom they love, is going to die? They are saddened by the news. More than likely they didn't hear about the resurrection part. How could they have understood that at the time? They are also probably dealing with the emotion of fear as well. What would they do when Jesus died? He had become the center of their lives and now He was leaving; that didn't seem fair. Could they also have been dealing with the fear of failure since they couldn't cast out the demon?

Emotion is a big part of our lives. Let's learn to deal with it in wise ways and ask God for patience when He allows a great amount of stress to push against us. It will develop all kinds of good fruit in our lives.

God's blessings open the dam,  
Pastor Steve

## "Forgiveness Is Not Optional"

January 26 - Matthew 18: 10-35

Let's face it, we tend to love those who love us. When I feel like someone cares about little old me, I tend to want to live in harmony with the source of that love. Isn't it interesting how all of those gigantic football players speak so sentimentally about their mothers? Recently there has been a TV commercial highlighting the Philadelphia quarterback's mom. In the commercial she is the Team Mom who feeds the players hearty soup so they can play well. Where are all the dads? I think the reason there is such an emphasis on mom is because of all of the nurturing she did through the years. It may not seem macho, but the truth is that mom gets most of the credit from down on the field. Who do the players say "hi" to when the camera is on them? Those who love us, like our moms, can make all kinds of mistakes and we would still be inclined to forgive them. On the other hand, it's much more difficult to deal with those we are not nurtured by, let alone forgive them.

Jesus' parable of the ungrateful servant speaks volumes about the central place of forgiveness in His teachings. The teaching concludes with the sobering words: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart."

Let's summarize the parable: a man owes an exorbitant debt to his master. When called to account he begs for mercy and receives it from the gracious master. He too has a debtor, whom he strong-arms to pay the debt. When that person begs for mercy he receives none, but is cast into debtors' prison. The servants of the big boss see this and report the matter to him. The big boss takes the ingrate and gives him a taste of his own medicine.

There are a few key observations here:

1. The first man owed a debt that was so huge that he needed forgiveness to be able to deal with it. He couldn't pay his debt.

2. The big boss expected the indebted servant to learn a lesson about forgiveness from His kindness.

3. The basis for the forgiveness we offer others will depend on how personally we take our own forgiveness. The question is "What impact has the master's graciousness had on our own lives?"

4. When we squander the privileges we have received, we then forfeit the grace that could have been ours. Or, we demonstrate by our lack of appreciation for what has been done for us that we really haven't personalized the love of the Master.

Jesus said in another place, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed," (Matthew 21:43,44).

True spirituality is marked by true forgiveness. After a person is transformed by the salvation of Christ, he is then made fit for the kingdom of God by the change of his heart. When there is no heart change, the person may try to conform to the standards and expectations of spirituality, but in the final analysis he will not be able to do the words of Jesus.

It sounds harsh, doesn't it? That the Master would be so angry with the first servant in the story. But think again about the disparity between what he had received and the way he didn't appropriate it. Jesus says that the Master would say, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" There was a disconnect between the great gift the Master had given him and what he ought to do with that gift.

What impact has the gift of God had in your life?

When you read about or think about the cross, how does that affect your relationships with some of the harder-to-get-along-with people in your life?

Has forgiveness been difficult for you when it comes to some people? Have their offenses been

eating at you to the point where you are distracted by them?

If you chose to forgive them today how would that affect your relationship with them? If you are not sure, why not give it a try, for Jesus' sake, and see what happens? You just might free yourself from the burden of carrying the offense.

Back to the analogy about mothers; most of us will always feel a certain amount of love and security from our moms. Moms tend to love us no matter

what. They have nurtured us and given us the sense that we could talk to them about almost anything. We trust them. We believe that they believe in us. It is easy to love our moms, because they love us; it is another story when it comes to those who owe us something and are asking us to forgive them. How can we treat them so harshly when we have had so much love and mercy in our own lives?

God's blessings empower us to truly forgive,  
Pastor Steve



Day 27

## "Little Kids"

January 27 - Matthew 19: 1-15

**P**ray Today,  
We could talk about divorce; it's in our reading today. But all those grown ups talking about grown up stuff like divorce can sometimes be unnerving. Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus and Jesus told them the way it was from the beginning, when God initiated the union of husband and wife. Grown ups are always talking about controversial subjects, it seems. Even the disciples were protective of the Lord's time and tried to shoo the little kids from interfering with the important work He was doing.

Do you remember how you felt as a child? I hope that you had a ton of carefree moments and days growing up. If you didn't, for one reason or another, I am sorry. I wish you could have known some of the lazy summer days I remember when the cares of adult affairs were as far from me as the moon. One of my favorite memories is riding my bike down to the park to play "over the line" with my friends. Over the line was a simple game of baseball that only required four players. We'd set up two bases where second and third are on a normal baseball field. There was a shortstop and outfielder, a batter and an underhand pitcher. The point was to try to drive the ball past one

of the players in the field. If you hit it past the shortstop, that was a single; if the ball landed in front of the outfielder, but got past him on the ground, that was a double; over the outfielder's head was a home run. Outs were made by catching a grounder at short or on the fly by either of the players in the field. We would play for hours. I might sneak back home for a PB&J, but then it was right back to the park.

Another pastime that my friends and I enjoyed was having Monopoly tournaments, especially on rainy days. We'd drink Dr. Pepper, eat candy and buy up as many properties as we could. When we were playing, we weren't worrying. Well, maybe we thought about what we might do that night or we would get on each other's case about who was better, the Dodgers or Giants. But we were not worried about adult stuff whatsoever. Man, that was a good time in my life. Can you relate to this in any way? I hope so.

I am concerned that via the Internet or cable TV or even regular old TV, kids are getting caught up in adult issues way too young. The things young children talk about at the grade school level these days were the things that made my friends and I blush in high school. Times have changed. But the purpose of

this email is not to discourage you, but help you to live with a more child-like attitude.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God was for kids. Don't you love that? At a time in the world when schedules and goals and deadlines and meetings are the norm, isn't it refreshing to know that the kingdom of God is for kids? Let's think today about ways we might emulate kids.

The other day a friend's son came up at a sporting event and out of the blue gave me a hug. Wow, did that feel special. Kids do that quite a bit, don't they? They do stuff out of the blue. When was the last time you did something that way? Why do adults become so predictable? I challenge you to do something out of the ordinary today in an "out of the blue" way.

Kids trust. They will quickly put their faith in someone whether that person is trustworthy or not. In other words, they are not as skeptical as adults. They are especially not cynical. Let's practice this in our prayers today. Let's come to God as little children and let Him know how much we love and trust Him

and believe that He is doing good things in our lives. Trust in the Lord. Also, show someone you trust them by giving them your attention and displaying to them through your body language that they are worth listening to.

There are so many other examples, but let's finish with playfulness. Kids have such great imaginations. Give a kid a ball or stick and let him go to town. For years my family lived in the woods. My kids would play for hours, doing so many creative and innovative things. They would get some old pieces of lumber and build a treehouse. It became a project that they couldn't wait to get to.

How playful are you? Are you in a rut? Would it help you to do something today in a playful way?

Be a kid. The kingdom belongs to such as these. If you are a child of God, enjoy acting like one. God loves to see His children at play and He loves to talk with them in all the adventures of life.

God's blessings, child,  
Pastor Steve



Day 28

## "With God All Things are Possible"

January 28 - Matthew 19: 16-30

**L**ift Your Head High,

Let's step back today and look at the account of the rich young man.

Once on a segment of ABC's 20/20 there was a report titled, "Lies, Myths and Downright Stupidity." One of the myths exposed was: Money brings happiness.

They reported from the perspective of a rap artist who made millions producing records, that money doesn't really give you the kind of satisfaction that is at the heart of living life well. The rapper, the lead guy from the group, Run DMC, said that one day he woke up to the reality that even though he had it all, it really felt more like a game than real life. Real life was found in serving God and by reaching out to others

and enjoying their happiness. He said that happiness is merely a byproduct of another's happiness.

The story of the Rich Man is a glimpse into the nature of all men. We want to know what we can do to have eternal life. I want my cake and I want to eat it too. I want it all. I want me to be happy. And so I become adept at justifying my own life to fit the way I perceive God's standard. When you read the account, you realize that the focus of the man was on himself. Nowhere in the story do you pick up that he is willing to follow Jesus. He wants to do a good work and earn eternal life.

How do you think the man would have responded if Jesus had said, "It's going to cost you a million dol-

lars." He probably would have paid it if he was worth ten million. But what would he have done if he was worth nine hundred thousand? In the latter scenario he would have had to rely on the Lord for what he didn't have. He would have had to humble himself.

Jesus puts the man in his place. He exposes him for who he really is. Jesus is saying that salvation -- eternal life -- cannot be bought or earned unless you are perfect. The disciples pick up on this and ask how then anyone could be saved. The Lord replies, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

In I Corinthians 1, the apostle makes the point that there are few big-wigs in the kingdom of God. He

says, "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth...He chose the lowly things of this world... to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1:26f.).

Are you still trying to earn eternal life? Jesus says it's impossible. Are you enjoying eternal life? Then you have learned the secret that with God all things are possible. Eternal life is in Jesus and if you have received Him, then you have eternal life. John says, "He who has the Son has life..."

God's blessings are realized in the Son,  
Pastor Steve

not pre-judging what He could or couldn't do. I was awestruck by the possibilities of His work in my life, but I did not force Him into a little box and dictate the way things would be. I didn't know better because I had so little knowledge about Him. All I knew was that He loved me and that He was alive. That was good enough. If He were to surprise me tomorrow in some new way, that was A-okay with me. I was more than willing to submit to the wisdom and power and will of the Father. My thoughts ran along these lines: "God, bring it on; you be God and I'll be just me in need of you, waiting for you to do whatever you want in my life. I will just sit back and let you work in ways that will blow my mind." Then I met people who knew all about God...

Once we think that God can be wired and fully comprehended, then we will be in for a very rude awakening. I don't think God is interested in being confined to our formulas and ideas. Now, I do not mean that there is not clear teaching about who He is and His ways. The Bible is clear about the nature and works of God. It's when we think we are as smart as He is and begin to portray that we know as much, then we are in trouble.

Jesus' parable of the hired workers reminds us who is in charge. At one point the master says, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" How could anyone argue with that? Of course He has that right no matter what anyone thinks about it. He's the one in charge and the one with the authority to hire. This is a very healthy way to view God. It helps us to keep the right perspective about who He is and who we are.

Sometimes we get too big for our britches. Have you ever looked around at the way God has blessed

others and began to feel put out because they seem to be getting much more than you? You work so hard and do so much and along comes so-and-so and it seems like they do very little and, wham, their life is full of blessings. This "works mentality" has been the downfall of many. It was for the religious Jews of Jesus' day. When Jesus begins to talk about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom of God, their religious feathers are ruffled. Here they have the spiritual background and the heritage that the teachings and life of Christ are fulfilling and these Johnny-come-lately Gentiles are going to be let in. That was a thought that truly rubbed them the wrong way.

What does God owe you? Truly, God owes me not one single thing. Rather, I owe him my all in all. If God decides to give someone else more than He gives me I can't complain because all that I have is from Him in the first place. Even if I worked all day in the sun to receive my pay, it is still by grace that I have the mercy to do that. The Bible says, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom

and knowledge of God!  
How unreachable his judgments, and His  
paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been His counselor?  
Who has ever given to God  
that God should repay him?  
For from Him and through Him and  
to Him are all things.  
To Him be the glory forever! Amen." Romans 11:  
33-36

God's blessings are unconditional. Enjoy yours,  
Pastor Steve



## "God Does What He Wants"

January 29 - Matthew 20: 1-19

**H**appy are the People whose God is the Lord, Remember being a kid and thinking how grown-ups knew everything? We thought that our parents must be like gods or something because the breadth of their knowledge was so far beyond ours. Then we grew up and realized that all of us have limitations to our knowledge. In so many ways--maybe in every way--we, as humans, are limited, mortal creatures.

Do you sometimes feel the weight of your own limitations? Or are you one of those who thinks that you are immortal and that life will always be the way it is now? Some religious faiths teach that man will one day become a god. He will shed his mortal flesh and take on the name of a god. Or, others hold to some belief in reincarnation, the idea that once you die you come back and get other chances to evolve into the god that you could become. Of course man's attempt at godhood is as old as the Garden of Eden. There, it was the devil who introduced the idea that man ought

to aspire to be a god.

Rather than being an acceptable thought, this very idea became the downfall of all men.

We'd like to believe that we could think like God thinks. Ponder that for a moment.

What happens when we aspire to be gods or, even more bizarrely, try to bring God down to our level and give Him an identity in our own likeness? When that happens, we severely distort the truth about who God is. God is God and there is no one like Him. His thoughts, Isaiah taught, and His ways, are not like ours. They are so much higher that it is futile to try and figure them out. We may look at what God reveals and make conclusions from the things we read, but to think that we can know the mind of God to such an extent that we could figure Him out -- well, sorry, it just won't happen.

The same wonder I had as a kid about my parents' wisdom I felt again when I first came to Christ. So much about Him was a mystery to me. I was

**“How Great You Are!”**

January 30 - Matthew 20: 20-34

**I** Hope You Find Yourself Blessed Today,  
How are you doing on the ladder of success? In America it looks something like this, starting from the bottom up: high school diploma, a bachelor of arts degree, a good job, a master of arts degree, advancement at your good job, an eye-catching car, a house of your own, a strong retirement plan, retirement, relocating to a warm spot, living the good life. Is that pretty close?

Success is usually measured by how much you have and how much influence you wield. These benchmarks are easily distinguished by the kind of car you drive or the level of intimidation aroused among your peers. Accomplishment can also be measured by the degrees on your wall or the plaques which announce the honors others have conferred upon you. One way or another, your worth is typically determined by the status you have achieved in society.

Bear with me for just a moment while I detour from what I want to say today so that I can bang a drum of mine on the subject of education. The truth of the matter is that you may have a child who is not wired, no way no how, to go to college. That's just the way it is. What happens in that child's mind when he is told from a young age that you will not amount to anything if you do not go to college? By the way, many of our up-and-coming smarty-pants kids end up in a liberal university where they buy into Darwinism and the liberal mantras of the day and come out of the dorms with an education and a belly and mind full of garbage. That is not a good definition of success in my estimation. Ecclesiastes says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all of your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom" (9:10).

Okay, I feel better, now let's get back on track.

In response to a mother's plea for her two boys to have honor in Jesus' kingdom, the Lord sits his dis-

ciples down and tells them the way it is in His economy. First of all, He makes it crystal clear that His way would not match the way of the world. He so much as says, "Stop reading books on leadership by secular authors. They will not establish the same principles that I have been teaching you when it comes to living in the realm of God's kingdom. As a matter of fact, if you go their way you will be working against the kingdom." Jesus, the Master Teacher, oftentimes throughout His ministry had to rebuke the attitudes of His disciples. In so doing He was making it clear to them that they were to be different. Instead of lords with all authority, they were to be servant leaders.

Peter has much to say about this in his first epistle. Let's quote him: "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed. Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away," (5: 1-4). Peter was there the day Jesus taught what Matthew recorded in our reading today and obviously he learned the lesson. Here he passes the torch to other leaders with clear expectations that they would lead by serving and not being served.

Jesus puts His money where His mouth is. Pardon the pun, but in a way that's true, isn't it? He took all of His resources and used them to serve others, even to the point of death so that others could participate in His kingdom. He made the way by sacrificing His own body so that we might have eternal life. "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all; how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things" (Romans 8: 32). If that isn't reason to serve

Jesus then I don't have one.

In what way will you serve others today?

Let's be like Jesus and follow Him in reaching out

to others in His Name!

God's blessings happen with the servant's towel,

Pastor Steve

**“The Last Days”**

January 31 - Matthew 21: 1-17

**J**onathan Edwards, the renowned Puritan preacher, resolved not to waste a minute of his time on things that he knew would not honor the Lord. He made reference to using his time during his life the same way he would use it if his death were imminent. A number of us live as if we will never die and die as if we never lived. In the end we tend to add up what our time has amounted to and begrudge the brevity of our lives. Life is short -- shorter than we think -- and it would be a good thing for all of us to take Edwards's motto to heart and begin to live as if this day was our last.

In the New Testament we now begin Christ's final week before resurrection. He is met at first with praise by a riled up crowd. Let's call this time "Messianic acknowledgment." The people thought Jesus could be the promised Messiah. Most, if not all, of them thought this meant the beginning of a new earthly kingdom that would overpower the Roman government.

For so long Rome had dominated the world, including the little Middle-Eastern strip of land called Palestine. It was a significant location because of its centrality between different nations, but it was not considered by Rome a difficult area to control and manage. Many of the Jews were outraged that the "heathen" were dominating like they were. They thirsted for a deliverer who could subdue the power of this mighty despot. Jesus reminds them that he is not a political ruler. He does this by healing the sick and restoring the blind and by cleansing the temple of

those who were exploiting God's things for profit.

Earlier, John the Baptist had sent messengers to ask Jesus if He was the "One" or if they (the Jews) should be looking for another. John too was apparently anxious to see his people escape the domination of Rome. Jesus sent word back to John clarifying that His ministry was one of healing and love and not of military conquest. He came to save, not to judge. He came to offer the kingdom and deliverance from sin and freedom for the soul.

This would be the beginning of some difficult days for Jesus. He knew that by the end of the week all of his close friends would forsake Him. He knew that he would be carrying the heavy cross. The praise in today's reading from the streets of Jerusalem should be a reminder to us that the adulation of men is short lived. If we are dependent on the praise of men, then chances are we'll be let down.

Could it be that many of the very people who yelled "Hosanna," screamed out a few days later, "Crucify Him!" Crowds are so easily swayed that I am sure there were some, if not many. Let's head into the month of February with eyes open, while we read the account of the last days of Jesus on earth.

This is the gospel at its heart of hearts. Let's swallow it whole.

Gospel means "Good News." We need good news today, don't we? We need to know that there is hope for our family and friends and for the world. There is just way too much bad news pouring out of every media crevice. Wherever you turn, someone else has

something difficult to say about the way things are. The world can be a very dark place. But there is good news! There is a light that shines in the darkness and dispels the darkness. There is hope in Jesus. The roughest week of Jesus' earthly life would become the catalyst for more hope than the world has ever known.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."

As you read the last week of Jesus, don't be

hasty. Take it in like a glass of cold lemonade on a hot summer day. Let it roll over your mind like hot wax dripping down a candlestick. Allow it to penetrate the inner regions of your heart and let your heart rejoice in God your Savior. He desires to be the Master of your heart. Set Him apart as Lord there today, will you?

God's blessings make life worth living,  
Pastor Steve



## "A Heart To Respond And Obey"

February 1 - Matthew 21: 18-32

**M**ay God Strengthen You, Jesus directed much of His teaching at the cold-heartedness of the Scribes and Pharisees. You need to think of these religious professionals as a class of people. Their reputation and their position was based on their status as the religious elite. Paul was a Pharisee and he would write in Galatians, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (1: 10). In a Pharisee's mind there was a ladder to be climbed and status to be gained. No wonder those who heard that Paul had been saved by the grace of Jesus were cautious at first to believe that he was truly a disciple.

Jesus' teachings were diametrically opposed to the idea that spirituality made you somehow superior to those around you. He taught that the most spiritual person was the one who served God from the heart. A truly spiritual person loves God and wants to be a son or daughter who obeys the voice of the Master. The grand teaching in the Bible, "to obey is better than sacrifice," is a reminder that listening to and obeying God's voice, hearing His Word as we go

about our business from day to day, is much more important, monumentally more important, than going through any sacrificial routine. It is the heart of worship that matters and not the exterior acts that God is after. That's why Paul would later regret all of the traditionalism he had so tenaciously held on to for so long, and trade it in for knowing Jesus.

The obedient heart is not always perfect. But God knows the heart and is pleased with its disposition. The disobedient heart may cover its disobedience with the appearance of a willing attitude, as in the story of the two sons that Jesus shares in our reading today. The obedient heart will come around and do what the Master desires. Which of the two sons do you relate to the most? Do you say you will, then don't? Or, do you sometimes say you won't, but then follow your heart and do what the Master desires?

Forgiveness is a good application here. We know that forgiveness is not an option for the believer, it is a requirement. If we are injured in some way, it is our obedience to Christ that leads us to offer forgiveness. Many times, I have talked to an obedient Christian who said at first, "I don't think I could ever forgive them for what they did." But later they do. Why? Because they have the heart of the Master "who came

not to be served but to serve."

May God keep all of us from cold-heartedness and may we walk in the footsteps of Jesus who humbled Himself to the point of death, even the death of

the cross.

God's blessings make forgiveness possible,  
Pastor Steve



## "Many Invited, Few Chosen"

February 2 - Matthew 21:33 - 22: 14

**R**ejoice In The Lord Always, Weddings are grand occasions. So much planning goes into a wedding because everyone wants it to be perfect, especially the bride. They never are flawless, of course, but that doesn't stop the need to try and perfect every detail. I was in a wedding where the bride and groom were just finishing the unity candle; they took their individual candles and lit the center candle and then they blew out the single candles to signify their oneness. The problem was that the bride blew her veil right into the flame and caught it on fire.

Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a wedding feast. It's a lavish affair. Everything is prepared and ready, but the original guests proved themselves unworthy of the occasion. So the call goes out into the streets to bring in all those willing to come. Guests begin to arrive and enjoy all of the benefits of the big event. The music is playing, the guests are engaged in lively conversation, maybe some are dancing and carrying on with spirits soaring, while still others are gorging themselves on the delicious trimmings at the table. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend, he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

If this fellow stood out like a sore thumb, then why didn't any of the other guests seem to be distract-

ed by him? Jesus gives us no background on the man, only that he was not suited for the occasion. Obviously then, the others were dressed appropriately. They had the wedding clothes on. But this one man was conspicuous because of what he lacked.

Maybe he was one of those who was originally invited but had made an excuse for not coming. Maybe he changed his mind but it was too late because he was one of the undeserving. That's only a guess; Jesus didn't say that. What we do know is that he didn't fit in. For some reason he was in the wrong place.

Have you ever seen that show called "American Idol?" The call goes out for many to come and sing. They get every imaginable kind of singer. Some of them are so bad, they are fun to watch. One guy was so ridiculous that even though he was rejected, he went on to be pretty famous. Everyone wanted to see the guy who was rejected by the "American Idol" panel. But some of the would-be stars are chosen. They are chosen on the basis of their ability to sing well. Then they have the opportunity to go on and make a name for themselves.

In the parable we are not given the basis for the king's choice. We are only told that some had wedding garments on and this one guy did not. Later on in the Bible we are given a crystal clear picture of what the wedding garment would look like. For example: "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature," (Romans 13:14) and "Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe

yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience..." (Colossians 3:12). Faith in Jesus is the basis for being made fit for the kingdom of God and for admission into the Great Wedding Banquet.

Jesus' own countrymen had rejected Him as king. They "paid no attention and went off." They were invited, but wound up turning away the rightful ruler. What was loss for them became an open door for the Gentiles (non-Jews), so that we without Jewish heritage can enter in and enjoy the bounty of the feast. The ones chosen will be those with faith in Jesus. Where does that faith come from?

I have often wondered why God has included me. His choice of me is based on my faith in Jesus, but why do I have faith in Jesus? Of all people I feel so unworthy of the faith that I possess. I feel like the guy without the wedding clothes more often than not. The clothes I have I did not purchase, I did not work for or sing for or bargain for, nor did I really seek to even

try them on. God knows I hate to try clothes on. Why me? Why not the other guy, the guy next door or the guy who works at the coffee company or...where are his clothes? At this point let me leave these thoughts a mystery, a mystery of grace. For grace is unmerited favor; we cannot earn it or deserve it or inherit it from our families. Grace gives for its own reasons and in its own time. You were invited, and if you were chosen then you know the grace of God in Christ.

Let's stop today and ponder the mystery of Grace.

In what ways have you experienced the grace of God?

When you first heard the message of grace, where were you and how readily did you try on your new clothes?

By the way, there ain't no blue suede shoes in that outfit, only the sandals of a servant.

God's blessings are full of grace,

Pastor Steve

error. One of my favorite confrontations is in John chapter 8. There He is accused of being of the devil. Jesus simply tells them that He is not of the devil but is from heaven – error dispelled, error carriers rebuked, record set straight.

Let's join Jesus and speak truth to those we rub elbows with. I believe it is always preferable to speak truth than to make up another story or not say anything at all or say that you'll talk about it later. This is true whether we are talking about Biblical truth or the truth about some situation you are in with others or about the way you feel about something. People will benefit more from hearing the truth than they will from being sheltered from it.

In our Western culture, for example, we think we are doing everyone a favor by "protecting" kids and sometimes even adults from the subject of death. Instead of teaching the truth that death is a part of life and is the destiny of us all, we tend to avoid the subject, not prepare for the inevitable and "politely" ignore the subject when little ears are nearby. Now, I'm not for being morbidly forthcoming, but I do believe we need to include death in our vocabulary so that when it does happen (and it will happen) we will be able to talk about it in a knowing way. Otherwise, we intentionally put ourselves at a disadvantage by not broaching the subject and talking about its impact on our lives.

The Sadducees did not believe in the supernatural. Therefore, they put together a scenario to upstage Jesus regarding the idea of the afterlife. What if a family of seven brothers died consecutively and passed down the woman the first brother married (that was the law, by the way)? Who would have her in the afterlife? Think about how unlikely this scenario would be! But even if it were possible, Jesus says that it misses the point altogether.

He accuses these "holy men" of not knowing the Scripture or the power of God. Then He corrects their inaccuracies. He simply says that there will be no marriage to others we knew on earth. Why is that? This is the case because we will be united to Christ in marriage at that time. Also, He makes it clear that there will be a future resurrection. He makes his case on the basis of a verse in Exodus chapter 3. In that verse God says that He is, not was, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This latter argument also gives us a window into Jesus' view of the Bible. He essentially says that the interpretation of that text of Scripture hinges on the tense of the verb, and in this case it was present and not past.

Even though the patriarchs had died, they were alive in God's presence. That proves resurrection. The fact that Jesus used such a small aspect of the verses in Exodus, shows the depth of the Word of God and Jesus' respect for its truth.

Don't you just love the reaction of the crowd? "They were astonished." Then the Pharisees chime in, trying to put Jesus on the spot, but to no avail. Jesus then gives them a Bible question that stops them in their tracks when they realize that Jesus is saying that He is Lord. Here too, Jesus gives us another glimpse into His esteem for the Word of God. He says that the Spirit was inspiring David when he said these things about Him. Our commitment to the Word of God should not be any less than Jesus'. Why would we water down our devotion to something that Jesus was 100 percent into? Let's not be caught like the Sadducees, who did not know the Scriptures or the power of God. Is there really any excuse?

God's blessings are found in Scripture,  
Pastor Steve



## "You Are In Error"

February 3 - Matthew 22: 15-46

**I**t's Good To Be Alive, Do you tend to be too wordy? Do your friends ask you to get to the point more than you'd like? Do you stumble for words and sometimes even begin to talk when you really don't know what direction you are going? I think most of us probably say too much and listen too little. Proverbs says somewhere that in the multitude of words sin is unavoidable.

The religious brass in first century Palestine were constantly trying to get one up on Jesus. That's kind of like a first year science major thinking he could get one up on Albert Einstein. The breadth of the knowledge of God was known and lived by Jesus and so He always had an apt response when the enemies of

truth came after Him. Also, quite characteristically, He didn't have to go into a lengthy explanation. He would simply utter a couple of direct lines, maybe a paragraph or two, and the job was done.

Another feature of Jesus' style was His directness towards those who were confronting Him. He told people when they were off base. He didn't accept the error and say, "Well, you have your opinion and I have mine and you can believe whatever you want. To each his own, whatever you believe is up to you." Not Jesus. If something wasn't true, he said so. He was the truth. He embodied truth. That's what John said in the fourteenth chapter of his gospel. Therefore, when He was challenged, He directly confronted the

**“Jesus Speaks Woes”**

February 4 - Matthew 23: 1-39

**G**od Help Us To Be True To Him,  
I have always had trouble with the idea of a person, whether they be a parent or a boss or a work associate or anyone else, pronouncing shame on another person. I have been in situations when someone has said, “Shame on you for this or that.” It strikes me the wrong way.

I am not sure why this is true. Maybe it is because, to some degree, we all deserve to be shamed, and I feel that the person pronouncing the shame doesn’t have the right to speak like that. All of us have sinned and fall short of God’s perfection and holiness, haven’t we? Therefore, it would seem odd for me to be the one to say “Shame on you!”

Have you ever felt shamed by another person? I’m not asking whether you have ever felt ashamed. There is no doubt that all of us have at one time or another felt ashamed by our behavior. It’s a different story when someone takes the shameful behavior that you would like to forget and rubs your nose in it. When I have felt ashamed I know that I have immediately wanted forgiveness or restitution or help. I did not need anyone to drag me through my own mud puddle.

Having said that, it is a whole different story when God pronounces shame on someone or some group of people. Jesus had already pronounced woes on some local cities for their stubbornness. He told them that if Sodom had the light they were privileged to have, they would have repented long ago. The result of this is that at the judgment these contemporaries of Jesus would be judged more harshly. Jesus had the authority to pronounce shame because He was without sin. At another time Jesus said about those who rejected Him that if He had not come they would not be held accountable, but because He had come and had spoken the Word of God, they had no excuse for their sin.

Jesus is always hardest on those who lead others astray. Those who are responsible for bringing others down or causing them to stumble away from the Lord will be the ones who receive a greater judgment.

All my life I have been a leader. When I was in high school I introduced my friends to behaviors that were far from upright. It wasn’t good. My intentions were simply for them to have fun too, but the result was that I led many astray. If you can believe this, our school journalism class was invited to go to a conference at a local Marriott for an overnight affair. You can imagine how crazy it got. We weren’t there to write stories, we were there to create stories. The next week one of my friends told me that I had inspired him. He said that before the weekend he had stopped doing any kind of drugs, but when he saw how happy I was, he picked it up again. At the time I thought to myself how cool it was that I had been such a catalyst in his life.

Just months after that debacle, I encountered Jesus and was all of a sudden on a different track. One of the first things I felt compelled to do was call all of my friends and tell them that I had found something that was so much better than anyone or anything else. Several of them came to Christ. But that one guy, whom I had inspired at the hotel earlier, I did not have the opportunity to talk to. For years I regretted that I had never been able to tell him about Jesus Christ. Well, 20 years later, after a class reunion that I did not attend, a friend of mine who did go met up with this guy and learned that he was now a believer. Whew! What a relief. That was some of the greatest news I had ever heard.

Maybe the reason the Apostle Paul spent so much energy trying to lead others to Jesus was that he had done so much damage to the cause before he became a follower. He considered himself the greatest sinner and in need of so much grace that he let it motivate

him to reach others. In Romans he laments the fact that his kinsmen, the Jews, would be lost apart from Christ. He wanted them to experience the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ as he had.

Here in Matthew 23 Jesus lets the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and the legal experts have it with both barrels. Let’s summarize the judgments. Try to make an application to meditate on under each bullet.

They order people around but are not willing to do as they teach.

*Application: Be a doer of the Word, not just a hearer.*

They love the praise of men.

*Application: Live for God’s approval, not man’s.*

They do not preach the true way of salvation.

*Application: Point people to Jesus for salvation.*

They play fast and loose with oaths to serve their own selfish desires.

*Application: If you make a vow, keep it.*

They neglect important matters by over inflating small issues.

*Application: Know what matters most and dwell on those things.*

They are more concerned about appearance than heart change.

*Application: Be pure in heart, cleansed inside.*

Then the outside will clean up too.

God’s blessings bring no woe,

Pastor Steve

**“Signs Of The Times”**

February 5 - Matthew 24: 1-31

**B**ecause God is God He knows the end from the beginning. Someone once said, “Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God?” God is all-knowing. In theological-ese it’s called omniscience. In layman’s terms it means that God is really smart. Albert Einstein had nothing on God. God, being the original designer of all things, got all things running without the help of anyone.

Since God is this way He can also accurately predict, without any sweat, what will happen down the road. Thus, the book of Revelation and other teachings like the one today in Matthew exemplify God’s brilliance. Peter wasn’t joking when he said to Jesus, “Lord, you know all things.” And so prophecy, as far as we can fathom it, with our limited abilities, is made alive to us by the Holy Spirit who can use the words of Jesus to give us encouragement when it seems like the world is coming apart at the seams.

Let’s look for clues in the chapter to understand the scope of the prophecy.

The disciples’ inquiry in verse three is in response to Jesus saying that Jerusalem would be destroyed. This actually occurred about 40 years after Jesus said this would happen; the Roman general Titus besieged the city and leveled it in the year A.D. 70.

False prophets would flourish, persecution against Jesus’ followers would be intense, God’s temple would be desecrated, and there would be natural wonders like earthquakes, falling stars and lights out, meaning the sun and moon would be dimmed.

It’s clear, I think, that the end of the chapter points into the distant future to the second coming of Jesus. Some Bible scholars see the allusions to Christ coming as “coming in judgment.” They would link the cosmic disturbances to a figurative interpretation. They are then used to amplify what is said earlier

about a judgment, with the victims' bodies cleaned up by the birds -- yuck! So in this view they say Jesus is talking about the coming judgment on Jerusalem, and not about the coming He refers to when He talks about coming again so that He can be reunited with His disciples.

Because this discourse by Jesus is the answer to a question about Jerusalem, I tend to agree with the above interpretation. But I have always tended to see the cosmic references as a literal happening. If they are, then some of chapter 24 would have been fulfilled in the first century and some would remain for a later date. If you look carefully at a prophecy quoted by Peter from the book of Joel in Acts 2 you will see this same sort of thing. Peter says that Joel's prophecy is being fulfilled that day in Jerusalem and then he goes on to quote the whole prophecy which

includes references to cosmic events like the moon losing its light.

As Jesus was led through the streets of Jerusalem to His death, some of the women were crying out because of the gruesomeness of the sight. Jesus said something very unusual. He said not to weep for Him but for themselves because of the coming judgment on the city and people that had rejected Him.

I hope these thoughts get you to thinking about Jesus' words. His words are spiritual and they are life.

Let His Words lead you and guide your life today. His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

As Job said, I considered His word as more necessary than my daily food. Let's do a spiritual Atkins diet and feed on the protein of the Word.

God's blessings are futuristic too,  
Pastor Steve



## “Ready or Not, Here I Come”

February 6 - Matthew 24:32 - 25:13

**H**ow long has it been since you played Hide and Seek? I loved that game. My friends and I would play it for hours; the challenge of trying to find new hiding spots was a blast. If you didn't use your head and crawl into some hidden place the chances are you'd be “it” next. My friend Tim had a house like a labyrinth with a ton of great nooks and crannies. That made it hard for the “it” guy, but it also added to the challenge of the game.

Life is not a game, is it? We can hide from God, but He will find us. So many people live their life as if it is all about them. They think life is like a game. They live as if all things will continue as they have been all of their life. But the older they get, the harder it is to find creative places to hide. Wouldn't it be easier to come out of hiding, raise our hands to God and say to Him that we would welcome His coming into our lives? Why do so many continue to reject Him

when they need Him so badly? Maybe God is calling: “Come out, come out wherever you are!”

Jesus says that His coming will take many by surprise. Some will not be prepared when He arrives. They will be going along through the motions of life, doing their daily chores and thinking that life will just keep on going the way it always has and then, as if in an instant like the shock of a natural disaster, the Lord will return. Matthew likens this coming to God's judgment at the flood where all but eight people were swept away in the deluge.

What will you be doing when Jesus returns? I can hear someone say, “If I only knew when He will be back then I could prepare.” Since we do not know when the Lord will return it can be tempting to fall into old sinful habits that bring us down. The truth is that we are not in control of the timing when it comes to Jesus' second coming. The Lord said that He would

return and that we are to stay occupied until that time. We ought to be about His business while He is away. The way Jesus simply put it was “Watch.” Like a sentry on guard, we are to watch ourselves and keep the trust given to each of us until He comes.

Jesus calls the man who watches “faithful” and “wise.” He is the person who continues to serve the Lord throughout his life even when things get difficult. On the other hand, the man who makes excuses for himself because he feels like the Lord delays His coming, will receive judgment in the place where hypocrites go where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It would be nice to know when the Lord will return. God hasn't given us that luxury. As a matter of fact, even Jesus was not given that knowledge. There have been those throughout the history of the church who have predicted the coming of Christ in their generation. They can really work people up into a frenzy with their wild and unsubstantiated predictions. People want to believe them because there truly is a possibility of it happening in our lifetime. The problem is that we do not know the time and to say that you have special knowledge is the height of presumption.

I once heard an end time prognosticator say that he wouldn't be surprised if the Lord didn't return before he was done speaking that evening. That was New Year's of 1995 or 1996. Either way, he was wrong. And at the very least I guess he got his surprise after all. He really had the ammo to whip the crowd into an excited frenzy. He claimed to have just returned from Israel where special plans were being made by the Israeli government that would provoke the battle of Armageddon. And on and on and on. Unfortunately, in my estimation, oftentimes the focus turns from simple devotion to Christ to an obsession on what they call “the signs of the times.”

Jesus took the emphasis off of the signs and put it on our preparedness. As a scout is always prepared, a believer in Jesus should always be ready to meet his or her Lord. The parable of the ten virgins is meant to emphasize, again, the importance of watching. The foolish virgins were unknown to the bridegroom. “The virgins who were ready, went in.”

Are you ready? What ought I do in order to prepare for the Lord's coming? Let's list several important areas that will be the oil for our lamps:

1. Verse 35: Have a firm grip on the Word of God and you will not go wrong. Be careful if you are trying to link the Bible with the current events – you may be wrong.

2. Jesus linked watching with praying. Be ready by being in constant touch with the Lord. Jesus said to watch and pray so that we would not enter into temptation. Prayer is a key ingredient in being prepared.

3. Keep working and doing well what you have been gifted to do. Don't stop the good work you are doing. Some would stop being productive because they think the Lord is coming back soon, but the Lord wants us to put our hand to the plow and keep doing a good work.

4. Jesus said in Luke's gospel: “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and care of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap,” (21:34). In other words, don't sink your roots down too deep in this world; don't become so worldly that you will not be fit for heaven.

5. Treat this world like you are passing through. This place is a stop over on the way to your final destination. You are like an “alien” and “pilgrim” on this planet; these are Peter's words. This point parallels point four above. But don't be just concerned about staying away from bad influences, make it more extreme than that. Don't treat this world as if it is your home. Consider that heaven is your true home and you are merely passing through.

6. Check out the armor of God in Ephesians 6. There you will see the equipment God prescribes for our walk and the victory till the end.

Let's all finish well. It's one thing to get off to a great start and be all revved up for God and another to finish the race well. Paul said that he had fought a good fight, run a good race, and he had kept the faith. Let's be ready when the final trumpet sounds and we are united to the Lord in the air to remain with Him forever.

God's blessings prepare us during the end times,  
Pastor Steve

**“Don’t Waste Your Life”**

February 7 - Matthew 25:14-46

**R**ise Up and Serve God Today, God is not going to hold me accountable for the way I have sung. God did not give me the ability to sing and so I do not expect to be asked about that. My dad was an architect. He could draw. My mom could paint. I cannot do either. I don’t expect to be asked about that. There are more things that I am not than things that I am. Yet I am some things and it is those gifts, those talents, that I will have to give an account for -- someday.

Are you willing to be used by God in some way or another? If so, I don’t think God disguises His will. If we are open to His hand gently guiding and directing us, then I think we will have that guidance. Just as a loving parent leads his child into a pursuit that he can accomplish, so the Lord leads us into the things that we will be able to excel in.

We have been given natural talents like athletic ability, singing ability, writing ability, designing, and others, and we have been given spiritual gifts like the gift of teaching or prophecy or discerning of spirits or helps or administration. It is no use spending our time bemoaning what we do not have or envying someone else who has the gifts we desire, because God wants us to be prudent about using what we do have. In the parable of the talents each one is given an allotment “according to his ability.”

Sometimes we can get into a rut when we do not explore untapped areas of giftedness in our lives. I hear so many excuses for why people cannot try something new but they usually all boil down to fear. I am out of my comfort zone, so I stay put and do nothing new because I wouldn’t want to get stretched and grow and experience all of the excitement that comes from seeing God work in some new way in my life. You won’t know unless you try. Maybe this week you could make a short list of possible new pursuits or areas of interest that you have not yet explored.

A great example of a man who used his God-given gifts was Charles Schultz. His Peanuts comic strip is known and read worldwide. Who doesn’t know Charlie Brown and Snoopy and all of the other beloved comic characters? Schultz used the strip on many occasions to highlight Bible themes and lead others into a greater understanding of truth. He is an example of a man who used his great talent and love for God to do something for others that would encourage an appreciation for God.

It’s interesting that the man who is rebuked by the Lord for not putting his money to work said that it was fear that motivated him to not act and use the gift that God had given him. Fear is a horrible taskmaster. Fear is a horrible motivator. Fear keeps us from doing the very things that our minds and hearts are prodding us to do. If you are afraid today about some area that you believe would be a good pursuit for you, would you talk to someone about it? Then you can put it behind you and begin to experience the freedom of doing the thing that God has given you the ability to do.

I think the judgment of the sheep and goats fits in here. When the sheep (the righteous) hear that they have helped so-and-so and done this and that, they are surprised. “When did we do that?” was their reply. Jesus said that they served Him when they were serving others. The truth I see is that when we are doing the thing that God wants us to do, we will automatically be serving others and thus doing God’s will. We won’t be conscious of it necessarily. We will be busy doing what we delight to do, like Schultz, and will find pleasure in doing God’s pleasure.

I can hear someone say that they go to work and do their job but don’t find much satisfaction in it; it only feels like a place to collect a paycheck. In my opinion, it’s time to change your attitude or change your profession. The Bible is clear that whatever we

do, we must do it for God as if He were our boss. Picture yourself being called into your manager’s office, but when you get there it is empty but for a Bible on the desk. In it is a ribbon marking our passage of Scripture in today’s reading. How does this passage about the talents apply to the kind of job you are doing? If you think there is a need for an attitude adjustment, think of a couple of ways you can change your tone today in order to be more like the first two fellows in the parable.

The fate of the third guy is dire because of his utter neglect of God’s will for his life. He disregarded God’s way because of a misconception about the nature of God. Had he realized that God was the giver

of his gift and that God had given him the ability to walk down that path maybe he would have reconsidered his course of action. But he didn’t because he only knew God as a harsh taskmaster and not as a loving Father who provides all we need to do His will. The safe road is not always the right road. It takes some risk to commit your life to God and open your heart to doing His will. In the end, though, the one who has done this will receive more and the one who hasn’t will be stripped of all he has. And the loss will be great!

Let’s get to work; God has a job for us today.  
God’s blessings give us talents to use,  
Pastor Steve

**“Not Me, Lord”**

February 8 - Matthew 26: 1-30

**I** love that the characters in the Bible were characters. We don’t know everything about them, but what we do know helps us to relate to them. They were average men and women with strengths and weaknesses just like us. They had faith and they had doubts. They had victories and they had defeats. They were upright and they were downright bad at times. But any way you stack it, they were our fellow brothers and sisters. They were not in a class all by themselves. They had real flesh and blood and experienced the same kind of ups and downs that have marked every generation in history.

Do you find yourself discouraged by your own inadequacies? Do you sometimes try to cover up your flaws so that others will not look down on you? Do you hear yourself making excuses for some of the errors you have contributed to society? Do you feel like some of the time you have to fake your way through life and hold on to idealistic images in your own mind of the way you wished things were? If so, then join

the club. It is difficult to admit who we truly are in the face of possible rejection. Rejection is the one thing that most people find unbearable.

Can you imagine how the disciples must have felt about being around Jesus? Here was a perfect man whose holiness must have shed a high-beam of light on their imperfections as they traveled from day to day. Yet, remarkably, they seemed to be able to be themselves and “say it like it was” and let their true selves hang out. Could that be because of the love of Christ which perfectly complemented His holiness? I’m sure it was.

When Jesus announced at the Last Supper that one of them would betray Him, the reaction was very telling. You would think that some of the disciples may have been on to Judas, wouldn’t you? I’m sure from time to time the old boy probably showed his true colors. Maybe a bit of a rebellious attitude or a word here and there about his dissatisfaction with the program Jesus was running could have

been picked up by at least John and Peter. But no, that wasn't the case, it seems. After Jesus makes this heavy accusation, all of the apostles begin to do a self-exam and they are immediately sad that it could be, not the other guy, but them.

I wonder what would have happened if Jesus had said something about picking one of them to be closest to Him in the kingdom. That may have sparked their pride. "Surely it's me," I can hear one of them saying, "Jesus knows how much I have sacrificed for the cause." I can also hear them in small groups debating their own case for why it should be them and not the others. But the subject on the table was not exaltation, but betrayal. One of them was about to betray the Master.

Can you imagine how difficult it must have been for the ones who loved Jesus with all of their hearts to even think that they might betray Him? That would have been an unbearable thought, especially for someone like John who had developed such a close relationship with the Lord. What a relief, mixed with sadness, when Judas dipped in the bowl with Jesus and identified his true self. Jesus had treated him like all the rest. When Judas finally leads the soldiers into the garden to bring Jesus to the authorities, Jesus addresses him as "friend." What an awesome example of the way to treat an enemy! Jesus made no personal remarks to Judas; He simply submitted to the will of His Father, which included rejection by a long-time associate.

The disciples' reaction to Jesus' revelation cor-

relates with the Lord's teaching that "there is none good but God," and Paul's later interpretation of Jesus' teachings when he writes in Romans 3 about the depravity of all men, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). At the point of Jesus' remark about betrayal, all of the men knew they were capable of falling away. They knew what they were made of. They knew it could be them. Maybe they thought that it seemed impossible for anyone to betray this loving Man and if it were possible for someone to carry this out then they were as likely as anyone else.

Later, of course, Peter would say that he would never deny the Lord, and then he did. Pride always goes before a fall. Let's not become so spiritually arrogant that we forget we are made of clay. We are vulnerable. We need the grace of the Lord to remain true to Him. It will help us to remember just how fragile we really are. It will keep us humble.

I am totally dependent on divine grace. How about you?

I am in need of God's spiritual power to do anything of value for God. How about you?

I am a man who sins and needs the constant washing that comes from the fountain of the cross. How about you?

I am susceptible to loosening my grip and falling. How about you?

Let's humble ourselves together.

God's blessings lead our loyalty to Jesus,

Pastor Steve



## "Do This and That"

February 9 - Matthew 26: 31-46

**G**od is Good All of the Time, Life can reach some pretty intense pressure points. I'll never forget an earthquake in California in the early '90s that felt like a freight train coming through our bedroom door. We were awakened early in the morning to a loud sound that seemed to be approaching us from hundreds of miles away. I leaped out of bed, called my kids to the hallway and together we swayed back and forth as stuff fell from the shelves downstairs in the living room.

I'm sure that at some time or other you have experienced some very intense moments -- we all do eventually. Those who have gotten the news from a spouse that they were leaving him/her for someone else know the shock and pain of losing someone they thought they would be with all their life. Then it's over and they are left with the pieces of a life that they aren't sure what to do with. The stress can be overwhelming. The jilted person's world is reeling and they lose their appetite and they talk about their pain and they cry, but it doesn't feel like anything is helping. Life as they knew it would never be the same.

Jesus was quickly at the apex of a time of suffering that would include a series of events that, though predicted long ago by the prophets, would entail the greatest cruelty on the most innocent man in human history. It began in the Garden of Gethsemane and ended on a Roman cross on a hill overlooking the city of Jerusalem. The garden was where it all began. I'm sure that Jesus had known for a long time, if not all of His life, that He would die on a cross, but now the reality of it is in front of Him. It's one thing to anticipate going to the dentist and quite another to hear the whizzing of the drill and feel the sting of the needle and smell the smoke of the tooth being drilled. Jesus had been warning His disciples of the inevitable, but now the dominoes were falling and there was no stopping them.

He prays honestly and with final submission. He draws on His Father for strength through prayer. His soul is being poured out with wrenching pain. In another gospel it says that He sweated great drops of blood, it was so rough. And in the middle of this crisis, the disciples, maybe from the wine at dinner or maybe just because they had had a long day or possibly because they were in denial and didn't want to face the realities of Jesus' words -- they took a nap. Each time Jesus comes to them they are asleep.

When the pressure is on are you tempted to withdraw? The disciples were sleeping at this time when Jesus needed support. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" Jesus says to them. It's human nature, isn't it, to move away from the pressure when the intensity is being elevated? Here Jesus needs help, wanting a bit of support, and the Lord asks for His servants to hold Him up. Here is Jesus in all of His humanity; truly, He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief as Isaiah saw Him. Jesus is alone in His suffering. He is forsaken by all, takes the sins of all on Himself by earning salvation all by Himself. He went it alone.

In the midst of His agony Jesus looks to the disciples-- to the three, Peter, James and John, but they aren't available. In a state of drowsiness He awakens them and gives them food for thought. He does this so that, even though they were not diligent now, they would remember His words and apply them to their future ministries. He tells them to "watch" and "pray."

To watch means to be on guard. It means to be on a heightened sense of alert. It means to be ready to step in when you are needed and lend a hand when someone needs you. It means to be wary of the devil's schemes so that you are not taken off guard and end up in a ditch of sin, entangled and caught in a trap. It can also mean that you are aware of the lessons and direction God may be leading you when

you yourself are in a garden experience. Jesus throws Himself on the will of the Father even though it would be easier to take another road. So we too are also watching to do the will of God and not our own, if the way of Jesus we would follow.

To pray means to petition God for the things that originate in the will of God. When we pray for the things that correlate with the will of God we can have confidence that they will happen. When we pray and ask for things in a self-centered way we will never find joy in prayer. Whether we get the selfish thing we want or not, true happiness comes from knowing that we are doing the will of God. Things do not bring happiness. So praying for things that are in the will of God is our only guarantee that we will receive the

things we pray for.

We are to watch and pray, Jesus says, because temptation is knocking at our door and it is too easy to take the easy road. We may want to do God's will, but the flesh, the body, is weak and it will demand things that contradict the will of our Father in heaven.

Take some time today to talk to God about His will for your life.

Ask Him to show you a few areas in your life where He could work even more powerfully to do His will if you'd watch and pray.

Try Jesus' prayer on for size: "Not my will, but yours be done."

God's blessings come to those who do God's will,  
Pastor Steve



## "You Have Heard The Blasphemy"

February 10 - Matthew 26: 47-68

**E**xpectation and anticipation are two very powerful components in our lives. When we are counting on something happening, our wills really kick into gear and we long for the desired result. Think of a young couple who is deeply in love and is planning for their big day. The expectations of what will happen during their wedding ceremony and in the days afterwards can create a great deal of anxiety. It's probably positive anxiety, but it is anxiety nonetheless.

From past experience I can say that there were times in my life when the anticipation leading up to an event was more daunting than the event itself. I remember in high school on the days I had golf matches, I was unable to concentrate on anything but what I'd be doing on the course that afternoon. I was obsessed with the desire to do well. I would mentally visualize each hole I'd be playing (if I had played the course already) and go through the locations I'd like

to position the ball. I could see myself swinging and making contact and ripping the ball right down the middle of the fairway. And on the greens I'd picture myself making every putt from every different angle. I can remember how I felt on the first tee of most tournaments. I was numb. I went through the motions to launch the ball, but it wasn't until I was out on the course that I was able to settle down and concentrate on scoring. You see, my expectations were high. And because of that I anticipated being able to see my expectations fulfilled.

The Jews expected their coming Messiah to fulfill the apocalyptic role written long ago in Daniel the seventh chapter. He would come with triumphal glory to set up a Jewish Kingdom ruled under His sovereignty. Of course, the Pharisees and Sadducees believed that they would reign with their conquering hero and, to the relief of all, Roman rule would finally be abolished. Daniel wrote: "I saw in the night visions, and behold,

with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his kingdom is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (7: 13-14). It's no wonder that the kind of Messiah Jesus was did not fit their bill. How could a meek and lowly at heart man be the conquering God-figure of Daniel's visions? They didn't see that Jesus could be the one when He was held up to the light of the Old Testament prophecies they had in mind.

Therefore, when Jesus agreed to the high priest's question asking if He was the Son of God and the Christ, and then also adds that He is the one Daniel spoke of, the response was vehement. This was the same as Jesus claiming to be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Caiaphas tore his robe in disgust and accused Jesus of speaking blasphemy. To Caiaphas, Jesus was claiming a position that only belonged to God and so he railed at Him for making this claim.

Under Jewish law the punishment for blasphemy is death. At this point it's very early in the morning, possibly not long after midnight; it is not a lawful time for a Jewish court to be in session, especially near a special Sabbath day, the one marking Passover.

Back in the Old Testament, in the days before the Israelites were released from Egyptian bondage, God had ordered His people to mark their doorposts with the blood of a lamb. The night the death angel swooped over the land of Egypt to kill all of the first-born, whether of man or animal, those who had the blood mark on their home were spared. It was at that

time that God led them out of Egypt. Since that time the Jews had been required to celebrate the Passover every year as a reminder of God's deliverance from bondage.

Jesus was brought to the cross on this day because He would become God's ultimate and final Passover Lamb. Remember what John the Baptist said when he first met Jesus? "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus would be murdered on Passover not by mistake or coincidence but because of a pre-determined plan of God that would bring forgiveness to all who put their trust in Him.

The high priest and his kangaroo court, early that morning, condemned Jesus to death, "then they spit in His face and struck Him with their fists. Others slapped Him and said, 'Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you.'" These were men who were looking for a way to condemn Jesus because envy had driven them to find anything by which they might sentence Him. Jesus was treated unfairly so that by His forgiveness of our sins we might be treated with mercy when we stand before a holy God. Behold, the Lamb of God!

The next several hours would be unthinkably brutal. Hold on to your seat...

God's blessings come through the unjustly treated Christ,

Pastor Steve

**“Then The Rooster Crowed”**

February 11 - Matthew 26: 69- 27:10

**F**riends,  
There are times in everyone’s life when a reminder cuts us to the heart. A smell can take us back to another time and place and may even bring tears to our eyes if sentimental emotions are stirred by the aroma. We may meet someone who reminds us of a significant person in our past. Depending on the nature of the relationship we may feel some pretty strong emotions; maybe guilt, or fear, or hurt, or you name it.

Some objects can bring back happy memories and others sad ones. I usually love James Taylor songs. Most of his early songs, like “You’ve Got a Friend” and “Walking Man” are among my favorites. His music really loosens me up. On the other hand some of his stuff from the early ‘80s unnerves me because of the circumstances in my life at that time. I associate those songs with the events in my life that were upsetting. For some, Christmas is the best time of the year and for others it is dreaded. Just the sound of a Christmas carol can bring tears to a person’s eyes -- for some tears of joy and for others tears of sorrow.

Let me list a few stimulants and you try to remember how they affect you even now: the flashing lights on a police car; the smell of alcohol, from a beer or wine; the smell of pine; a sunburn; cotton candy; seeing a car like the first one you drove; sand between your toes; a couple walking hand in hand; hearing the song “Let It Be” by the Beatles; a cross on the side of the road with someone’s name written on it; kids laughing; the smell of chlorine; piano music; salt water; a campfire; Oreo cookies; thinking you may have felt God’s presence; John 3:16.

Just a few days before the time we read about in today’s passage, Peter boasted that he would never fall away from the Lord. The prophet Zechariah prophesied that the Shepherd would be struck and

all the sheep would be scattered. Jesus applied this Scripture to His impending death and the flight of the disciples. Remember, after the crucifixion, the 11 remaining disciples are found hidden away in a secret place where they were wondering what to do next. If Jesus was led away to the slaughter, how would they escape the same fate? I think they were pretty nervous at that point. Peter had gone from big talker to denier. He was over-confident, but ended up jelly-legged. Jesus had told him what would happen, but did he believe it? I don’t think so.

Then Peter heard the rooster. That sound, that bird, that moment of the cold morning, would be etched into Peter’s conscience forever. “Cock- a-doodle-doo.” That screech would mean so much more than a wake-up call. It was like an earthquake to Peter, rocking his world and challenging all that he had trusted for the past few years. How could all that was so special with Jesus be ending in such a mess? He was probably in shock in many ways, the least of which was probably amazement at his weakness. Now he knew what Jesus meant by “watch and pray.” He was caught up in the moment and in the moment he denied his best friend, his Lord. Peter was humbled and heartbroken.

Peter wept bitterly. Picture him, would you? Take a moment to put yourself in his shoes. Some of us don’t have to imagine very hard because we have been in his shoes. But think how he must have felt at the sound of the bird. He must have felt helpless. In his mind at that point, he had failed and Jesus had failed. He had nowhere to turn. I wonder if thoughts of the miracles of the Lord may have flashed through his mind’s eye. If you’ve ever been in a quandary then you know where Peter was that morning. Nothing made sense. Peter, Jesus had told you this was going to happen the other day. Why not trust Him despite the circumstances?

Humility is a good thing. It doesn’t always feel that way, but the results of humility will be good medicine for our souls. Over and over in Scripture we read about humbling ourselves under God. Let the sound of the rooster remind you that we are all made of the same clay, like Peter. Let it be a reminder that boasting can lead to a fall. Paul would say later, “Let him who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall.”

There is another sound from that day that we will soon be hearing. It is the sound of the nails piercing

the hands of the Lord Jesus. That sound is also humbling because it should forever remind us of the love of God. Can you hear the bang on the head of the metal spike and see the grimace on the face of Jesus? It is that grimace that expressed the pain emanating from the body that would bear every sin we have ever committed.

God’s blessings are associated with key events in our lives,  
Pastor Steve

**“Bad Dreams”**

February 12 - Matthew 27:11-44

**D**ear Friends,  
Are you a dreamer? Some have the most vivid dreams and others cannot, for the life of them, remember if they dream anything at all. Sometimes our dreams will correlate with our current thoughts. It seems like if we are preoccupied with something we will wind up dreaming about it. This can cause restless sleep if we feel like we are reliving our day while we are asleep.

I wonder why so much of our dreaming comes under the category of bizarre. Many of my dreams I cannot make heads or tails of no matter how hard I try. They seem to have no significance at all. I know that there are some psychologists who think dreams tell a lot about a person, but how in the world do they come to any conclusions about the random, non-sensical, and wacky nature of most dreams? I think they make up conclusions to make a buck. I could be wrong, but that’s my suspicion.

The Bible records many dreams as from God. A couple of the more famous ones recorded in the Bible are Jacob’s dream of a ladder that extended to heaven (Gen. 28:10ff.), Joseph’s dreams about his rise to power (Gen. 37), and the Babylonian king’s dreams about

the future of the world powers (Daniel). Then in the New Testament we have already seen how Jesus’ step-dad Joseph had dreams that would warn him about protecting the Christ child (Matt. 1). This is only a small sampling of the numerous accounts of the way God used dreams to lead His people.

You can imagine how befuddled Pilate must have been after hearing Jesus. He was amazed that the Lord did not answer. It was as if Jesus was conceding to the wishes of the crowd and thereby sealing His own fate. Matthew records that Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and that the Pharisees had only turned Him over out of envy. By the time the governor gave Jesus over to the executioners he wanted nothing to do with the responsibility of His death. In those days it was important for a Roman governor to maintain peace in his jurisdiction so that he would receive a favorable job evaluation in Rome. Who would Pilate need to appease in this situation? The Jewish ruling council (called the Sanhedrin)? The crowd? His own conscience?

There is a little verse tucked into this long narrative that says so much. It talks about a most unlikely source and also shows that God was working in the

details of the matter in order for the truth to be told later. The verse simply says, "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of Him'" (27:19). Mrs. Pilate (of course that wasn't her name) is bothered to such a degree that she has to warn her husband against condemning Jesus. Pilate had been on the judgment seat countless times. Why this time, why Jesus? She had a dream that alarmed her. Don't you wish Matthew had explained the contents of the dream? Possibly he didn't know what they were. But it was nightmarish enough to warrant disturbing the proceeding, momentarily. What if she had been up that night, maybe disturbed by all of the events. Could she have gotten up in the wee hours of the morning and seen the torches and the small crowd coming down off of the Mount of Olives, some of the crowd feverishly yelling? Then maybe she went back to bed and there in her mind's arena, she witnessed the greatest travesty of justice ever. However and whenever this all occurred was enough to rock her world and compel her to stand up for the Man.

God was making it clear that Jesus was an innocent man. He had done nothing worthy of death, except that under Jewish law He could be stoned for claiming deity. The elders of the Jews and the chief priests wanted more. They wanted Him to be publicly condemned and hung on a cross so that all men

would see and know that this Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah was actually a false prophet. In their minds, crucifixion would be the disgrace necessary to make the point.

Pilate's wife knew the truth. Whether she personally acted on it later is unknown, but what we do know is that she couldn't keep her dream to herself. Pilate must have been whirling when he heard her report. The dream was one of many evidences that pushed Pilate towards offering Jesus to be released rather than the condemned criminal, Barabbas. But the crowd already had their minds made up for them and cried for Jesus to be condemned and the criminal to be freed. And so today the irony of that scene is the salvation of all those who put their faith in Jesus. The innocent man was condemned so that the condemned man could be released. Today, we all are guilty and worthy of condemnation, but Jesus took that condemnation so that we might receive life; in this case we are talking about true spiritual life.

Next time you have a dream, go ahead and pay attention to it. God may be speaking to you in some way. But remember to always check what you hear with Scripture. God will always stay true to His word.

God's blessings are worked out in the details of Jesus' condemnation,  
Pastor Steve



## "After Jesus Died"

February 13 - Matthew 27:45-66

**H**ave you ever heard strange stories about the aftermath of a person's death? I have heard people say that they heard music when the spirit departed. Others have said that they could feel the person's soul go upward. I have heard others say

that their loved one sat up or opened their eyes for the last time as if they were seeing something out of this world. Someone recently told me that they felt a rush of wind when their loved one died.

Since Jesus was who He was, it should be no surprise to us that outstanding things happened after his death. As if to signal that something monumental had just happened, a string of out of the ordinary occurrences took place. At His birth the angels heralded his arrival and a star appeared over the city of Bethlehem; why should it surprise us that at His death there would be some very unusual wonders? Isn't it true that a person goes out in much the same fashion as he lived? A person's impact is felt when they leave much the same as it is when they live.

I love the story of Elisha's bones in the book of II Kings. At the time of Elisha's death his people were at war. The people were in the process of burying a man when a group of raiders (not the Oakland Raiders, by the way) were spotted. They hastily took the man's body and heaved it into the tomb of Elisha. When the body touched the bones of Elisha, the man came to life and stood to his feet. Now those are powerful bones! But that's my point. Elisha was a powerful man while he lived and in his death he was powerful too. Quite a story.

Let's just list the things Matthew records that happened after the death of the Lord: The curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom (why did Matthew put it that way? To highlight that it would be a God thing and could not be attributed to man); there was an earthquake; dead guys came to life and showed up down at the pool hall (I don't know if there really was a pool hall in those days. Is it curious to you that they were raised when Christ died and showed up three days later when the Lord arose?); the Roman guards were impressed with the death of Jesus to the point that they thought He must have been divine; a rich disciple comes forward to bury the body in a new tomb and he has a big rock rolled over the entrance of the tomb.

There were some ladies watching the events that day from a distance. The immediate disciples had

fled. I can imagine that everyone connected with Jesus must have been mortified. How could He have allowed such a horrible thing to happen? Wasn't He the Lord? Didn't He have power to calm the seas and still the winds? Then why didn't He set up His kingdom?

Instead: emptiness, despair, sickness, distress, disappointment, discouragement, fright, maybe a homesick feeling -- a complete letdown.

What did they think of the darkness? Was it a sign or just a coincidence? It wasn't only dark outside though, it was dark in Peter's soul and in John's and in James's and in Thomas's and in Bartholomew's and in Judas's (not Iscariot) and in Simon's too (he was a zealot but not on that dark day. That day he cowered with the rest out of harm's way). In Andrew's soul there was an ache (was he thinking of his brother's denial of the Master? Was he thinking of his own flight from the pressure in the garden?); Philip's soul was bleak also; the other James was bummed as well; and then of course the author of this gospel-- he too was hunkered down in seclusion, maybe a bit shaky because of the day's events. Darkness of the soul is tough to deal with.

Do you feel some of this same sort of pain in your life right now? Has someone you trusted apparently let you down? Do your circumstances defy the way you wish things really were? Is it hard to make heads or tails out of your current situation? Is fear governing your day to day life? Remember, it's Friday, but Sunday is coming. It may be a season of pain and suffering, but Sunday is coming. As a matter of fact, in our reading tomorrow we will witness the greatest event in human history. It dwarfs any other experience known to mankind. It is more monumental than the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Until then, hope in God's blessings,  
Pastor Steve

**“The Greatest Reason”**

February 14 - Matthew 28: 1-20

**I** Hope You Are Having A Good Day,  
 We all need a reason to live. I think that most of us would like to have God in our lives. Some fill that need by immersing themselves in good religious activity. They live by the rule of proximity. The thinking kind of goes like this: if I'm near to the things of God, within arms' reach, then I will be near to God. Really, that is not horrible thinking because you are more apt to find the Truth by being near to a source (maybe like a fountain) of Truth. But you will have to drink from that outlet yourself before you can say that you are in the Truth. I wonder how many people will be close to God things and yet miss the great gift of God's grace.

To me, that God could be known and admired and appreciated and loved is the greatest possibility of all. Some would recoil at this suggestion and think that you were as loony as a man in an institution who thinks he is Napoleon Bonaparte to hold to such an idea. By and large, most people are so naturalistic in their thinking that any supernatural talk would set the “rational” and “logical” thinker against you before you were able to explain what you meant.

What does it mean to you to know God? How would you explain to someone that you have personally come to know God? What would you talk about? What do you think that unbeliever would think if you told him that God has been speaking to you lately? You've heard the story of the guy in the asylum who thought he was Napoleon, haven't you? He announces to the group in the lunchroom, “I am Napoleon Bonaparte, the famous ruler!” Then he puts his right hand into the fold of his jacket just above his belly in true Napoleon fashion. The orderly says to him, “How do you know that, man?” He shoots back, “Because God told me.” A voice comes from the other side of the room, “I did not!” Just because someone says they know God doesn't mean that they know what

they are talking about. If God can be known then it seems to me He would have to make Himself known empirically. I use that word in the sense of “verifiable by experience or experiment.” This parallels that Old Testament invitation to “taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Jesus never pussy-footed around about who He was or what His intentions were. He said who He was and backed it up with actions. He said what would happen next and it did. He did not ever waver or change His point of view or admit to wrongdoing. No wonder He says after the crucifixion, as He stood before his unbelieving disciples, that he had all authority. This is a quality or attribute of someone who is Lord of all. You cannot have all authority if you are not Lord of the entire house. By the way, this is the theme of the entire book of Hebrews -- Jesus is superior to all in the same way that the builder of a house is greater than the house he builds.

So what is it here in Matthew about resurrection that we ought to emphasize? I think that first of all we need to get into our heads that Jesus' aliveness is an indication that we today can have a connection with Him that will bring us close to God. He presents Himself alive to His own and then commissions them to go and tell everyone about Him. Why? So that they can know God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so they can experience His presence with them as they carry the message abroad. When they first looked on Him they did what you'd expect -- they worshiped. Some doubted. That would have been me. I'd have been looking for mirrors. How could this be the same man who was on the cross a few days ago? This kind of thing just doesn't happen.

We'll get back to the resurrection three more times through the gospels, but let's stop here this time and try to apply what Matthew says to us.

Think about what that scene of worship must

have looked like. Try to reconstruct it in your mind and then include yourself in the group. How would you have worshiped Jesus under those circumstances?

Take a time out today to spend time worshiping Jesus. Address Him directly and let Him have it. Let Him know from your heart that you believe He has all authority and begin to worship Him with your lips.

And do you want to take a risk today? Worship Jesus by bringing up His name and His authority with someone who obviously doesn't have any connection to Him.

Jesus wants us to teach about Him and tell others what He said. What teachings from the gospel of Matthew could you relay to your family this evening?

Take some time today to review what we have been learning so that you can pull a thought or two from the gospel to give to others. Teach Jesus and others will be amazed at Him. He is amazing in so many ways.

Jesus is alive! Expect Him to work in little old you today in some way or another. Expect it and then be aware of how He is directing your life. Don't doubt when you see His imprint on your life in some way today.

Rejoice in Jesus always.

God's blessings raise us up with Jesus,  
 Pastor Steve