



Cornton Baptist Church

Demonstrating God's love in action
in the community of Cornton

Through the Bible

September 2013

I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it? (v.9)

The religious leaders in Jesus' day were supposed to go to synagogue to hear the Word of God, to worship, and to serve. Instead they went to find out something about Jesus to criticise. Their primary purpose was to discredit Christ. They were upset with Jesus. They didn't like what he taught or what he did. And they didn't like the kind of people he hung out with – the tax collectors and sinners. Here as Jesus is in the synagogue teaching a man with a withered hand was present. The religious leaders were watching Jesus closely so that when he made a mistake they could go after him. They wanted to find a reason for accusing him of doing wrong. Of course Jesus knows what they are up to and asks which is right to do on the Sabbath. The trouble for the leaders was they had made so many extra rules that were not Scriptural. Jesus wants to break through that and teach them to have a heart of love and compassion for others.

People in churches today aren't much different. Too many Christians go to church to find fault, to gossip, and to criticise. In his book "Angry People", Warren Wiersbe wrote: "Joseph Parker, the great British preacher...was preaching at the City Temple in London. After the service one of the listeners came up to him and said, 'Dr. Parker, you made a grammatical error in your sermon.' He then proceeded to point out the error to the pastor. Joseph Parker looked at the man and said, "And what else did you get out of the message?" What a fitting rebuke!

No one in the church is perfect - not the pastor, the deacons, the musicians, or those that welcome you at the door. We all make mistakes. A faultfinding spirit can produce only discouragement and strife. And people who always look for mistakes miss out on the instruction, correction, and blessings the Lord has for them. We all need to ask ourselves this question: Why do I go to church?

Pray: asking God to forgive you for the times you have had a critical spirit in church.

Reflect: why do I go to church?

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said “Don’t cry”.
(v.13)

One night in 1935, Fiorello H. La Guardia, mayor of New York, showed up at a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench. One case involved an elderly woman who was caught stealing bread to feed her grandchildren. La Guardia said, “I’ve got to punish you. Ten dollars or ten days in jail.”

As he spoke, he threw \$10 into his hat. He then fined everyone in the courtroom 50 cents for living in a city “where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat.” The hat was passed around, and the woman left the courtroom with her fine paid and an additional \$47.50. The mayor had compassion on the poor and vulnerable and needy in society.

Jesus shows that same concern for people. Here in Luke 7 we see him approaching the town gate as a funeral procession is making its way out. The widowed mother is understandably in some state as they make their way out – she has just lost her only son having already lost her husband. When Jesus saw her his heart went out to her. He had compassion on her and told her not to cry. Then he performed a miracle as he went up to the coffin and commanded the young man to get up. As the young man sat up and began to talk, Jesus gave him back to his mother. Can you imagine the scene? Awe and wonder and amazement.

Jesus calls for us to have a heart of compassion as well. We are not merely to watch on as people suffer and grieve – he calls for us to go and offer support. He calls for us to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. Instead of thinking how sad a situation is and then turning and getting on with your life, consider how practically you can help. Can you spend time with the person, can you get them something, or can you help them in some way.

Pray: asking God to give you a heart of compassion.

Reflect: how can I practically help someone I know is struggling just now?

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. (v.15)

Many of you will know I have been growing some vegetables the last couple of years in the garden. I took careful time to prepare the soil, making sure it was weed free, broken up and ready for the seed. I planted several items and watched as some didn't even get a chance to start – the birds swooped down, pecked the ground, and made off with my good seed. Others began to spring to life and I sat back smiled but soon they bent over, withered and died. I still don't know what I did wrong. Others grew up and because I didn't watch carefully a weed grew beside it and that was it. Fortunately a good proportion of the seed produced a good crop and made sure we enjoyed some good fresh vegetables (and also that I did it again the following year). It didn't appear to matter what I did, some grew and some didn't.

And that is true in life as well as we share the word of God. The word of God is the seed spoken of in today's parable. The farmer may have prepared his soil well but some of the seed fell by the wayside and was snatched away, others fell among the rocks and struggled to make it up, others had weeds and thorns grow up by them and they had no chance, whilst some fell on the well prepared soil of the sower. The key message is to keep sowing the seed.

The farmer knew that a proportion of what he sowed would come to nothing, yet he kept sowing looking for the harvest that would come. We have to keep sowing the gospel seed; keep sowing the word of God. Yes, some people will turn around and not listen. Yes, some people will appear to receive it but when a time of testing comes they will fall away. Yes, some people will receive but when the worries and temptations of the world come they too will fall away. But some people will receive it and find life in all its fullness. It's all worth it to see that wonderful harvest. There is great rejoicing in heaven over one lost sinner being found. Keep sowing the seed!

Pray: asking God to give you opportunities to sow the seed of the gospel.

Reflect: who can I share the gospel with today?

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed. (v.7)

A young woman teacher with obvious liberal tendencies explains to her class of small children that she is an atheist. She asks her class if they are atheists too. Not really knowing what atheism is but wanting to be like their teacher, their hands explode into the air like fleshy fireworks. There is, however, one exception. A beautiful girl named Lucy has not gone along with the crowd. The teacher asks her why she has decided to be different. "Because I'm not an atheist." Then, asks the teacher, what are you? "I'm a Christian." The teacher is a little perturbed now, her face slightly red. She asks Lucy why she is a Christian. "Well, I was brought up knowing and loving Jesus. My mum is a Christian, and my dad is a Christian, so I am a Christian." The teacher is now angry. "That's no reason," she says loudly. "What if your mum was a moron, and your dad was a moron. What would you be then?" A pause, and a smile... "Then," says Lucy, "I'd be an atheist."

Now we may have heard that story before but it is true. There are many in this world who struggle to comprehend who Jesus is. They think of all kinds of reasons as to why he can't be who he says he is instead of looking for reasons why he is as he says. Jesus here sends his disciples out to preach and to heal. News reaches Herod but instead of rejoicing in the miracles and listening to the good news, he is perplexed. His immediate thoughts are that this can't be. And sadly that is how many think in our world today. Instead of hearing the good news and receiving it, they hear it and straight away try to find reasons to disprove it.

'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.' (1 Corinthians 1:18). Let us not give up sharing the gospel for not all will reject it. Some will hear the truth and the truth will set them free.

Pray: for those you know who are lost and perplexed by Jesus, asking God to open their eyes and show them the truth.

Reflect: how can I better share the gospel with someone today?

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (v.37)

Some ministry students were asked to preach a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and Phyllis Le Peau tells an interesting story about what happened on the day they were scheduled to preach:

When the hour arrived for their sermon, each one was deliberately delayed en route to class. As the students raced across campus, they encountered a person who pretended to be in need. Ironically, not one of the students stopped to help. Le Peau commented, "After all, they had an important sermon to preach."

How sad and yet how true in life. We all lead busy lives and have so many other things to do that when we see a need we often walk on past. Now there are many reasons we may put up for not helping but they are nearly all just excuses. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus talks of robbers beating and robbing a man and leaving lying in the gutter. A priest and then a Levite both walk on by. Good religious people yet for whatever reason they ignored the need before them. Maybe they were rushing to some important meeting, maybe they feared for their own lives, maybe they didn't want to become unclean by touching this fellow. Whatever their reason they left him. A Samaritan came by, and he was heading somewhere, but he took the time to stop and help. He cleaned the man up and took him to a safe place to recuperate promising to pop in on his way back to settle any outstanding debt. True Christian love in action.

Christians preach the most powerful sermons when they live what they say they believe - when they demonstrate God's kindness to others, not just talk about it. Every time we meet someone in need, we choose whether to behave like the religious Pharisees or the Good Samaritan. We can either take the time to get involved or be like the religious leaders who passed by and offered no help.

Pray: asking God for the strength to demonstrate his love in action in our lives.

Reflect: am I more like the Pharisees or the Good Samaritan?

Lord, teach us to pray. (v.1)

Dr. Robert A. Cook, president of The King's College, told an audience at Moody Bible Institute that he had talked with Vice President George Bush the previous day. Two hours after that, he spoke briefly with President Ronald Reagan. Then, smiling broadly, Cook told us, "But that's nothing. Today I talked with God."

What an incredible privilege we have each and every day in life – we have access not to the Prime Minister, or the President of the USA, or even the Queen, but access to the King of kings and Lord of lords. We can come right before the throne of grace and pray to our Father in heaven. The old hymn writer got it right when he wrote 'What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.'

Jesus was often found in prayer. Here we find Jesus' disciples watching him pray and then when he had finished one of them asking him to teach them how to pray. Jesus spent time often talking to God. It was a privilege and pleasure for him and it is for us too.

Jesus gives them a model prayer – not one simply to say verbatim although there is nothing wrong with that, but one showing how to pray. It begins with a rightful focus on God, praising him for who he is, and then asking him to reveal his will for us on earth. It moves on to focus on us but with the recognition that God it is who is the giver of all good things in life. We can ask God for provision of our needs. There is a reminder to confess our sin on a regular basis and also for us to be forgiving towards others. And there is a cry for strength to resist the temptation that we so often face in life.

Let's use the model often as we praise God, confess our sin, and ask for his help in life.

Pray: thanking God for the privilege of prayer.

Reflect: how often am I found in prayer?

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (v.34)

George W. Truett, a well-known pastor in America, was invited to dinner in the home of a very wealthy man in Texas. After the meal, the host led him to a place where they could get a good view of the surrounding area.

Pointing to the oil wells punctuating the landscape, he boasted, “Twenty-five years ago I had nothing. Now, as far as you can see, it’s all mine.” Looking in the opposite direction at his sprawling fields of grain, he said, “That’s all mine.” Turning east toward huge herds of cattle, he bragged, “They’re all mine.” Then pointing to the west and a beautiful forest, he exclaimed, “That too is all mine.”

He paused, expecting Dr. Truett to compliment him on his great success. Truett, however, placing one hand on the man’s shoulder and pointing heavenward with the other, simply said, “How much do you have in that direction?” The man hung his head and confessed, “I never thought of that.”

For too many in our world today this is sadly true. At times we too are like that. We try to work up to a good job, we buy a big house, we go for a fancy car, and we grab all the possessions we can including all the latest gizmos and gadgets. Yet they are all worthless when this life comes to an end. Our focus should not be on earthly treasure but on the hope of heaven that lies before us. Jesus speaks to the rich young fool and says to him his desire and focus for earthly wealth will leave him spiritually bankrupt when he stands before the judge on judgement day.

Our focus ought to be on God and we should not worry over earthly things. That said, there is nothing wrong with having earthly possessions – as long as they are not our focus, our idols and our all. Look to God alone for salvation and satisfaction. Live for him in this life and seek to serve him with your time, your talents and your treasures.

Pray: praising God for all his goodness to you.

Reflect: am I too focused on earthly possessions?

Lord, are only a few people going to be saved? (v.23)

Years ago, before Korea was divided, a theological professor from Yale visited a mission in northern Korea. He wanted to preach in a country church, so the mission sent him with a missionary interpreter to a rural Korean village. The professor began his sermon, “All thought is divided into two categories, the concrete and the abstract.”

The Korean interpreter looked at the tiny congregation sitting with eager attention on the floor of the little church – toothless grandmothers, barefoot schoolboys - and made a quick decision. “Dear friends,” he translated, “I have come all the way from America to tell you about the Lord Jesus Christ.” From that point on, the sermon was firmly in the interpreter’s hands.

I love to sit around and discuss theological issues with anyone who is interested. That was probably one of the best aspects of college, to be able to interact with my classmates on a broad range of biblical and theological issues. But while it is fine to discuss theology, there is an inherent danger in doing so, namely, the danger of not applying the truth to one’s own heart.

Jesus was continuing to teach as he made his way along. Someone in the crowd asked a deep and important question ‘*Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?*’ I don’t know about you but I often wonder about that. Jesus does not dwell on that though. He could have had a big theological discussion here but he senses an urgent need to apply that question in a personal way to the person asking. The man had asked, “Will the saved be few?” Jesus turned it around to ask, “Will the saved be you?”

Jesus takes the opportunity there and then to challenge the questioner and the crowd about their response to the gospel message. Let’s not miss simple opportunities by trying to be clever and deeply theological.

Pray: asking God for courage to share the gospel.

Reflect: do I try to overcomplicate matters instead of simply sharing the gospel?

But they all alike began to make excuses. (v.18)

Excuses, excuses, excuses. We all make them at times. Some are valid reasons why we can't do something or be somewhere, yet others are simply flimsy reasons for not wanting to get involved, for not wanting to mix, for not wanting to give up our time. People make many excuses for not coming to faith in Jesus. We see them here in this parable.

The first man makes the excuse of material possessions. He has bought a field and wants to go see it. He is interested in material gain. Many are like him in the world today – focusing on getting all we can while we can. The second man makes the excuse of professional advancement – he has bought some oxen to get ahead in business. Many are just like this fellow. They allow their occupations, their businesses and the pursuit of material gain to keep them from coming to God. There is nothing wrong with working and with making money, but when these things come ahead of God, they are sinful! The third excuse is of personal relationships. He wants to spend time with his new wife. There is nothing wrong with spending time with people as long as it doesn't keep us from God.

People still make their excuses in our day. The excuses mean as much now as they did then. Not a single person who rejected this invitation had a valid reason for doing so, and not a single person who rejects Jesus Christ has a valid reason for turning a deaf ear to the invitation of the Gospel.

We have to watch in our own lives not to make excuses. It's easy to sit back and say I've made a commitment to Jesus that's me sorted, but then we make excuses for not using our time, talents and treasure in his service. We make excuses of being too busy improving the house, too busy at work, or too busy spending time with a friend or family member. Some of these reasons will be valid but often they are just excuses to please ourselves rather than God.

Pray: asking God's forgiveness for making excuses not to serve him.

Reflect: do I make excuses not to serve God?

Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep. (v.6)

Evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman recounted a testimony given by a man in one of his meetings. The man said, “I got off at the train station one day as a tramp. For a year I had begged on the streets. Badly in need of food, I touched a man on the shoulder and said, ‘Mister, please give me a dime.’ As soon as I saw his face, I recognised my aging father. “Don’t you know me?’ I asked.

Throwing his arms around me, he cried, ‘Oh, my son, I have found you at last! All I have is yours!’ Think of it - I was a tramp who begged for 10 cents from a man I didn’t know was my father, when for 18 years he had been looking for me to give me all he possessed!”

In life we spend an awful long time looking for happiness and satisfaction, for love and acceptance, for peace and comfort. We look in all kinds of places and most of them are the wrong places. All the while God, our heavenly Father, the one who can give us that joy and peace and love and hope, is looking for us to see him and respond to him. Its time to stop looking in the wrong places and time to look up to our Saviour and Lord.

Jesus tells three lost and found parables here in Luke 15. The first is the shepherd who leaves his ninety nine sheep in order to find the one that is lost. He looks everywhere and does not give up until he is able to carry the lost sheep home to safety. God does not give up on us. The second is the woman who loses a coin and searches the house until she finds it. And the third is the famous loving father with the prodigal son. The father waits and watches every day for his lost son to return home. Instead of giving him what he deserves he gives him the love, acceptance and happiness he has been craving.

What wonderful stories to remind us of God’s love for us. He reaches down to rescue us and to give us what we don’t deserve.

Pray: thanking God for his love and mercy.

Reflect: do I live in the light of God’s love and acceptance for me?

*Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much.
(v.10)*

Faithfulness in duties we think are of minimal importance proves our readiness for larger tasks. Charles M. Schwab told of a prosperous man who started out in his youth as a poorly paid helper in a department store.

One rainy day when business was slow, the employees gathered in a corner to discuss the current baseball situation. When a woman came in, wet and bedraggled from the weather, they all continued talking except this young fellow. Quickly he walked over to the customer and asked courteously, "What can I show you, madam?" He promptly got the merchandise she requested and explained its features in a pleasant manner.

A short time later, the firm received a letter from this lady ordering complete furnishings for a large estate overseas. "I want to be assisted by the polite clerk who waited on me a few weeks ago," she wrote. The head of the company responded by saying that the one she asked for was young and inexperienced, so the manager would be sent instead. But when her reply came, it stated that she wanted the person she had designated and no other. So the courteous employee was sent to advise in furnishing a famous Scottish palace, for the customer had been none other than Mrs. Andrew Carnegie!

Jesus encourages us to be faithful in the small things we are entrusted with so that we can be entrusted with more. He calls us to faithfully serve at the bottom of the ladder and prove our worth for climbing it. I've heard of many guys who say they are called to ministry but they have never served in the church in any capacity. Get involved quietly behind the scenes and serve faithfully there first and then allow God to develop those other gifts in you.

Pray: asking God for opportunities to serve him in church life.

Reflect: am I happy serving in simple small ways?

Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? (v.17)

A story is told of a man who was lost in the woods. Later, in describing the experience, he told how frightened he was and how he had even finally knelt and prayed. Someone asked, “Did God answer your prayer?” “Oh, no,” the man replied. “Before God had a chance, a guide came along and showed me the way out.”

Like that man, many people are blind to the many blessings that God daily showers upon them. They awake to see the sun shining, and do not give thanks to God. They hear the birds chirping and see beautiful flowers and trees, but they don’t give it a moment’s thought that God has given those blessings and given them the senses to enjoy them. They grumble about having to eat the same old cereal, forgetting that many would gladly exchange places with them and eat anything for breakfast. They complain about their jobs, forgetting that many would be grateful just to have a job or even to have the bodily strength to go to work. They complain about their lack of money, forgetting that they spend more on entertainment each month than many around the world earn as their total income.

God has blessed us in so many ways and we simply take him for granted. It is good for us to have a thankful spirit. In the parable of the ten lepers all ten are healed and sent on their way to the priests. Only one comes back realising he has been healed and thanks Jesus for all he has done for him. Jesus looks and says ‘*Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?*’ Worse still Jesus says only the foreigner came back to praise God indicating that the other nine were Jews who should have known better.

Sometimes we in the church are as guilty as any other for taking God’s blessings for granted. Its time for us to take a careful look around and as the hymn writer suggests ‘count your many blessings, name them one by one and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.’ When you count those blessings, make sure and stop and give God thanks and praise.

Pray: thanking God for his abundant blessings in your life.

Reflect: in what ways has God blessed me today? Give him thanks.

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. (v.13)

Charles Haddon Spurgeon used to tell the story of a duke who boarded a galley ship and went below to talk with the criminals manning the oars. He asked several of them what their offences were. Almost every man claimed he was innocent, blaming someone else or accusing the judge of taking a bribe.

One young fellow, however, replied, “Sir, I deserve to be here. I stole some money. No one is at fault but me. I’m guilty” Upon hearing this, the duke shouted, “You scoundrel, you! What are you doing here with all these honest men? Get out of their company at once!” The duke ordered that this prisoner be released. He was set free, while the rest were left to tug at the oars. The key to this prisoner’s freedom was his admission of guilt.

The same is true of our relationship with God. When we come before him and admit our need of him, when we come and admit we are sinners who need his salvation, then he forgives us and frees us from guilt and condemnation. The trouble is many of us find that too hard to do. We would rather blame someone else or else pretend to be good in our own merits.

Jesus speaks of this in a parable today when he speaks of a Pharisee who goes to the temple to pray and says thanks to God that he is not like other people and bad. He praises himself with his spiritual acts. A tax collector also goes to pray and he simply asks for God’s mercy as he is a sinner. He says the tax collector goes home justified before God because he was honest and asked for mercy.

Let’s not think more highly of ourselves than we are. Let’s admit regularly that we are sinners who need a Saviour. And then let’s rejoice in God’s salvation.

Pray: thanking God for your salvation.

Reflect: do I admit my sin or cover it up and write it off?

Today salvation has come to this house. (v.9)

Maurice Pritchard, the traffic administrator of the Midland Red bus company in Shrewsbury, was going through the post one morning when he was surprised to find a letter with a £5 note in it. The woman who had sent it explained that as a child, some twenty years earlier, she had sometimes avoided paying the bus fare on her way home from school. Her letter went on, ‘in church on Sunday our pastor preached about restitution for things we had done wrong, and I remembered. I wanted to apologise to you and honour God by paying what I owe. I think the same bus fare would cost 50p now hence the £5 enclosed.’ Mr Pritchard told his local paper the Shrewsbury Chronicle ‘we were all astonished by the letter. It’s such a shame we weren’t able to thank the woman, because although she had signed it, the signature was virtually unreadable.’

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ a change takes place. The chains of sin that once bound us have been broken. Satan no longer controls us but Jesus has set us free to follow him. And when we start to live for Jesus we will act differently.

We see that in today’s reading with Zacchaeus. He is a tax collector and a corrupt one at that. He has heard of Jesus and wants to see him but being small he can’t get anywhere near. He runs on ahead and climbs the tree. Jesus is seeking sinners and he spots Zacchaeus and tells him to come down for he wants to spend time with him. The people are bewildered. Why would Jesus want to spend time with a sinner like him? But that’s exactly what Jesus longs to do – spend time with sinners so he can show them the good news.

As Zacchaeus spends time with Jesus he is changed. He turns from his old way of life, and one of the results of that change is the paying back plus interest of all he has dishonestly taken. Jesus changes lives.

Pray: thanking God for bringing change to your life.

Reflect: in what ways have I changed since I came to faith in Jesus?

Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. (v.25)

Lambeth Council in London was forced to admit that it had sent three demands for Council Tax to the church of St John the Divine in Brixton, addressed to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost respectively. Each was asked to pay the sum of £521, or face possible court action. In its defence, the council said that it was hard for their staff to weed out frivolous applications.

The issue of tax comes up next in Luke's gospel but it comes up as a way of trying to catch Jesus out. The religious leaders don't like Jesus and have been trying to get rid of him. Nothing has worked so far and here they send some spies to keep an eye on him and then to try and catch him out.

After some flattery, they asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" If Jesus answered, "Yes," the Pharisees would accuse Him of being soft towards Rome and certainly not being the Messiah who could deliver the nation from Rome's hated sovereignty. If He answered, "No," the Herodians would report Him to Pilate as being opposed to Caesar's rule, thus guilty of sedition. They thought that they had Him this time.

But Jesus' answer stunned them. In one succinct sentence, He showed that God and Caesar each have legitimate realms of authority with corresponding responsibilities. But if there is a conflict between realms, God is supreme over Caesar. By asking His critics to produce the Roman coin, Jesus underscored the fact that they were enjoying the benefits of Caesar's government. They used his coinage; they enjoyed many civil improvements and benefits that he provided. Thus they were obligated to give him his due.

It is right that we pay taxes and respect those in authority over us in the land – but only as long as it doesn't cause us to do anything against God's Laws and ways.

Pray: for those in authority in the land.

Reflect: do I respect those in authority and pray for them often?

*Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name.
(v.8)*

In 1976 a young bearded man named Ron kept turning up at the Los Angeles Times building asking for an interview with the religious news reporter, Russell Chandler. When Chandler sent a message down to send the man away yet again, Ron said ‘This may come as quite a surprise to you; I am the Messiah.’ ‘Well,’ the messenger replied, ‘this may come as quite a surprise to you, but you’re the third Messiah we’ve had here today.’

There are many over the years who have claimed to be Jesus. In May this year a former IT specialist called Alan John Miller claimed to be Jesus reborn and his wife is actually Mary Magdalene. As many as 150 people at a time crowd around to listen to him.

How sad that this happens in our day and age and yet Jesus warned us it would happen. In fact in Luke 21 he gives his disciples some guidance and warning as to things that would happen. He says there will be religious delusion, international distress and religious persecution. He urges his disciples in verse 8 to watch out in case they are deceived. He says that many will come in his name claiming to be him and asking people to follow them. That’s what we see in this man Miller. How can you stop yourself from being deceived? Check everything against Scripture. Don’t take people’s word for it, even if they do sound convincing.

Then Jesus speaks of wars and revolutions, earthquakes and famines. We see it all around us. These are signs of the times. And he speaks also of persecution that believers will face. We see that all around us and in fact we have seen it in every church age – it’s just that they increase and intensify over time. We should not be surprised by the signs because the times are changing. We should watch for Jesus returning, and we should keep guard in case we are deceived by a false god.

Pray: for strength to stand for Jesus in the difficult days in which we live.

Reflect: am I watching for Jesus’ return?

But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. (v.26)

J. Gresham Machen, world-renowned theologian, accepted lowly work while serving as a YMCA volunteer during World War I. He was assigned the task of making hot chocolate at a canteen. Since it had to be ready at a.m., Machen would get up before 5. He'd take bars of chocolate and shave them into slivers. Then he'd melt them, gradually adding condensed milk and water as the mixture heated. From 7 until 9 he kept busy serving the hot chocolate and often didn't get his own breakfast until the middle of the morning. Although Machen would have been an excellent counsellor to the servicemen, he honoured God by accepting a mundane task without complaining.

In Old Testament times, it was an honour for the Levites to do the manual labour associated with the tabernacle and temple. Likewise, the apostle Paul wasn't ashamed to make tents. The Lord Himself washed His disciples' feet. Any lowly task, done as unto the Lord, affords a unique opportunity to exalt Him and to demonstrate the reality of our faith. Christians can find joy no matter where they serve.

The disciples were struggling to understand what was going on around them. Jesus has just shared the Last Supper with them, yet instead of pondering the significance of his words and the meal they have shared, they start an argument over who is the greatest. Jesus wades in to the discussion and speaks of the least being the greatest and the one who serves as being as important as the one who rules.

We are all called to serve one another. And we are all called to serve our Lord. No task should be considered to menial in the Lord's service. What is it you avoid doing in service to God? Get off your high horse and do it this week.

Pray: for a servant heart.

Reflect: am I willing to serve the Lord in any capacity and in any way?

Surely this was a righteous man. (v.47)

John Gordon was a respected general for the South in the American Civil War. After the war, he was running for the U.S. Senate, but a man who had served under him in the war, angry over some political incident, was determined to see him defeated. During the convention, he angrily stamped down the aisle with his anti-Gordon vote in hand. As he saw Gordon sitting on the platform, he noticed how his once handsome face was disfigured with the scars of battle. Overcome with emotion, he exclaimed, "It's no use; I can't do it. Here's my vote for John Gordon." Then, turning to the general, he said, "Forgive me, General. I had forgotten the scars."

I wonder how many times we take the cross for granted. We know that Jesus died to save us from our sin but we rarely go back and ponder at the cost involved in that great transaction that saved us. It is good to sit and read a chapter like this one in Luke 23 and to remember the momentous day when sin was atoned once and for all.

Jesus was on trial and although innocent he was condemned to die. The crowds that once followed him shouted out 'crucify him'. He was nailed to a cross and hung to die. He was mocked and abused. And yet he suffered it all for you and me. And then he breathed his last and one centurion standing nearby proclaimed '*Surely this was a righteous man.*' Yes he is. He is God's Son. He is the sinner's Saviour. He paid the price that we could not pay.

If your love for the Lord has grown cold, go back to the cross and remember the scars – not just the physical scars, but the scars of God's wrath that Jesus bore in your place. Let His amazing love turn your heart from sin and give you more devotion to serve Him.

Pray: thanking God for his amazing love that allowed his son to die in our place.

Reflect: has my love for the Lord grown cold? Go back to the cross and remember the price that was paid for your salvation.

Were not our hearts burning within us? (v.32)

A five-year-old boy from Texas was told that the family would visit the Grand Canyon. They described it as much bigger than downtown Dallas. He could hardly wait to see it. When they finally got there, they asked him how it measured up to his expectations. With a little frown, he said, “I thought you said that it was a big cannon.” He was probably hoping to see them shoot it! When you’re hoping for the Grand Cannon, you can be let down even by something as spectacular as the Grand Canyon!

If your expectations are wrong, you can even be disappointed by God. It’s not that God was somehow lacking. He is far more glorious and perfect than we could ever conceive. But often, because of our limited perspective, we feel as if He let us down. We thought that He would do something, but He didn’t do it. We thought that we were trusting in the promises of His Word, but they didn’t come true. We thought that we were praying in line with His will, but He didn’t answer. God didn’t come through as we had hoped.

That’s where two weary travellers were at as they walked the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus one Sunday. They had been hoping that Jesus was the promised Messiah who would redeem Israel (v.21). But their hopes had been dashed when the Jewish religious leaders suddenly succeeded in crucifying Jesus. They were going home, dejected and disappointed. They were still in shock. They didn’t understand why God had let them down. They were talking about these things as they walked when a stranger caught up to them. He was really not a stranger; He was the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus encouraged their hearts from the Scriptures and their eyes were opened.

When we feel disappointed with life, turn back to the Scriptures and see God’s story of salvation unfold. Grasp the truth of the fact that Jesus has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. And cling to the hope of heaven that lies in front for each of us through faith in Jesus Christ.

Pray: thanking God for his plans and purposes in our lives.

Reflect: do I turn to the Lord and the Scriptures when life is tough?

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (v.14)

Shah Abbas was a Persian monarch who loved his people very much. To know and understand them better, he would mingle with his subjects in various disguises. One day he went as a poor man to the public baths, and in a tiny cellar sat beside the fireman who tended the furnace. When it was meal-time the monarch shared his coarse food and talked to his lonely subject as a friend. Again and again he visited and the man grew to love him.

One day the Shah told him he was the monarch, expecting the man to ask for some gift from him. But the fireman sat gazing at his ruler with love and wonder and at last spoke: 'You left your palace and your glory to sit with me in this dark place, to eat of my coarse food, to care whether my heart is glad or sorry. On others you may bestow rich presents, but to me you have given yourself, and it only remains for me to pray that you never withdraw the gift of your friendship.'

As we think of what our Lord has done for us, we can echo that fire tender's sentiments. Jesus stepped from heaven to earth, from the worship of angels to the mocking of cruel men, from glory to humiliation. He left behind the perfection of heaven for the brokenness of this world. He came not to be served but to serve. He came to lay down his life that we might take up ours. He came to die so that we might live for evermore. What a wonderful Lord and Saviour.

Jesus came to shine light into darkness, to reveal our sin and to show us the way out. He is the way and the truth and the life. He came to point us back to God. To provide our salvation, Jesus came in human flesh, took upon Himself the form of a servant, and '*became obedient to death, even death on the cross*' (Philippians 2:8). Our great Creator became our Saviour. He deserves our heartfelt worship and humble adoration.

Pray: praising God for Jesus and all he means to us and all he has done for us.

Reflect: do I know the Lord's presence daily in my life?

*Get out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!
(v.16)*

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Four: one to change the bulb and the other three to talk about how much better the old light bulb was. How many Pentecostals does it take to change a light bulb? Ten: one to change the bulb and the other nine to pray over him in tongues. How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? CHANGE? Did you say CHANGE?

None of us like to change. We like the habits we have. We like the places we go. We like the friends we have. We like the things we do. And yet when Jesus comes into our lives he calls for us to change. He wants us to become more like him. He wants us to throw off the old nature and to put on the new. He wants us to rid our lives of sin and to follow God's ways.

When Jesus entered the temple area in John 2 he saw what the people had turned the place into. They had forgotten whose house this was and what should take there. Remember that Jesus came to shine light into darkness. He came to reveal sin and to point people back to God and his ways. And so Jesus was angered when he went into the temple. He demanded change. The first thing he did was turn their tables over and demand they leave.

What was so wrong with what they were doing? Well they had lost all sense of awe and respect for God. This was a place for worship but they turned it into a den of robbers. They bought and sold goods. Instead of bringing the best sacrifice of their own to the altar, they bought the cheapest they could find in the temple courts. They had forgotten what it was all about.

We have to be careful we don't forget what our worship is all about – it is all about Jesus.

Pray: asking God to help change us to be more like Jesus.

Reflect: do I come to church with the right attitude and for the right reasons?

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (v.16)

In her memoirs Mary Ann Bird writes: I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates asked, “What happened to your lip?” I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored - Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy - a sparkling lady. Annually we had a hearing test...Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back - things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?” I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.”

God says to every person deformed by sin, ‘I wish you were my daughter’ or ‘I wish you were my son’. He sent his only son in the world to show that love to us. He sent his own son to die in our place taking the punishment for our sin. He allowed his own son to die so that we might not die but have eternal life.

In this one verse which is the best known verse in the bible I think, we see the source of love (God himself), the scope of his love (for each and every person; for the whole world), and the sacrifice of his love (he gave up his son for us).

Pray: thanking God for his great love for you.

Reflect: have I accepted God’s gift of love?

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. (v.13-14)

During a gospel meeting in a town in Ohio, a man was greatly convicted of his need of the Lord Jesus. He concealed his feelings even from his wife, who was a lovely Christian. One evening when she was away, he became so anxious about his condition that he began pacing the floor. His daughter, noticing her father's agitation, asked him what was wrong. "Oh, nothing," he replied, trying in vain to relieve his pangs of conviction.

The youngster, with the profound simplicity of childhood, said, "Daddy, if you were thirsty wouldn't you go and get a drink of water?" Her words startled the father. He thought of his thirsty soul, so parched and empty. Then he remembered what he had heard in the meeting - that the gospel was like a freely flowing fountain. He resisted no longer. That night he asked Jesus to save him.

Nothing can quench our spiritual thirst but Jesus. We often try many different things to meet our needs but they so often fail. We climb the work ladder, we buy fancy houses and cars, we get the latest gadgets and clothes – but nothing satisfies for long. We need Jesus.

Nothing can quench our spiritual thirst but Jesus. The woman at the well discovered that. She goes to the well at this time so she meets no one. She is ashamed of who she is and what she has done. Jesus has been journeying and stops for a break. He speaks to the woman, and in so doing breaks down several barriers. In Jesus' day Jews didn't speak to Samaritans, men didn't speak to women in public, and good religious folks did not speak with immoral sinners. Jesus laid all those aside. He saw a need in this woman and wanted to share about the water of life with her. He saw her guilt and shame. And he says to her stop looking everywhere else for what you need. Come and receive the water of life.

Pray: thanking God for meeting our spiritual needs in Jesus.

Reflect: are you striving for more but are never satisfied? Stop looking in the wrong places and come to Jesus and receive the water of life.

Do you want to get well? (v.6)

A little book, long out of print, called “Expectation Corner”, tells of a king who prepared a city for some of his poor subjects. Not far away he constructed a large storehouse where everything they needed would be supplied if they would only send him their requests. There was one condition, however: they should constantly be on the lookout for his messengers so that when they came with the gifts in answer to their urgent pleas, the petitioners would always be found waiting and ready to receive them. One faithless subject, not actually expecting to get what he asked for, never watched for their delivery. One day he was taken to the king’s storehouse; and there, to his amazement, he saw scores of packages that had originally been made ready for him. The messengers had come to his door, but because he was not looking for them, the king’s gifts never satisfied his needs.

I often think in life we are like that. We are looking for salvation but never see it right in front of us. We pray to God for help but never watch for the answers coming. Jesus asks the man in the passage today an interesting question – ‘*Do you want to get well?*’ You would think that he would jump at the chance and shout yes please. After all he has been ill for thirty eight years – probably his whole life. He has not been able to walk and relies on people carrying him everywhere. He cannot work and has to beg to get by. He is sitting by the pool of Bethesda which is supposed to have miraculous healing powers for the first to get in when its waters stir. Rather than saying yes to Jesus, he makes some excuse about others getting in the water before him.

We are often like that when it comes to our sin and the offer of salvation. It is freely available to us and in a sense we want to get well, but in another we are happy as we are, so we make our excuses. Jesus tried to nail the man hard by saying ‘*Do you want to get well?*’ He says to you today ‘*Do you want to get well?*’ Stop making excuses, turn from your sin and turn to the Saviour.

Pray: thanking God for his gift of salvation.

Reflect: do I make excuses not to accept God’s gift of life?

Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many? (v.9)

About halfway through a rehearsal conducted by Sir Michael Costa, with trumpets blaring, drums rolling, and violins singing their rich melody, the piccolo player muttered to himself, “What good am I doing? I might just as well not be playing. Nobody can hear me anyway.” So he kept the instrument to his mouth, but he made no sound. Within moments, the conductor cried, “Stop! Stop! Where’s the piccolo?” The most important person of all missed the piccolo’s seemingly unimportant contribution.

At certain times in life we all feel insignificant and useless. Surrounded by people with greater talent than ours, we are tempted in our weak moments just to settle back and “let George do it.” We reason that what we have to offer won’t make much difference anyway. We forget that Jesus used five loaves and two small fish to feed a multitude.

Here in John 6 we find a large crowd gathered around Jesus and Jesus wanting to feed them. He asks the disciples where they can buy food to feed the crowd but Philip looks around and says we can’t do that. Andrew has found a boy with his small picnic who is willing to share it but he questions how far that will go. Jesus takes that small picnic, has the crowd all sit down, gives thanks for the food and passes it round. The whole crowd is fed and there is a basket left over for each of the twelve disciples.

Like that young boy on the mountainside, each of us has something important to offer, and we are foolish to hold back because we discount the value of our contribution. God can do amazing things with one life given over to him. Whether our talent is great or small, the performance isn’t complete until we do our best with what we have. What is your gift? Offer it to God in service.

Pray: offering yourself and your talents to God in service.

Reflect: do I offer myself and my gifts to God in service?

Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. (v.43)

In the film Polar Express a large train comes along in the middle of the night and collects boys and girls who have stopped believing in Santa Claus. The ticket collector welcomes them on board and tells them they are heading for the North Pole. Some of the children become very excited about this but others still insist there is no Santa.

After an eventful journey they arrive at the North Pole just in time for the big celebrations and Santa's arrival to collect the parcels and the reindeer. Despite being in the North Pole and seeing all the reindeer and parcels and Santa's helpers one boy still does not believe. He cannot bring himself to do it.

Santa comes out and everyone is cheering and screaming for they have come to see and believe. And yet despite being there with all the others and seeing what is happening and catching a glimpse of Santa the boy still does not believe. These friends are now divided over their belief in Santa. Some believe but some don't. It's not until later in the film the little boy finally believes.

We see the same problem here in John 7 in relation to Jesus. The people just cannot make up their minds. Some believe in Jesus and others don't. The people began to debate the answer to questions such as 'What kind of man is he?' 'Where does his teaching come from?' and 'Is he the Christ?' Someone asked in verse 42 '*Does not the Scripture say?*' and of course if we turn to the Scriptures we find the answer. In all there are over 300 prophecies that detailed the first coming of Jesus to the earth. God went into great detail so there would be no mistake about who the Messiah would be. If you are still struggling with working out who Jesus is, then open your bible and start reading it. Discover for yourself the one who is the way, the truth and the life.

Pray: thanking God for giving us His Word.

Reflect: how can I help someone else discover who Jesus is?

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (v.12)

The young Robert Louis Stevenson was looking out of the window one evening at the Edinburgh street in which he lived, when the old-fashioned lamplighter came past on his rounds. The boy's nurse called him to come and have his supper, but he couldn't bear to tear himself away from this remarkable sight. 'Look, look!' he cried, his face pressed hard against the glass, 'There's a man out there punching holes in the darkness.'

That is exactly what Jesus came to do in our world and in our lives. He came to light up our dark world and to reveal sin. He came to light up our path and show us the way to walk in. He came to allow us to leave our dark and sinful pasts and to walk in his light from now on.

If we are following Jesus, then two things are going to happen: the first is that we will have a growing sense of direction. When we follow Jesus, we may not have all the answers yet, but things start making sense little by little. We begin to orient our lives around a new centre. Almost like changing the orientation of a compass, we have a new, better north pole to point us with. God's Word begins to put a light on our lives, and it begins to show us what's on the path we're walking on. The Psalmist said in Psalm 119:105 '*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*'

Secondly we will gain a growing sense of what's right. Coming to Jesus involves coming into the light. The things that you've done secretly begin to get exposed. Growing up in Christ involves "truth". It means we stop hiding from our sins and learn to face them. Walking in the light brings complete cleansing, as long as you respond to the light, confess your sin, and move away from your sin.

Jesus is shining his light into your life – do you see your sin and are you dealing with it before him? He is shining his light to show you the way – are you walking in it?

Pray: thanking God for Jesus 'the light of the world'.

Reflect: am I walking in the light?

While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. (v.5)

Some years ago a famous artist painted a picture. The painter lived where Christmas is in winter time. The scene was of a wintry and windy twilight. The white Christmas tree-shaped pines were bending under the force of the wind. In the middle of the dark picture the painter put a dreary, dull house. It seemed lonely and desolate in the midst of the cold scene. It was a sad picture. Then – as he was finishing the painting – with a quick stroke of the brush, he put a bright yellow light in one window. The picture was transformed. Now the scene seemed to be one of security and warmth.

There is a real sense to which that is what happened when Jesus entered into our dark world. The world was a dark and dreary place. Sin had taken over and people could see no hope. Then Jesus came and suddenly light shone into the scene. Sin was revealed for what it was and Jesus pointed us to a better way; he pointed us back to a relationship with God.

In these verses Jesus and his disciples come across a blind man and his disciples ask who sinned – him or his parents. Jesus said that neither had, but that this had happened ‘*so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*’ (v.4). Jesus then defined his mission again as coming to free those who were blind, lame, halt and death. Jesus came to free us from sin that blinds and binds. And He defined it as giving glory to God. He says here that while he is in the world he is the light of the world. He shines light into our dark world in order to bring security and warmth.

Of course Jesus then goes on to spit on the ground, make some mud and place it on the man’s eyes. He told him to go and wash it off. And as the man obeyed Jesus and did this, his eyes were opened and he could see. Light shone into those eyes for the first time. This man saw the world clearly around him for the first time. Jesus longs to do the same in our lives. He wants us to open those eyes that have been blinded by sin and show us life in all its fullness.

Pray: thanking God for opening your eyes to the gospel.

Reflect: do I find my security in Jesus, the light of the world?

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (v.3)

A man in Australia was arrested and charged with stealing a sheep. But he claimed emphatically that it was one of his own that had been missing for many days. When the case went to court, the judge was puzzled, not knowing how to decide the matter. At last he asked that the sheep be brought into the courtroom. Then he ordered the plaintiff to step outside and call the animal. The sheep made no response except to raise its head and look frightened. The judge then instructed the defendant to go to the courtyard and call the sheep. When the accused man began to make his distinctive call, the sheep bounded toward the door. It was obvious that he recognised the familiar voice of his master.

Jesus uses the truth that sheep know the voice of their shepherd to speak of him being the good shepherd here in John 10. Jesus says here that the shepherd has the right credentials – he enters the right way. Jesus entered the world in the right way by fulfilling all the prophecies that had been given surrounding his birth. Not only does he properly but he calls properly. There may be several flocks sharing the same sheepfold. However, when the shepherd of the sheep walks up to the door and calls his sheep, they instantly recognise his voice and respond to him. They know his call. So it is with the lost soul. There are many voices which compete for our attention in the world, but there is a special note to the voice of the voice of the Lord. You see, the voice of the Good Shepherd is the only one that can awaken the dead heart; the only one that can give us hope; the only one that sounds right to a desperate soul. And of course he commands properly as well. When the shepherd calls forth his sheep, he goes before them and they instinctively follow him. He doesn't have to drive them, that is for goats. He just leads them out and they follow close behind. What a truth! When a soul is saved by the grace of God, they will have a desire to follow the Good Shepherd!

Have you heard the shepherd's voice? Are you following him closely?

Pray: thanking God for Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Reflect: do I follow the shepherd's voice?

*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?
(v.40)*

As Vice President, George Bush represented the U.S. at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Bush was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband. In a moment of despair she clung to hope - the miracle of life eternal.

Here in John 11 we find the despair of Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus, who was a good friend of Jesus, is dead. It appears they have lost hope. They have called for Jesus explaining Lazarus is ill but Jesus delays coming for two days. And it is too late, or so it appears. By the time Jesus arrives Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. Martha came out to Jesus and says '*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*' Jesus shares some startling words sharing that he is the resurrection and the life. Martha says she believes. Mary then comes on the scene and repeats the same words as Martha. Jesus weeps with her, then goes to the tomb with them, and calls Lazarus out of the tomb. Martha tries to explain he will be smelly and decaying but Jesus reminds her about believing and she would see the glory of God. Jesus performs a miracle and Lazarus comes forth. They see the glory of God.

Jesus calls us out from our life of decay and death in sin, and gives us life in all its fullness. We now have hope for eternal life because of his sacrifice on the cross.

Pray: thanking God for the sure and certain hope we have of eternal life.

Reflect: do I rest secure in the hope that I have in Christ?