STUDENT GROWTH COMMUNITY

FALL 2024

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THE RIVER CHURCH

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PREFACE

If you are reading this, you are most likely in middle school or high school (or the parent of someone who is). Whether you are a Christian or not, being a teenager comes with its challenges. There are low moments where you get left out, fail a big test, or receive bad news, but there are mountaintop moments too; moments where you get good news about the team or role you were hoping to make and the feeling of accomplishment that comes with it! Wherever you are right now, God's Word has something to say about it.

This semester we will explore authority, conclude the Sermon on the Mount by studying Matthew chapter 7, and examine the biblical facts behind Christmas.

Come along on this journey by joining us every week for Student Growth Community at any of The River Church locations!

LESSON ONE

GO OUTSIDE THE CAMP

ELIJAH EDWARDS

When I was growing up, my household had very specific rules as to what could be done inside the house and what had to be done outside the house. For example, I was able to play baseball inside if it was a video game, but the moment I wanted to play it for real, I had to take it outside. Almost every time, I would tell my mom it would be okay and I would not break anything; something would get hit and break. Active sports or messy things had to be done outside the house.

1. What are some things at your house that are allowed outside but not inside?

_____
_____
_____

2. What is a story from your life where you did something inside the house that was meant for outside?

_____
_____
_____

Not only are there things that we must do inside versus outside in our households, but the Bible also takes us through this when it comes to becoming like Jesus and reaching others with the Gospel.

In the Old Testament, God gave examples of things that are to be done inside the camp and outside the camp. These examples were a covenant or set of laws that God had given His people to follow. One such example is found in Exodus 33:7.

Read Exodus 33:7.

3. What was to be done ***"outside the camp"*** in this verse?

_____
_____
_____

During the time of Moses, any person who wanted to connect with the Lord or take counsel with Him had to go ***"outside the camp"*** to this ***"tent of meeting."*** This happened because before this the people of Israel, who had been freed from slavery in Egypt, were worshiping a golden calf instead of God. It was the only way that the Israelites were able to connect with God. This rule was established as something that had to be done ***"outside the camp."***

Read Hebrews 13:8-14.

4. According to verse 8, is the God in Exodus the same as the God in Hebrews?

_____
_____
_____

5. What similarities are there between Hebrews 13:8-14 and Exodus 33:7? (Think ***"outside the camp."***)

_____
_____
_____

When Jesus was crucified, He was ***"outside the gate"*** (Hebrews 13:12). He was put to death outside of the city of Jerusalem or outside of the city where God's people lived.

6. Why do you think Jesus was crucified outside of the city?

_____
_____
_____

7. What significance is there in having Jesus crucified away from the "holy city"?

_____
_____
_____

For the Jews, the idea of this was a camp. In the case of the book of Hebrews, it was an important sanctuary or resting place of sorts. It was a living place where God dwelled, and His people (the Israelites or Jews) lived and saw it as their land. It was something they held in great importance. It was a place where they felt safe, they could be themselves, and live the lives that they wanted to live. Many times, foreigners or outside people were frowned upon because they were not God's people, according to them.

Read Hebrews 13:13.

8. This passage mentions bearing Jesus' ***"reproach."*** What do you think it means to ***"bear His reproach"***? (Look up the word reproach.)

_____
_____
_____

When bearing His reproach, it means that we identify with Jesus and share in the same shame that He did on the cross. We grow to become like Jesus and are willing to sacrifice things for the glory of God.

9. What are some ways that you can ***"bear His reproach"***?

_____
_____
_____

When reading these passages in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the main theme we go back to is what is done outside and inside. When looking at what it means to reach other people with the Gospel and tell them about the Good News of what Jesus did on the cross and how they can have eternal life through Him, where do we go? We go ***"outside the camp."***

10. What does it mean to go ***"outside the camp"*** when telling others about Jesus?

_____
_____
_____

11. What would this ***"camp"*** be in your eyes?

_____
_____
_____

In order to reach others, we must go outside our camps, whether that be our church, neighborhood, or comfort zones. We need to be willing, just as Jesus was, to go and tell others the truth. If it is only done inside the camp, then it will not reach new people.

Read 1 John 2:2.

12. For whose sins did Jesus die?

_____
_____
_____

Jesus died for the sins of the entire world, and it is our task to go out to the world, ***"outside the camp,"*** to tell others the Good News. Let us go ***"outside the camp"*** and ***"bear His reproach."*** It is going to be tough, and there may be times when you are persecuted and rejected, but know that your identity lies with Christ. He took the ultimate punishment of the cross.

NOTES

LESSON TWO

GOVERNMENT

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD & PATRICK BICKNELL

Today, we are exploring a topic that will have two extreme opposites among students. Either you are going to be really into history, government, and politics, or you are not going to care at all about politics and the things that revolve around that topic. I am someone who has moved away from caring much about politics, but I love history, specifically history in regard to presidents and other famous ancient civilizations. I love reading about the American colonies and how they overthrew the British monarchy, or reading about ancient Rome and all the emperors who ruled, or how different governments operated during wartime, like during World War 2. It is fascinating to me to see how governments, kings, and rulers have influenced the world over the course of history. Does it make me a bit nerdy that I enjoy studying history? Probably, but for those of you who know me, you know I'm a little bit nerdy anyway, so I'm okay with it.

1. Are you someone who is interested in history? What time eras have you enjoyed learning about?

_____
_____
_____

2. Do you have a moment in our history as a country that you lived through and have not forgotten?

_____
_____
_____

3. Who is a President that you admire?

_____
_____
_____

When I was around middle school age, politics was not anything on my radar. The world I grew up in was not as focused on politics as it is today. Honestly, as a middle school boy, my biggest concern was how many people I could make laugh with a dumb joke during class. However, that seems to be changing with the generation you

guys are growing up in. That is why we think it is important to study the different lanes of authority as it pertains to the government. Regardless of what category you fall in that I mentioned at the beginning, whether you are someone who is deeply concerned about politics or you could not care less, it is still important that you know what the bible says about how we are to respect those who are in the leadership positions of our country.

As we open to the book of Romans, Paul does a fantastic job of communicating the mindset and understanding our response and attitude towards those in governing authority. Beginning in Romans 13:1-2 Paul writes, ***"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."*** I love Paul's boldness as he writes what God has put on his heart. We read that there is no room for the discrepancy on who is subject to governing authority - everyone! But Paul takes it a step further. He knows, and really God knows since He is the one who commissioned Paul to write about this, that we are going to question man's authority or who we have voted into power. Yet, the second half of verse one tells us who put our governing authority in place: God.

4. What is the ***"therefore"*** in verse two there for?

_____

_____

_____

5. Can you share a story from God's Word about someone who was disobedient to God's authority?

_____

_____

_____

Ever since Genesis, the beginning of the world, there has been a battle between obedience and disobedience to God's authority.

We know that in Genesis chapter 3 we have what is referred to as "The Fall." It is a moment in our history, as a world and a people, that forever changed the world. It was more severe and had more ramifications than any other event in history. We were separated from God and forced to live a life apart from His presence. Yet, because of what happened thousands of years ago in the garden, the world was given a chance at reconciliation and redemption through Jesus Christ. Therefore, upon confessing and believing Jesus as our Savior and Redeemer, we are called to a life of obedience to the Father. It is through this lens of obedience that we must view those in governing authority, as it is honoring to God.

Now, I want to look at another passage with that view and understanding of obedience in mind.

Read 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Here, Peter reiterates the same teaching and understanding as Paul in Romans chapter 13, yet he is more blunt and to the point.

6. What human institution and authority ought we be subject to?

_____
_____
_____

7. Who is the one authority we are called to fear?

_____
_____
_____

At the end of verse sixteen, Peter makes the statement, ***"but living as servants of God."*** If you do not get anything else from this lesson, please hear this. The reason that we honor and respect every human institution and governing authority that is in place is ultimately to show the world that we are different. Further in this passage, Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:21, ***"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an***

example, so that you might follow in his steps." You see, by showing respect and honor, we are showing love and being an example of Jesus Christ. Yes, it will be difficult at times to show honor and respect. Yes, we will disagree, and if we ask our brothers and sisters in Christ around us, it is safe to say that we have all disagreed with some governing authority at some point! However, we are ultimately called to obey our Heavenly Father and live as an example of Jesus. Paul wraps up this topic in Romans 13.

Read Romans 13:5-7.

8. Who are we ultimately honoring if we honor the governing authority placed over us?

_____
_____
_____

9. Is there someone in authority to whom you have not shown respect and honor that you need to change your attitude towards?

_____
_____
_____

Talking about the government is not an easy subject. I have had many debates and discussions with family, friends, and co-workers. Regardless of whether you are red, blue, green, or whatever color you may lean in the political field, I hope you remember to have the proper lens.

"The very word authority has within it the word author. An author is someone who creates and possesses a particular work. Insofar as God is the foundation of all authority, He exercises that foundation because He is the author and the owner of His creation. He is the foundation upon which all other authority stands or falls." R.C. Sproul

NOTES

LESSON THREE

THE CHURCH

PASTOR PAT ROWLAND
& PASTOR KEATON WASHBURN

1. What are some words you would use to describe the church?

_____

_____

_____

To understand the church's role and authority in our lives, we need to go back to its beginning. In Matthew 16, Jesus is speaking to His disciples when the word ***"church"*** is introduced for the first time.

Read Matthew 16:13-18.

The disciples had no context for the word ***"church,"*** but Jesus was clear that at that moment, with Peter's words, Jesus would build this new thing called a church.

2. What was Jesus referring to as the ***"rock"*** of the church?

_____

_____

_____

St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City has placed the bones of Peter in a tomb beneath the church, believing it is Peter by whom the church was built. Though he played a significant role, the church has been built upon a principle, not a person. It is the Gospel, which was proclaimed by Peter through the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter two, that established the church. The Bible says that when the people heard the message, ***"they were cut to the heart"*** (verse 37). Those who accepted the message were about 3,000. In one day, God established the church.

Read Acts 2:42-47.

3. What was the focus of the early church?

_____

_____

_____

4. What role did the apostles play in leading the early church?

_____

_____

_____

The apostles were chosen, prepared, and called by Jesus to be Gospel carriers, taking the message to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). They became the first church planters, traveling throughout the world sharing the Gospel and starting churches in city after city. The pattern was for them to preach the Gospel and to disciple these early converts before moving on to a new city. These churches needed leadership in their absence, so they appointed elders. Acts 14:23 says, ***"And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed."***

5. What qualities do you believe are required of an elder in the church?

_____

_____

_____

6. Read 1 Timothy 3:1-7. How does this list compare to yours?

_____

_____

_____

The role of an elder is a tremendous responsibility, which is why choosing one requires prayer, fasting, and guidance from the Holy Spirit. An elder is not just a person who has been around for a long time but one who is of high character, high regard, and spiritual maturity. He is involved in leading the church and serving on behalf of Christ, who is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18).

Peter describes elders as shepherds of the flock in 1 Peter 5:1-4, ***"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness***

of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

7. Multiple passages in Scripture point to the church being a flock and Jesus being the shepherd of the flock. What are some of those passages?

_____
_____
_____

The primary responsibility of a shepherd is feeding, or in this case, teaching. Every elder must be able to teach the Word of God, and when they do so, they do so with the authority of Christ.

8. How do you view a message in a worship gathering as the words of a man or the words of God?

_____
_____
_____

As preachers of the Gospel, elders have an anointing from God to share a message with God's people as God's words. An elder is to humbly seek to speak God's words, not their own, much less the words that people may want to hear. An elder is accountable to God and will give an account.

Hebrews 13:17 says, ***"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account."***

James 3:1 adds, ***"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."***

A measure of a preacher-elder is humility in life and speech yet a willingness to proclaim with boldness the convicting words of the Gospel. In a culture where people like to hold to their own version of the truth and desire a feel-good message, an elder must remain faithful to the message.

The second responsibility of a shepherd is protecting the flock from ***"wolves."***

Read Acts 20:28–30.

9. What are the ***"wolves"*** in today's church? How do you see elders protecting the ***"flock"***?

_____
_____
_____

In both duties, it must be remembered that the flock belongs to God, not to the pastor. God entrusts some of His flock to the pastor and elders of a church to lead, care for, and feed.

10. As members of the flock, how are we to respond to elders?

_____
_____
_____

In 1 Peter 5:5-6, we read, ***"Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you."***

As followers of Christ, we have all submitted ourselves to Christ's ultimate authority. A regular attendee of any church has submitted to the leadership of that church. Submission is an attitude of spiritual maturity and the process we all go through in seeking to be more like Christ.

The elders are the pastors, the spiritual leaders of the church. They are concerned for the deep needs of their people, not simply for what lies on the surface. The greatest way to support the elders is to pray for them and trust them. Please close out this time praying for the elders of The River Church.

NOTES

LESSON FOUR

JUDGING OTHERS

PATRICK BICKNELL

Judging people has become a hot topic between the church and the world. Many people over the course of history have been hurt by those within the church because they have felt judged, unloved, or ultimately pushed away. It may be because people do not live, talk, or look like them; therefore, it seems they do not deserve to come to church. It is wrong for us to judge people by a standard we are not willing to judge ourselves. Equally, it is wrong to even judge others for how they live when we think there is nothing wrong in our lives.

I have heard many stories of people who no longer go to church because they had an encounter with a Christian that they deemed was “judgmental,” and now they view the church as a group of people who are all judgmental. When it is done improperly, it can cause lasting hurt that leads people away from the grace and love of God that we so desperately want them to know. We are going to dive into this topic tonight as we study the Sermon on the Mount. As we talk about these questions, I would encourage you to be open and honest about how being judged has affected your life. This will help us to know what people feel like when they are judged in ways that are wrong and will help us to be more conscious of looking at our own actions first before we look at the actions of others.

1. Has there ever been a time when you were judged? How did that make you feel?

_____
_____
_____

2. Is judging always wrong? Does the Bible tell us to never judge anyone?

_____
_____
_____

Read Matthew 7:1-5.

This is one of the most known passages by people who do not truly know the Bible or follow Christ. It is often stated as a way of telling us that, as Christians, we are never supposed to judge, but is this true? Let us look at these verses and see if Jesus is teaching us that.

First, it is important to note that Jesus is giving a clear command of something we are not supposed to do.

Go back and read Matthew 7:1-3.

3. What is Jesus telling us not to do?

_____
_____
_____

4. Is He condemning all forms of judgment in these verses? Explain your answer.

_____
_____
_____

5. What are some ways that you have broken this commandment?

_____
_____
_____

6. Do you find it hard to ***"take the log"*** out of your eye? Do you find it hard to admit your faults first?

_____
_____
_____

Jesus is teaching us a clear lesson about judging people. He wants us to examine ourselves first before we go off and start judging others. It is very easy for one reason or another to judge other people who we think we are better than. We usually do it to make ourselves feel

better, puff up our pride, or any other number of reasons. We must fight against that and not judge the way others are living without first looking at our life.

Read Matthew 7:4-5.

7. What do you think these verses are teaching us about judging others?

_____
_____
_____

8. Do these verses allow us to judge others?

_____
_____
_____

9. Why is it important that we examine ourselves first before we judge others?

_____
_____
_____

The importance of examining ourselves first before we judge others cannot be stated enough. Judging others is not condemned in the Bible, only the heart behind how we judge others. If we judge others without examining ourselves that shows we are judging others from a place of pride rather than a place of humility.

Before we wrap up, let us look at some verses that help us see how we can examine our brothers and sisters in Christ in a healthy way.

Read Galatians 6:1-4.

10. What does ***"transgression"*** mean?

_____
_____
_____

11. When another follower of Christ is caught in sin, what are we called to do?

_____
_____
_____

12. Does this verse allow us to judge others? Why or why not?

_____
_____
_____

13. What does verse 4 tell us to do first before we examine another follower of Christ?

_____
_____
_____

The command to not judge others can make us think we are never meant to examine the lives of other believers and help them in their walk with the Lord. The truth is, if we really love them as ourselves, we are going to be examining their lives so that we can help them be watchful of falling into sin. However, we must first examine ourselves and make sure that if there is any sin in our lives that we know. We must confess and repent of it.

14. After going through this lesson, is there anyone you need to apologize to for judging them?

_____
_____
_____

15. Is there anyone you need to forgive for judging you?

_____
_____
_____

NOTES

LESSON Five

DISCERNMENT

GARY WRIGHT

My wife, Kim, works at Genesee Intermediate School District (GISD), working with special needs adults ages 18-26. A big part of her job is teaching her students job skills that they can use to secure a job once they have graduated. They go to businesses (job sites) to gain knowledge and experience in many different settings. Several years ago, my wife was working at the Humane Society with her group of students. Kim and I just happened to be looking for a house dog at that time. One particular day when she was working, a Shih Tzu was brought in. These types of dogs do not stay very long in the shelter, as they are adopted pretty quickly. Kim was there on the right day at the right time, and we were able to adopt this little dog, whom we later would name Hazel. She has been the best dog we have ever had! Wherever we are, she wants to be with us. If we leave the house to go somewhere, she begs to go too. She loves riding in the car. She is such a blessing to us both.

1. Do you have a pet? Share the story of how you got your pet.

_____

_____

_____

In Matthew 7:6, Jesus talks about dogs and pigs, ***"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."***

2. Do you think the dogs and pigs Jesus is talking about are pets? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

To understand this passage about dogs and pigs, we have to understand what Jesus is talking about. John MacArthur says this about dogs, "In biblical times dogs were seldom kept as pets. Except for those used as working animals to herd sheep, they were largely half wild mongrels that acted as scavengers. They were dirty, greedy, snarling, and often vicious and diseased. They were

dangerous and despised." If you come between a dog and its food, it will likely attack you. A dog would give no regard to holy things.

Pigs would not have been kept as pets either, especially by a Jewish person, nor would they have been eaten since they were considered unclean and nasty. Pigs, just like dogs, were considered wild animals. Pigs ate out of the garbage dumps and scavenged for food. A pig would not care about jewels; they would trample them under their feet.

Jesus is talking about pigs and dogs metaphorically. Jesus describes the dogs that He is referring to in Revelation 22:14-15, ***"Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."***

3. Who are those who wash their robes?

_____
_____
_____

4. What does it mean that those who wash their robes have the right to the Tree of Life, and may enter the city by the gates?

_____
_____
_____

5. According to this verse, who are the dogs?

_____
_____
_____

Now that we understand what the dogs and pigs are, we need to understand what the pearls that Jesus talks about are. Read Matthew 13:45-46, ***"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in***

search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

6. What is Jesus talking about when He is speaking of pearls?

_____
_____
_____

7. How does someone receive the pearl?

_____
_____
_____

Dogs and pigs are those who reject the Gospel. They have heard the Good News, but they love the things of the world more than they love the truth of God's Word. If you come between them and the worldly things they love (just like the wild pigs and dogs), they are likely to attack you. They may reject, tease, laugh, walk away, or treat the Gospel like garbage.

Read Matthew 7:6 again, ***"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."***

8. Is Jesus asking us to judge people before we share the Gospel with them? Explain your answer.

_____
_____
_____

Of course, we know that is not what Jesus is saying because we can look to other Scripture and know that we are to share the Gospel with everyone. Read Mark 16:15, ***"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.'"***

9. Who are we to share the Gospel with?

_____
_____
_____

What Jesus is asking us to do in Matthew 7:6 is to use discernment when we share the Gospel.

10. What is discernment?

_____
_____
_____

Jesus is not teaching us to judge people to see if they are worthy to hear the Gospel. He is telling us to share the Gospel with everyone; however, when people reject it, we are not to force it.

In Matthew 10:14, Jesus teaches His disciples how to use discernment when sharing the Gospel, ***"And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town."***

11. What were the disciples to do when people rejected the Gospel?

_____
_____
_____

Paul gives us an example of using discernment as well. Acts 13:46 says, ***"And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.'"***

12. Did Paul and Barnabas share the Gospel?

_____
_____
_____

13. What did Paul and Barnabas do when the Jews rejected the Gospel?

_____

_____

_____

Matthew 7:6 is a very hard truth from the Bible. When people reject the Gospel, it can be difficult to walk away, but when we do, we should not walk away in a self-righteous, judgmental way. In Luke 19:41-42, Jesus is approaching Jerusalem for the last time. Look how He responds to those who have rejected the Gospel, ***"And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'"***

14. How should we respond when someone rejects the Gospel?

_____

_____

_____

Even though sometimes people in our lives reject the Gospel, it does not mean that they will not be part of our lives anymore. We can still point them to Christ by how we live our lives. We should also be praying that God changes their hearts.

15. Who is someone that you need to share the Gospel with?

_____

_____

_____

NOTES

LESSON SIX

ASK, AND YOU WILL RECEIVE

PASTOR JOHN CARTER

Before we dive into the lesson, take a minute and answer this question.

1. What do you want? I am not talking in a general sense, but what do you really want more than anything else in the world?

_____
_____
_____

You may find a lot of different answers come up if you work through this question in a group setting. Some of the things that I can remember being a really big deal in my life as a student were the following:

• A particular car (4-door Jeep Wrangler to be specific)
• A relationship to happen (I had a crush in high school that I absolutely wanted to work out)
• A particular career (I was going big time and had it all worked out in my head)
• Certain painful memories to go away (I will not go into the details, but we all have them to some degree)
• To win at a certain game (basketball was my game)

There may be a lot of other different things you may hear in your Growth Community. There are also a lot of ways our culture tells us to pursue what we want.

2. What are some of the common (culturally speaking) ways you have heard to get what you want?

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_____
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Here are some things Forbes magazine says are good ways to get what you want:

• Be persistent
• Be waiting for your want to be fulfilled (this is a kind way of saying, "Just take it")
• Make yourself invaluable (this seems to indicate that you must promote "self")
• Make your gain the other person's gain (in this phrase, I hear, "It is okay to manipulate to get what you want")
• Stop apologizing or "don't give in" (it does not matter who you hurt to get what you want)
• Just ask

Now, I am not in any way recommending these as the method to get what you want. There is an interesting aspect to several of these cultural guides to answering the question, "How do I get what I want?" They almost all list the simple statement of, "Just ask." That might seem like really basic, obvious advice. To "just ask" seems almost too easy, but the reality is this simple thing is probably a bigger hurdle than most realize.

3. What is something you are afraid to ask for? (You might have more than just one thing. List them all.) Be sure to have fun with this question. There is something we are all afraid to ask for.

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Here are some things that might stir your thoughts:

• Asking someone out on a date? (fear of being rejected)
• Asking Mom and Dad for permission to do something? (fear of being told "no")
• Asking for help? (fear of looking ignorant or incompetent)

The passage we are going to look at today is in Matthew chapter 7. Jesus tries to teach us some of the things we have been already talking about.

Matthew 7:7–11 says, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"***

4. What are some of your immediate thoughts as you read this passage?

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I tend to be a skeptic, thinking, "Yeah, right!"

- Do you read those verses and start thinking of your wish list?
- Do you start to doubt the words of Jesus?
- Do you think these words are true, reliable, or dependable?

I do not know where you fall on the skepticism scale, but I tend to question everything. Sometimes, this skepticism is to my advantage and then other times to my disadvantage. How are we to take this seemingly confusing passage and make it make sense to us? It sounds like Jesus is saying, "I am a genie, just ask and you will get it."

The passage is broken into three main ideas. The first is to ask. The second is to seek. The third is to knock. This is all laid out in the whole sermon Jesus is preaching. It is called context, and it is a crucial part of understanding the who, what, and why of Scripture. If

we just took the one passage we read earlier, then we could easily incorrectly contextualize the passage to say, "Jesus is our genie and all we have to do is ask to get whatever we want."

First, let us look at the ***"ask"*** part of what Jesus is teaching. He says, ***"Ask, and it will be given to you…For everyone who asks receives."*** Earlier in Jesus' sermon, He teaches us exactly how to ask. Asking God is directly in line with how we pray.

Matthew 6:7–13 says, ***"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'"***

Several things pop out to me as I read this. There is the notion that there are people who pray ***"empty phrases."*** There are several ways to take this. One might even say that there are people who pray for empty things.

4. What might be something a person would ask for that is ***"empty"***?

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You will begin to see that the way we ask has very little to do with us and everything to do with God and others. For example, ***"Your kingdom come, your will be done"*** is not the same as "My kingdom come, My will be done."

5. What are some of the ways ***"your will"*** (God's desire) might differ from "my will" (your own desires)?

_____

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The whole point Jesus is trying to make is that when we start asking things according to God's will and His purpose for our lives, our priorities tend to change. When we start to focus our attention on "His Kingdom," the things we ask for tend to also be very different from the desires of "my kingdom."

The second point is about seeking. Let us see what Jesus teaches about this in His sermon. He said, ***"Seek, and you will find…The one who seeks finds."*** Earlier, Jesus said these relevant words in Matthew 6:31–33, ***"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."***

6. What are some of the things in your life that bring you anxiety?

_____

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We see Jesus teaching us where our priorities should be. Guess what? The things we are seeking are not any different than what we tend to ask for. Jesus is consistent with His teaching and points us right back to the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Righteousness means His good behavior.

The third subject Jesus mentions is the idea of knocking at a door, ***"Knock, and it will be opened to you…To the one who knocks it will be opened."*** It is not in the same message, but Jesus uses this same analogy in a different sermon. In Revelation 3:20, we read,

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

In all three subjects, Jesus is getting at the same core issue. It is an issue of our hearts. He is telling us the source of our needs, the place we are to be seeking satisfaction, and the door that needs to be opened to God.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus really hammered this home with one verse. Matthew 6:21 says, ***"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*** The last question that I really want you to focus on is this:

7. Where is your heart? Is it focused on "my kingdom" and "my will"? Are you knocking on the door of self? Or are you willing to let Jesus come into your heart and change your focus to "His Kingdom," "His will," and "His righteousness"?

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Go back to the list of wants and anxieties, and consider what Jesus is saying: ***"How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"*** There is nothing greater than the good things of Jesus. Jesus is the greatest gift of all. Consider how wonderful it is to have a Father who knows your needs and promises to take care of your needs.

NOTES

LESSON SEVEN

SECOND PLACE WINS

ZACH HONNEN

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 7:12

If any of you had a chance to go back in time to when I was growing up and take a sneak peek at how I treated my siblings, family, and friends, you would have seen someone who did not care whatsoever about anyone but number one! (I was number one, obviously.) Growing up, I remember demanding that others would put my feelings first, my opinion first, and themselves second. I was self-focused, self-centered, and self-absorbed. As you can imagine, when my parents introduced me to this text, I was not a fan. Go back and read this text again to really have it fresh in your mind.

1. What was your first thought after reading this passage from Matthew chapter 7? Was it positive or negative?

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2. Do you see this passage as really important or maybe not that important?

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Now, I want you to know that Matthew chapter 7 is probably my favorite chapter of the entire book of Matthew. There are so many awesome, deep, and mind-blowing passages in this chapter, and truthfully, verse 12 is one of those verses that I would often let slip through the cracks. It is a passage that is not mind-blowing like Matthew 7:21-23, ***"I never knew you,"*** or Matthew 7:24-27, ***"Built his house on the rock."*** However, Matthew 7:12 is so different to me, and it just has never seemed to catch my eye before. I believe the reason is that I do not like feeling called out. I do not like having to realize how much I still need to grow. I have a feeling that could be you as well. If that is the case, let us really look at this passage together and let God work, convict, and grow us through His word.

The goal of the Christian life is summarized in one beautiful and powerful sentence from the Westminster Confession of Faith, which states, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” Our goal as believers is to glorify God and enjoy Him. Another way to put it is to worship God and find our joy in Him.

Does that sound pretty simple? Well, this leads me to a question.

3. How do we glorify and worship God?

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It is helpful to look at another passage of Matthew to explore this deeper.

Matthew 22:36-40 says, ***“‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’”***

4. So what do you think? Do you see a connection here? (Take a moment to talk and see what you come up with.)

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One of the best ways to worship God is to obey Him. If we act like we love Jesus, but that love does not make its way to our neighbor, then we have nothing of value. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, we read, ***“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I***

am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

We can do many great things, powerful things, and amazing things, but apart from love, it is meaningless, pointless, and empty. Think about a friend coming to you and calling you out on something. If they come across as someone who just wants to be right and make you look bad, it does not go over well. However, if they come from a place of love, care, and humility and say the same thing in a different way, it becomes much more effective.

We are called to worship God and glorify Him through the way we live. That includes loving our neighbor as ourselves. Remember how I said I always put myself first when I was younger? At times, that mentality still comes and goes in my life now. To love my neighbor as myself is to put others before me. The love that I naturally have for my own needs, wants, and desires is the same love that I am commanded to have for my neighbor. I must become second, and God and others must be first. If I want people to be kind to me, I should be kind to them first. If I desire others to serve me out of love, I should first serve them out of love. Ultimately, to love others demonstrates the love of God, and when we demonstrate the love of God, we glorify God and find true joy in Him.

Here are some practical questions to take into consideration this week:

5. How can you demonstrate love for others this week?

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_____
_____

6. How do you prefer to be treated?

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_____
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7. How could you change your perspective on love for others?

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8. Who is someone you struggle to love? How can you purposely love them?

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9. How can you be better about putting others first?

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NOTES

LESSON EIGHT

NARROW GATE

CHRIS MONTVILLE

I am a huge baseball fan. I grew up playing and watching a lot of baseball. I love everything about the sport. I love to watch it and play it, and I would love to coach it in the future, Lord willing. I love baseball, regardless of what role I would be playing in it (almost). There is one person's shoes I do not want to be in: the umpire. The umpires have a lot of pressure on them. They have to make decisions quickly, and those decisions literally impact how the game will continue. When the batter has a full count, and they do not swing at the next pitch, deciding if that pitch is ball four or strike three is a big difference in the game! Because of this big responsibility, coaches and players are regularly upset with umpires when they disagree with their decisions. Basically, umpires get yelled at a lot.

1. What is the most upset you have ever seen a coach, parent, or yourself be at a referee or umpire?

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_____

I was an umpire for a few years while I was in high school, and I absolutely hated it. I really only umpired a handful of games, and the names I got called from coaches in that short time were not very nice! When a coach is upset at your decision, you basically just have to stand there and take it. If you back down from your original decision, you will lose all credibility to your calls from that point on! Umpires need to decide what they think and then stand on that decision, regardless of what comes of it, even in the face of doubt, even if you are not 100% sure of your call.

Let us take a look at our passage for today. Matthew 7:13-14 says, ***"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."***

2. What is the gate that Jesus is talking about? What do you think is meant by the ***"narrow gate"***? Why is it referred to as a ***"gate"***?

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3. Why is the way that leads to destruction ***"easy"***? Why is the way that leads to life ***"hard"***?

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4. Do you think you normally lean towards the ***"easy"*** way or the ***"hard"*** way? Why?

_____
_____
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We all have a natural desire to sin. It does not matter whether you were raised in the church, outside the church, in the jungle, or in a desert; it does not matter. We all have a leaning towards sin because of our sin nature that we were born into ever since Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the garden.

Romans 5:12 says, ***"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."***

5. What is our only hope to live free of this sin nature we inherited?

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Just a couple verses later, Romans 5:15-19 says, ***"But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And***

the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."

6. How does this passage relate to us being set free from sin?

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7. If we are set free from sin, why is denying sin still so difficult?

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I want to bring this full circle; let us go back to our example of umpires in baseball. As I said, they need to stand on their decisions (convictions) regardless of what is being said to them or the heat they have to take.

8. How does this relate to us and our walk with Christ?

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9. Have you ever had to make a difficult decision to stay on the narrow road?

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_____
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If you answered “yes” to the previous question, I encourage you to talk about it with a leader or even another student. We, as the church, are not meant to walk through those moments alone. The church is designed to build each other up and encourage each other. Allow others to hear your story and encourage you. On the flip side, if you answered “no” to the previous question, that is okay! I will say this: as students, there are a lot of life experiences left for you to face. I promise you, that moment will come. Every person has had moments like that in their life, and as you approach high school, college, or work, I promise you will be presented with those moments, and they will be difficult. I also will tell you that you will most likely feel like you failed at times. All of your leaders have failed at times in these moments in their past as well. Here is the key piece - lean on your church family.

Ultimately, this is what it boils down to, ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”*** (Hebrews 11:1).

When it seems like there is no decision to make except the ***“easy”*** way that leads to destruction, and yet we choose to stay on the ***“hard”*** way that leads to life, that is faith, and it is by that faith that we strive to enter by the narrow gate, through the work Jesus has already done for us.

Hebrews 12:1-2 adds, ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”***

10. Who do you need to invite to walk that narrow road with you or who might need you to walk with them? How can you lean on your church family? How can they lean on you?

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NOTES

LESSON NINE

BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS

GARY WRIGHT

1. Tell me about a time when someone lied to you. How did it make you feel?

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If there is one thing that annoys me more than anything else, it is when I am lied to. I have two children, and when they were growing up, I always taught them to tell me the truth, then we would deal with whatever it was, good or bad. I would love to tell you that my kids always told me the truth, but that would be a lie. Both of my kids lied to me at times when they were growing up. It was very hurtful to say the least. Honestly, it made me feel like they did not trust me enough to be honest. I had a hard time trusting them after they lied to me.

Last week, Jesus taught us the truth about two directions we can go in life: the wide gate or the narrow gate. Jesus said the wide gate is the way that leads to destruction. It is the way of the world, the gate that leads to Hell. Jesus also taught about the narrow gate. It is the way to life, the gate that leads to Heaven. Jesus invited us to enter that narrow gate through faith in Him.

Today, we are going to learn from Jesus that there are not only teachers and preachers who point us to the truth of the narrow gate but there are also liars who try to lead us astray and point us to the wide gate. Matthew 7:15 says, ***"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."***

2. When you hear the word ***"beware,"*** what comes to mind?

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3. What does Jesus mean when He says that the false prophets are in ***"sheep's clothing"***?

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4. What does Jesus mean when He says on the inside of these false prophets are ***"ravenous wolves"***?

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The false prophets were pretenders. They pretended to be one thing on the outside, but on the inside, they were the complete opposite. They were liars. Instead of leading people to the truth of the Gospel, they were leading them towards the wide gate. Jesus goes on to explain how to recognize a false prophet. Matthew 7:16 says, ***"You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?"***

5. Jesus says we will recognize false prophets by their fruits. What is the fruit that Jesus is talking about?

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The good fruit Jesus is talking about only comes from putting our faith in Jesus. Acts 2:38 says, ***"And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"***

6. What do we receive when we put our faith in Jesus?

_____
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When we receive the Holy Spirit, He changes us. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, we read, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."***

Romans 12:9-21 adds, ***"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."***

7. List some fruit that we should see in a Christian's life.

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_____

Jesus continues teaching about good fruit. Read Matthew 7:17-20 ***"So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will recognize them by their fruits.***

8. Do both healthy and diseased trees bear fruit? What kind of fruit do they bear?

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_____
_____

9. What do the healthy tree and the diseased tree represent?

_____
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_____

10. How do we recognize false prophets and teachers?

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_____
_____

If someone has entered the broad gate of life, they do not know Jesus as Savior, and they are the unhealthy tree that Jesus is talking about. Those who have not put their faith in Jesus cannot produce good fruit. On the other hand, those who have entered the narrow gate have put their faith in Jesus and are the healthy tree. Once they trust Jesus as Savior and receive the Holy Spirit, their lives will change, and they will bear good fruit. Warren Wiersbe puts it this way, “The way of life is narrow, lonely, and costly. We can walk on the broad way and keep our baggage of sin and worldliness. But if we enter the narrow way, we must give up those things.” Jesus is warning us about false teachers, and this statement can be applicable to our own lives as well.

11. Have you entered the narrow gate? Have you put your faith in Jesus?

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_____
_____

12. If you have put your faith in Jesus, what has your faith in Jesus cost you? What are some things in your life you need to let go of?

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_____
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13. How has your faith in Jesus changed you? What kind of fruit are you producing? Does your life resemble Romans 12:9-21?

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The false prophets were liars; they were pretending to be something that they were not.

14. Are you living one lifestyle around your church friends and a different lifestyle around your worldly friends? Are you a pretender? A liar?

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At the beginning of our study, I told you that when my children lied to me, I had a hard time trusting them afterward. If you are a pretender or a liar, how will your unsaved friends and family believe in the transforming power of the Gospel when it has not transformed you? Proverbs 14:5 says, ***"A faithful witness does not lie, but a false witness breathes out lies."***

NOTES

LESSON TEN

I Never Knew You

PATRICK BICKNELL

One time, when I was driving to Florida with my family, we had to stop at a gas station to use the restroom. For those of you who do not know, I have a very small bladder, which means this stop was probably because I needed to use the bathroom (please do not make fun of me). Anyway, as we were getting back onto the highway, something stood out to me that absolutely blew my mind. We were getting on the ramp to get on the highway, and this ramp went right by the ramp to get off the highway. The ramp that was getting off the highway had these two signs that said, “WRONG WAY: DO NOT ENTER.” That made sense; they should warn people not to go on the wrong ramp. However, what stood out was that down this specific ramp, there began to be more and larger signs that read, “WRONG WAY: DO NOT ENTER.” I thought to myself, how in the world could someone enter the wrong ramp and get that far down it and not notice any of these signs? Surely, the warning was not good enough.

1. Have you ever seen any comically huge warning signs that have made you laugh? (Maybe I am the only one who notices these in the world.)

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We are going to talk about a warning that Scripture gives us in Matthew 7:21-23. Many people describe this passage of Scripture as one of the scariest to them. I do not want to scare you all with these verses tonight. Rather, I want it to be a warning for us to use this time to examine our hearts before the Lord.

Read Matthew 7:21-23.

This passage can spark a lot of emotions as we read through it. I want you all to know that it is okay for Scripture to scare you sometimes, although that is not my intent tonight. It is important to study all of the scriptures, even the ones that may seem scary to us.

2. What kind of emotions does this passage spark in you?

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_____
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3. Why do you think that you are feeling some of those emotions?

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4. After reading these verses, do you think someone can lose their salvation?

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I want to tackle a misconception that is often thought of when reading these verses. It is the idea that someone can lose their salvation. People will try to take this verse out of context and say that Jesus is teaching that we can lose our salvation by one means or another. They will say that when He says, ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven,"*** it shows that someone may have been saved in the past, but can lose their salvation if they do something wrong.

This passage is not teaching that claim. Jesus is using a technique that He has used in the few verses before it. He is giving us a contrast between two groups of people. There are the many who are going the wrong way and the few who will truly follow Jesus. What Jesus explains to us, is the people who will be cast away from Him are those who were never truly saved. We can notice that in their response in verse 22.

Read Matthew 7:22.

5. What is their reasoning for why they should get into Heaven?

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_____
_____

6. Is their reason for getting into Heaven based on their own works or what Jesus did for them?

_____
_____
_____

What Jesus is trying to teach us is that it is not about what "good works" we have done in this life. None of those can save us. Those who come to Jesus at the final judgment, who think they are truly following Him, will say, "But Jesus, we did so many things for you!" His response will be, ***"I never knew you."***

Read Isaiah 64:6 and Romans 3:20.

7. According to Isaiah chapter 64, what are our ***"righteous deeds"*** like to God?

_____
_____
_____

8. Why will works not save us?

_____
_____
_____

The warning Jesus is giving us in this passage is that we need to truly know who Jesus is to be saved. It is not about what we can do, how many good deeds we can perform, or how good of a person we are. Even if we supposedly do works in Jesus' name, it is not enough. It is not about our actions. It is about knowing Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

9. What does it mean to truly know Jesus?

_____
_____
_____

10. What has Jesus done to save us?

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At the end of Matthew 7:21, Jesus says, ***"But the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"*** will enter the Kingdom of God. What, then, is the will of the Father? Jesus tells us in John 6:40, ***"For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*** God wants us to know, believe, and surrender to what Jesus has done for us. Truly knowing Jesus is believing that He died on the cross for our sins, rose again, and that He is the only way we can have salvation and eternal life.

Read a couple of other verses that talk about what Jesus did for us.

- John 14:6
- Ephesians 2:8-9
- John 3:16-17

11. Do you know Jesus this way?

_____
_____
_____

12. If you were to stand before God, how would He respond to you? Would He say, ***"I never knew you"*** or ***"Well done, good and faithful servant"***?

_____
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I hope these verses do not scare you, but I also want every single one of you to know Jesus as your Lord and Savior. If you are here and unsure how Jesus would respond to you if you were to stand before Him tonight, then I would encourage you to talk to one of your leaders about following Jesus right now. His grace is free, and it is here for anyone who comes to Him and puts their faith in His finished work.

NOTES

LESSON ELEVEN

"BUILD YOUR HOUSE"

PASTOR FERDINAND SANDERS

Imagine if I were to challenge you and your group to build the tallest Lego structure. In this scenario, I am giving every group ten minutes to build. At the end of the ten minutes, I will be going around to everyone's structure with a leaf blower. The winner of this competition will be whatever group's structure remains the tallest after I get to wreak havoc with the leaf blower.

1. Given the criteria of the competition, what would your strategy be to come out on top?

_____

_____

_____

I do not know if Lego played as influential of a role in your childhood as they did in mine, but I really cannot think of anything that I can immediately sink all of my focus, attention, and a few hours at a time into like I can with Lego. A few years ago, my parents were cleaning out some things from their house. I nearly demanded that the large collection of bricks find their way into my car to take home "for my kids" to play with. Building freely from my imagination was a lot of fun and led to some pretty incredible creations. However, I am not sure that it can compete with the satisfaction of placing the last brick in place after diligently following each step, page after page, from the instruction booklet.

2. When it comes to Lego, what team are you on: "Free Build" or "Follow the Booklet"?

_____

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I do not know about you, but I know that there have been many times in my life in which I have thought, "I do not need the instructions for this. I can figure it out." Although it may require more work and closer attention to detail, the times that I actually sit down and follow through with what the instructions say, the end result is better in every sense of the word.

3. Have you ever tried to build or accomplish something without using the instructions? How did it go? (It does not have to just be Lego).

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Today, we are continuing our study of Jesus' words recorded in the book of Matthew, known commonly as the Sermon on the Mount. At the end of chapter 7, Jesus gives one final parable to the gathered crowd.

Matthew 7:24-27 records, ***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."***

4. Summarize in your own words the lesson that Jesus is communicating here.

_____
_____
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5. What do you think Jesus is referring to when He uses the metaphor of building a house?

_____
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My guess (or hope) is that none of you said that Jesus was offering a free lesson in home construction. Though Jesus was a carpenter and would probably have been qualified to speak on the matter, the

message here goes way deeper than taking His words simply at face value. The way I see it, there are a few different factors at play in this parable. Upon reading this passage, we see two very distinct paths. They are building our house on the rock or building our house on the sand.

6. What differences do we see in Matthew 7:24-25 and Matthew 7:26-27?

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7. Why might it be tempting to build our ***"house on the sand"***?

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8. What additional things might be required to build your ***"house on the rock"***? (You can answer this literally or figuratively.)

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No matter what it is in life, getting the job done properly is going to require something. There are no shortcuts here. Reading this passage makes me think of a saying that is often used when building something, "Measure twice, cut once." This saying is certainly helpful when cutting wood, but the principle can be applied in many aspects of life. Oftentimes in life, when we try to take shortcuts or bypass necessary steps in an attempt to save time or effort, we end up creating even more work for ourselves. In life, things are not always as small as building with Lego, nor are things always as big as building a house. However, the truth remains that these principles are applicable to each decision we are faced with.

9. What similarities do we see in Matthew 7:24-25 and Matthew 7:26-27?

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I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge something that I do not think was included by accident. In both scenarios, there was great rain, floods, and wind that crashed against these houses. The Bible is very clear about two things. First, we will face trials and tribulations (great trouble or suffering) in this life. However, more importantly, through Christ and Christ alone, we can know true peace, joy, and hope despite any of the trials and tribulations that we will face. Christ is the rock or the foundation that we are to build our house (our life) upon.

10. What "storms" are you facing right now? (If you feel comfortable to share, I greatly encourage it.)

_____

_____

_____

11. In the midst of these "storms," are you confident that Christ is your foundation? (Do not move past this question unless you are sure!)

_____

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Earlier in this lesson, I said that getting the job done properly is going to require something. We just looked at how we will face trials, and earlier, we talked about how building our house on the rock may require some different, additional, or intentional work or effort. What I want to be clear as we conclude this week's lesson is that despite all of our efforts or the things we do, when it comes to our salvation, nothing can take the place of giving our life to Christ. At the end of our life, no amount of work or things that we do or

accomplish will save us; only Christ can do that. At this moment, if you are unsure if you have a relationship with Christ or that Christ is the Rock or foundation of your life, I strongly encourage you to have a conversation with your leader or student director.

I will build my life upon Your love
It is a firm foundation
And I will put my trust in You alone
And I will not be shaken.

"Build My Life" - Pat Barrett

NOTES

LESSON Twelve

Jesus' Authority

Pastor Keaton Washburn

1. How do you feel about going to the dentist? Do you look forward to going or dread it? What is the worst experience you have had at the dentist?

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Not too long ago, I was dealing with some pain in one of my teeth. I tried to avoid it and ignore it, but it continued to get worse. Over the course of a couple of weeks, I gradually started to chew less and less with that side of my mouth. I knew that something was wrong, but I did not want to deal with the potentially painful steps that the dentist would take to fix my tooth. This went on for about six weeks before I finally caved and told my wife about it. She was immediately concerned and had me schedule a dentist appointment to get it checked out.

2. What are some things that you avoid doing for as long as possible? Why do you put them off?

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Whether it is a chore, homework, or a dentist appointment, there is something about putting things off that comes naturally to some people. For me, I put off the dentist for as long as possible because it is uncomfortable, and I do not like getting the numbing shot in my mouth. With homework or chores, the temptation is to put it off because there are more enjoyable things you could be doing with your time, like hanging with friends, playing video games, or watching YouTube.

As we wrap up our series in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we have read and studied His words on judging others, doing to others as we want done to us, the fruit of the Christian life, building your life on the rock, and many other topics. Many of these teachings are difficult to live out, but Jesus knew that when He taught them.

Grab your Bible and turn to Matthew 7:28-29. Read those verses together as a group.

These two short verses are where we are going to spend our time today. These are not words spoken by Jesus, but they are inspired words that Matthew wrote to conclude the Sermon on the Mount.

3. What do those verses say the reaction of Jesus' listeners were? What seemed different about Jesus' teachings compared to what they were used to?

_____
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4. Take a minute and think about this before you answer. When was the last time you were ***"astonished"*** at something? What was it that you were astonished at? (If you are not sure what it means to be astonished, choose someone in your group to look it up quickly.)

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_____
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5. Is astonishment an emotion you experience often? Why or why not?

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_____
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I believe that if we had heard the sermon from Jesus' mouth like His original hearers did, we would have had the same reaction. The thing about astonishment, though, is that it often sticks with someone for a while. They are not quick to forget what they saw or experienced that astonished them. Like an image burned in your mind, it sticks with you.

When I was in elementary school, one of our "specials" was computer class. In this class, we went to the computer lab (the

room with all of the computers), were each assigned a computer, and learned things like how to type correctly, how to build a website (once I got to high school), or how to use computer programs like Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. At my school, we had these old computer monitors; they were about a foot thick (no joke!). There were a couple of these monitors that, no matter what you had on the screen, had a logo that would not go away, blocking most of the screen. These were images that someone left on the screen for a long time that were burned into the screen. This is the mental picture I have of what true astonishment does. It burns the image or experience into your mind.

6. What Bible verses are burned into your mind? When did you first learn them?

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_____
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7. Why might it be important to memorize Bible verses? What benefit is there in having verses memorized?

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Colossians 3:16-17 says, ***"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."***

The ***"word of Christ"*** is the entire Sermon on the Mount, but it is also all of Scripture. Paul is writing here in Colossians, telling his readers to know, understand, and memorize God's Word. He knows that it is one of the most powerful things that a Christian can do to fight temptation and have the peace of God that Paul talked about in the verse right before this one (Colossians 3:15).

8. How much time and effort would it take for you to memorize one verse this week? Do you think that is worth the time and effort?

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Coming back to our original passage in Matthew 7:28-29, which says, ***"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 their scribes."*** There is one aspect of Jesus' authority we will explore before we conclude. When someone takes the authority of another seriously, they listen to and carry out the requests of that person. To accept Jesus' authority is to live out His teachings.

Like me putting off going to the dentist (where I ended up needing a root canal that was not very fun!) is there something in Jesus' teachings that you have been putting off? Take a couple of minutes and look over the last eight lessons on the Sermon on the Mount. Is there a decision you felt convicted to make but instead put it off? Is there a sin that God revealed to you that needs to be confessed? Is there something that you have been building your life on that needs to get torn down? Is there something that you have been nervous to ask God for?

9. Choose one reflection from the last eight weeks and share it with the group. How can your Growth Community support you in that?

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Jesus did not command His followers to live in a certain way just to make their lives difficult. As our Creator and Designer, He knows what is best for His children and has experienced it firsthand in His 33 years as a human.

NOTES

LESSON THIRTEEN

SAME GOD

PASTOR FERDINAND SANDERS

Growing up, it felt like every few years a similar cycle would happen. Someone claimed that they “knew” that on a specific date, the “world would end.” Maybe there was nothing better for news and media outlets to talk about, but these people and their stories would gain a bit of a viral following. This would last until that predicted date came and passed. Then, they fell into irrelevance. As far as I am concerned, despite these claims, the world has not, in fact, come to an end. It seems like it has been a while since something like this occurred (maybe it happened between the time I wrote this and you reading it).

1. If someone were to make such a bold prediction, what would your immediate reaction be?

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Before we really jump into the lesson today, I would like to strongly encourage you to have a physical Bible with you. If you need to pause to go find one or ask a friend or leader, please do so. There will be a lot of passages to look up this week. I know that you could easily use your phone to look up these verses, but for this week, I request that you try to use a physical Bible.

If you are anything like me, I am sure you have had moments in which you have thought about how difficult certain parts of the Old Testament are to read or relate to. You may have even wondered what purpose certain books or passages serve or why they were included in the full, complete Bible (Canon). When we think of Christianity, Church, and the Bible, we think of Jesus and God. That is not entirely a faulty thought process; however, the temptation would be to think that the narrative of the life of Jesus is solely a “New Testament” thing. I am sure we have all fallen into a similar thought process. One of the most unique and incredible things about the Christian religion is how this narrative story is not simply folklore or just recorded historical events. It was prophesied 700 years before the birth of Christ.

2. What does it mean to know that the birth of Jesus was prophesied 700 years in advance?

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There are a number of different appropriate responses. For one, it speaks to the level of validity or credibility of God's Word and of Christianity as a whole. Secondly, it gives me hope and a sense of purpose knowing that God has a grand, master plan that is way higher than we can even begin to understand. Another thing that it does is that it connects all of God's Word together. The Old Testament and New Testament are not two different stories, but makeup one collective narrative of the redemptive story between God and humanity through Christ. In this lesson, we are going to look at the prophecies that were fulfilled through the birth of Christ and discuss their significance.

3. As a group (or own your own), discuss the quantity as well as the depth of details that you think were prophesied and recorded prior to the birth of Jesus.

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One of the most foundational prophecies we have is from Isaiah, one of the major prophets of the Old Testament.

Read this prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14.

We see this fulfilled in the Gospel of Matthew. Read Matthew 1:18-25.

4. What foundational prophecy do we see filled in the Matthew passage?

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Not every prophecy that we see pertaining to the birth of Jesus gives us a profound theological framework for our faith. What blows me away is that even some 700 years in advance, prophecies pertaining to the specific location and the cultural climate of Jesus' birth were fulfilled.

Read Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:4-6.

5. What is the importance or significance of having these details prophesied and recorded?

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A number of prophecies throughout the Old Testament that were fulfilled by the birth of Jesus can be traced through genealogy. You might be asking, "What is genealogy?" It is likely the chapters or passages of Scripture that we just skip to the end of (insert winky face emoji). Listen, it is okay, we have all done it. There is no requirement to have all of the genealogy memorized. It will not be on the quiz. However, it does serve a purpose. Take a look at the genealogy of Jesus provided in Matthew 1:1-17.

6. Why might it be easy to want to skip over reading through the genealogy that is provided in Scripture?

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We are going to get a second look at the genealogy but in a slightly different format. Rather than just a list of names, take some time

to look up and read the following passages in reference to Jesus' lineage.

- Genesis 12:1-3
- Genesis 26:2-4
- Genesis 28:10-15
- Genesis 49:10
- Isaiah 9:6-7
- Isaiah 11:10

7. What are some common themes or threads found in these passages?

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By taking a closer look at these passages from the Old Testament, you begin to see God's presence, faithfulness, and blessings beginning with Abraham, to Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Jesse, and David. They all lead to Jesus. These are big and important names in Scripture, and all come with their own stories and lessons, but today we are focusing on how they play a part in the grander story of Christ.

8. As you have been looking up these verses in your Bible, has anything stuck out to you?

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By now, you might be saying, "Wow, this is a lot of back and forth." That is the point that I want you to understand. By flipping back and forth from the Old Testament to the New Testament, you have been going back and forth 700 years of God fulfilling His promises by sending His son Jesus to Earth. I could have easily copied and pasted these verses, or you could have easily looked them up on your phone, but I wanted you to go through the physical turning

of pages. To me, this is an incredible reminder of God's plan and faithfulness spanning through the generations.

9. Do you view God as the same God from the beginning, throughout Scripture, and still today? What makes it hard to see that He is the same God?

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Do not put your Bibles away just yet; there is one last prophecy fulfilled that I want to end with (Do not roll your eyes). We started by looking at a pretty foundational prophecy that was fulfilled, and I want to make sure that we are ending with one.

Look up Jeremiah 31:31 and Matthew 26:28.

This prophecy was not technically fulfilled by the birth of Christ (although, you could argue that it would not have happened without the birth of Christ). However, just as the string of events that would lead to His crucifixion was about to unfold, Jesus began to tell His followers that there would be a new covenant through His blood. It is the way in which our sins would be wiped away and the only way that we could be made right with God. This is a foundational truth that I want to make sure is understood.

10. How does having an understanding of these prophecies shape our view of God today?

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NOTES

LESSON FOURTEEN

VIRGIN BIRTH

PATRICK BICKNELL

One of the more well-known facts about Jesus is the story of His virgin birth. Even if you have not grown up in church, odds are you have heard how Jesus was born of a virgin. I would be willing to bet if you went and walked on the street and asked people if they had heard of the virgin birth of Jesus, nine times out of ten they would say, “Yes.” However, it is one thing to know about the story, and it is completely different to believe. Even going a step further than that, just because many people have heard it, does that make it true? Does the majority of people knowing a story happened mean that it actually happened? In our groups tonight, we are going to be discussing the topic of the virgin birth and talking about whether or not it actually happened and what that means for us.

1. Do you believe the virgin birth of Jesus actually happened?

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2. What convinces you that the virgin birth actually happened?

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These last few weeks, our student Growth Community lessons have centered around the idea of apologetics. Apologetics is simply defined as making a defense for different aspects of the Christian faith. This means that we answer the questions, “Did this actually happen, and how do we know that it is actually true?” In regards to the virgin birth, that is what we are going to try to discover, and hopefully, this can help you all as you tell people about Jesus and defend the faith to those who do not believe. First, let us look at the story of Jesus’ birth from Scripture.

Read Luke 1:26-35.

3. Why might this story seem hard to believe?

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4. What makes this birth a miracle?

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5. What do you think was going through Mary's mind after this interaction?

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This is the story that we are starting with. This is what we believe happened. We do not believe it was made up. We believe that our God does miracles, and we believe that the birth of Jesus was one of these miracles. Through this miracle, the world received the Son of God, who would end up going to the cross to die for our sins and rise on the third day. Every time we hear, sing, or read of the birth of Christ, we should rejoice over how amazing it is that God came to the Earth for us!

However, I do not just want to say we believe it and call it good. I want to look at two different places to show evidence for why we believe this happened. There are more than just these two pieces of evidence, but these are the ones we are going to look at tonight.

Read Isaiah 7:14.

6. Why is this verse important to the story of Jesus' birth?

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_____
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7. Do you think this verse is talking about Jesus?

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_____
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8. If this verse is talking about Jesus, does that make the story of His virgin birth seem accurate? Why or why not?

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The prophet Isaiah wrote about this prophecy hundreds of years before Jesus had even been born. He spoke about what the Lord was telling him, and he foretold that one day, God would send His Son to be born of a virgin. Now, I do not know about you guys, but if someone predicts an event to happen hundreds of years prior, and then it actually happens, I would tend to believe that person's claims. Fulfilled prophecies, as you talked about last week, are one of our major points of evidence for the Christian faith. The virgin birth of Jesus was not just something Mary made up to get out of trouble for being pregnant out of wedlock; rather, it was foretold it would happen hundreds of years earlier by someone she never knew or talked to.

Now, let us look at the second piece of evidence.

Read Matthew 1:18-25.

9. Did Joseph believe Mary when she first told him that she had conceived a baby by the Holy Spirit?

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_____
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10. What convinced Joseph that Mary was telling the truth?

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11. Why do you think the way Joseph responded provides us with evidence that the virgin birth actually happened?

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I thought it was interesting when studying this topic and found that an apologist (someone who does apologetics for a job) said that Joseph's response was a piece of evidence for the virgin birth. He says this about Joseph, "He was aware of how marrying Mary would mar his reputation for the rest of his life. So why did he go on and marry her? Only one reason makes any sense at all. He knew the truth. He believed the message from the angel and that it was the absolute truth. Mary was indeed a virgin who was bearing in her womb the Son of God conceived by the Holy Spirit." He knew this to be the truth. If he did not believe it, he would have left Mary. However, he was convinced it was the truth and decided to live with them despite what people may say about the situation.

The virgin birth was necessary for many reasons, such as Jesus needed to be born a man so that he could die in our place for our sins. However, another reason I want to look at briefly is found in Hebrews chapter 4.

Read Hebrews 4:14-16.

12. How does it make you feel knowing that Jesus understands the weaknesses we go through?

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13. What are some other reasons why the virgin birth of Jesus was necessary?

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I want to end with this quote by John MacArthur, “Mary’s virginity protected a great deal more than her own moral character, reputation, and the legitimacy of Jesus’ birth. It protected the nature of the divine Son of God… Jesus had to have one human parent or He could not have been human, and thereby a partaker of our flesh. But He also had to have divine parentage or He could not have made a sinless and perfect sacrifice on our behalf.”

NOTES

LESSON FIFTEEN

DECEMBER 25TH

PASTOR KEATON WASHBURN

1. When is your birthday? Do you have a favorite birthday tradition?

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_____
_____

2. When is Christmas? (not a trick question) How do you feel about the month leading up to December? Are you a fan of the festivities?

_____
_____
_____

3. What is one of your favorite Christmas memories? (Favorite gift, fun experience, or a specific time with family)

_____
_____
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Christmas is a time for gifts, family, and traditions. As you probably know, though, the real reason for Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ, when humans were given the best gift possible. That gift is eternal life with the Lord in Heaven. There are many people out there, though, who do not care about the real meaning of Christmas or even outright deny it. We will spend time today looking at the evidence for Jesus' birth and life, ultimately seeing why we can believe that Jesus really is the reason for the season.

4. Do you think Jesus was born on December 25th? Why or why not? What theories have you heard about the date of Jesus' birth?

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The date that we celebrate Christmas was probably not the actual date of Jesus' birth to Mary. While no one knows the exact date, we are going to look at some of the history and facts.

The first mention of Jesus' birth being celebrated on December 25th comes about 300 years after Jesus' earthly life in the Roman calendar. While we do not know exactly how Christians celebrated it before then, there are some historians who point to a Roman festival called Saturnalia, and Christians celebrate Jesus' birth during it to try and "Christianize" the festival. In Egypt and Asia Minor, for years (and some still to this day), many Christians celebrated Jesus' birth on January 6th, pointing to the date they believe the Wise Men (Magi) brought gifts to lay at the feet of Jesus.

While we do not know the exact origin of the Christmas celebration, we do know that if God wanted us to know the exact date of Jesus' birth, He would have made it clear. This should give us comfort in celebrating Christmas on December 25th. As long as Christmas is actually about Jesus, there is nothing wrong with celebrating it on December 25th.

5. Does your family do anything special on Christmas to remember the birth of Jesus?

_____

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For a couple of years, when I was a kid, my parents had us read the first half of Luke chapter 2 before we opened our presents. While it felt like the right thing to do, my siblings and I rushed through it as quickly as possible to try and get to the gifts, while my parents reminded us to focus on Jesus instead of the presents. My parents were onto something there. They were trying their best to keep the focus on Jesus even in the midst of the gift-giving.

Even though we do not know exactly how Christians celebrated the first Christmases, we do know much about the first Christmas. Jesus' birthday (the one where He was born) came without the cake, candles, and gifts that we are used to. Let us look at some of the facts.

Read Luke 2:1-7.

6. What are the circumstances surrounding the first Christmas?

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Verse 7 tells us that after Jesus was born, Mary ***"wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."*** In most of our minds, that would mean that Jesus was born in a barn outside of the town. The homes at the time, though, were pretty small, with one room upstairs and a lower level where the animals were kept. It would have been in this lower level with the animals where Jesus was born and laid in the manger. It would have been in town but on the lower level of a home with the animals.

Read Matthew 2:9-12. Use context clues to figure out who is the ***"they"*** in this passage.

7. What was their response to Jesus' humble birth? How was this birthday different from a typical birthday party?

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This event is one of the keys to the history of Christmas. If you remember from earlier, this is one of the key dates that Egyptian Christians used to celebrate (and some still do) Christmas.

8. How does such a long history of Christmas add to the importance of it? Is tradition something your family values?

_____
_____
_____

9. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of tradition?

_____

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While the Bible tells us the details about Jesus' life and birth, there are a lot of outside sources that back it up as well. One of the most respected historians of the time, Tacitus, talks about a group of followers of Christ, which he called "little christs." He says that this took place during the reign of Tiberius. Luke 3:1-3 coincides with this saying, ***"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee…during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."***

This comes later in the Christmas story. It is years later, but it adds to the historical evidence of Jesus' life and birth. These verses recount the life of John, whose birth and life is very intertwined with Jesus' life and birth. This is just one evidence of the historians of the day lining up with what the Bible also said.

So, this Christmas, we join Christians in continuing a celebration of Jesus' birth that has been taking place for almost 2,000 years!

Close your Growth Community time out tonight by singing Happy Birthday to Jesus! (Just kidding!)

NOTES