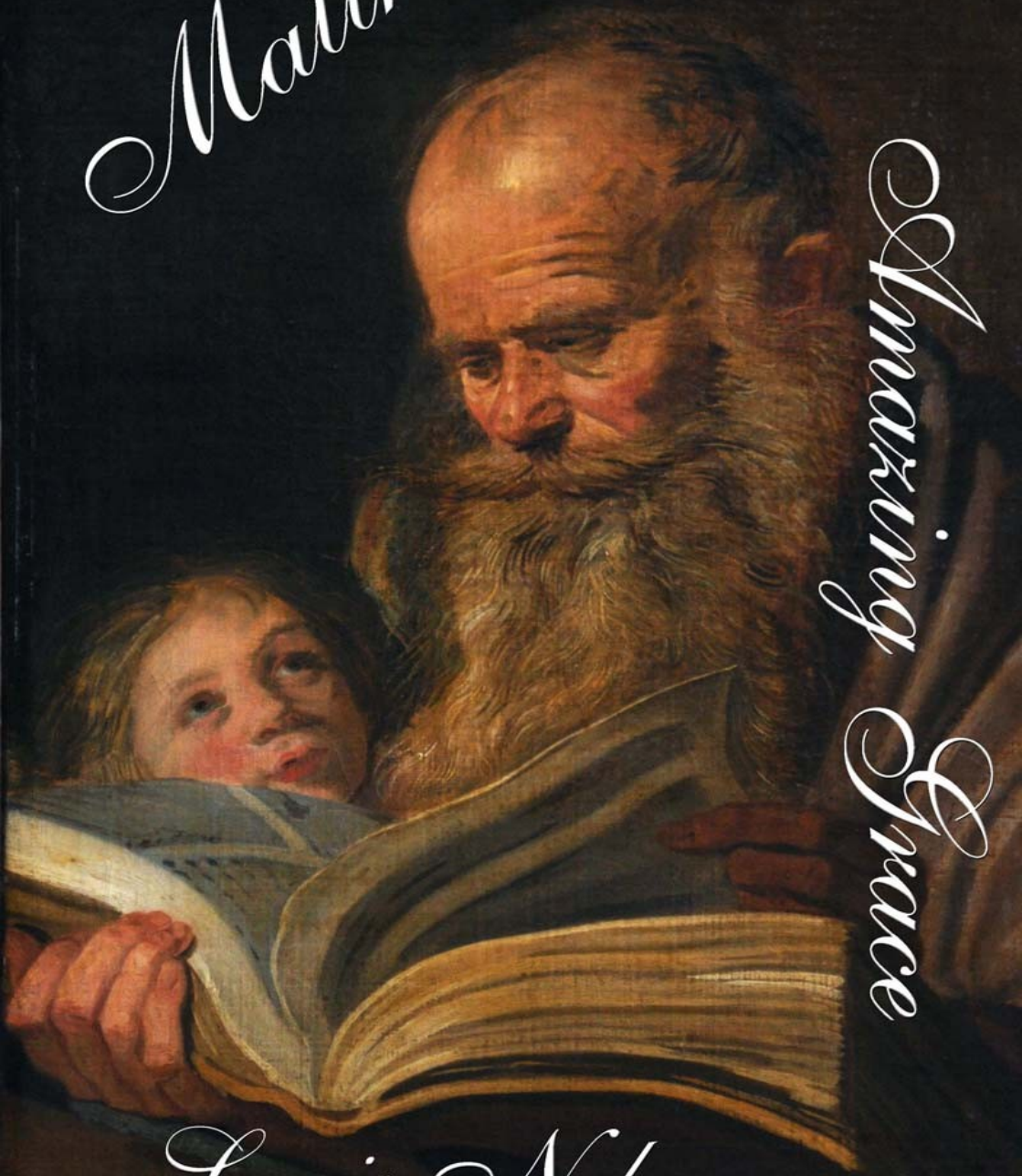


Matthew

*Amazing
Grace*

Louis Nel



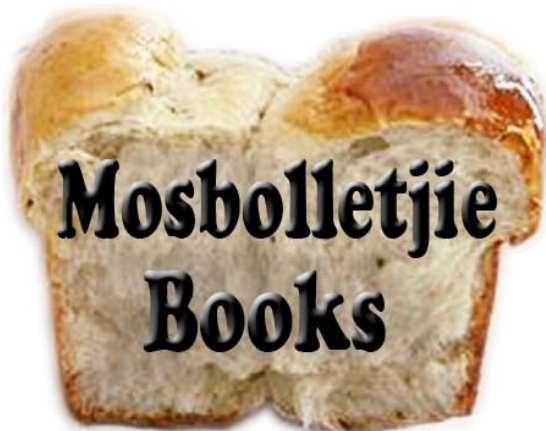
Matthew

Amazing Grace

Louis Nel

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Contents

- 1.** Introduction
- 2.** The Genealogical Registry
- 3.** God-With-Us
- 4.** Follow That Star!
- 5.** False and True King
- 6.** Attitude of the Heart
- 7.** Submit Yourself
- 8.** Survival and Victory
- 9.** Galilee of the Gentiles
- 10** Mission Task
- 11** The Greatest Sermon of All Time
- 12** To be Salt and Light
- 13** True Meaning of the Law
- 14** Chastity and Adultery
- 15** An Eye for an Eye!
- 16** Love for Your Enemy
- 17** Give without expecting anything in return
- 18** In Conversation with God
- 19** That's we Pray
- 20** God's Kingdom
- 21** My Daily Bread
- 22** Forgive me, Lord!
- 23** To be Fasting
- 24** Don't Worry
- 25** Doing Good to Others
- 26** Perseverance and Paradise
- 27** House on the Sand Dune
- 28** Love in Practice
- 29** How to Follow Jesus
- 30** Storm at Sea

- 31** Terror in the Cemetery
- 32** Complete Healing
- 33** A Feast with Sinners
- 34** Please Hurry!
- 35** We Can See!!!
- 36** The Harvest is Great
- 37** Sent Out to Harvest
- 38** Persecuted for Your Faith
- 39** The Needle in the Haystack
- 40** Critique
- 41** Judgment and Redemption
- 42.** Laws and Traditions
- 43.** The Smoking Lampwick
- 44.** The Deadly Sin
- 45.** The Goose and the Slingshot
- 46.** The Old Haunted House
- 47.** Jesus' Family
- 48.** Sowing Without Ceasing
- 49.** Hear and Do
- 50.** Come Sow Together!
- 51.**Weeds and Flowers
- 52.**Mustard and Yeast
- 53.**The Kruger Millions
- 54.**Miracles
- 55.**The Head on the Platter
- 56.**Food for a Massive Crowd
- 57.**Walking on Water
- 58.**Traditions
- 59.**To Nag God
- 60.**More Bread
- 61.**Yeast

- 62.** The Keys to Heaven
- 63.** Dark Night!
- 64.** Glorifying Jesus
- 65.** Miracles and Faith
- 66.** Temple Tax
- 67.** The Little Ones
- 68.** Caring for Each Other
- 69.** Complete Forgiveness
- 70.** Marriage and Divorce
- 71.** Rich People and Heaven
- 72.** Unjust Reward!
- 73.** To Serve
- 74.** Two Blind Men
- 75.** The Great Entry
- 76.** The Temple Cleansing
- 77.** Believer's Prayer
- 78.** A Willing Sinner
- 79.** The Vineyard
- 80.** The Wedding Feast
- 81.** Taxation
- 82.** Is There Truly a Resurrection?
- 83.** The Great Commandment
- 84.** To Be Jesus for Someone
- 85.** Pride and Humility
- 86.** Hypocrites!
- 87.** When Will Jesus Come?
- 88.** The Signs of the Times
- 89.** Be Vigilant
- 90.** Sufficient Oil
- 91.** Talents are risky!
- 92.** Before the Judgement Seat
- 93.** Prepared for Death

94. The Passover Meal

95. Holy Communion

96. Night of Terror

97. Fearless Love

98. Guilty!

99. Peter's Fall

100. Repentance - Too Late?

101. Jesus Barabbas or Jesus Christ?

102. Mocked

103. Jesus Is Crucified

104. God Forsaken By God

105. Jesus' Burial

106. He Truly has Risen!

107. Sent Out

1

Introduction

The Book of Matthew

What must I do to be saved, to go to heaven? Simple: Believe in Jesus! However, God goes further: the Holy Spirit even gives me the necessary faith! So, actually I do absolutely nothing! After all, we sing: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." No man can earn his own salvation.

However, we must be very well aware that this grace of God is certainly not cheap. Jesus paid dearly for it! We must never take

it lightly! However, Jesus warns in Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven."

Matthew therefore has a message for you and me that challenges us to do the will of God. The question is: how do I do the will of God? Can I just sit back and say "God's grace is enough?" We find an example of God's will in Matthew 28 where He gives the order to carry the Gospel to all the nations. It means working hard physically in His Kingdom. His command to love one another

has several implications. It's not just a passive "I love you", but it means that it goes into action. He gives the example of the good Samaritan.

Matthew's message is that three things are essential, namely to believe in Jesus, to confess His Name, and to maintain a way of life that shows that I have indeed received that grace from God. It must be a way of life of doing what God asks of me. By living like this, I prove that my faith is not just lip service, but that it is real!

What was Matthew's purpose with this Gospel, and when was it

written? Matthew did not see the light of the first Gospel, and even less is it the first New Testament book that was written. All of Paul's letters were already written before Matthew. Mark was probably the first complete Gospel. Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source along with another unknown writing that was lost. So he relied on other writings and then, around 80 AD. wrote his story. However, it was much more than just a duplication of a story.

If we look at the strong Jewish character of the book, then you come to the conclusion that it was probably written in Antioch for the

large number of Jewish Christians in that city. These believers still followed the law carefully, unlike for example the Greek believers, and therefore Matthew places a strong emphasis on living the law.

A direct answer is not given as to why Matthew wrote this book, but we soon realize that this is not just a book about the history of Jesus. It is something much bigger. In the first place, we see how Matthew deals with the term "church" and "congregation". He already sees the birth of the church in his baby shoes during Jesus' ministry.

It is necessary for us to know that

Matthew writes Jesus' story from the background of the congregation where he lived and worked as a writer. It was therefore not only a historical story, but it was current for his congregation's own situation and needs. The emphasis was strongly on his congregation's circumstances. They therefore had to discover answers to their own problems and circumstances from the story of Jesus and His disciples.

Today this book must be read in exactly the same light as the people of 80AD. read it, and discover answers to our

contemporary problems and circumstances from this story.

But it was all seen from a human point of view. If we remember through all this that Matthew wrote this book under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we cannot help but realize that it is actually God Himself who wrote this book, just like all the other books in the Bible. He uses ordinary people and inspires them to write so that those writings are absolutely timeless, just as God is timeless. It leaves one in awe when you read a story that was written 2000 years ago at a time when technology was not even a

word. And today in our times of technological explosion this book is still fresh and new. Perhaps today we do not see the problems of Matthew and his congregation, but we read our own problems and circumstances in this.

I therefore want to invite you to walk through this book with me and look at it with an open mind and new eyes. Let's open our hearts to what the Holy Spirit wants to say to us in 2023 through this inspiring book from the year 80!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for Matthew who obeyed Your voice and wrote

when You gave him that
command. Make me also
obedient to Your instructions for
me today.

2

The Genealogical Registry

Matthew 1:1-17

If you wanted to write something for Jews about a prominent Jewish person, it would only be right to first reproduce his genealogy so that your readers could at least know where the person comes from and who he is. Thus Matthew also begins his story with the genealogy of Jesus in order to properly introduce him to his readers. They wanted to know where He came from and exactly how His family was put together. "How boring!" most people would say. What could be

interesting about a long list of names? But I want to invite you to look at Matthew's list with me. I guarantee you some very interesting, maybe even shocking facts!

He starts with Abraham, a very good place to start, because Abraham was a very deep believer! However, if you dig a little deeper in Abraham's closet, you come across some gruesome skeletons! Like the time when he introduced his wife as his sister to the pharaoh, and caused great trouble. Later he repeated this trick on several occasions (Gen. 20:13).

However, Abraham was also the father of the entire Arab world. His first son, Ishmael (by the slave girl) later made war against Abraham's other descendants. And today, thousands of years later that same war is still going on! How ironic, that the Jews as well as the Arab peoples, who are mainly Muslims, reject Jesus as Saviour today!

The next big name on the list is Jacob, also known as the Deceiver. Even the pagan judge, Pontius Pilate, had to admit that there is no deception in Jesus. Therefore, the name of the deceiver, who even stole his own

brother's inheritance, is pertinent in His genealogy, so pertinent that the entire Jewish nation is named after him: Israel. He got this name when he wrestled with God in the Jabbok river.

A Jewish genealogy usually contains only the men's names. However, Matthew does something unheard of, and he includes four woman's names as well. The first one is the very interesting name of Rahab. But wasn't she a prostitute? And on top of that, another Canaanite, a heathen! How then can Jesus come from the lineage of such an unfortunate person?

However, it gets even worse, because the second woman's name is that of the shameful Tamar who seduced her own father-in-law and had sexual intercourse with him!

But there are also pagan women in this genealogy, such as the Moabite woman, Ruth, the grandmother of King David.

And speaking of David, the fourth woman's name is not even mentioned. She is only described as "the wife of Uriah" to rub in the shame of David's adultery. By the way, Bathsheba was a Hittite woman. What makes matters even worse is the fact that that

very big name in Jesus' lineage, David, not only committed adultery, but also had Uriah killed in cold blood in order to get Bathsheba.

What do I read in these names? Jesus is irrevocably committed to the ordinary sinful man! Jesus did not come to this world only for the Jews, because if that were the case, we might today label His mission as a failure because so few Jews follow Him. However, Jesus came for the whole world. We see this clearly in the last chapter of Matthew, where Jesus' commission is to carry the Gospel to the wider world. In the second

place, I also see that Jesus did not only come for the "holy" people, but for sinners, even prostitutes, adulterers, frauds and murderers. Indeed we see Him hanging on the cross in His last moments, where He acquits a convicted robber. The man would still be in paradise the same day!

Who is this Jesus that Matthew writes about? Why should I be His follower? And what does He expect from me as a follower? Matthew will answer these questions for us in the next few chapters.

We have already seen how human-bound Jesus is. But there

is another side of Him that Matthew touches on in this genealogy, namely His Divine. The Divine planning of Jesus' birth is very subtly contained in verses 16 and 17, where Joseph is not called Jesus' father, nor is Mary His mother. Joseph is called "the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus, who is known as Christ, was born." From this we see that Jesus has no earthly father or mother, and this implies His Divine character. Furthermore, the Divine intervention in the planned ordering of history is emphasized when Matthew mentions the three times fourteen generations from Abraham to

Jesus' birth.

What is locked up in this passage for me personally? Of course I know that Jesus is God. After all, I've been learning it all my life, and as such I can worship Him. However, this passage brings me as a person much closer to Jesus, and I can bring my weaknesses, my sin, my humanity to Him. Even long before His birth, He already had to do with this, and He knows everything about it. There is no one more qualified than Him to help me with that!

Prayer:

Lord, I can never thank and

praise and worship You enough
for all the grace You show me.

3

God-With-Us

Matthew 1:18-25

Where Matthew begins his story with a long genealogy, his description of Jesus' birth is short but to the point. But don't be fooled by its brevity, because these few verses involve so much that volumes have already been written to try to explain it. This short pericope has also caused heated debates, and people simply cannot agree on its meaning.

To begin with, over the past 2000 years there has already been an

argument between the Jews and the Christians about the quote in verse 23: "Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel." Matthew read this prediction in Isaiah 7:14, where it is written: "Therefore my Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, the young woman is with child, and is about to give birth to a son. She will name him Immanuel." Christian believers agree with Matthew that this quote points to Jesus being the Messiah. The Jews say: "Never! You don't know what you're talking about! It's Sacred Knowledge!" The question is, did Isaiah ever have Jesus in

mind when he wrote it? The answer is simply: NO! But that is a conversation for another day!

Furthermore, the Catholics and the Protestants do not agree on verse 25, whether Mary remained a virgin, even after Jesus' birth? The orthodox and liberal Christians also do not agree whether we can draw conclusions from this passage of Scripture about the virgin birth of Jesus.

And all the time we miss the entire message of Matthew completely! We stare so blindly at the bones of contention that we do not hear what Matthew wants to tell us at all. Matthew's

message from these verses is contained in the Name he links to Jesus, namely Immanuel, which means "God-With-Us". For Matthew it is so important that he repeats the thought several times throughout the Gospel that this book begins with this thought and ends with exactly the same thought in 28:20: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of time." Matthew thus frames his entire Gospel with this thought, as it were.

But why is this so important to Matthew? With this he wants to say that Jesus was not just a figure from the past. For example,

he was not someone like David, who was indeed a hero, and now had to receive honour for what he did. On the contrary, at the time when he wrote the story, 80 years after His birth, Jesus was still just as relevant and just as present as at the time when the story took place. Indeed, Matthew implies that today, 2000 years later, Jesus is still just as present as he was then! Jesus guides us, His church on earth, today personally. If we understand Matt. 28:20 correctly, it is exactly the same Jesus who spoke to His disciples that day, who is present here with us today. Actually even so much better, because in the meantime

He ascended to heaven to receive there the position of honour at God's right hand, and therefore it is no longer the Man, Jesus, who is bound to earthly limitations, but the Almighty Jesus, Creator of the heaven and earth, who is with us today!

In this pericope we also see something of Matthew's view on the law, and its obedience. When Joseph realizes that Mary is pregnant, he is faced with a very big dilemma: Dishonour! The world will think that he has caused great disgrace. But he knows that he is innocent, and that he certainly did not break the

law of Moses. Was Maria unfaithful to him? He decides to break the engagement, as the law provides when there has been infidelity, to hide the shame.

For God, however, it is so important that He tears open the sky, as it were, and sends down His heavenly messenger to persuade Joseph to other insights. So the angel comes and talks to him and explains what is happening. Josef is convinced and he decides not to break off the relationship, even if there are people who have all kinds of things to say about him. The law was here to Joseph, not about a

legal rule, but about something much bigger. His own spotless reputation is put on the line to live out the true meaning of the law.

Over the next 33 years, Jesus would repeatedly demonstrate this rule. He would "bend" the law or even break it completely to make way for the living out of its true meaning, namely love. He would often get into trouble for this with the ringleaders. Their frustration was so bad with His new interpretation of the law that they sought His death, and finally got rid of Him cruelly. But they didn't keep step with Immanuel, God-With-Us, because barely

three days after He was wiped off the face of the earth for good, He was back again - this time in glory to be here forever!

Prayer:

Lord, we can pray to You today and talk to You because You are Immanuel, God-With-Us. Thank you for your great mercy!

4

Follow That Star!

Matthew 2:1-12

When you hear the words "Star of Bethlehem", your heart just jumps a little extra, because it evokes memories from your childhood. Maybe it was a Christmas performance, where you participated as a child. Or maybe the final decoration on the Christmas tree, the star that Dad hangs on the tip of the tree with his long arms. But it also captures your imagination, because you try to form a picture of the three wise men running after a star. How is this possible? By the way, it is a

myth that there were THREE wise men. Nowhere does the Bible tell us this. We just drew our own conclusions!

However, Matthew's story goes much deeper than a star and wise men. He paints for us a tremendous contrast in the story. First these men meet the false king, Herod the Great in his luxurious palace, surrounded by his advisers. A little while later they meet the true King, Jesus, where He lies in the simplicity of a stable, and where it certainly does not smell so pleasant. Herodus bakes beautiful buns under false pretenses. He

supposedly wants to pay homage to that new King, but actually he is trying to find out where Jesus is so that he can get rid of Him. On the other pole, God who sends His Son out of love, not to come and damn people but to save them from death.

The core of the story is the wise men who come to pay homage to Jesus, the Son of God. Isn't it ironic that God uses pagan magicians to pay tribute, while the Jewish scribes and national leaders, and also King Herod want to kill Jesus.

But who were these "wise men" and how did they get a star

following? They were stargazers from somewhere in the East. We can really only guess, but they may have come from Persia (today Iran). There were men who occupied themselves with very deep things about life, man and nature, and this was accompanied by the state of stars, sorcery and such things. In Judaism they actually had a bad name, but in the rest of the world their prestige was very high.

There are also many theories about the star they followed. It probably had a very long run-up with the alignment of planets and possibly even the eclipse of a

planet. The end may have been a comet that led them to Bethlehem. Natural phenomena? Maybe so, but already millions of years before, God planned it to work out exactly right.

It was the year 5 BC when the final sign appeared for these stargazers, a sign they had been waiting for. The Babylonians were the leading mathematicians and astrologers, and they knew of the Jewish belief that a star would announce the coming of the Messiah. The path followed by the star or comet would lead these men straight to Bethlehem, where it would be visible in the

early morning in the South. It was probably visible for 70 days, also about the time it would take to travel from Babylon to Bethlehem.

I can imagine how excited those men were when this special star made his appearance! For three years they watch with bated breath the changes in the stars and planets. Their superstition about the movement of planets and stars suddenly shook inside them, when they saw something supernatural happening. Perhaps they spent nights speculating and reasoning about what was happening. And the excitement when a comet finally appeared

three years later that confirmed all their calculations. How disappointed they must have been when they came to Herod and saw his hostility. He did tell them that he also wanted to pay tribute to the new King's Child, but they could see right through his hypocrisy that he did not mean what he said at all. And then that heart-pounding excitement when the comet led them to Bethlehem, and they found the Child there in the stable.

Matthew, interestingly enough, does not see these magi in a negative light, but he tries to

show that the elite of paganism at the time recognized Jesus as king. And this while Herod and all of Jerusalem were deeply troubled by the same event. God prepares praise for the Messiah from the actions of simple shepherds who slept somewhere in the field near Bethlehem (Luke's version), as well as pagans who follow His star over long distances. And this while His own people, especially the church leaders, showed absolutely no understanding. Thirty years later, Jesus said to these Jewish leaders: "Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of God rather than you" (Matthew

21:31).

And me and you? Do we give to Jesus, the true King, the One who rules at the right hand of God - do we give Him the honor He truly deserves?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, together with the wise men I also want to pay homage to You this morning. I want to praise and praise You with everything that is within me.

5

False and True King

Matthew 2:13-23

Matthew gives a brief description of three events shortly after Jesus' birth. In two of the cases there are angels who bring messages and the third time a dream with a command from God. So we see that God is in full control of the situation. There are some very strange decisions that are made, for example why is Joseph fleeing to Egypt? And when he returns to his native land, why does he settle in Nazareth of all places?

Egypt played a very important role in the history of Israel. Joseph was the first prominent Israelite with Egyptian ties. He started his career there as a slave and then ended up in prison for a few years. He then became prime minister of Egypt at exactly the right time, so that his family could be saved from the looming famine. It is precisely in Egypt where that single family lives so prosperously that they finally become a people to be reckoned with. Egypt was therefore a place of refuge for the Israelites in times of need. The baby, Moses is protected here by the Pharaoh's daughter when her father

massacres the boys. He gets his education in the royal house, where the foundation is laid for his exceptional leadership to lead the people to the promised land years later.

Time and again we read throughout history of persons fleeing to Egypt when some great danger threatens. It is therefore not at all unusual that Joseph flees to Egypt precisely when the angel comes to warn him!

Herod the Great was king over Israel at the time of Jesus' birth. He had then already sat on the throne for 37 years. Herod was an extremely clever and cunning

ruler, notorious for his cruelty. He even had his own son executed! Herod was physically a very strong man, and he impressed the Romans very much with his cunning methods of collecting taxes and bringing wealth to Rome. He even robbed David's tomb, and thus antagonised the Jews. He had a exotic taste in architecture, and his buildings were very impressive. Unfortunately, he built all kinds of exotic things, such as theatres and amphitheatres, which promoted Greek and Roman philosophies, and at the same time greatly upset the orthodox Jews.

But he also rebuilt the temple into a magnificent piece of architecture, thereby regaining the Jews' trust. His life was characterized by cruelty, murder, jealousy and lust for power. One of the last atrocities was the infanticide Matthew writes about. He died in the year 4BC. From this we can naturally deduce that Jesus was not born in the year Zero, but probably in 5BC, since Herod was still alive during Jesus' birth.

After the news of Herod's death, Joseph decided to return to Israel, but only after an angel once again instructed him to do

so. However, Herod the Great was succeeded by his eldest son, Herod Argelaos, a man who learned well from his cruel father, and had a terrible temper. During a Jewish uprising, he was once responsible for the death of 3000 Jews, and so he once again antagonised the Jews. No wonder Joseph decided to live in Nazareth in Galilee instead. At least he wasn't there under Herod's rule! However, it happened again after a dream with a command from God. Nazareth was widely known as the place of the gentiles, i.e. the heathen. It is also interesting that the Christians in Syria, where

Matthew's congregation possible was, had the nickname of Nazarenes.

The terrible contrast we see in history between the earthly kings of the time and the true heavenly King is noteworthy. Cruelty, jealousy, greed, theft, murder and lust for power were characteristic of the Herod family. They were so obsessed with their own lives that they even killed each other!

This is in stark contrast to Jesus, the true King, who was humble and whose life was characterized by love, selfless self-sacrifice, sharing, healing and even resurrection from the dead. There

was no question of lust for power. He did not live in magnificent palaces like the Herods. In His last three years He didn't even have a house to stay in, and He probably had to spend most of the time in the veldt with His disciples.

With His life, He also set an example for each of us. How do we follow Jesus' example? No, it is certainly not necessary for a present-day believer to live as Jesus lived. But He explained to us through parables and sermons, such as the breathtaking Sermon on the Mount, which principles are

important in your life. Not to slavishly follow the law, but to see what the true meaning of the law is. The one great ideal that Jesus spelled out is love. The Herods had absolutely nothing of that, except self-love. Love for God in the first place and love for your fellow-man. That understanding is all-encompassing.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for sending the true King to not only save us from sin, but also to teach us how to truly live!

6

Attitude

Matthew 3:1-12

Matthew is still telling about Jesus' birth, when he suddenly jumps to John the Baptist, thirty years later, almost as if it happened at the same time. Matthew actually wants to connect John's actions inextricably with those of Jesus.

John was a very straightforward man, and he said exactly what he thought, without mincing matters. It would end up costing him his life! However, John was so serious about his message that

he did not hesitate for a moment to say what he believed to be right. Even the king and the church leaders were not spared his tongue! Despite his painfully straightforward message the Jews flocked to him, and people were converted in great numbers!

Why were so many people flocking after John? There was certainly a hunger for true, undiluted religion, and John offered them something that the scribes could not offer.

He preached somewhere in the desert of Judea, and his appearance was rugged. His clothes were made of coarse

camel hair and there was an impressive leather belt around his hips. But the worst part was that he lived on locusts and wild honey! It must have made them think of the picture they carried in their minds of Elijah, a prophet who had also spent a long time in the desert. Here was a true man of God!

John gripped the people so much that even the church leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees came to see what he was doing. However, John saw through their motives, and told them exactly what he thought of them: "You snakes!" he scolded them. They

were really just there to look religious but were they ever really willing to fix what was wrong in their lives? When Jesus comes into your life, you must show through your way of life that He has truly become part of your life. If your acts of love towards God and your fellow-man do not become visible, then it means that you were not serious when you gave your heart to Him.

I was once seriously criticized for writing that it is only necessary to accept Jesus to gain eternal life, and that you do not need to keep the law at all. The person was very upset, and asked if it is then

right that one can just go and sin as one feels like it? Indeed she was absolutely right! But first allow me to qualify my statement: No law-keeping will ever bring you salvation! Only the precious blood of Jesus, in other words believing in Jesus, can give you salvation. BUT, that day when Jesus comes into your life, there must be a radical change of heart in you. Now you will stop sinning, and your life will become a joy, not because it can earn you salvation, because Jesus has already earned it on your behalf! You do it out of gratitude for God's great mercy upon you. Your life must show that you were really

serious about your decision to follow Jesus. It can't just be a decision you had to make because people expected it of you. James put it so aptly: "What good does it do if someone believes, but his actions do not confirm it?" James 2:14

This is exactly what John said to the church leaders: they were only there for appearances, and their lives did not show that they were serious at all. Indeed, the law is not important for your salvation, but the law is extremely important in the eyes of God, and He wants us to keep the law. However, there is a huge shift in

emphasis, because it is no longer a long list of do's and don'ts that you have to slavishly follow, but rather an attitude that is written in your heart!

Jesus summed up the whole law by saying that it is about love, first of all love for God but at the same time also love for your fellow-man. If you really love God, then you will honour His Name and throw out the idols in your life. Then it is no longer a law, but an attitude. If you love your fellow-man, you wouldn't want to hurt him in any way! Whether it concerns his possessions, his good name or in whatever way. In

fact, if you truly care for your fellow-man, you will go out of your way to shower him with love, with kindness, care, hospitality and much more. Then it is no longer a law, but a way of life!

This is exactly what John meant. For the church leaders of that time, it was only about the observance of laws at all costs and not about the right heart attitude and way of life. Despite the fact that they had them baptized, they were later furious with Jesus, and eventually had Him killed. They had Him nailed to the cross innocently!

Is it love?

The question is, what does the attitude of my heart look like? For what reason do I go to church and do good to others? Is it to look better to the world? Or is it truly a life of gratitude that bubbles from deep out of my heart?

Prayer:

Lord, please cultivate in my heart the right attitude towards You and my fellow-man!

7

Submit Yourself

Matthew 3:13-17

How do you submit to the will of God? It is natural for humans to resist submission. My military training many years ago was where I simply had to submit to the authority placed over me. If the sergeant said "Jump!" then you jumped, whether you wanted to or not!

However, God's authority works completely different. It is not a hard, unapproachable authority, but something gentle that encourages you to want to do

what He asks of you! Then you submit joyfully to His authority.

In the story that Matthew tells us today, it also has to do with the acceptance of authority. John the Baptist was baptizing people. In the previous verses, we saw how he preached that people should repent of their sinful lives. As a sign of God's forgiveness for their sins, they had to be baptized to be symbolically washed clean. He also told them that he himself was actually just the forerunner, and that someone much greater than he would come. He was, as it were, just the sign-post to this One!

One day, while John was baptizing people at the Jordan River, a great dilemma suddenly arose for him. Jesus appeared from Galilee and went straight to John with the request that he baptize Him. John immediately realized who he was dealing with, that it was the sinless Son of God, the Messiah. If he were to baptize Jesus, it might imply that Jesus did have sin. John felt very inferior because Jesus was holy, and he would much rather have Jesus baptize him. How could he be so "arrogant" as to want to baptize the Holy One of God? John tried to talk himself out of this situation, but Jesus had to let

God's will be done. John had no choice but to submit to the will of God and give in to Jesus' request!

Should we read in this that Jesus did have sin that needed to be "washed away"? Absolutely not! It is terrible even to think such a thought! Jesus was the first and only man who was completely without sin!

What then was the purpose of this baptism for Him? He wanted to fully identify Himself with sinful man. He, the Creator God, the absolutely sinless one, now had to be humbled to submit to the will of God, a thought that is completely incomprehensible to

me as a insignificant human! Over the next three years, His disciples had to learn from Him how important it is to submit to God's will. This often put them in very difficult situations that sometimes made them blush. It is not easy to submit to God's will, something that Jesus' disciples had to learn the hard way. But they had a Teacher who was willing to carry this thought through to the bitter end and even practically demonstrate it to them.

To walk the full path as a child of God to be obedient to His will is difficult, but it is certainly not impossible, and it also does not

mean that you have to do it with a long face. It certainly also does not just involve suffering! On the contrary, I can testify today that it brings you unprecedented joy of life. Jesus had already experienced this joy when He took the first step to submit to God. After John baptized Him, heaven opened and God Himself spoke from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." At the same time, the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit, descended on Jesus like a dove and equipped Him for His huge task. After this, He went into the wilderness for forty days of isolation.

The Lord has a task for every believer to perform. However, I have a choice whether to accept it or not. If I accept it, it is the first step in doing His will. He also wants me to do it wholeheartedly, not half-heartedly. To do so, I need to submit to His will. Perhaps you are struggling with such a task that the Lord is asking of you today, and you are afraid. He only asks you to declare yourself willing to do what He asks. The wonderful thing is that when you say "yes," He will give you all the equipment you need. The Holy Spirit will give you all the power and wisdom you need. He is truly an inexhaustible

Source! However, this does not mean that you can just sit back and do nothing about the matter, and that wisdom will fall into your lap. On the contrary, He wants you to bring your side of things, but then put your full trust in Him and at the same time fully submit to Him. Believe me: it's worth it through and through!

Prayer:

Lord God Almighty, I want to fully submit myself to You again this morning. Holy Spirit, please equip me with strength, wisdom and willingness!

8

Survival and Victory

Matthew 4:1-11

She sits with her hands in her matted hair crying. She is thirsty and craves a delicious, juicy burger and a tall glass of cold drink. Actually, she longs for anything edible or drinkable, as long as it's not a locust or mopane worm, because that's what she had to survive on for the past few weeks!

It all started when she asked as a military officer to do a survival course with the men. It was unheard of, and the brass

refused, but she was determined. Eventually they gave in, but it was a mistake, a very big mistake! She was stripped of all her possessions, even her toothbrush and clothes. She had to make something out of a springbok skin to cover her body. Yesterday she found water where an elephant had made a deep track in the clay soil. There was a little water in the track, probably from a rain shower the previous week. The problem was that there was also a piece of dung in the same track. She picked up the dung and lapped up the dirty water tastily. Now she feels sick just thinking about it...

All she asks for is a hairbrush to smooth out this matted mess on her head! She envies the men who are doing the course with her; at least they have short hair!

This is the story of a friend of ours who was in the military years ago. Her recommendation after this traumatic experience was that it is definitely not intended for women! This is exclusively a man-thing!

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness has caused many people problems over the centuries. First of all, it has been asked how it is possible that Jesus, who is God Himself, can be tempted by the devil? He has

no sin, does He? Did He ever experience these temptations as genuine? In today's modern skepticism, other questions arise, such as how it is possible that Jesus could survive for forty days in the wilderness without eating anything. How did He get on the temple roof without anyone seeing Him? Where was that mountain that was so high that He could see all the kingdoms of the world? Wasn't it all hallucinations because He hadn't eaten? These are all legitimate questions!

The fact is, however, that we simply don't have answers, but

such questions lead us away from the true message of this pericope. We want to see the devil playing a major role in this story, but actually, even that is not true! He actually has a minor role. To understand the story, we must see it in the light of the preceding section where Jesus was baptized with the Spirit. This story then illustrates practically how Jesus as the Son of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, overcomes the devil through His total obedience to the will of the Father. The devil's role in this story is only to highlight Jesus' obedience. We also see that Jesus answers each time from

the Scripture, which not only confirms that as the Son of God, He lives fully in the will of the Father but also sets an example for us of where we should look for answers when temptations threaten our lives.

With the first temptation, the devil tried to exploit Jesus' hunger by saying that it is easy to perform a miracle and turn stones into bread. This would have completely defeated the purpose of Jesus' wilderness experience, as he wanted to confirm his total dependence on God. If he gave in, it would be like someone on a survival course testing their

perseverance, and when hunger pains strike, they pull out their phone and order a pizza and half a dozen beers to be delivered by helicopter in the woods where they are struggling.

With the second temptation, Jesus could have spectacularly jumped off the temple's roof with angelic support, thus proving his Messiahship to the world. He could also have come down unharmed from the cross, but that was not why he came into the world. He came to perform an act of redemption, and he would carry it out to the bitter end!

With the third temptation, the

kingdoms of the world seemed attractive to him, but once again he resisted, because ultimately all the kingdoms would belong to him anyway. But now he had a task to fulfill, and he dare not deviate left or right.

How does this event affect us today? First and foremost, we must realize who is truly in control. It often seems to us as if the devil is firmly in the driver's seat and everyone is dancing to his tune. However, Jesus is still Lord! He has overcome the world and the evil one, and with this knowledge we can find courage for all the temptations that come

our way every day. Indeed, Jesus has walked the path of obedience to the will of God and, in doing so, has not only set an example for us, but has paved the way for us to do it in his power. All we need to do now is to follow in his footsteps and follow Jesus.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, that today we can know that you have already overcome the devil, and that we can live in the power of your victory!

9

Galilee of the Gentiles

Matthew 4:12-17

Jesus' forty days in the desert had come to an end. Physically exhausted from all the hardships, but spiritually strengthened for the enormous, totally inhuman task that lay ahead of Him.

For us, it is often incomprehensible how Jesus was a normal human being with ordinary human limitations and needs during that time. But at the same time, He was also God. How these two elements were interwoven is far too great for our

human understanding. We clearly see how His human nature comes to the fore. He experiences temptations like any other human being. He experiences hunger, pain, sadness, frustration, and anxiety like you and me. But then the Divine often shines brightly through.

In human terms, the time in the desert prepared Him for what awaited Him so that He could take up His task with self-confidence. But then the tragic news comes that His predecessor, John, has been imprisoned by Herod. This

prompts Jesus to decide not to stay in Judea any longer, but to begin His ministry in Galilee. He leaves for Capernaum where He settles. There He continues John's preaching by proclaiming the message of repentance. After all, the Kingdom of God had come near! None of the people who listened to His preaching truly realized how close it was.

But why Galilee in particular? Although many Jews lived there, it was traditionally a non-Jewish area. It was predominantly Gentiles who lived in Galilee. Matthew describes it as "Galilee of the Gentiles" in verse 15.

Jesus thus leaves the strictly Jewish Judea and preaches also to the Gentiles. Perhaps this was one of the main reasons why the Pharisees and scribes hated Jesus so passionately!

But it doesn't make sense, because we already know that Matthew wrote this book for Jewish believers, and that he emphasizes elsewhere that Jesus' actions were aimed at the Jews. So why does he write so specifically that Jesus went to preach in a Gentile area? We must remember that Matthew's community was not in Judea, but possibly in the Gentile city of

Antioch. And it was precisely from this congregation that such wonderful missionary work was done by their members, including Paul and Barnabas. They were sent out into the Gentile world.

At the same time, the fact that Jesus left Judea for Galilee may be a subtle condemnation of the Jews. After all, they rejected Jesus, and He foretells that Jerusalem would be left as a ruin for the Jews. That Kingdom would be given to another people. Even the temple, which was holy and precious to the Jews, would be completely destroyed!

Then Matthew quotes a passage

from Isaiah 8, about the land that dwells in darkness, which has seen a light. What was condemnation for the Jews was an announcement of salvation for the Gentile region of Galilee. Later, we will see that thousands of people from this dark region gathered around Jesus to hear His message of redemption.

If we think about it today, it is still interesting to know that God's message of salvation was taken from the Jewish area to the Gentiles. The twelve men who Jesus would later appoint as His ambassadors were all Jews. And even the great missionaries who

had to spread the message among the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas, were Jews. Paul was not just an ordinary Jew, he was even a Pharisee! Yet their message was rejected by the Jews and it was actually the Jews who caused them the most problems. Gentiles welcomed them with open arms!

It is tragic to think that God's people became Jesus, the Creator God's worst opponents. Later we would see that they hunted Him down and tried to humiliate Him. They went out of their way to get rid of Him. In the end, they killed Him. We can

describe Jesus' execution as nothing else but murder!

But we must be careful that the same thing does not happen to us. Believers are often the church's biggest enemy, because we involve ourselves in insignificant things and argue over things of lesser value, while there is a heathenism outside that is on the verge of being lost. Just like the Jews of old, we are often busy creating a sanctuary for ourselves that we keep jealously for ourselves!

We believers need to wake up and start reaching out to "Galilee of the Gentiles." How many

unbelievers have you shared the joyful message of Jesus' salvation with in the past month or two or six? Oh, we often live and work in "Galilee" but we behave like "Jews" who try to keep our faith exclusively to ourselves. Although I do not agree with the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, I take my hat off to them because they fearlessly spread their message to all who do not share their faith. Let's try to do the same!

Prayer:

Lord, I confess this morning that I shy away from the "Galilee" in my life. Please help me overcome

that fear and to reach out to
unbelievers!

10

Mission Task

Matthew 4:18-22

Imagine this: you arrive at work this morning, make yourself a cup of coffee, and sit at your desk to start your day's work. Soft music plays in the background, and a feeling of bliss washes over you. You thoroughly enjoy your work.

Suddenly, the phone rings. What the voice on the other end tells you shocks you to your core: "Hurry down to the street: a rental motorcycle is waiting to take you to the airport. You are leaving immediately for North Korea to do

missionary work. Leave your belongings, your family, your work, everything just as it is. Come right away! Your wife is already waiting for you at the airport to greet you."

"For how long?" you ask, "a week?"

Then comes the shocking answer: "Possibly three years, maybe even ten!"

You are told that working conditions in North Korea are often harsh, even life-threatening. There may not be enough money for food every day, and the accommodation is very primitive. Will you go?

You would surely say, "But this is absurd! Such things cannot happen!" But this is exactly what happened to Peter and his companions.

In the previous passage, we learned that Jesus went to Galilee to preach repentance. The Sea of Galilee is very prominent in this region, and several fishermen make a living from this rich source. And it is on the shore of this great lake where Jesus finds Himself. As He walks along the shore, He sees a few men busy at work in the distance. He sees the brothers Simon (Peter) and Andrew busy throwing a fishing

net with a graceful bow into the sea and then hauling it in. A tranquil scene. Fishing is the life and work of these two brothers, and they enjoy doing it. Here by the fishing water they are happy, and they know that the sea provides enough for them to make a good living.

They have heard of this new Preacher who preaches to the people on the beach. Then they recognize Him as He walks straight towards them. Does He perhaps want to buy fish?

But Jesus knocks their feet out from under them: "Come here," He beckons to them, "come with

me, and I will make you fishers of men!"

They leave their nets right there and follow Him. Just a short distance away are two more fisherman brothers, James and John, in their boat working on fixing fishing nets with their father. They too are called, and they leave their father Zebedee alone to continue with the nets while they follow Jesus. If they thought this was something that might take an hour or two, they made a big mistake. With a shock, they learn that they would have to leave everything for at least the next few years - work, family,

belongings - everything! And they wouldn't exactly be staying in a five-star hotel! It would sometimes get rough.

The first Jews who read this story understood exactly what Matthew was telling, because for a Jew to become a Christian at that time meant that he would often have to give up absolutely everything. The Jewish community and even his blood family would completely reject him if he were to break with the Jewish faith. He was regarded as a traitor, and no one would support your business. You become impoverished because your income dries up.

Today we have exactly the same situation with the Muslim who adopts the Christian faith. Even in an enlightened country like South Africa, that person is stripped of everything and is rejected by his own family. He is considered a traitor. He is even persecuted to such an extent that he can be killed at any moment. In Muslim countries, however, it is much worse, and such a person is often beheaded!

For these four fishermen, it was a huge decision to make, but luckily they were not yet rejected by their own people, because the authorities had not yet realized

what was about to happen. Years later, these same men would be cruelly persecuted for their faith!

We are not all called to do missionary work in foreign countries, but we can pray for the brave people who do it under extremely difficult circumstances. Pray for actions like Open Doors and other organizations that use ordinary people to smuggle and distribute Bibles and Christian literature in countries where the gospel is taboo and where Christians are persecuted. Also pray for institutions where missionaries are trained. You and I can make a difference by

supporting missionary work and making the task of missionaries easier. Or you can participate in one of the many outreach actions that are constantly being launched.

Become Mission-Minded!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me mission-minded, and when the call comes that I may have to go, give me the courage and willingness to say yes!

11

The Greatest Sermon of All Time

Matthew 4:23-5:12

Jesus went around in Galilee and initially started teaching in all the synagogues and simultaneously healing every disease and sickness possible among the people. The news about Him spread all over Syria, and people from every province came to see Him and of course be healed of their sicknesses and ailments.

It's interesting to note where the people came from. They didn't just come from the Jewish areas

of Jerusalem and Judea, but also from all the heathen provinces like Syria and Decapolis.

This wasn't just an act of mercy, but Jesus was working towards a much greater goal. He wanted to gain the stage for the greatest sermon of all time. As Jesus began this breathtaking ministry, the news spread to the outskirts of the region. People were very excited because they had never experienced anything like it before! It was told and retold until it echoed throughout the province of Syria. In their hordes, people flocked to see Jesus. Everyone wanted to experience it for

themselves, and as a result, huge crowds of people gathered around Him. The synagogues became too small, so He had to move outdoors, and the best place was by the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus waited for the right moment. When enough people had gathered, He climbed the mountain so that everyone could hear Him. Then He began that wonderful sermon that has been unraveled, discussed, and analyzed over the years. It has provided comfort and learning for millions of people, but it is also often misunderstood.

Jesus' sermon consists of the

introduction (Matt 5:3-16), the middle (5:17-7:12), of which the "Our Father" prayer is the core and the word "Father" dominates the section. This is indeed the key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount. Then comes the conclusion (7:13-27). If we want to understand the Sermon on the Mount correctly, we must realize from the outset that it is not about a bunch of very commendable demands, but rather about children's loving relationship with the Father that is expressed when believers do God's will.

People often see the Ten Commandments as demands that

God makes, demands that make many people feel helpless because they cannot meet them. However, that was never God's intention, and we should rather see them as guidelines according to which we can live out our love for God and our fellow human beings. Just as the Ten Commandments regulate the practical outworking of our covenant relationship with God, so the Sermon on the Mount shows how children of God can practically live out their love relationship with the Father and how disciples of Jesus should follow Him.

The opening scene of the Sermon on the Mount creates ambiguity: in verses 1 and 2, we read that Jesus preached to his disciples, but in Matt. 7:28, we read that the crowd was amazed by his preaching. So, who was the sermon intended for? This is a deliberate ambiguity by the writer to show that this sermon was meant not only as instruction for the disciples but also for anyone who wanted to listen.

The sermon begins with the so-called "Beatitudes." The disciples had to first hear how gracious God is before they could hear the demands that God makes of

them. This is exactly like the Ten Commandments, where God first tells of His great grace over Israel before He makes demands. The first announcement of grace is that the person who realizes that he is totally dependent on God experiences great blessing and shares in the Kingdom of God. The 2020 translation puts it this way: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The parallel in Luke 6:20 says that this blessing is for those who are physically poor. There is no real difference between the two, because if you are poor, you begin to realize your dependence on God. The poor in Jesus' time were despised by the spiritual

leaders because they believed that poverty was a sign that God had rejected them. Luke says that they are wrong and that these so-called rejected ones are actually accepted by God.

The beatitudes are actually about righteousness. Firstly, having the right attitude before God, but at the same time, doing what is right. If these two elements are present in your life, you receive blessings and share in God's Kingdom. Doing what is right involves being merciful, making peace, mourning over what is wrong, being meek, pursuing righteousness and keeping your

life clean and pure. But you can also expect to be persecuted if you are serious about following Christ, but then there is comfort in knowing that a great reward awaits you in heaven!

To truly live out your faith in this way and share in the Kingdom of God, is not for cowards. It takes a lot of courage to stand humble before God and confess your pride and self-righteousness to Him. And then, to take on the yoke of the Kingdom and follow Jesus. But the reward is unimaginable blessings, peace that surpasses all understanding, and joyful fellowship with the

Father.

Prayer:

Lord, I realize again this morning
how dependent I am on You,
because without You, I am
nothing!

12

To be Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-16

There are two things I can't imagine living without: salt and light, and that's exactly what today's pericope is about.

First up is salt, something easily obtainable in our country. But in some countries, it is an extremely scarce commodity. Here, you can simply scrape it together in salt pans. Elsewhere, deep salt mines have been dug.

Wikipedia writes, among other things, about salt mines: Years ago, salt mining was one of the

most expensive and dangerous operations due to rapid dehydration caused by constant contact with salt and other problems caused by accidental excessive sodium intake. Salt is now readily available, but until the Industrial Revolution, it was difficult to obtain and was often mined by slaves or prisoners. The life expectancy for miners was low.

In south-western China, natural salt deposits were mined with boreholes that could reach depths of more than 1,000 metres, but the yields of salt were relatively low. Salt is a necessity for life!

But what makes salt so important?

Firstly, salt is essential in any food. It gives taste to anything, even a chocolate cake needs a little salt! Just imagine how bland a juicy steak will taste without salt!

Secondly, salt is healing. It is often used as a disinfectant. For a sinus infection, for example, nothing beats a salt rinse.

Thirdly, salt is a preservative. Without salt, biltong and bokkoms simply wouldn't be possible. Similarly, a cowhide that isn't sprinkled with salt will quickly decay!

It is a wonderful observation that Jesus made here. Firstly, that salt is a precious commodity. "Salt" is also a precious item for a believer that he should use generously. What is this "salt"?

Firstly, to give taste. There are many ways to give taste, such as kindness and hospitality. Without preaching, every believer can radiate Jesus' love. The aim is twofold, to be an instrument to make people feel and act better and more positively. But at the same time, you are also an ambassador for God's kingdom, to show what the kingdom is really about, while praising God

through it.

Secondly, we have seen that salt is healing. A tasty, radiant friendliness first heals yourself of all kinds of stress-related ailments. But at the same time, it heals everyone around you of the same consequences of stress because people automatically feel better about themselves.

Thirdly, salt preserves, in other words, it prevents something from rotting or decaying. By being salt, you can have the same effect on people. A radiantly happy life makes people hungry to experience that same joy that God has given you. This can lead

to such a person's salvation from eternal damnation!

However, these are just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more we can say about this subject!

In the second part of the pericope, Jesus says: "You are the light of the world." This short sentence is also loaded with a lot of truth. Load shedding has taught us that when that darkness suddenly strikes, even a small candle completely dispels the pitch darkness.

Just like with salt, even a little bit of kindness makes a huge difference. However, it's more

about other people than yourself. I make a point of walking through stores with a smile, and I've seen on various occasions what a difference it makes to the people around me.

But it's about much more than just portraying a beautiful image of Christ. In verse 16, Jesus says: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." After Pentecost, the first church grew at a staggering pace. Why? Because every believer was an "evangelist." You simply told everyone you met about Jesus.

Today, it seems like only a few specially trained people are doing it. Jesus' command in Matt. 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," was not only aimed at the eleven apostles, but it is still directed at every believer today. It is our duty! It is our personal mandate from Jesus!

This is how we can let our light shine in a night that is darker than ever today. But even if my candle is dim, it is still a light that can completely dispel the pitch darkness!

Prayer:

Lord, I confess that I so often hide

my light under a bushel. Please
give me the willingness to take it
out and let it shine brightly!

13

True Meaning of the Law

Matthew 5:17-26

This morning we are talking about the Law, and immediately your hair stands on end, because it is one thing we don't even want to think about. Yet there are those for whom it is of utmost importance. When we read this passage, we realize that there are two things that are in constant tension. On the one hand we see how Jesus emphasizes the smallest details of the Law, and on the other hand He says that it's not really about the small details, but about the global

essence and true meaning of the Law. At first glance, these seem like two contradictions, but if you look closely, the two statements are in total harmony with each other.

Sometimes it's necessary to create a law in order to cultivate a certain mindset in someone, and often this law must be enforced cruelly to instill the idea. I tried to teach my children from a young age a love and responsibility towards nature. My daughter, Anita, was very young when we were driving one day when she threw a candy wrapper out the window. She knew full well about

the "law" that one should not litter. I stopped the car and told little Anita to get out, walk back along the road and pick up the wrapper. "Cruel!" you might say. But it worked, because she never did it again! She had to learn the hard way that you don't mess with nature, and today she has a great love for nature. At that time, she saw it as a law she had to follow, otherwise she would be "punished". Now, years later, she realizes the value of the law. It's not just a meaningless law that must be upheld to make Dad happy, but she realizes that if she litters, she pollutes and destroys the natural beauty she loves!

The Law is a very controversial topic. I think I may have confused a few people with statements about the Law. I have written on occasion that it's not necessary to uphold the Law, because God's grace alone is enough to save me. I was thoroughly reprimanded for this statement! Another time, I wrote that one must indeed uphold the Law. I do this out of gratitude for God's grace. For this, I was also chastised, because no one can ever perfectly uphold the Law, and furthermore, what about grace? At first glance, these are two great contradictions that stand directly opposed to each

other, but if you look closely, they are actually saying the exact same thing. What Jesus says about the Law also appears to be a huge contradiction at first glance, but if you read between the lines, you'll see that there is no contradiction, but that the full truth behind the Law and its fullness is actually hidden here.

Now, I just have to emphasize that it's very dangerous to read a verse from the Bible and draw conclusions from it. You can easily set a completely twisted message from the Bible for yourself! Every verse must be read in the context in which it

stands. Often, it's necessary to read a whole chapter or even more to understand the full extent of a specific verse. And then it must be tested against the whole message of the Bible. This is one of those sections that actually must be read in it's entirety. Indeed, it's part of a sermon that Jesus delivered, and you can't just take a single sentence from a sermon and try to make sense of it! For practical reasons, however, we are forced to discuss this sermon over a few days, and thus all the daily pieces that deal with it must actually be read as a unit.

When Jesus says that the Law

must be followed very contentiously, He explains what He actually means by that. The first example He uses is the law that says you may not murder. When I told Anita that she shouldn't litter, it was actually about nature conservation. The littering story was just an example.

Similarly, Jesus explains that the law against murder is just an example, and it actually goes much deeper. It's about love for your fellow human being, because if you insult him or speak ill of him or harbour resentment towards him, it's just as good as

killing him. It's actually about your attitude towards your fellow human being, because if your attitude is right, you won't try to harm him in any way. If your attitude towards your unreasonable boss is right, you won't call him "The Pig" in front of your co-workers. And when someone is mocked, you will stand up for his good name if you really care about him.

Actually, it goes much deeper. Later, Jesus explains that it should not be a negative "thou shalt not" attitude, but rather a positive, active expression of love. We'll talk more about this

later.

So the question is, what does this "caring" and "attitude" actually mean? We'll discuss that over the next few days.

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me to live out
Your Law as You ask of me!

14

Chastity and Adultery

Matthew 5:27-32

Show me the man who doesn't have an eye for a beautiful girl! And show me the woman who can't look at an attractive man with appreciation! Oh my goodness! When I look at the demands that Jesus makes in this sermon, they seem completely unrealistic and unattainable. Then a man must be dead... Or are they really that bad?

During a marriage seminar, the presenter said that if a beautiful girl walks past you, it's only

natural that a man, even a married man, will look at her with appreciation. There's nothing wrong with that. However, if, when she disappears around the corner, you run after her to get a closer look, then the red warning lights start flashing wildly! That's when you need to start examining yourself, because that's the beginning of adultery. It's all about sinful desires, and that's exactly what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 5.

In those days, the married woman led an extremely vulnerable life in Jewish society. It was her unilateral duty to remain faithful to

her husband, and she had to fend off the greedy eyes and hands of strange men. The man, on the other hand, had it easy because the woman was, as it were, his property, and he could do with her whatever he wanted. Now Jesus places the onus on the man when He says that the man should look at a woman with the right eye. This will mean that his wife will have it easier, and their marriage will be secure. It's not about an unnatural suppression of your senses, where you have to close your eyes and not even see the beauty in life. It's actually much broader, where a man doesn't constantly look at a beautiful

woman with lustful eyes!

In a time when no woman was safe alone with a strange man, Jesus normalized society with His relationship with various women, without any ulterior motives. Some of them were even prostitutes! Today, it's especially the preacher who must be very careful, and constantly praying as he goes about his daily business, often alone with women and listening to their deepest secrets. Often a woman who pours out her heart to him is extremely vulnerable, and it can potentially develop into a dangerous situation. Therefore, pray

regularly for your preacher, that he will remain strong and standing.

But it's not just preachers who can be tempted, our world has degenerated into a sick society. Pornography is rampant, not only in magazines that are explicitly displayed on shelves, and that mess with the hormones of both men and women, but movies are shown on TV that can make a man pant for his breath. And we haven't even talked about the disgusting pornography that is freely available to everyone on the internet. In society, the female gender often becomes guilty by

dressing provocatively. Clothes are often chosen to make men look a second and third time, and not just to look, but to desire! It makes her feel good when men can't look her in the eye, but rather appreciate her assets! However, the same goes for men. Yes, a man can also be alluring and make women swoon! But that's not what it's about, it's much more about not letting yourself be seduced, and only seeing the beauty and not the provocation!

This brings us to the third contradiction of Jesus, namely divorce. I have received many

questions about this, but I want to make it very clear that I am not a marriage counselor. Today, divorce has become very easy. In the New Testament times, it was also easy because the Jews had their own interpretation of a verse in Deuteronomy 24:1, which states that a man can divorce his wife if he finds something indecent about her. They elaborated this verse and said that he could even divorce her if she just burnt the food. However, when we deal with Matt. 19, we will look more deeply into divorce. Let's make it very clear: Divorce is not acceptable to God, and it is

not the way to resolve marital conflict. To end a marriage is simply adultery. In this, Jesus does not take an absolutely unapproachable attitude, and I must emphasize again that we should not take a single verse and make an unbreakable law out of it. We must read the sermon in its entirety to get the true meaning. If we look at the big picture, we see that Jesus wants us as "bearers of the abundant righteousness" to first bow down in prayer before the King. We must first make that basic surrender before we can come up with any "yes, but" about our marriage.

However, the question is whether we are ever able to seek God's will in our marriage without bias? Or do we just look for the first "solution" when things go wrong in the marriage?

Prayer:

Lord, I pray that you will keep me from stumbling. Please keep my heart pure and keep me from harbouring wrong desires in my heart!

An Eye for an Eye!

Matthew 5:33-42

"Have you guys heard: the third world war just broke out!" A very excited boy gestures towards America. "The Americans and Russians are already s attacking each other with atomic bombs!"

"Really? Are you sure?" a voice from the audience sounds doubtful.

"Yes, I swear!" He sticks his index finger in his mouth, clicks his tongue, and sticks his finger in the air: "Cross my heart and hope to die!" Now his story is credible!

A few men disappear from the audience to go and spread this juicy story further, of course with their own embellishments to give the story a bit of flavour.

Do you remember? When we were kids, we didn't dare confirm our stories with an "I swear"! It was a big sin! And then there were all sorts of other tricks and sayings used to confirm that what we were saying is the pure truth. But what do all these things actually say? They are all ways to confirm with an oath that I am telling the truth. Jesus mentions to His disciples a few examples that people use to avoid using the

true oath where God's Name is invoked, but it actually boils down to exactly the same thing. To take an oath, you call God as your witness in the conversation. If there is not 100% truth in what you say, then you make God out to be a liar!

However, it goes much deeper than that. God is no one's "playmate"! We must remember that He is the highest authority in the universe. He is the King of all kings; the Creator of all things. As such, we must have the utmost respect for Him. There is a book written with the title: "Hey, God!" where the author has a very light-

hearted relationship with God. I have never read the book because the title alone sounded a bit blasphemous to me. How can I address God like that? Indeed, I may and MUST talk to God, and it is one of the most wonderful gifts He has given us, but we must always remember who it is we are talking to, and have the greatest respect for Him. That is why I will definitely think twice before lightly taking an oath. To tell the truth, it is better to never take an oath at all. Jesus Himself said so!

In the past few days we have already pointed out a few contradictions that Jesus made.

Today we look at the fifth contradiction that Jesus makes. It deals with violence. Don't we have enough of it today? Our country is plagued daily by violent uprisings. In addition, there is the frightening gang violence, especially in the Cape. Not to mention murder, rape, domestic violence, farm attacks, and much more. However, in Jesus' time, it was much worse, but on a completely different level. It was not blatant crime that dominated the Jews' lives like today, but the Romans, and especially the arrogant Roman soldiers who simply crept out everywhere to make life sour for everyone!

We often hear the bitter statement of someone who has experienced violence: "I hope he rots in prison!" I don't think there's a single person reading this piece today who isn't sick of all the violence ravaging our beautiful country. Now Jesus comes and says that we shouldn't fight that violence with more violence, but with love. "But how do you do it?" is your immediate question.

"Be creative!" says Jesus. He gives a few examples of how to deal creatively with violence. In those days, a Roman soldier had the right to grab anyone along the road and force him to carry his

baggage for a kilometer. Jesus tells His disciples that it doesn't help to fight with the man. Rather, take the pack, and offer to carry it for another kilometer too, because in that way you show him something of God's love.

In today's language: If someone crashes into your brand new car, you can do one of two things. You can jump out and in a fit of rage curse the poor guy and tell him exactly what you think of his driving skills. Chances are good that his blood pressure will also shoot up, and that he will also yell back at you. Road rage, where people even shoot or beat each

other, has become a big problem on our roads!

But there is another alternative: you can pray for wisdom, strength, and calmness, and then calmly and peacefully get out and decide with the other party in a friendly manner how you're going to handle the matter. If you do this, the matter is already three-quarters resolved!

In short: don't constantly pursue revenge. If you seek revenge, you will discover with a shock how your own humanity is systematically eroded. There is a saying that goes: "He who chases another doesn't stand still

himself." Love, on the other hand, is a powerful weapon that can defuse many explosive situations and at the same time build up your own humanity.

Prayer:

Lord, please put a guard before my mouth and give me the calmness and wisdom to handle people who offend me, with love!

16

Love for Your Enemy

Matthew 5:43-48

War is a terrible thing, and I believe our world has had enough of it in recent years. Today, the senseless war between Russia and Ukraine rages on while Israelis and Palestinians shoot each other. However, if you are one of the older generations, you will surely remember the horrors of World War II. And many of us middle-aged men have fought in the terrifying border war. But it is precisely in such gruesome circumstances where you see people do the funniest things,

often under terrible conditions. It often happens that a man risks his own life to save one of his wounded comrades. But sometimes it also happens that someone risks his life to save one of the wounded enemies! And then we wonder what went through that man's mind.

A few years ago, I reported when another senseless murder was committed, this time on a young pastor. The natural reaction of the young man's father should have been one of revenge, to curse the cruel attacker in anger. But he did not do that! The incomprehensible reaction of the shocked father

was to say that he was praying for his son's murderer! Surely everyone remembers the cruel attack on the couple, Louis and Hettie Brittz, and that Hettie was also raped. Hettie and Louis' reaction was that they forgave that rapist and had absolutely no grudge against him!

Our natural reaction is to immediately ask how it is possible? You can't otherwise but hate such a heartless scoundrel! And what about your enemy in war? You must hate him! Or not?

Jesus' sixth contradiction makes your hair stand on end when He

says you must love your enemy! Your first reaction is to say, "Lord, now You're making a mistake! Surely it's impossible?" It's not in human nature and it goes against everything that is within you! Is it humanly possible to obey such a command from Jesus? Are you not digging a grave in your heart if you have to do such things?

Let's be honest with each other: it's probably not humanly possible to love your enemies. But that's not primarily what it's about! It's all about God and how He is. Verse 45 describes the indescribable goodness of God and how He gives all His gifts to

good and bad people alike. He gives without limit to friend and foe. He is willing to give the gift of eternal life to anyone who is willing to believe in Jesus. And often it is people who have lived in the greatest enmity with God. He is willing to forgive that enmity and give that rebel a new heart, and even give His Spirit to that person. An example of this is Paul.

God wants that there would be something of that kind of love in us. We must be like He is! Of course, that's not possible, but He wants us to at least try, to try seriously to pursue such love. It is

only in the light of God's love, and specifically His love for His enemies, that this command of Jesus begins to make sense. In theory, it sounds impossible, but in practice, it has been proven over and over again that this kind of love is achievable. Be creative! It will depend only on you how resourceful you can be in implementing this love and how you can cultivate it. No, actually that's not entirely true, because it is only through the power that the Holy Spirit gives you that this command can be fulfilled.

When Jesus says that we must be as perfect as God, He means

that there should be a continuous striving towards this perfection within us. No, of course, we can never achieve it, but we must never stop walking that path of "trying," and you must walk that path with surrender. Some people progress much further on the path than others. However, it must be a love journey for each of us, one where we express our love towards God and our neighbour. Yes, even towards our enemies! However, this can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer:

Lord, I stand deeply indebted to You when it comes to loving my

enemies. Please give me a true heart of love!

17

Give without expecting anything in return

Matthew 6:1-4

I have failed the test of Matthew 6 so many times with honours! And time and again I feel like a worm afterwards! So many times have I been confronted by a beggar, every time with a long story. And most of the time right in front of the church! Their stories can often become so authentic that they convince you of the reality of the situation. Ninety percent of the time it's a made-up story, but the question is: How do I know if it's true or not? And who am I to

judge? And then, when I send the person away empty-handed, the letters in Matthew 6 suddenly stand before me like glowing words, words that accuse me of the same hypocrisy as the Pharisees of old.

I have failed this beggar test so many times in my life. And on top of that, I've been caught unawares many times!

"Friday is alms day," an old Muslim carpenter with whom I worked years ago, told me one day. "On Fridays, you can't let a beggar go empty-handed!" In every Muslim's shop, there is therefore a saucer full of cents on

the counter on Fridays, and every beggar who passes by gets a few cents. His law says he must do it, so he does it. The law also doesn't say how much he should give, so he gives the absolute minimum, nothing more than a few worthless cents. He is helping the poor! His conscience is now spotless!

A news item comes up about some big organization that donated money for welfare. The image displayed is a group of people with fake smiles from ear to ear, and a huge cheque, easily two metres long, on which of course the company's emblem

appears for the world to see. The cheque is handed over to the struggling welfare organization with exaggerated handshakes. Very impressive! Of course, this handover, which gets TV news coverage, is an excellent advertisement for the company!

On another occasion, there is also a report on TV: the name of the person who appears is completely unknown, but for years she has been giving food to hungry children in the townships. All her capital has already been used up, but she is radiantly happy. No one from the outside world had ever heard of her until

someone accidentally saw her one day and decided to take a video of her doing her life work.

In the church lobby, I hear someone complaining: "Here I worked my two hands to the bone for the church function, and I don't even get a thank you for it!"

What do all these examples mentioned above have in common? The single word: **ATTITUDE**. Muslims give to the poor because the law says they must. That's why they only give the absolute minimum, just to stay within the limits of the law. There is no love involved in this act, or even any sympathy or empathy

towards the beggars they give to. The company with its giant cheque, on the other hand, has only one thing in mind: to get as much news coverage as possible through it's action. He must be seen as someone who truly cares, because then his product will sell better. Yes, it's easy to point fingers at them, but isn't it exactly the same as someone who makes some big donation in church and then expects to be thanked for it in public? I myself have often fallen into this trap, that when I perform some task, I sit waiting for the pastor to thank me from the pulpit for my contribution to the success of the

church. An old pastor was once praised for his sermon after the service, and when the praise singer walked away, the pastor told me that the devil had worked hard, because if someone praises you like that, you know there was a big problem with your sermon!

It's all about your attitude. The woman with her soup kitchen in the townships' greatest pleasure in life is to see the grateful smiles of hungry children who receive food. She reflects Jesus' love without asking for recognition. When you and I give our share - what is the attitude in our hearts?

Do we give without expecting anything in return? Or do we perhaps give in the hope that the community will somehow reward or thank us for it? If we still get recognition for our good deed! Or is it maybe that we expect a reward from God for what we have done? Indeed, God will reward those who give with the right attitude, but the right attitude is not to give so that God will reward us, but rather to give only out of love and gratitude for everything God has already done for us.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the right

attitude and empathy with those
who are less privileged!

18

In Conversation with God

Matthew 6:5-8

Does it help to pray? Am I just wasting my time? And am I also wasting God's precious time? In Matthew 6:8 it is written that God already knows exactly what we need, even before we ask for it. So why pray?

Indeed, it may not even be necessary for us to ask, but prayer is about so much more than just asking something from God. Prayer is a wonderful gift that God has given us. It is a communication channel that is

open every second of the day, with direct access to God Almighty. He wants us to use it regularly and intensely, but there is also a danger involved in that we may ABUSE it. In Jesus' great sermon on the mount, prayer is presented as the heart of the sermon. He starts by showing how prayer should NOT be and how it can be abused!

The Jews had their regular prayer times, and it was not uncommon to see people praying on the street. Today, we see this again with Muslims and their set prayer times. Some of them take it so seriously that if they cannot do it

elsewhere, they will open their mat and pray right where they are, even if it's in the middle of the street.

However, the problem with the Jews was that some of them, especially the devout Pharisees, often stood on the street and prayed. It was not because they were so devout, but rather to impress other people. Everyone had to know how truly devout they were! Such a prayer is no longer a prayer, because in that way, you are actually using God to advertise your own self-image. Prayer is an intimate conversation with God, and for that, the privacy

of your inner room is the appropriate place.

But does this mean that public prayer has no place in my life? Certainly not! Jesus often prayed in public, and so did Paul. Public prayer in worship services and prayer meetings has a definite place in the life of a believer. This section is about the true character of prayer and that it will remain an intimate conversation with God, even if it is also a public prayer.

I have heard on a few occasions a pastor summarizing his sermon in his closing prayer to finally drive the message home to the congregation. This is then also no

longer a prayer, but rather a mini-sermon or a catechism lesson! Then the conversation with God is abused to teach people. In the same breath, I have heard how during a prayer meeting, someone actually preached to one of his fellow-worshippers about some sin in his life, instead of talking to God. It is like using God's name (actually abusing it!) to stab your fellow-believer!

We must also be careful of those long drawn-out public prayers that put your fellow-worshippers to sleep. In your inner room, you can pray for as long as you want. In public, it should be brief and to

the point, and you should consider other people.

The second matter Jesus speaks about that is dangerous in prayer is trying to get God's attention with a flood of words. This tendency was common among the heathens when they prayed to their idols. They even went further and tortured themselves so that the idol must see how serious they are. This practice is still followed today, especially among Hindus. I have witnessed it myself on occasion, and it is absolutely gruesome!

However, it also occurred among the Jews, where a prayer was

repeated over and over. It is still done today, but this time by believers! Self-torture is an everyday thing among Christians, especially in Latin American countries, where people punish themselves during Easter and even have themselves crucified. Closer to our own lives, we often see someone saying the same thing over and over in a prayer. It is repeated a few times or said in a different way so that the Lord must understand it well. If we think that the Lord did not hear or understand it properly the first time, it is a slap in the face of God. He hears and understands much better than you and I! Then

there is also the practice of mentioning the Lord's name over and over, so that every sentence begins with "Lord" or "Father," as if God must be reminded that it is actually Him who is being spoken to. It is entirely unnecessary to repeat things to God. He already knows what you wanted to pray before you even started talking!

What can we learn from what is said here then? Prayer is necessary, and God wants us to pray, even in public. But prayer is not dependent on beautiful, long, lofty, serious, or chain prayers. Do not try to impress God, because then you cut the prayer short

yourself. Prayer can take place at any time and any place, but it remains a private conversation between you and God. The motive and attitude with which you pray are of utmost importance because that is what God is interested in. And this is surely the essence of prayer: it is an honest and sincere conversation from your heart with God, without any ulterior motives or other motives.

How then should we pray? Read more about this tomorrow.

Prayer:

Lord, my prayer life falls so short. I so often pray selfishly and to

impress people. Please teach me
to pray You want us to pray.

That's how we Pray

Matthew 6:9-15

I have often heard someone say: "I don't know how to pray." And then of course, the nightmare of many an elder: "I'll die ten deaths if I have to pray in the vestry/public!" If I can tell you a secret this morning: I myself struggle to do a public prayer, because I listen to other people's long and impressive prayers, and then I start to pray, and I feel so small and insignificant because I don't have that flood of beautiful words and thoughts that the "intercessors" have. But then I

think of the example of a prayer that Jesus gave to His disciples, and then I don't feel ashamed anymore, because Jesus' prayer is short and very simple.

Let's take a look at what Jesus teaches us about prayer:

The opening of the prayer tells us about the nearness of God. But then Jesus speaks of the Father who is in heaven, far exalted above us? No, the fact that He is in heaven has nothing to do with distance. How far is heaven? Perhaps much closer than we think! Let me explain: If we are in two adjoining rooms, with a one-way window between us, you

may not be able to see me, and you may not even be aware of my presence, just a few meters away from you. However, I am still right beside you and I can see you and hear you and even communicate with you. Perhaps we can also see heaven in that light. After all, Jesus promised that He will be with us until the end!

So this has to do with the Father's omnipotence and omnipresence. We worship the Almighty God, for whom nothing, absolutely nothing is impossible. He is certainly greater than His creation, the universe. He can hold our world in the palm of His hand. As an

inhabitant of the earth, I can go wherever I want, but I am still very close to God, right in the palm of His hand.

We also do not talk to an impersonal God. Jesus teaches us to regard Him very personally. He is "our Father". This means that it is a very personal conversation with Someone who cares for me and loves me, just as an earthly father will love his own child. It emphasizes the absolute closeness of God to me when I pray. God's fatherhood is at the core of the entire Sermon on the Mount, and when we read through it, we see how Jesus

refers to it time and time again. It is therefore very important to thoroughly understand how personal this conversation actually is when we pray. However, it is equally important to realize the omnipotence of God, to which I referred just now, because as we pray for our daily needs, we must know that it is within God's power to provide.

Looking at the simplicity of the prayer that Jesus teaches us, it invites everyone to come and participate, because even the most timid worshipper will have a chance with such a simple prayer. There is no overwhelming set of

instructions that will overwhelm you, and everyone can identify with it.

In the core of the prayer, there are three "You" prayers and three "Our" prayers. In this way, God and man are connected in a balanced prayer where one does not dominate the other. When we pray, there is a big trap that we all often fall into, and that is to centre your entire prayer around yourself. I just want to come before God with my own needs. It's like standing with a shopping list and telling the Lord what you want and what you need. Everything is about "me" and

"myself". Indeed, I often fall into this egocentric trap, where my whole prayer is just about my own needs and myself.

If I had the opportunity to go for a cup of tea with King Charles of England, how would my conversation start? Of course, I would first compliment him on his beautiful house. I would admire all the gold and crystal in Buckingham Palace, and tell him how wonderful it is for me. I definitely wouldn't barge in and make all sorts of requests!

Isn't God much, much greater than him? Isn't He millions of times more exalted than Charles?

Why then would we give more honour to King Charles than to Him? Wouldn't it just be a natural outflow of a conversation with the Almighty God to first pay homage to Him and show Him how much respect we have for Him? Tell Him that you honour His power and greatness, and that His wonderful Name is holy to you and how precious His love is to you!

Back to the King: When his arrival is announced at a big reception, all the guests will stand up out of respect at the mere hearing of: "His Majesty, King Charles." How much more should the mere

hearing of the holy Name of Almighty God not command awe and honour from me as a lowly human being? Of course, I will honour His Name. Of course, at the mere hearing or invocation of His Name, I will give Him all the respect and worship that He deserves, and I will tell Him how much His Name means to me.

But we will continue with this conversation tomorrow, God willing.

Prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Your holy Name is so great to me
that I take it on my lips with
trembling. I praise You, Lord of

hosts!

20

God's Kingdom

Matthew 6:9-15

Yesterday we saw that Our Father is in heaven and that we should hallow His wonderful Name. We also thoroughly realize that He is the King of all creation. He personally planned and created every small detail of it from nothing. In Psalm 103:19, the Psalmist sings so accurately about God's reign over everything: "The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."

The question you will surely ask

is, if God already reigns over everything and everyone, why do we still have to pray: "Your kingdom come?" Then isn't our prayer unnecessary?

The answer is simple: the earth is a disputed province in God's Kingdom. The devil claims it as his territory. Just look at how he offered the Kingdoms of the world to Jesus during Jesus' temptation in the wilderness! He wants it to appear as if it is his own that he wants to exchange for worship. He presents himself as the prince of this world. Although God's Kingdom has become a present reality with Jesus, we know that it

still has a provisional character in this dispensation. It will only come to full realization in the future. When the great Day of the Lord arrives and the sign of Christ appears in the sky, it becomes a final reality. Then He will destroy all evil powers (1 Cor. 15:24) and transfer the Kingship to God the Father "so that God may be all in all." (1 Cor. 15:28).

Meanwhile, it is necessary that we, the Father's children, continue to pray persistently: "Your kingdom come." But it goes much deeper than it appears at first glance. It means that all believers must be servants in the

Kingdom of God. Every citizen of the Kingdom is actually a warrior. You naturally become a soldier in the battle against the powers of darkness. He wants to use us as ordinary people to fight the battle, but also to work in His Kingdom and to expand the borders of that Kingdom as ambassadors of His Kingdom.

We certainly cannot pray the "Our Father" and do nothing for the proclamation of the coming Kingdom to all nations. Like the seventy-two disciples of old, we must use every opportunity to tell people: "The Kingdom of God is near" (Luke 10:9). If I pray for the

Kingdom to come, I must be willing to accept citizenship of this Kingdom. And with citizenship come duties. But there is also the assurance that Christ will one day come to finally take possession of the Kingdom.

As believers, we not only expect the coming of the Kingdom of God. We also pray for it, long for it, and strive for that new heaven and new earth that God has promised.

We have already seen very clearly that God wants us to pray and ask. In Isaiah 43:13, God said, "I will act, and who can reverse it?" Now He commands

us to intercede that His will be done! How does this fit together?

This means of course that God can do whatever pleases Him without our prayer. The prayer is not for the Lord's sake, but for our own sake. If He allows us to participate in the fulfillment of His will through prayer, He does so to teach us that His will is best for us. Look for example at how a wise father works. He plans carefully and thinks of every detail. Then he discusses the plans with his children, involving them in his planning. He has already done his homework properly, so their input will not

change the results. But by involving them, they become excited and enthusiastic. And so does our Heavenly Father. He wants us to be involved in His Kingdom planning.

Therefore, when we pray for God's will to be done, it eliminates the danger of praying in conflict with God's will. When we pray this prayer, we not only submit ourselves to God's will, but we also positively make His will and desire our own.

In the third prayer, we are taught to ask that the Lord's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In

heaven, God's will is already fully accomplished, because the heavenly beings obey Him completely. Where God's dwelling place is, His reign is not contested. It still happens on earth, and that is why we pray that it will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

"So let Your will be done..." therefore means: "My Father, You are wise and good and loving, far above what I can understand. Your will for Your children is perfectly good, just like You. Therefore, I trust You unconditionally and desire nothing else but that Your will be

done. As it is in heaven, where Your Kingdom is already perfect, and the angels as serving spirits perfectly accomplish Your will, let Your will also be accomplished on earth."

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I pray fervently that Your Kingdom will come and Your will be done. I declare myself ready to be a full-fledged citizen of Your Kingdom. I pray that You will give me the strength and wisdom to do so!

21

My Daily Bread

Matthew 6:9-15

With the most important part of the prayer done, comes the second part that is about myself and my fellow-humans. It is about my daily needs, the forgiveness of my sins, and the temptations in my life. In other words, I pray for the things I need to survive, both physically and spiritually.

When I pray for these things, I want to tell the Lord that all my trust is in Him, because I am dependent on Him for everything in life. There is nothing that I can

do successfully on my own, because even the bread I eat is a gift from God!

During a vacation in Marloth Park in the Lowveld, we decided to immediately throw some mealie grains and birdseed for the birds upon our arrival. We were still unpacking the car when the first client was already there, a red-billed oxpecker. He seemed quite skittish towards us as he just grabbed a piece of food and flew away. I was disappointed because I would have wanted to enjoy his presence a little longer.

A few minutes later, however, he was back for more food, and once

again, he didn't stick around to enjoy it but just flew away with it in his beak. Straight away I was annoyed! Was our presence not good enough any more? After the fifth time he returned, I started to become suspicious because he flew away each time in exactly the same direction, and he followed exactly the same route through the trees. It was then that Mosbolletjie drew my attention to the sound of little birds screeching, each time just after he flew away.

I decided to follow the oxpecker, and there I saw how he stuck his long red beak into a narrow slit in

the rough trunk of a knobthorn tree. In the depths of the tree, I saw movement behind the slit, and then I knew: there was a nest! In a hole in the tree trunk, he had closed up for Mama Hornbill, leaving only a small opening through which he could feed her and the little ones. There she laid and hatched her eggs, and there she raised her little ones until they were ready to face the outside world. When she sat there, closed up and isolated from the world, she and the little ones were totally dependent on Dad for every need in life. The poor guy worked himself to the bone to bring food, so he barely had time

to eat himself!

Of course, Mama didn't do nothing! She had a very important task of taking care of the little ones. But she was still totally dependent on Dad.

When we pray for our daily bread, we also confess our total dependence on God for absolutely everything in life. We are like that hornbill female who cannot live a day without the loving care of Dad. Don't think that if you have a good business, you no longer need God for your material needs. In the blink of an eye, the rug can be pulled out from under you! Indeed, it

happened to me, and then I had to realize that I am totally lost without God's caring hand! One only truly begins to realize their dependence on God when they find themselves in a financial crisis!

Sometimes it happens that a believer becomes too self-assured in his life when everything is going well for him and he doesn't have to worry about anything. A good job with an income that provides for everything. It is then so easy to forget about God. When the blows of life hit you and you lose everything, it's not God's

punishment. It's then that you experience God's faithfulness and support in the most difficult of times. During trials, we often learn essential life lessons and realize what truly matters in life.

It is striking that Jesus' model prayer does not ask for future planning. For example, I do not pray that my business will do well so that I can show a fat profit at the end of the year. No, He teaches us to live day by day, and to stand before Him in dependence for today's needs. Does this now mean that I should cancel my policies and abandon all my future planning and

precautions? No, definitely not! That would be pure foolishness! However, He wants us to realize that we are dependent on Him for today.

Over the past few years, I have often witnessed how the Lord provides in a breathtaking way every day. Just when there is no more money left for food or fuel, someone hands me an envelope with enough in to provide, or money is deposited into my bank account at a critical moment. Often it comes from someone who does not know what my real needs are. The prayer for my daily bread has become a reality

for me to look to God day by day for today's needs only. I thank Him for that.

Prayer:

Lord, I do not pray for wealth or abundance, but only for today's bread. Thank you for providing!

22

Forgive me, Lord!

Matthew 6:9-15

We can literally write books about the fourth prayer, where we ask the Lord to forgive our sins. Over the years, I have received numerous letters from people tearfully asking if it is possible for God to forgive their great sins. Of course! Just read what our gracious Father says in Isaiah 1:18: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." Psalm 103:9: "He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever." Psalm 103:12: "As far as the east is from the

west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Rom 3:23: "For all have sinned ... but they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

There is a story about Martin Luther that he once had a dream where the devil came to him with a large sheet of paper filled with writing. "All your sins are written here," the devil said to him, to which Luther asked if there might be more. "Yes," replied the devil, and he produced a second sheet and a third, all filled from edge to edge with Luther's sins. In his dream, Martin Luther took a pen

and drew a thick black line through everything that was written.

"What are you doing now?" the devil exclaimed in distress!

"It is all forgiven!" Luther triumphantly said to the devil, "Jesus Christ has paid for all my sins!"

The question is: if all my sins have already been forgiven, why do I still need to ask for forgiveness? Quite simply: I still commit sins every day. I do not live as God requires me to live, and I must acknowledge that I often greatly grieve Him. Once again, it comes down to my total

dependence on God. I need Him so desperately to stay out of trouble, and despite the fact that the Holy Spirit constantly warns me not to do the wrong thing, I still do it. That is why it is necessary for me to hang my head in shame and say, "I'm sorry, Lord! Please forgive me once again!"

However, there is a story to this prayer: "as we also have forgiven our debtors," we declare before the Lord. Or as the old translation says: "as we also forgive our debtors." This is the difficult part because it is not always easy to forgive others. Often, a believer

carries a grudge in their heart against someone who has wronged them for years. How can we ask God to forgive our sins (which often fill volumes of books) if we are not willing to forgive someone for a single sin against us? To forgive means that your whole attitude toward that person must normalize, and you accept them as a friend as if nothing ever went wrong between you.

My grandmother was in a concentration camp during the Boer War, and she witnessed horrible things there. Many years later, she told me that she had forgiven the English, but forget?

Never! It was impossible! She still carried the grudge in her heart for the things they had done to her and her family. This means that she never truly forgave them.

Indeed, some things are very difficult or impossible to forget. But it's about the person, that your forgiveness is complete, without expecting anything in return. Bennie Mostert put it aptly: if I were to lend a book to someone, and they lose the book, my reaction should be to tell the person that everything is fine. Then I would buy a book out of my own pocket to replace it and forget that they ever borrowed my

book.

The final prayer deals with temptations that come our way. When we ask the Lord to protect us against them, it means that we will actively avoid them. The song from *My Fair Lady* says: "The Lord above gave liquor for temptation, to see if man can keep away from sin. But with a little bit of luck, when temptation comes, you'll step right in!" The song has a total misconception of temptation. The guy in the song actually wishes that a little temptation would come his way so that he can "accidentally" fall into the trap. We should not go

looking for temptations! We should, in fact, stay away from them! If you know in your soul that a certain sin can be a temptation for you, then you stay away from the places or situations where it occurs. If gambling is a temptation for you, you simply don't go near a casino. End of story! Just like an alcoholic wouldn't dare to keep a drop of alcohol in his house because he knows that in a crisis, he will give in.

And it's not the Lord who tempts us, but the devil, the enemy! It is he who tries his best to make us stumble and lure us away from

God. And that's precisely why we pray the last part: "deliver us from evil."

Let's look at this prayer with new eyes and live it out.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I praise Your Holy Name this morning. I want to be a useful citizen of Your Kingdom. I stand this morning in deep dependence on You, and I ask that You please provide for my needs. Forgive me for the many offences against You and my fellow human beings, and help me to also forgive those who have caused me harm. And then I also ask that You help me to stay

away from temptations!

23

To be Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

She walks into the bookstore, and I can see immediately that a heavy burden rests on her two little shoulders this morning. It's 1976, and I manage the Bible Bookstore in Welkom, a tiny shop that sells only Christian books. This store, located in the heart of the famous Horseshoe, is the focal point around which all spiritual things revolve in Welkom. Many times, I have to be the shoulder on which sorrowful people come to cry. And many deep spiritual conversations take

place there. Not many books are sold, but the little shop is a true blessing for numerous believers across the entire spectrum of churches. And in that little shop, the Lord shapes me to later, much later, send the gospel message across the earth.

"What's wrong?" I want to know. Her teary eyes beg me to ask this question.

"I'm fasting!" she sighs heavily. I can immediately tell that this is definitely not a lie. That long face and the heavy sighs tell me that she is going through deep waters of bitterness. It's not the first time she has come to cry on my

shoulder. Welkom is a mining town, and miners can sometimes be a rough bunch. She has complained to me on a few occasions about her husband mocking her faith. He wants nothing to do with the church, and he doesn't care in the least about any of her attempts to live a holy life. One thing she has managed so far is to keep a TV out of the house. She absolutely refuses to allow that abomination into her home!

She bursts into tears, and raw sobs tear through her. "He humiliated me!" she sobs it out. "Yesterday, when I came home

from the store, there was a big cardboard box in my living room. Written on it in big, bold letters was: 'NOW YOU HAVE THE WORLD IN YOUR HOME!' I just couldn't take it anymore!"

I console her, but I still don't understand the fasting. "You say you're fasting?"

"Yes," she continues sobbing, and I feel so sorry for her. "He knows that I don't want a TV! He deliberately went and bought that devilish thing!" Now the tears flow down her cheeks again.

Then she tells me that after her big shock that morning, she took a hessian sack and cut three

holes in it, one for her head and two for her arms. And then she put on the coarse hessian and placed ashes on her head. She went and sat on the pile of ashes in the garden where her husband throws away the barbecue ashes every Saturday night after his antics. And she's fasting!

I understand the sack and ashes because she is deeply saddened by this thing her husband has done to her. But I still don't fully understand the fasting. Then she explains, "I'm fasting so that the Lord can save my husband. I won't stop fasting until the Lord has given me an answer. I can't

bear it anymore with that man! If he doesn't repent now... the Lord must hear me!"

Needless to say, when I finally left Welkom, long after this incident, her husband was still the rude, irresponsible, unbelieving brute!

A sad story in more than one way. What this poor woman did sounds noble and touching at first glance. But she completely misunderstood the concept of fasting. Is it wrong to fast? In the Dutch Reformed Church, fasting is rarely discussed because it has had a "sectarian" connotation for many years. But let's take a look at what Jesus says about it. He

doesn't say that you shouldn't fast, but He warns against distorting the idea of fasting. I've often heard someone proudly proclaim it for everyone to hear: "I've been fasting for a whole week!" Jesus warns against the habit of walking around with long faces and advertising that you're fasting. It is a very personal matter between you and God. Don't let anyone know about it.

The question is: why do I fast? Is it to manipulate God's hand over some matter? Perhaps to beg God or even force Him to do something in your life? Definitely not! Why did John, Jesus, and

various prophets spend time in the wilderness? It was also a form of fasting. To prepare themselves for a great task. In other words, to focus their thoughts on God. Fasting has exactly the same purpose: to focus your thoughts on God. And fasting can take on many forms. It doesn't necessarily have to involve food. For example, you can enter a period of fasting by refraining from watching TV or engaging in the usual recreational activities in your life. The pure purpose should be to draw closer to God.

And while you're engaged in that fast, no one should ever suspect

anything. If someone tries to tempt you during that time, simply make an unassuming excuse. It's so easy to create the idea that you're better than others because you're fasting! It puts you on a "holy" pedestal. It's a pitfall that the devil places before you, and if you fall into it, you might as well stop fasting! Then it has completely lost its meaning and purpose.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me understand the meaning of fasting correctly.

24

Don't Worry

Matthew 6:19-34

Where is your heart this morning? It's a funny kind of question, but Jesus says very clearly in His great sermon that your heart is where you gather your treasures. The counter question is, therefore: where are your treasures? What things in life are very important to you?

The biggest court cases in our country are not about heinous crimes like murder or rape, but about money! Cases of corruption and fraud involving many

prominent people have been front-page news in recent years, and these cases often drag on for many years, with legal costs amounting to millions. Money has become incredibly important to humankind.

So, when we read through today's Scripture passage, you may become somewhat irritated with the unrealistic, almost irresponsible lifestyle that is being advocated in the passage. We are supposed to focus on the lofty things in life, and the rest will sort itself out. The question is, can we really take this seriously? You struggle to teach your children

that one must work hard to succeed in life. Now it seems as if the Bible undermines all your hard work!

But on the other hand, there is something utterly irresistible about these words because perhaps this is exactly how life should be. All the rushing and scrambling, the stress, traffic jams, and an unforgiving boss! And all of that just to have a roof over your head and food on the table! Is it all worth it? Wouldn't you rather have a carefree lifestyle somewhere? Do you dream of the day when you can bid farewell to your annoying

clients and go lie on a beach somewhere and relax?

Jesus says in verse 24 that you can only have one master: either God or money! By the way, Mammon is the Aramaic word for money. I have seen time and time again that the person who accumulates possessions and idolizes his earthly wealth can quickly forget about God. Usually, that person is convinced that it is through his own efforts, hard work, and cleverness that he has amassed his wealth. Then you forget about the prayer we just discussed, where we pray for God to provide for our daily

needs. In other words, you forget about your total dependence on God.

In the first section, Jesus says that you should seek treasures in heaven rather than on earth. If we want to live this out practically, it means that you should not spend all your time on your work just to afford a shiny new BMW, but rather give your time to kingdom work. You will be amazed at the peace it brings you and how it draws you closer to God.

The second section is completely incomprehensible to us if we do not see it in the light in which the Jews of that time understood it.

The eye was for them a symbol of sincerity and, in particular, generosity. So, if your eye is set right, you will not cling tightly to your possessions, but you will have an open hand for those in need. You will definitely be willing to give generously for the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

In the last section, Jesus explains what it's all about. Because you trust completely in God, you can now be freed from anxiety and worry about your daily existence.

To worry means to not have full trust in God, as it is a symptom of a superficial view of life, where

everything revolves around material needs and especially standards of living. Worrying is ultimately a waste of time, as there is nothing to gain by it. Moreover, it is a lack of trust in God, implying that I don't believe that God can or will take care of me!

Often, God needs to intervene forcefully when these thoughts cannot penetrate our hearts, as He did with me. He pulled the rug out from under me so that I fell hard to the ground, to learn to truly rely on Him for absolutely everything in life. Don't cry when it happens to you! Rejoice,

because it shows that God truly cares for you.

What does Jesus say to you and me today through this sermon? Should we literally get rid of all our possessions? Definitely not! Jesus invites you and me to start living creatively with our time, our money, and our possessions. For some people, it may mean giving up all security for a completely new life. For others, it may mean looking at our choices in life. I must carefully consider how I use my money and my time. Do I use my money to buy extravagant luxuries? Or do I invest it in kingdom work? Are my

possessions my master, or am I willing to make my possessions available for God's Kingdom?

The great secret is that there will be a healthy balance in my life regarding these things. If I have the means, there is nothing wrong with enjoying a few luxuries, but at the same time, I must not forget about the Kingdom and be equally generous to give back in that area!

Prayer:

Lord, please open my eyes today to see that Your Kingdom is the most important matter in life!

25

Doing Good to Others

Matthew 7:1-12

If there is one passage in the Bible that we often misunderstand on purpose, then it is the section from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount about the speck in your brother's eye and casting pearls before swine. How many times have you, and certainly I too, said to someone, "First look at the beam in your own eye before you look at the splinter in mine!" And how many times in your life have you noticed with annoyance that you shouldn't cast your pearls before swine? What exactly did Jesus

mean by these expressions?

This is about the idea of "Abundant Righteousness" that Jesus is trying to convey. We can perhaps summarize this passage with the words: "Do Good to Others." In verses 1 to 6, Jesus explains how others should NOT be treated, and in verses 7 to 12, He explains how it SHOULD be done.

In the first part, the idea is pertinent: "Do Not Judge." Those are very convenient words to hide behind when we do something and want to justify our actions. However, if you do that, you are misusing the Word of God

because that is not what Jesus meant. Jesus wants to tell you and me that we should look at our own faults before we judge others. On TV, we see people from impoverished neighbourhoods throwing stones and protesting because there is no service delivery. Often, they have to go without water for weeks. There is no sanitation. They live under dire circumstances. For years now, they have pleaded and begged and complained, but nothing happens. And now they are angry. Our first reaction is that they should not handle their problems in such a way. They should do it

in a "civilized" manner!

But my question is: if you and I were in that same situation, wouldn't we also have become angry? Wouldn't we have joined the protest? Don't we sometimes get angry in a traffic jam, especially when some guy cuts us off? Or with the utter incompetence of some government department? This is just an example, but I am quick to judge people without looking at myself first, to make sure that my own life is clean and pure. If my own life is not spotless, I dare not judge others! In 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul says that he would

never even dream of calling someone else to battle if he himself is not properly qualified!

But what about Matthew 18:15-20, where Jesus explicitly says that I should confront my fellow-believer if he sins? Indeed, Jesus wants to say here precisely that I should live my life in such a way that I have the freedom to tell my fellow-sinner where he can find his grace. So, I won't judge him from a high position, but with humility, keeping in mind my own weaknesses, I will talk to him. But only after I have properly swept in front of my own door!

This also connects to the next

section, because if you offer your "valuable advice" condescendingly to someone, you will only receive such "valuable advice" in return, because that person will definitely not appreciate it, and then it is like casting your pearls before swine! They will simply trample it in the mud!

Now how should I then serve my neighbour? Verse 12 sums it up by saying that we should do to others what we would like them to do to us. Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets confirm this. However, one must be cautious in interpreting these words because

what may be pleasing to one person can be painful to another. I want to emphasize once again that you should never take a single verse and make it a law! You should read it in the context in which it was written. The standard here is not how good it looks for YOU to do, but rather what GOD requires. If we look back at the things we have read recently of Jesus' sermon, we see how God expects us to treat our fellow-human beings. There are certain guidelines, and the most important of these is love. This means reaching out to your fellow-human beings and even to your enemy.

1 Corinthians 13 tells us very clearly how we should act in love with these things. Paul says, among other things, that love is patient and kind, and certainly not boastful or arrogant. Furthermore, it is not touchy. If we keep Paul's instructions in mind, we can begin to live out that love practically as Jesus wants us to do. We owe it to each other! Only when we start getting these things right, THEN we begin to fulfill God's law.

The painful question this morning is: what happens if I don't get it right? Let's say I try hard, but it is impossible for me to live out my love properly? Then I ask my

merciful Father in Heaven. He is always ready to give good gifts to me and you. Yes, indeed, He even gives the gift of His love where you and I fall so far short, so that we can also live out that love to it's full potential, not only towards God but also towards my fellow-human beings.

Prayer:

Lord, I confess this morning that I am often so self-righteous - so eager to see the splinters in others' eyes while I have a huge beam in my own eye. Forgive me and please guide me on the right path - the path of perfect love!

Perseverance and Paradise

Matthew 7:13-14

Many years ago, around 1959, my dad's great sense of adventure led him to buy a Land Rover. This rugged car had to be properly initiated and tested, so we set off to Mozambique for a vacation. We drove past Lourenço Marques entirely because it was deemed too civilized for our Landie. Our destination was Xai-Xai, already a familiar spot for our family.

Sylvestra, a fishing guide, was hired for the week. He knew that

world like the palm of his hand, and he was almost like family to us. When Sylvestra saw our brand-new Land Rover, a sparkle appeared in his eyes because this thing could go places where he couldn't go with anyone else, and immediately he told us about an exotic fishing paradise where the fish swam right up to the bare hook, ready to be caught. "The road there is a bit rough," he explained, "but now we have a Land Rover, and that thing can go anywhere...."

And so, one dark morning, we set off for an unknown destination. My buddy Fanie and I were

bubbling with excitement: ADVENTURE! The first few kilometers were on a paved road through the Limpopo marshes, but just past the town of Chidinguela, Sylvestra signaled a small sandy path where we had to turn off. Barely a kilometer further, there was another turn, but this time, it was just two faint, almost invisible tracks that disappeared into dense thickets. It was an idyllic landscape, and we drove along the edges of lakes that stretched as far as the eye could see. They were, of course, infested with crocodiles and swarms of mosquitoes. Then, suddenly, the double track ended,

and before us rose an impenetrable jungle. "We have to go through here," Sylvestra indicated in his Portuguese English. Now it was getting truly exciting! A fallen tree blocked our path, and it had to be chopped down first. Step by step, we struggled through the forest. Time and time again, we got stuck in loose sand. Then it was digging and pushing! In those days, we didn't have the luxury of a winch. Finally, after a terrible ordeal, we reached an opening, but the mountainside we had to drive against was so steep that it felt like we could tip over any moment and roll into the unknown depths.

My stomach tied itself in a knot, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Then another dense forest emerged between us and the tropical golden beach. It had long ceased to be an exciting adventure! I was tired, and I just wanted to reach our destination. And so, while we could smell the sea air and hear the waves crashing, we still struggled to make our way through the wilderness!

Suddenly, there was a pure white sand dune right in front of us. And as the overheated Land Rover groaned over it - **THE PARADISE!** Pristine, untouched, idyllic,

breathhtaking paradise. We were the very first South Africans to set foot on this beach. Everything had been worth the effort! All the hard work and nerves, the mosquitoes and crocodiles! The final destination was astonishingly beautiful! And to top it off, there were fish too!

I remember as a child that in many homes there hung a framed picture of "The Narrow and the Wide Path." In this picture, the worldly path of pleasure and amusement is depicted as a beautiful main road, while on the other side, there is a dangerous, narrow winding path that leads to

heaven. There are only a few people walking on this path, contrasting with the masses on the main road. The picture was drawn based on Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:13-14).

Indeed, it is not an easy path to walk if you truly want to follow Jesus. Every person has a choice of which path to follow. Initially, the path Jesus indicates doesn't seem too difficult, but as you walk on your life's journey, things become increasingly challenging. There are certain things you have to give up if you are serious about walking the path in full, perhaps a

circle of friends who live indifferent lives. Along the way, you realize that certain things you have always enjoyed doing are actually sinful, and you have to let them go. Maybe the Lord asks you to sacrifice your vacation to participate in a mission outreach in a remote and difficult place. Perhaps you are invited to a major sports event on a Sunday morning during church time, and you have to make a very difficult choice. Then there is the matter of love - that you have to give love to people who don't appreciate it. And turning the other cheek when blows are dealt...

When faced with such choices in your life, there may be only one thought in your mind: THE FINAL DESTINATION! While we struggled through the impenetrable forests of Mozambique, that paradise beconing us from the other side was our driving force. However, we could never have dreamt how beautiful it truly was! Everyone who walks the difficult path of faith will one day exclaim in awe, "I could never have dreamed how wonderful it really is!" All the hardships of today will then be more than worth it!

Prayer:

Lord, it is often very difficult to stay on the right path. Please remind me frequently of the final destination and the paradise that awaits me there!

27

House on the Sand Dune

Matthew 7:15-29

Here, along the coast it often rains heavily, and the day when it starts raining persistently, a lot of damage can occur. What many people don't realize is that most coastal towns are built on a giant sand dune. Over a period of thousands of years, sea sand is blown inland, and grain by grain, a dune is formed. Plants grow on it and stabilize it, and over time, it compacts into reasonably solid "ground." Ballito and Umdloti are two of these towns built on such a dune, and in some places the

slope of this dune becomes very steep. Naturally, it has become a major attraction for many people because the steeper it is, the more breathtaking the view. However, the only problem is that even this very steep mountain is still just an ancient sand dune, and there are no rocks beneath it to keep it stable - the only things holding it together are the trees and shrubs that have established themselves there over thousands of years. If you were to remove the plants to build your house, you would create a potentially dangerous situation because you would reduce it back to the ordinary sand dune of thousands

of years ago. And when the heavy rains come, everything washes back into the sea where it originally came from.

That's exactly what happened in a terrible nightmare with a family in Ballito. Their house was on the steepest slope, with a breathtaking view stretching as far as Australia. But then came the heavy rains. The woman was lying peacefully in bed, reading, when suddenly she got the shock of her life: her bed vanished in an instant beneath her, and she barely managed to jump off the bed as the house teetered on the edge of a precipice! A gaping hole

in the floor, big enough to swallow a bed, sneered at her. Shaken by the shock, she shone a flashlight into the hole. What she saw made her go cold: three meters below, a raging river of muddy water was flowing through beneath their house!

They rushed out in the pouring rain to see what had happened. From the street above the house, a grinding mass of muddy water surged out of a damaged stormwater pipe straight towards their house. Helplessly, they had to watch as the sand beneath their house's foundations washed away towards the sea and how

their house was slowly but surely starting to break in two.

A year ago, an even bigger storm hit the KZN coastal area. This time it was Umdloti that suffered, and houses and even apartments built on the sand dune were washed away.

What prompted Jesus to talk about the house on the sand? It was actually about "False Prophets." "Phew! Thank goodness, I'm not one of them!" you might say. But who are they really? They are not necessarily false teachers, but rather false leaders who, through their disregard for the law of love, lead

the rest of the congregation into lovelessness. (You can also read Matt. 24:11,12, where Jesus sketches their profile.) Jesus says that these people may appear very religious and present the name of Jesus to show how pious they truly are. But it's not just a pious face and beautiful words that bring you to heaven!

Jesus uses the metaphor of trees and the fruit they bear. One of the biggest problem plants in our country is Lantana Camara, a climbing plant covered in thorns. This plant has beautiful flowers, and it's pitch-black berry fruits are very attractive and even

enjoyable to eat. However, the fruits contain deadly poison that can cause kidney failure and even death. Furthermore, the plant is a menacing invader, stifling other plants. What appears to be a beautiful plant on the outside is completely corrupt on the inside. Similarly, the alluring fruits of the magnificent Seringa tree are highly toxic, and many children have been poisoned by this popular shady tree. And what about Pretoria's purple pride, the Jacaranda? It is actually a declared weed and a dangerous invader!

Jesus says that we will recognize

those who try to lead us astray by their fruits. Are their fruits love? If not, there is something drastically wrong internally. Is the outward appearance important then? Are good works important? Is it not enough to simply accept Jesus as our Saviour in faith? The proverb says, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." If you are serious about your relationship with God, your actions will confirm it. James is very serious about this matter (James 2:14) where he writes, among other things, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds to show for it?" If your faith

is genuine, built on the Rock, Jesus Christ, then you will strive to live out His love and flee from sin. However, if your faith is built on an unstable sand dune, your life will certainly reflect it.

Today is the time to determine the foundation of your faith. If it stands on sand, it is better to consult an "engineer" on how to correct the error before the heavy rains come, and it may be too late forever...

Prayer:

Lord, please help me today to live out my faith practically through words and deeds!

28

Love in Practice

Matthew 8:1-17

In this wonderful sermon that Jesus delivered on the mountain, Matthew showed us the authority with which Jesus spoke. The things He said left the crowds astonished, and thousands of people hung on His every word. But mere words usually mean nothing if they cannot be confirmed by actions. We often see this truth among men and women in high political circles. Beautiful inspiring speeches are given time and time again, and wonderful promises are made.

And then usually nothing comes of it. We see it happening in our country, and the man on the street becomes furious because the promises remain empty. Lately, we have seen people rising up in anger because there are only promises of clean water, electricity, and service delivery, but nothing is actually done. Garbage and debris fill the towns, and the sewage systems no longer work. In Hammanskraal, several people died of cholera in the past week because it all remains talk and the words do not translate into actions.

Matthew shows us that Jesus is

so different. When a leper dares to come to Jesus among the large crowds, only a single word from Jesus is enough to heal him of his terrible disease. Someone with leprosy was an outcast from society in those days. No one wanted or could have anything to do with them. The law even prohibited them from having any contact with people because their skin disease could be deadly and contagious. They could be heavily punished if they were to step among other people. This desperate man takes a great risk by going to Jesus and even walking among the crowds. On the other hand, a healthy person

would not dare to touch a leper because then you would become unclean. Jesus does not hesitate to touch the leper. He puts His own reputation and purity on the line, showing that love demands more from you than what is usually expected.

The second person we hear about this morning is someone who filled the Jews with hatred at the mere mention of his name. Although he is a man of status and holds a good position in the military, he is not a Jew, and the Jews passionately despise him because he was part of their enemy, their oppressors, the

Romans. How dare he, someone who has absolutely no part in the Jews and their faith, come knocking on Jesus, the Son of David, for help? But the situation is even worse: it is not for himself or his family, but for a worthless piece of property, a slave! This officer humiliates himself by coming to a Jew to ask for help for a slave! I see a man who truly cares because a slave in those days was the lowest class of human being, and they were often treated like animals. Yet this hardened Roman had the compassion in his heart to care for that slave. Jesus sees his compassion, and his faith

impresses Him, and the slave is instantly healed. In this, Jesus shows that He can not only say beautiful things, but He also lives them out practically. When He says that you should love your enemy, He shows how you should apply that love in practice.

The third incident also involves an outcast from society. Not only was she a woman, who incidentally was considered nothing more than property in Jewish culture, but she was also a mother-in-law! She lay there with a high fever and didn't even ask for help because she knew she wasn't worth being helped. As a woman,

she was less important, but for Jesus, she was of the utmost importance because she is a human being! Without her asking for it, Jesus took her by the hand, and suddenly the fever disappeared, and she was completely healed.

Matthew writes that on that night, many people came to Jesus, and He healed all the sick and cast out evil spirits.

I said at the beginning that words without actions are meaningless. Jesus demonstrated here how we can and must live out the things He spoke of. For a believer to merely say, "I believe in Jesus!" is

meaningless if the things you do don't show what that faith means. In the previous passages, we clearly saw that your actions leave a mark on what you confess. Today, Jesus practically demonstrates that it's not only enough to say that you love your neighbor but that you must step out and do something practical to alleviate their needs. But He goes further and demonstrates that it's not necessarily the people in your circle of friends or your family who should receive your practical love, but also those outside. The outcasts from society often need your practical love more than the people who are easy for you to

love. The dirty, smelly beggar, the neighbor who causes you so much trouble, the struggling boss who everyone hates, they are all people and also God's children!

Let us make it a point today to practically live out our love to everyone who crosses our path!

Prayer:

Lord, I must confess this morning that my faith is often merely theoretical, and the practical is lacking. Please help me truly live out my love.

How to Follow Jesus

Matthew 8:18-22

In my early youth, I worked for a construction company. This was a rough bunch of guys! Not only were the men on the ground tough, but even up in the director's chairs, there were a few questionable characters. When the clock struck quitting time, the gang started partying. Ian was the company secretary and also a director, a very indifferent man. His marriage was a mere side issue for him. He was rarely home anyway because when it was time to go home, he and his

buddies had already planned some unholy activity for the evening. They would come up with any possible excuse to throw a wild party or hang out at the pub. Sometimes, even the invitation to their parties was so vulgar that it made me blush. Friday evenings were especially wild because that's when Ian and his buddies would head to Durban. They knew every strip club and hovel. Usually, they would stumble home on Saturday morning. However, Ian's wife never gave up hope. She and a few friends often prayed together for her indifferent husband while he was out carousing. Their

prayer was that he would find Jesus.

Their prayers were not unanswered, and one day Jesus came into Ian's life, and he underwent a powerful conversion. The Holy Spirit convicted him of his sins, and Ian pleaded for forgiveness for his dreadful life. Then Jesus issued the call: "Follow Me!" Ian called a board meeting. I can only guess what was said that day, but when he walked out, every director knew that something significant had happened in Ian's life. He resigned as a director and became a student preacher in a

small Methodist community somewhere in Zululand where there is no financial security. Ian surely must have agonized over this drastic decision for many sleepless nights. It couldn't have come easy because he had to give up a high salary, security, and many other things. By worldly standards, Ian sacrificed everything to follow Jesus, but what he gained in heavenly joy cannot be bought with money.

What exactly does it mean to follow Jesus?

Matthew tells of two individuals who wanted to follow Jesus. Jesus' response is surprising, and

from His answer to them, you quickly realize that you must think twice before blindly saying that you want to follow Jesus. To follow Him wholeheartedly can mean a drastic and even dramatic change in your life. Jesus made it clear to the scribe that if he wants to follow Him, there are no securities and no fixed address. He and His disciples often had to spend the night somewhere in the field. This implies that the same fate might befall you as well. If you read the gripping novel by Jaco Thom, "Paul, the Thirteenth Apostle," you will discover that the followers of Christ had a very difficult time after His resurrection

and were rejected by society and even their own families. They often lost everything in life. Even the famous Paul was initially rejected by all his friends, and when he turned to the believers, they rejected him too. When Matthew wrote down these words of Jesus, he also realized the true meaning from his own costly experience.

In practice, following Christ today means that you often have to make great sacrifices. You will sometimes find that people avoid you or even mock your "holiness." For example, following Jesus as a teacher has become very difficult

these days because you dare not live out your Christianity in school. If you dare to talk about Christianity in class, you face persecution. Some teachers I know sacrifice their breaks to share the Gospel message with children who voluntarily come to listen. But even this causes fellow teachers to become hostile and cause trouble.

However, one can go further in their discipleship and join organizations like the Macedonia Project to spread the Gospel in countries where the message of Jesus' salvation is not welcome. There are millions of people

hungry for the Word, but it is being denied to them by the authorities. Spreading the Gospel in such places is difficult and dangerous work, but there are believers who sacrifice everything for it and return radiant after another successful outreach.

In the second incident, a prospective follower's excuse to unconditionally follow Jesus was that he first wanted to bury his father. For that man, it was important to complete an emotional task first. If you truly want to follow Jesus, there is no room for unimportant things. Forget about them! It means you

must focus solely on Jesus and leave behind the emotional attachments that hold you back. An idyllic annual family vacation by the sea may need to make way for an outreach to Mozambique, where every day involves hard work and struggle, flies, mosquitoes, scorching heat, dust, and sore feet.

Are we truly willing to follow Jesus? Completely? The cost is high, but the spiritual reward is immeasurably great.

Prayer:

Lord, I want to follow You with my whole life. Where there are things that hold me back, please help

me break free from them.

Storm at Sea

Matthew 8:23-27

How great is the omnipotence of God? To catch just a glimpse of the mystery and grandeur of God's creation, we can lift our eyes to the stars. In the well-known constellation of Orion, there are a few stars that stand out brightly. One that catches immediate attention is the star that forms the right shoulder of the giant: its name is Betelgeuse. This is a very special star, one of the so-called "super giants." It is 60,000 times brighter than the sun and has a diameter of 5.6

astronomical units (AU). An AU (astronomical unit) is the distance from the sun to the earth. Therefore, if this star were in place of the sun, its outer edge would stretch almost three times as far as the earth is from the sun. Betelgeuse is so large that this single star could engulf half of our entire solar system with all its planets! And yet, it is only one of billions of other large stars, merely a speck in the vastness of the universe, God's creation. The question now is: How great is the true omnipotence of God?

If we keep this image in mind and read the story that Matthew writes

about the events in the boat, everything makes sense, and we begin to glimpse a bit of Jesus' omnipotence. However, the problem is that our own problems often seem so enormous to us that we are completely overwhelmed and cannot see the power of the Lord.

Around the Sea of Galilee, there are several mountains and ravines. Often, short, strong winds form that flow down these ravines, almost like through a funnel, causing sudden and violent storms on the lake. Jesus and the twelve disciples were in a fishing boat on their way to the

other side of the lake when one of these unpredictable storms hit them. Jesus was lying and sleeping. No wonder, for He must have been exhausted after another marathon day of preaching, healing the sick, casting out demons, and being crowded by the throngs of people who all wanted to come to Him.

When the storm hits them, the men are terrified because their small boat feels like a tiny float in the vast ocean, and they have already seen themselves sinking into the depths. They shake Jesus awake. Throughout all the excitement, He still lies calmly

and sleeps! "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" they cry out in distress. Miraculously, the men still remember where they can seek salvation! A single word from Him calms the raging wind and waves, bringing a sudden deathly silence and calm.

Jesus rebukes the men for their lack of faith. For the past while, they have witnessed the miracles He performs every day and have seen the most astonishing things happen. But when it comes to their own predicament, they begin to doubt what exactly Jesus is capable of. Clearly, they still have a long way to go before they are

ready to take over the leadership of the church. "Who is He then?" they ask themselves. "What kind of person is He that even the wind and sea obey Him?" They haven't even begun to understand who this Man who makes all these things happen truly is.

The question is whether you and I truly understand exactly who Jesus is? I think that, just like the twelve men of that time, we often don't fully realize who we are dealing with. Firstly, I believe that our finite minds are simply too small to comprehend Him because His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence

are much greater than we can grasp. One man once told me that he couldn't believe in God because how is it possible for someone to be in many different places at once? Yes, he is right: our understanding cannot grasp such things because it doesn't fit into our frame of reference!

Yet, the evidence is overwhelming. Just think about the star we talked about earlier, Betelgeuse. We cannot fathom just how incredibly enormous that star truly is. Nevertheless, it is a reality, and astronomers confirm it. It seems absolutely impossible

for someone who is terminally ill to suddenly be completely healthy! Medically, it is not possible! Yet, it happens, and then doctors often just shake their heads in disbelief. With God, absolutely nothing is impossible.

All these things should bring us once again to the realization of the absolute greatness and omnipotence of the Lord. It is not necessary for us to physically experience and see miracles: all the evidence is already there. But if we just open our eyes, we will see countless miracles happening around us every day. The purpose of these things is to

inspire us to worship Him who reigns over all and for whom nothing is impossible.

Do we ever truly realize who God is? We often speak of Him so lightly. We don't even give Him nearly enough praise, and we talk about Him as if He is just another part of our faith. Let us today deeply realize who we worship and give Him the praise, honor, and thanks that He deserves.

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I bow down in worship before You, for I am but dust before Your great omnipotence.

Terror in the Cemetery

Matthew 8:28-34

"I dare you to put a handful of rabbit droppings on Old Rabbit, the math teacher's chair!" It's a dangerous thing to do because Old Rabbit is extremely sensitive about his nickname, and he will definitely make a fuss about such a despicable act! If the poor fellow who dares to do it gets caught, he's as good as dead! But when you're dared, you don't dare refuse! You didn't even think about the consequences of your actions. All that dominated your thoughts was to be crowned the

hero of the day!

And I remember well how the poor guy who committed the act had a behind that looked like a baboon's, red and raised. But he was very proud of it!P

However, there was one "dare" that was never taken lightly and certainly never taken up lightly: to walk alone through the spooky cemetery of Waterval Boven at night. I mean, it was bad enough to walk through the old historical buildings of Oosterlijn Primary School at night. It was rumored to be haunted. Just ask the principal, Uncle Ghoul (his nickname), he was deathly afraid

of the school's ghosts! But the cemetery? No way! Not even the bravest "dare" would have found you there, because the evils you might encounter there were more dangerous than anything you could ever deal with.

Years later, I'm part of the church youth in Durban North. The beautiful old cemetery is just a short distance from the church and forms a shortcut to one of our friend's houses. We often walked through it after church in the evenings, and the tranquility and calmness struck me, and I enjoyed it!

So what's the difference between

Durban North and Waterval Boven's cemetery? Nothing! The difference lies in the people, because in Durban North, it was believers who experienced God's presence in the silence. The scared boys in Waterval Boven completely misunderstood God and only saw the terrible evil.

I think even the poor people of Gadara would shudder to enter the cemetery in broad daylight because there lived two men who were completely insane. (Mark writes about only one.) They were possessed by multiple demons that completely controlled their lives. To encounter such a person

was already a disaster for those people. Moreover, to find two of them together in a cemetery was horrifying because they felt that in such circumstances, they were completely outside God's jurisdiction.

When Jesus and the disciples passed by, these possessed men crawled out of the tomb where they lived and ran towards Him as if they were greeting a very important person. The demons, or rather, the devil's angels, immediately recognized Jesus as the Son of God, and they were afraid! They knew His omnipotence! They also knew in

advance what awaited them, so they begged Him for an alternative dwelling. It only took a single powerful word from Jesus to deliver the possessed men and allow the demons to enter a herd of unclean pigs, which then rushed down into the sea and drowned themselves.

For the disciples, this must have been a traumatic experience. They hadn't even recovered from the shock of the previous night when they all thought they were going to drown. Jesus had to intervene again during that terrible storm that night, and with a word, everything calmed down.

Barely setting their unsteady foot on land, the next crisis hits them. But the message is very clear: with Jesus by their side, the worst crisis becomes only an opportunity to demonstrate Jesus' omnipotence.

Jesus has overcome evil. In this story, we clearly see Jesus' power over evil. However, it doesn't mean that evil has disappeared. It still remains dangerously present, but as a child of God, I no longer need to fear evil because with Jesus by my side, He is the One in control. However, it doesn't mean that I can be indifferent to the power of evil. If you play with

devilish things like the occult, divination, astrology, etc., you can get badly burned. Then you move away from Jesus and find yourself in the clutches of the devil, so to speak.

Matthew's story ends tragically: when the inhabitants of Gadara saw Jesus' power over evil, they became afraid of Him and begged Him to leave. However, if you read Mark's version, you'll see that there is still a beautiful ending because these possessed individuals who experienced Jesus' deliverance went back to their people and told them what had truly happened. Thus, the

message of Jesus' salvation spread among the Gadarenes. Later, these very same Gadarenes became the salvation for many believers who had to flee for their lives during the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem.

The message is clear this morning: even in the most terrifying circumstances, you can know that you are still within God's realm of power. He remains fully in control! As long as you remain with Jesus, you are safe.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for once again giving me the assurance that you

are in full control - no matter what happens!

Complete Healing

Matthew 9:1-8

How would you understand it if I were to say that your sins are forgiven? Apparently, the members of the congregation in Matthew's church struggled with this question. So, Matthew tries to explain it to them with an incident that happened just after the disciples had the experience in the cemetery in Gadara. They were no longer welcome there because the cost of the Gospel was too great for those people. They had, after all, lost an entire herd of pigs because of the

Gospel, and they were afraid of Jesus. His power over evil made them tremble. So, they get back into the boat and row across the lake to Jesus' hometown, where He naturally was well-known.

The news spreads quickly, and a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus on a stretcher. Our initial reaction would be to think that Jesus would heal him, as He has done so many times before. That is, after all, the paralyzed man's expectation. He has heard so much about Jesus being able to heal any illness. And finally, his chance has come. But then something surprising happens

because instead of laying His hands on him and healing him, Jesus simply tells the man that his sins are forgiven.

The man was surely very disappointed! After all, he didn't go through all the trouble just to be forgiven, did he? He wants to be healed! However, he is not the only one disappointed. Some curious scribes who came to see what Jesus was about to do hear these shocking words. Now, their blood is properly up because it is blasphemous to claim to forgive someone's sins! How can He, as a mere human, declare that the man's sins are forgiven? Only

God can forgive sins! No human can do it on behalf of God!

The question we must ask today is whether the Pope would dare to make such a declaration? Or the minister or priest? Does anyone dare to speak on behalf of God like that?

The fact is that the Lord has promised forgiveness of sins to everyone who believes in Jesus. Of course, I cannot forgive someone's sins; only God can. However, based on God's promises in the Word, I, as a believer, can declare that someone's sins are forgiven because of their faith in Jesus.

God has given you and me, as His children, the authority to declare forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name! It is clear in Romans 3:23-26: "Everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free..... In this way God shows that he himself is righteous and that he puts right everyone who believes in Jesus." 1 John 1:9 - "But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing." John 4 describes the story of the

woman at the well. She committed adultery, and she was forgiven. In 1 Timothy 1:13-16, we read about how the persecutor, murderer Paul obtained complete forgiveness. There are numerous similar passages in the Bible that celebrate God's forgiveness. And if the Lord writes it in His Word then why shouldn't I proclaim it for everyone to hear?

The fact that Matthew wants to emphasize here is that Jesus looks much deeper than just physical need. Jesus heals the whole person. After the first great miracle where the man's soul was healed, a second miracle follows.

For the first time, the man can walk again. The onlookers are amazed and astonished. However, the wonder does not end here because Matthew tells us that the man went home. Now he can once again take his place in the family and society as a whole person. But it goes even further: because his sins are forgiven, there is also a restoration in his relationship with God.

It is dreadful to live with the dark cloud over you, knowing that your sins are not forgiven. That as a result, there can be no relationship between you and

God. Sin builds a wall between you and God. And it is so unnecessary! That wall can be completely broken down and totally disintegrated so that nothing remains of it. It means a free access for you to God.

However, there is only one way to make that miracle happen and restore your entire being. The answer is simple: faith in Jesus Christ. No, not just believing that He exists, that means nothing! Faith here means a complete trust in Him alone and surrendering your life completely to Him. When that happens, the great miracle takes place. The

woman at the well, Paul, the paralyzed man, and many others have experienced this miracle. Then Jesus makes your life completely new. The dark cloud disappears like mist before the sun, and the wall disintegrates. Your sins are made spotless as described in Isaiah 1:18 - The LORD says, "Now, let's settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red, you will be as white as wool."

Prayer:

Lord, my prayer goes out to everyone reading this message

this morning, and who has not yet
made the decision to follow You!

A Feast with Sinners

Matthew 9:9-17

In a tax booth sits a man who is bitterly lonely in a certain sense. Yes, he has friends, but no one can be proud of such a corrupt bunch! How he wishes that society would accept him. Oh, if someone with a "clean character" would just talk to him as if he were a human being! It's his profession that causes this, probably one of the most hated professions in Israel, that of a tax collector. He must collect taxes and squeeze money out of people, people who often are

already struggling greatly. Sometimes he has to use underhanded methods to extort the hard-earned money from the Jews. It is difficult and bitterly lonely to be a tax collector! Respected people certainly don't associate themselves with you. So, you have to be content with shady characters as friends. Matthew sighs heavily. How he wishes...

A great excitement breaks out further up the street. Matthew cranes his neck to see what's going on. A large crowd is slowly approaching. It seems to Matthew as if everyone is focused on one

Man. Oh, it would be so nice to get some positive attention!

When Matthew applied for this position as a tax collector, there was fierce competition. You can make good money because the Romans don't really control your collections, as long as they get their share! You actually determine your own income from the "illegal" money you collect from people. Stealing? No, he wouldn't call it stealing, but it's definitely not far from it! Everyone suspects him of being a thief and a rogue anyway. He's used to it by now, and it rolls off him like water off a duck's back.

A strange excitement takes hold of Matthew as the crowds approach his tax booth. Who is this Man who attracts so much attention? Isn't it perhaps that new Prophet who is making waves? His Name is said to be Jesus.

As the crowds pass by Matthew's "office," the Man suddenly stands still and He looks Matthew directly in the eyes. It feels as if the Man is looking right through him, as if He can read his every thought like a book. "Follow Me," says the Man to Matthew. At that moment, Matthew knows that there is only one path for him. He doesn't yet

know exactly who this Man is, but he leaves his work just like that and he follows Jesus. He soaks up every word from Jesus' mouth like a sponge.

"I want to have dinner at your place tonight," the request comes unexpectedly. Matthew is startled! But then excitement bubbles up within him. He doesn't even listen to the wonderful things Jesus is saying anymore. "I simply must go and tell my pals!" He starts running. So many things to do! What will he serve Jesus? Whom should he invite? There's not much time! If he wants to prepare a royal feast, he'll have to hurry!

"Come and eat at my place tonight - we have very special guests!" he shouts to a very shady character as he runs past. Matthew pinches himself to make sure he's not dreaming. Someone is interested in him, Matthew, for more than just his money!

When the twilight descends over Nazareth, Matthew paces nervously. The tables groan under the weight of the food, and one by one, his unsavory friends shuffle in. Matthew feels guilty, knowing that they are not exactly the type of company he would like to share with this holy "Prophet," but they are the only friends he has!

They laugh and talk vulgarly boisterously. And then Jesus arrives, followed by a group of very uncomfortable disciples. Never in their lives have they shared a table with such a bunch of sinners! "This is a rough bunch!" Simon whispers to his brother Andrew.

"Yes, what could have possessed the Rabbi to want to eat here?"

That controversial meal does not escape the watchful eyes of a few Pharisees, and they listen with disdain to the cheerful sounds coming from Matthew's house. The next day, Jesus has to answer a few difficult questions.

Why did He choose to associate Himself with this scum? "Healthy people don't need a doctor," He explains to the self-righteous. "God desires mercy, not sacrifice. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."

What we as believers often fail to understand is that living out our faith does not consist solely of our fellowship with other believers. As a believer, I must not withdraw from the world like a monk; instead, I must step into this world of recklessness and sin and proclaim the forgiveness of sins. When Jesus called this shady

character, Matthew, He immediately gained access to a bunch of other sinners who needed His forgiveness. What's more, that same sinner was possibly the very Matthew who became an apostle and later led countless people to Jesus. He touched the lives of thousands through his preaching. It was a snowball effect that simply grew bigger and bigger. Jesus came precisely to save sinners! He saves people who are without hope and completely lost for the Kingdom of God.

Prayer:

Lord, please open my eyes so

that I can see beyond just the believers in my circle. Give me a passion for lost sinners!

Please Hurry!

Matthew 9:18-26

The poor man is desperate. Jairo's daughter's condition is deteriorating by the minute. The doctors have given up their hands. He has to helplessly watch as her life slips away! The fact that he is an esteemed council member of the synagogue counts for nothing! Slowly, a thought takes hold of him: that Jesus he has heard about, the Miracle Healer... But then he wants to push the thought out of his head. What will his colleagues say if he now seeks this Man's

help? Each of the council members wants to catch snakes at the mere mention of Jesus' name! How will it look if he asks Jesus for help? The other stubborn heads will surely roast him! But Jairo is desperate! His darling daughter is more important than the opinions of the "wise" men. There is no other option.

It feels like an endless road to Nazareth for Jairo. His breath is racing because he cannot afford to rest for a moment. If only he is on time! It doesn't take long to find out where Jesus is. Rumours about Jesus are on everyone's

lips. "My little daughter has probably already died," it runs through his mind all the time, "Jesus is my only hope to save her!" He runs as fast as his two feet can carry him. His breath burns in his lungs. When Jairus arrives in Nazareth, his overworked heart makes an extra leap because from a distance he already sees the crowds of people, and he knows that salvation is in sight. He bursts through the crowds and falls at Jesus' feet. Then he sobs it out: "Lord, my daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live!"

Jesus immediately realizes how urgent this matter is, and He stands up from where He was preaching to the crowds. "Come, let's go and see your daughter," He comforts Jäirus. They quickly start walking towards Jäirus' house.

But then there is a cruel interruption. A woman pushes through the crowds. She has a problem: she has been suffering from "bleeding" for many years, and she is weary. She is considered "unclean," and she is not allowed to even come into contact with people. If only she can touch Jesus' clothes.....

Jewish men wore a prayer shawl, also known as a talit. Tassels were attached to the four corners of this talit. They are called tzitzit, and they were meant to remind you of God's commandments (Numbers 15:38-41). Some people believed that there was a power radiating from these tzitzit tassels because they indirectly represented God. This woman probably just wanted to touch those magical tassels on Jesus' robe so that she could experience the power of God through them. After all, Jesus is a "Prophet," and therefore the power from His tzitzit tassels could bring her healing.

Jesus turns around, He wants to know who touched His clothes. The disciples are annoyed because everyone is pushing and shoving to get to Jesus. Now He wants to know who touched Him? Everyone touched Him! But Jesus wants to know first, and then the woman confesses and tells her story.

One feels tempted to say to Jesus, "The little girl! It's urgent! The woman can wait a bit, Lord! She has been living with this condition for twelve years anyway! Her problem certainly won't worsen, and another hour or two will surely make no

difference!"

However, Jesus wants to attend to her needs first because it is important to Him. While you and I and the disciples are jumping up and down impatiently because Jesus is taking his time with this urgent matter of the dying little girl, Jesus calmly talks to the woman first. He tells her that her faith has saved her. For this woman, her healing has opened up the world for her because for the first time in many years, she is truly human again!

Only then does Jesus turn his full attention back to the council member and his daughter, who by

now has tragically died!

Upon arriving at Jairus' house, the sorrowful, mournful sounds of death flutes and mourners' lamentations linger. "Go away!" Jesus startles them to the great astonishment of the family. "She is not dead - she is just asleep!" They laugh at Him: how can He say such a ridiculous thing? Everyone saw that the child was dead! She is already cold!

Then Jesus walks into the house. Dozens of curious eyes follow Him. Will He accomplish the utterly impossible today? No, definitely not easily! People who are dead certainly do not come

back to life! And if He thought the child was just sleeping - they all saw what they saw! Today, He will surely come off second-best!

Jesus tenderly takes the child's hand in His hands. "Talita, cumi!" they hear the words whispered, "Little girl, arise!" (Mark 5:41). And then, before the amazed eyes of the sceptical people, she sits up - fully alive and glowing with health.

Within minutes, there is not a single person in the village who does not know about the breathtaking miracle that happened in Jaïrus' house!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, only You can give life
- You are the only Way to eternal
life!

We Can See!!!

Matthew 9:27-34

It's astonishing to see what is being done today to make life normal for a blind person. The computer programming to make computers accessible to the blind is astounding. AI (Artificial Intelligence) has opened many doors for the blind, among others. For example, DepthNavAI is an app that a blind person can download on their mobile phone. It assists with navigation, allowing them to "see" what is in front of them and how far it is through sound. It also performs advanced

facial recognition, even if the person is wearing sunglasses, as well as text recognition. So, the person can form a mental image of what is happening around them through their ears.

I have the utmost admiration for blind individuals who lead a completely normal life and carry out their daily tasks despite their impairment. Years ago, I became friends with a blind guy in Welkom, Staffie Pelser, a physiotherapist. He was also deeply involved in his community, especially with the youth. His ability to read the Bible with his fingers in braille amazed me!

Despite blind individuals learning to live with their impairment, there are still things they often long for, like being able to drive a car, see a rainbow, experience a sunset, and appreciate the colourful wonder of flowers.

In biblical times, it wasn't as easy for the blind. They didn't have the same opportunities and education as we have today, and they were completely dependent on society and their families. How many of them must have longed to be a full-fledged part of society, have a family of their own, and be able to care for them!

How must it feel to be blind for

most of your life and then suddenly, one day, be able to see clearly again? What kind of experience must it be to suddenly see everything you've wondered about all those years! Just think: you might not even know what your life partner, whom you've been married to for so many years, looks like, and suddenly you see them face to face.

Two blind men received a glimmer of hope in their lives. They heard about the wonderful things happening through Jesus. And then, one beautiful day, this very Jesus is in their vicinity. Could He possibly do something

for them? So, desperately, when they hear the crowds passing by, they cry out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" If only He would hear them! If only He would pay attention to their plea!

With our modern medical science it is now possible to restore sight to a blind person in some cases. Where a cataract used to mean permanent blindness until a few years ago, it is now just a minor surgery to implant a new lens in the eye to restore sight. However, in biblical times, there was no cure for blindness. These two men were asking Jesus for the absolute impossible. How does

He react? He wants to know if they truly believe that they can be healed. Their desire for this one thing in their lives is so great that they unequivocally answer, "Yes, Lord!"

I can't even begin to understand how it must feel to be enveloped in darkness for your entire life. The awe-inspiring miracle that follows, where they suddenly gain clear vision, dominates their lives. Jesus tries to quiet them, but it is impossible for the two to remain silent about that wonderful thing that happened to them. As far as they go, they excitedly tell everyone about what happened.

The question is whether faith is always a requirement for healing. Some would say "Yes," but we must realize that Jesus does not act according to fixed recipes. For example, Peter's mother-in-law was healed without even asking for it. The focus is not on the prescribed procedure but on recognizing Jesus as the true Son of God. He is the One who cares for ordinary people like you and me. If we approach Jesus with this conviction and expectation, we will also experience His mercy.

In the next passage, we learn about a mute man. Poor guy, he

was under the power of an evil spirit. However, when Jesus heals him, the church leaders grumble. According to them, Jesus uses the power of the devil to drive out evil spirits. What a terrible thing to say! It still happens today, and often the work of evangelists who use unconventional methods is criticized by some church leaders. We must be very cautious before passing judgment. If something doesn't seem right to you, you should thoroughly test it against the Scriptures and only then, when you are absolutely certain of your case, attribute it to the devil.

Matthew's story of the blind men also reminds us of another kind of blindness: spiritual blindness! Have you been healed from it? If so, are you keeping silent about it? Or are you proclaiming it to the whole world, like the two men whom Jesus healed? Don't remain silent! Shout it out!

Prayer:

Lord, I want to shout for joy - You are the great healer who even heals spiritual blindness - who has also healed my own spiritual blindness!

The Harvest is Great

Matthew 9:35-38

The Free State can be an unforgiving place, where on any given day a dust storm may arise and you see this bank of terror rolling in, swallowing everything in its path. When the dust cloud envelops you it becomes dark, and the suffocating dust robs you of your breath. In our thatched-roof cottage, it almost feels like rain as the dust particles sift slowly through the thatch and sprinkle everything in the house with a layer of red mine sand. Mercifully, the dust storm passes

after a few days. Then comes the scorching, searing heat of summer. The bone-dry air burns your lungs and the rain often stays away.

But the soil is fertile and if the rain comes in time, the red earth yields abundantly and the fields produce a bountiful harvest. That specific year, the rain came at exactly the right time and it was enough. Now the fields are heavily pregnant with golden wheat ears ready to burst from their sheaths. The stage is set, and you can feel the anticipation and tension in the air.

Then, early one morning the

heavy machinery thunders down the dusty farm road in a thick cloud of dust. At the forefront of the procession is a giant green monster with a long row of teeth. In its dust trail, a group of about five harvesters and trucks follow. My heart skips a beat! It's harvest time! I am overwhelmed with excitement!

For the next few days, the harvesters rumble up and down the fields. A thick stream of golden wheat grains sprays into the waiting bins of the trucks until they are overloaded and groan as they drive away with their precious cargo. Eventually, only

stubble remains on the stripped fields. A deadly silence descends over the farm. The breeze whispers cold and mournfully over the skeletons in the wheatland. But in my heart, there is warmth because the harvest has been gathered!

And the harvest was great!

Jesus' preaching attracted huge crowds of people. They trampled over each other just to get near Him. Jesus had great compassion for the people (Matt. 9:36), and He saw that the harvest would be plentiful. However, gathering a harvest is the work of many people. It requires workers who

are willing to toil in the wind, weather, and sun. Harvesting is not easy work, but the satisfaction it brings is immeasurably great. With a spiritual harvest it is even greater, and soon your hard work is completely forgotten when you enjoy the joy of a successful harvest.

For a while, His twelve disciples have been witnessing what Jesus does day by day and hearing what He says. But now the time has come for them to put into practice what they have learned. Yet Jesus does not send them into the field empty-handed. He equips them properly. This is still

just a school of learning but later, after Jesus' ascension, these same men would have to set the ball rolling to spread the Gospel throughout the whole world.

You and I are also part of Jesus' team of "farmers". Some of us are still being trained, and we must be content to pull weeds or provide water. Others manage those big machines that harvest tons and tons of souls. Some are entrusted with only a small plot of land that we must nurture until it's ready for the harvest. Some even have just a single corn plant to care for! Then there are those who have been given a huge land

to manage where the harvest is tremendously abundant and the responsibility even greater. However, it's crucial to know that every worker, no matter how small or large their responsibility, is equally important in the team! The one who serves the tea is just as important as the preacher!

The question this morning is: Are you already part of that team? Are you doing your part to gather the harvest for Jesus? Just as there are various workers on a farm, each with their own task, there is also a variety of workers in Jesus' harvest field. On a farm, there are only a few who operate the giant

harvesters. The others must maintain vehicles, weed out the fields, plow, fertilize, irrigate, or even bring the farmer coffee! Similarly, not everyone in Jesus' harvest field is a preacher, pastor, or missionary, but everyone has their niche where they contribute to gathering the great harvest. If you're not part of that team and choose to do nothing, there is a gap in the team. It cannot function properly without you. Find out where your place is in Jesus' team and get to work. If it means receiving training of some kind, then you should do it. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few" (Matt 9:37). Are

the workers few because your place is still empty?

Prayer:

Lord, the harvest in the fields is plentiful. Please give me the passion in my heart and the zeal to work and help gather Your great harvest!

Sent Out to Harvest

Matthew 10:1-15

Matthew tells of five disciples who were called by Jesus. First, the brothers Peter and Andrew, and then two other brothers, James and John. Later, Matthew the tax collector also followed. Now we hear that the inner circle of disciples eventually grew to twelve. They are, of course, not the only regular disciples, but they were chosen to perform a special task. They will be His apostles, or rather, those sent out, and they will receive intensive training. They will

ultimately form the core of the "new Israel."

The twelve now receive their first major assignment, to go to the "lost sheep" of the people of Israel. When He sends them into the unreachable world, He gives them absolute authority over unclean spirits and to heal the sick. In other words, they can continue His ministry directly as His authoritative messengers.

They receive very specific instructions to carry out. They are sent specifically to Israelites. They must avoid the Samaritans and other gentile nations. Their message to everyone must be:

"The kingdom of heaven is near!"
But it should not just be limited to preaching. Their message must be accompanied by the practical demonstration of it, such as healing the sick, even cleansing lepers, and driving out evil spirits!

I think the men were very excited to apply practically what they had learned from Jesus recently. All students get excited when they suddenly exchange the lecture hall for a field trip to experience things practically; it's exhilarating!

But a little surprise awaits the disciples: if they thought it would be easy, they make a very big mistake! Jesus forbids them to

take anything with them. They are not allowed to bring any money, extra clothes, shoes, or even a travel bag. Moreover, they are not allowed to accept any payment from anyone for the work they do. Does this sound a bit unfair? How are they supposed to survive?

However, Jesus wants to teach them something very important: total dependence on God. In the Sermon on the Mount they have already heard that you are blessed when you realize how dependent you are on God. Perhaps they will remember this when they find themselves somewhere in the veldt without

food or shelter. Or even with a pair of shoes that have worn out on the road. The worst part is that when this happens, they won't be able to beg for help somewhere. They must rely on the hospitality of the people who hear their message. God will indeed send the message to someone who, in turn, will be obedient to God's voice and, of their own free will, without being asked, provide accommodation and food for the men, and everything they need.

One often walks in fear and trembling in such a situation. I can imagine how the men must have felt. In my own life, I can

testify to that. When we lost our house back then, we were desperate for a place to stay. No money to rent a house or even a room somewhere, but we didn't ask anyone for accommodation. Out of the blue, I received a call from Willem; he and Linda had a vacant little apartment. Would we like to come and stay there? For free! A year later, Danie and Adele asked if we would please house-sit for them while they were in Australia, also for free! Such hospitality simply is not logical. It doesn't make any sense at all, and it can only be attributed to God's provision when you begin to realize how truly

dependent you are on Him.

I am eternally grateful to these two families, as well as many other believers who provided for us in various ways, and I want to say, "Thank you for listening to the voice of God! May He bless you abundantly!"

Jesus wanted to make it very clear to the twelve who were sent out how serious the message was that they had to proclaim. For those who received it, and especially those who offered them hospitality, the rich blessings of God awaited them. The promise of eternal life and God's peace were more than anyone could ask

for. However, those who rejected them, along with the message, faced eternal damnation. As a sign of this, the men had to symbolically shake the dust off their feet. Today, the message is exactly the same. Those who accept Jesus' salvation receive more than anyone could ever dream of. But if you reject it, eternal damnation awaits you!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for giving me eternal life and Your wonderful peace. This morning, I pray for so many people who hear the message daily but still reject it!

Persecuted for Your Faith

Matthew 10:16-33

Often, there are things written in the Bible that don't make sense to us today. Was it not a great sin for Solomon to have so many wives? Today, polygamy is abhorrent! Or is it really? Many of the prominent leaders in Africa have multiple wives, is that wrong? It's after all biblical! And why did women in Paul's time have to wear head coverings? Aren't we obligated to do the same today?

When we read a passage in the Bible, we must always be aware

of the circumstances and background in which that particular passage was written. When Matthew writes this story of Jesus, he does so under very specific circumstances, many years after the events had already taken place. From the time Jesus went around with the disciples and preached, to the time Matthew publishes the story, many things had happened. The Jews who embraced the Christian faith were despised and abused by their own people for abandoning the Jewish faith. In many cases, they were cruelly persecuted. For example, Paul went around before his

conversion and had numerous people thrown into prison. He was even involved in the murder of Stephen! Yes, you can describe it as nothing other than murder! Christians feared Paul! After his conversion, he had to walk the same path, and on occasion, he was stoned just like Stephen back then and left for dead. Christians faced many hardships because they lost their standing in society, and in many cases probably also their income!

It is with this background in mind that we should read Matthew's Gospel. When he quotes Jesus' words here, he specifically

emphasizes the thoughts that will comfort his congregation in their circumstances. So, when we read about how Jesus sends out His disciples, the major themes that are addressed are not only martyrdom but also God's preservation when it happens. Matthew is not just telling a story; he is at the same time trying to bring a certain message and comfort to his readers.

In the two thousand years since Matthew recorded this story, circumstances have obviously changed many times, but even today, we see the same things happening that he writes about.

Today, his message still serves as comfort to us in often difficult circumstances. It is especially in Muslim-dominated countries where Christians face great hardship today and are often persecuted because of their faith.

When we read the passage, it almost seems like the Jewish Christians were a bunch of troublemakers. However, that is not the case at all, and of course, the Lord doesn't want you to deliberately make yourself a martyr! It is simply not natural to desire suffering deliberately. However, when suffering is inevitable, you must act with

dignity and use that opportunity to honestly and sincerely proclaim the Gospel.

For example, think about Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi. They were first beaten severely and then chained in a filthy, stinking dungeon. If it were me, I would probably sit there and whine, feeling sorry for myself. But what did they do? They sang praises! By doing that, they achieved two things: firstly, it helped them forget about their own pain a little. But more importantly it was a testimony, not only to their fellow prisoners but also to the authorities, to the

extent that the jailer and his whole family came to conversion that very night and met Jesus as their Saviour.

Another beautiful example is when John and Peter were brought before the Jewish Council, and the Council tried to intimidate them to stop preaching the Gospel. Their defense was: "We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). These two men did not shrink in fear but surrendered completely to the Holy Spirit. He gave them the words and the power! No wonder the council members were amazed at them

because they were just simple, uneducated fishermen!

When Matthew portrays this conversation between Jesus and His disciples, we tend to focus solely on the persecutions, sufferings, and even death threats. But in reality, this is much more about God's protection, assistance, love, and support if these things come your way. It is also about not resisting or forcefully emphasizing the message of the Gospel when you are persecuted for your faith. Rather, surrender yourself to God's grace. Reflect Jesus' serving, persuasive love, even to

the point of suffering and martyrdom.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you very much for reaffirming today that You will carry us in all circumstances, even when we are persecuted for the sake of the Gospel. Thank you for Your wonderful comfort!

The Needle in the Haystack

Matthew 10:34-11:1

To search for a needle in a haystack means that a situation is completely impossible and there is no way to solve it. A few years ago, someone made a TV program where they tested whether you could literally take up that proverb. They gave two teams the task of using all their creativity to each find four needles each in a haystack. One team decided to burn the straw in their haystack bit by bit and sift through the ashes for a needle. The other team threw their straw

into a water trough and tried to find the needle with a magnet. After many hours of hard work, all the needles were indeed found. What seemed like a completely impossible task turned out to be possible after all. By the way, the water and magnet team eventually won! So, the proverb of looking for a needle in a haystack will no longer have exactly the same meaning for me from now on!

This morning we are confronted with a different kind of contradiction that hits you between the eyes. We have always been taught that Jesus

brings peace. After all, He is the Symbol and Source of PEACE. And now Jesus tells His disciples that He did NOT come to bring peace, but CONFLICT and even enmity. It doesn't make sense! To make matters worse, He specifically speaks of conflict between people who are very close to each other, between parents and children, husband and wife! How can that be? Just a few sentences ago, Jesus taught them to wish their hosts peace, and now He says this terrible thing. How are we supposed to understand it?

Throughout the centuries, this

passage has often been misunderstood, and it has led, among other things, to monks locking themselves up in monasteries to interpret these words literally. In other words, to fully follow Jesus, you must literally choose against your family because you cannot love both your family and Jesus, so they believed. Later, the so-called liberation theology followed, where a kind of holy war is waged against all forms of political oppression.

What about the commandment: Honour your father and your mother? Then you are

contradicting the commandment, right? How are we supposed to understand it?

First of all, we must look at the background and intention of these words and understand them before we can know what Jesus meant. In Micah 7:6, we read about a family split, which will be a sign of the end times. Matthew's congregation experienced the beginning of the end times. In the society of those years, family ties (including extended family) were extremely important. So when certain members of such a family accepted Jesus as Saviour, they were simply kicked out of the

family. It was a huge disaster for such a family.

Today, it still happens to some extent. When only a portion of a family has accepted Jesus as Saviour, there is division in the family. Values differ, and there is constant conflict and disagreement. This is especially true when a Muslim meets Jesus, where this division becomes much worse. Such a person is not only completely cut off from all family ties but also from their circle of friends. They are considered a traitor and a unbeliever, and often they are declared out-lawed, meaning

anyone who opposes them has the right to kill them. Such individuals are often executed in some parts of the world.

Of course, as a child of God, I do not seek this split, but there are choices to be made. The wrong choice has a terrible end...

In the last few verses before Jesus sends out His disciples, He comforts them by emphasizing the absolute connection of His disciples to Him. If you stand in Jesus' service then you are inseparably connected to Him, and whatever people do to you, they indirectly do to Him as well. But that's not all: there is also a

great reward awaiting.

To summarize: Our task as believers to spread the gospel has immense value - after all, it makes the difference between life and death - and absolutely nothing should prevent us from fulfilling this task. Secondly, we must realize that power and violence do not spread the gospel but rather serving, persuasive love alone, even to the point of suffering and martyrdom.

Prayer:

Lord, I want to send Your wonderful gospel into the world - no matter the cost.

Criticism

Matthew 11:2-19

Two preachers once appeared in a certain congregation. The first preached brimstone and fire, and in no uncertain terms told the congregation that their sins would catch up with them. If they did not repent, hell awaited them. He named their sins: slander, hypocrisy, discord, adultery... The congregation grumbled all the way home that day about this arrogant preacher who came to preach to them as if they were so sinful!

The following Sunday, another preacher stood in the pulpit. His sermon focused on grace and love. He told them how much God loved them and what Jesus had to endure to pay for their, this congregation's, sins. Once again, the congregation grumbled all the way home that Sunday about this overly sentimental sermon. This man's sermon had no substance! They were intelligent people who wanted a sermon with reasoning and statements. This sermon was for simpletons!

Oh my! One day, a lady told me that she had counted how many times the preacher had repeated

a certain word that morning. What was the message about that morning? No, she couldn't really remember! She definitely did not grasp the message of that morning's sermon! For the ministers and pastors who are reading this meditation this morning, I just want to say: you are in very good company! Jesus had exactly the same problem. Even John the Baptist did not fully understand Jesus' message, as he began to doubt. And then Jesus casually remarks that "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John!" John preached that the Messiah would

come to judge people, and the reports he heard in prison had absolutely nothing to do with judgment. He was so convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, but now Jesus only preaches about love and heals people. What happened to judgment? Perhaps these were the kind of thoughts that John struggled with.

If you think that John had problems, then you should hear about the problems other people had: Firstly, most people did not want to accept John at all. They did not like his ascetic lifestyle. He was the typical fire-and-brimstone preacher who

preached that if you did not repent, you would go into eternal damnation and burn in the eternal fire of hell. He lived on locusts and wild honey, something most people would abhor! And his fashion sense left much to be desired, rough clothes made of camel hair!

Then John said whatever he wanted! He was not afraid to say anything to anyone. Even the king and his immoral wife fell victim to his sharp tongue. That very same sharp tongue ultimately resulted in John's beheaded head being brought in on a platter at the king's party. I am convinced that

John followed the law down to the smallest detail. He probably never drank a drop of wine. People said he was crazy!

Then Jesus appeared on the scene, preaching love and grace. He mingled with everyone, even unclean gentiles, despised Samaritans, prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, and sinners. He broke all taboos and ate with a bunch of tax collectors and sinners. He disregarded the Pharisees' strict Sabbath laws. Jesus was criticized as a "glutton and a drunkard" because they expected Him to have an ascetic lifestyle like John.

Would Jesus have been acceptable if He had been like John? Certainly not, because then they would have rejected John! The point is: Although both John and Jesus came from God, neither of them could bring about repentance in Israel. It is not just Israel's fickleness that is reflected here, but also their stubbornness. God worked in completely different ways, but nothing was good enough for them. No wonder Jesus later pronounces judgment on Israel's unrepentant cities!

Yes, we shake our heads today about the stubbornness of the

Jews. But let's not judge too quickly, because what is described here is actually the history of humanity: God overwhelms us with evidence of His grace, love, and favour, and we are not satisfied with any of it. We try to find fault with everything that is presented to us and we criticize or doubt the message of every preacher who speaks what the Holy Spirit has laid on their hearts.

Let us pray that He who is merciful will open the eyes of humanity (including you and me) so that we may see His grace and love. May we truly see the real

Jesus, and open our ears to hear what He says to us, making our hearts receptive to His Word and softening them so that we may truly experience and live out His love and grace according to His will.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I worship You this morning for who You truly are. You are God and the Creator of the Universe and the King of all kings, but above all, You are my Redeemer and Friend!

Judgment and Redemption

Matthew 11:20-30

We all know the chilling story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the terrible things that happened there. The story of Lot and his family being saved by angels from Sodom just before the judgment of sulfur and fire struck the city is a classic that is etched into every child's memory. Reading between the lines, we get a picture of those cities of horror and abomination. Scientists have various theories about what happened there. Was it perhaps a volcanic eruption?

Most scholars believe that something else occurred. One theory is that a massive rain of meteorites struck the Earth. They claim that a "cluster" of meteorites penetrated the atmosphere and hit the area around Sodom and Gomorrah. White-hot fireballs struck the cities, and everything and everyone was burned to ashes within minutes. Lot and his family were saved in time by the angel, but because his wife hesitated, she was also swallowed by the judgment from heaven.

Regarding the towns of Tyre and Sidon, which, like Sodom, were

also non-Jewish cities, we read in Ezekiel 28 how they are condemned. Horrible things also happened there, and it was especially the pride of the inhabitants that was a great sin. The ruler of Tyre exalted himself to a divine status!

We have already read how Jesus went through the entire Galilean region, preaching and healing the sick, performing miracles. People followed Him in huge crowds and watched in disbelief at what He was doing. It was especially in the towns of Gadara, Bethsaida, and Capernaum where Jesus acted with so much passion. He even

resided in Capernaum for a while. However, for most of the inhabitants of these cities, it remained mere wonderment, and they never took the step to truly become followers of Jesus.

When we go back in history, we see how Jonah delivered a simple message of repentance in the sinful city of Nineveh, and how the people repented. Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom did not have prophets to preach to them, so their sins were almost out of ignorance. However, when it comes to the Galilean cities, it is absolutely inexcusable because each person in those cities heard and

experienced the Word of God firsthand. Yet they still did not bother about it. In fact, these three cities that Jesus singled out are symbolic of the entire Israel that rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Even today, two thousand years later, Israel still has not accepted Jesus!

We live in a time where the message of the Gospel is within reach of almost every person on earth. Every Sunday, people are called to go to church. Some obey the call, some because it is their passion, but others because they are compelled by circumstances. Some

churchgoers have accepted the salvation of Jesus, while others hear the message of salvation Sunday after Sunday but never go so far as to take the step.

Jesus' message for us today is that the judgment of God will be terrible for people who hear the Word and experience God's goodness day by day but do not accept Jesus' redemption. This applies even to compassionate church members! For the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and their abominable sins, it will be easier on the day of judgment!

Indeed, Jesus came to judge, but He also (especially!) came to

save. His message of salvation is simple: all you have to do is accept His gift of redemption. Unfortunately, for many people, it is far too simple! They still wanted to perform many rituals and do things. Many people cannot understand the message precisely because it is so simple. They seek complicated reasoning. Many people see salvation as hard work or self-torment and terrible sacrifices. Jesus says it is not necessary because He came to give rest. You may want to bear a heavy burden to follow Jesus, but He says the burden He gives you to bear is light and easy.

He invites each one who reads this reflection today to come to Him. Perhaps you are one of the people under the terrible judgment mentioned above. Perhaps you are tired of searching for answers. Perhaps you are burdened with trying to earn your salvation. Jesus invites you this morning with the words, "Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Jesus does not want to condemn you because He is gentle and humble (Matthew 11:29).

Many people have written to me, asking how they can come to

Jesus. Often, these are people who have tried very hard in various ways to earn salvation. The answer is so simple that some have rejected it, but the angels in heaven rejoice today over each person who has accepted that answer. If you want to know how to take that step, please write to me at louis@dagstukkies.co.za or send a WhatsApp message to 0827714925.

Prayer:

Lord, my heart goes out to so many people who live day by day under the sound of Your Word but have never truly encountered the

Jesus of the Word!

Laws and Traditions

Matthew 12:1-14

Reverend Daantjie received a calling to a small town somewhere in the Natal countryside. Some of his colleagues immediately warned him that it was a difficult congregation, but he had peace in his heart. And so he arrived in the beautiful town of Greytown. The residents welcomed him with a grand celebration, but he quickly noticed that something was amiss. The men in black seemed burdened, but no one dared to say anything. Reverend

Daantjie was not one to keep his thoughts to himself, and soon he called the chief elder closer. "What's wrong? I sense that something is troubling here!"

"Brother," sighed the elder, "where is your frock-coat then?" Reverend Daantjie was taken aback. He had never owned a frock-coat in his life! "It is tradition for the church council, especially the preacher, to wear a frock-coat," the man with the long, somber face explained. Reverend Daantjie wanted to protest, but the elder said, "Pastor, you won't step onto that pulpit unless you're wearing a frock-coat" And with

that the matter was settled.

Well, funds were scarce, and having to buy such expensive clothing... but luckily, a widow came to his rescue. Her late husband's frock-coat, which he had worn for the past fifty years or so, hung there uselessly in the closet. It was now quite faded and worn in places, but a s frock-coat is still a frock-coat ! And so, for the next few years, he preached Sunday after Sunday in his worn-out frock-coat . Stubborn as he was, he refused to buy a new one. But the congregation was satisfied because the tradition remained intact!

A somewhat ridiculous situation, one might say.

Jesus and His disciples are on their way. It has been a long day, and the men are hungry. The path they walk takes them through a field of wheat. The juicy, plump green ears of wheat lie before them as if on a platter, making them even hungrier. Without thinking, they pluck some ears and chew on them as they walk. There is absolutely nothing wrong with it, except for one big problem—it is the Sabbath. The falcons of the Pharisees do not miss this terrible, unauthorized act. It is clearly stated in their manual: "64

Unauthorized acts on the Sabbath" that you must not pluck grain on the Sabbath. Plucking wheat is nothing but harvesting. And harvesting is work! The Scripture clearly states that you must not work on the Sabbath. Jesus is criticized for not ensuring that His disciples uphold the law.

A while later, Jesus and His disciples arrive at a synagogue. A man with a disabled hand is brought to Him. It is clearly a trap to see if He would commit the terrible unauthorized act of healing the man on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are on a mission to try and trap Jesus.

I think Jesus must have been quite frustrated with this lot. Look, they were good people, and they meant well because with their laws and traditions, they wanted to serve God. But they completely missed the point of what serving God is really about. For them, everything revolved around laws and traditions—Jesus explains to them what it actually means to serve God. It should be about mercy and love! No, He doesn't dismiss the law, but the law is there for a very specific purpose. If you miss the purpose, the law actually means nothing at all! For the Pharisees, it was merely about meticulously observing the

law down to its smallest details, but they never tried to figure out why the law was there.

The law is a guideline on how to love God and love your neighbour. The Sabbath law was given by God to humans as a day of rest, specifically to dedicate your time to God. But what about Sunday?

Stefan Joubert writes in a document about the Sabbath and Sunday, among other things: "On Sundays, according to Justin, believers gathered to read together from the prophets and the apostles, listened to a short sermon, prayed together, and

then celebrated the Lord's Supper. These meetings usually took place before sunrise and/or after sunset since the early believers still had to work on Sundays. Only from the fourth century, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, did Sunday become an official day of rest. It is also from the fourth century that Sunday gradually took on the character of a Sabbath within many church circles." Read the article: New Testament Perspectives on the Sabbath and Sunday at: bit.ly/dsJoubert

In Jesus' statement, it is not just

about the Sabbath, but rather about suffocating laws and traditions that prevent you from living out your love. A good example of this is the nurse who refused to perform an abortion a few years ago. The law required her to do it, but it didn't align with living out Jesus' love. She was persecuted by the authorities, lost her job, but she achieved a great victory for the practice of what Jesus preached.

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me the true meaning of Your law once again!

The Smoking Lampwick

Matthew 12:15-21

A bright light fills the room, and in great awe, I experience this abundance of light. The only problem is that the thing makes a noise! It hisses and blows, making it difficult to hear each other speak. The Coleman lamp is only used for special occasions, and then it's a whole ritual to get it lit. With its tank full of kerosene it is pumped until its pump makes a "tssst, tssst" sound. Then Dad carefully pours a little methylated spirits into a groove around the wick. It is

ignited with a matchstick so that the lamp's mantle can warm up properly. And just before the blue flame bids farewell, Dad opens the valve. And behold! A dazzling bright light that fills every nook and cranny of the room!

We also had the very fancy but highly temperamental Aladdin lamps on the farm. The flame would heat a delicate asbestos wick, and it would give a good, bright light, but if the flame burned even a tad too high, the wick would turn pitch black. Then it was quite a task to slowly burn off the black soot, bit by bit, in order to get any light out of it

again!

But then there were, of course, the ordinary old kerosene lamps that stood in every room. Not much of a light, but they worked. They were always there and when you lit them, they gave their light. Sometimes the light was dim, and most of the time the wick would smoke, leaving a large black mark on the ceiling where the lamp usually stood on your bedside table. You had to frequently trim and adjust the wick to get a decent light out of it. Sometimes this lamp would be as stubborn as a mule and no matter what you tried, it simply wouldn't

burn properly! During those times, it would send out a suffocating black smoke. Yes, it is those times that the lamp becomes a pain and you feel like pulling out its wick and throwing the lamp out the window! But as long as that lamp has kerosene and a wick, it usually gives its light.

It is precisely about this kind of lamp that Jesus is talking here. It is the kind that keeps on trying and is not always terribly successful. I often think that I am one of those lamps. No matter how hard I try to live properly and rightly, without sin, I constantly find myself stepping into the mud

somewhere. And most of the time my old wick smokes like crazy!

And speaking of wicks: In the same breath, Jesus also says that He will not break off a bruised reed. Frustrating things, reeds in your fishpond. I had a bunch of reeds in my fishpond for years. They look beautiful when they are nice and healthy, proudly displaying their fluffy brown plumes. But when the coastal wind blows, they are the first to be hit and then they break. They lie crookedly across the fishpond. And then I go in with the pruning shears to deal with the messy chaos. Everything that is crooked

is summarily pruned and thrown onto the ash heap.

Indeed, I am also a reed that sometimes stands very upright and tries to serve the Lord with my best smile. But oh dear! When those strong winds of testing come, I also break very quickly. My courage breaks, and I struggle with my faith and my trust. Isn't that the case with most believers? Yes, there are surely those "Coleman lamps" that radiate their bright light even when the storm winds are at their strongest. But they are few and far between. I am definitely not one of them!

The good news is that Jesus assures us today that He will not extinguish the smoking lampwicks (Matt 12:20). He knows what you and I are going through, and He realizes that we are not perfect. The ingrained sin in us means that our best efforts are not even close to good enough. He will also not quarrel or shout (v. 19). He has empathy for us, even though we are often weak and smoky. Furthermore, He will not break off the bruised reeds among us. Even though we waver and break so often when the storm winds blow, He will not do what you would expect. He forgives and forgives and forgives

over and over again!

In this passage, there is great comfort for you and me: Jesus did not come to save the righteous people but precisely the sinners. After all, He told the Pharisees and highly educated, holy Scribes that He did not come to heal the healthy but rather the sick! When Isaiah writes that the Messiah will not break a bruised reed or extinguish a smoking lampwick, he is referring to our imperfect lives (Isaiah 42:1-4). We don't even have to be perfect before He accepts us, but He accepts us just as we are, with all our sins and shortcomings. Remember the

thief on the cross next to Jesus. He promised that sinful man that he would be with Him in paradise that very day!

However, this does not mean that we can now sit back and indulge in sin. Not at all! It means that I will try to live out my gratitude even more and in this way, thank the Lord for the great grace He has shown me.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for Your great love and grace and patience with me. I confess that my lampwick often smokes a lot - thank you for helping me out of it with love every time!

The Unforgivable Sin

Matthew 12:22-37

The unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit, has surely given every Christian believer chills down their spine at some point. Have I perhaps committed that sin at some point? Maybe I unknowingly committed the mortal sin, and now I think I'm on my way to heaven, but in reality, hell awaits me! Such chilling thoughts have crossed the minds of many believers.

But let's start at the beginning: In this passage, three attitudes

toward Jesus are discussed: a half-hearted attitude for Him, a whole-hearted attitude against Him, and a whole-hearted attitude for Him.

When the people bring a blind and mute man to Jesus, it is someone with a very serious disability. No wonder they considered him to be under the power of an evil spirit. It was, by the way, a common view of that time when someone had a severe disability. When Jesus heals the man, there are two reactions: some people wonder if He might be the Son of David. In other words, there is some recognition

that He is the Messiah.

In stark contrast to their half-hearted "Yes????," there is the whole-hearted "**NO!!!!**" of the Pharisees. Their "no" is so strong that they accuse Jesus of using demonic powers to drive out evil spirits. What a terrible accusation to make! And at the same time, so ridiculously absurd!

Jesus answers them in two parts: a logical part and one that requires faith. Logically, He explains that the devil would not turn against his own demons because that would undermine himself. And by the way, their own disciples also drive out evil spirits

- so they are condemning themselves. His second answer requires more: In faith, you must be able to see that this healing is done by the Spirit of God and that the Kingdom has drawn near. Jesus is the One who is stronger than the devil - He has bound the strong man (Satan). It doesn't help if you only half-heartedly agree that He might be the Messiah - you must wholeheartedly choose FOR Jesus and follow Him with surrender before you can truly say that you are on His side. Jesus asks for your total, full loyalty!

This brings us to Jesus' statement about that controversial and much-debated topic: the sin against the Holy Spirit. It is about opponents of Jesus who attribute slanderous things to Him, such as being filled with the spirit of the evil one and not the Spirit of God.

I have said in a previous devotional that the Pharisees are actually a good bunch - good church people who uphold the law in its smallest details. But under that cloak of piety hides rotten, inherent wickedness. They refuse to see anything good in Jesus, and even when He clearly performs a divine healing, they

dismiss it as the work of the devil. When Jesus makes this statement about the unforgivable sin, it is not about someone who rejects God out of ignorance or a believer who commits a terrible sin, but about opponents of the Gospel of Christ who, deliberately and against their better knowledge, refuse to acknowledge God's acts of salvation and attribute them to the devil.

What does it say to you and me today?

Firstly, as a believer who serves Jesus wholeheartedly, you must not torment yourself with the

thought that you may have committed the unforgivable sin in the past. After all, you have already experienced God's redemption and forgiveness! God does not go back on His Word - if He has forgiven, His forgiveness is complete! I firmly believe that no person who has committed this terrible sin will ever have the slightest desire to worship God - to have a relationship with Jesus, the only Saviour. Therefore, every believer can be at peace about this.

But secondly, we must not use this statement as a weapon to condemn people who openly

reject Jesus. God's judgment on someone who commits this terrible sin is terrifying, but it does not cancel out God's immeasurable love, grace, and patience with people. And it also does not give anyone the right to decide on behalf of God who is eternally lost and who will receive eternal life. Many people who have been written off as completely lost by believers have found Jesus. Even outspoken Satanists, who are perhaps the most extreme form of opposition to God, have experienced Jesus' redemption. The thief hanging on the cross next to Jesus is a lasting reminder to us of God's

great grace.

God is Love and grace! He does not want a single sinner to be lost. But it requires something from that sinner - they must wholeheartedly choose "Yes!" for God and accept that gift of eternal life that God offers.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for choosing me and giving me eternal life. Thank you for completely forgiving all my terrible sins from my past and making me new!

The Goose and the Slingshot

Matthew 12:38-42

One day I heard the story of little Johnny and his sister Susie who went to visit Grandpa and Grandma on the farm. Grandpa made a slingshot for Johnny and sent him out to the field to practise handling this new "dangerous" weapon, but also so that Grandpa could have a little rest. Johnny was excited and in his imagination he could already see himself slinging a "Goliath" with it! But to his great frustration, he quickly realized that this thing was much harder to use than he

had thought. No matter how hard he tried, the stones flew in whichever direction they wanted! How David managed to hit Goliath with this thing was a great miracle!

After an hour of struggling, he returned home feeling discouraged. In the yard, Grandma's beloved goose, which she cherished so much, honked at him. "Stupid goose!" Johnny snapped at the pest and swung his slingshot in the goose's direction. And then Johnny's heart almost stopped because the stone struck the goose right between the eyes, just like David

did to Goliath, stone dead!

Naturally, Johnny was terrified! He never in his wildest dreams thought he would strike the goose! Grandma would definitely kill him! In a panic, Johnny quickly buried the dead goose under a pile of wood so that nobody would find it. But when he looked up, he saw his sharp-tongued sister Susie standing there, watching him. Susie didn't say a word, but he could tell that trouble was on the way!

That afternoon after lunch, Grandma wanted to know who would help her with the dishes. Johnny almost fell off his chair

when Susie casually said, "Grandma, Johnny said he would like to help in the kitchen." And then she whispered softly in Johnny's ear, "Remember the goose!" Submissively, Johnny washed the dishes.

In the late afternoon, Grandpa wanted to take the two children to go fishing in the farm dam. However, Grandma was not happy because she wanted Susie to help her with dinner. "Don't worry, Grandma. Johnny said he wants to help. I will go with Grandpa," said Susie, giving Johnny that remember-the-geese look!

And so, this blackmail continued for a few days and poor Johnny had to work himself to death while Susie delighted in the situation. Eventually, Johnny couldn't bear it anymore, and with tears, he confessed to Grandma about the goose. Grandma gave him a hug and said, "Darling, I know about the goose - I was standing at the kitchen window when it happened, and I saw everything. But I love you, and I forgave you a long time ago. I was just curious to see how long you would allow Susie to keep you as a slave!"

There is a "Johnny" in each one of us, and we all have a few

skeletons in the closet! The devil wants to exploit them and tries to remind you of those old sins. However, God has already seen every sin and He knows each one of them! There is nothing you can hide from Him. But if you are His child, He has long forgiven you for all of that, but He is waiting for you to lay those sins at His feet so that He can free you from the devil's merciless whip!

But to qualify for that, you must be part of God's family. In other words, there must be a relationship of faith between you and Jesus. But what if that is not the case? Does God ever forgive

the sins of people who do not believe in Jesus?

In Matt. 12:38-42, Matthew tells of how the Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, as if they hadn't seen enough already. The sign that Jesus offers them is chilling because as unbelievers, there will be many "Susies" who will testify against them one day, and this time they won't be able to confess and receive forgiveness because it will be too late. God's grace is infinitely great, and He gives so many opportunities for people to turn around and follow Him. The Pharisees, for example, had numerous opportunities: how

many times did Jesus perform miracles before their eyes? They knew the Scriptures, and they could clearly see from it that Jesus was the Messiah, but they stubbornly refused to acknowledge Him and follow Him. On the other hand, there will be a crowd of believers who will give damning testimony one day. Today, the same applies to the many people who hear the gospel over and over again but refuse to make the decision FOR Jesus!

However, if you are a child of God, the devil will also try to testify against you, but then Jesus will intervene and say, "This child

of Mine belongs to Me! I have long forgiven ALL those sins!"

Prayer:

Lord, I realize this morning that You know everything, EVERYTHING about me, and I can't hide anything from You. Thank You for already forgiving my sins. Please set me free from the devil's accusations!

The Ghost is Gone!

Matthew 12:43-45

On the farm where I grew up near Waterval Boven, there was an old "haunted house." Indeed, someone had lived there many years ago but when that person left, the house was vacated and cleaned and then it stood empty. Soon, the farm workers began using it as a workspace. One day, the chimney of the old coal stove in the kitchen collapsed, but nobody ever bothered to repair it. So, every time someone lit the stove the whole house would fill with suffocating black smoke,

eventually leaving the ceiling and walls stained black!

Over time windows were broken, but since the house was uninhabited, they were never repaired. Eventually, the house became a complete ruin, although the walls and roof were still sturdy. If you stepped inside, it felt as if darkness gripped and pressed against you. Apart from a rickety table used by the workers for ironing and of course, the smoking stove, there was no other furniture.

However, there were many inhabitants, but not the friendliest ones! There was always a scurry

of bugs and rats and the place was infested with fleas and lice. The farm workers also believed that a ghost had taken up residence! I exploited the situation and enjoyed scaring children who came to visit with the eerie place and its "ghost." Of course, with great imagination I made up my own stories about the creepy ghosts that lay and lurked there at night!

Eventually, the farm was sold. Many years later, I visited the place again. In the meantime, the farm had been transformed into a guest farm. There was a happy ending to the story because the

owner had renovated the dilapidated old "haunted house" and turned it into a beautiful guesthouse. Where there were once dark holes for windows, now cheerful curtains hung. The once-dead "haunted house" suddenly came to life anew. It must have taken a lot of hard work, scrubbing, and disinfecting to make that old place habitable again, but it was ultimately all worth it!

In Matt. 12:43-45, Jesus is still dealing with the Pharisees. They had confronted Him earlier because He was casting out demons, and now He confronts

them on their own territory. They, too, were casting out demons but when the person was delivered, they simply left him to fend for himself. Usually, the poor man couldn't overcome his affliction alone, and before long he would end up back where he started, perhaps even worse! Jesus tells them that when an unclean spirit is cast out, that spirit seeks a place to stay and if it returns to find its previous dwelling empty and clean, it will go back in. It will also bring along all its companions. Today, we often see this with people addicted to drugs. They may go for rehabilitation, but a few months

later they are back, and often in a much worse state. Without Jesus, rehabilitation is usually a complete failure!

Often, people are like houses. For example someone's life house has a very prominent resident, the devil. One day, a Christian comes to him and explains that the devil is ruling his life and that he must be set free. The person is frightened and starts living a good, clean life - even goes to church. But gradually, he starts slipping back into the old life and ultimately ends up in a much bigger mess than before.

Why does this happen? Usually,

it's because the person didn't genuinely choose Jesus and didn't enter into a relationship with Him.

We must also remember that surrendering fully to Jesus is often a gradual process. Just as a baby doesn't suddenly grow up, a person also grows spiritually gradually. Just as a baby first receives milk and later solid food, a new believer must be fed, starting with gentle nourishment and later moving on to solid food. To proclaim the gospel message to someone and then leave them to fend for themselves is cruel! The person must be helped and

guided to spiritual maturity; otherwise, they may eventually fall into despair and die from spiritual hunger. It is of course the church's responsibility to ensure that its members receive spiritual nourishment and continue to grow. How does it do this? Sunday services are just the beginning. It is the duty of the members to look after one another. Those who are spiritually strong should take the "weaker" members by the hand and guide them to full maturity.

For the member who has fallen into complete lostness, there is still hope. However, it is our duty

as mature believers to seek out that person and uplift their life so that their dwelling may be beautiful once again, and inhabited by the Holy Spirit. There is, of course, a bonus because when you engage in such "uplifting work," you yourself are spiritually strengthened! It further enhances your growth in faith, and thus, your own life house is beautified.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to maintain and expand my own life house. Also give me the zeal to take the weaker members by the hand and help them reach full spiritual

maturity for the glory of Your
kingdom!

Jesus' Family

Matthew 12:46-50

Who is my family? I often hear of people completely disowning their family, even brothers and sisters and parents. Terrible! When Jesus asks, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" we are shocked by His statement.

During the Vietnam War, a woman receives a call from her son one day with wonderful news: "Mom, I'm back from Vietnam, and I'm on my way home!" The mother is overwhelmed with joy, saying, "Our child is coming

home!"

"But Mom, I want to ask you a favour. I have a friend who is coming with me. He's like a brother to me. He was severely injured in the war, and he lost an arm and a leg." By that time, Dad is also standing by the phone, listening with one ear. "The poor man has nowhere to go and no one to take care of him. Will you mind if he stays with us?"

"No problem," says Mom, "we'll start looking for another place for him to stay and someone to take care of him."

"No, Mom," says the son, "I mean he will come and live with us

permanently. Forever!"

At that point, Dad takes over the phone, saying, "My son, you don't know what you're asking for!" Dad is not at all happy. "You know, someone who is so disabled will place a great burden on me and your mother, and we have our own lives that we want to live. We cannot allow such a thing to interfere with our lives. Come home now and forget about that man! He will find a place to stay."

And with that, the conversation is ended. Or so they thought.

A few days later, they receive a call from the police. It's sad news: there was an accident, and their

son is dead. Dad is shocked to learn what happened. He is informed that their son fell from a building, and they suspect it was suicide. They have to come and identify his body.

The grieving parents go to the morgue to do the identification, but then they receive the second major shock, something they never knew: their son had lost an arm and a leg in the war.....

When Jesus' family members want to see Him, Jesus asks the shocking question, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" You immediately want to ask the question for yourself:

"But how could Jesus be so callous? What about the fifth commandment: honour your father and mother?" But if you look closely at this passage, you begin to realize that with such an approach, you have actually missed the whole point. He didn't want to exclude them, but with these words He expanded His circle of family to include all who follow Him. "Here are my mother and brothers!" says Jesus, pointing to His disciples. That gesture however, goes far beyond just the couples sitting around Him. With that gesture He says that all who follow Him are His brothers and sisters - His blood

family. Later, during His ascension (Matt. 28:20), Jesus further confirms this with the wonderful promise that He will never leave this family of His. "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

It is a wonderful consolation that Jesus offers us here. We are part of His family! Moreover, He is not somewhere far away but here with us! When we look at the family structure of that time, we see what it truly means to be part of Jesus' family. There was a very close bond within the family. Family members stood by each other through thick and thin. Even

family members who deviated from the family's norms and standards were still protected and enveloped in the love of the family. The "black sheep" was not cast out of the flock!

With that in mind, it puts us in a completely different perspective today. If it is true that I am part of Jesus' family, then it must also be true that the other members of His family are close relatives of mine! Now it becomes somewhat uncomfortable because a family is not a one-way affair where Dad takes care of the family and the rest do nothing. On the contrary, in a family, members take care of

each other and care for one another. The same goes for the extended family of Jesus, where we must care for and love one another.

As we read through the Gospels, we discover that Jesus talks about two kinds of love. Firstly, there is love for our fellow-human beings (you must love your neighbour as yourself). This means that we care for them and will not harm them in any way, even if they are our enemies. The second kind of love is the love for our fellow-believers. This is genuine family love that should be much more intense and show

extreme care. Going back to our story of the injured son: of course, the parents would have loved and cared for that son, even with his great disability. However, they were not prepared for such a task when family ties were a bit more distant. How far am I willing to go with my caring for the other members of our extended family in Jesus? Is there truly love, even for that family member who is an embarrassment to me or frustrates me greatly?

Prayer:

Lord, my love for my brothers and sisters in Jesus falls far short. Teach me to truly love each one

with a warm Jesus-like love!

Sowing Without Ceasing

Matthew 13:1-9

I camped a few years ago with a group of young Voortrekkers in a beautiful gorge on a farm near Ballito. We only took the essential necessities with us. A tent was not considered one of the necessities. The children had to experience what it feels like to sleep under the stars. We drove on a narrow path until we reached a point close to the gorge, and then we walked the remaining distance. Before us loomed a lush green forest, almost impenetrable. A clear stream

trickled through the forest thickets. In the damp ground, we saw the tracks of bushbucks, duikers, and bushpigs. The children eagerly began setting up camp. I breathed the delightful, moist forest air deep into my lungs. Dusk began to settle over us, and the children were instructed to gather firewood and start a fire for the night.

And that's when the trouble began! I chuckled to myself because I knew what a nearly impossible task it is to start a fire in this damp forest. Besides, I had forgotten to bring matches. One of the things the group of children

had to learn this weekend was that not everything in life comes easily, and starting a fire is one of those things. Here we were in an untouched forest, without ablution facilities, and the city kids quickly learned that a shower, a sink, and a toilet are luxuries. But now they were full of enthusiasm and eagerly searched for dry wood which, by the way, is not easy to find in such a forest because everything is damp. Eventually, they arrived, each with an armful of wood. But that's when the real challenge began because finding wood is one thing, but getting it to burn is a whole different matter. I watched with great interest as

they painstakingly struck one match after another, trying to ignite the damp grass. Eventually, there was a flicker of flame, and they huffed and puffed to keep the flame alive. It was pitch dark before the first pieces of wood caught fire!

Hours later, after struggling to cook food, we sat and gazed at the stars peeking through the canopy above us. The eerie shriek of a bushbaby echoed somewhere through the dense trees. The children were exhausted but excited about this adventure they would remember forever. The fire was not exactly a

resounding success. Most of the wood was too damp and only produced smoke. Some pieces were so wet that they didn't catch fire at all. But those few that did ignite made all the effort worthwhile.

The parable that Jesus tells about the sower makes me reflect on those special times I spent in the veldt with my Voortrekkers. Just as not all the seeds wanted to grow, not everything in the veldt worked either. But I also learned that the same applies to kingdom work. In my younger days, we often went to Welkom to do street evangelism. We ventured into the

streets with great enthusiasm and expectations of a bountiful harvest of new converts. However, many times we returned home disappointed, with only one soul won for the Kingdom. Often, the fiery street evangelists would end the day disheartened by the meagre results.

Jesus' parable of the sower also speaks of many "failures" because many people hear the Word, but only a few respond positively. If this happens with Jesus, then we don't have to feel bad or discouraged because we know what to expect when we ourselves sow in God's fields. It is

a wonderful comfort for us! Now we also know that it is not our responsibility to bring the seeds we sow to life. God will give life. He is the only One who can give life! We just need to keep sowing, knowing that although many seeds will be lost, there are a few that will grow. And then the angels in heaven will rejoice!

So I send these daily reflections every morning to thousands of people around the world. I know that only a portion of the people who read them will respond positively. Nevertheless, it is a mission for me. I send them out every morning with great

enthusiasm because somewhere, someone finds great meaning in today's reflection. It makes a difference in that person's life. I often receive letters from individuals who tell me what it means to them, and then all the effort is worthwhile. And sometimes, I receive a letter from someone who has been touched by these reflections to seek Jesus. When I am given the opportunity to lead that person to Jesus, I rejoice and celebrate because then I know that the seeds I have sown have not been scattered by the wind but have fallen on fertile ground and will bear much fruit!

Today, I encourage you to keep sowing. Many of your seeds will be lost, but do not be concerned because somewhere along the way, your seeds will find fertile ground, and then there will be a cry of joy in heaven.

Prayer:

Lord, my prayer this morning is that the seeds I sow today will not return empty but will fall on fertile ground somewhere, grow, and bear much fruit!

Hear and Do

Matthew 13:10-17

I really love stories! A story is like an anchor to firmly embed a certain message in your mind and hopefully also in your heart. A sermon is often quickly forgotten, but a good story is not easily forgotten. Every time you think of that specific story, the message it conveys automatically comes to mind. But believe me, I have a very good Teacher! Jesus continually taught people by telling stories and using parables to convey life truths.

When Jesus tells the parable of the sower, Matthew tells us that He got into a boat. From this floating "pulpit," He taught the people. It served a twofold purpose. Firstly, it was a clever way to ensure that everyone could see Him. The crowds had become very large, and people were jostling each other, so most likely many couldn't see Him at all. This way, He had access to everyone on the shore.

However, there was also a second, more subtle reason. He wanted to show that there was a certain distance that had arisen between the crowds and Jesus.

Most of them were there for the wrong reasons, and unlike the disciples, they didn't truly want to accept and follow Jesus. They were there out of curiosity or to receive something. Perhaps they could witness some awe-inspiring miracle or healing. In other words, they were only there for the sensation!

It's also interesting to note that Jesus sometimes speaks to the crowds and other times only to the disciples, His true followers. He says one thing to the crowds and something different, something more intimate, to the disciples. Then Jesus explains to

His disciples that the crowds don't necessarily understand the stories or parables He tells. To them, it's mostly just nice stories. And then Jesus says something that has often been debated. He says that the understanding of the crowds has been dulled and that God has not given them the ability to understand. And it sounds somewhat unfair to us. Why would the Lord do such a thing?

There are several explanations for this passage, but the most logical one is that it is certainly not an unfair act of God to deliberately block people. This is

confirmed by numerous passages in the Bible that speak of God's great grace and that He will accept anyone who comes to Him as His child. No one is ever turned away! So what happened here is that the people's understanding became dull because, in a sense, they themselves closed their ears to the Gospel. It is not the fault of the parables that the people couldn't understand them, but rather the hardness of their hearts and their unwillingness to truly follow Jesus like the other disciples.

The fact is, understanding doesn't

just mean that it's logically comprehensible to your mind. It first has to touch your heart. It's a matter of belief and action, and most importantly, complete surrender. When the parable you hear transforms into action, it truly gains perspective in your life, and you gain understanding.

So what was the difference between the disciples and the crowds on the shore? The crowds and the disciples heard exactly the same message. The crowds went home unchanged that evening. The disciples, on the other hand, kept what they heard in their hearts, pondered it and

adjusted their lives according to what they heard!

We read about how this was put into practice in the book of Acts. Luke tells in great detail what these disciples did. They applied everything Jesus taught them through parables in practice. One example of this was living out the parable of the sower. They scattered the seeds of the Gospel far and wide. Many of those seeds fell on fertile ground, grew, and produced abundant fruit. They not only sowed but also taught those in whose hearts they sowed to do the same. The result was an explosion of the Gospel

with enriching consequences. Even a hardened Pharisee like Paul was impacted by their obedience. Indeed, Jesus had to intervene personally! The result was that the Gospel spread throughout the Western world, even to the heart of "Babylon," Rome!

You and I hear the message every Sunday in the worship service. The question is: what do we do with it? Does it end with hearing? Do we enjoy the beautiful sermon and then go home unchanged? The idea is that we must put into practice what we hear, the message that

the Holy Spirit conveys to us through the preacher. How many times have we received the command to share the Gospel with everyone we meet? How many of us have ever taken action on that? Aren't we perhaps in exactly the same boat as the crowds who stood on the shore and listened to Jesus' parable, and then went home unchanged?

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I want to ask for forgiveness for often neglecting Your messages to me - hearing them but not putting them into practice!

Come Sow Together!

Matthew 13:18-23

Jesus' disciples sit around Him in the boat. On the beach, there is a crowd of people waiting for something to happen, but Jesus is occupied with this handful of men. It is of utmost importance that they understand properly what this parable is about because their entire mission is based on the truths summarized in this parable. The story is simple: a sower who scatters his seed on rocky ground. Some of the seed fell on the path, and the birds immediately picked it up.

Another portion fell on rocky ground where it began to grow but, without enough soil, it could not survive for long. A third portion fell among the weeds and was choked. The good news is that some of the seed also fell on good soil, and it grew and bore fruit.

Now Jesus explains to the men that there is a deeper message hidden behind the story, and that the seed actually represents the message of the Gospel, and different people react differently to it. However, the question is: why did Jesus explain the parable to the men? After all, they had all

already received the message, and all of them had responded positively. They are all the good soil, and the fruit can already be seen in their lives. Did they then need such a message? You might wonder about Judas. He was also there. Did he ever truly respond positively?

From a young age, we have been taught about this beautiful parable. It means that it is a call to the people who hear the Word. You must show the right response when the Lord speaks to you through His word. You must strive to be the "good soil" so that the seed of the Gospel sown in your

life will grow to maturity and bear fruit. And that is entirely correct. Today, the Lord also asks of you that you honestly assess for yourself whether you truly are that good soil and whether the seed sown in your life is truly bearing fruit.

But there is also another meaning to this parable. Jesus specifically wanted to convey this entirely different meaning to the disciples to encourage them because soon He would send them out, and then they had to remain motivated even if not everyone responded positively to the message. And if you are part of

the "good soil" and are bearing fruit, then this meaning is also intended for you. For you, it is rather about the sower, the person proclaiming the good news in whatever way. This parable serves to encourage everyone who sows the seed of the word in their work. Personally, I can confess this morning that I have often been bitterly disappointed when I sowed the Word, and it was simply swallowed by the weeds. Or it seemed to me that my message was accepted with joy and there was great rejoicing, but a month or two later, everything withered, just like the seed that fell on the

rock and the beautiful young plant scorched by the sun. It makes you feel discouraged!

A teacher can stand on the pulpit Sunday after Sunday and proclaim the Word, but at the end of the day, it feels as if nothing significant has happened! The congregants are still divided, and they continue to gossip about each other! His words fell among the weeds or, worse yet, they fell on the hard path! Before the people even stepped out of the church door, the birds had already devoured all the seed! They didn't hear a single word of what he said! That's often how it

feels for a preacher.

And it's not just the teachers who often feel this way. You and I might be talking to someone about the Lord—giving them a tract or sending them a WhatsApp message. And then there is no response! You feel as if all your best efforts are completely worthless.

This parable wants to encourage and motivate all the sowers to continue sowing. Yes, seed will fall on the path and among the bushes and on rocks. But then you must know that somewhere, seed will also fall in the plowed soil, and that seed will grow to

maturity and bear fruit itself. Never ever stop your missionary efforts, even if you sometimes feel discouraged. And never ever stop spreading the gospel because somewhere, there is someone who is eagerly waiting for that message from you.

In Matthew's time, this parable was an encouragement to the entire congregation because everyone participated in the sowing process. It wasn't just the teacher who sowed. Today, this parable is not only meant to encourage the teacher but also to encourage me and you as "ordinary" members of the

congregation to become part of the sowing process and not to become disheartened when it feels like the seed never falls on fertile ground. I once had a long conversation with a man who was on the verge of committing suicide. My best efforts to convince him felt like seed among the weeds. And suddenly, there was a breakthrough, and against all expectations, he met Jesus. What a joyful day! Come, let's sow together! God will bring forth fruit from our labour!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this wonderful encouragement that my work is

not in vain. Thank you for rewarding my labour, even if I often don't see it. Please give me the perseverance to continue sowing!

Weeds and Flowers

Matthew 13:24-30 & 13:36-43

I don't consider myself a skilled gardener, as I don't really have green fingers. Furthermore, my busy life doesn't allow me to spend much time in the garden. But in the good old days when I still had my own house and had time on my hands, I enjoyed getting my hands dirty in Ballito's red sandy soil, and planting to my heart's content! I could boast of having a beautiful garden, but I must quickly add that it wasn't all my ingenuity that made the garden beautiful. The credit

should actually go to a creative young Zulu guy named Andrew, who would come and work in my garden on Saturdays, generously incorporating his creativity.

One thing I've never been able to succeed in is growing flowers and especially vegetables from seeds. Perhaps I don't have enough patience for that. But occasionally, I come across a packet of flower seeds with a rapturous and attractive picture on the front that I simply must buy. So one day, shortly after Andrew started working for me, I bought a packet with the most beautiful little flowers on the

cover. I had a few spare minutes, prepared a patch of soil hastily, added compost and fertilizer, and sowed the seeds. And I waited. I was excited about my handiwork and eagerly anticipated colourful flowers amidst the drab shrubs. Eventually, the first flowers began to peek out above the ground. My wildest expectations were exceeded because, for once in my life, all my seeds sprouted! I was overwhelmed with joy!

Two weeks passed, and my flowers had grown beautifully, but for those of you familiar with Natal, you'll know that weeds thrive much better here than

flowers, and soon the flower bed was overrun with weeds. No problem, because Andrew is here on Saturdays, and he knew that weeds were top priority in my garden.

And so Andrew arrived that Saturday with a joyful heart and a mission to make mincemeat of the weeds. I got busy elsewhere, and it was only late afternoon when I could take a stroll in the garden. Andrew had finished his task for the day and was smiling from ear to ear as he admired his handiwork. I also looked and was filled with horror! Just that morning, my little flowers that I

had sown with so much effort and love were still smiling at me happily, albeit among the weeds, but they were still there! Now there was only a painfully neat and barren flower bed without a single weed. And also without a single flower plant. Andrew never realized that those plants were supposed to be flowers!

I was extremely unhappy, and poor Andrew was pale with shock. How was he supposed to know? Flowers and weeds look exactly the same when they're small!

We have seen on a previous occasion that you cannot completely isolate yourself from

the world. As a believer, you constantly rub shoulders with unbelievers and heathens of all kinds. Here in KwaZulu-Natal, this may be even more pronounced than anywhere else because Hindus, Muslims, and various Eastern beliefs are prevalent here. However, when you come to church, you find yourself among believers. Or do you really? Indeed, not everyone who goes to church is a believer! Some churchgoers simply put on the mask of faith for various reasons. I have often heard someone say that we need to purify the church of all this hypocrisy. I even know of

congregations where it has actually happened. I myself have suggested removing all the indifferent members from our church list. I could hardly believe I had suggested such a thing!

Is the church only for believers then? Indeed, the church, or rather the congregation, is the place where believers are spiritually nourished, coached, and trained to fulfill their role in the Kingdom. But isn't it also the place where unbelievers can hear the Word and hear Jesus' plea to come to Him? If all the unbelievers in the church are "eradicated," some weak

believers are definitely going to fall. But at the same time, some unbelievers might be deprived of their last chance to taste eternal life!

Of course, we should never accept that many of our fellow church members are lukewarm or unbelieving, and it should motivate us to encourage those people to become useful for the Kingdom.

By the way, after that sad day, Andrew never again pulled out a "wrong bush." He got the message loud and clear, and with his enthusiastic help, our garden later received the "garden of the

month" award in Ballito. Would a "Congregation of the Month" award be inappropriate? I'm just asking...

Prayer:

Lord, I often want to withdraw myself from the sinful world, but then how will people hear Your message of salvation? Please give me the strength, wisdom, and zeal to proclaim Your Word everywhere!

Mustard and Yeast

Matthew 13:31-35

Look, if you want a big tree, you need to plant a big seed. Take a coconut palm, for example: it certainly has a massive seed! In the tropical islands where they naturally grow, the trees often stand right on the beach. When the coconut ripens, it falls and usually ends up in the sea, often washing up on another island where it takes root and grows. Quite romantic! And the Coco de Mer seed is even larger.

But the mustard seed, that's a

whole different story. It's seeds are tiny black grains, barely a millimeter in diameter. They definitely look like they're only good for making mustard. Only weeds have such small seeds! But just plant that tiny little seed! Once that tiny grain sprouts, it starts to grow and grow until it becomes a large shrub, and before you know it, you have a 3-meter-tall tree! And you stand in amazement because who would have thought that such a tree could grow from such a small seed?

Jesus uses the mustard seed and yeast to illustrate the Kingdom of

God. yeast is of course a very useful thing. Have you ever tried baking bread without yeast? I mean real bread, not the plastic kind you make with self-raising flour or baking powder. I promise you: it comes out of the oven like a brick, completely inedible! But if you mix a few grains of yeast into your flour and let it lie and ferment for a while, you'll see how that little bit grows and grows until it wants to spill over the edges of your bowl. And oh, how delicious a freshly baked pot-loaf tastes! It makes your mouth water, especially early in the morning!

When Jesus uses these two

images, He explains something about the secret of God's Kingdom that takes your breath away. For the Jews, what He wanted to emphasize regard to the Kingdom was totally different from how they had imagined it. Even today, we struggle to comprehend the concept. For a Jew, the idea of greatness and glory was deeply ingrained when they thought of the Kingdom of God because everything about God revolved around Israel. Their understanding of the Kingdom of Israel and God's Kingdom was so intertwined that when they sang in glorious language of Israel, God's Kingdom was

simultaneously in their thoughts.

Now Jesus comes and describes God's Kingdom as a tiny mustard seed, and it shocks the Jews to the core! But the great secret behind it is that it should not be underestimated because although initially there was only a small handful of people who accepted Jesus, the Gospel suddenly exploded on Pentecost, growing and growing at an astonishing pace until it eventually spread throughout the whole earth. The other example that Jesus uses is yeast. It's just a few inconspicuous gray grains that you mix into a bowl of flour, and

look at the enriching influence it has on the dough! Like grains of yeast, the early Christians infiltrated the gentile world, and the consequences were absolutely phenomenal!

Today, you and I as Christians feel like tiny mustard seeds or gray grains of yeast in an overwhelming world of godlessness. When we see how crime in all its forms, not only in South Africa but around the world, washes over us, we feel so powerless. But we must look beyond the masses and see God's power and omnipotence, for within me, as a tiny mustard

seed, is a dynamic force waiting to burst forth. Thank God it's not our own power but the immeasurable power of the Holy Spirit that lies dormant within us! We just have to allow Him to unlock that power.

However, the problem is that we fear the consequences. Or when we finally give in, we become discouraged because it seems like so little is happening at the beginning. Take a mustard seed, for example: when it sprouts, it still looks so small, fragile, and vulnerable. The same with yeast: if you peek into the bowl after a few minutes, your dough still

looks exactly the same. Nothing has happened! But incredible forces are at work, and the outcome is overwhelming! You just have to exercise enough patience. From my own life, I can testify with great thanks to God about the incredible growth power He can give you.

A mustard seed may seem insignificant, but it is packed with energy: 46% oil and 43% protein. Similarly, the pale gray grains of yeast are actually a living organism just waiting for the flour and water to burst forth. Likewise, the gospel may seem inferior and insignificant at first glance, but

when I make myself available to it, the full power locked within it comes into effect.

All He asks of you is to be willing to be used!

Prayer:

Lord, please use me to manifest
Your power in the world!

The Kruger Millions

Matthew 13:44-52

Tell any young boy about a treasure buried somewhere, and you can see how he bubbles with pure excitement! However, it's not just young boys who were excited about President Paul Kruger's treasures. And for many years, Waterval Boven was the focal point of speculations about that fabulous treasure because the old President's last standing was in the small town of Waterval Onder. Numerous fortune seekers were convinced that he had buried all his gold in that area. Every now

and then, someone would show up claiming to have new insight into exactly where all that fabulous wealth would be buried, and they wanted to move mountains, literally and figuratively to find it!

Back then, several people came to Grandpa begging him to let them search for the gold on our farm in Waterval Boven. They were convinced it was hidden on our farm. The only gold I ever stumbled upon there was Mom's gold ring and Grandpa's gold medal that he won in his youth in athletics!

But just imagine this: in an old

chest in your attic, you discover a note that has turned yellow with age. It is written by your great-grandfather, who was one of the old President's confidants. In the letter, addressed to your great-grandmother, he describes exactly where he and his companions buried a great amount of gold to revive the country after the devastation of the Boer War. Wouldn't you be excited? Finally, this riddle of more than a century is solved! And you are the only one who knows about it. You pack your bags and hit the road to the Lowveld. Everything has changed over the past hundred years, but

after a long search, you find the farm described in Grandpa's letter. Everything is exactly as Grandpa said! You are so excited that you tremble. You track down the owner of the farm and make him an offer to buy the land because you are absolutely convinced that incredible treasure is buried there!

How do you know? Your source is one hundred percent reliable because he was there personally and part of the group that buried the gold. Of course, you believe him, and now that you are so close, there is an excitement bubbling irreversibly through your

veins. You are willing to pay almost any price for the land. You would even sell your house and all your belongings to get enough money to buy the farm because the reward will more than make up for what you pay.

Jesus concludes His third great sermon with three short parables. The first two are about things of great value, just like in our story above. Jesus says that when an opportunity for such a treasure arises, you would do anything to obtain that treasure. Look at the efforts some people make to retrieve treasures from old ships that have been lying under the

sea for hundreds of years. No expense or effort is spared! It is the same with the Kingdom of God: if you discover it one day (or if it discovers you!), you become so excited about it that you would literally do anything to become part of it.

Take Peter and his companions as an example: they were such an example. They left everything behind, their work, friends, parents, family, boats. And they unconditionally followed Jesus. Not just for a day or two, but for three years, they were willing to endure total discomfort just to be with Jesus. For them, this

Treasure was of immeasurable value! When a Muslim discovers that Treasure today, he must be willing to give up absolutely everything because total rejection from his family and friends awaits him. He is stripped of everything he owns and everything and everyone dear to him. Moreover, he is no longer even sure of his own life.

"Is it worth it?" you might ask.

Fatima, a lady who, as a young girl, exchanged the Muslim faith for the Christian faith, told me excitedly what it means for her to be able to follow Jesus. All the dreadful hardships she had to

endure were more than worth it. Now she does missionary work and spreads the Gospel. She shares the Good News with thousands of people trapped in the clutches of Hinduism and Islam.

My question to you this morning is whether you have discovered that Treasure that excites people so much? You have? Are you also excited about it? Are you as excited as you would have been if you had discovered the Kruger Millions? Are you so excited that you simply can't keep quiet about it and that you have to tell everyone who crosses your path?

May this day that lies before you hold great blessings for you and make you bubble with excitement about the fabulous Treasure that only Jesus can offer you, the Treasure of God's Kingdom and Eternal Life!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for giving me that Treasure of Eternal Life and Your Kingdom as well. Give me a passion to help others find it too!

Miracles

Matthew 13:53-58

Today, I want to throw a stone into the forest with a question that might make many people sit up straight: Are God's miracles dependent on us as human beings?

Perhaps I should qualify my question with a few examples. In my younger days, I often performed on stage and sang humorous songs. We would sometimes have a sympathetic audience, and that would fuel me to give it my all. The more the

people clapped, the better I could perform on stage. I remember one evening when I had to perform just a few days after undergoing a nose operation. I was in pain, and there were dark bags under my eyes. However, when I started singing and the enthusiastic audience cheered me on, I couldn't help but deliver a successful, grand performance. But not all of my performances were received with such enthusiasm. The most frustrating performance I ever experienced was in my own community, where it felt like no one was even listening to me. People sat and chatted while I sang my heart out!

Indeed, your own community usually appreciates your talents the least.

In recent years, I have been regularly invited by various churches throughout Zululand to preach on Sundays, even though I am not a minister. However, in my own church, I have had the privilege of leading a worship service very few times.

Charlize Theron is an excellent example of this. When she lived in South Africa, no one knew about her. She had to be content with the scraps. It was only when she had to move to America that people truly appreciated her

incredible talent. And there, in far-off America, she started to blossom for the first time. Within a few years, she became a cover story and reached the pinnacle of the Oscars, fueled by enthusiastic supporters.

In Matthew 13:53-58, we read that Jesus went to His hometown, Nazareth. He had spent the first thirty years of His life there, working in Joseph's carpentry shop. When He returned after an absence of a year or two, everyone was very skeptical. They knew Him, after all! And they went on with their lives. Jesus must have been very

discouraged with this group because no matter how hard He tried, they wouldn't even listen to Him. Perhaps He told them to bring their sick so that He could heal them. But they simply shrugged and said, "What does a carpenter know about medical matters?" In a sense, Jesus' hands were tied because without people's cooperation, He was powerless. It sounds terrible to put it like that! Was He truly powerless? Of course, we know today that wasn't the case! Although Matthew writes here that Jesus could do very few miracles because of the people's unbelief, we know that He

performed breathtaking miracles elsewhere!

Today, it is still exactly the same. Jesus continues to perform miracles, and from time to time, there are reports that testify to it. You hear about astonishing healings where everyone had given up hope, where doctors had already written off the patient! However, someone held on in faith to the one Lifeline, Jesus. Today, there are numerous people who can testify to divine healings, where medical science simply cannot explain what happened. But in almost all of these cases, there was someone

involved who revealed the faith that God provided the opportunity for healing. Healings are just one example of God's modern wonders. They happen in various fields today. Personally, I can testify countless times that I could only attribute things to the hand of God. Some time ago, I was driving down the street in Ballito. I passed under a giant fig tree, and then a Voice somewhere inside me told me to look in my rearview mirror. I stopped abruptly right there in the middle of the street because right behind me, that huge tree had fallen and was lying across the entire road. If I had been one second slower, I

probably would have been crushed by the tree. A woman coming from the front saw everything happen: "You don't know how lucky you are!" she said to me. No, I wasn't lucky! God protected me. It was yet another of the many miracles He sent on my path!

However, the question now is: Is God then dependent on our faith to perform miracles? Is He in other words powerless if we don't believe? I have to say a thousand times no! Of course, He is not dependent on us as human beings. He is not dependent on anything or anyone! Did He not

create the entire universe out of absolute nothingness before there was any life? But what is true is that God wants us to have faith in Him. When we begin to manifest this faith, things happen in our lives that are otherwise inexplicable. However, we must also be very careful not to try to use our faith to manipulate God. It simply cannot and should not be done! Your faith should be used and seen in deep childlike dependence on God, not as a merit but as an absolute gift of grace.

Prayer:

Lord, I can't stop singing about all

Your miracles!

The Head on the Platter

Matthew 14:1-12

Herod did a horrific thing when he allowed his lust to overpower him! The consequence was that he played right into the hands of his wife, Herodias!

The Herod we're talking about here is Herod Antipas. His father was the infamous Herod the Great, who was responsible for the horrific massacre of infants shortly after Jesus' birth. Herod the Great's three sons, Archelaus, Philip, and Antipas, received their education in Rome. After their

cruel father's death, each of them was given a region to rule. Antipas' territory was Galilee and Perea. He was married to the daughter of Aretas of Nabatea, but he simply couldn't keep his eyes off his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. Eventually, his lust got the better of him, and he divorced his wife and took his brother's wife for himself. Naturally, this made his father-in-law Aretas very angry, and the result was a war—a war that Antipas lost. But well, he had already had his fill of Herodias. Or was it perhaps she who had had her fill of him? She was a real troublemaker, that woman! That's what we gather

from reading between the lines...

John the Baptist simply couldn't stay quiet about the ruler of the land who behaved like a pig, so he told the truth to Herod and Herodias bald headed. Herodias then exploded with anger! How dare an uncouth street preacher insult her husband, the Tetrarch of Galilee! So they threw John into prison. That's what happens when there's no freedom of the press!

And then came that party: Herod's birthday, and he threw a grand feast. I can imagine: everyone with a title was there. The tables groaned under the

weight of exotic food, and the drinks flowed abundantly. Scantily clad dancers entertained the guests with erotic dances to the rhythm of Eastern music. And then came the highlight of the evening: the rapturous daughter of Herodias appeared on the dance floor. She had learned from her cunning mother how to enchant men, and as she glided and wriggled across the dance floor, she made many men drool in the room. Herod couldn't take his eyes off her. When she finally made her last turn, the applause was deafening. Herod beckoned her closer, saying, "Just tell me what you want!" He was

noticeably enchanted by her performance. "Anything! I swear, anything you ask, I will give it to you!" His tongue was loose because lust had a way of making you say things you wouldn't normally say. Your mind simply no longer thinks logically!

She looks questioningly at Mummy, and Mum whispers something in her ear. For a moment, it almost seems as if the girl is shocked, but then a sly smile spreads across her beautiful face: "John the Baptist's head!"

A shocked silence descends on the room. Did they hear correctly?

Herod turns pale, but his wife has a satisfied smile on her face. "I want John the Baptist's head on a platter!" she declares, pointing with her finger how the man should be beheaded. By this time, Herod is completely sobered. He tries to backpedal, because of course, he is a responsible ruler! But then he remembers his promise to her. If he were to go back on his word now, his reputation would be completely ruined.

"Very well then!" He is despondent.

And Herodias smiled contentedly, her undisguised hatred for John

was satisfied! However in the process of satisfying her lust for blood, she makes a murderer out of her daughter.

A while later, two slaves bring the gruesome, bloodied head into the room on a platter and give it to the girl. She doesn't want it and gives the horrifying gift to Mum Herodias. Herod feels sick...

A gruesome story that raises many questions in your mind. Herod had the privilege of receiving a visit from the greatest prophet of all time, John the Baptist. What does he do? He has him imprisoned and murdered. He gets a second

chance when Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, comes to preach in his vicinity. He turns pale with fear, thinking it's the ghost of John! Once again, he lets the chance to obtain eternal life slip through his fingers. There was never another chance for Herod thereafter. He had squandered his last chance!

Someone wrote to me some time ago and asked what she should do to become a child of God. I sent her the clear, simple message of the Gospel. Her response was that she wasn't ready for it yet. She still had things to straighten out in her life.

I never heard from her again. Is it perhaps too late for her, just like it was for Herod? Were her sins so great that she thought there could be no forgiveness for her? Jesus granted eternal life to a thief while hanging dying on the cross. Even his terrible sins were not too great for God's forgiveness. If only Herod could have realized that, he might have been saved! But he closed his ears to the gospel. He didn't want to hear it!

Don't let that happen to you...

Dear Lord, this morning I fervently pray for the many people who have already received the clear message of the Gospel through

these daily reflections but have not yet responded to it!

Food for a Huge Crowd

Matthew 14:13-21

The news of the gruesome and incomprehensible murder of the prophet, John the Baptist, shook the community. Jesus himself was deeply affected by it, so much so that He just wanted to be alone in a quiet place where no one would bother Him.

Sometimes it is necessary to separate yourself from the world to be alone with God, so that you can gain perspective on life again. Jesus and His twelve disciples get into a boat and row

to a secluded spot. However, they don't easily get away from the hungry crowds of people. When they see them again, there is already a huge crowd gathering around them. Jesus' moment of silence was very brief. The need among the people is great, and there are many who are desperate to be healed, but there are also many who come just to hear Jesus speak, because His words are like balm to the soul's wounds.

The twelve men murmur among themselves. It's getting late, and they are in such a remote place. Where will all these people get

food? One of the men is sent to whisper something in the Master's ear, he should send the people to the nearby villages to find food. However, Jesus squarely places the problem on the shoulders of the twelve: "They don't need to go away; you give them something to eat."

The men are shocked. There's a large crowd gathered here! They quickly estimate: there are at least five thousand men! And they haven't even counted all the women and children! (So we can assume that there could have been somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand people

gathered together.) It's scary!

Just arrange a very simple meal for fifteen guests and see how much it costs! Then think about how much work you have to put into keeping everyone happy. Here we have a thousand times more people! How do you provide for such a multitude of people? The logistical problems involved in such a meal are astronomical, even if it's very simple!

Jesus' disciples scrape and scrounge, but the five loaves of bread and two fishes they come up with are laughable ridiculous! There isn't even enough for the twelve of them!

Jesus' reaction? He simply thanks God for the food and starts distributing it. The men's eyes widen! They can't believe what they're seeing! They send the food down the line, but it simply doesn't diminish! Eventually, there is more than enough for everyone, and the abundance is so great that they have twelve baskets left over after everyone is satisfied.

What exactly happened here? There was a great need, and the men went to Jesus for help. They thoroughly realized that they couldn't do anything on their own. Jesus gives them an instruction to

do something about the situation themselves - they had to give food to the people! They didn't just sit in a heap and say that it was absolutely impossible and that it wouldn't even help to try! No, they started asking around who had food. In other words, they acted proactively. What they could get their hands on, they gave to Jesus. With their scanty offering, He made the miracle happen.

Over the past few years, soup kitchens have sprung up everywhere in our country. People have seen the great need of the unemployed, the poor, and the

orphans and decided to help where they could, even if many of them didn't even know where to start to get the resources. There are many stories of people starting such a soup kitchen with absolutely nothing, and then finding that the food and funds to operate the kitchen are miraculously provided. However, if you look at the methods God uses to provide, you will quickly realize that the food and money don't just fall from the sky! God asks us to take active steps. Let's say you might go to a large supermarket and explain to the manager what you're doing. Then you ask for donations or for food

that can no longer be sold, like wilting vegetables. The miracle happens when God works in that manager's heart and he decides to provide. Before you know it, there is a chain reaction that astonishes you!

The important things to remember are:

1. Bring your need to God in faith so that He can help.
2. Get involved yourself and do what He asks of you. Don't just hope that help will fall from the sky!
3. Believe that God will provide at the right time and through the

right channels.

4. Thank God when the "manna and quails" come raining down on you, often from the most unexpected source.

5. Give all the glory to God because only He can provide, even if it sometimes seems to come from purely human origins.

Prayer:

Lord, this morning we need to once again realize that You are almighty and that You provide for all our needs. Please help me to place my full trust in You!

Walking on Water

Matthew 14:22-33

To be able to heal people may still be acceptable. To turn water into wine however is astonishing. To provide food for a crowd of fifteen thousand out of nothing is definitely the absolute impossible. But to walk on water - that is something reserved only for the gods! That's what the people of ancient times believed. To be able to walk on the sea meant entering the world of the gods!

However, with this story Matthew wants to tell us much more than

that this is just another miracle of Jesus. He wants to emphasize the true identity of Jesus. He is not just from the world of the gods, He IS the Almighty God!

After Jesus and His disciples provides food for the massive crowds, it is understandable that they are completely exhausted. Jesus sends the disciples ahead in a boat to the other side of the lake while He dismisses the remaining people and finally finds some rest. He climbs up the mountain to pray and regain His strength. It seems that Jesus spent the majority of the night in prayer. This once again

emphasizes the tremendous value and necessity of prayer for us as believers.

Meanwhile, the other disciples struggle with the sea. They literally have the wind against them, and their boat just won't make progress. Then, in the hazy mist of the early dawn, they see the figure walking on the sea towards them. They are terrified because what is happening here is the absolute impossible. Have they entered the realm of gods or spirits? Is it a ghost?

I can relate to the disciples. A mysterious figure walking towards you over the raging waves, and

there is nowhere you can escape! I think it must have been blood-curdling and frightening for the poor disciples. They cried out in fear!

Then they hear their Master's comforting words: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Jesus' words, "It is I," remind us of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. Moses wanted to know, "Who are you?" "I AM WHO I AM" is how the Lord revealed Himself to Moses (Exodus 3). Suddenly, a terrifying situation is defused. What's more, Jesus is telling them that He is the same faithful Covenant God

who appeared to Moses, the God who not only gave deliverance to Moses and the Israelites in the past but who is also NOW bringing deliverance in their present need. He is Immanuel, God With Us! All power belongs to Him, even the completely impossible, like walking on water!

These two thoughts immediately bring calm to them.

Suddenly, Peter summons up courage: he also wants to walk on water! Yes, Peter is the one who always acts and speaks on impulse, without thinking. Passionately impulsive! And often, it gets him into trouble. And

now he wants to do the completely impossible thing, the thing that only the "gods" can do, just because he saw Jesus doing it. When Jesus invites him to get out of the boat, it is Peter's impulsive faith that gives him the power to take the first steps on the water.

He did it! He is standing on water! His mates can't believe their eyes because there he is, Peter, an ordinary human being walking on the rough sea. **THE ROUGH SEA!** That's something Peter didn't take into account. Walking on water, maybe he could handle that. However, now the terrifying

waves are rushing towards him. Suddenly, he no longer sees Jesus, only these terrible waves. And then he starts sinking. The moment he takes his eyes off Jesus, everything is lost. Jesus grabs him by the hand and helps poor, bewildered Peter into the boat.

"We must keep our eyes on Jesus" we sing. But then we sink when we lose sight of Him. Indeed, Peter also sinks quite a few times on his journey ahead!

Isn't there perhaps a Peter in each of our lives? We are often plagued by fear, unbelief, and little faith. Sometimes there are

moments when we doubt God, when we completely take our eyes off Him. Then, like Peter, we also ask: "If it is really You..." (verse 28). But then, when we (like Peter) hear the words of the Lord inviting us: "Come!" we are able to rise above the doubt and fear and literally walk on water!

However, we must remember that this is not about human bravado but about a "walk in faith." We are constantly aware of our own doubts. There are frequent moments of collapse from which Jesus must save us. Yet, we hear the voice of the Lord each time: "Come!" He wants us to dare on

the path of radical love and obedience to overcome our fears and little faith. Peter ultimately triumphed after Pentecost. Then he emerged as a cornerstone of faith. You and I can do the same. Like Peter, we have also received the Holy Spirit, who provides us with all the necessary power.

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for giving me Your Holy Spirit and granting me unlimited power through Him. Lord, please strengthen my faith and trust in You every day!

Traditions

Matthew 15:1-20

In our congregation, there was once a heated debate during a church council meeting about what kind of clothing the elders and deacons should wear in church. The argument went on until late at night, and the poor preacher had to endure it all. Some wanted to maintain the tradition of black suits and white ties, while others simply couldn't stand the hot clothes in the stifling Stanger anymore. Eventually, a compromise was reached: safari suits! It was considered high

fashion at that time! However, at the end of the discussion, the poor preacher learned that he still had to bear the burden of the black suit and, on top of that, a toga. After all, he was the pastor!

We can surely ask the question, what is the purpose of a church council meeting? Is it to engage in endless debates about upholding traditions, or is it to reflect on ways to better expand the Kingdom of God?

Senseless traditions have been the cause of much pain and distress in the church. Take for example, the issue of women having to wear hats, whether they

wanted to or not. Thank goodness that matter has been resolved! Hats often turned worship services into fashion parades. And then there were the absurdities!

I once read a story by Ferdinand Deist that took place in the Sandveld: the boarding school children were forced to go to church, so on Sundays, they sat bored on the gallery, plotting mischief. One Sunday, a boy brought a piece of fishing line with a hook to church and, as luck would have it, a dignified old lady with a huge hat adorned with a plastic fruit arrangement sat right

below him. When the minister said, "Let us pray," the boy seized his opportunity. Everyone stood up for the prayer, and while everyone's eyes were closed he lowered his hook and neatly hooked it into the fruit arrangement, securing the line to the gallery rails. However, what he didn't realize was that the lady had firmly pinned her hat to her hair with hairpins to prevent it from blowing away. Consequently, when the minister said, "Amen," there was consternation because when the lady tried to sit down, she remained suspended, like Absalom of old, between heaven and earth! Fortunately, someone

came to her rescue and cut the line with a pocket knife. But then came the second consternation because the sudden release of tension caused the old lady to plummet onto the church bench with a resounding crash! The minister preached in vain that Sunday because I doubt anyone could remember anything from his sermon!

The handwashing mentioned in Matthew 15 has absolutely nothing to do with normal hygiene but rather pure traditions rooted in temple worship. The Pharisees tried to impose these traditions on the common people. When they

also tried to impose their traditions on Jesus' disciples, Jesus rebuked them for their hypocrisy. According to tradition (that is, the Pharisees'), a certain portion of their possessions had to be dedicated to the temple only, and they were not allowed to touch it. This was an easy way for them to avoid their other obligations because there wasn't enough left to, for example, take care of their parents. Basic compassion had to be sacrificed for the sake of a pious tradition. Jesus called it pure lip service! External righteousness cannot fix what is wrong on the inside. Such outward righteousness can even

cause someone else to sin in the process. Just look at how the poor boarding school boy was chastised because of the old lady's fruit arrangement! And all because of external piousness and traditions.

We must clearly understand that Jesus is not waging a campaign against outward religious actions or traditions here, but rather against a person's attitude. Genuine religion starts with the right internal disposition, and its first cornerstone is love. Firstly, sincere love for God and then, of course, genuine, unfeigned love for your fellow-human beings.

This love must again not be a superficial action just to impress others but must come deeply from your heart. The proverb says, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." If your heart is full of love, not only your mouth but your entire life will overflow with it.

By saying this, I don't mean to suggest that all traditions are bad and should be discarded. Indeed, there are still beautiful traditions that should be preserved. But the condition should be that we don't uphold them just for the sake of tradition but that we live out the true meaning behind the tradition,

and it should come from the heart!

Prayer:

Lord, please open my eyes so that I can recognise when the things I do are merely beautiful traditions. Please help me to truly live for You from the heart!

To Nag God

Matthew 15:21-28

If I ask the Lord for something and He doesn't answer my prayer, can I keep asking? Then it's like persistently nagging God!

Paul had a "thorn in the flesh," and he prayed three times for the Lord to remove it, but the Lord's answer to him was that it was not within His will to take it away. Paul didn't ask again. Does that mean that God eventually turns a deaf ear if we keep asking? Today's Scripture passage is precisely about such a person who

persisted in pleading.

Jesus had temporarily moved to the cities of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia, a non-Jewish region. With a few exceptions, such as the Hellenistic area of Gadara, Jesus had primarily focused His preaching and healing so far mostly on the Jews, the People of God. Now He finds Himself in a foreign land with foreign people. You surely remember that the residents of His hometown rejected Him!

One day, a Canaanite woman came and persisted in pleading with Jesus to please help her sick daughter. What does Jesus do?

We are actually surprised to see that He acts as if He doesn't hear her and simply walks on. The men with Him become irritated with this woman who keeps persisting in her pleas. When they can no longer handle it, they tell Jesus to please just send her away because she is nagging!

Then Jesus turns around. He makes it clear to her that He would not have helped her because she is not a Jew. His task was specifically to come and bring the gospel to the Jews, the chosen people of God. Remember, it was only after His ascension that His disciples

received the command to carry the gospel to the other nations. At this stage it was intended only for the Jews. But this woman is desperate and she presents all sorts of arguments as to why she should also be part of Jesus' ministry. She would even be satisfied with just "the crumbs that fall from the master's table." She understands very well, but she doesn't want to take away the "bread" from the chosen ones. Please...

How ironic that the scholars who studied the Word of God in the smallest detail rejected Jesus. He is the One whom the Scriptures

spoke of, the One about whom Isaiah wrote so soulfully. They knew everything, yet they scorned Him and scolded Him for everything that was wrong. Yet this pagan woman from a heathen land addresses Him with His Jewish-Messianic title: "Lord, Son of David!"

Yes, eventually these same devout "people of God" went to the extreme and had Jesus put to death in order to be forever rid of Him. And God gathered for Himself a new people from all the heathen nations of the world, as He commanded the first disciples: "Go into all the world and preach

the gospel to all creation." (Mark 16:15)

Jesus listened compassionately to this woman who wouldn't stop. He saw faith in her, a faith that was absent in the Scriptural scholars. How could He simply ignore her request? Of course, He wouldn't ignore it! Her daughter was healed. Her plea certainly did not fall on deaf ears. Who knows, maybe He wanted to test the strength of her faith with His ignoring attitude, to see how strong it truly was.

To come back to the question of whether I may continue to ask God for something: Yes, certainly!

If Jesus would help a non-Jewish woman, although it wasn't His initial task, how much more will He help His children. He is indeed Immanuel, God with us, and He has promised that it will always be so. We can therefore be assured of His help at all times, and we may, like that Canaanite woman, sometimes persistently plead with Him. Unlike people who often get irritated with us when we keep persisting, Jesus will still patiently listen to us. Sometimes it feels like He completely ignores us, but rest assured: He listens! Perhaps He also wants to test your faith through it. Perhaps He wants to expand and strengthen your faith

so that you can become a useful instrument in His hands to expand the Kingdom of God.

Of course, He will not grant every request you make because sometimes it is not within His will as in the case of Paul. But you may continue to ask until you receive an answer from God.

Often it also happens that He hears your prayer, your plea, but He answers it in a completely different way than you had hoped. I have intensely experienced this over the past few years, where I had to plead for release, plead for the Lord's provision. And then He does provide, but at a time and in

a way that I least expected. I often stand in amazement and, at the same time, in wonder at the ways of the Lord that are so surprising and fresh.

And yes, I also persistently plead with Him, and I have never been scolded!

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, that I can persistently plead with You, and that You always listen to me!

More Bread

Matthew 15:29-39

This morning we read a story filled to the brim with love and compassion. Jesus and His disciples are back at the Sea of Galilee, where a large part of His ministry took place. This time He climbs up a mountain in a remote area, and sick people are brought to Him from far and wide: the paralyzed, the crippled, the deaf, the mute, the blind. Jesus heals them all. The stream of "patients" is never-ending, and the wonderful thing is that the people recognize the hand of God in this

and praise and glorify Him. If we read between the lines, we must realize that the few healings recorded for us are just a drop in the bucket compared to what Jesus truly accomplished!

This continues for three days, and the crowds keep growing. But there's a problem: in this deserted place, there is nowhere for these people to go and get food. They are far away from the nearest village and for three days most of them have had nothing to eat. Jesus feels deep compassion for the people and He expresses His concern to the twelve disciples. They look at each other: "Where

can we get enough food in this desolate place for such a large crowd? Here are four thousand hungry men with their wives and children! We surely can't conjure up food for everyone....?"

Oh dear! The twelve had long forgotten about the previous occasion where they gave food to a huge crowd in an almost identical situation, with just five loaves of bread and two fishes! How is it possible that they could forget such a miracle? Or perhaps they thought that such a miracle couldn't possibly be repeated?

Jesus must have been greatly

discouraged with His disciples. How long would it take for them to start learning? When will they finally grasp the message? Three days filled with breathtaking miracles, and still the men are filled with little faith!

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asks.

Seven loaves, that's all! And a few fishes as well. Then Jesus does it again: He thanks God for the food, and the men are instructed to start distributing it. The further they progress, the more the food multiplies! There simply is no end! And when everyone is satisfied, there is still

plenty left over, seven baskets full of bread!

How ironic that these very same people who listened to Jesus with such wonder, who soaked up every word that came from His mouth, eventually rejected Him. Yes, it was the same people who brought a never-ending stream of the sick, the blind, the crippled, and the deaf to Jesus with such fervour! We read that Jesus felt deep compassion for these people. We see time and time again how He exhausts Himself to meet their needs. We see how He has to work day after day to heal the rows of sick people and

even goes so far as to provide food for large crowds. How much compassion was locked within Jesus' selfless work! Yet it is the same people whom He lavished with so much love who, just a while later, filled with hatred, shouted angrily, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Today we condemn the Jews for their shortsightedness. But let us not be too quick to judge, for isn't this the history of modern humanity as well? Don't we see these very same things playing out before our eyes today? Indeed, we can point fingers at the hordes of people openly

rejecting Jesus today, even after the gospel, the good news is proclaimed so clearly and vividly across the world through TV, radio, and the internet! Just like the Jews of old, everyone today can witness the wonders of God firsthand. Yet the overwhelming majority of people simply laugh at this gospel and then continue undisturbed with their reckless lives!

Still, we must not be too hasty to judge because you and I, as Christian believers, who have personally experienced Jesus' wonderful love and know that He saved us from eternal damnation

– how do we express our gratitude to Him for this great grace?

Indeed, we are not shouting "Crucify Him!" but rarely do our lives reflect that wonderful love that Jesus showed us. When I think of the love and compassion with which He saved me, I stand before Him with great guilt! I can't even begin to thank Him with my life! In Matthew 28, Jesus asks me for one small thing: to go and tell. How many people have I ever shared the gospel with in my lifetime? But it's more than just telling about Jesus because in the past week's reflections, we

repeatedly see how Jesus feeds and heals people. Jesus doesn't just save our "souls" – our whole being is important to Him. It is in His compassionate treatment of people that they recognize Him as the Messiah.

The world is hungry for the Word. But without us, God's messengers, they cannot be satisfied.

Prayer:

Lord, I praise and worship You because You are so good to me. You shower me with abundant blessings every day. Please help me to give something back to You as well!

Yeast

Matthew 16:1-12

Yeast is a wonderful thing. Just look at how it can work magic with a bag of flour! One of the great pleasures of a visit to the bush is, of course, that blissful relaxing by a wood fire, absorbing the sounds and scents of the veldt To sit and gaze at the flickering flames, leaping and dancing, conjuring all sorts of images. And all the while, your meat rests peacefully on the embers, becoming tasty while you absorb that heavenly scent of smouldering wood like a sponge. But actually the most important

thing is your pot bread, standing there on a few smouldering embers, turning golden brown and irresistibly soft!

But to achieve that golden-brown, fluffy texture, you need a few things. Of course, flour and salt, and a few herbs for flavour, but without the packet of yeast, it will taste like a brick. It's hard work to knead the yeast properly. But then the miracle begins as the white dough rises before your eyes, rising and rising until it tries to escape over the edge of the bowl! It's amazing how a small amount of yeast can transform a whole bowl of dough into a

delicious, fragrant, steaming, mouthwatering loaf of bread. When you lift the lid of the pot after an hour of baking, it resounds around the fire: "Aaaaah!" in pure astonishment. That's when you may even forget about the expensive steak on the embers!

How does yeast work? I don't know, but what I do know is that it affects everything it comes into contact with. If you throw a teaspoonful into a bowl of flour, it starts bubbling and fermenting, becoming a living organism. Throw a bit of yeast into a bucket of water and sugar with a little

ginger and a handful of raisins, and soon you have a bubbling, boiling, steaming concoction. The end product often has a lively kick if left standing long enough! The yeast changes the calm concoction into a fierce brew!

I've made marula beer a few times in the Lowveld. It makes quite a delightful refreshing drink. On one occasion, I added a bit of yeast and left it for quite a while, just to see what would happen. After a week, a smell emerged that would scare you! Hesitantly, I poured a glass. That bubbling brew had a kick like a mule! Toxic! And utterly undrinkable.

Perhaps it is this kind of influence that made the Jews view yeast in a negative light. They believed that yeast actually caused a kind of deterioration. During Passover, all yeast was thrown out of the house as a symbolic action, and the bread that was baked was made without yeast. I can imagine how unappetizing such unleavened bread must have tasted! In the New Testament, yeast is usually used in a negative sense, with only one or two exceptions. In Matthew 16:6, for example, Jesus warns His disciples about "the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."

Just as a small amount of yeast has a great influence, one individual often has an influence on many people. Hitler was a powerful "leaven" that influenced millions of people. Similarly, one negative person can sour an entire community. I remember the Sunday when a church member stood up during the Worship Service and announced that he would no longer listen to the minister's "nonsense." It completely ruined the entire service! One person's negative attitude can influence an entire congregation negatively.

But yeast can also be seen in a

positive light, as described in Matthew 13:33. Think of that fragrant pot bread. One person can positively influence an entire community with love that radiates with joy and enthusiasm. Test it: enter a room where a bunch of downcast people are sitting. Start greeting the people cheerfully and warmly, with joy coming from your heart, and within minutes the whole mood of that group will change. People who were completely indifferent will start talking to each other. That's how good yeast works.

The wonderful thing about yeast is that it's a living organism. It's

not like baking powder for example, which can only make the dough rise once. Yeast can keep going and going. If you save a bit of the leavened dough, you can still make dough rise with it the next day and the day after and even the following month. Likewise, a believer's positive leaven should not be a one-time thing but a way of life, inspiring and spreading joy that continues without ceasing, even through difficult times. This way, you give courage to other people and most importantly, hope!

The important thing to remember, however, is that no one can do it

in their own strength. Only the Holy Spirit can give you the power to persevere and be good yeast, baking fragrant "loaves." But equally important is that you make it clear to everyone who is touched by your yeast where your strength comes from!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me good yeast in Your Kingdom and give me the strength to live it out for Your glory!

The Keys of Heaven

Matthew 16:13-20

Peter's confession has been a sticky problem for the church throughout the centuries, as there are clearly two divergent views on this matter. On one hand, the Catholic Church believes that Jesus' words to Peter were directed personally to him, and that the Pope today continues Peter's position of authority. On the other hand, Protestants believe that the church's authority is not vested in an individual but in Peter's confession that Jesus is the Son of God. So, who is

actually right? Let's see if we can unravel this knot.

This pericope consists of three parts. It begins with the question about Jesus' identity and Peter's confession. The second part deals with the exceptional position of Peter/the Church, and the third part is about Jesus' instruction that they must not talk to anyone about it.

Jesus first asks what others think about Him, and it's clear that most people have no clue who He really is. They realize that He is very special, perhaps a Prophet like Elijah, Jeremiah, or even John the Baptist! Only the

disciples know His true identity! And it's not just Peter, because as you'll recall, when Jesus walked on water, all twelve disciples knelt before Him and confessed, "Truly You are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:32) So, Peter did not only express his personal opinion here, but he spoke on behalf of all of them.

In a wordplay, Jesus tells him that he is Peter (which means rock) and that he is therefore strong enough for the task at hand. And upon his confession (as powerful as a rock), Jesus will build His church. Peter's confession is only possible if it is placed on his heart

by God (the Holy Spirit)! And this still applies to us today! Now the authority is given to Peter to teach that church. Although Peter seems to be singled out here, it is not solely directed at Peter but at the whole circle of disciples. When Jesus, for example, tells Peter that he will receive "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," this statement is repeated word-for-word in Matthew 18:18. This time however, it is addressed to all the disciples and thus, by implication, to the whole church.

In other words, it's like the captain of a rugby team receiving the trophy. Although he is the one

being congratulated and receiving the trophy in his hands, he receives it on behalf of the whole team, including the coach, assistants, and even the men on the reserve bench who never had a chance to play or maybe just ran onto the field for the last five minutes. But it extends much further. This trophy also belongs to all the men and women who toiled behind the scenes, and ultimately, to all the supporters of the team. So, Peter is indeed singled out, but he did not receive this promise solely on behalf of the other disciples but on behalf of the entire church. Jesus thus gives us the promise that the

church will survive the assaults of the powers of Hades. The disciples and the church will receive the authority to lead believers in the teachings of Jesus.

The question is: why is Peter lifted out then? Why does Jesus point to him when giving this promise? Was he such an extraordinary person? In a sense, he was indeed very special! However, if we look closely at him, we see an ordinary person, just like you and me. Peter was exceptional because, according to Christian tradition, he was the person who connected the

believers to the earthly Jesus. After all, he was the one first called by Jesus. But as we read the Gospels more deeply, we discover some very disturbing things about someone who is considered the representative of the church. Peter had feet of clay. Often, he was lacking in faith! Take, for example, the time when he walked on the water and how his faith failed him. He was outspoken! Just look at how he boasted that he would never abandon Jesus and that he would even be willing to die for his Master. And see how disgracefully he denied Jesus just a few hours later. He was even

afraid of a mere servant girl! One time, Jesus even said to him, "Get away from Me, Satan!"

Oh, I see in Peter my own wavering life. I stumble so easily. Sometimes I am brought bak to earth. But there are also highlights, and like Peter of old, it sometimes feels like I'm soaring high. When someone tells me that a devotional I wrote deeply touched them, I soar high. Then I know that what I have done has truly meant something to someone. Isn't that the life of every child of God?

Peter "is" the church! But it doesn't end there. You and I, the

believers, are also the church. And the keys have been given to us for heaven. If we do not use those keys responsibly and open heaven for someone, then we are misusing God's gifts. In fact, it means that we are locking heaven for someone! What a terrible thought!

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the wisdom to use Your keys sensibly and also the zeal to use them frequently!

Dark Night!

Matthew 16:21-28

You often plan things meticulously and work on your case. Finally, everything falls into place and you think, "Now I've got it! I've nailed it!" And then your whole house of cards collapses. That's when a person can sometimes feel very discouraged or afraid!

Once, I planned a weekend camp with my Grade 7 Voortrekker team. The idea was to spend a night or two under the stars in an untouched piece of nature, with only the bare essentials at our

disposal. All the arrangements went smoothly, and so I set off on Friday afternoon with a minibus full of exuberant, almost uncontrollable teenagers brimming with self-confidence!

On the way to the farm however, I noticed with great concern heavy thunderclouds forming. When we stopped at Frik, the farmer's house, I quickly realized that trouble was brewing! Just to be on the safe side, he gave me a piece of tarpaulin and some poles that we could set up for a shelter if it started to rain heavily.

Our campsite was, to say the least, breathtaking! It was

situated on the edge of a cliff with the impenetrable forest, brimming with mystery, spreading out below us. Barely had we arrived there when the first raindrops began to fall heavily on us. There was a rush to quickly set up the tarpaulin before the storm caught us, and the children's meagre belongings were hurriedly brought under the shelter as pitch-black clouds churned and roiled above us. Fear gripped the hearts of the children. Mine too!

And then the floodgates of heaven opened. Soon, it was pitch dark. The rain poured down, wave after wave, without ceasing.

The thunder rumbled deafeningly and lightning flashes blinded us momentarily with frightening cracks. We sat tightly huddled together under the middle section of the tarpaulin, while the rainwater flowed through our makeshift roof like a young river. Everything was wet. It was cold. It was dark! The children, who were overflowing with self-confidence earlier, were now scared. "Why does this have to happen to us?" someone asked me. When the storm subsided around midnight, there was still no chance to sleep because everything was soaking wet, despite the tarpaulin.

Suddenly, the most horrifying sound rose from the forest. "What was that? Did you hear it?" It sounded almost like the cries of a colicky baby! A larger bushbaby's call can be frightening to the uninformed. I reassured them. There was a light movement somewhere in the forest. "Uncle Louis, could it be someone trying to rob us?" The children were terrified. Everything was so terribly strange, so palpably dark. There is only one comfort: "Uncle" is there to protect them against all this misery during this never-ending, suffocating, terrifying dark night!

When the day finally broke, revealing the breathtaking beauty of the forest before us, there was a group of very grateful children who had experienced more fearful moments in a single night than most people experience in a lifetime. Now they began to understand a tiny bit about nature. We sat there on the edge of the cliff in awe as the Knysna loeries flew below us, their bright rainbow colors shimmering in the few rays of sunshine. Raindrops sparkled like thousands of diamonds on the leaves of the towering forest. The night was over! The day was there in all its glory!

For Peter and his mates, they also had this great "adventure" with the Messiah. But then they started to see the thunderclouds with great concern! The strong opposition that Jesus faced from the church leaders made them anxious. Even death threats emerged! And suddenly, it became a nightmare when Jesus told them that He would be executed in Jerusalem. Peter was rebellious: "May God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You!" Peter didn't understand. He was sternly rebuked by Jesus. Then Jesus explained that it is not easy to follow Him. It can sometimes be a very difficult path.

You may even face death! But in the end makes all the trouble worthwhile.

Perhaps today you are going through one of those terrifying thunderstorms in your life, where it seems like there is no way out. It may feel like the night is endless. Hold on to your faith with all you have! The comfort is that Jesus is with you all the time. He is right beside you, holding your hand tightly through it all. Remember: He has experienced all these things, and much, much worse. He understands because He knows exactly through which storms you and I are going

through. And He also warned that it wouldn't be easy. We must be prepared for the storms. But there is also another great comfort, and that is that the sun will shine again, and that daybreak will be breathtakingly, indescribably beautiful.

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I want to pray for strength when the thunderstorms strike. Please hold my hand tightly and carry me when I can no longer go on!

Jesus Glorified

Matthew 17:1-13

Winter time can often be extremely frustrating for birdwatchers because then all the birds look the same. Of course, there are exceptions, but if you look at the LBJs (Little Brown Jobs), they all seem very similar. Maybe one bird's beak is slightly darker or redder than the other, or its feet are orange instead of pale. But otherwise, they all look exactly the same to the untrained eye.

But when summer comes and

breeding season arrives, these same drab birds burst forth into colourful prancing males. The Pin-Tailed Wydah dons a jet-black suit with elegant long tails and a snow-white shirt. The drab Paradise Wydah trades its grey work clothes for an impressive jet-black tuxedo with tail feathers that trail endlessly behind, along with a cream-coloured shirt and an huge red-brown bow tie. Mr. Red-Headed Weaver puts on a blood-red cap that hangs down to his shoulders. Mr. Red Bishop also wears a blood-red cap, but with a jet-black mask and shirt and a red-tailed jacket. The Long-Tailed Widow undergoes a breathtaking

metamorphosis from a drab old LBJ with an inconspicuous short tail to a charming jet-black dandy with a half-metre lush shiny black tail and a black and white jacket with blood-red shoulder tabs. When he flutters over the highveld grass plains, no one can overlook him!

Usually, you don't even recognize these grey birds as anything other than another drab bird. But for a brief period, they suddenly get names and become visible! And it's especially the female drab birds that take a closer look! Does he have to put on his tuxedo and bow tie before he becomes

important?

Matthew describes an incident where Jesus climbed a mountain with Peter, James, and John. We must remember that Jesus looked like any other Jewish man. It was only His words and actions that made Him different from the others. Even His own disciples struggled to recognize Him as the Messiah. Even until the very end, they weren't even sure. It was only for fleeting moments that they were truly certain of who He really was!

Then this almost indescribable thing happened on the mountain, an event that became

permanently engraved in the memories of the three men. Suddenly, Jesus' whole appearance changed. His face shone bright like the sun. Then Moses and Elijah appeared from heaven to converse with Jesus. For Peter and his companions, this awe-inspiring spectacle was overwhelming. They wanted to preserve it forever. They even wanted to build shelters there to stay forever. Then a bright cloud appeared over them, and a majestic voice spoke from the cloud: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." Peter and his companions fell to the ground

when they heard the voice of God.

For these three men, it was an extremely precious moment! But did they truly understand what was happening?

Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Their appearance confirms that the entire Old Testament culminates in Jesus. They legitimize His messiahship, fulfilling all the promises of the Old Testament in Jesus. Furthermore, Matthew 17:5 is almost a literal repetition of Matthew 3:17 (during Jesus' baptism). At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, God affirms who

Jesus is - the Son of God - and that He acts with divine sanction. In 17:5, this fact is reaffirmed before Jesus travels to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world. It is another reinforcement for Jesus before He embarks on His Via Dolorosa. The three disciples also hear this - that Jesus is the Son of God. It is clearly revealed to them, but they fall down in fear. Jesus reassures them: "Do not be afraid" - the exact words He speaks on the sea and on several other occasions whenever something overwhelming occurs. "Do not be afraid, trust me, everything is under control," Jesus wants to say to His

disciples.

Often, we take Jesus for granted. After all, He is just there! He has become so much a part of our everyday lives that we no longer recognize Him as the True Living God. It deeply pains me when I hear how Christian believers speak about Jesus in a diminishing or trivial manner. Often, there are joking or even humorous references to Him, albeit in a positive sense. But with such remarks, we actually lower Jesus to the level of a human being in a negative or demeaning way!

Sometimes we take Jesus for

granted. He's just there! He has become so much a part of our everyday lives that we no longer recognize Him as the True Living God. It deeply hurts me when I hear how Christian believers speak diminutively or casually about Jesus. Often, jokes or even jesting remarks are made about Him, but in a good sense. But with such comments, we actually reduce Jesus to the level of a human being in a negative or demeaning sense!

Indeed, He is with me every moment of the day, and I can speak with Him at any time. Indeed, I can discuss all my joys,

worries, and sorrows with Him. But we must always remember WHO and WHAT He truly is. He is, obviously, Almighty God! He is the King of all kings, the Creator of the universe! He is the One who sits on the throne and reigns over everything and everyone for eternity! We must always give Him the necessary honour and respect, even if we don't see Him in the splendour and glory that Peter and his companions saw Him.

Let us glorify Jesus today and show Him the respect He deserves!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I worship You as my King and my Lord and my God. All praise and thanks and worship belong to You alone!

Miracles and Faith

Matthew 17:14-21

Why don't miracles happen anymore today?

Do miracles truly still not happen today?

Do miracles still happen?

Why do miracles only happen to other people and not to me?

Is there perhaps something wrong with me that I don't experience miracles?

Miracles... Not a chance!!!

Miracles are a reality of life itself!

These are some of the many

questions and statements you hear when miracles are mentioned. Firstly, you have to ask yourself whether miracles still happen today. We have seen how Jesus performed a multitude of miracles, some of them incredibly great! Are such things still possible? When Jesus sent out His disciples, they themselves also performed miracles. They indeed healed people and much more. Later in Acts, there are also accounts of numerous miracles that took place through the hands of the apostles.

When a man in great distress came to Jesus with his son who

likely had epileptic seizures and had even fallen into the fire at one point, he also mentioned that Jesus' disciples had tried to heal the boy but were unable to. Jesus was exasperated with them, saying, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me!" Harsh words! Later they asked Him why they couldn't heal the boy. He answered them, "Because of your little faith!" He then said that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains!

Can miracles still happen today if

our faith is big enough? Indeed, YES! Now the question is, is it then my faith that performs the miracle? And the answer to that is a definite "No!"

No, but... No, it is not your faith that performs the miracle, but it is YOUR faith that releases the power of God. And THAT can move mountains! Firstly, we must clearly understand that it is not YOU as a person who performs the miracle, but that God can use you as a tool. It's like a water pipe that carries water from a windmill to a dam. It's not the pipe that does the work. The pipe is merely the channel through which the

water flows to the dam. The one that does all the hard work and pumps the water up from deep underground is the windmill. But we must also realize that if the pipe is rusty and full of holes, that water cannot reach the dam. Then all the water leaks out long before it reaches the dam.

I experience miracles in my life every day. It may not always look impressive, but if you were in my shoes, then you would know how truly remarkable it is. About 20 years ago, in January 2002, I desperately prayed that the Lord would give me a daily devotional to write. I was in great need

because the person who had always provided me with daily devotionals had suddenly disappeared, and no one wanted to help me. My faith was quite weak, but I obediently sat down and started writing as the Lord commanded. And so, the first devotional of "Our Daily Bread" was born!

I was amazed myself by the devotional I had written because I was not capable of such things. Then the light suddenly dawned on me: He, the Holy Spirit, had given me the thoughts to write down. The next day, I was full of courage for the second

devotional! I looked forward to being used by the Lord in this way. Now, more than 5,000 devotionals later, the words have never dried up. Not once have I experienced "writer's block," when I didn't know what to write!

Each devotional I write is often a surprise for myself. When I finish one, I often sit back and say, "Wow! Where did that come from?" And then I know: It wasn't my work, but God's alone because I am not capable of it. I am just that water pipe. But if I don't believe that God will do it through me, then this "water pipe" is full of rusty holes, and I am

useless to God.

This is just one example. He also uses people through whom He can perform healing miracles or to give hopeless people courage for life. There are countless other miracles that the Lord accomplishes through people in this way. He can use YOU in the same way! Close those "unbelief-rusty holes," and you will be amazed at what can happen through you!

Prayer:

Lord, please give me more faith so that I can be useful to You in Your Kingdom. I also make myself available to You so that You can

use me to perform miracles!

Temple Tax

Matthew 17:22-27

Tax is something you usually pay with a heavy heart. But what if you were told that, based on your heritage, you don't need to pay taxes - wouldn't that be fantastic news?

Peter is confronted by the temple officials when it seems like Jesus hasn't paid the temple tax. "Of course, He pays!" Peter replied to them. Later, Jesus explained to Peter that a king's sons are exempt from paying taxes to their father. They are, after all, free

from taxation! "However," he adds, "but we will pay, so as not to cause offence to the people." Peter wonders where the money would come from and then Jesus tells him to go and catch a fish. In the fish's mouth, Peter will find a coin. What sounds almost like a fairy tale becomes a reality when Peter pulls the fish out of the water and finds the coin in its mouth, exactly as Jesus had predicted. The coin is enough to pay both Jesus' and Peter's taxes!

How should we interpret this story today? Does it mean that Christian believers don't need to

pay taxes simply because we are children of the King? A few years ago, a prominent spiritual leader in America thought so and he got into serious trouble! If you reason like that, then you've missed the point entirely! What it does mean is that believers (children of the King) have been set free in God's Kingdom. Remember, we were once bound by the law and had to work for our salvation until Jesus set us free. What does being bound by the law mean? It means that you have to faithfully obey the Ten Commandments. It also means that you have to observe the other laws recorded in the Bible, including giving your tithe

for God's work. In today's terms, it would be equivalent to temple tax.

However, if you are set free, these laws are no longer binding because Jesus fulfilled the Law when He died on the cross. Does this mean that I don't have to follow any of the biblical laws anymore? The simple answer is: No! No, you don't have to follow the laws to earn your salvation because if you believe in Jesus, the Son of God, He gives you eternal life. Just read what John 3:16, John 3:36, John 6:47, and others say. It also means that you are not even obliged to give your

tithe! In Romans 7:6, we read: "Now, however, we are free from the Law, because we died to that which once held us prisoners. No longer do we serve in the old way of a written law, but in the new way of the Spirit."

Now I know that some people will want to crucify me for this statement. "How can you just throw away the Law like that?!" But read on before you grill me!

If a father says to his son, "You are free to do whatever you want because you are my son," does it mean that the child can go crazy and do as he pleases? Of course, his father has given him

permission to do so! But if he loves his father, he definitely won't go overboard! Naturally he will be very grateful for this newfound freedom! That's why he will try to say thank you to his father in his own way. Maybe he will bring his father coffee or mow the lawn. But now, it's not "work" anymore; it's a pleasure because he knows his father will be happy when he does it. Suddenly, he realizes that the things that used to be "laws" make sense. He now adheres to the rules, even though it's not necessary for his survival. If his father made that sacrifice to set him free from all the laws, then he can also make sacrifices

to say thank you to his father in that way. Suddenly, his father is no longer a "boss" but a loving father and friend.

In the second part of Romans 7:6, Paul writes: "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code." So, God's Kingdom works just like this family: Because you are God's child, you don't have to follow His laws, but of course you will still follow them out of love and gratitude. However, you do it not because you are compelled to do

so, but because you want to. The law now becomes a guideline for expressing your gratitude towards God.

What about the "tithe" then? Does it also mean that I don't have to give it anymore? Indeed! The Tithe (temple tax?) now becomes a Thanksgiving offering because you give it voluntarily out of gratitude, so that God's Kingdom can be expanded. You give it because a new love grows in your heart, not only towards God but also towards other people. And you want to help your fellow human beings wherever you can. Why? To express the Lord's love

towards them out of thankfulness. But it goes further because when you show love to others, they see the light of Jesus shining in you. In this way, you silently proclaim the gospel without words. Thus, you become an instrument in the expansion of God's Kingdom. In short, when the law is fulfilled as a duty, it is useless. It must come from the heart! Only then does it truly make sense!

Prayer:

Lord, I love You deeply, and that's why I try to do what You ask of me. That's why I give a thanksgiving offering to say thank you for what You do for me!

The Little Ones

Matthew 18:1-5

As a prescribed book for my final year of high school, I had a Dutch story titled "De Klijne Johannes" (Little Johannes). This simple story with a profound meaning made a tremendous impression on me! It's about a little boy moving through various stages of his growing-up process. As a young boy, he firmly believes in fairies and all the mystical creatures of the forest. However, as he grows older, doubt creeps in. Then his search begins for the "little book," the Book of Life.

Ultimately, he starts doubting everything and everyone around him. When the true Book of Life is presented to him, he even doubts that and continues his search.

In a way, it's a very sad book because you want to tell Johannes all the time, "Don't abandon your childlike faith!" And when he overlooks the Book of Life, you want to shout, "The Truth is right here under your nose, seize it!"

The story touched my heart, and I understood it, but the significant lesson from it I never applied to my own life! Only years later, in my own search did I discover the

truth right under my nose!

It's Sunday School closing, and the children are performing a Christmas play during the church service. The heartfelt performances of these little ones touch your heart. The childlike sincerity and wholeheartedness with which they participate bring tears of emotion to your eyes. One of the little kids accidentally gets hold of the Jesus doll and runs away with it. Chaos ensues! When the "kidnapped Jesus" is found, the play continues undisturbed, with lots of confidence, and the performance is ultimately a huge success,

despite several hiccups!

We can certainly learn a lot from these little ones! Jesus used this truth as part of His fourth major sermon. Genuine childlike faith can touch your heart. The often amusing sayings of children make you realize how sincerely they believe. To illustrate this, let me use a story I once heard.

It's evening, and little Johnny's mom asks him to go and fetch the broom from the porch. But when he looks outside and sees the dark porch, his trembling little voice says, "Mom, I'm afraid of the dark!"

"Don't be scared, Johnny, Jesus

is always with us, even on the dark porch."

Johnny turns around, walks to the door, and opens it just a crack: "Dear Jesus, please pass me the broom!"

We want to laugh about this because it seems absurd, but our faith should be childlike and sincere like that. However, it's not only childlike faith that Jesus is talking about with His disciples. They actually wanted to know who is the most important in the Kingdom. In that time, children were completely disregarded. They had almost no significance in society and were certainly not

considered important. For Jesus' disciples, though, there was always rivalry about who among the twelve was actually the most important. I think they must have felt quite ashamed when Jesus explained that not one of their "important ones," but these despised little children are actually the most important! I think they must have been quite embarrassed!

So often we look down on the "simple ones" and belittle their dignity. From this passage, we learn a very valuable lesson, not to despise anyone. Treat the old beggar with the same respect as

you would treat the high-ranking person. How do you know what that person's circumstances are? Who am I to judge?

Remember the story of the Samaritan woman at the well? Jesus humbled Himself by doing what no respected Jewish man would ever do – talking to her. He listened to her with great compassion. He took an intense interest in her and He did not condemn her for her sinful life. He gave her courage to believe in herself again. The result was that she broke out of her cocoon of hiding and went to talk to the people who rejected her. And the

entire village came to Jesus because of her testimony!

By making a rejected person understand that she is also someone, the world opened up for her. The same can happen when you and I treat the "little ones" in the Kingdom as full-fledged individuals, created in the Image of God. Thus, we can bestow dignity upon them.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for giving me dignity – for creating me in Your Image. Please open my eyes to see other people – especially the "little ones" – in the same light!

Caring for One Another

Matthew 18:6-20

At first, it sounds like the rustling of the wind through the trees, but then I hear the overtones: squeak, chirp, grunt, murmur, rumble, and I know exactly what's coming! Above the dry grass, a cute little face peeks out to see if it's safe. He ducks back down and then weaves through the shrubs at top speed, straight towards the porch. A little way behind him, a bundle of grey creatures follows in a long line. Their little legs move like clockwork soldiers, only much faster. There's an

excitement bubbling within me. These mongooses are my favourite creatures because caring for one another is their way of life!

I toss a few pieces of leftover bread their way, and the reaction is overwhelming! They play and rumble and grunt and scramble, but eventually each one has a piece, and now they coo and chirp in satisfaction because they're content. One of the little ones discovers the little pond and lies flat on his belly in the water. Another one finds the braai grill and calls his buddies over. Together, they lick it clean and

then they attack the pot with last night's leftover porridge. They climb inside the pot and lick it clean!

Suddenly, the troop leader grunts a warning, and everyone stands still, looking intently at the big knob-thorn tree where the great danger looms. The little ones are gathered together and protected from the danger. A vervet monkey peers arrogantly through the leaves from above. Clearly, he has no respect for these bunch of clowns. He shouts an insult from above (which I won't repeat here)! The mongooses don't take such insults lying down, and one very

brave little guy decides to confront the arrogant monkey and chase him away! He takes action and runs straight up the slanted trunk of the knob-thorn. The monkey isn't happy with such arrogant behaviour, and he climbs down the trunk threateningly to deal with this impudent one. After all, he's much bigger! The mongoose's courage fails him, and he scrambles back down to safety.

But don't think he's defeated. He's just getting reinforcements. He quickly gathers a few buddies, and before the monkey can wipe that sneer off his face, they storm

the trunk in a bundle. The rest of the crowd cheers them on loudly from below the tree. The arrogant blue monkey nearly falls out of the tree in shock, and he hastily climbs back to safety!

Satisfied with their successful offensive, the mongooses climb down, very dignified, amid loud cheering. The troop leader turns around, and with a self-contented chirp, chirp, coo, and squeak, they streak away through the dry grass to a new destination.

We can definitely learn from nature what caring for one another truly means. Just look at how a pack of (cruel?) wild dogs

takes care of and looks out for their fellow-dogs. It's especially the little ones that are pampered, not just by their mother, but by every member of the pack.

In this sermon of Jesus, He continuously mentions the "little ones" and their vulnerability. Here, He's not talking about children, but about adults who have become small within themselves and genuinely believe with childlike faith. Do not disdain on such a person! They have come close to God's Kingdom. But they can easily be hurt, especially if fellow-believers cause them to stumble. Jesus

uses harsh words for people who cause the little ones to stumble!

The emphasis in this passage is strongly on caring for one another. We, as believers should be like that shepherd who cares deeply and sincerely and goes to great lengths to bring back the single sheep that has strayed. Someone who has fallen into sin should not just be written off or condemned but sought and led back to the flock with great compassion.

Jesus also explains the steps to take when someone strays or sins. First, talk to the person alone, of course, with love! If that

doesn't yield results, take someone else along and try to persuade him to see things differently. Even if the person becomes hardened and refuses to break away from their sin, it's still not the end. Then he is treated as a "heathen and a tax collector." Is he then written off? No, certainly not! Then he becomes a "missionary case." It means that the gospel must be brought to him again, just like to an unbeliever. Your caring must never cease, even if your love is rejected!

Prayer:

Lord, so often I forget about true

caring. Teach me to give from the depths of my heart to every fellow believer, especially the "little ones" in Your Kingdom!

Total Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

I want to play devil's advocate and ask you how many times you've sinned. You might answer, "What kind of question is that?! I am a good person! I try very hard to live right!"

Let's put this question into perspective. Think back to last Sunday. Perhaps, even while you were sitting in church, did you have critical thoughts about someone? Maybe about the pastor's sermon? Perhaps, you even discussed that person with

someone else. If so, that's gossip! Maybe your mind wandered elsewhere while the pastor was preaching. In that case, you disrespected God's words to you, for the Holy Spirit speaks through the preacher after all! And on your way home, when that taxi recklessly swerved in front of your car, what did you say? Think carefully about where you sinned yesterday. Maybe you can remember ten sins, and if you count carefully, maybe even a hundred! Let's do some quick calculations. If, on average, I sin only ten times a day, then I would commit 3650 sins in a year. A person in their fifties would have

180,000 offences to their name, and I think we can easily multiply that by ten, making it already one or two million sins! It's frightening, isn't it? Such a habitual criminal shouldn't just see the outside of a prison cell!

Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother if he sins against him. Is seven times enough? Actually, Peter is quite generous with his sevenfold forgiveness, as the norm at that time was to forgive three times, and after that, the person had to face the consequences!

"No Peter, seventy times seven times!" Now we start calculating: that's 490 times. Should that be the new norm? Wow, that's a lot of times! But what Jesus actually means is that there should be no end to your forgiveness! You should always be willing to forgive, even when the hour-glass has run out long ago!

But why should I be so forgiving?

Jesus explains to His disciples using a parable of a servant who owed the king millions, and there was no way he could repay it. The king took pity on him and forgave all his debt. The servant had barely left when he came across

a colleague who owed him a few bucks. What did he do? He threatened the man for a few rands!

"Shocking!" we would immediately say. But let's look again at the calculations we made earlier about our own sins: How many times did you sin again? 180,000 times? Maybe much more? And how many times has God already forgiven you (and me!) for those sins? I promise you: every single one of them has been written off! Go and read what is written in Isaiah 1:18, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 John 4:10, Isaiah 43:25, and 1 John 1:7. God

forgives us not just seven times or even 490 times, but every single sin, of a barn full of sins that we have committed! Moreover, His forgiveness is complete, so much so that He doesn't even think about it again!

Now Jesus says that just as the king acquitted the servant of millions, it is now the servant's turn to acquit his colleague of a few rand. Because God acquitted you and me of countless sins, it is now our turn to acquit or forgive the few wrong things that others have done to us. If his sin against you is a minor offence, it's easy. If he or she gossiped about you,

you might still be able to talk things out. When it comes to your money and that person swindled you out of a few thousand rand, then it becomes quite challenging. If that person is the reason you lost your job and, with it, possibly your car and house, then this forgiveness story gets even harder to swallow! Then you'll find it difficult to swallow!

But it only truly becomes very tough when your marriage is threatened and someone steals your life partner of many years away from you. Or when your life partner, the one you trusted with your whole life, betrays you and

seeks greener pastures. I know many people who have gone through this kind of trauma. But even then, Jesus asks us for forgiveness, no matter how difficult. Yes, even when a loved one is cruelly murdered by thieves, our Father wants us to not carry hatred in our hearts but to forgive. It is very difficult, almost impossible. Yet it is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Just look at Louis and Hettie Brittz - the wonderful example they set about forgiveness. Remember that God Himself was willing to forgive those who so cruelly tortured and killed His only Son, Jesus.

Completely and unconditionally!
So why shouldn't you and I
forgive as well?

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I realize once
again how many times I've
grieved You and sinned. Please
forgive me again, Lord. And
please teach me to forgive others
who wrong me!

Marriage and Divorce

Matthew 19:1-12

One day, I was sitting on the stoep in the Lowveld, observing the activities of a Red-Billed Hornbill. We had thrown some maize kernels and a bit of leftover food in front of the stoep, and Mr. Hornbill discovered it. With clockwork regularity, every five minutes, he would fly to pick up a kernel or two. Then he would fly straight to his nest where Mrs. Hornbill and the chicks were waiting in a closed up hole in a tree trunk. There was only a small opening through which they could

be fed. Hour after hour, he worked tirelessly until the sun set. Early the next morning, shortly after the cock crowed, he was back at his post, rarely stopping to eat himself. There was only one thing on his agenda: his mate waiting for him.

If another hornbill happened to pass by, he wouldn't even look in her direction because his mate was the most important thing in his life. He cherishes her like gold and is very cautious not to reveal the secret of her nest, in case someone with ill intentions might take an interest. So, he never flies straight to the nest but

makes a detour to make sure no one is following him before delivering his umpteenth packet of food.

And what is her role in this relationship? She willingly confines herself to a confined space and dedicates her entire existence to her mate and their little ones. The selfless, sacrificial love they have for each other and the passion with which they work on their "marital ties" make me ashamed of how often I can be selfish and insensitive towards my own mate.

And then, I involuntarily think of

something completely different: a troop of baboons. How terribly different they are! There's constant sneaky flirting going on whenever the big boss turns his head. "Marital purity" is not a concept for them and often they make you blush with their explicit sexual antics!

Jesus is confronted with the question of divorce. What makes this passage difficult is not so much understanding what is written, but relating it to our own contemporary world of today. We live in a world where extramarital relationships and divorce have become so terribly "normal." Then

Jesus' statements about this can sound terribly outdated! However, the truth is that I often witness the pain and suffering caused by a third person interfering in a marriage. I often see people broken because someone else destroyed their marriage.

Of course, the Pharisees were just trying to trap Jesus with their question, but as usual, He doesn't fall into their trap. They wanted to corner Him with legal points, but Jesus immediately gets to the heart of the matter. It's not about what the marriage laws say and how the legal experts twist the matter to fit every circumstance.

It's about God's will. He intended marriage from the beginning as a permanent bond between one man and one woman. It is personally joined by God, and no one should break this bond. Read again Matthew 19 verses 5 and 6. So, there is no place for divorce within God's will.

Yet, Jesus takes into account the brokenness of our world, and He says: "except for adultery." Does this mean that one MUST divorce if adultery is involved in the marriage? No, certainly not! You are not obligated to divorce, but in God's great grace, you are allowed to divorce. True

repentance and forgiveness can even prevent a divorce in such a case. I know of several cases where this treacherous marital infidelity was not the end of the marriage. Divorce is never a solution - it still goes against God's will. However, it may, in certain cases, be accepted by the believer with repentance and mourning as a way out.

If marriage is so full of pitfalls, wouldn't it be better for a believer never to marry? After all, Paul himself said that it might be better not to marry (1 Corinthians 7). We must realize that marriage is in service of the Kingdom of God

and is therefore subordinate to it. However, a person's highest calling is to serve God wholeheartedly. Therefore, someone who decides to dedicate their whole life to God alone may choose not to marry, as in Paul's case. In Paul's life, a marriage would never have worked because he spent his whole life on the road, spreading the Gospel. If he were to marry, he could never give his full attention to God. Besides, it would constantly put his spouse's life in danger as Paul narrowly escaped death several times. However, it is a great gift to remain unmarried, and very few

people can do it. The point is that there is nothing wrong with getting married, but there are still people who can serve God better by remaining unmarried.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for my marriage, and thank you for the life partner you have given me. Help me to always cherish her and pour out my love on her!

Rich People and Heaven

Matthew 19:13-30

Can wealthy people also enter heaven? This is a very unsettling question, especially in the country where we live, where there are many extremely rich individuals. Many people live in exorbitantly expensive, luxurious mansions, often with breathtaking views of the vast ocean.

The problem is that when someone is very wealthy, they can easily forget their total dependence on God. Their trust may lean towards their own

abilities or the wealth they have amassed. And then the question arises: can such wealthy people ever partake in the Kingdom of God? The story of the rich young man gives the impression that someone who is very rich cannot enter heaven.

But what did Matthew write about this delicate issue? A wealthy young man comes to Jesus seeking advice. He wants to know what he must do to obtain eternal life. Jesus then tests him. Naturally, he must keep the commandments and he assures Jesus that he has done so. However, can that really be

enough for something as significant as eternal life?

"Indeed," Jesus explains, "there is still one thing that stands between you and eternal life: your wealth!"

The young man is certainly not willing to give up his wealth! Then Jesus drops the bombshell: for a rich person it is extremely difficult to enter heaven! It is almost as impossible as trying to thread a camel through the eye of a needle! That's how difficult it is for a wealthy person to have eternal life.

If we were to stop reading the story there in Matthew, it would be enough to plunge any rich

person into a terrible depression. It would mean that no wealthy person will ever reach heaven. The disciples are deeply disturbed when they hear what Jesus says because it is evident that this doesn't concern only the wealthy. It implies that all people are included. In other words, it is entirely impossible to earn eternal life!

Thankfully, Matthew also records the rest of Jesus' conversation, and only when you read the rest do you begin to understand what Jesus truly meant with these words.

Jesus starts explaining that it is

indeed impossible for a person to earn salvation, but that anything is possible for God. He emphasizes the gracious nature of eternal life. It is not something that can be earned; only God can make it possible! He grants eternal life as a grace to those who are willing to follow Him unconditionally.

Then Peter asks, "Look, we have left everything and followed You. What will we get in return?" We might feel disheartened with Peter's question because it seems as if he's drawing a thick black line through the gracious nature of eternal life! Surely the

disciples must be rewarded in some way for their great sacrifice and all their hardships, right? It was certainly not easy to follow Jesus for three years. They had to live on charity. How many times did they have to sleep cold and wet in the fields? How many times did they have to endure the sharp tongues of the Pharisees and scribes because of the things Jesus said or did? How many hundreds, perhaps thousands of kilometers did they have to travel on foot from village to village, often through the arid desert? Hardship was an integral part of their lives every day.

Indeed, there will be a reward! However, the reward in question is a reward of grace. It is just another way to describe the "treasure in heaven" that Jesus talks about in Matthew 19:21. But then Jesus comes to Matthew 19:30 and cuts all merit-based arguments at the root because what people consider to be first may not necessarily be first to God. Although the disciples' reward will be very great - as they will be rulers in the Kingdom - the eternal inheritance remains a "reward" far beyond proportion to what they invested. The heavenly dividend on their earthly investment is not 10% or 20% or

even 100%, but 1000%. This makes this "investment" more than worth it. And the additional bonus they receive is of immeasurable value: eternal life!

The Lord asks us to make sacrifices. Perhaps He asks for a portion of your wealth or your precious time. Maybe He wants you to step out of your comfort zone and do things you fear, perhaps to brave dangers, smuggling Bibles into an inaccessible land. Or to be willing to risk losing your friends when you speak about things that are wrong. But, in all of this, remember one thing: Everything,

absolutely everything, is by grace, unmerited favor alone!

Can wealthy people also enter heaven? What seems impossible to you and me is more than possible for God!

Prayer:

Thank You Lord, for Your grace and that we do not receive salvation based on our merit, but purely on account of Your great grace. Thank You for making all of this possible through Your Son, Jesus!

Unjust Reward!

Matthew 20:1-16

Imagine working for many years at a company and reaching a high position. The boss has always been very good to you and pays you a generous salary. In short, you are happy! One day, a cleaner is hired. All she does is sweep the floors because her abilities are quite limited. Then, your feet are swept from under you when you find out that she is receiving the exact same salary as you! Wouldn't you be bitterly unhappy about this terrible injustice done to you? The

question is, were you truly done an injustice? Weren't you perfectly happy with your salary until you found out what her salary was?

The story that Jesus tells makes one feel very uncomfortable. Just yesterday, we read that the believers who are willing to give everything to the Lord will receive a great reward in heaven. And now, it seems that the reward in heaven will be distributed unjustly. How should I understand this? Haven't I clearly learned that God is just? This story not only requires a complete reversal of our thinking about wage practices

but also about how our relationship with God works. The idea of "reward according to merit" constantly churns in your mind, despite the fact that our Protestant heritage repeatedly teaches us about the Grace of God. The previous passage ended with the words: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." This thought is now carried forward, and it is characteristic of the Kingdom of heaven.

Jesus' story is about the owner of a vineyard who hired workers at different times of the day to work in his vineyard. When the first

group started working, they were perfectly content to work for the "usual daily wage." With those who started later, the agreement was for "a fair payment." The expectation is created that each will be paid according to the number of hours they worked.

However, when the time comes to pay, one absurdity follows another. The foreman is instructed to start paying the last workers first. But the peak of injustice is reached when the first workers receive their money, and it is no more than what the last workers received!

Our sympathy definitely lies with

the poor guys who toiled all day long! Aren't their complaints completely justified? What does the owner have to say about this? His defense is that he didn't treat them unfairly. He simply paid them what they agreed upon. Secondly, he wants to give everyone the same because he is good, and thirdly, after all, it is his money! He can do with it as he pleases. If he wants to give someone more than they deserved, it is his right to do so!

The owner concludes his defense with two questions. He doesn't condemn the complainers; instead, he makes an appeal to

them to come to a different understanding. He wants them to see things as he sees them. His reward is not calculated by cold equations. He rewards according to a measure of love and mercy.

At this point, the issue is beginning to become clear. It is not without reason that a vineyard is mentioned in this story. God's people, Israel, is often described as God's vineyard in the Old Testament. So, in the first place, this is about the relationship between God and His chosen people, Israel. Throughout the centuries, God poured out all His love and grace over this people.

Yes, and more than often, they didn't even appreciate it! However, in the second place, it is also about the Jewish leaders (the complainers) who cannot fathom that Jesus is including the outcasts (the tax collectors and sinners) and ordinary people in God's Kingdom. God's Kingdom is one of grace and not of merit where you have to impress yourself.

In the third place, we see later, after Jesus' ascension how even the gentiles also become part of the Kingdom. Now they can also sit together with the Jews at the banquet. For many Jews, this was

a bitter pill to swallow because they have been walking with God all the way for the past few thousand years. Suddenly, the gentiles come out of nowhere and they receive the same blessings as them!

Fourthly, this parable invites us today to look at the world around us with the same goodness of love and mercy that God displays here. Only when we make the grace character of the Kingdom of heaven our own does the world start to make sense. We only truly understand the character of the Kingdom when we realize that the world ultimately lives on love and

grace, not on cold calculations. As believers who grew up with the Word and have walked a long road with God, we often become jealous when someone converts after a reckless life and then experiences God's blessings very intensely. What makes him better than me?

Let us start today to see God's grace from God's perspective.

Prayer:

Lord, forgive me for the many times I have been jealous of people who, in my opinion, did not deserve Your grace!

To Serve

Matthew 20:17-28

Our story today is about two brothers, James and John. Their dear mother came to Jesus with a very serious request, that her two little boys would please get the top positions at His throne the day He reigns. It doesn't sound like an extremely unfair request since they were part of a small group of Jesus' intimate friends for the past three years. However, she had no clue what it was all really about. One would also expect them to immediately tell her, "Oh, Mother, forget it

because we know it's about much more than just a place of honour next to the throne!" But no! They played along, and you realize that even after all the things Jesus taught them, they still had no idea WHO Jesus was.

The other men were very upset with these two and of course, their mother's request. You would think that they would at least have understand something? However, if you look a little closer, you discover that their indignation was due to the fact that James and John had beaten them to it. They actually wanted to aim for that top position themselves!

What made the whole situation even more absurd was the fact that this event took place just after Jesus had told them that the church leaders would arrest Him in Jerusalem. They were on their way to Jerusalem at that time, so this nightmare was just around the corner. He also told them that He would be sentenced to death. In detail, He explained how the gentiles would mock Him, flog Him, and crucify Him. But on the third day, He would rise from the dead. Didn't these things sink in with them? Were they so preoccupied with their own positions one day in the Kingdom that they didn't even hear what

Jesus said?

I think Jesus must have been very frustrated with this bunch. For three years, He gave them intensive training and explained to them exactly what it was all about. There were indeed beautiful moments when it seemed like they realized who Jesus was and even confessed that He was the Son of God.

And then, THIS...!

Perhaps this pilgrimage of theirs to Jerusalem triggered thoughts that Jesus might stage a coup and liberate Israel from the Romans. Didn't Jesus already at various occasions describe what

would happen in Jerusalem? Didn't they hear when He told them about the suffering and death that awaited Him there? So when Jesus asked them if they would be willing to drink the cup of suffering with Him, they answered with an unequivocal "YES!" They spoke without thinking, without realizing what they were saying.

Jesus called the twelve aside and painted a picture for them, a picture in which He explained the difference between a worldly Kingdom and a Divine Kingdom. In today's terms, Jesus would probably say that the president

and his government are completely misusing their powers. Instead of serving the country, they want to be served, driving in long, black cars, living in palaces and having unlimited power. They want to have many security guards to protect them!

In God's Kingdom, it works very differently: you are not served, but your highest task is actually to be servanthood. Jesus repeatedly set the example, even washing His disciples' dirty feet, something that only a slave would do. He shunned all honours and every time He healed someone, He ordered the person to keep quiet

about it. Jesus' day of glory, the day He finally defeated the enemy, was not a huge celebration but from a worldly perspective, an extremely tragic day. On that day, He, the King, the Victor, was hung on a cursed wooden cross and mocked and beaten. Jesus does not expect any of us to ever go that far. His message is however, that the highest honour that can befall you is to have the opportunity to serve and that you will seize it with both hands!

I have often experienced that people who hold the highest positions in the church are the

ones who are willing to wash the dishes and do the most humbling tasks!

Believers should strive to be serve, not only to God but also to everyone we cross paths with. Along with servanthood comes humility and the willingness to be the least. It is certainly not easy! It takes a lot of courage to come down from that throne! And even more so when you have to watch the person taking your place, and you know they are certainly not worthy of being there. My prayer for you this morning is that this will be a characteristic of your life.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to be servanthood
in Your Kingdom, but also
humble. Please send
opportunities my way today
where I can serve, and make me
willing to be the least!

Two Blind Men

Matthew 20:29-34

Jesus' ministry is now at its climax as He leaves Jericho. The very last leg of His journey on earth begins as He takes on the steep, dry mountain pass from Jericho to Jerusalem. Jesus is followed by a huge crowd of excited people. Can they sense that something very significant is about to happen? The question is: what do they want to happen? The previous incident, when Jesus' intimate group of twelve still couldn't understand why Jesus had come, is still fresh in

their memory. It makes you wonder if these people have ever truly seen the real Jesus? Do they perhaps see Him as a political candidate who will lead them in a revolution and free them from Rome? All indications are that they see Jesus as a political saviour who will conquer the city of Jerusalem!

But then there is an interruption, something they certainly do not want at this critical moment. Two simple blind men seek Jesus' attention. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" they cry out.

"Be quiet! Can't you see He is on His way to Jerusalem? There are

much more important things to do than to deal with two whining blind men! We are going to conquer Jerusalem!" The blind men are silenced summarily.

But they don't give up that easily. This is their last chance, and they cry out even louder, begging Jesus to have mercy on them. The more the people try to silence them, the louder they shout. They are desperate - Jesus is their only hope. If He passes them by now, it may be too late! He is their last and only chance.

"Forward! Forward! Jerusalem is waiting!" is all that boils in the

minds of the crowds. "These men have had a full three years to seek Jesus' healing! Why now? Why at this critical moment? No, they should definitely wait!"

Jesus stops. He turns to the two pitiful figures, and to the frustration of everyone pushing Him toward Jerusalem, He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" His attitude speaks of great compassion. He feels deeply sorry for them because society has rejected them.

"That our eyes may be opened, Lord..." Jesus makes His way through the crowd to them. He touches their eyes. Then the

miracle happens: they can suddenly see! Between His "busy schedule" of taking the final steps to redeem all of humanity, Jesus takes the time to touch the eyes of two miserable outcasts.

And they followed Him!

I believe that these two followed Jesus for a completely different reason than the rest of the crowd. They followed Him out of gratitude for what He had done for them. They followed Him because they truly saw Him as the Son of God who saved them from darkness. He gave them the gift of sight! They were different from the crowd that actually did

not follow Jesus but rather pushed Him mercilessly toward Jerusalem.

Who is Jesus really to you? You may say that such an arrogant question can't be asked! Jesus is the King, after all! Indeed, but often we try to make Jesus into something He is not. Just as those crowds wanted to use Jesus to achieve their political aspirations, we too often try to manipulate Him! Of course, I can and must go to Jesus in my hour of need and ask Him for help. Indeed, we must realize that our entire existence depends on Him. But so often we also try to

manipulate Jesus to get certain things. In a selfish prayer, we often try to force Him in a certain direction, and sometimes we even trample on others, just like those crowds did to the blind men on the side of the road, to get Jesus where we want Him to be!

We must remember that our entire existence as children of God should revolve around the concept of a life of gratitude. Jesus paid the highest price possible to give us the gift of eternal life. That's why it shouldn't be about what more I can get from Jesus, but rather about how I can better serve Him. What can I

do for Jesus today to say thank you? How can I structure my life to truly show the Lord that I love Him above all else and everyone else? Every gift that comes our way should be seen as pure grace, and it should only encourage us to live a more intensive life of gratitude. Furthermore, we must realize our total dependence on Him every moment of the day, just as those two blind men did.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I want to confess this morning that I have often tried to manipulate You. Please forgive me for that, and open my eyes

today, so that I may see the opportunities to serve You better. Make me willing to stand in Your service and make me thankful for everything You do for me every moment of the day!

The Great Entry

Matthew 21:1-11

Jesus spent the majority of His three-year ministry in Galilee, particularly around the Sea of Galilee. While He made a few visits to Jerusalem and some heathen regions like Gadara, Tyre, and Sidon, He now concludes His rural ministry and reaches His final journey to Jerusalem for the Passover. However, this Passover would be very different from all the others before it and would radically change the history of humanity.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is laden with symbolism. He didn't just go there to celebrate the Passover. The entire process is charged with royal authority - the authority of the King who came to claim His rightful possession, Jerusalem. This is where the enemy, who arrogantly declared to the world that he was in full control, would be defeated in a way that surpasses all understanding.

When Jesus approaches Jerusalem, He sends two disciples ahead and instructs them, "Go into the village near you, and immediately you will find

a donkey tied up, and a colt with her. Loosen her and bring them to Me."

Couldn't it have been a magnificent, proud horse instead? Jesus chose a donkey because it suited His humble personality. A horse is associated with military invasion; they are war animals! Jesus didn't come to invade Jerusalem; He came in peace! He had the mighty host of angels at His disposal to conquer the city in glory, but He chose to come as the Prince of Peace without using violence. Although we might look down on donkeys today as stubborn and willful creatures, in

Jewish tradition, they were considered royal riding animals. If we read Genesis 49:10-11, we see Jacob's prophetic words about the Ruler riding on a donkey.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem indeed speaks of royal authority. When He had the donkey brought to Him, it was enough for the disciples to tell the owner that the Lord needed it. The man immediately consented without asking questions or resisting. The large crowd of pilgrims accompanying Jesus laid out a red carpet for Him, so to speak. They were bubbling with

excitement because they could sense that something significant was about to happen. They danced, sang, and threw their clothes in His path. They plucked branches from the trees and triumphantly waved them as a tribute to their King. According to John 12:13, these were palm branches.

In Jerusalem, there was a commotion among the people. The news of the King's entry spread like wildfire. However, this commotion was not due to excitement about Jesus' arrival; rather, it was astonishment. You might remember that there was a

similar commotion in Jerusalem during Jesus' birth. Herod was furious when he heard that a new King had been born! Thus, Jesus' peace also brought conflict!

It's mind-boggling that Jesus had been preaching and performing miracles throughout Israel for three years, and massive crowds had followed Him. But when He entered Jerusalem, people wanted to know who this Man was. For many of those who participated in the procession, Jesus was merely "the Prophet from Nazareth." Were their ears and eyes closed to everything Jesus had done? To them, He

was a complete stranger, a Stranger with a strange message. This inevitably leads to conflict! After all, Jesus had said that He did not come only to bring peace but also division (see Matt. 10:34).

Indeed, Jesus certainly brings conflict for those who find His message of peace too revolutionary, as it can completely turn your life around. Many people are still greatly disturbed when they hear the message of Jesus' peace. Many criminals are favoured or summarily forgiven for their misdeeds, but when the message of Jesus' peace is

broadcasted on a Christian radio station, it is silenced. It is silenced out of fear that it might violate some law. In schools it is a crime to proclaim the message of peace. Could it be out of sheer fear of the message of peace?

However, for those who are willing to bow in worship before this Prince of Peace, He brings true peace and rest, an indescribable peace that surpasses all understanding!

This morning, Jesus urgently asks you: Have you come to the point in your life where you surrender your life to the Prince of Peace? Or are you still afraid to take that

step because it might mean a radical change in your life? Grace time is running out! It may even be too late tomorrow...

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, I bow in worship before You this morning because all honour and glory belong to You. Thank you that today I can experience Your full peace and rest. Thank you for being the King of my heart!

The Cleansing of the Temple

Matthew 21:12-17

Business was booming that day! People flocked to the temple in large numbers because Passover was approaching. Starting a "trading post" here at the temple was definitely worth it, as the obstacles created by the Pharisees and Scribes had made it almost impossible for the man in the street to come and offer sacrifices in the temple. It was especially hard on the pilgrims who had come from afar. A group of businessmen saw an opportunity for a profitable

venture here. Perhaps a few chief priests and Pharisees had a share in this thriving business? One can only wonder...

The Jews believed that any image of a person on a coin violated the second commandment. Therefore, such coins could not be used in the temple. Roman coins bore the face of the Emperor, so they had to be exchanged for coins without such images, like the ones minted in Tyre. Naturally, the money changers made a hefty profit from this!

Moreover, many people who came to offer sacrifices had to

travel long distances to reach the temple, and it was not practical for them to bring animals along. Only the best quality animals were allowed to be offered, and if you had been travelling with an animal for a week, it would have looked very tired and worn out. The priests would never accept such a withered sheep as a sacrificial animal. So, there was also a good market here for providing animals to be offered, of course, at a price!

And where else could you find a better place to set up a stall to sell these goods than right in the Temple courtyard? The weary

traveler wouldn't need to search elsewhere for a sacrificial offering. Lambs and doves meant to be offered became a regular sight at the temple. People were shamelessly exploited, right in the temple courtyard. Instead of being a place of worship for God, it had turned into a den of robbers! It showed the kind of mindset the Jews had adopted and of course, the church leaders approved of these things. Perhaps they also received a substantial commission from it?

Does this mean that a church building should be a holy place where it must always be quiet and

solemn? Indeed, no! Just look at what Jesus did here: After driving out these traders, He didn't sit and brood, but He began healing the sick. Blind and lame people, in particular, flocked to Him. There was a long-standing tradition from the time of David that disabled individuals, like the lame and blind, were not allowed into the temple. We read about it in 2 Sam. 5:8. These poor people were, in other words, deprived of the right to worship in the temple. With Jesus' action, He not only healed these people but also gave them the opportunity to worship in the temple for the first time!

We must remember that the temple in Jerusalem was a symbol of God's presence in Israel. Turning it into a den of robbers was a slap in God's face. A church building today does not hold the same significance. The building itself is not holy; it is simply an empty structure. However, it should be a "workshop" where children of God are trained to live a meaningful life of gratitude. It should also be a symbol of God's love to the world outside, as the people who walk out of this building should express His love visibly and practically by giving to everyone they encounter.

Jesus' actions that morning in the temple left the church leaders raising their eyebrows. Inside, they were boiling! But then came the icing on the cake: a crowd of children, who probably had seen how the adults praised Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, now witnessed these miracles before their eyes. They shouted it out loud, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" until the sweet sounds of children's voices echoed through the temple halls. The church leaders were shocked to their rock-hard foundations! "Do You hear what they are saying?" they indignantly asked Jesus.

Indeed, Jesus heard what the children were singing. From the beautiful hymn, Psalm 8, Jesus also quoted to these burdened men that God ensured that children and infants would sing His praise. If the church leaders refused to do it, then those who were rejected and considered insignificant would glorify Jesus for who He truly was!

The leaders had turned religion into a burdensome and difficult affair; thus, Jesus' actions in the last verse were highly symbolic – He turned his back on this kind of religion. He left the temple and went to Bethany.

You and I are the "children" who should let the sweet sounds of God's praise resound from our church buildings to the world. Not just with our voices but with practical love that overwhelms people's hearts.

Prayer:

Lord, please grant me the zeal and insight today to live out and sing Your love practically, so that I may spread the sweet fragrance of Your great grace!

Faithful Prayer

Matthew 21:18-22

In the wilderness, we once encountered a very unhappy Kori Bustard. If you're not familiar with the Kori Bustard, it's a very large bird, the heaviest bird capable of flight in the world. It stands almost one and a half metres tall and has a wingspan of nearly 3 metres. It's quite a challenge for such a heavy bird to take to flight, so it spends most of its life on the ground.

A few impalas were peacefully grazing near this bird. Well, it was

peaceful until they accidentally entered the Kori Bustard's space. Suddenly, the Kori Bustard became aggressive and the poor impalas were driven away in fear! She puffed up her neck feathers and looked quite intimidating. The impalas fled from this "monster" in terror! Only then did she calm down. I suspect she must have had a nest nearby to protect.

This reminds me of a similar situation when we saw a buffalo bull approach a blacksmith plover's nest. The buffalo, of course, is a large creature and the plover is merely the size of a brick. But this little bird kicked up

a racket and bomb-dived the buffalo until the big guy finally got the message that he wasn't welcome there. If the bird was a human, that little plover surely would have prayed very hard, and maybe the Kori Busterd too. Yes, her precious nest remained unharmed!

Does prayer ever help?

What a question!

Jesus explains to His disciples the power of a faithful prayer, which all started with a disturbing incident involving a fig tree.

Jesus and His disciples spent the night in Bethany, a village just

outside Jerusalem. Early in the morning, they were on their way back to Jerusalem, feeling hungry. They noticed a fig tree beautifully adorned with lush green leaves right by the road. They were excited because they thought they would find something to eat, maybe a few delicious juicy figs. But to their disappointment, the tree didn't have a single fruit. Then something astonishing happened: Jesus cursed the tree, and immediately it began to wither away. "May you never bear fruit again!" How could Jesus say such a terrible thing?!

However, the incident is dripping with symbolism, and Jesus wanted to illustrate two things: practically, for the here and now, He wanted to explain to the disciples the power of faithful prayer. But there is also a deeper symbolism: this fig tree symbolizes the people of Israel. On the surface they appeared beautiful, with lush green leaves, and they worked very hard to keep the law. Outwardly, they seemed perfectly righteous and no sin was tolerated. If anyone were to stumble, especially if you were a woman, you'd be stoned to death to eradicate evil from society. That "fig tree" had to look

very beautiful at all times!

However, the people were inherently corrupt. There was not a single fruit on this tree. Everything was self-centred. They lived to create a path to salvation for themselves. In the process, they trampled on anyone who could possibly sour that dream. Now it's 2000 years later, and it's still the same. My daughter lived and worked with Jews for three years in Israel, and she experienced these things firsthand, returning an emotional wreck. The fact that Jesus caused the fig tree to wither immediately underscores the seriousness of

the matter: Israel's time was up! God would replace Israel with a new nation who would bear fruit.

If we were to extend this thought a bit further, Jesus promised His disciples and the church a new life. Through prayer and faith, they would literally be able to move mountains. "Moving mountains" is an integral part of God's work in the end times, as we read clearly in Isaiah 40. So, if the disciples trusted in God, lived within His will, and activated His power through prayer, they would experience God's great deeds.

As the Church of Christ, we must be very careful not to walk the

same path as Israel. I've seen so many congregations that display the beautiful lush green of the fig tree but, as Israel of old lack fruit. Everything is about showing the world how good and successful they are. However, I also know other congregations where the love of God shines forth, and there is an abundance of fruit. And if you look at the prayer life in such a congregation, it is kept alive and members usually stand in a prayerful relationship with God. Prayer certainly moves mountains!

Prayer:

Lord, You have promised that I

can accomplish great things if I pray to You in faith. Please give me firstly the confidence to put my faith into action, even if it's as small as a mustard seed!

A Willing Sinner

Matthew 21:23-32

Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly as the Great King, despite the strong opposition from the church leaders. His kingly authority was further emphasized that same day when He cleansed the temple of the den of robbers it had become. It seemed that no one could stop Him. A third incident followed, where Jesus' authority over nature was demonstrated when He caused the unfruitful fig tree to wither.

Now, Jesus is as if seated on the

"throne" in the temple, in full control of the explosive situation building up. And then the religious leaders, the chief priests and elders, tried to trap Him by asking questions to find something wrong in His words so they could condemn Him. However, Jesus uses a tactic that the rabbis themselves loved – answering a question with a counter-question, trying to outsmart each other. They were baffled because Jesus' counter-question left them in a great dilemma. They simply dare not answer, as either way they respond, they find themselves in deep trouble. Checkmate!

When Jesus confronts these men, He implies that His work and that of John the Baptist are closely intertwined. Just as John had pleaded with the people to repent, Jesus also tried to lead them to new insights. However, it was all in vain, as they simply ignored the admonitions. There was no sign of repentance among the Jewish leaders!

Another deeply disturbing thought that emerges is the cruel death that John had to pay for his convictions. Jesus would pay the same price, but much, much worse! Even though it might sometimes feel to us that Jesus

lost all control here, the opposite is true. He knows exactly what He is doing, and He is purposefully heading towards the ultimate destination!

Then Jesus rubs salt into the wounds of His interrogators with two parables, in which He not only tells them something about themselves but also pronounces judgment on the whole Jewish people.

In the first parable, there are two sons, each given an instruction. One is stubborn and rebellious and outright refuses. The other is very obedient and says piously, "Yes, Father!" However, when it

comes to the practical application, the obedient son is nowhere to be found. The rebellious one, on the other hand, feels ashamed of his reprehensible behaviour and goes and does what the Father asked.

And Jesus cleverly rebukes these men, for they are that "obedient" son! They are the leaders of the people in every aspect and they are the ones who should set an example for the rest. Outwardly, they perform perfectly with their religious rituals, meticulous observance of the law, and ticking off the lists to prove how devout they are. They will even go out of

their way to maintain this appearance. However, inwardly they are corrupt, for they think only of themselves. All their time goes into polishing their exterior while completely neglecting the inner being. They don't even spare a thought for the other sinful creatures who pass by them daily!

On the other side of the spectrum, there is the rebellious son. These are the rejected ones among the people who aren't even given a chance to partake in God's Kingdom. Among them are the tax collectors, the crippled, the lepers, and anyone who

committed any detestable sin. These people are written off by society and especially the religious leaders. There can be no good in them, right? However, when given a chance, like Matthew the tax collector, wonders happen! Read again the devotional "Feast with Sinners" at bit.ly/ds230607

You and I must be careful not to fall into a pious life where we only think of ourselves and how to present a good image to the world. The great danger is that we might then overlook the entire spirit of the gospel! Or that we get so stuck in church matters that we

no longer have time to live in a relationship with Jesus. Don't try to be anything other than what you are! However, it is essential that we do what the Lord asks of us – to live out the love of Jesus in all aspects of our lives. This means doing it not only before God but also before our fellow human beings. But again, this living out of love should not be a forced thing that you do because you feel obliged to do it. It must come from the heart. It must be a passion in your life that overflows with gratitude towards God.

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I must confess

that my life is filled with sin.
Nevertheless, I ask that You grant
me the strength and passion to
live out the wonderful love You
have shown me, despite who and
what I am!

The Vineyard

Matthew 21:33-45

Yesterday, we saw how Jesus was confronted by a group of chief priests and elders with a trick question while He was teaching in the temple. After making it clear to them that He will not fall for their cunning trick, He tells them two stories.

Yesterday's story was about two sons. Today's story is very disturbing, about a man who established a vineyard and beautifully prepared it for production. He then leased it out,

but when he went to collect the rent after a year, the tenants mistreated his slaves who were sent to collect, beating, stoning, and sending them back empty-handed. One of them was even killed! Then the owner decided to send his son to settle the matter once and for all. But the tenants murdered his son, thinking they could claim the vineyard for themselves. However, they didn't take into account the grieving father – he would make sure not one of them would escape severe punishment!

Jesus then makes a very startling statement: He tells these religious

leaders that they were actually those tenants, and the Kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to another people!

These men were furious. Their clever words had backfired on them. They were embarrassed because they wanted to arrest Him then and there, but the crowds of people hanging on Jesus' words would have stoned them if they dared. Steaming with anger, they stormed away, filled with murderous intent!

When we read this story, we might quickly think, "Great! They got what they deserved! Let their

heads roll!" But don't be too hasty. Don't simply "direct" this parable at others, because every believer, yes, including you and me, is addressed in Jesus' story.

Firstly, let's see what Jesus directly wanted to say to those men: The vineyard represents the people of God, Israel, and the tenants are the Jewish leaders. God expected a "harvest" of righteousness from them, but with their self-righteous behaviour and suffocating religious regulations, they prevented the people from producing the fruit of love, mercy, and peace. The slaves Jesus talks about are the prophets who

came time and again to plead with the people. They were repeatedly mistreated and even killed. The most recent case being the cruel death of John the Baptist.

Finally, the Son is sent – Jesus. He already sees clearly how He will be cruelly tortured and killed by these very men standing before Him and fuming with anger.

As in yesterday's story, there is no ambiguity when Jesus tells the religious leaders that Israel is losing its status as God's people, and that title will be given to another people. Indeed, it

happened exactly that way, and today, you and I are part of that people scattered throughout the world. And the wonderful thing is that this people even includes converted Jews!

Indeed, we can rejoice and celebrate because we are now part of God's people. However, there is also a very serious warning for us hidden in this story. We must be careful not to follow the same path as the Jewish leaders! Firstly, we must realize that it is not about a vineyard with beautiful grapevines. It is solely about the fruit that the vineyard bears. There must be godliness in

our lives; otherwise, we, as Christian believers, are absolutely worthless for God's Kingdom!

Secondly, there must also be a delicate balance in our lives. Although we must live holy and close to God, we must also realize that we live IN the world. The suffocating legal regulations of the Jewish leaders killed the people. Don't let it happen to us! By that, I don't mean that all laws should be thrown overboard. I also certainly don't mean that we can now roll around in sin like pigs in mud! However, we must make the deeper meaning of the law part of our lives. It's about

love, mercy, peace, and all the beautiful virtues that Paul wrote so much about.

We must also bear in mind that the Pharisees were not "bad" people; they were people who passionately practised their religion. However, they were so obsessed with their religion that they couldn't recognize God in it. It degenerated into an act rather than a heart relationship with God.

We must be careful that the same doesn't happen to us. We must be careful that we become so obsessed with religion that we forget Jesus. True religion is to

have a living relationship with Jesus. It is a relationship that leads me to live out love in all aspects of life, not out of compulsion, but because I want to do it out of gratitude and love for God.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you that today I can also be part of Your people. Please make me a worthy, fruit-bearing branch in Your vineyard and grant me an abundance of love, joy, mercy, tolerance, peace, and once again, love in my life!

The Wedding Feast

Matthew 22:1-14

After Jesus' intense conversation with the Jewish leaders, we find Him here once again among a group of people hanging on His every word. Oh, how wonderful it must have been to be able to sit in on one of Jesus' teaching sessions! Every word He spoke could be absorbed like a thirsty sponge!

On this occasion, Jesus tells the people a story about a wedding. We must remember that Jesus, during the last days of His life on

earth, was living as a "normal" human being. The worst part of it all was that He knew exactly what awaited Him. Yet, He continued to tell stories to His listeners as if nothing was wrong. But these were certainly not just ordinary stories. These narratives are filled with symbolism, and the idea is that the people should not only learn something from them but also respond seriously! This applies not only to the direct listeners but just as much to you and me today! Furthermore, the fact that He told these stories when He had so little time left makes it of the utmost importance that we take them to heart.

Jesus tells of a king who prepared a magnificent wedding feast for his son, but the invited guests did not pay it any attention. Some even murdered his messengers! Of course, this was a huge insult to the king, and the punishment for such a slap in the face was severe!

So, the king had other guests gathered from the streets. His servants had to invite anyone they could find, and there was a grand feast. However, not everyone at the feast had good intentions: one man refused to wear wedding clothes and thus showed disrespect. It was just

plain bad manners! He was thrown out forcefully!

Of course, this story is primarily related to Israel. God sent His "servants," the prophets, to the invited guests, Israel and especially the Jewish leaders. They were meant to participate in the great wedding feast of Jesus, His Son. Throughout the centuries, the prophets were mistreated. The last prophet, John, was despised and cruelly killed. It was a slap in the face to God, especially when the church leaders stubbornly rejected Jesus, the Bridegroom. They even killed Him that same week

despite all His efforts to gain their trust.

God's response, entirely just, is a terrible punishment for all who rejected Him. However, the wonderful sounds of joy that rise here utterly dwarf the punishment. Now, all the others who never could partake in such a wonderful feast have the opportunity to be part of it. He starts with simple fishermen and despised tax collectors, and eventually, it expands to rejected Samaritans and despised gentiles. Yes, there was even a woman with a bad reputation and another who committed adultery

and was almost stoned to death. What a wonderful opportunity God suddenly offers to everyone who wants to come, no matter who you are. The bonfires of joy burn high!

But not everything is entirely kosher. Despite God's sincere intentions, there is someone present with dishonest motives. Even though he is at the wedding feast, he does not participate. He openly shows his dissatisfaction by not wearing his wedding clothes.

This incident tells us that being part of God's Kingdom means you can't just passively be there

without doing anything. As an invited guest, you have a responsibility to actively participate in the feast. Discipleship demands full loyalty as well as effort, in other words, things like acts of love and mercy. Indeed, I see “so-called believers” every day without wedding clothes, people who just ride along on the congregation train. They are always ready with criticism or to stand begging, but they refuse to throw in their weight and actively engage in church activities. The church is only there to serve them! Put on your wedding clothes! Become

part of the grand feast!

The last sentence can be quite alarming: many are called but few are chosen. How should we understand this? Does it mean that a believer must live constantly under a cloud of uncertainty?

Indeed, no! However, it's crucial to know that God's election does not exclude our effort. It should in other words serve as an encouragement for us to persevere. There is a close parallel between Divine election and human responsibility. This is a connection that isn't logically transparent. It certainly isn't about

salvation insecurity, where you constantly have to prove yourself to God. It's about the authenticity of your discipleship. If you are a true disciple, you will find joy in the presence of the Son at the wedding feast. You show it by putting on "wedding clothes." It involves a life of doing what is right and living according to the guidelines in the Word.

Prayer:

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for allowing me to be part of this wonderful wedding feast of Your Son, Jesus. Give me the zeal to truly live out my joy!

Taxes

Matthew 22:15-22

The question of taxes has made many believers stumble. You might still remember from a few years ago when a prominent American preacher was arrested for tax evasion. He had preached fervently and was known for his views on taxes. His defence for evading taxes was that he dared not pay taxes because all his money belonged to God. How could he then give God's money to the government? This man made a mockery of his faith, the Bible, and Christianity in general!

Clearly, he did not know his Bible, or else how could he have misunderstood Jesus' statement on taxes?

Paying taxes to a Christian government is already difficult, but when the government is openly pagan or even anti-Christian, it becomes very challenging to part with your hard-earned money. But what does Jesus say about this? What should we as believers do?

I think it was also a bitter pill for the Jews to swallow, that they, the people of God, had to pay taxes to such an ungodly heathen government like the Romans!

What was happening to their hard-earned money? All they could see were pagan amphitheatres and places of evil! And, of course, the hated soldiers who were paid with that money to make their lives difficult. So when the Pharisees sent a delegation to Jesus to confront this "wise Man" on this delicate issue, it was a very timely matter that was raised, a matter on every Israelite's lips! The Pharisees were clever, or so they thought. They sent a group of Herodians along with this delegation. The Herodians were supporters of Herod Antipas, thus they were loyal to the Romans. If Jesus said

anything wrong about the Romans, He was trapped! First, flattery was used lavishly to sing praises to Jesus for His wisdom and how just He would be. But then came the tricky question, one to which Jesus couldn't simply answer "Yes" or "No": "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" In this question, so much emotion was bottled up that it was explosive!

Jesus' answer was ingenious and He saw right through their trap. If He said "Yes," the Jews would surely stone Him. But if He said "No," He would be in trouble with the Romans. However, Jesus'

answer gave them much more than they asked for, for He called them a bunch of hypocrites. Then He explained why Caesar should receive what is due to him - after all, his portrait was on the coin! But at the same time, you must not forget about God because He is the Great King, even over Caesar! These men were so embittered by the fact that they had to pay "unlawful" taxes to heathens that they completely forgot about God. God had become only a side issue to them!

Yes, we can easily laugh at the Pharisees' foolishness, but then

we conveniently forget about our own situation. I know this morning that many of the readers of this devotion are trying to find any possible way to avoid paying taxes. Apparently, it's not a sin to deceive the taxman, especially since the government is utterly corrupt! I won't go into the merits of this today. That's a matter you should decide for yourself, especially in light of Jesus' statement. However, what's much more important is the question of what you and I give to God. Years ago, when a financially struggling Montclair congregation in Durban wanted to build a very expensive church building, the minister, Rev.

Nico Schreuder, asked the congregation to give a tenth of their income so that the building could be paid for. And for those who didn't have money, he asked for a tenth of their time to help build.

Yes, perhaps you say this morning that you give your share in money to God. The question, however, is: how much time do you have left for God? Our lives have become so busy that God has absolutely no place in them. The seven minutes it takes to read even this devotional are entirely too long for some people. Several subscribers have

cancelled it because they don't have the time to read it. Often these same people don't have time to go to church, read the Bible, pray, or spare ANY time for God. They also don't have time for a fellow-human in need, someone who might be broken and just seeking an ear to hear their suffering!

The question is: how much time do I spend on kingdom work? Am I willing to sacrifice a Saturday to bring a little joy to a nursing home or an orphanage? Am I willing to sacrifice a bit of my busy time to bake pancakes for Bible distribution?

Jesus said: " and give to God what is God's." (Matt. 22:21)

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I must confess this morning with tears in my eyes that I give far too little time to You in my life. The express train of my life speeds past without allowing You as a fellow-passenger on board. Please help me to stop so that I can again give to You what rightfully belongs to You!

Is There Really a Resurrection?

Matthew 22:23-33

The brilliant scientist, Stephen Hawking, claimed that a human is like a computer. If you unplug the power cord, then it's dead! There is no life after death...

For the religious leaders, time was running out and they tried to provoke Jesus in some way to bring something concrete against Him. They were desperate! Just a moment ago, the Pharisees were silenced because the answer they received to their "perfect" trick question left them speechless.

Now it was the turn of the Sadducees, and they believed they had a question that Jesus simply couldn't answer. They did not mingle with the Pharisees, but this time, they were willing to put aside their differences for the greater cause.

While the Pharisees placed an exaggerated value on the observance of the law in their lives, the Sadducees were exactly the opposite. They did accept the Law of Moses, but the rest of the Scriptures had less significance to them. They were influenced by worldly culture, and Greek civilization weighed heavily on

them. Angels, spirits, and the resurrection weren't even part of their vocabulary and they propagated a kind of fatalism, along with a freedom of human will. Does that sound familiar in today's times?

So when this group came to Jesus and fired Him with with an absurd question, they did it tongue-in-cheek to try to prove how ridiculous the idea of resurrection was. It was a "watertight" test case: if a woman was married seven times successively to seven brothers, whose wife would she be in the afterlife? The concept of levirate

marriage dictated that if a man died childless (i.e., without sons), his brother should marry his wife so that his name could live on. The idea of resurrection was not as prominent in Old Testament times, and many people believed that you would live on through your offspring. With this question, the Sadducees wanted to prove once and for all how absurd the whole concept of resurrection was. If there was a resurrection, then that woman would have to be married to all seven men simultaneously, and according to the Law of Moses, that was unthinkable! Indeed, they outwitted the Pharisees with this

question, but with Jesus, they had met their match!

Jesus' answer focuses on two things: firstly, a true knowledge of Scripture. Neither the Sadducees nor the Pharisees truly understood the Scriptures! Secondly, Jesus showed them the power of God. Jesus explained to them, with a quotation from Exodus 3:6, that God is not a God of the dead but of the living. If He spoke of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they weren't just long-deceased forefathers, but living, resurrected citizens of God's Kingdom.

We cannot apply the limitations of

earthly standards to life beyond death. When you pass through that gate, everything is made completely new, and you experience a life that radically differs from what you are accustomed to. Different norms apply there than here on earth.

The resurrection is only a problem for those who think little of God. He is not limited by death! He is not (with all due respect) a "funeral director." God is in the "life business"! We can be deadly realistic (like the Sadducees) to the point that the wonder of life completely passes us by. The realist says that it's a fact that we

all will die someday. However, the true reality is that death is a gateway to true and abundant eternal life. If you truly know God, you will undoubtedly know that believing in the resurrection from the dead is the pinnacle of realism. Exactly how life looks there beyond is a wonderful surprise. When the door to the gates of heaven is opened just a crack, we see an awe-inspiring life of peace, purity, and perfection.

Will everyone taste this new life? Unfortunately not! Only those who are already prepared to accept Jesus' act of redemption on earth

will live and have already obtained that eternal life! How do you do it? Simply by saying "YES" to the gift of eternal life that Jesus offers you. When you say "YES" to Jesus, you enter into a living relationship with Him. Then you fulfill **ALL** the requirements that God sets. What happens to you if you do not meet God's requirements? A large veil has been drawn over that, but the gate of death leads such people to a place described by Jesus Himself as dreadful. It's a place of eternal pain and misery, forever distant from God!

The choice is yours - what will it

be? Jesus and Life, or eternal destruction. Have you already made the right choice?

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that today I can know with certainty that the wonderful, abundant, breathtakingly beautiful eternal life is waiting for me. Please give me the zeal to recruit candidates every day to also live in that wonderful prospect. Please give to those who read this writing today and are not yet part of Your Kingdom the desire and the courage to make the right choice!

The Great Commandment

Matthew 22:34-40

When I was a young boy, I had a little bristly mongrel dog and a big cat that was scared of nothing. The dog's mission in life was to irritate the cat to no end. Every time he did it, the dog received a swipe from the cat. He would then just shrug it off and come back for another swipe. Over and over again!

The Pharisees were exactly like that mongrel! They tried to trap Jesus with some clever question, and then they received a

humiliating rebuke. The next day they were back, and the same thing happened again. But it's as if they were so thick-skinned that this beating stunned them just for a little while, but then they just came back for another rebuke. They just couldn't learn!

Did they really think, after so many times of being second best, that they could trap Jesus with a tricky question? This time they wanted to know what the greatest commandment in the Law was. It's not as if they didn't know, because they knew the law inside out. However, they hoped that this time Jesus would give the

wrong answer and then they could trap Him.

The fact that the Sadducees were just defeated moments ago was a sensitive blow for the Pharisees, because although they didn't always see eye to eye, they now formed a united front against Jesus. If one were to win, it would be a victory for all! After all, Jesus had turned the entire Jewish religion upside down. The Law expert's question must also be seen in the context of the hundreds of commandments in the Torah as well as the many teachings of the rabbis. Was there perhaps one of these laws

that stood out above the others?

Jesus' answer gets straight to the heart of the matter: He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5. The greatest commandment is that the whole person - will, emotion, and intellect - should live directed towards God. Of course, the Scribal experts knew this, but then Jesus surprises them by quoting Leviticus 19:18 about the attitude towards your fellow-human being. He equates this law with your attitude towards God. Jesus brings these two together as God's total will for your life. These two commandments are therefore one, just as you cannot

separate the head and tail of a coin.

We must understand the implications of this commandment. Regarding the first half, love for God, there isn't much misunderstanding. It's the second half that we stumble over because mere charity is not enough. Charity truly becomes love when we mirror it in light of the love for God. The important thing is that we must love one another just as Christ loves us. Only then do we discover true charity. Jesus set an example for us on how to love. It wasn't theoretical lip-service love but

practical, doing love. He practically dedicated His entire life to changing people's lives by teaching them the right path while attending to their physical needs, such as healing, providing food, comfort, and more. Our love should not just be words but practical, doing love.

It's also essential to understand that this core commandment does not replace the "lesser" commandments for our Christian way of life. On the contrary, all other commandments must be measured and tested against this commandment. When we, for example, read the Ten

Commandments, we see repeatedly that each commandment can be measured against the love commandment. To murder is to act without love, and theft is an unloving action. Evil desires cause you to do things that completely disregard love. Bearing false witness is equally unloving because it can cause great harm. And, of course, the first four commandments are also an expression of love for God. When we think carefully about these commandments, we see a much bigger picture of love. This was precisely the big problem with the Pharisees. The

mistake wasn't that they had all sorts of legal provisions, but they had allowed the one thing that weighed most heavily with God, namely love, to have no place in their laws. For them, it was about the laws and not about the people behind the laws. They lived the laws down to the smallest details without giving love any place!

Of course, a Christian believer's life must be disciplined, but there must be a fine balance so that it doesn't become rigid. It must never be about a law for the sake of a law, but a law that binds you to serve God and your neighbour in love. And, of course, to fully live

out your love for God and your neighbour. You do this, of course, not out of duty but because it comes deep from your heart, out of gratitude for God's great grace and unconditional love for you.

Prayer:

Lord, please fill my entire life with love today so that it overflows, and I touch the lives of everyone who crosses my path today with all-encompassing love!

Being Jesus to Someone

Matthew 22:34-40

Let's take another look at Jesus' statement about loving your neighbour. We'll explore a few practical examples of what this means.

I was deeply moved by the story of a group of salesmen who attended a seminar in Chicago. When the long, exhausting seminar was finally over, they had to rush to catch their flight because it had gone on longer than they expected. At the airport, they had to move quickly and one

guy didn't make a good turn, accidentally colliding with a table in the airport building.

On the table, there was a huge pile of neatly stacked apples. When the man hit the table, apples rolled in all directions, and the entire floor was covered in apples. A messy situation! The men were running late for their flight, so there wasn't time to stop and try to fix the situation.

One guy did, however, look around while running, and to his shock, he saw a poor girl who looked like she was standing in the midst of lost hope amidst the rolling apples. Suddenly, he felt

deep compassion for her and turned around to help clean up the mess quickly. He signaled to his buddies that they should go ahead but asked them to please let his wife know he'd be late. He'd find another flight. He couldn't leave the poor girl with the mess they had caused.

However, what he found at the apple stand was heart-wrenching. The 16-year-old girl was in tears of pure frustration. That's when he noticed she was blind. She had no idea where to even start looking for her apples. As she desperately tried to pick up the apples, hordes of people

streamed past her, unintentionally trampling her without even noticing.

The man immediately jumped in to help clean everything up and neatly re-stack the apples on the table. In the process, some of the apples got damaged. He packed them separately in a bag and then took out \$40 from his pocket and gave it to the girl to cover the damage caused by his friends. "I hope we didn't ruin your day too much," he kindly said to her as he turned to go arrange for another flight home. But he was brought to a halt when the girl unexpectedly asked him, "Sir, are

you perhaps Jesus?"

The man did eventually catch a flight home much later, but the girl's question continued to burn in his heart: "Are you perhaps Jesus?" It might sound like a blasphemous question at first, but think about it carefully: is that what the world out there should think of me? Have I ever meant so much to someone in need that they see Jesus in me? Indeed, we should live out Jesus' love in such a way that people can see Jesus in our lives. Love is not just a feeling or lip service; it's the practical living out of what Jesus exemplified for us!

When we say we know Jesus, we should live and act as Jesus would if He were in our shoes. Knowing Jesus means much more than just going to church or knowing Bible verses or praying regularly. It means that I live out the Word in every situation I experience every day. It means that I will notice people's needs, not just see and feel sorry for them but that I will actually do something positive to help that person.

I read a newspaper article about a police officer who stood idly by and watched while a criminal was robbing someone. When

confronted later about his indifferent attitude, he simply shrugged, saying, "I was on my way to the office." He was in a situation where, as a trained police officer, he could have helped someone. However, he completely ignored the poor person's in need!

The apple guy could've just closed his eyes and continued on with his life, running alongside his friends. He could've made his flight on time and spent the evening with his family. No one would've even known about the blind girl's dilemma. But for her, it would have ended in a disaster.

The small sacrifice he made showed someone that Jesus is still a reality today. That He still cares for ordinary people.

I challenge you to be Jesus to someone today!

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the passion in my heart today to notice the needs in people, but not just pass by, but also give me the strength and courage to turn around and actually do something about the situation!

Pride and Humbleness

Matthew 23:1-12

Once upon a time, there was a rooster in a farmyard, a red one with golden highlights that made his shiny feathers sparkle even more in the morning sun. A crown adorned his head, a proud blood-red crest that stood proudly erect. When Rooster walked across the yard, everyone knew: here comes that rooster! His significant task in life was to ensure that the sun rose every morning. Just before dawn, he would climb to the very top of the roost, puff up his feathers and take a deep breath.

Then he would let out a massive crow that echoed across the yard. Proudly, he would gaze at the horizon, for at that moment the sun's head would peak above it. Satisfied, the rooster would think to himself, "There you have it! When I crow, the sun obeys! Am I good, or am I GOOD?!" All the animals in the yard watched with great respect and awe as Rooster day by day ushered the sun up out of the grass.

On a beautiful day, Pig had a birthday and threw a big party. It went on until late at night and of course, Rooster was the lead dancer again. But then the tragic

thing happened in Rooster's life: the next morning, he overslept completely! When Rooster rubbed the sleep from his sleepy eyes, he saw to his dismay that the sun was already high in the sky! Rooster was so startled that he fell off the roost. To his great shock, he had to find out that it was never HIM who made the sun rise. Rooster was dismayed....!

We find Jesus, likely in the temple where He delivers the fifth and final of His great sermons. The Pharisees and Scribes are criticized. Over the past few days, they went out of their way to try

and entrap Jesus. Now it's His turn to warn the disciples and the curious crowds about the teachings of these haughty church leaders.

Jesus doesn't deny their authority, just as He showed on a previous occasion that you must acknowledge the authority of the government, even if it's a pagan, oppressive, unjust authority. Indeed, their knowledge had gotten to their heads. They wanted to be in charge and they had made all sorts of rules that the ordinary people simply had to obey. But in their cunning, they left loopholes for themselves so

that they could circumvent their own laws when it suited them. As an example: the Sabbath was one of their major concerns, and that's why they created a bunch of laws around the Sabbath to ensure that no one accidentally broke the significant Sabbath law. One of these Sabbath laws was about how far you could travel on a Sabbath. It was fixed at 2000 "El" or about 880 metres. The only exception that could be made was when you were on the water, namely a boat, and obviously you couldn't control the distance the boat moved. They took this law further and said that if you placed a bag of water on a

wagon and sat on it, then you're technically on water so you can travel as far as you want!

Unfortunately, for these people, it wasn't only about the laws they were so attached to, but also about their own status. They had to be addressed in the right way to uphold their prestige, and they always got the best seats. They appeared very righteous, but they carefully selected their practices of righteousness to make them easy to perform. Their clothing, prayer bands, and tassels set them apart as "holy" people, and they wanted to show it to the world by making the bands and

tassels excessively large and conspicuous.

Jesus saw the danger looming for the disciples, for they would be the future leaders of the church. They had to be very careful not to fall into the same trap as the Pharisees! It would be so easy to see yourself as someone who has achieved great things in life. Humility is of utmost importance, for in the church, we are all equal! Leaders are there to guide the church's activities and not for honour or status. For example, being an elder leader doesn't mean you're a step above the rest of the congregation. It simply

means you have a specific task to perform. The same goes for the preacher and even the moderator or whatever position you fill. "You are all brothers," Jesus said. Humility is the key. Didn't Jesus live out these things practically? Just look at how He washed the disciples' dirty feet and how He partied with the outcasts!

The story is told of someone who visited the great theologian, Dr. John Broadus. That evening, Dr. Broadus told him to leave his shoes outside his door. The next morning, he found his shoes polished to a shine. After a few days, he looked to see which

servant was so diligent so he could give him a tip, and to his surprise, he found Dr. Broadus himself in front of his door, busy polishing shoes. No task, no matter how humble, was beneath this great theologian. Christianity is not about being served but about serving humbly yourself.

Prayer:

Lord, please heal me today from my pride and make me humble and serviceable in Your Kingdom!

Hypocrites!

Matthew 23:13-39

Do you still remember the wonderful blessings Jesus shared in Matt. 5:3-12? Of course you do, because they were surely the highlight of Jesus' sermon on the Mount. That was a wonderful, powerful sermon that touched your heart deeply. In stark contrast, Jesus now presents seven woes as a counterpart to the blessings. These woes are apparently specifically directed at the Pharisees and Scribes.

At first, we might be shocked and

say, "But God is love! It doesn't make sense!" Oh, absolutely, God is love, but God is also just, and justice must be served!

The question is: Does this mean that the people whom Jesus pronounced condemnation upon were eternally lost? Certainly not, for He is also merciful! If they would just gain insight, they could also experience the blessings of the Kingdom of God. But what led to these terrible woes?

Jesus is not talking with the Pharisees here, but about them. He is addressing believers and the curious who came to listen to Him. The disciples are in the

presence here of Immanuel (God-with-us). At the same time, the Pharisees stand under the judgment of God, even though they are under the impression that they are still the people of God. With this statement, Jesus is essentially saying, "This is far enough!" God simply wouldn't endure their sin any longer!" We can summarize their sin with one word: Hypocrisy. They wanted to pretend that they were something entirely different from what they truly were!

Looking at Jesus' condemnations, we quickly grasp the seriousness of the matter. He isn't just

condemning minor sins here. First and foremost, the Pharisees held the keys to the Kingdom. They had the power to open or close the Kingdom to the people. The people looked up to them because they were the Law experts, the people who knew what God expected of them. When they, therefore, transgressed, they led many people astray and excluded them from the Kingdom. Even in the mission field, they made proselytes of the gentiles and with their teachings, led these people further into destruction!

Then Jesus comes and shows

how utterly ridiculous the hypocritical practices of the Pharisees were. The example He mentions is the practice of swearing of oaths. The background here is that the Pharisees completely avoided using the Name of God, fearing to violate the third commandment. Therefore, the temple or the altar was used as a substitute for God's Name. This practice eventually degenerated, with people saying that they didn't actually mean to involve God's Name. However, when you swear, you make an oath and you involve God in your statement. You set it up so that God is a

witness to what you say! This is something only a believer can do when the law requires it of you. If you lie, you're essentially making God a liar!

Another example Jesus cites is the practice of giving tithes. Jesus says that these men went out of their way to tithe as the Scripture required, but love for their neighbours was completely absent! No, it's not wrong to tithe, but practical love is ten times more important. Through this, you actually fulfill God's law. If you don't do it, you're engaged in trivialities.

The fifth and sixth "woe"

statements of Jesus deal with the externalization of the law. As we've seen several times, the Pharisees were deeply committed to meticulously obeying every possible law. Outwardly, they were immaculate and spotless. However, if you keep the law outwardly and there's no inner desire to serve God, you're like a whitewashed tomb! You are beautifully adorned on the outside but inside full of decay, stinking bones of death!

In His final statement, the Pharisees and Scribes are labeled as murderers of prophets. We might easily stand aside and

scoff at the Pharisees. "Well, they're getting what they deserve!" Today, Jesus is asking you and me to also test our lives against these statements. Read them again and ask yourself if you often do the exact same things the ancient Pharisees did. You might say, "I don't smoke, drink, or curse!" But meanwhile, you might also not be able to forgive the person who caused you to lose your job. Or you look the other way when someone in need crosses your path. Perhaps you're not genuinely interested in the problems of the person who works alongside you. You ignore it and let the opportunity slip

through your fingers to perhaps bring them to Jesus. Maybe you're so entangled in your religious practices that you overlook the need of a world that is perishing.

Let us be still before the Lord and ask Him to reveal where we still live with a Pharisaical attitude.

Prayer:

Lord, please cleanse my inner being and replace the putrid bones of death in my life with love and compassion!

When Will Jesus Come?

Matthew 23:37-24:14

In Israel, there has been a checkmate situation for many years. The Jews eagerly desire to rebuild the temple. For any Jew, it's their greatest desire to see the temple standing on the temple mount again, where worship can take place. However, there's a significant obstacle to realizing this dream, as a massive mosque stands on the very spot where the original temple stood. For Muslims, this is a highly sacred building. It would have to be demolished before the temple

could be rebuilt. And if that happens, it would trigger a war that would make all previous conflicts pale in comparison. But what has become of the temple that once stood there? In the year 70 AD, the building was utterly destroyed by the Romans.

It all began with Jesus' prophetic discourse. At the end of chapter 23, Matthew describes Jesus' words: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Look, your house is left to you destroyed." Shortly after saying this, Jesus leaves the temple.

The temple was originally built by Solomon - an impressive structure adorned with Cedarwood, Cypress, bronze, and gold. With the fall of Jerusalem during the exile, the Babylonians destroyed the temple and burned it down completely. It was later rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel, but this building was nowhere near as magnificent as Solomon's. Many years later, Herod the Great gradually dismantled and rebuilt the temple. This was truly one of

his most magnificent constructions. It was a breathtaking building.

As Jesus and the disciples walk away from the temple, the men marvel at the splendid architecture of the temple. Then, Jesus says something that shakes them to their bones: "Do you see all these things? Truly, I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be broken down." Perhaps the men thought He meant this "spiritually." It couldn't possibly be true, right? The first disaster, from a Jewish perspective, struck the temple only a few days later when

the curtain in the temple tore from top to bottom during the crucifixion! However, for Christians, this was not a disaster but rather meant free access to God!

42 Years later, Jerusalem is attacked by the Romans. About 600,000 Jews die in the brutal attack and even the temple is burnt down. In the heat of the inferno, the gold extensively used in the building melts and flows into the cracks between the stones in the walls. This gold was highly valuable and the Romans literally dismantled and overturned every stone to get

their hands on the precious metal. And so, Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled down to the last speck. Today, there is no sign that a temple ever stood there. Of Solomon, Zerubbabel, and Herod's breathtaking constructions, not a single stone, not a splinter of cedarwood, nor a grain of gold remains!

The men walk to the Mount of Olives, and there Jesus sits alone with His disciples. They are confused about all the statements Jesus made and the condemnations. When will these things happen? How will they know when the end has come?

And when will Jesus return? Then, Jesus begins to tell them about the horrors of the end times: all kinds of disasters that will befall the earth, natural catastrophes, and terrible wars. But there's more: there will be a terrible persecution of Christians. Many will fall away, and the love of many will grow cold. False prophets will arise and spread false teachings. But through it all, the Church will continue to proclaim the gospel until it spreads throughout the entire world, and no one will be able to say they haven't heard the gospel. Only then will the end come.

What did Jesus really wanted to say to them, and undoubtedly to you and me today as well? They shouldn't try to calculate when the end will come. All the signs Jesus mentions have occurred repeatedly throughout history. However, when these things happen, we should know that the end is drawing near. These things should keep us as believers on our toes so that we can be ready for Jesus' second coming at all times. All these signs are here today, even more intensely than at any other time in world history. Today, the last sign Jesus speaks of has already come true: that the gospel has reached every people

and nation. Never before in history have we been so close to Jesus' return. Of course, we shouldn't be deceived or terrified. We must be watchful, persistent, and stand firm in love and righteousness. Only in this way will we be ready when the end comes. And the end will come unexpectedly, when no one expects it.

Prayer:

Lord, keep me on my toes every moment of the day so that I will be ready to meet You when You come unexpectedly!

The Signs of the Times

Matthew 24:15-31

We're still engrossed in Jesus' prophetic discourse about His second coming. Jesus paints a picture of terrible events that will precede His return. In verse 15, He references a passage from the prophecy of Daniel (Dan. 9:27 and 11:31) where Daniel speaks of the "thing that is an abomination in the eyes of God." This brings to mind the horrifying deeds of the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who desecrated the temple in Jerusalem by erecting an altar to

the Greek supreme god, Zeus, above a part of the altar for sacrifices. The Jews were compelled to offer sacrifices to Zeus, even with pork! It's also reminiscent of the Aqsa Mosque, which now stands where the temple once stood, causing horror among the Jews.

Jesus portrays the horror of the end times, where people will flee to the mountains. The urgency of this flight is emphasized by the fact that there won't even be time to gather your most necessary belongings or pack clothes. It will be a terrible emergency, something that reminds us of the

horrors of tsunamis that have devastated the world in recent years, where most people didn't even have the opportunity to flee. The sea simply engulfed everything in its path.

As we witness the wickedness of the world today, we stand in wonder that God hasn't put an end to it all! How long will God's mercy still endure over this wicked generation? How much longer before God says, "Thus far and no further!"

The comfort, however, is that the Church of God, His children, can enjoy God's protection during this great tribulation. God makes it

bearable for His chosen ones by shortening its duration.

One of the characteristics of the end times will be false prophets and even false Christs who will try to deceive the elect with great signs and wonders. Aren't miracles performed only by Christian believers? No, even God's enemies perform miracles through the power of Satan. I involuntarily think of the infamous "Doomsday Prophet" who made his congregation eat snakes!

How do you test the person performing miracles? Through their obedience to God's will in living out love and righteousness.

In the time of the early church already, there was indeed confusion among believers about Christ's coming. There were various views on exactly how and where Jesus' second coming would occur. For example, the Qumran movement expected Him to come in the desert. So, they settled in the desert around the Dead Sea. Others thought that Jesus' return would be kept secret until He appeared (in the bedroom) - Matt. 24:26.

However, Jesus emphasized that His coming would be immediately recognizable to everyone. When that day comes, no one will need

to wonder or doubt, for He will be as visible as a lightning flash in the sky. The saying in verse 28 confirms it: just as vultures immediately recognize carrion from the sky, the Son's coming will be just as conspicuous. Therefore, we should never worry that we won't recognize Him when He comes!

Today, there's still the same kind of confusion. How many times have we heard in recent years that the end would come on a specific date? You'll recall how people were stirred up about the heathen Mayan priests' prediction that the end times would occur in

December 2012.

Then there was the invisible asteroid named Wormwood that was supposed to hit the earth and destroy everything suddenly. It also came and went! And still, it's not the end!

The fact is simply that we don't know. No one knows! Not even the angels! But we'll discuss this more in the next devotional.

There are five things from this passage that we can apply to ourselves today:

1. History is moving towards a point: the coming of Christ in glory.

2. We must always be ready for His coming, avoiding all speculation about the exact time.

3. We are involved in preparing for His coming by proclaiming the gospel. We mustn't just sit back and wait. We must lead as many people to Jesus as possible, for those who don't believe will face eternal damnation.

4. Evil is a reality in the world, and it has power.

5. We live under God's protection, and that is enough for us to live and die comforted.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, when we see the

wickedness of the world around us with anxious hearts, our prayer today is: Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!

Be Vigilant

Matthew 24:32-51

Have you ever spent time in the Lowveld during the month of September? Spring in the Lowveld is a very special time. In a sense, it's a heartrending time because it's still the last throes of winter. Rain hasn't come yet, and it's painful to see the arid fields and animals groan with hunger, longing for the lush greenery of spring. The trees yearn for rain, and everything is dead and parched. Yet, there's an excitement, a sense of anticipation, because everyone

knows that spring is just around the corner.

In Marloth Park, there's a specific spot near Leliepan where there's a patch of clay soil. A forest of the ugliest little trees you can imagine, grows on that mound of clay soil: Mopane trees. They're like semi-dwarf, tangled thickets, and in late winter, there isn't even a sign of a leaf. If you happen to walk by on a nice day, just a few days after the first spring rain, your breath will be taken away. Almost overnight, these trees explode into a golden mass of the the most colourful flowers. Suddenly, everything has gone

from utterly lifeless to abundant life, and you feel like hopping and frolicking in exuberant joy with the impalas. Every tree is literally covered in pure gold, and then you wonder what happened!

The person who pays attention, who watches, eagerly anticipates the day this miracle will happen. He can see when the time is ripe for it, as the other trees start budding. Life comes to the bush because it knows when spring is near. And suddenly one day, the Mopane trees blossom and then you know: spring has arrived!

Jesus teaches His disciples to see the signs of the Son's second

coming with the same attentiveness as they observe nature and discern certain things from it. When the fig tree starts to bud, they know that summer is near. The coming of the Son is also subtly presented as summer when the full, ripe fruit of your relationship with God will manifest, unlike the dreadful lifelessness of the Jewish religion that makes you think of winter. From these signs, they must learn that the time is near!

Matthew's community expected the second coming to be in their own lifetime. Did they misunderstand Jesus' words

then? The key concepts here are ignorance, watchfulness, and readiness. Jesus says it repeatedly so that you'll understand it. He emphasizes the fact repeatedly, that no one knows when the Son is coming, but you must always be ready. Just as you don't know on which day the Mopane trees will bloom, but you can feel the tension of that wonderful event in nature, so is the coming of Christ. It's a great mystery, but all the signs of His coming are already present.

Meanwhile, life continues as if nothing is going to happen. People eat and drink, they marry,

and there's nothing warning them that the second coming is about to happen. Indeed, this doesn't mean that because all the signs are already there, you should stop your work. It would be foolish to sell all your belongings and sit in a heap, waiting for Jesus to come! Life must continue as usual, but you must be ready at any moment! The signs are not there as a time indicator, but to say: Be ready at every moment – if you die now in a war or earthquake, the end has come for you...

With the parable Jesus tells about the faithful and unfaithful servant,

He wants to convey another thought to us: faithfulness! Watchfulness doesn't just mean being ready at any time, but also being faithful in the work that the Lord entrusts to you. For example, if you're an elder in your church, it means you'll constantly stay in touch with your congregants and genuinely care for each one. Even if you're just the one who cleans the church, you do it with such dedication that everyone who enters feels welcome and experiences the presence of God. Indeed, Jesus promises a reward for those who are faithful in what God appoints them to. But there is also

punishment for those who are unfaithful.

However, we must be careful not to do our work in the Kingdom for the wrong reasons. We certainly don't do it to earn a reward! We must always consider everything as grace alone. And when we shoulder the wheel for God's Kingdom, we do it purely out of gratitude for everything He has already done for us. Furthermore, we do it solely for the glory of God. It's something that should come from deep in the heart for selfless reasons. If we receive a reward one day, it will be a wonderful bonus!

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to be faithful in the things You appoint me to, and grant me vigilance so that I'll be ready at any time when Jesus comes again!

Sufficient Oil

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus tells the compelling story of the ten girls who waited late into the night for the groom to make his appearance at a wedding. There are a few questions that you instinctively ask yourself when reading the story that Jesus tells here, things that simply don't make sense! Why did the groom keep the guests waiting for so long? Why didn't the five foolish girls bring enough oil with them? Didn't they know that the groom could sometimes be late? Was the groom ever actually late?

If you just take a moment to look at the background of the story, these things start to make sense to you. We live in a time in history where time truly matters a great deal. Every appointment must be kept down to the minute, otherwise your client is upset, and furthermore it causes you to be late for your next appointment too. Often, even seconds are of the utmost importance. Our watches are synchronized worldwide. Even our computers and phones are set to international time down to the second, every moment of the day. Time has become our master!

During that time, things were completely different: there were no such things as watches in the first place and people determined time by looking at the sun or the stars' positions. You listened to your body when it told you it was hungry or tired because then it was mealtime or bedtime. Only the very rich could afford the luxury of a sundial. The Jewish day began at sunset. So, for example, the Sabbath would start when you could see the first star on a Friday evening and continue until sunset on Saturday evening. Furthermore, the day was divided more or less into hours. However, Roman time started at midnight,

and time was very important to them because a military machine operated on time.

However, there is another very important question surrounding the concept of time: when was the right time for an event to take place? Nowhere in the Bible do we read that appointments were made to meet someone at a specific time. The most important person determined when the time was right. For example, a person would invite guests for a meal, but no time was given. When the meal was ready, the host would send messengers to let everyone know it was time. At a wedding

reception, the groom was obviously the most important person and it was his privilege to determine when it was the right time for the ceremony to begin. Everyone knew it, and the invitees waited with great excitement. The groom's arrival was indeed a great surprise. Of course, it would be an insult if someone wasn't ready when he showed up, because the entire ceremony revolved around him!

In this story, we see guests waiting in great excitement for the big moment - the groom's arrival. Some surely expected him to come early in the evening. So,

when he suddenly arrives in the middle of the night with great rejoicing, they haven't been ready for a long time. It would be a disgrace!

The importance of this thought is emphasized by the fact that Jesus says it over and over again. Over the past few days, we have repeatedly read how Jesus hammered the importance of being ready into His disciples. In the application of this story, we see God as the most important Person. Only He can determine when the Second Coming will take place. Of course, we know that all the signs are already there

and that He can come at any time. He has also already sent the invitation to the great feast to everyone. Therefore, we must be ready because that trumpet can sound at any moment and when it happens, we definitely don't want to be caught off guard!

We often hear about people making mathematical calculations about the exact time of the Second Coming, but it remains a great mystery that we eagerly await. There are even faith groups that claim the Second Coming has already happened. But why didn't we know about it then?

Of course, there is another factor we must keep in mind, namely the total unpredictability of the time in which we live. Daily, we hear of people being murdered. On the road, you are just as unsure of your life, and in the blink of an eye, you can enter eternity. Are you ready for that? The events of September 11th a few years ago showed that you are not safe anywhere. Thousands of people died within minutes in a "secure" building. In the volatile Middle East, Ukraine, Africa, numerous people enter eternity daily. Even in Europe, the USA, and Britain there are frequent terrorist attacks claiming

many lives these days!

And as if the terrifying things aren't enough, a heart attack can come like a thief in the night! Do you have enough "oil" in your life lamp for the moment when the Bridegroom unexpectedly arrives? Have you already come to Jesus?

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the zeal today to be ready for Your coming and the patience to wait eagerly for You!

Talents are Risky!

Matthew 25:14-30

Do you want to have some serious fun in your congregation? Then host a talent auction one Saturday. Here's how it works: Ask people who are willing to make their talents available. It can be practically anything! The more creative, the more enjoyable. Then organize a nice social gathering where these talents are auctioned off. This way, funds can be raised for a cause, such as supporting a children's home. An example of such talents could be someone

who is skilled at baking, and she can provide a private demonstration to the person who buys her talent on how to bake the perfect chocolate cake. Another example could be offering someone a car wash or taking an elderly person shopping. The possibilities are endless. We have done this on occasion in our congregation, and it works like a charm! And the best part is that it all goes towards expanding the Kingdom!

The question, however, is: what is a talent really? In Biblical times, it was a very valuable coin that was worth about 6,000 denarii. This

would have been about twenty years' wages for a labourer. In today's terms, maybe a million or two rand.

In the story that Jesus tells here, three slaves each receive these talents, each according to his ability (The 1983 translation simply speaks of gold coins.) This money is not their own. They are merely to use it and multiply it on behalf of their master. Each of them possesses the necessary aptitude, skill, and experience to make a success of their portion. Two of these slaves understood their assignment well and they went to work with this money.

With good business talent, they doubled it. The third one, for safety's sake, simply buried his.

What did Jesus want to convey with this story? We say: "But it's easy! It obviously means that we use our talents or gifts!" To a large extent, this parable has been misunderstood through the years and has acquired a moralistic meaning. You should use your natural abilities or talents! However, that was not Jesus' intention. It's crucial that you never read a portion of the Bible out of context! A single Bible verse out of context can get a totally wrong meaning.

The parable starts with the words: "Again, it will be like..." In other words, it's a continuation of the previous parable, which dealt with how we should spend that waiting time before the Second Coming of Jesus. We must live out the will of God. The talent Jesus speaks of here is therefore the gift of the Kingdom of God with which we, as Christians, are to trade. We can describe it further as the gift of God's love and mercy. These are immense sums discussed in the parable, and in the same way it's an overwhelmingly great gift that Christ entrusts to us to work with. I don't think we fully realize how immense that gift really is!

Just like the slave with the one talent, you can easily say that using this gift is a huge risk. So, I would rather hide behind excuses like being just an ordinary sinful person or being ashamed or modest, etc.

Because the gift is so incredibly enormous, there are, of course, significant risks associated with it. The good news, however, is that this "talent" God entrusts to us doesn't belong to us but to God. So, we have no chance of losing anything. The risk is entirely God's!

The whole point of the gift of love is that it must work! Therefore, we

are allowed to take these risks, and we must abundantly experiment with it on everyone! Only then does the law of the Kingdom come into effect and it grows a hundredfold because God's love is released. The outcome is that we can taste the wonderful privilege of sharing in the eternal joy of the Lord.

The question then is whether the "talents" I have received, meaning my natural abilities, have no significance? Do they hold no value? Oh, but of course, they are very important because these are instruments God gives us to live out this love we've been talking

about above. Only when we are willing to release the love of God do our natural talents start making sense in life. To give an example: if I have been given a beautiful voice and I decide to use it to sing in the church's praise and worship group or to sing gospel songs, then that noble use of my talent still doesn't make sense! It only starts making sense when I simultaneously live out the love of God positively through it. So, when I use that singing talent in such a way that it radiates Jesus' love and invites others to Jesus - only then do my talents truly make sense and gain value!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me willing to take that risk in life, to pass on Your wonderful love to others around me, and to live out Your love positively!

Before the Judgment Seat

Matthew 25:31-46

The Second Coming of Jesus arrives, and now everyone on Earth knows that these stories about Jesus were not just stories but the truth. All the people of the Earth gather together, but they are divided into two groups, with a clear line between the two. There is no grey area. You either did the will of God, or you didn't! That's the only criterion! Based on this, everyone is separated. Millions of believers dance and sing with excitement and pure elation, because finally, what

we've longed for and yearned for has happened. They all stand in the much smaller group. Over the other group, a dark cloud of damnation hangs.

Yet, there is uncertainty in everyone, even among the believers, because high above everyone stands the Judgment Seat. On the seat sits the Judge-King in glory and majesty, visible to all. The tension becomes unbearable because Jesus is about to pass judgment on each person.

"Those on my right, come and inherit your inheritance! It is the inheritance that God has

prepared for you." And then a question arises from the group: "Thank you, Lord, but I really don't deserve to be in this group! Why did You specifically place me here? What have I done to deserve this?"

And then Jesus replies with a smile: "I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink. And the day I was a stranger, you invited Me in and gave Me food and a place to sleep."

"But Lord, I don't remember that! I can't recall doing anything for You personally."

Jesus smiles from the Judgment Seat: "Do you remember that old

man in rags and tatters you helped one day? The one who asked for a little water? And then you gave him a plate of food and coffee and new clothes from your closet? When you showed him love and mercy, you actually did it for Me."

"Lord, what about me?" another voice asks. "Do you remember the day when I was so sick? You lovingly took care of Me without expecting anything in return."

"No, Lord, with all due respect, You must be mistaken! It wasn't me..."

"The day you picked up the sick beggar on the park bench and

took him to the doctor - you even let him sleep in your house for the next few nights. It was Me you cared for because when you give so much love to someone else, you're actually giving it to Me!"

Now there's murmuring from the other group. By this time, it has become clear that they won't be entering those glorious gates of heaven. "Lord, I have also cared for a beggar! What about me? Doesn't that count?"

"Yes, Lord, I've personally also given food and clothes to a stranger! He even said he would repay me, but nothing ever came of it. And now the salt is being

rubbed in my wounds because now I'm in the wrong group. It's not fair!"

"I agree!" voices now chorus, "We worked hard to do good. We saved the rhinoceros, which You personally created, from extinction! Doesn't that count?"

"And what about all the hours we spent building up the community?"

"Actually, you did nothing for Me! You did it all purely for yourselves!" comes the damning response from the Judge. "You never truly showed love without expecting something in return. Moreover, you never

acknowledged Me as Saviour, and you've never had a relationship with Me. Eternal damnation is your fate!"

Slowly, reality starts to sink in. It's not about what you've done, but it's about an attitude of the heart. On both sides, there were people who did good things. On one side, it was for selfish reasons or perhaps purely humanitarian and noble at first glance. Often, these were the "good" people who were honoured by the community for their tremendous work. But in God's eyes, it means nothing.

On the other hand were people who often didn't even realize they

were doing acts of love, as it came from the depths of their hearts. Why? There was one driving force: the love of Jesus. They didn't do their acts of love to try to earn something with it. They didn't seek recognition or a favour from God or anything else, but they did it purely out of gratitude because Jesus redeemed them. When Jesus has truly taken form in your life - when you live in a relationship with Him - the things you do will show that you are His child. Then you will live out your gratitude without any ulterior motives.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me a genuine caring love in my heart. Open my eyes to the needs in other people's lives, and make me willing to help where there is need!

Preparing for Death

Matthew 26:1-16

The final chapter of Jesus' life as a human on earth has begun. For some time now, the Jewish leaders have been trying in every possible way to seize Him, but every time their plans are thwarted. However, only Jesus had the final say. Only He could determine when He was ready for that dreadful day. Yes, on various occasions He had told the disciples that He would die and be handed over to the hatred of the Jewish leaders. Yet, He was vague about exactly when it

would happen. Now however, He makes a statement that sends shivers down the spines of the men around Him: "In two days' time, I will be crucified!"

Immediately we see how the machinery is set in motion to bring Jesus to life. He was never caught off guard, in fact, He Himself initiated the process when the time was right for it. This naturally places the Jewish participants in a lower order, as their plans could only succeed if they aligned with God's grand plan.

This brings us, of course, to the question of the relationship

between God's counsel and human plans. If we were to say now that God made the decision, would that absolve the Jews of their involvement? It was, after all, God's decision, wasn't it?

Certainly not, because they had long been piecing together their evil plans. However, this places their plans within a much larger framework, because while they were busy brewing destruction, God actually used their malice for the salvation of all mankind. How ironic that God's great plan of redemption was carried out through human plans of murder, and although those actors weren't

mere puppets in God's hand, God still had the final say in the matter.

This must be a wonderful comfort and encouragement for us today, especially in the time of terror in which we live. God is infinitely more resourceful than humans, and He is never caught off guard. Yes, indeed, He makes all human plans, whether bad or good, work for His purposes. This allows us to see the situation of corruption in our government and all that goes with it in a different light. Yes, of course, it's wrong! However, God allows it for a reason, and therefore, I don't need to react with anger or

hopelessness. I trust God that everything will work out according to His grand plan!

Jesus' reference to the Passover Feast in this passage is very significant. It directly links His death to it, subtly referring to Jesus as the Passover Lamb being sacrificed for the sins of the people.

In contrast to the Jewish murder plans, we see a woman who selflessly demonstrates her love for Jesus by pouring precious oil on His head. The disciples are indignant, for how many poor people might have been fed with the money from selling that oil?

We might understand their indignation, but there's actually something much deeper in their reaction: they still couldn't come to terms with Jesus' death! They are directly involved in His death as well.

Perhaps they were unwilling to walk the full path of Jesus' suffering with Him. Indeed, we see this clearly when they completely abandon Jesus in His greatest need. When Jesus says that the poor will always be with them, it's almost shocking! It doesn't make sense! However, Jesus is saying that poverty will always exist, and He's not

promising them Utopia on Earth. He emphasizes though, that while the commandment to love your neighbour is extremely important, the commandment to love God above all is indeed the first commandment. But it actually goes much deeper, as He is also saying that His crucifixion is the greatest single event in the history of creation. This woman's anointing places the seal on this significant event of His crucifixion.

Jesus' statement about the timing of His death not only sets the Jewish leaders in motion but also Judas. We can only guess at the precise reasons for his decision.

Matthew says it was greed. Perhaps he was disappointed or scared. Was he disappointed because this Messiah didn't meet his expectations? Jesus didn't free them from the Roman yoke, as he and many other Jews had expected. Was he afraid, for the only straw he could cling to was withering away?

The fact however, is that God used even Judas' betrayal in His plan, and David had already predicted this betrayal in Psalm 41:10. That's why Judas is called "one of the twelve." It doesn't make sense to condemn Judas, for it's about us! The betrayal and

denial of Jesus become a much greater reality than we'd like to admit. Peter could confirm this when, as a great disciple, he faltered that night and completely denied knowing Jesus. If for example, we remain silent when God's holy name is abused, then we're doing exactly the same as Peter and Judas...

Prayer:

Lord, please hold my hand tightly, and when it seems that the waves of the terror of violence are about to engulf me - please keep my eyes fixed on Jesus!

The Passover Meal

Matthew 26:17-25

The Passover feast has arrived. For the Jews, this was a highlight on the calendar, celebrated every year around April. It also coincided with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasted for a week and served as a reminder of the haste with which the Israelites had to leave Egypt, not even having time to let their bread rise. Remember, in those days there weren't instant yeast packets! The Passover lamb was slaughtered on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and

its blood was sprinkled on the altar. The lamb was then roasted and eaten that evening during the Passover meal. The Passover lamb symbolized God's forgiveness of sins.

This particular Passover was a very special one for Jesus and His disciples and for the disciples, it was likely a very somber occasion. Jesus specifically tells them that His time is near. He would soon die on the cross, even if He didn't explicitly spell it out for them. With this announcement, He associates the Passover feast with His death. When He dies on the

cross, He dies as the Passover Lamb for the sins of the world.

That evening, everyone is reclining peacefully at the table, eating. And then Jesus drops a bombshell: "One of you will betray me." I can only imagine what went through the minds of the men at that moment. No one suspected anything, except of course, the one who had already begun his treacherous plan!

Jesus caught them so off guard that each one began to wonder if perhaps he himself might commit this terrible deed. "Is it I, Lord?" is asked repeatedly, with shock and horror. They might have put on a

brave face in recent days, but deep inside, uncertainty about Jesus, their Master's impending death, gnawed at them. What will become of them? And now this!

"The one who dips his bread into the bowl with me, he is the one who will betray me..."

"But each one of us has dipped his bread into the bowl with Jesus at some point! Could it maybe be me?" This thought probably went through the mind of each disciple. The disciples address Jesus as "Lord," confessing that He is the Son of God. However, when Judas innocently asks the same question, whether it could be him,

he doesn't address Jesus as "Lord," but as "Rabbi," meaning "Mister" or "Teacher." This is the same form of address that Jesus' opponents used for Him. Judas' question comes across as cool and indifferent, for he knows he's guilty! Jesus' calm response, without any hatred or reproach, is simply, "You have said it." Now everyone knows.

Yet, we must not overlook the finer nuances. The fact that the other disciples also ask the question shows once again that they, too, are just humans with guilty consciences. Indirectly, each one of us can ask that

question as well. Is there perhaps betrayal of Jesus or His cause present in me? No one is automatically exempt from faithlessness. Jesus answered Judas gently, and even though he had already made a decision, there was still a chance for him to turn back - until the very end! However, Judas chose not to turn back.

Today, we might reason that poor Judas committed the dreadful betrayal because God had planned it that way! And that he was lost because of it! But Peter did almost as bad with his denial of Jesus. However, he asked for

forgiveness. And he received it! He went back and made amends where he had messed up. Judas had the same opportunity, but he threw it away himself. Yes, he had remorse, but he never sought God's forgiveness!

What made Judas so different from the other disciples? All of them were, in terms of faith, "weaklings." Later that same evening, we would see how they sleep when Jesus desperately needs their support. We see them run away when their Lord is arrested. We need to hear them completely deny ever knowing Him, and this in His greatest hour

of need. They are uncertain and fearful about what lies ahead for them. Yet, in spite of all these things, they still call Him "Lord," for their complete trust, however shaky, is in Him. Judas, on the other hand, experiences these same uncertainties and fears, but he decides to withdraw his trust from Jesus. Jesus is no longer the "Lord" he initially thought He was, and he sells Jesus out to the enemy.

There comes a time in every Christian believer's life when uncertainty, fear, and even blatant cowardice grip you. It is crucial that you continue to look to Jesus

as the only Lord, even if it seems like the end of the world has arrived. If you find yourself in that situation today and, like Judas, have decided that Jesus is no longer the Lord of your life, there is still a chance for you to turn around! Jesus' hand of love is extended to you. Seize it with all your might!

Prayer:

Lord, in the midst of storms that often rage in my life, and when uncertainty and fear threaten to engulf me, please hold my hand tightly and keep my gaze fixed only on You, for You are my Lord and my God. In You alone I trust!

Holy Communion

Matthew 26:26-30

A deathly, sacred silence descends upon the church. Each person is lost in their own thoughts. The deacons are distributing the bread. The words: "Jesus' body," run through my mind, "His body that was broken for me, tortured so that I may live!" The silence is deafening. Only a soft shuffling as the plates are passed on. Suddenly, the plate with small pieces of bread is in front of me - I was startled. With trembling hands, I take a piece. How clean and pure is the

bread! In my mind's eye, I see Jesus and His twelve disciples sitting at the table. What is going on in those men's minds? Jesus has just pointed Judas out as His betrayer. Now, He's busy with a piece of bread as if nothing has happened! No accusations, no reproaches!

"Take, eat: This is My body," His gentle voice breaks the silence. Piece by piece His body would be broken, just as it happened to the temple 45 years later. Then, not two stones were left on top of each other. They, the church leaders, would break His body until He lay dead in the grave.

The terrible loneliness would make it feel as if He is utterly abandoned - even from God!

Not one of the men realizes exactly what Jesus' words truly mean. None can fathom the horrors that await them later that night and the next day, especially for Jesus. None realize how cruelly Jesus' body would be brutalized, broken just like this piece of bread! As the bread is torn, just so would Jesus' body be torn by merciless lashes raining down on Him. My thoughts go to the movie: The Passion of The Christ, where I repeatedly see that nightmarish scene play out

before me, where pieces of flesh are ripped from His back by the metal points of the whip, until I want to scream, "Stop! Stop! That's enough!" But it goes on and on and on...

"Take, eat...", the liturgist's calm voice brings me back to the present.

Once again, a deathly silence descends as the deacons distribute the wine. My confused thoughts return to that terrible night. Jesus takes a cup of wine and gives it to the men. There is a heavy silence in the air, a silence that none of them dare break.

"Drink from it all of you, for this is

my blood..." These cruel words pierce through the men. Has the end truly arrived now? It sounds so terribly unreal, but the evidence is already there, just look at what Judas is doing!

"...the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus' voice is gentle and calm.

"What exactly does Jesus mean by this?" The men don't quite understand. Yes, if only they could foresee what would happen the next day! First, there would be the gruelling trial, the mockery, the purple robe and reed. Later, the terrible crown of thorns stuck

into His scalp so that the blood, His precious blood, would flow over His face! It would blind Him when He had to undertake that gruelling journey up the hill. Those horrible scenes from the movie haunt me again. I want to look away, but I can't! Whichever way I turn my head, the scenes remain before me! Blood flows over Jesus' torn back, and it flows over His face. Then comes the horror of the crucifixion where the soldier drives the rough iron spikes through His hands and feet. I see again my beloved Saviour's face screaming with pain and fear. I hear the vulgar laughter of the soldier taking

pleasure in his gruesome task. I hear the women's bitter wailing. I see the Pharisees and Scribes standing contentedly on the sidelines. And I see the blood freely flowing from the vile wounds in His hands and feet. My Saviour's blood. Shed for me! Shed so that my sins can be forgiven.

"Take, drink..." - the liturgist's soft voice. I pick up the small glass. The sweet red wine inside sparkles brightly. I swallow it - I feel how it burns in my throat. The sweet smell of the wine fills my mouth, my nose, my entire body, until it becomes one with me.

Jesus' blood! It is part of my whole being! It is so integrated into my life that I cannot separate from it. As the wine washes through my entire being, I feel how my sins are washed away from me.

"God has forgiven everything through Jesus' precious blood!" it resonates within me. "I am free! Free! Free!" A jubilant song wells up in me: "Praise the Lord, O my soul, praise His holy name!" I radiate with happiness because Jesus' blood has cleansed my sins!

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, thank you:

thank you for dying for me, for suffering, for taking all my sins upon yourself, and that I can now know that I have eternal life, not through my good deeds but through your great grace and love alone. Help me to serve you with my whole life out of gratitude!

Night of Horror

Matthew 26:31-46

Jesus' disciples begin to realize what is unfolding. Their Master is going to be arrested! After all, didn't they see Judas turn pale when Jesus told him he was the betrayer? They are deeply uncertain because what exactly is going to happen remains a mystery to them. But one thing is certain: they know exactly what they are going to do! Of course, they will stand by Jesus to the bitter end!

"You will all desert me tonight."

They can't believe what they are hearing! Suddenly, the men are upset. How can Jesus say such a terrible thing about them?

"But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." They don't even hear this last sentence. The accusation that they will abandon Jesus stings them to the core!

"Not me!" Peter protests, deeply hurt. "Maybe they will, but me? Never!"

"Peter, I tell you, in this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."

Now Peter is deeply disturbed! How can his Master think so

poorly of him, Peter the Rock? After all, he is the strong one, the one who is afraid of nothing! And now Jesus accuses him of such cowardice. "Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!" the others chime in with Peter. They have become so much a part of Jesus that it is inconceivable that they will ever forsake Him.

But then comes the first test, and they fail it miserably. From the upper room where they had enjoyed the Last Supper (did they really enjoy it?), they walk a long way into the night, down into the Kidron Valley, until they finally

arrive in Gethsemane, the olive press garden. It is located at the foot of the Temple Mount. It is late at night. The men are tired.

"I will go and pray," He tells the men. He has often gone to pray like this alone. "Sit here and wait for me until I am finished."

Peter, James, and John are ordered to go with Him to where He will pray. The men immediately notice that Jesus is deeply distressed and that His tears are very close. It breaks their hearts. He falls with His face to the ground and is engaged in a deep spiritual struggle with the Father. He knows exactly what

lies ahead, and humanly speaking it is absolutely impossible to go through this horror!

"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me. Nevertheless, may Your will be done."

When Jesus looks back, the three men are fast asleep. He is upset! Can't they support Him in His time of need for just one short hour? Weren't they the ones who just reacted so vigorously and said they would stand by Him through thick and thin? Jesus talks angrily to Peter - after all, he is the leader. But it doesn't help

because He has barely started praying again, when the three are already asleep!

"My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, may your will be done." Blood sweat flows down Jesus' face when He gets up. The tension is unbearable. He looks sadly at His sleeping followers. Couldn't they have made His suffering a little lighter? Couldn't they have just stayed awake with Him for this short while? He turns around and prays again, for the very last time. He has now made peace with His suffering. He feels very sorry for the men because they don't

realize the terrible time they are about to go through. They are still brave now, but soon they will be scattered.

Jesus wakes the men up: "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Look, the hour is at hand!" He tells them.

"What hour?" they may wonder, but then Jesus tells them that it's time for Him to be handed over, and that Judas is already on his way with the soldiers.

The eleven men had totally lost the first round of the terrible battle. They were so positive that they would stand by Jesus through everything, but they

couldn't even stay awake during His hour of prayer!

Often today, Jesus also asks you and me to remain faithful to Him in small things, and then it is so very difficult. Don't blame the disciples! Feel free to do some introspection in your own life, and you will see that we do exactly the same. Sometimes we feel completely lost, just as those men may have felt. This was just the beginning for them. It would get much worse! Jesus' promise to gather them back together was their comfort. He also comforts you and me, even when things seem completely lost. He is still

waiting for us at the end of the road. But even more: He walks the entire path through our trials with us. Furthermore, unlike the disciples' feeble attempt, He never abandons us for a single moment!

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, that today I can have that wonderful assurance that you are always there for me, and even though it sometimes feels like I am completely lost, you still wait with open arms for me!

Swords and Clubs!

Matthew 26:47-56

The final scene in Gethsemane is one filled with violence. A large group of people arrives with swords and clubs and seizes Jesus. However, the lasting impressions we get from the scene are not the violence but something very different.

It is pitch dark, and furthermore Jesus is not so well known in Jerusalem because His ministry was mostly in the countryside. That's why Judas arranges with the soldiers that he will identify

Jesus for them by greeting Him with a kiss. This way, they can recognize Jesus and know whom to arrest.

At that time, it was customary for Rabbis to greet each other with a kiss of peace. However, this peace kiss from Judas meant anything but peace! Jesus' response to this is very difficult to translate accurately. In the 1983 translation, we read, "Friend, do what you have come to do." The 1953 translation says, "Friend, why are you here?" The 2020 translation might be better: "Friend, do what you are here for." The intention is actually that

Jesus sees Judas's betrayal as part of God's plan of suffering for Him, and He submits to God's will. We can see this very clearly in the prayer struggle that just took place in the garden!

The question we inevitably ask is whether God was very unjust towards Judas? He is condemned to let God's will be done! The answer is, "No!" I believe that even after his betrayal, Judas had the opportunity to ask for God's forgiveness. Peter denied Jesus, but he repented and was forgiven. Judas had exactly the same opportunity, but he did not use it.

One of the disciples, Peter, takes out his sword to defend Jesus with violence. He strikes wildly at the first person who comes in his way, and the High Priest's servant suffers for it as his ear is cut off. Jesus calms him down - violence is not an option! In Matt. 5:38-42, Jesus had taught His disciples about how to handle violence, that you should not resist it but also turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile. Now Jesus practically applies what He had preached that day. He explains to them that all power is at His disposal, and it would take just a word to make the heavenly armies descend and destroy all

His enemies. However, these things must happen as written in God's plan. The cause of the Kingdom cannot be served with violence because God's Kingdom is meant to bring peace to the earth. It wants to turn hate into love. It certainly cannot be achieved through revenge. Someone must be willing to break the terrible cycle of violence, and that task squarely rests on the shoulders of us as Christian believers. Like Jesus, we as His followers must also be willing to turn the other cheek so that the greater cause of the Kingdom, God's reconciliation, can be lived out.

At that moment, however, Jesus' disciples were definitely not willing to follow this path of love. They wanted to resolve the situation with violence!

What Jesus wants to teach us here is not easy, on the contrary, it is very difficult. Just take your daily commute to the office: how many times did you get extremely angry with someone who was driving recklessly this morning? How many ugly words and vulgar gestures did you use to make your fellow road users understand exactly what you think of them? Your first reaction is to do what Peter did. Jesus' example,

however, is to calmly consider the situation and then act in love.

Jesus must have been very discouraged with the people who came to arrest Him because He had tried so hard to teach them: "Did you come out with swords and clubs as against a robber to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple area and taught, and you did not seize me." But then He explains: "But all this has taken place so that the Scriptures of the prophets would be fulfilled."

When they see that they cannot succeed, they choose the only other option: to flee into the night! The men scatter and run away.

They leave Jesus behind to walk alone on the path of torture. Much water had to flow into the sea before they would understand what Jesus had done and what He meant. Indeed, there was a great change on Pentecost. Only then were they willing to confront the Jewish Council fearlessly. When they were beaten and chained in prison, they sang hymns to God!

To live out the love that Jesus preached does not mean that you should adopt a timid attitude but rather to courageously live out God's love, no matter what the cost. However, you cannot do it

on your own but only with the inexhaustible power that the Holy Spirit gives you. And only if you walk hand in hand with Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord, I live in a world full of horrors, and there are so many things that make me want to grab my sword. Please give me that love in my heart so that I can combat violence with love, and please also give me the courage to stand firm in the midst of it all!

Guilty!

Matthew 26:57-68

After Jesus is arrested, He is taken to the house of the High Priest for His trial by the Jewish Council. Peter is the only disciple who dares to follow from a distance. When they arrive at Caiaphas' house, he even ventures inside the courtyard.

What is happening here is actually entirely illegal. We see that the trial takes place in the early morning hours. Remember, the rooster has not even crowed yet! According to Jewish law, it

was not legal to hold a trial at night, especially when the death penalty is at stake. In any case, the Jewish Council did not have the authority to definitively impose the death penalty on anyone. That was the privilege of the Roman government, and if the Jewish Council felt that someone deserved the death penalty, it had to be ratified by the Romans.

Despite the fact that the meeting is illegal, it is not just a few members of the Council who are present, but the full Jewish council. The high priest as chairman, chief priests, family heads, and scribes - the whole

shebang! The message is unequivocal: Jesus must be officially found guilty by the entire Jewish Council. They have tried in various ways to trap Him. Several so-called witnesses were summoned to testify. However, all the false witnesses failed because their stories simply did not match. Finally, they managed to find two witnesses who gave the same testimony. They claimed that Jesus had said He would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Damning testimony! But is that enough to deserve the death penalty? The high priest clearly realizes that this, on its own, is a powerful

accusation. But it has a much deeper meaning.

At that time, there was a very strong Messianic expectation among the Jews. Unfortunately, it was accompanied by many myths, such as the Messiah freeing the Jews from Roman rule. Some theologians believe that Judas betrayed Jesus to force Him to carry out this liberation action. That's why he wanted to return the money when he saw it wasn't working.

Another expectation among Jews was that the Messiah would build a new temple because of Israel's wickedness. This is why this

accusation, that Jesus would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, was so important. In other words, Jesus would claim to be the Messiah.

To the great frustration of the high priest and the Council, Jesus remains silent. He hears all the charges against Him, but He does not defend Himself at all. Therefore, the high priest asks Him directly: "Are You the Christ, the Son of God?" The question could not have been more straightforward. To this, Jesus only needed to answer "Yes" or "No."

Jesus finally breaks the silence,

and His answer sends shockwaves through the entire Jewish Council: "It is as you say!" He gives them much more than they asked for. He only had to answer "Yes," but now He continues: "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Jesus' answer is so overwhelming that the high priest tears his clothes. This is not just an emotional act. It is a prescription he had to follow when blasphemy was involved.

What exactly is Jesus saying to the Council here? He wants to

make it very clear to them that He is not just a Messiah who came to liberate the Jews. He is not just a very special Man with supernatural powers. No, He is much more than that. When these things are settled, He will sit at the right hand of God and reign. Who else can rule with such power except God alone? So, He is indirectly telling them, in clear language that each of them can understand, that He is the Almighty God! That is why the high priest and the entire Council are so terribly shocked.

I often become deeply disturbed when I see how people belittle

Jesus. How people even make jokes about Him or misuse His holy name as a curse word. Yes, you can certainly expect that from an unbeliever because they have no part in Jesus. However, it becomes much worse for me when a believer starts to belittle Jesus. Often, believers want to see Jesus as someone who is there only to meet their needs. When things start to get tough, Jesus is invoked to come up with a quick solution.

Indeed, He is always there for us as believers. However, we must never, ever forget who He really is. He is the Almighty God, the

Creator and Saviour. He is the Holy One!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I worship You as God, Creator, and Saviour. You are the Holy One!

Peter's Fall

Matthew 26:69-75

The scene now shifts from Jesus' trial to Peter. He is the only "brave" disciple who dares to stay near the trial after following the soldiers at a safe distance. Although he is the one who had the courage to stay close to Jesus, everything is not as it seems. A deep chasm has opened between him and his Lord, one that he dug himself through his fear and uncertainty. This was the part of his history he would later desperately wish he could rewrite! These were surely

the darkest moments of his life!

In the courtyard, Peter sits with a tight knot in his stomach. He strains his ears to try and hear what's going on inside. He feels ashamed of his earlier actions that evening and those of his companions. After all of them had unequivocally declared that they would stand by Jesus through thick and thin, they all scattered and ran away when they saw the soldiers. How could they be so cowardly? Now, Peter is at least trying to "attend" the trial.

It's bitterly cold, and Peter pulls his cloak over his head to try to endure the cold a bit. A servant

girl comes running out and suddenly stops to look at Peter a second time. He feels her eyes burning into him. He pulls the cloth even lower over his face. They must not recognize him here!

"You were also with Jesus the Galilean!" Suddenly, a silence falls, and all heads turn toward the hunched figure hiding under the cloth.

Peter gives a nervous laugh: "No, you must be mistaken. I don't know what you're talking about!" He feels his heart pounding in his throat, and he turns deathly pale. The girl shakes her head and

walks away. Anxious, Peter stands up and heads towards the courtyard's exit. That was a close call!

Suddenly, another servant girl stands right next to him: "Hey, all of you! This man was definitely with that Jesus of Nazareth! I recognize him!"

Peter gets furious with anger at the snitch: "I don't know the man! Do you hear me? I don't know Him!" He curses emphatically, expressing his displeasure. How far can a person fall! Peter received the highest honour any disciple could dream of, confessing the true identity of

Jesus on behalf of the church. Then that same Peter falls into the deepest, darkest pit of denial. Just hours ago, Peter had been so self-assured, saying, "Maybe they will, but certainly not I...". Peter had to learn in a very hard way about a person's absolute dependence on God. If you rely on yourself, you might fall very far and very hard...

However, if you truly love Jesus, you won't fall out of His grace. There is the possibility of restoration. Peter and the other disciples discovered this when they later received Jesus' command (Matthew 28:16-20)

and truly lived it out.

The contrast we see in this story is astonishing: while Peter is in the process of denying Jesus and openly avoiding mentioning Jesus' name, Jesus is acting on behalf of Peter and all believers, confessing on behalf of all of them to official Judaism that He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Our own confession is not unimportant, but ultimately, it is Jesus' confession on our behalf that matters most. What is also very important is Peter's bitter repentance after his terrible fall. It was genuine repentance, and it

ultimately led to him truly working to correct the situation. Later, we see him testifying about Jesus before that same Jewish Council. This time, he doesn't hesitate for a moment to admit that he intimately knows Jesus. Judas also had remorse, but he handled it completely differently, but we will talk about that in the next devotional.

But what does this mean for you and me? Yes, perhaps there are also great sins in our past, where we too have shamefully denied Jesus. People often ask me if the Lord would ever forgive such great sins? And the answer is

unequivocal: "YES!" Read Isaiah 1:18 again, where the Lord emphasizes that He will cleanse even the worst sins. If He could forgive Peter and help him become a powerful witness, it is certainly also possible for you and me! He paid the FULL price on Golgotha!

Prayer:

Lord, like Peter, I often fall, especially when I try to do things in my own strength. Please help me to place all my trust in You alone, and when I fall one day, may I take Your hand to lift me up!

Regret - Too Late?

Matthew 27:1-10

It was early morning when the Jewish Council finished with Jesus. Well, actually, they hadn't finished at all! They had Him bound like a dangerous criminal and taken to the procurator, Pilate's palace, about a kilometer away. They had decided that He must die, and Pilate had to merely endorse it.

In the meantime, Judas began to realize that this terrible betrayal of his was wrong. What made him change his mind? He must have

known that he had handed Jesus over innocently! He felt remorse for his despicable act, and so he tried to make amends by returning the money that the Jewish Council had paid him for his betrayal. However, they refused to accept it, so then he did a strange thing: he threw the money into the temple!

To understand this action, we need to look at its origin. When someone had entered into a transaction, possibly selling property and later realized it was a mistake, they would attempt to undo the transaction. It might have been ancestral land he

wanted back. If the other party refused to undo the transaction, he would throw the money into the temple, hoping this act might change the buyer's mind.

In this way, Judas hoped to bring about a change of heart in the Jewish Council. His conscience tormented him bitterly. But their hearts were as hard as stone. They had only one thing on their minds - to remove Jesus from their lives forever! They had no sympathy for a traitor's remorse! For Judas, all was lost. He simply couldn't live with this heinous act of his, and so he took the terrible way out by hanging himself!

According to Deuteronomy 23:18, "sin money" could not be accepted in the temple. Judas's bribe money was seen as such, and therefore it could not be used for temple service. Thus, the potter's field was purchased with it. Zechariah had already prophesied many years earlier about the absurdly low price the Lord was valued at (Zech. 11:12,13)!

Some theologians believe that Judas didn't actually want Jesus dead. He might have been one of those hoping that Jesus, the Messiah, would come and liberate Israel from the Romans.

When he finally realized that it wasn't going to happen, he decided to force Jesus in a certain direction. If he betrayed Jesus now and the church leaders arrested Him, Jesus would take action and begin the liberation struggle. However, that didn't happen, and suddenly he saw that his plan was failing because Jesus didn't resist. Therefore, he tried to undo his deed, but it was already too late...

However, this is just a theory, and we can only speculate about it.

We despise Judas because he is seen as the greatest sinner ever. However, Peter is revered as the

father of the church. What is the big difference between them? On the night of Jesus' trial, Judas betrayed Jesus. It was a despicable act! On the same night, Peter denied Jesus. He vehemently denied ever knowing Jesus. He even cursed and swore to make it clear. It was just as despicable an act! Judas felt bitter remorse for his act, and so did Peter. Judas's act was not worse than Peter's. So what's the difference? Judas chose to go his own way and seek a solution for his sin himself. Ending his life would forever solve his problem, at least that's what he thought. He was very wrong. Peter's remorse

led him back to Jesus. He realized he couldn't fix this thing on his own and sought God's forgiveness. He was willing to give the Holy Spirit a chance to take over and transform his life.

Paul walked the same path, and although he was an unrelenting persecutor of the church and wrongly imprisoned innocent Christians, he repented of his actions and became the greatest missionary ever!

Do you perhaps think this morning that your sins are so great that they are unforgivable? That God will never forgive you for them? Judas, Peter, and

Paul's sins were equally great. God stood waiting with open arms for all three of them. Peter and Paul said "YES" to God's offer of grace. Judas turned away from it. What is the "unforgivable sin"? Saying "NO" when God extends His hand of grace to you. Judas experienced that. Even for the Jewish Council, there was still a time of grace! If you have not yet accepted God's offer, there is also grace time for you this morning. For Judas, it was gone in the blink of an eye! Just as God's grace time can pass by in the blink of an eye for you too! Make the decision now, before it may be forever too late.

Prayer:

Gracious Father, thank you for saving me in time from the clutches of eternal destruction because You are merciful.

Or... Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. I have heard Your plea and today I surrender my life to You!

Jesus Barabbas or Jesus Christ?

Matthew 27:11-26

Under Roman rule, the Jewish Council couldn't impose the death penalty. If they wanted to condemn someone to death, they had to make a request to the Roman government, which would then decide whether to grant their request. That's why Jesus was brought to Pilate in the early morning hours. He served as the governor or procurator of Rome from AD 26 to 36, and the final decision rested with him. He was widely regarded as a fair and just

judge.

For Pilate, this was an extremely difficult case. Among all the accusations brought against Jesus by the Jewish Council, he couldn't see anything that would make Jesus guilty of any crime under Roman law. Moreover, Jesus maintained silence and didn't even attempt to defend Himself against all the charges. However, this was not passive resistance. There were three main reasons for His silence. It demonstrated His complete trust in God. He also knew that it was an integral part of God's great plan that He be condemned to

death, and it wouldn't make sense to try to defend Himself. Furthermore, this trial was part of His suffering.

In Jesus' silence, we recognize the Servant of the Lord who fulfilled His mission of suffering without complaint or protest. But at the same time, we also see in it Jesus' Royal dignity. The only question to which Jesus responded was when Pilate asked Him if He was the King of the Jews. He answered in the affirmative. Indeed, He wasn't only the King of the Jews but the King over the entire universe, personally created by Him from

nothing!

This concept of kingship further underscores Jesus' high status when Pilate tries to secure Jesus' release by offering to substitute Him with another prisoner, the notorious Jesus Barabbas. There's a very interesting wordplay here: not only are their first names the same, but the name Barabbas literally means "son of a father." Jesus Barabbas, who had sullied his father's name with his crime, is the son of an earthly father. In contrast, Jesus Christ is the Son of the Almighty God the Father. Barabbas is in no way worthy of that title, but

through His innocence, we see that Jesus Christ is the Righteous One par excellence. He represents the perfect image of the Father in heaven.

Pilate's wife's dream also plays a very important role. Dreams had a special revelatory function in Matthew, emphasizing God's perspective in the story. Through this dream, God personally affirms Jesus' innocence. We can see similar instances of the significance of dreams in Matthew in Matthew 1:20, 2:12-13, and 2:19.

Jesus' total innocence is further confirmed when Pilate declares

twice that Jesus is innocent. In Matthew 27:23, we see that he finds no fault in Jesus. In verse 24, we see him symbolically washing his hands, signifying that an innocent Man is being handed over. There was a similar Old Testament ritual described in Deuteronomy 21:1-8. With this act, Pilate places full responsibility for Jesus' death on the Jews. Their response to this is chilling. The Jewish leaders accept full responsibility on behalf of the entire people and their descendants. They also accept any consequences that would come with their actions, whether good or bad. Moreover, they

accept this responsibility on behalf of their children as well.

What they did was a terrible thing. The punishment that the Jews invoke upon themselves with these words is the loss of their status as the people of God. From now on, this status belongs exclusively to all believers. Another aspect of this punishment is likely the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. However, we must not conclude from this punishment that the Jews as a people will forever pay for Jesus' death. It contradicts the atoning work of Jesus, which was offered for all

who accept Him, even believing Jews.

Today, the sword of eternal punishment still hangs over the head of anyone who disregards Jesus' atoning death. Anyone who has not become part of God's new people by accepting Jesus as the only Saviour will endure eternal (terrifying!) punishment. On the other hand, the flip side of the matter is also true: if you believe in the Son, you have eternal, blessed life (John 3:16). John 3:18 confirms this statement: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is

condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that this morning I can testify that with my whole heart, soul, and body, I believe in You as the only Son of God the Father, and that I need not fear eternal punishment but that You have also granted me eternal life out of Your great grace!

Mocked

Matthew 27:26-31

Pilate had Jesus scourged. It was a horrifying punishment! The instrument used for this was a stick with three leather straps, each of which had pieces of iron or tin attached to them. The person being scourged was mercilessly struck with this.

The loud cracking sound that a whip makes when you snap it is caused by the tip of the whip breaking the sound barrier. This gives you an idea of how fast that tip moves. The points of the

scourge moved somewhat slower due to the pieces of metal, but they still moved very quickly.

So, the pieces of metal would have lacerated the skin of the person being scourged and torn pieces of flesh from them, something extremely gruesome. According to Jewish law, a person was never to receive more than forty lashes with such a scourge, so they administered 39 lashes to ensure they didn't accidentally exceed 40. In the movie "The Passion of the Christ," this terrible punishment is graphically depicted, so much so that you might want to close your eyes to

avoid witnessing this bloody torture further.

However, this was just the beginning of the terrible suffering that Jesus had to endure. After this, it was the soldiers' turn. Matthew says that a whole battalion was gathered. This was just his way of saying that there were a large number of soldiers gathered because such a unit would consist of between 600 and 1000 soldiers. These men were bored, and this little excitement was, of course, great fun for them. They put a purple robe on Jesus' battered shoulders. This was the typical Hellenistic royal

attire. A crown and sceptre complete a king's attire, hence the crown of thorns and the reed that served as a sceptre. Then of course, came the customary mockery: "Hail, King of the Jews," followed by a deep, mocking bow.

The crown of thorns burned deeply and painfully into His scalp, causing blood to flow down His face. And while He writhed in pain, the soldiers mocked Him with the reed they had placed in His hand as a sceptre. And then, the mocking soldiers who were supposed to be His troops. Every king has an army, right...?

How terribly ironic! Indeed, He is

the King of the Jews - and of these soldiers! Yes, of the whole world. Even more than that, He is the King of the entire creation, of which this world is just a tiny speck! What's more, He also wears royal garments (Matthew 17:2) and a crown (Revelation 14:14). In His hand, He holds a sceptre (Hebrews 1:8), and He sits on a royal throne (Matthew 19:28). Moreover, He has an army at His disposal (Matthew 26:53), and all power belongs to Him, not only earthly power but over the entire universe (Matthew 28:18). However, His Kingship is not of this world (John 18:36), and His rule is one of love and

righteousness, unlike that of all other kings!

The King we see here, while the soldiers mock Him will ultimately rule over all. But first, there is a very important task that must be accomplished because this righteousness must be bought at a very high price with His blood. Therefore, He is now the suffering King and is spit upon, mocked, beaten and crucified. Listen to what Isaiah says about Him:

"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of suffering, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised, and we

esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

This gripping account of the Messiah's terrible suffering was written more than 500 years before Jesus' birth. Yet it feels

fresh, as if it were a newspaper report of something that was happening at that very moment. Jesus' terrible suffering took place 2000 years ago, yet it is still fresh today. It feels as if we are in the midst of these dreadful events, and we can now hear the roaring crowd shouting, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Indeed, it is very fresh because what happened that day has a direct impact on me and you today. Furthermore, Isaiah's words from 500 years earlier still bring healing to me and you today!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, it pains me deeply when I think about the terrible suffering You had to endure so that I may taste eternal life. Make me genuinely grateful today for Your great sacrifice, and help me to live out this gratitude with my whole heart, soul, and body!

Jesus is Crucified

Matthew 27:32-44

What is the greatest event in all of human history? Some might say it was the devastating flood that wiped out the entire human race, except for the few that survived in Noah's ark. Others might argue that it was World War II because it profoundly altered the course of human existence. Someone might even suggest that it was the day the first person walked on the moon because humanity conquered the heavens that day. Even events like September 11th and the tsunamis of a few years

ago could be considered. However, someone who thinks clearly would likely say that it was the birth of Jesus. The arrival of Jesus in the world can certainly be seen as a momentous event!

The single greatest and most far-reaching event in all of human history though, took place 33 years later. It was the events that occurred on a little hill called Golgotha, which happened two thousand years ago. At first glance, it was just an ordinary event where a few criminals were executed. It was a common occurrence in that era. However, the shockwaves of that one

execution are still keenly felt today, two thousand years later, as if it had just occurred!

After Jesus had been scourged, mocked, and beaten, His strength was depleted. He could barely walk. There was however, still a full kilometer of steep ascent ahead to the top of Golgotha hill, where the execution would take place. Criminals were required to carry their own crosses, or rather the heavy crossbeam of the cross, up the hill. Jesus was so weak at this point that He was unable to carry it. Therefore, the soldiers commanded Simon, likely a proselyte from the city of

Cyrene in present-day Libya, North Africa, to carry Jesus' cross. He was just in town for the Passover festival, and now he had no choice but to become part of Jesus' crucifixion. When a Roman soldier orders you to do something, you dare not refuse!

This was probably the longest kilometer in the history of the world. Every year, during the Passover festival, millions of people still walk this path as a pilgrimage, the arduous final kilometer of Jesus as a (mere) human on earth. In front of Him loomed the dreadful "Place of the Skull," and He knew that the

greatest torture ever awaited Him there. The soldiers offered Him a sour wine mixed with gall to drink. He refused this sarcastic act of "mercy." Was it out of callousness and contempt that they wanted to give it to Him? Compare this with Psalm 69:22, where the suffering one asks for food and water and receives poison and vinegar. Did they give Jesus gall to worsen His suffering? Or perhaps it was a drug given out of pity for Him? We can only guess!

Then comes further humiliation as His clothes are stripped from His body, and He has to stand there in shame, naked before all the

people. His clothes were divided as spoils among the soldiers.

What terrible anguish must have gone through Jesus' soul as the man with the hammer and nails approached. With a grimace on his rough face, the soldier took a rough iron spike, and it was ruthlessly driven through Jesus' hand into the cross. It wasn't through His palm, as we traditionally see in pictures, but through His wrists, making the torture worse. He writhed in unbearable pain, but there was no mercy. Once the hand was properly fixed, His other hand was nailed, and then His feet.

Can you imagine the excruciating pain as a rough iron spike was driven through your feet? Blood flowed from the wounds. His scalp burned like fire from the poison of the crown of thorns that tormented Him. His back was one big raw wound, with pieces of flesh torn out by the scourging. In this way, tortured to death, Jesus was lifted up on the cross. He was mocked and jeered at, even by the other crucified criminals.

But there was further humiliation: He was not alone there, but He was crucified between two criminals, two robbers. Did the soldiers want to say with this that

He was the King of the sinners, the criminals? After all, there was a sign nailed to His cross that said He was the King of the Jews.

How ironic it is that this is where He belongs, among sinners. He came specifically to suffer and die for sinners. How many times did He in His life feast with sinners, the despised, the outcasts! Would He want anything different now, in His final hour? The soldiers had played directly into God's hands in every detail.

However, these horrifying events were just the prelude to the greatest horror ever awaiting Jesus. We'll read about it on

Monday.

Prayer:

Lord, I weep this morning as I conjure up the images in my mind of the terrible suffering You had to endure there on Golgotha - all for me, Lord, so that I may escape the terrible punishment of hell!

God Forsaken by God

Matthew 27:45-56

From all sides, Jesus is mocked, insulted, jeered - by the soldiers, the Jewish leaders, the crowd, even His fellow crucified ones. This goes on until it crescendos in Him crying out that He is completely forsaken. Where are His disciples? Where are the vast crowds who hung on His every word as He preached day after day? Where are the thousands of grateful people He healed of their ailments? There is no one! Except for a few women standing at a distance, weeping. Where is His

confidant, Peter? And His friend John, the one whom He loved? Where have they all gone? And where is God...? (In John 19, there is mention of one disciple who was there, likely John.)

Jesus cries out, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" - My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?

This is a quotation from Psalm 22. This poignant Psalm that David wrote long ago is now applied word for word to Jesus' life. How did David know? "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me, and why are You so far from saving me?... I am scorned by everyone and despised by the

people who see me..."

How should we understand these poignant words of Jesus? Did God truly forsake Him? Is Jesus experiencing, in these moments, the punishment of God-forsakenness on behalf of all humanity for their sins? How can Christ, who is God Himself, be forsaken by God? These are questions that swirl through your mind when you read this passage. Can we ever understand it?

I don't think our simple human minds will ever grasp the immense scope and complexity of those words! We can only

vaguely guess at their meaning. We don't have to feel alone in our search for an answer because even the great theologian Martin Luther tried to articulate this mystery when he asked, "God forsaken by God, who can understand it?"

However, our text doesn't speculate on these kinds of questions. Let's look at Psalm 22, from which these words are quoted. First of all, it is a believer from the Old Covenant (David) complaining to God about the mistreatment he is receiving from his fellow countrymen. Furthermore, we see that the

Psalmist still clings to God, despite his God-forsakenness. The same can be seen in Jesus, who continues to address God as "My God," even though He feels that God has utterly forsaken Him. The fact that Matthew so generously uses Psalm 22 in this entire passage shows that we can apply Psalm 22 to the entire life of Jesus. Consider, for example, the last part of the Psalm where the psalmist ends with a confession that God has answered his prayer. If we apply this to Jesus, it points to His resurrection, where God vindicated Him. God heard Jesus' cry and gave Him back His life.

The other events of the day that Matthew describes are heart-wrenching. Jesus' death is filled with so much meaning that simultaneous unnatural natural phenomena occur. First, there is a terrifying darkness that falls over every one. In the middle of the day, it becomes pitch-dark. Shortly thereafter, a tremendous earthquake shakes the earth, causing rocks to break. Along with this, there is a real shocker as several tombs open, and believers who had long been dead are raised from the dead!

This almost makes you think of Ezekiel's vision of the valley full of

dry bones coming to life (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Could Ezekiel's vision also have been a prediction of what would happen that day? When all these things happen, even hardened soldiers, the same soldiers who had just mocked Jesus and even their officer, confess that Jesus is truly the Son of God. At the foot of the cross, the new people of God awaken.

A great "disaster" strikes the temple. The veil of the temple is torn from top to bottom. This was the heavy curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. And no, this curtain was

not torn by human hands, and even less was it torn due to the earthquake or some other natural cause. The veil was torn by God Himself, from top to bottom. The old covenant was now definitively over. It not only meant that the temple was no longer the central place of worship, but everything that God had separated from humanity was now gone! There is suddenly an unobstructed view right into the Most Holy Place! It is no longer only the high priest who could enter this sanctuary once a year. The path to God is now wide open, and everyone has free access to God at all times through the death of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, there is life through Jesus' death!

Prayer:

Lord, we cannot even begin to understand everything that happened on Golgotha that day. Nevertheless, it is enough for us to know that we have received eternal life through the events at the cross. Thank You for that incredible sacrifice You made that day so that we could receive forgiveness for our sins!

Jesus' Burial

Matthew 27:57-66

Jesus has died - He blew out His last breath! The other Gospels describe how the soldier thrust a spear into His side to make absolutely certain that He died. For Matthew, it's not even necessary to describe it. Everyone knew that He was dead.

Now, the horror of the cross is finally over. All the mockery, hatred, and torture is over! Jesus died a dishonourable death, treated like a criminal who had to

die on a cursed tree. According to Galatians 3:13, anyone who hangs on a tree is cursed! He had to hang there in shame, naked in front of everyone, cursed by the religious leaders, cursed by the people. Cursed by God? Do we dare to say that?

But then Jesus receives an honourable burial in a new rich man's tomb. According to Jewish custom, a body had to be buried before sundown. The day was already far advanced, and there was a rush to arrange everything on time.

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man and certainly

influential. He had the courage and boldness to go and talk to Pilate about Jesus' burial. This put him at risk of incurring the wrath of the Jewish Council.

Pilate agreed to let Joseph take the body, and Jesus' naked body was wrapped in linen cloths and placed in Joseph's tomb. In doing so, he paid his last respects to Him. None of Jesus' disciples were anywhere nearby! They had all deserted Him, and the task fell to Joseph to do everything on his own. Yes, there were two women sitting and watching what Joseph was doing, but even they did nothing to help, just sat there in

front of the tomb.

Indeed, God provided once again at the right time. When there was no one who had the courage to take care of Jesus' body, He sent Joseph, the only man who had both the courage and the means to carry out the task. We shouldn't judge Jesus' disciples too quickly for this. Remember, they were confused, terrified, and crushed. Their whole world had collapsed, and they didn't know which way to turn. Perhaps you and I would have done exactly the same. Peter at least tried, and he managed to attend the proceedings for a while, but then

he also fell hard. So, Joseph was God's answer to give His Son, Jesus, an honourable and dignified burial. This marks the first step in the glorification of Jesus.

But not everything was kosher. The Jewish Council quickly got wind of Joseph's plans, and they saw danger lights flashing. The disciples might steal Jesus' body! Then they could claim that Jesus had truly risen, just as He had said! If they managed to pull it off, they could potentially incite the whole population! No, that definitely couldn't happen! They had to quickly devise a plan to

thwart everything!

The next day, Saturday, or the Sabbath day, they went to Pilate to explain their dilemma. He agreed to give them a guard to seal the tomb and keep watch day and night. How ironic that these men who were so meticulous about observing the Sabbath were now so desperate that they suddenly had no problem working on the Sabbath! They wanted to put Jesus to death because He had healed someone on the Sabbath, and now they were doing much worse things on the Sabbath! However, it's even more ironic that with this

action of theirs, they cut their own throats and played right into God's hands. The mere fact that they themselves sealed the tomb, moreover, with the governor's seal and guarded it with Roman soldiers under their supervision, eliminated any possibility of deception regarding Jesus' resurrection.

There may be a touch of divine humour involved here because it is laughable. The Jews took all precautions against the poor, frightened disciples and completely forgot that they were dealing with the Almighty God Himself! Such measures against

Him are absolutely laughable! Moreover, they sabotaged themselves because the entire situation was under their jurisdiction, and if anything went wrong, no one else could be blamed but themselves!

Now, the stage was set for the great event, and the universe was bursting with excitement! Easter Sunday was almost here!

Jesus' suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection are all interconnected. You should never focus solely on the cross because without the death and resurrection, the crucifixion would also be meaningless. Indeed, it's

the same with your own life: everything you may experience on Earth is entirely meaningless if there is no resurrection and life after death. That new life is truly the pinnacle of your entire existence! Your struggles on Earth are just the beginning of everything.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can look forward to a wonderful eternal life in glory. Thank you that today I can be assured that Jesus did not remain in the grave, despite the Jews' efforts, but that He went ahead to prepare a place for me in the wonderful bliss of heaven!

He Truly Has Risen!

Matthew 28:1-15

We have reached the last chapter of Matthew. It may be the last chapter in his story, but certainly not the end! At the same time, it is also the first chapter of a brand-new story. This is a story of exuberant joy, life, and a future without limits!

It's early Sunday morning. The long and bitter Sabbath is over, and the two Mary's are on their way to the tomb to take care of things. Jesus was buried so hastily on Friday afternoon before

the Sabbath began that there wasn't even time to say a proper goodbye. Are they going to the tomb now to bid farewell?

Suddenly, they are brought to a halt as the earth shakes beneath their feet. They are frightened – what could it mean? This is the second earthquake they've felt in three days. The previous one happened when their Master, Jesus died. That was definitely a divine occurrence! Could this second shaking be one as well? Terrified and with hearts pounding, they hurry on towards the tomb as the tremors subside. Did something terrible happen?

When the two women reach the tomb, they are shocked for the second time that morning. What they find there fills them with amazement and horror. The stone covering the tomb's entrance has been rolled away. Who would have done such a terrible thing? However, it's not the open tomb that disturbs them the most. It's the "man" sitting on the stone! This is not a human being! His face shines so brightly that they cannot look him in the eye. His entire form is like lightning, and his clothes are dazzling white. They have never seen anything like this! The two poor women tremble with fear and their knees

turn to jelly. But then a comforting voice from the "man" says, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified." He then begins to tell them in a reassuring voice that Jesus has risen from the dead, just as He had told them on various occasions. Slowly, it dawns on the two women that this is not a man at all but indeed an angel! He invites them to look at the place where Jesus lay. The tomb is empty!

The women can't believe what they see: "Then everything is true!" The angel tells them to go quickly and tell the others that

Jesus has risen. The two women are trembling with fear but also with joy. "Jesus lives! Jesus lives!" They are bubbling over with joy! They run as fast as their feet can carry them, and their fluttering robes allow, to proclaim this wonderful news to the discouraged disciples. "Jesus lives! Our Lord lives!"

Before they can reach the disciples, they are stopped in their tracks. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Jesus stands before them. For the third time that morning, they turn ashen with fear. Once they recover from the shock, they run towards Him and

grab His feet while kneeling before Him, worshipping. "Oh, what joy! Oh, what happiness!" They are now completely confused. They don't know how to handle this. Everything looks so unreal! "Do not be afraid," Jesus calms them. "Go tell My brothers to go to Galilee - there they will see Me."

The two women run away, jumping for joy. I can only imagine the scene when they arrive where the others are. How they must have chattered to convey the news, with all the questions and excitement!

But there's another side to the

story, one of darkness and ominous things. When the angel appeared at the tomb early that morning, the soldiers on guard were still standing calmly at their posts. Then the earth shook! While they were still full of fear, wondering about this terrifying "natural phenomenon," the angel appeared right in front of them - shining brightly and frightening. They were so shocked that they "became like dead men!" Later, when they recovered and saw the damage, they rushed to the Jewish leaders and told them what had happened. The men were greatly disturbed! They couldn't explain what had actually

occurred! Out of desperation, they paid the guards to spread the story that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body!

No one saw Jesus rise, not the guards because they had fallen like dead men, nor the women because they were still on their way. The only "evidence" was the empty tomb and, of course, the appearance of Jesus. However, He only appears to believers. No unbeliever ever sees Him! Did Jesus really rise? Isn't it just a fabrication? Indeed, it is a physical reality, just like the empty tomb and the women holding His feet. However, these are not

proofs of His resurrection but signs that must be embraced in faith. Ultimately, the Jews got the sign they had asked for, but it did not lead them to faith. The question is whether it has led you to faith.....?

Prayer:

I rejoice and exult this morning, Lord, because You live! You have truly risen! You are my King and my Lord!

Sent Out

Matthew 28:16-20

More than a hundred devotionals ago, we started with Matthew. It took exactly five months to work through this precious book of the Bible and personally, I have been greatly enriched. The Lord has been good to me, and all praise and thanks to Him alone, who provided me with the daily devotionals to write. Now we have reached the end of this incredibly inspiring book and I want to thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to share it with you. Thank you also to

everyone who has shared it further!

In the final verses of Matthew's inspiring book, we find ourselves on a mountain in Galilee with the eleven disciples. Jesus sent them there, and they can sense that something very significant is about to happen. Then suddenly, Jesus appears, and they immediately worship Him as the Risen Lord. Although Jesus has appeared to them several times already, they just can't get used to the idea that Jesus has truly risen! However, they are well aware that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and this is truly a

wonderful divine manifestation, so they worship Him! Faithlessness is a significant danger for this group, and although they see Jesus, not everyone believes completely. Seeing is not necessarily believing! Perhaps it's quite the opposite: believing is seeing and doing!

Jesus, for the last time, makes a final announcement to the eleven: an authorization, a command, and a promise. We have seen over the past five months that Jesus had authority from the Father. Here He confirms it once again when He tells His followers that all authority in heaven and on

earth has been given to Him! It is therefore, with full authority that He now gives them a command! His command includes four things: to go, to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach. In short, the Great Commission.

So, the command is firstly to go into the wide world and establish the gospel of Jesus Christ worldwide. At the same time, they must administer the sacrament of baptism to the new believers. They must then provide training to these new believers so that they can do the same, but also to do everything that Jesus has taught them. When Jesus says,

"make disciples," the intention is not only to lead people to Jesus. However, it is essential that these converts be trained in such a way that they will become true disciples who, in turn, will go out to recruit and train workers for the Kingdom.

Then Jesus gives them an amazing promise that He will be with them until the end of the world!

Today, two thousand years later, the Church has experienced many setbacks. Islam is trying hard to gorge the Church; Hinduism proclaims that it doesn't matter which God you serve and

that Jesus can be worshipped along with all the others. Buddhism claims that you don't even need a God, as long as you live a good life. And so we can go on. There are more than a thousand different religions worldwide. Despite all these setbacks, the Church of Jesus Christ has grown to become the largest of all religions.

It all started with a small handful of followers who were willing despite their unbelief and inadequacy. Jesus gave them the necessary faith, and the Holy Spirit equipped them. The great secret was that these converts

did not just come to worship but were also trained to do that mission with great zeal, equipped by the same Holy Spirit. Most Christians today have become "lazy" and just sit like sponges, absorbing all the good things that come their way. However, Jesus' command to you this morning is to get involved.

But how? How can I also become a "sent one"?

Send these devotionals to others, or if it's difficult, send me the addresses and I will send them on your behalf. Thank you very much to everyone who regularly sends me addresses of new

subscribers to the devotionals. Get involved with a mission organization like Open Doors, the Macedonia Project, the Christian Seafarers' organization, or wherever the Spirit leads you. Live out Jesus' love in your daily life. Get involved in your own congregation. Encourage your congregation to get involved in mission work if they are not already. Be creative! If you are willing, opportunities and doors will open up for you.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I make myself available to You today. Please show me where You want to send

me or how You want to use me.
Thank You for that wonderful
promise that You will be with me
forever and always!