

Student Guide



Questions Jesus Asked

An exploration of Luke

Bible Study Lessons
for Christians involved with
God's redemptive efforts
in the world

Acacia Resources - a division of Baptist Center for Ethics
4219 Hillsboro Road, Suite 210
Nashville, Tennessee 37215
Phone: 615-383-3192 Fax: 615-383-0915
Web site: www.ethicsdaily.com

© Baptist Center for Ethics 2001

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from Baptist Center for Ethics, 4219 Hillsboro Road, Suite 210, Nashville, Tennessee 37215.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) of the Bible copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Those marked NIV are from *The Holy Bible*, New International Version copyright 1978 by International Bible Society, Zondervan Bible Publishers. Those marked KJV are from *The Holy Bible*, King James Version. Those marked *Cotton Patch Version* are from Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version*, Association Press, New York, copyright 1968, 1969.

The Baptist Center for Ethics is a free-standing network of trained ethicists, ministers and educators, providing resources and services to congregations, clergy and educational institutions.

BCE is a pro-ethics voice for thoughtful moral reflection and practical solutions to real problems.

For more information about Acacia Resources, call 800-469-4223 or visit our Web site at www.ethicsdaily.com.

Questions Jesus Asked leader guides are also available.

Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's curriculum initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to the family, the diversity within families and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Today's acacia tree is known for its ...



Value

Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Diversity

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America.

Durability

The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

Table of Contents

3	Preface
4	Why Were You Searching for Me?
7	Is It Lawful to Do Good on the Sabbath?
10	What Credit Is It to You to Love Those Who Love You?
13	Why Do You See the Speck in Your Neighbor's Eye?
16	Why Don't You Do What I Tell You?
19	Where Is Your Faith?
22	Who Do You Say I Am?
25	Who Is Your Neighbor?
28	Didn't God Make Both the Inside and the Outside?
31	What Is the Kingdom of God Like?
34	What Is Faithful Stewardship?
37	Does Obedience Demand Praise?
40	What Do You Owe the Government?

Preface

Jesus challenged the prevailing religious practices of his day with probing, knotty questions.

He questioned the observance of the Sabbath with its hyper-commitment to legalism over meeting human needs. He asked about the self-righteous judgmentalism that looked for minor faults in others and overlooked one's own major flaws. He confronted the religious community's narrow definition of neighbor that limited social responsibility. He scrutinized the relationship between God and the state. He wondered aloud about a host of issues.

Sometimes, Jesus' questions stung those closest to him—his family and disciples. At other times, his questions reframed the way his religious opponents thought about issues, sharply forcing them to rethink their traditions and values.

Jesus asked over 50 questions, according to Luke. At age 12, Jesus was in the temple "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (Lk 2:46). At the end of Luke's account, Jesus left those on the Emmaus road questioning their burning hearts (Lk 24:32).

He also questioned the troubled hearts of those disciples in Jerusalem (v. 38).

Clearly, Jesus used the strategy of questioning as a form of learning and teaching about matters of faith and practice.

We, too, would do well to embrace Jesus' approach to discernment. If Jesus is truly our criterion for interpreting the Bible, then would we not profit from studying his questions and understanding his answers? Of course, the answer is yes. The more we understand about Jesus, the more likely we are to understand the biblical witness and our mission as disciples.

But not only must we ask and explore Jesus' questions, we must also practice his approach to life with our own questions.

Indeed, many Christians wear WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets. They ask themselves and others what Jesus would have them do in different circumstances. As questioners, they walk in his footsteps, carrying one of Jesus' symbols—the question mark.


Unfortunately, some within the Christian community are fearful of the questioners. They do not trust the process of questioning. They frown on those who question the traditional

interpretation of the Bible and inquire about traditional religious practices. The religious establishment prefers the control of the imperative to the uncertainty of the interrogative.

While the biblical witness offers many imperatives of faith, it never banishes the interrogative.

As pilgrims in the midst of cultural conflict and transition, we must keep the question mark ever with us. After all, asking the right questions may determine how we think, when we speak, where we go and what we do.

Through 13 questions, this undated curriculum series examines some of Jesus' questions closely related to discipleship. We hope these lessons enrich Christian discourse and advance discernment. We also hope that a focus on Jesus' commitment to the question mark will encourage others to question how they live out their faith.

So, what are the questions Jesus asked? Are you ready to explore them? 

Robert M. Parham is BCE's executive director. He and his wife, Betsy, have two teenage children.



Why Were You Searching for Me?

Luke 2:41–51

“Why were you searching for me?”
—Luke 2:49

Each Christmas, a certain city erected a nativity scene in the town square. Sadly, vandals regularly trashed the tranquil scene. Among other things, the baby Jesus often disappeared. Joseph was left standing, looking somber and holy, while Mary sat with her radiant smile. Finally, in desperation, the mayor had the baby Jesus chained to the manger. It didn't help. Jesus still made his getaway.

Most of the townsfolk were quite perturbed, but a local pastor wasn't surprised. As one familiar with the ways of God, he quietly observed, “I think the baby Jesus went to Bosnia for the holidays. You see, they need him over there.”¹

Have you ever had Jesus disappear

on you? It happens sometimes as we go merrily on our way, doing what we have to do when suddenly, we look up, and he is gone. Amid our harried lives, we rush off in some direction without checking to see if he is with us. Only when we feel the ache of his absence do we discover that Jesus has disappeared on us . . . *again!* Where did he go? And where can we find him to ask his forgiveness, seek his truth and live in his love?

Explore the Biblical Witness

Jesus disappeared on Mary and Joseph following the family's annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As a devout Jewish family, Jesus and his parents went to the holy city every year to celebrate Passover (Lk 2:41). The Passover festival commemorated the liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage (Ex 12:21–36). It was the most important festival of the Jewish year.

As Luke tells the story, this Passover celebration held special meaning for Jesus' family. Jesus was 12 years of age (Lk 2:42), on the cusp of young manhood. At 12, a Jewish male was no longer just a child, but a son of Israel. To this day, 12 is the age of the Jewish bar mitzvah.

After passover, Joseph and Mary turned toward home, not realizing Jesus wasn't with them (v. 43).

Joseph and Mary were traveling with other pilgrims in a caravan (v. 44). Such a caravan was a bustling parade of animals, children, families and friends. Joseph probably assumed Jesus was in the back of the pack with his mother, where Jesus had always traveled before. Knowing her boy was eager to claim his new place among the men, Mary probably thought he was up front with his father. In any event, the casual, sometimes chaotic nature of travel by caravan helps explain why Jesus' parents didn't miss him until they settled in for the night.

Yet, despite mitigating circumstances, the truth remains: Jesus disappeared from the company of Mary and Joseph for the same reason he often disappears from us. They *assumed* he was with them (v. 44). They *assumed* he wanted to go where they were going; they *assumed* he wanted to do what they were doing. Only that night by the campfire did Mary and Joseph realize Jesus was missing.

First thing the next morning, Mary and Joseph beat a path back to Jerusalem. For three anxious days (v. 46), their son was missing: a day's journey from Jerusalem, a day's journey back, and on the third day they found Jesus.

When at last they found him, he was lost in conversation with the teachers

of the law (v. 46). This was the traditional method of instruction in Jesus' day: a dialogue between teacher and students.

Christian tradition has often portrayed Jesus in this scene as a wonder boy, pulling divine rank on his teachers, but there is little hint of that in the text. Up until now, all the signs and wonders surrounding Jesus' entry into the world have been given to others, not to Jesus himself. Luke says explicitly that Jesus *listened* and *asked questions* (v. 46). Despite the perennial Christian heresy that Jesus was not truly human, Luke is careful to note that Jesus “*increased in wisdom*” (v. 52).

To be sure, Jesus was a precocious youth, steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures; the teachers of the law were “amazed at his understanding and his answers” (v. 47). And certainly at this time in his life, he was awakening to his unique call from God (v. 49b). But Jesus discovered God's unique claim on his life precisely because he was raised as a true Israelite, one who knew the Word and ways of God.

The confrontation between Jesus and his parents is painful to behold (v. 45–46). “*Child,*” Mary snapped, eager to put her son in his place. “Why have you treated us like this?” Voicing the gut-wrenching anguish of three harrowing days, she added,

“Your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety!”

Jesus looked up at them in genuine surprise: “Did you not know that I must be in my *Father’s* house?” (v. 49).

Joseph felt an old familiar pain. The suppressed memories of the child’s unique birth came roaring back: this boy never belonged to him, but to God. Mary took Joseph’s arm, quick to comfort. How could Jesus be so insensitive?

But Jesus wasn’t being insensitive. He was just telling the truth, and not about himself only but about all who become sons and daughters of God through him. Their greatest loyalty and love is no longer their next of kin (see Mk 3:31–35). Following after Jesus, they too will lose themselves in the Father’s house, pondering God’s Word and learning God’s ways.

Applying the Biblical Witness

Mary and Joseph lost Jesus. Because they became so preoccupied with their own priorities, drives and needs, they left him behind. Joseph, a small businessman, had contracts to bid and jobs to finish; for Mary, being a mother required that she work overtime every day. Jesus’ disciples still lose touch with him for the similar reason. Absorbed

with our own agendas, we rush off without him. Only when we feel the ache of his absence do we backtrack, trying to find him. When at last we stumble upon him, he looks at us with imploring eyes: “Did you not *know* that I must be in my Father’s house?”

When Jesus disappears on us, it is not because he has left *us* but because we have left *him*. We lose Jesus when we look for him in a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle instead of following him in the way of suffering love (Lk 9:23; 18:18–25). We lose Jesus when we look for him in quick fixes and easy solutions instead of pondering the vital, life-giving truth of Holy Scripture (Lk 4:1–4). We lose Jesus when we look for him in the noise of the world’s acclaim instead of listening for the “still small voice” of the Spirit (Lk 4:5–8). We lose Jesus when, scandalized by his grace toward sinners, we prefer the cold company of life without him (Lk 15:25–32).

Where did you last lose Jesus? Guess where you can find him! Even now, he asks—eyes clouded by bewilderment and pain—“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

The beauty of this story in Luke’s Gospel is that it tells us where we can find Jesus. We can always find him where his distraught parents

found him: (1) in a deepening knowledge and love of God’s Word, and (2) in a radical willingness to live God’s way.

Loving God’s Word

Jesus knew and loved the Hebrew Scriptures—the Christian Old Testament. Throughout his life and ministry, the Scriptures were in his heart and on his lips. By knowing and loving the Scriptures, Jesus came to recognize the voice of his heavenly Father calling him to his unique vocation: not merely to *teach* God’s Word, but to *be* God’s Word embodied in a human life (Jn 1:1–5, 14–18).

Thus, for Christians the Bible is not just the Old Testament but also the New. For in the New Testament, we learn about God’s decisive saving act in his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

A Chinese student attended our Sunday School during her year in America. Now back in her homeland, she wrote an American friend: “Every Sunday morning, I spend one hour to read the Bible book. Then sing the church songs I learned in America—in my heart and pray at home. Someone said there was a Christian organization in Shanghai but I have not found it yet. I believe the God still continues to love me.” There is no better place for Jesus’ disciples to seek and find him than in

the Scriptures. As the two disciples on the road to Emmaus confessed, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was ... opening the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32).

Living God’s Way

Jesus’ visit to the temple also teaches us that we can find him in a radical willingness to live God’s way. For Jesus, as for his followers, Scripture was not an end in itself. It was the bench in the park where he went to talk with God. The point of the meeting was to “be about my Father’s interests” (v. 49). That is an alternate translation of verse 49, first popularized in the *King James Bible*: “I must be about my Father’s *business*.” Clearly, Jesus was committed not only to being in his “Father’s house” but looking after his “Father’s interests.”

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus embodies and announces his “Father’s interests” in the sermon in Nazareth (4:16–21). Jesus comes proclaiming good news to the poor, the oppressed and the blind. And we will still find Jesus wherever his saving love is proclaimed and embodied to the broken-down and broken-hearted.

Want to find Jesus? Look for him among people who care not just for themselves but others. Look for him at the soup kitchen where “the least of these” are fed and loved in his

name. Look for him by the hospital bed where some desperate soul aches for hope and healing. Look for him where “sinners” are not a nuisance to be endured but wayward children to be welcomed home into the loving embrace of God.

Not long ago, a teenager in our church sang a song I hadn’t heard in years. Her face radiant with faith, she sang about a girl who wasn’t as pretty as her peers. But that was all right, she sang, so long as the miracle of grace unfolding in her life created another kind of beauty. She just wanted people to look at her and say ...

“She’s got her Father’s eyes, her Father’s eyes.
Eyes that find the good in things,
when good is not around.
Eyes that find the source of help,
when help just can’t be found.
Eyes full of compassion, seeing every pain.
Knowing what you’re going through,
and feeling it the same.
Just like my Father’s eyes, my Father’s eyes, my Father’s eyes.”²

The young lady singing the song was not much older than Jesus was when he made his eventful trip to the temple at the age of 12. But following after him, she has come to love the Father’s house, the Father’s Word and the Father’s way. Now, by the grace of God, she is becoming

like her Lord and Master. She is a young person of character, courage and compassion. Like Jesus, she has “her Father’s Eyes.”

Has Jesus disappeared on you? He’s not hard to find. Just look for him where Mary and Joseph found him and many others after them: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Like the North Star, pointing a lost traveler unerringly home, Jesus is the One who leads us ever deeper into the Word and ways of God. 🌳

Robert B. Setzer Jr. is pastor of First Baptist Church, Macon, Georgia.

1. The Rev. William Carter, “Where Does Easter Happen?” The Protestant Hour, April 18, 1999, Web address: <http://search.protestanthour.com/1999/ph-1999-16.html>.

2. Words and music by Amy Grant.

Is It Lawful to Do Good on the Sabbath?

Luke 6:6-11

**“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?”
—Luke 6:9**

Day after day, night after night, in the late fall of 2000, we were all reminded of the extent and intricacy of our nation’s vast legal system. Lawmakers, laws, lawyers, judges—and then more of the same!

Even apart from the strangest presidential election we will ever experience, our culture overflows with laws and the personnel necessary to interpret and apply them. There are also rules, spoken and unspoken, that govern behavior in corporations, schools, families, and yes, churches. Whether fully codified or simply understood, we do not lack for laws in our modern world.

With all these laws, is it possible for us to be so right in keeping them that

we are wrong? Consider these dilemmas:

First, from not so many years ago—

Suppose you are white-skinned, and the law says that only people like you can be served in your restaurant. A dark-skinned person takes a seat and asks for a menu. Should you serve this person?

Next, an emergency that could take place any day—

The speed limit is 60. A passenger in your car—perhaps your child—is suddenly and violently ill. Should you break the speed limit to rush to the nearest medical facility?

Then, a day much like today—

It’s Sunday morning. You’re almost always in church, but today your elderly neighbor is being moved out of her house. She and her siblings could really use your help loading the moving truck. Should you skip church and offer one last kind act to this person to whom you have tried for years to show God’s love?

And what about broader religious beliefs?—

Your denomination or Christian group opposes “liberal” or “fundamentalist” interpretations of the Bible, ostracizing those who choose

that path. A Christian acquaintance is far more liberal or fundamentalist than you are in reading and applying the Bible. Should you remain open to friendship and fellowship with that person?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, you have taken exception to law or accepted practice.

In the first example, we have civil disobedience. Sometimes, intentionally breaking the law is the only way for a minority convinced of a law’s wrongness to bring about change. It can be a challenge to know when to take the risk of participating in such activities. The would-be restaurant patron already made that choice. Who will stand with him or her?

Next, we have mitigating circumstances. Just about anyone, even a highway patrol officer or a traffic judge, would understand breaking the speed limit under emergency health circumstances, particularly if the lives of others are not being endangered in the process.

Finally, in the last two examples, we see the principle of putting people first. What is more important, religious convention or caring for people? Such choices are put to us more often than we recognize.

Explore the Biblical Witness

The Jews of Jesus’ day had no shortage of laws. While they were under Roman rule and subject to Roman laws, it was their own body of Jewish law that primarily guided their lives. Precisely 613 laws—and many times more interpretations of the same—proscribed every aspect of Jewish life. Much of that law related to observance of the Sabbath, which was paramount in Jewish life at the time. Inflexibility characterized the interpretation of all the laws, and particularly the Sabbath requirements.

Properly keeping the Sabbath involved far more than rolling out of bed, dressing decently and driving down the road for a few hours of Bible study and worship, followed by lunch out. Don’t pat yourself on the back just for attending church. Compared with requirements of Jewish Halakah or law, that’s nothing!

With 39 categories of prohibited Sabbath labor, and plenty of detail-adding definition within each category, it was hard work to rest on the Sabbath! Intentional breaking of Sabbath law was punishable by death. Just to be on the safe side, it was forbidden to even touch an implement that you would use to perform prohibited work (such as a pencil, money, a hammer), because

someone holding the implement might forget that it was the Sabbath and perform prohibited work.

The same laws dictate Orthodox Jewish Sabbath-observance today. Based on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, these laws do not necessarily make sense to us. For instance, it can be all right to move a heavy piece of furniture slightly on the Sabbath, but lifting a feather is prohibited. And splinters under the fingernails can be interpreted as carrying wood—*forbidden*—on the Sabbath. Whether logical or not, Orthodox Jews believe that these laws are from God. So they adhere to them without exception.

Never mind that the Sabbath was instituted to give people a right to rest, to protect them from overwork, to offer a rhythm to their days and a continuing opportunity to focus on what really matters in life.

For Jews of Jesus' day and the Orthodox Jews of today, the fourth commandment—"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy"—as recorded and defined in Exodus 20 seems to have taken on a life of its own.

But Jesus, that upstart Teacher from Galilee, inserted himself right in the middle of the morass of Sabbath law. Once again, he displayed a way of cutting to the chase—not doing away

with commandments, but getting rid of everything extraneous, getting right to the core of what God's laws really mean.

So what did he do? We read in Luke 6:6-11 that he healed a man on the Sabbath, sending the red lights of the Pharisees (those Jewish lawyers/police) flashing and their sirens wailing. *Broken law! Right over here! No can do! Not on this day!*

As recorded in Luke, the story seems to indicate that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. It seems that he *wanted* to heal on the Sabbath. He probably could have postponed his healing act.

Instead, "Even though he knew what they were thinking" (v. 8), Jesus committed civil disobedience (right there in the synagogue!), and seized an opportunity to teach all those who were carefully watching him, as if to say, "Hello! O holy men of Israel, don't you see? A wonderful work, a health-restoring miracle, was just performed. What better day for such an activity than the Sabbath?"

In their condemnation of Jesus' Sabbath healing, the Pharisees were so right that they were wrong. They kept the letter—every jot and tittle—of the law, all right, but they completely missed its spirit of human restoration and wholeness.

Jesus, however, made it clear when he healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath: people's needs are more important than religious legalism.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Rules are usually in place for good reasons. Although they aren't meant to be broken, neither are they meant to keep us from doing the right thing.

When should we dare to break the rules? The trick, it seems, is to know and recognize the right time. For that, we will have to be individually attuned to God's Spirit, listening with our whole hearts. And that takes some practice. It requires spending time with God to understand God's purposes in this world and our potential roles in carrying those out.

It's tempting to fantasize about what it would have been like to know Jesus in human form, to have been there with him in Galilee or Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. It's tempting to idealize the effect such a first-hand experience would have on our lives. What if we had been there to witness this healing? What if we had heard these Sabbath words of Jesus with our own ears? What if we had heard all of Jesus' teaching during his three years of ministry?

Well, we weren't there. But many of us have had years of exposure to Christian teaching, as children and as adults, in Sunday School classes and church services, on retreats, in small groups, in additional Bible studies of all kinds. Maybe Jesus wasn't the teacher. But, after a while, you'd think that all this Bible study and training in Christian living would change us. The truth is that it never will. Not unless and until we apply the teachings to our lives. Not until we choose to live as Jesus instructed his first followers.

Practically speaking, what does that mean? It may mean thinking outside of our narrow religious boxes. For example, particularly as the spouse of a pastor, I do want people in church, preferably *our* church! From time to time I teach a Sunday School course or a Wednesday night seminar. I want people to attend those sessions. (Not so secretly, I probably want them to feel that they *should*.) But there can be some pretty good reasons for taking a pass.

One member of my church visits AIDS patients during the Sunday School hour each week. Maybe that's more important than coming to class, even one I'm teaching!

What about when we Christians insist that a certain practice is unbiblical and wrong, and consequently we write people off, making

them unwelcome in our churches, treating them with unkindness, demonstrating an abhorrence of them that goes far beyond Christian judgment against their behavior? Are we missing the spirit of our Christian codes of living?

If we believe all the right things, if we interpret the Bible just so, if we follow all the churchy rules, does that make us *right*? Does it make us right in the sense of being correct—and does it make us right with God?

Jesus shared with a testing lawyer what he considered to be most important. We read about this later in Luke, with the lawyer's words, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (10:27). To this Jesus responded, concerning inheriting eternal life, "Do this, and you will live." (For more on this passage, see lesson 10 in this series.)

Funny. This recounting of the law had little, if anything, to do with right belief. Rather it was about love—love for God and for people. Such love breeds compassion. And such compassion breeds righteous acts. That's where Jesus leads us through the example we read today in Luke's gospel.

Will we follow? Or will we be held

back by narrow, life-choking legalisms? When confronted with human need, may we be guided more by God's living Spirit than by lifeless rules and regulations. 🌳

Karen Johnson Zurheide is author of Life with Molly and lives in Edmond, Oklahoma. She and her husband, Jeff, have two children. She is a frequent writer for BCE.

What Credit Is It to You to Love Those Who Love You?

Luke 6:27–36

**“If you love those who
love you, what credit
is that to you?”
—Luke 6:32**

Jim Brazzil is a Baptist chaplain serving in the Texas death chamber. In the face of death and condemnation, he offers a presence of peace and a message of hope. To those whom society hates, he offers unconditional love. For many of the men and women facing execution behind the high brick walls of the Huntsville, Texas, prison, this Baptist minister is the last friend they’ll know in this world.

Early on the afternoon of a scheduled execution, Brazzil meets with the condemned prisoner and offers spiritual counsel through words or perhaps silence. He prays with the

inmate. He carries a message to the inmate’s family, who cannot see him face-to-face. He eats with the prisoner at the last meal before execution, reasoning that no one should have to eat alone at a time like this.

And then, as the prisoner is strapped to the gurney before a small crowd of witnesses, Brazzil gently places a hand on his or her leg—a reminder that someone who cares is nearby.

He’s neither for nor against the death penalty. In his job, he simply can’t afford to express an opinion one way or the other. What he’s clearly for, though, is loving society’s enemies, doing good to those who have hated, praying for those who have abused and loving those who have not loved him.

While few people will have the opportunity to live out the words of Jesus in the way Brazzil does, he advocates other steps to foster Christian reconciliation between abusers and the abused.

Christians, he believes, must become part of the solution to America’s crime problem by joining the movement for restorative justice. That means not just locking people in prison and throwing away the key. Rather, it means fostering dialogue between victims and victimizers, helping those who commit crimes

understand the consequences of their actions.

To do so, he believes, echoes the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Mt 5:44, KJV).

His ministry illustrates what Jesus meant when he said, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” (Lk 6:32, NRSV).

Explore the Biblical Witness

Several of the hardest of the hard sayings of Jesus are found in the brief passage of Luke 6:27–36. Jesus commands us not only to love those who hate us, but also to turn the other cheek, to do unto others as we would want them to do unto us and to love those who cannot repay us.

What’s more, these hard sayings of Jesus recorded by Luke and other Gospel writers form the essence of Jesus’ teaching. They are not à la carte additions from which we may pick and choose. Rather, they are part of the core curriculum for those who would follow Christ.

Matthew introduces this same section of Jesus’ teaching a bit more fully than does Luke, explaining: “You have heard that it was said,

‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’” (Mt 5:43–44).

Matthew helps us understand that Jesus, as he did so many other times, was taking a common Jewish teaching and breathing new life into it.

“Love your neighbor” was part of the Old Testament law. But this law had been interpreted for generations to make fulfilling it easier by carefully defining who was one’s neighbor. Jesus attacked the same problem in the parable of the good Samaritan.

No Jewish leader of Jesus’ day would have said the law applied to those who hate you, to those who have abused you, to those who were your enemies. Jesus was making the law obsolete by replacing it with a higher standard of love.

In Luke 6:27–28, Jesus gave four specific commands:

- ◆ Love your enemies.
- ◆ Do good to those who hate you.
- ◆ Bless those who curse you.
- ◆ Pray for those who abuse you.

To these hard directives, Jesus adds a series of commands to share:

- ◆ Give to those who strike you.

- ◆ Give to those who beg from you.
- ◆ Give to those who take from you.

Yes, these commands are hard to swallow. They run counter to our human intuition. Living them out requires power from a source greater than anything we can muster from within ourselves. The only way we can love our enemies is by tapping into Christ's love within us.

Think for a moment about the most effective individual and corporate ministries you've encountered in your lifetime. Examine those in your community, church or family who are accomplishing the most good for the kingdom of God. In them, you no doubt will find the living fulfillment of Jesus' five commands to love, do good, bless, pray and give.

From these ministry-actions spring the most effective evangelism the church has to offer. People notice the difference in such gospel-filled lives.

"Gospel" literally means "good news." One of the first lessons taught in journalism school is an age-old definition of news. When a dog bites a man, that's not news, incoming students are told. But when a man bites a dog, that's news.

This is what Jesus is teaching in Luke 6:32-34. It's not news when we love someone who loves us or someone who can repay our love.

Even sinners do that.

The good news that gains a hearing in a busy world is based on actions that defy people's expectations, in helping hands offered at unexpected times and from unexpected friends. That is news, and it's a platform for advancing the good news.

Perhaps this is why for years now Baptist home missionaries have recorded great numbers of professions of faith and baptisms not through direct evangelism but through ministry evangelism. Reaching out to those stricken with AIDS, feeding the homeless, walking alongside the military and loving the unlovable are just a few ways they demonstrate how to fulfill the gospel.

Even so, this Jesus-kind of love is hard to live out. If it were easy, it wouldn't be news.

Apply the Biblical Witness

How do we move to this higher level of love demanded of Christians?

A first step is to consider the measure of grace with which Christ has regarded us. When we become full of pride and think we're the cause of every good thing around us, it's natural to see those around us as unworthy of our help or love. This

massive plank in our own eye prevents us from seeing God's way of helping others remove the speck from their eyes.

But when we realize that we too have been saved by God's unmerited compassion, we gain new empathy for those we encounter along the way.

Jesus spoke to this in Luke 6:31, a passage we know as the Golden Rule. Again, this was not a new saying to Jesus. Rather, Jesus took a well-known idiom and turned it on its head. The statement had been recorded previously in the negative form: "What you do not want others to do to you, do not do unto them." Jesus turned it around to a positive form, thus giving new meaning as well: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

This new meaning carries a higher motivation as well. It is a call to be proactive. It is a call to community, to watchfulness, to protecting those around us.

A second step in making the journey to live out Jesus' hard command is to see the change that can result in ourselves. New Testament scholar Earle Ellis noted that "the effect of Christian love in a person is in exact proportion to his practice of it."

Simply put, we cannot spend

repeated and extended time in prayer for an enemy without experiencing a change in our own attitude. True prayer is as much about changing the person praying as it is about changing the person being prayed for. Our enemies and the circumstances around us might not change, but God can change our attitude about them when we pray.

In a classic Jesus-style paradox, we learn that the way to know love ourselves is to show love to those who do not love us.

A third step in the journey to live out this hard saying of Jesus is to realize the reward Jesus offers. This is the carrot, not the stick. Jesus lures us toward right behavior not by coercion but by persuasion.

Follow this command, Jesus teaches, and you will receive a great reward and become "children of the Most High" (Lk 6:35).

This transformation occurs not by collecting a required number of merit badges for good deeds along the way, but by the very acts of selfless service we perform. In this sense, God's kingdom is ushered in not with a bolt of lightning or the blare of trumpets but through humble service that transforms both the giver and the receiver.

There's an old joke about the Baptist

who pledged to pray for his neighbor, offering a rather backhanded blessing in his explanation: “You need the prayer, and I need the practice.”

Corny, perhaps, but the point is true. It is through the practice of loving the unlovable, praying for those who persecute us and helping those who would hurt us that we are changed from the inside out.

That approach has the potential to make us different from everyone else. And that’s good news. 🌱

Mark Wingfield is editor of the Baptist Standard. His wife, Alison, is a freelance writer and the design editor for BCE’s Ethics Report. They live in Dallas, Texas.

Order
The Practice of Living Faithfully

This adult curriculum explores 13 practices of living faithfully, such as pursuing discernment, fasting and speaking kindly.

Call
1-800-469-4BCE
or visit
www.ethicsdaily.com

Why Do You See the Speck in Your Neighbor's Eye?

Luke 6:37–42

**“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”
—Luke 6:41**

Doctor,” said the patient, “when I press my finger against my forehead, it hurts. When I press against my cheek, it hurts. When I press my finger against my stomach, it hurts. What gives?”

Stumped by this strange constellation of symptoms, the doctor referred the man to a specialist. A week later, the patient returned.

“So what did the specialist say?” asked the doctor.

“He said I have a broken finger.”

A broken finger can cause a lot of problems, especially for folk who wag it a lot.

Jesus’ proverb, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged” (Lk 6:37) is addressed to people who like to point fingers. His words can also be translated, “*Stop judging ... stop condemning,*” or to paraphrase, “Stop pointing that finger, *especially* if your finger is broken.”

In the course of human history, nagging never changed anybody, at least not for long. Granted, in this department hope springs eternal. I know married couples where each partner has hounded the other about a pet peeve for 50 years. To this day, there is no sign of progress, and no sign of giving up!

Nagging persists not because it is effective; nagging persists because it temporarily makes *us* feel better even as it entrenches the other person in the very behavior we despise.

Jesus’ remarks about not judging others are addressed to members of “Naggers Anonymous.” They are not a prohibition against making any moral judgments whatsoever. In fact, these words are found within a larger passage known as the “Sermon on the Plain” (Lk 6:17–49), Luke’s condensed version of the “Sermon on

the Mount” (Mt 5–7).

The Sermon on the Mount is the most devastating moral critique ever offered of a broken world where God’s law is flaunted and God’s love ignored. No, Jesus was hardly an ethical amoeba lacking in moral backbone! Throughout his ministry, he attacked vested pride and privilege, unmasked religious pretense and exposed the idolatry of wealth. He was ruthless in naming and opposing evil, even at the cost of his life.

Thus, those quick to chirp in the face of every moral failing, “Judge not that you be not judged!” speak but half the truth. When read in context, Jesus’ words do not mean Christians can renege on their duty to be morally discerning; they mean that moral judgments should be made with a certain restraint and kindness.

This passage turns on the importance of practicing careful self-evaluation, lest we lash out in self-righteous judging of others. Jesus is calling the hand of those quick to attack in others those failings to which they are blind in themselves. Hence, the paraphrase: “Don’t nag,” “Don’t point fingers,” or “Don’t be judgmental” might be preferred to the more literal, “Don’t judge.” As Jesus himself refined his meaning, “Do not *condemn*, and you will not be condemned. *Forgive*, and you will be

forgiven” (v. 37b, emphasis added).

Explore the Biblical Witness

In illustrating his point, Jesus painted a vivid, unforgettable picture. It is a picture of a determined crusader trying to remove a speck from his neighbor’s eye while remaining oblivious to the log in his own (vv. 41–42). Don’t miss Jesus’ humor. Visualize the scene as a cartoon.

Two weekend warriors are building some shelves in the garage. As they push a piece of lumber through a table saw, sawdust spews out. One of the wood workers gets an eyeful of sawdust. His friend turns to help. The only problem is that the well-intentioned friend has a long 2-by-4 protruding from each eye. He looks like a praying mantis with two huge antennae as he staggers toward his friend! Needless to say, the man with sawdust in his eye ducks for cover. With friends like this, who needs enemies?

With a deft use of humor, Jesus exposed the madness of trying to help others with their problems till we have tackled our own. Those who persist in such behavior are “hypocrites,” a word derived from a Greek word translated “actor” (v. 42). According to Jesus, a hypocrite is someone pretending to be sanctimonious when in reality the hypocrite’s

hidden defects are larger than the problems he or she is so quick to attack in others.

How is it we have razor sharp vision for the sins of others while remaining blissfully oblivious to our own?

Two thousand years after Jesus vividly described this phenomenon, Freud called the process “projection.” Projection is a process by which we project onto another—as on to a movie screen—things we cannot bear to face in ourselves: our own lust, greed or ruthless ambition, for example. By attacking in others what we cannot or will not face in ourselves, we get a sort of psychic relief. We get to feel self-righteous and saintly, without any moral exertion on our part. What a deal! It’s like winning the lottery! All the rewards and none of the work!

An amusing story is told about the time D. L. Moody met Charles Spurgeon. Moody, the great American evangelist, admired Spurgeon from afar. Knowing Spurgeon’s preaching had taken Britain by a storm, Moody went to meet his revered mentor and model.

Moody knocked on the door of Spurgeon’s London home. He was shocked when his idol greeted him with a big, fat cigar in his mouth. “How can a man of God smoke *that*?” Moody asked in surprise.

Spurgeon took the stogie out of his mouth and stepped toward his visitor. Putting his finger deep into Moody’s bulging belly, the great British Baptist answered, “The same way a man of God could be that *fat!*”

Yes, it’s much easier to recognize another’s failings than to deal with our own. Indeed, the things we attack with a merciless vengeance in others are an excellent barometer of unfinished business we have with ourselves.

Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount that instead of attacking the flagrant sins of others, say adultery, it is far better to address the lust in our own hearts (Mt 5:27–30).

The old adage is true: “When you point one finger at somebody else, three fingers are pointing back at you.”

Apply the Biblical Witness

So what is the answer? Should we avoid all moral judgments lest someone level the charge we are hypocrites? That’s the coward’s way out.

Jesus expects and demands better of those who follow him. His prescription is this: “*First* take the log out of your own eye, and *then* you will see clearly to take the speck out of your

neighbor’s eye” (Lk 6:42, emphasis added). After all, leaving a friend with a speck smarting in her eye, with tears of pain or remorse streaming down her face, is not a loving act. The issue Jesus lays before us is how to help in such a situation rather than do further damage.

How do we take the “log” out of our own eye so we can see clearly to help others?

By engaging in serious self-evaluation in God’s presence. As the psalmist prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23–24). Only as we are rigorously honest with ourselves—an honesty immeasurably deepened as the Spirit of God searches our hearts—can we seek forgiveness for our own sins. Then, we are less apt to be unduly concerned with the sins of others.

By seeking the counsel of a trusted Christian friend. Sometimes others see in us things we do not recognize in ourselves. Perhaps we are eager to set someone straight about how she is neglecting her mother in the nursing home. To us, this seems an open-and-shut case of calloused behavior. But a trusted friend might ask, “Why so much energy for this particular cause? And why *now*?” Is there some wound or unmet need in

ourselves we hope to resolve by attacking another? Good friends know how to ask hard questions.

By being honest with ourselves before God and sometimes, a trusted friend. This is the work of confession. As Will Willimon has written, “In confession, we stand face-to-face with as much truth about ourselves as God’s love enables us to bear.”¹ As certifiable sinners from David to Peter to Yours Truly have proven time and time again, moral imperfections do not disqualify one from loving and serving God. It is *blindness* to one’s struggles and failings that hampers one’s effectiveness as a follower of Jesus (Lk 6:39). Only as we live out of God’s grace toward ourselves can we in turn, live grace-full lives toward others. Jesus touched on this theme often in his teaching (v. 36). Jesus reminds us here: judge not, condemn not, *forgive* (v. 37).

Confession gets the log out of our own eye so we can “see clearly” (v. 42) to remove the speck from our neighbor’s eye. Confession dissolves a caustic, self-righteous, and judgmental spirit, making us less likely to “scapegoat” our problems onto others. This allows Christians to engage in a needed “civil critique” of the moral and social ills of the day.²

What is the difference between “scapegoating” and “civil critique”? What does this look like in practice?

Scapegoating means we blame the public schools for surly, out-of-control kids; a civil critique might mean recognizing many youngsters don't have the parental support they need to thrive in school. Might we volunteer to tutor a troubled child two days a week?

Scapegoating means we slam Hollywood as a den of iniquity while pretending every Christian home is a bastion of family values; a civil critique might mean boycotting films that glorify violence, while enthusiastically recommending those that speak to the deeper issues of life.

Scapegoating means holding a grudge because the other person doesn't deserve our forgiveness; a civil critique might mean being honest about how we have been hurt and courageous enough to address the matter with God, a trusted friend, and maybe even—as Jesus implores us—our “enemies” (6:27).

Bottom line, we are best able to help others when we are mindful of our own need for grace: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (v. 36).

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes about her battle with alcoholism. She credits the sober alcoholics of her AA group with saving her life. “Religion,” said one of her AA buddies, “is for people

who are afraid of hell; spirituality is for people who have *been* there.”

At first, Lamott found her AA group annoying, because the members kept piercing her denial. They kept showing her she *was* an alcoholic when she much preferred scapegoating her problems onto everybody else. But healing came as she was asked to face the painful truth about her alcoholism in the context of an accepting, gracious love.

She writes, “I was angry for a long time. I didn't know why these annoying people wanted to help me or why they seemed to love me even though I was whiny and arrogant and defeated all at once, the classic ego-maniac with an inferiority complex. I finally figured it out, although I could not have put it as well as Sam (her seven-year-old son) did last night.”

“He was watching King Kong, the remake with Jessica Lange, and toward the end, he said, ‘She loves him because she can see that he's lonely.’”

“And that is why,” says Lamott, “[my AA friends] loved me and helped me.”³

It might scandalize some folks to realize that a true church is not unlike an AA group, and an AA group is not unlike a church. Both are

places sinners gather, hoping to be saved by grace. Indeed, only *sinners* can be saved by grace. Those who are already perfect—or think they are—need not apply. As Jesus said it, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:31-32).

In the company of the church—a true church where sinners gather—the strangest thing happens. As people experience God's grace for themselves, they become more gracious toward others. Then, like a loving mother, deftly plucking a speck from a child's eye with the softest of tissues, they reach out to a troubled world with a gentle touch.

For, they follow a Master who rarely raised an accusing finger but always offered a helping hand. ☹

Robert B. Setzer Jr. is pastor of First Baptist Church, Macon, Georgia.

1. William H. Willimon, *With Glad and Generous Hearts: A Personal Look at Sunday Worship* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1986), 43.

2. For a helpful discussion on the difference between “scapegoating” social ills and engaging in “civil critique,” see Robert Parham, *Walk Right: A Christian's Guide for*

Proactive Discipleship, 24–26.

3. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 188.

Why Don't You Do What I Tell You?

Luke 6:46–49

**“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?”
—Luke 6:46**

Is your environment like mine? I live in a heavily church-ed community, with a Christian church on nearly every corner. Here, it's the norm to attend worship services, to participate in Bible studies, to be part of a church youth group.

Not only that, there are new churches being built all the time—bigger and, presumably, better. I see the Christian sign of the fish on many vehicles. Frequently, I read of Christian music events in the area, including concerts by top recording artists. Plenty of people here seem to be calling Jesus “Lord, Lord.”

In terms of church attendance and related activity, this environment stands in marked contrast to those

I've known in other regions of the country. In my former community, 85 percent of the population did *not* go to church.

Which leads me to wonder: With so many of us Jesus-followers concentrated here in one place, why is this regional culture not radically different in distinctly positive ways than places I've lived where nearly no one attends church or claims to follow Jesus?

Instead, statistics indicate that some social problems are more pronounced in this region than in less-church-ed areas. The divorce rate is higher here, for instance. What's wrong with this picture?

Perhaps part of the answer parallels experiences I've had with my young son. A few years ago, as a “no-worries” sort of little guy, he often was not really tuned in to what was going on around him. He was there, present, part of the family, but not paying attention to the direct or more frequent indirect messages that would have clued him in to what was up.

The specifics of the incident—it could have been any one of dozens in which my son was deemed annoyingly clueless by his older sister—have been forgotten. But the exclamatory sentence lives on. A few years ago, exasperated as only a

big sister with a little brother can be, my daughter declared to her brother with a major sigh, “You just don't get it!”

We Christians participate in worship and study times, prayer meetings and fellowship suppers. We hear the message of Christ. But when it comes to obedient action, it seems that we just don't get it.

Explore the Biblical Witness

The good news is that the Bible gives us plenty of opportunities to “get it” throughout both the Old and New Testaments. In passages such as Jesus' Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:17-49), Jesus gave us simple, clear guidelines for daily living. He instructed us how to act differently and make a difference in our world.

Fully understanding our human frailties, however, Jesus included these instructions to his disciples and other listeners with the stern warning found in text: *Obey me. If not for my sake, then for your own.* That's the essence of what Jesus has to say here to those who supposedly want to follow him.

Although we can surmise that Jesus requires obedience to all his other commands and teachings, he was likely referring specifically to obedience to the teachings he had just outlined, which included:

- ◆ Love your enemies (vv. 27, 35)
- ◆ Do to others as you would have them do to you (v. 31)
- ◆ Lend, expecting nothing in return (v. 35)
- ◆ Be merciful (v. 36)
- ◆ Do not judge (v. 37)
- ◆ Forgive (v. 37)
- ◆ Give (v. 38)
- ◆ Take the log out of your own eye (v. 42)

These commands were antithetical to what human nature—both 2,000 years ago and today—would dictate. They were the opposite of the “me-first, take-all, own-kind, pay-back, get-even” rules by which people tend to live. But these sorts of attitudes and actions were what Jesus expected from those who would follow him.

In case “obey me” was not clear enough, to help his listeners “get it,” Jesus used a simple, graphic illustration. He said that hearing his words and not obeying them is like building with no foundation (v. 48). Such a foundationless structure cannot withstand the floodwaters of life. According to Jesus' own words in this passage, the consequences for not obeying him are great. Catastrophe will result. All will be lost.

Take the color picture on the front page of my morning paper. It shows Central American houses sliding down a steep, muddy mountain

following a 7.6-magnitude earthquake. The homes were those of poor people, and the homes were poorly built. With no foundations, perched precariously on the surface of unstable ground, they could not withstand such a disaster.

Obedying Jesus' words, on the other hand, is like digging deeply and building with a foundation set on rock (v. 49). The floodwaters of life, the earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes, cannot move such a structure. It is secure, come what may. Similarly, we can trust that a life built on obedience to Jesus will not be moved.

Jesus used three verbs (v. 47) to describe the process of obeying him:

Come—Whether in the company of other believers or individually, coming to Jesus is personal. It involves conversion, to be sure, but it is also a continual process.

Hear—We hear many words in the world, some of which are those of Jesus. We hear many words in the church, some of which are those of Jesus. We must listen and discern to hear truly what Jesus is saying to us, both corporately and individually.

Act—It is not enough to come to Jesus and hear his words. Obedience requires action sometimes forgoing the wrong thing, but more often

doing the right thing.

Apply the Biblical Witness

For some, the first step of coming to Jesus and putting themselves where they can hear his words, has yet to happen. But where I live, there are thousands of people who regularly hear Jesus' teaching. As someone who is studying this lesson, you are likely one of those who hears Jesus' words.

Of those of us who come to Jesus and hear his words, why do so few seem to obey his teachings? Why do we not act on his words? Why do we so seldom witness the unconditional love, the unbridled generosity, the God-like mercy, the hesitation to judge that Jesus demands of his followers?

Possibility #1—

In our church services and Bible studies, in our youth meetings and small groups, we are not being presented with the teachings of Jesus that we need to obey. If our preachers and teachers are not sharing with us those actionable words of Jesus, we may need to encourage them to bring the kind of teaching that will challenge us to act. Individually, in personal devotional time, we can certainly choose to read and study Jesus' salient commands.

Possibility #2—

We hear Jesus' words but are not "getting it." Maybe we are just hearing and not listening.

As we attend times of group instruction, we can focus our minds and open our spirits to hearing what Jesus would say to us. As we read on our own, we can meditate on Jesus' words and let them sink in and become part of us.

Our lack of understanding may also relate to the fact that many of us are programmed to think that Bible knowledge and believing the right doctrines is what God requires, what the life of the Christian is all about. Our Western culture and educational system help to promote this notion. Add to that a great Baptist tradition of Bible learning that somehow has oriented us more toward an intellectual understanding of Christian faith than an emphasis on spiritual understanding and changed living. As much as we know with our minds, we sometimes miss the main points of the Gospels as they might apply to our daily lives.

Possibility #3—

We hear and understand but choose not to obey. What could prevent us from obeying? Perhaps laziness, because breaking old habits and living Jesus-like takes work. Perhaps

fear, because moving out of our personal comfort zones can be uncertain and scary. Perhaps peer pressure, because there are so few living a radically obedient Christian faith.

I get frustrated with my own imbalance between hearing and acting. I can spend hour upon hour hearing Jesus' words, studying them, even teaching them. By comparison, I spend little conscious, concerted time acting on them. And when I do make an effort to obey, nine times out of 10 it is concerned with not doing this or that. I work at breaking bad habits, at minimizing sinful actions. But I usually don't get very far with positive Jesus-following obedience. It is easier not to do wrong than obediently to do good.

Do we want our lives to be like houses that can endure any storm? Then we know what to do—or at least we know in part, and we can surely learn more of what is required if we wish. If we want to grow in obedience, let us consider applying the steps Jesus mentioned in these ways:

Come—Approach Jesus in humble adoration, connecting with God's Spirit as often and as regularly as we can. In addition to times of corporate worship and study, come to Jesus in specific times of personal reflection and in casual moments scattered

throughout each day, becoming increasingly aware of being with Jesus.

Hear—Read the Gospels thoroughly to see what commands Jesus actually gave his followers. Incorporate listening into personal times of prayer and reflection. Ask God to direct us in how to act obediently. Stay alert throughout our days to the guidance of God’s Spirit.

Act—Respond in obedience. Rely on God’s grace and strength to step out in new ways, even to live upside-down and contrary to what may be long established personal habits—habits that are contrary to Jesus’ call.

While we are each individually responsible to obey Jesus, we are not alone in our endeavors. You are likely studying this lesson with a group of other Christian believers. As prayer partners or support groups or in some other form of community, we can help each other to come and hear and obey. Share insights and callings. Share successes and failures in the journey of obedience. Work together in doing obedient actions. Encourage one another to build strong foundations.

When my preschooler daughter surprised me once at bedtime with the question, “What is Jesus saying to you?” I began to answer with a list of some of what Jesus is

recorded to have said in the Gospels. But that’s not what my child was after. She interrupted me with, “No. What is Jesus saying to *you—right now?*” This four-year-old believed that Jesus has personal, up-to-the-minute words for each of us.

Let us listen, if we dare. Does Jesus have words of challenge for us right now? May we respond in grateful obedience, for our sakes and that of our world. ☂

Karen Johnson Zurheide is author of Life with Molly and lives in Edmond, Oklahoma. She and her husband, Jeff, have two children. She is a frequent writer for BCE.

Where Is Your Faith?

Luke 8:22–25; 24:36–43

**“Where is your faith?”
—Luke 8:25**

On Monday, March 5, 2001, a 15-year-old boy walked into a high school in Santee, California, and shot 15 fellow students—two fatally. The fear among students and parents around the nation rose again due to the deadliest school-shooting spree since Columbine.

On Thursday of that week, National Public Radio aired an interview with a student at the high school in Santee who had witnessed the death of two of his friends. Beside the grief, his prevailing emotion was the fear he knew he would experience four times a day as he walked down the hallway where the shootings occurred.

This student’s fear is a dramatic type of fear that unfortunately many in our society face as we endure school shootings, drive-by shootings, hate crimes, terrorist bombings, tornadoes and so on.

In addition, extensive media coverage of medical conditions and our own personal experience with illness contribute to widespread fear of cancer, heart disease and other diseases.

A story on the “Today” show about colon cancer, resulted in a 75 percent increase nationally in requests from patients to have a colonoscopy.

Fear related to job security is on the rise as the economy teeters on bad times. We encounter many fearful situations in our lives. We need to hear Jesus speak the words, “Fear not,” in all areas of our lives.

Explore the Biblical Witness

The disciples had many fearful experiences, ranging from a storm on the lake to seeing the risen Christ Jesus. An examination of Luke’s account of these two experiences will encourage us to live courageously in difficult times.

Luke 8:22–25 relates a story found also in Mark 4:35–41 and Matthew 8:23–27. The account of the storm is part of a series of mighty works that Jesus performed.

Prior to this account, Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him. In this exchange, Jesus expanded his view of family to include those who hear God’s word and do it.

Following the account of the storm on the lake, Jesus cast out the demons from the Gerasene demoniac, and then the man proclaimed what Jesus had done throughout his city. Therefore, both the story before and the story after the account of the storm deal with the issue of faith and its concrete expression in life.

Jesus initiated this trip to the other side Lake Galilee. Since they sailed to the region of Gerasene, the other side would have been the eastern side of the lake.

If you consult several translations (and the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark), you will find the place called by at least three different names: Gadarenes (KJV), Gerasenes (NEB), and Gergasenes (NRSV). Ancient manuscripts of each Gospel variously record each option for the name of the territory. Today, most scholars accept that the region of Gerasene is on the east side of Lake Galilee, but in the final analysis—like some other places in the New Testament—we simply cannot be sure of the exact location.

As the boat sailed to the other side, Jesus fell asleep. Suddenly, the disciples were in the middle of a storm, and their boat was in danger of capsizing. They woke Jesus, pleading that they were perishing. Jesus responded by calming the storm. He then asked a hard question

of the disciples: “Where is your faith?” (8:25). The full impact of what they had witnessed then hit them, and they wondered aloud who Jesus was.

The Gospel writer obviously included this story to show Jesus’ power over nature. Subsequent stories in this section of Luke’s Gospel show Jesus’ power over demons, physical evil and death itself. In consideration of this kind of power, what should the disciples fear? The Gospel writer’s answer is nothing!

This passage and its synoptic parallels highlight fear. Correctly, we can assume that the disciples were scared to death during the storm—they said they were perishing—and this knowledge must have been accompanied by great fear.

But it was not until after Jesus calmed the storm that the Scripture says explicitly that the disciples were afraid. Could it be that the writer is signaling something special about this story besides the obvious show of Jesus’ power over nature?

By specifically mentioning the second episode of fear, the gospel writer shows where our greatest fear should be. Fred Craddock said that the disciples “had been around Jesus long enough to have adequate ground for trust in God and Jesus’

access to God's power."¹ Yet they did not trust that Jesus would take care of them during the storm. When Jesus questioned the strength of their faith, they experienced true fear when they realized they had doubted Jesus' power. Is this a word for us? Nothing in this physical world should cause us to fear; we had best be fearful if we doubt Jesus' power is real and is available to us.

In Luke 24:36–43, the disciples had gathered on the evening of the resurrection. The two disciples to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus had joined the 11 and others in Jerusalem as they discussed Jesus' appearance to Simon Peter.

As this discussion took place, Jesus appeared. Because the disciples first thought they were seeing a spirit, it is evident they were not totally convinced by the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Even though this group of believers had heard stories from multiple sources, they were frightened when Jesus appeared before the larger group.

In the face of this fear, Jesus gave them his peace. In Luke 2:14, the angels proclaimed peace at the birth of Jesus. In Luke 7:50, Jesus linked faith to peace. Here, Jesus assured them of his peace. The angels' promise at Jesus' birth was fulfilled in the resurrection. Jesus demonstrated his power, as he had during

the storm on the lake. God's power in Jesus' life was so great that death had no hold over him. In the face of such resurrection power, what is there in this world to fear?

In Matthew 10:24–31, Jesus instructed his disciples about what they should expect in their ministry. Jesus addressed the issue of fear in terms of those who may kill the body. Jesus reassured the disciples that fear should be reserved for God who can destroy their soul.

Jesus specifically connected the issue of fear with weakness of faith. In both of these passages (Lk 8:22–25; 25:36–43), Jesus addressed the strength of the disciples' faith in a question. Jesus was not questioning the presence of faith in the disciples. He questioned why their faith was not strong enough to overcome their fear. Jesus pointed out the source of their fear—their weak faith.

The message is clear: for those who have faith in Christ, fear should not be an issue.

The combined message of these stories is that faith in Jesus as the resurrected Lord removes our fears and provides us with God's peace in Christ.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Dr. Bill Wallace was a missionary to China for more than 20 years

until his death in 1951. He dedicated his life to serving the medical needs of the Chinese people. In his missionary service, he fought disease, faced the advancing Japanese troops when they invaded China and, of course, encountered the fanaticism of China's new Communist leaders to rid the country of religion, especially that brought by Western missionaries.

Wallace refused to leave China, even knowing the goal of the Communist Chinese government was to rid the country of foreign influence, especially religious influence.

When Wallace went to China, he vowed to give his life for his work. He was killed at the hands of the Communist Chinese in 1951, after being imprisoned for a few months. Those who knew and worked with him in his ministry knew him as a man whose extraordinary faith conquered fear in each of the crises he faced.

Bill Wallace's life testifies to the truth of Scripture:

First, being a Christian does not ensure that we will be free from physical or emotional storms. Before and after the resurrection, Jesus' disciples faced situations in which fear was not unreasonable: for example, being out in a boat in a raging storm and seeing someone

whom you had witnessed die on a cross! Yet, they had the resource at their disposal to conquer their fear.


Second, in Jesus' presence we have the power to overcome our fears. The Scripture is clear that Jesus has power over nature, evil and even death. The power to overcome fear is unquestionably available to us.

The third lesson, however, is the key: faith in Jesus is what releases the power to overcome fear.

Is our faith in Jesus strong enough that his power may be enabled in our lives?

Obviously, we must first have a relationship with Jesus through our faith. But with that relationship established, do we really trust Jesus in the day-to-day goings on of our lives? Spending time with Jesus in prayer, Bible study and worship strengthens our faith and enables us to trust Jesus when storms arise.

Stories like that of Bill Wallace are dramatic examples of people who have found peace in the face of fear. As a pastor, I have seen less dramatic, but equally faith-filled confrontations with fear as I watched people of faith face illness, impending death from illness, grief, death of loved ones, divorce and so forth. Every day, people of faith find the strength needed because of their

relationship with Jesus. Knowing Jesus will not eliminate the storms of life, but knowing him will provide us companionship as we go through them. 

Wayne Hager is pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, North Carolina.

1. Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 115.

**Order
*Real Baptists***

**Thirteen undated lessons
explore changes to the
*Baptist Faith & Message.***

**Call
1-800-469-4BCE
or visit
www.ethicsdaily.com**

Who Do You Say I Am?

Luke 9:18–20

**“Who do the crowds say that I am? ... Who do you say that I am?”
—Luke 9:18**

Every year our church produces a play on Maundy Thursday called “The Living Last Supper.” The cast portrays the entrance of the disciples into the upper room and then the events of that night.

This year the director faced a new challenge—we had to get a new Jesus. As the director and I talked, we faced our own preconceived notions of what Jesus looked like. We both knew that if we were true to what Jesus may have looked like as a Palestinian Jew, we would have to get away from a tall, rosy-cheeked, fair-haired, blue-eyed Jesus. But we also realized the expectations of the congregation and the community would not be a dark-skinned, brown-eyed Jesus. We could expect some controversy if our selection was

outside the “safe-look” Jesus. We were torn between the “real” Jesus and popular perceptions.

Newsweek had a cover story titled “Visions of Jesus: How Jews, Muslims and Buddhists View Him.” The issue explored the “other Jesus,” meaning the non-Christian view of Jesus. While the issue was well done and informative, the reality is that such an issue could also be done about the different “Christian” views of Jesus.

Just as we struggle with preconceived ideas of what Jesus looked like, we also struggle with preconceived perceptions of who Jesus is. While some of these disagreements revolve around distinct theological issues, we more often deal with a conflict between the Jesus of civil religion and the Jesus of Christian faith.

By the term “civil religion” we mean the popular expression of faith in society. Civil religion in America is behind the societal observance of Christmas and Easter. Civil religion observes Christmas as the celebration of love, good will and good times with family and friends. Civil religion does not observe Christmas as the celebration of the birth of God’s Son.

Civil religion observes Easter as the beginning of spring and recovery

from a hard winter. Civil religion does not observe Easter as the celebration of the resurrection of the Savior and the guarantee of eternal life for those who believe. Civil religion endorses the laws that govern society but separates the laws from the revealed will of God as the source of societal morality. In short, we turn Jesus into what we want him to be to support the prevailing understanding of relationships in our society and our country with other countries.

Explore the Biblical Witness

In Luke 9:18–20, the question about Jesus’ identity, which had been raised by preceding narratives, received its first answer. The passage shows Jesus praying in the presence of his disciples.

Significantly, the confession comes in the midst of a time of prayer. In Luke, prayer precedes other important events in the life of Jesus—empowering by the Holy Spirit (3:21–22) and choosing the Twelve (6:12ff)—and indicates that what is about to happen is of major importance.

Jesus was not asking an idle question or one out of curiosity. The question about Jesus’ identity had been raised before (8:25; 9:9). Jesus asked them what they had heard people say about him. Perhaps Jesus already

knew the opinions of the crowds as he had had plenty of interaction with them.

Because the crowds did not see Jesus as the Messiah leads us to conclude that Jesus had made no such claims before the crowd or else they would have eagerly proclaimed him Messiah.

The first answer the disciples gave was the same basic answer to Jesus’ identity that was presented in Luke 9:7-9. Here, the popular opinions made their way all the way to Herod Antipas. Apparently, even though the crowd did not know the manner of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, being fed in Jesus’ presence by his disciples led to an affirmation of the popular opinion that Jesus was Elijah. The crowd already knew of Jesus as a healer even before Jesus healed Jairus’s daughter (Lk 8:41ff). Feeder and healer are two characteristics associated with Elijah (see 1 Kings 17:8-24). Familiarity with Malachi 4:5-6 would also encourage the crowd to perceive Jesus as Elijah.

The connection with John the Baptist was a little more problematic. The crowds would surely know that Herod had killed John the Baptist. Instead of seeing Jesus as the Messiah, the crowd instead saw him as the forerunner of the Messiah. Fred Craddock has said that if the

crowd had seen Jesus as the Messiah, they could no longer continue to shape the Messiah to their expectations. Instead, they would have had to deal with who Jesus was.¹ Not seeing Jesus as the Messiah kept hope alive that the Messiah would come and win the battle against Rome and set them free. Obviously, Jesus was not going to do this. Jesus as the forerunner of the Messiah was a lot easier to deal with than Jesus as the Messiah.

But Jesus is not content just to hear the popular understanding. He likely posed this question to the disciples (9:18) to see if the disciples were ready to go beyond the popular understanding of his function. By asking the disciples what they thought, he was signaling that the crowd had it wrong. He wanted to know what the disciples understood about him.

On behalf of all the disciples, Peter answered that Jesus was the Christ of God. By indicating that Jesus was the Christ of God, Peter continued previous confessions about Jesus in Luke made by the angels at his birth (2:11), Luke as narrator (2:26) and the demons (4:41). Jesus was more than a prophet, a forerunner of the anointed one. Jesus was the anointed one.

In the Gospel of Mark, Peter simply called Jesus “the messiah” (8:29).

Peter’s addition in Luke conveys the disciples’ understanding that Jesus’ anointing was from God. Luke used Peter’s declaration to show the history of God’s salvation: Jesus is the Christ of God, i.e., part of God’s plan.

Scholar I. Howard Marshall has wondered why the disciples would have a different understanding than the crowds. He has said that only the disciples knew two previous events—the raising from the dead of Jairus’s daughter (Lk 8:41–42, 49–56) and the miracle of the feeding of the multitude (Lk 9:12–17). Jesus explicitly kept the knowledge of the miracle of Jairus’s daughter from the public (Lk 8:56), and the actual blessing and breaking of the loaves and fish when Jesus fed the five thousand occurred only before the disciples.

Marshall has suggested that through these two events the disciples came to know Jesus beyond the role of the prophet the crowds saw. Through these two events the disciples understood Jesus to be the giver of life and the provider of the messianic banquet.²

This would indicate that by having a closer relationship with Jesus, and knowing more than just what could be easily observed, the disciples were in a position truly to know who Jesus was.

Apply the Biblical Witness

So what? What difference does it make to our daily lives that the Scripture deals with this account of Jesus’ life?

I have found it extremely useful in my growth as a Christian to pay extra attention to the places in Scripture where Jesus asks a question.

These questions were important enough to the Gospel writers to include in their accounts. Since each Gospel was written with a particular audience in mind, the questions were important in shaping the beliefs of the early church. Likewise, Jesus’ questions in Scripture are extremely important in shaping our stories as Jesus’ followers.

Clarence Jordan was a New Testament scholar and a farmer. He was the founder of Koinonia Farms in Americus, Ga., and the translator of the *Cotton Patch Version* of much of the New Testament. Jordan grew up in the mid-20th century, when southern Christian religion justified segregation of blacks and whites. Much of the rhetoric was the same as what had been heard in the slavery debates a century before. Southern civil religion supported a segregated society, and most religious leaders were not willing to hear the words of equality in Scripture.

Jordan was too much of a New Testament scholar to be thrown off by civil religion and its justification of prejudice. He knew what Jesus taught. So, Jordan founded Koinonia Farms as an integrated farming community modeling love and care for people of all colors.

The real danger of making Jesus into a civil religionist is that we don’t really hear what Jesus says. Our religion most often becomes an endorsement of society instead of being the “light” for truth.

Israel rebelled against the message of its prophets because the prophets’ messages from God usually ran contrary to Israel’s reliance on its kings and its treaties.

Civil religionists accept blindly a nation’s patriotism regardless of whether the position is biblical. Civil religionists declare, “My country right or wrong.” True followers of Christ will be prophetic in their approach to patriotism.

The church can easily fall into the civil religion trap and hear the voice of society’s Jesus and not the Jesus of New Testament faith. Relating this to the text, the crowd’s understanding of Jesus was not who Jesus really was.

As Christians we must work to let Christ be Christ. Experience teaches

us that we should be extremely leery of any use of Jesus and his teaching to justify actions of the state.

As Baptists, we have a long history of experiencing the use of religion as a weapon against us. That is not to say that all actions of the state are bad, but we must be discerning in evaluating religious reasons to support state actions.

We can work to let Christ be Christ by dedicating ourselves to the study of the Bible firsthand, not just hearing it through teachers, preachers and other interpreters. One of the great outcomes of the Reformation was that the Bible was put in the hands of the people. Read it and discuss it with other Christians.

We can also observe how God is acting in the world around us. Hear the testimony of others about how God is working to heal relationships and minister to the broken lives of people. Such action is inclusive and reaches across gender, racial and economic barriers. Evaluate the message being proclaimed in Jesus' name by your own experience with him.

After the disciples were able to discern the true Jesus from the competing images of the crowds, Jesus was able to guide them further along in their understanding. May we do practice such discernment and

experience such insight and commitment. ☹️

Wayne Hager is pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, North Carolina.

1. Fred Craddock, Luke, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 127.

2. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 364.

Who Is Your Neighbor?

Luke 10:25–37

**“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor?”
—Luke 10:36**

Every day, I drive by people on street corners begging for money or work. How many times have I been in line at the grocery store and observed a person struggling with English in order to communicate with the store personnel? Or what about the stranger sitting on the step crying or the small child walking home from school all alone?

Are these people really my neighbors? Am I willing to take the risk to involve myself with these people?

In Luke 10:25–37, Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan was prompted by a question from an expert in the Jewish law: “Who is my neighbor?”

Jesus chose to use a surprising hero as one who demonstrated real

understanding of the law. He turned the question “Who is my neighbor?” into the active question “To whom should I be a neighbor?”

The parable challenges us to consider that since we love God, whom we can’t see, we should surely love those around us that we can see. Indeed, how can we say we love God, if in our “neighborliness” we choose to love only those we deem socially acceptable to ourselves?

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a lesson about discovering who our neighbors are.

Explore the Biblical Witness

The context of this parable is Jesus’ answer to the question from the teacher of the law who was trying to trap Jesus.

This man was probably a Pharisee, one of a Jewish religious group who saw the “oral tradition” about the law as equal with the written law. It was in his scholarly tradition to pose such a question to a respected rabbi and then discuss what the law meant by quoting other experts from the past. But in this case, he hoped that the question would serve as a trap for Jesus.

In verse 25, the original question he asked Jesus was, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus refused to be caught in the trap and turned the questioning back to the law expert by asking him what the Scriptures said about the question and how he interpreted them.

Jesus asked, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” (v. 25)

Jesus didn’t ask what the oral tradition said about the question. Rather Jesus asked what the written law said about the question.

The expert gave Jesus the correct answer, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27). Jesus agreed with this answer and replied, “Do this, and you will live” (v. 28).

Jesus saw no need for further discussion when the law was plain in its requirements. But the teacher of the law wanted to justify himself in the eyes of the surrounding crowd. He asked, “Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29).

For Jesus, this was an amazing thing: here was a supposed expert in the law of God who did not understand what the law meant. It was the expert’s last question that prompted Jesus to tell the story of the good Samaritan.

Jesus said a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked and left him for dead. Jesus did not identify the man. We don’t know if he was Jewish, Greek, Roman, a Pharisee, a Sadducee, rich or poor; we are not told. We simply know he was someone in need. Three people journeying in their daily lives came on a person in need.

First, a priest came down the road, saw the man and walked by on the other side. For the Pharisee, the priest would have been one of his chief competitors for understanding the Jewish religion. The priest represented the height of Jewish religion. They were the ones who offered sacrifices in the temple. If Jesus had been telling the story today, he would likely have used a pastor.

Jesus may have intended his audience to think the priest had been ministering in the temple. Likely, the audience was surprised the priest did not stop and help. The teacher of the law may have taken secret delight in that a member of a respected religious group in Judaism failed to help.

Next, a Levite approached. He even went over and looked at the man, yet he passed by without helping him (v. 32). The Levites cared for the temple and assisted the priests in the worship. A modern counterpart

might be a minister of music.

Again, the teacher of the law may have taken secret delight in that a member of another respected religious group in Judaism failed to help. Perhaps the expert in the law expected that Jesus would make the hero of the story a Pharisee. Instead, Jesus gave a jaw dropping ending to the parable, at least to most Jews.

The hero was a Samaritan, a “half-breed,” hated by the Jews for centuries. Jews so despised Samaritans that when Jews from Galilee went to Judea they refused to walk across Samaria; instead, they took the long way around, walking many miles out of their way to avoid contact with these people.

Here was a man deemed unclean and uneducated in the law who clearly understood who his neighbor was. He became involved with someone who needed him. He didn’t question the man’s identity. His social status, his ethnicity, his religious and political leanings were unimportant to the Samaritan. He was simply a person in need.

The Samaritan tended to him, put him on his own animal and took him to an inn where he cared for him that night. The next day he gave the innkeeper two denarii, the equivalent of two days’ wages. He told the innkeeper to care for him until he

returned. He promised to pay any additional charges at that time.

Jesus then turned to the teacher of the law and asked, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v. 36).

The teacher of the law couldn’t bring himself to say the word “Samaritan.” He simply replied that the neighbor was the one who showed mercy (v. 37).

Jesus replied, “Go and do likewise” (v. 37). Clearly, showing mercy involved acts of kindness to strangers.

Jesus’ final question to the expert changed the focus of the question from, “Who is my neighbor?” to “Who acted like a neighbor to the one in need?” Jesus said true neighbors were those who helped the needy in their midst.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Jesus made loving our neighbors an active part of our Christian life that is tied to our love for God. The real question Christians must ask themselves is, “How can we say we love God if we don’t love those whom God created?” (see 1 Jn 4:20).

Now, what do we do with the struggling strangers whose paths we

cross? Can we help all of them?

I can’t answer what other Christians should do when confronted with these situations. But I can make some suggestions about how we can actively train ourselves in the habit of being a “neighbor.” Here are some neighborhood habits for Christians:

Volunteer to help at a food pantry or soup kitchen several times in the next few weeks. Enter into conversation with those persons receiving aid.

Volunteer with others to help work on the home of a poor family or elderly person and get to know the residents. This could be through Habitat for Humanity or a neighborhood rehab program. Or your church could partner with another church to provide home repairs for elderly persons.

Volunteer to help and/or observe an emergency center where the poor are served. Examples might include the emergency waiting room at your county hospital, the courthouse where hearings and trials take place, the food stamp center, the Social Security office, the driver’s license office or a legal aid office. Talk to the people seeking aid and offer to advocate on their behalf.

Visit the unemployment office and enter into dialogue with those

making application.

Volunteer to go with a social worker or police officer on visits that will help you understand the struggles of the poor.

Involve yourself in a prison ministry, teach Bible studies or English, or just be a friend to an inmate and listen to his or her story. Work in a prison hospitality house as a volunteer.

Work on a team or ministry that is involved in a mentoring relationship with a welfare-to-work family.

Support, adopt or become involved in ministry with a refugee family. Visit them in their home and invite them to your home to hear their struggles, learn their culture and offer hope.

Tutor a child who needs some extra encouragement to succeed.

None of these will finally solve the world’s problems, but they will help us become more sensitive to the needs of “neighbors” all around us.

We must train ourselves to be good neighbors. In the end, that is what Jesus requires of us, that we be neighbors.

So, I pose the same question to you that was posed to Jesus, “Who is my

neighbor?” And the reply is resounding: anyone who has need of me! 🌱

Karen Gilbert is minister of missions at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Her husband, Tim, is professor of philosophy and religion at Tarrant County College.

Subscribe to *bcE*byte*

A weekly e-newsletter
for congregational leaders,
expressing opinions,
digesting surveys and
creating a proactive network

E-mail info@ethicsdaily.com
with the message
“Subscribe bcE*byte”

It's free!

Didn't God Make Both the Inside and the Outside?

Luke 11:37–44

**“Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?”
—Luke 11:40**

Judging someone's outward behavior is so much easier than evaluating someone's attitude. But God examines our attitudes because they influence how we respond outwardly. What is on the inside comes out.

Maybe you've heard this saying recently: “You can't judge a book by its cover.” This popular proverb tries to capture an important truth: what you see on the outside may not reveal what's inside—in a person or a book.

Jesus stressed the importance of integrating what's outside with what's inside. Some of Jesus'

strongest words were directed against “hypocrisy”—a situation in which a person's outside and inside were essentially a mismatch with each other. Jesus insisted that what is inside persons will influence directly their outward behavior.

Explore the Biblical Witness

According to this passage, a Pharisee invited Jesus to share a meal at the Pharisee's home (v. 37). As a Pharisee, the host belonged to a scrupulously religious group of men who tried to follow carefully the law of the Old Testament and to apply it quite seriously in their own life situations. Their frequent conflicts with Jesus, evidenced in all four Gospels, arose from radically different approaches to Scripture.

Both Jesus and the Pharisees were serious about applying the Bible to life. But they approached the Bible in different ways. Jesus was most interested in the spiritual principle or thrust of meaning from God in a passage. He wanted to know why a particular passage said what it did.

On the other hand, the Pharisees always asked: “What does this passage say, literally and legalistically, about my religious practice before God?” Jesus knew how to take the Bible seriously without always taking it too literally; but the Pharisees could never separate the

two. They were intent on their strict, literalistic legalism in applying the Bible to life.

In fact, the Pharisees became so serious about religious life they invented their own tradition of strict rules by which God's people should live. Based on their strict reading of biblical passages, they devised and passed along their own biblical interpretations. Called the “tradition of the elders,” these interpretations were intended to maintain their own—and the people's—holiness and “religiosity” (but the Pharisees called it “righteousness”).

However, in Luke 11, Jesus clearly repudiated the Pharisees' system of interpreting the Bible. He frequently was “on the other side” of interpretation. Even risking their rejection as a “blasphemer,” he flatly condemned as fatally flawed the definition of “righteousness” that resulted from the Pharisees' inadequate approach to Scripture (see Mt 5:20).

One of the “traditions of the elders” was washing one's hands before eating a meal. Not required in the Hebrew Scripture, this specific action was adopted “above and beyond” the Bible's own statements about ceremonial washing or cleansing of oneself.

Jesus and his disciples did not observe this ritual devised by men.

So Jesus' host was scandalized by the failure of his biblically oriented Jewish guest to wash his hands (v. 38).

Arriving at the table, Jesus must have noticed that the table setting was neatly and perfectly arranged. Every table vessel was sparkling clean and waiting to be used. Then Jesus observed the persnickety Pharisee who was concerned that all details of the setting be “just right” (including Jesus' “unclean” hands!) but who was missing the whole point of table fellowship with a fellow Jew.

Jesus used the table vessels to provide a convenient metaphor and taught his host a profound lesson about people who are genuinely spiritual rather than merely “super religious.”

“You Pharisees are so intensely preoccupied with externals in religion! Look at the fuss you're making over clean cups and dishes. You are even willing to ruin wonderful table fellowship over the issue of clean hands. You are serious, aren't you, about scrubbing and polishing the outside—the external?” Jesus perceived correctly that Pharisaical religion was too often done “for show” and not for God. He warned against such practices (Mt 6:1ff).

Clean hands? Sure. Much more

important than “clean hands” was down deep inside cleanliness. Jesus sliced through the sham of showy piety into the deeper shame of shoddy ethics. What good is a public display of religiosity from the same person whose heart is set on greed, even to the extent of robbing others?

God can see what is happening much clearer than others see. “The Lord sees not as humans see; people look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7, author’s paraphrase). Don’t expect to fool a God who knows the interior by engaging in a host of exterior acts. God remains unimpressed.

Jesus emphasized to his Pharisaical listeners that God created both the inside and the outside of the vessel of our personhood—just as a potter makes a whole clay vessel.

Who are we fooling when we try to act as if the two can be disengaged? Certainly not God! Jesus affirmed that God had made us whole persons. He had made both the inside and the outside. Whole beings cannot be split without deep and serious damage to their formation under God.

Our Creator-designed humanity is best maintained only in its wholeness. To begin to reduce us to fragmented parts is to lose spiritual

health and psycho-emotional vitality. Artificially separated parts are easier to manage, arrange and manipulate—but there’s no real life in those forms. Life is lived in whole experience rather than dissected, “feel good” compartments.

The Pharisees were expert in dissecting life into its little segments that could be controlled, in every detail, so that proof of purity and righteousness might be demonstrated.

Jesus didn’t let them get away with it. A cup has an outside and an inside—don’t wash just the one. A coin has two sides—don’t expect to separate them. A person consists of both external and internal realities—pay sufficient attention to both.

The Pharisees much preferred the pure and clean parts of people, even if it meant relating to only a fraction of a person’s life. Pharisees designed their own itchy-bitsy comfort zones and then proceeded to guard them with picky, pious perfectionism. They tithed the herb garden, leaf for leaf—exactly one leaf in 10 went to the temple (see vv. 42–44). They insisted that hands were washed as a man-made ritual of appearing clean before God. They prayed a noisy public petition, to impress others, and went away self-impressed, too.

Referring to the alms-giving of his host (v. 41), Jesus focused on the

heart’s desire from within to engage in acts of mercy. Mercy gifts were hypocritical when they came from someone who begrudged the loss of that money. Jesus accused his “clean hands” host of having a dirty heart, one smudged in greed and stained with robbery. How could such a man even consider alms-giving to others as a legitimate statement of his spiritual state?

Jesus seems to be saying that what stays inside our heart carries much more spiritual significance than what leaves our hand—dirt or denarius/dollars! Our inner life of thought and attitude will influence our outward behavior and relationships. What you have internalized regarding your real beliefs about loving God and loving neighbor will come out. So spend much more of your time and effort focusing on your inner person, not merely “washing” the outside you want people to see.

Jesus’ point about alms-giving is quite clear: “The outside will take care of itself when the inside is correct; then all that you are will be clean before God.” The word Jesus used for “clean” is *katharos*, from which we get the word *catharsis*—cleansing, purifying, renewing. Come on, Pharisees! Clean up your act, spiritually speaking. Even our keeping of the biblical injunction to give alms must rise from an internal principle of relationship, not merely

the external practice of ritual.

Apply the Biblical Witness

The counselor looked her squarely in the eye. Once again he asked her, gently but firmly, “But what do you want from your life? I’m talking about the person down deep inside you (not about the roles you play as wife, mother, church worker, cook, housekeeper, carpool driver, community volunteer, etc.). What does she want—your real, inner person?”

For any one of us, our wholeness, health and happiness come easier when the person outside reflects accurately the person who lives inside. The inside must come out.

The company president determines within herself to begin a new approach. From now on, she will listen to the complaints of her staff differently. She takes these comments to be valuable feedback toward improving overall operations. No longer are they labeled “gripes” or “whining.” After all, she reasons, if these competent people I have hired did not care about our work together and its results, then they would not bother to speak up at all. And guess what happens? Personal morale and productivity, not to mention corporate profits, reach all-time high levels.

Study Notes

The very concerned father of a very adolescent son worries about the occasional brief outbursts of this normally cooperative teen-ager. Dad becomes anxious over Junior's rebellious self-assertions. What's ahead for this child and for this family? Catastrophes of all kinds suggest themselves to Dad's fearful imagination.

Finally, a veteran parent provides a different perspective. The helpful mentor suggests that it's appropriate, and even necessary, for this child-struggling-to-become-an-adult teenager to "test his wings" of independence by pushing away decisively from the ones who have been so close. Sometimes the very strength of pushing away reveals just how close and valuable the nurturing relationship has been.

Dad's anxiety gives way to understanding; fear is replaced by insight. And he resolves to welcome the son into the adult world with more calmness and gentle support. No longer will he even unconsciously try to hold him back in a child's world of immature power plays.

Junior's next hypercritical tirade is handled quite differently. Dad receives it, listens calmly, and responds with a quiet and controlled question: "So, what do you suggest we do about this problem? You are obviously very frustrated. And you

are also right—we need to fix it. I would value your opinion on the matter. Let's work on it together to discover a solution."

And what's inside will come out in wholeness and in health. ☹️

Don Garner is a religion professor at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee.

What Is the Kingdom of God Like?

Luke 13:18-21

**“What is the Kingdom of God like?”
—Luke 13:18**

When a friend offered us a starter lump of sourdough bread, we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. This little lump of dough seemed innocent enough, and although we knew we would have to feed it, we would never have to take it for a walk. How could we know that we would have to cook like crazy or sit silently and watch as sourdough took over our whole refrigerator?

We cooked loaves of bread, rolls, sweet rolls, and every delicious delight imaginable, but we just could not keep pace with the “once little, now large” lump of dough in the refrigerator. We started conning our friends—as we had been conned—into taking a little lump home, feeding it, and enjoying endless

baking success. Despite our effort to “share” our sourdough “success” with our friends, we eventually had to throw the monstrous mass of a leavened lump into the trashcan. Finally we were free from the ever-growing gourmet goulash that was eating us out of house and home!

What started so small radically transformed our refrigerator space.

Only kudzu can grow as rapidly as my wife’s sourdough starter. For the 100th birthday party for the United States, countries were invited to build exhibits at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Japanese government constructed a beautiful garden filled with their native plants. The large leaves and sweet smelling blooms of kudzu captured the imagination of American gardeners who soon began to use the plant for ornamental purposes.

That was the beginning, and the end is out of sight.

While kudzu grows like an ordinary plant in Japan, the climate in the southern United States causes the plant to go absolutely wild. The problem is that kudzu grows too well! The vines grow as much as one foot per day during summer months. This vigorous vine grows over entire houses, abandoned cars, telephone poles, or anything standing in its

way. Country lore has it that southern mothers keep close watch on their little ones while they are sleeping lest wild kudzu vines sneak in and choke the children!

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has estimated that kudzu has crept over more than 7 million acres, consuming 120,000 fresh acres each year from Florida to New York and west to central Oklahoma and Texas. What began as an ornamental Japanese garden is literally taking over the southern United States. Instructions on a bag of kudzu seeds read, “Throw the seeds and run. Very fast!”

Where it grows, kudzu has the ability to eliminate native plant species and upset the natural diversity of entire plant communities. It kills natural vegetation through crowding and shading, even stifling agricultural and timber production.

Since landowners in the south have not found a way to overcome kudzu—in fact, herbicides only make it grow faster—they have tried to develop creative ways to use the weedy vine. You can smoke it, cook it, weave baskets out of it, or produce jelly and syrup from it. But you might as well find a way to enjoy it because you cannot beat the vine that ate the South! Love it, or hate it ... it grows on you!¹

Explore the Biblical Witness

And so it is with the kingdom of God. Christ’s coming inaugurated the kingdom of God on earth. The coming of God’s kingdom was not the once-for-all confrontation between a military Messiah and the powers of the Roman Empire envisioned by first-century Jews.

Rather, this less than catastrophic entrance of the kingdom of God began with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. While merchants were busy trading and innkeepers were busy serving demanding guests, the kingdom of God quietly entered into the world through the birth of Jesus. What began so humbly was but the beginning of a kingdom that will ultimately grow great and powerful until it fulfills the purposes of God.

As we follow Jesus, our lives will be different because we bear the Spirit of Christ and belong to God’s kingdom. As God’s kingdom spreads on earth, his rule in our own lives increases as we yield ourselves to him, as we yield our will to his will.

Jesus’ brief parables about the growth of the kingdom of God found in Luke 13:18–21 are introduced with a story of healing on the Sabbath. The healing of the crippled woman (vv. 10–17) demonstrates God’s saving power over the forces of evil.

This demonstration of the reign and rule of God should have been a sign to the people of God that the kingdom of God was at hand. The healing declared that God was at work, that his reign had begun in the person of Jesus. By healing the woman on the Sabbath, moreover, Jesus was trying to make clear that people are more important than rules (see lesson on Luke 6:6-11).²

Parable I, The Mighty Mustard Seed

“He said therefore, ‘What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches’” (Lk 13:18-19).

While God’s kingdom may have had a humble beginning, it is no less present. For as Jesus explained in this brief parable, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that, although among the tiniest of all seeds, yields a plant large enough for the birds to nest in its branches. God’s kingdom is in process from a tiny beginning to a tremendous end. The healing of the crippled woman on the Sabbath is but a sample of God’s power to overturn evil in an ultimate, climactic battle (v. 16).

Jesus apparently was still in the synagogue (v. 18, “Therefore”) as he

proceeded from the healing of the woman to the parables about the process of the kingdom of God. As in some Old Testament passages, the birds in this first parable may represent the kingdoms of the world, thus showing how the kingdom of God grows to worldwide size (Dan 4:12, 21; Ps 104:12; Ezek 17:23). Luke did not want his readers to be discouraged by the obscurity of the origins of God’s kingdom. God will bring to fruition the seed of the kingdom that he has planted.

Parable II, The Leavened Lump

“And again he said, ‘To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened’” (Lk 13:20-21).

The second parable strengthens the case already made by the first. God is like both the man who plants the seed and watches it grow into a tree and the woman who works a small amount of leaven into a great amount of flour to allow the fermentation process to permeate the entire lump of dough.

The word Jesus used for “three measures of flour” represents enough dough to feed 160 people. Ancient Hebrews kneaded a piece of fermented dough from a previous baking into their dough (Mt 13:33).

As the process of leavening occurred at night, the whole mass of dough was transformed. Anyone who has been given a “sourdough starter” knows what it means for the fermenting process to permeate larger and larger amounts of dough! While leaven usually symbolizes evil in Scripture—such as the hypocritical teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 16:6; Lk 13:21) or malice and wickedness (1 Cor 5:6-8)—here it represents the pervasive kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is about transformation from the tiniest seed to a great tree, from a small bit of yeast into a completely leavened loaf. This transformation may appear to go on quietly. However, when viewed under a microscope, the process of yeast working is viewed as a series of small bubbles exploding and a violent action taking place. What God is doing is radical, indeed.

Apply the Biblical Witness

So what? Does the presence of the Kingdom of God among his people not demand that we live lives that are radically different from the world? As his kingdom grows within us, how will we be different?

Materialism—Will we be caught up in the materialistic values of a consumer culture? Are we working only to buy ourselves bigger and

better houses, cars, and electronic gadgets? Do we measure others and ourselves by the size of our bank account or stock portfolio? Are God’s people willing to simplify their lives for kingdom work and kingdom purposes (Mt 6:19–21)?

Relationships (race, gender, beauty)—Will we judge people based on superficial criteria, or will we look at their hearts as God does? The Madison Avenue mentality driving modern marketers places value on youth and beauty. Are we willing to build communities that are truly gender-blind and color-blind (1 Sam 16:7)?

Forgiveness—Will we dispense forgiveness to those who have wronged us as God has dispensed grace to us? The unwillingness to forgive is inexcusable for Christians. Those who have enjoyed God’s grace must also respond in grace. To deny forgiveness to others is to deny God’s forgiveness for ourselves (Mt 18:21–35).


Fruit of the Spirit—Will our lives be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control? As God’s kingdom expands within us, our lives must exude the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23).

Hope—Will we be permeated with kingdom hope in times of despair?

Unlike the world, we have eternal hope. God is in control of everything. He is our creator, redeemer, and sustainer (1 Thess 4:13).

For years, Tom's family prayed for him, hoping he would develop a personal relationship with Christ. Tom had once been a sailor who embodied all the world's woes. And a recent test told Tom he had prostate cancer at the young age of 42.

Partly as a response to the fear invoked by such startling news, Tom began coming to church, receiving gospel seeds sown in each worship service. As the seeds germinated in his heart, he was radically transformed. The presence of God's kingdom in Tom's life made him a different man. The change in Tom was both evident and explosive. When they have sprouted, kingdom seeds radically transform our lives.

Perhaps kingdom seeds, like kudzu seeds, should also bear a warning: Beware! Once the kingdom of God takes over your heart, your entire life will be radically changed. 

Howie Batson is pastor of First Baptist Church, Amarillo, Texas.

1. The Kudzu File, <http://ernie.gbsu.edu/~ckile/south/kudzuwhat.html>; Scientists Closing in on Kudzu, <http://www.charlotte.com/0203kudzu.htm>; Kudzu, <http://dailyrevolution.org/>

Monday/kudzu.html; How Fast Can You Run?, <http://www.cs.nmt.edu/~cort?kudzu/>; The Amazing Story of Kudzu, <http://www.cptr.us.edu/kudzu/>

2. I. Howard Marshall, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 559-562.

What Is Faithful Stewardship?

Luke 16:1–13

**“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”
—Luke 16:11**

Molly Ivins wrote a newspaper column titled “Hardtimes: The under 40s are getting a taste of the Crash of ’29.” She discussed the downturn in tech stocks in the last year and the fortunes that have been lost in the process. Ivins said, “It’s hard to know what to say to someone who was worth \$200,000 last year and is worth \$20,000 this year.”

The thrust of her commentary was that the real problem is not losing their money, but losing their faith. Their faith in life was tied up with the accumulation of wealth in the “new” economy.

The relationship between wealth and

the spiritual life is a centuries-old problem. The influence of wealth on our spiritual lives is addressed repeatedly in Scripture. The Gospel of Luke, more than any other Gospel, deals with the issue of possessions and wealth. Luke has 25 passages relating to material possessions, while Matthew and Mark have only 12 combined. Approximately 27 percent of some 600 verses in Luke (chapters 3–22) relate to the theme of wealth.

Luke also heightens interest in possessions in passages he shares in common with Matthew and Mark. In other words, the Gospel of Luke emphasizes the place of “things” in the life of a Christian. The issue of material possessions plays an important part in the story of the early church, as portrayed in Luke’s companion work, the Book of Acts (note in particular the importance of the community-summary passages in Acts 2:43ff and Acts 4:32ff).

Explore the Biblical Witness

Luke 16:1–9 is commonly called the parable of the dishonest manager. Depending on interpretation, some call this the parable of the prudent steward. The two names for the parable indicate the problem that some interpreters have with this parable.

Since Jesus commended the

manager/steward, it disturbs us if we call him dishonest. I prefer to call the manager prudent or shrewd. Even this describes the manager in terms about which most Christians feel uneasy.

Most commentators mention two options for the actions of the manager: either he simply reduced his own commission which was already built into the amount owed, or he falsified the amounts owed to his master in order to gain favor with other people. Either way, keep in mind that Jesus did not commend the actual action of the manager but his shrewdness in using money to help himself and others.

Jesus did not say we were to be dishonest or self-serving. Rather, the commendation involved the shrewdness of the manager. Be it dishonest or self-serving, the manager’s use of money served him well.

The parable by itself suggests that the manager was able to determine his circumstance and then act accordingly. People should act with the same discernment to the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. The parable used material possessions to make this point because the next set of teachings turns explicitly to Jesus’ instructions on the use of possessions.

In verse 9, Jesus interpreted the

parable. Jesus encouraged the disciples to make friends for themselves by use of dishonest wealth. The “dishonest wealth” should probably be interpreted simply as worldly wealth, without attaching a moral value to it.

Jesus was not suggesting that the disciples gain wealth dishonestly. Jesus was speaking of using worldly wealth to give alms, which in the Jewish mindset secured a place in the coming kingdom. While this sounds like works theology, it would have connected with the listeners to make the point that the use of wealth among the disciples is associated with sacrifice. The disciples were encouraged to use wealth for a spiritual end.

The instructions in 16:10–13 are not dependent on the previous parable for their interpretation. Most commentators feel that Luke probably took the opportunity of the earlier parable to gather other instruction of Jesus about possessions. The instructions, however, continue some of the themes apparent in the parable.

Verse 10 is an example of a secular truth being used for a religious lesson. By its context, faithfulness is portrayed as a quality expected in a steward. The opposite of faithfulness, in the saying, is dishonesty. Such dishonesty would certainly be expected among worldly people.

The verse says our riches indicate the way in which we will respond to God. If we mishandle our possessions, we are sure to mishandle the greater matters of the kingdom of God.

This saying reminds us that life is a series of seemingly small opportunities that show how faithful we will be in the great opportunities. If we fail in the everyday activities, how could we expect to be up to the task in the great opportunities of faith?

Verse 11 sets up the real possibility that disciples may not act faithfully with worldly possessions. The use of faith in connection with such possessions indicates that the use of worldly possessions has a spiritual dimension to it—and the disciple can make the wrong choice.

The use of the term “dishonest wealth” (v. 11) connects the readers back to the parable where the main character is a steward, not an owner. “True riches” refers to the reality of the age to come—a heavenly treasure. Here is the point of the question: If you cannot handle worldly possessions in an appropriate way, can you handle the gospel and the new age to come?

The importance of material stewardship for believers continues in verse 12. Worldly possessions are now defined as “what belongs to an-

other.” Worldly possessions are not owned by the disciples but are rather held in trust from God. If the disciples cannot act faithfully with what is really God’s, they will not receive what is their only true and sure possession—their heavenly treasure.

The concluding verse 13 has a double warning: a warning against being unfaithful in God’s service; and a warning against being enslaved by wealth. The disciple is called a slave. God is the master. A slave can only be of first-rate service to a master if the slave is totally devoted to the master. If anyone else demands such devotion, it is impossible to serve both equally. One master will be cheated.

Verse 13 specifies the two masters Jesus had in mind: God and money. If accumulation of wealth is the focus of life, no room can be left for devotion to God. Wealth, itself, is not a threat to God. The wealthy Christian is not by definition unfaithful to God. At issue is whether money is worshiped because of one’s commitment to accumulate more and more wealth.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Living in a material world is a given for most Christians. Few people live a monastic lifestyle where worldly possessions are given up entirely. In reality, making the

one-time decision to give up everything may cause less stress than having to maintain a responsible relationship with one’s wealth.

The Bible passage affirms that Jesus’ disciples must wrestle with the issue of wealth. The parable itself encourages us to make an accurate assessment of our situation and act accordingly. The passage also concludes that there is a responsible way to deal with wealth. We can use wealth to secure what is truly valuable. The real problem is figuring out the relationship.

This passage points to a connection between material possessions and one’s spiritual life. This connection is a matter of faith. Faith entails making a decision about what is most important in life and then responding accordingly.

Worldly possessions are not owned by anyone in this world—everything belongs to God. We are simply stewards of our possessions. Possessions themselves are not bad. What matters is the place they have in our lives. If “worldly wealth” is central to our decision-making, then it occupies the place reserved for God. As a result of God’s dislocation, we will not grow spiritually and will not enjoy the “real wealth” of relationship with Christ.

What are some of the actions we can

take to ensure that possessions occupy the correct place in our lives?

Tithe—One area of consideration is the matter of the tithe (10 percent). The tithe forces us to adjust our lifestyle in order to return a tenth. It also reminds us that we really do not own all we think we do.

Recently one of the saints of our church died. She was not a wealthy woman in a material sense but was one of the most spiritual people I have known. She left all of her belongings to her daughter. As a tribute to her mother’s understanding of the correct place of material possessions in one’s life, her daughter gave our church a tithe of her mother’s estate. As a result of this donation we have been able to begin a number of new ministries and complete some tasks that reap weekly benefits for God’s kingdom. The mother’s legacy of support of the church continued even past her death—all because she and her daughter properly understood possessions in the life of a disciple.

Ministry—A second way to ensure the proper perspective is to get involved in the ministry of the kingdom—even if it is, as verse 10 indicates, the small matters of ministry. Opportunities to minister to such people as the homeless, the poor, the disenfranchised, the sick

and the imprisoned, bring a certain degree of perspective to our lives. Often, such ministry touches us more than it does the ones to whom we minister. We often see evidence of great faith in the midst of little that the material world has to offer.

On a recent trip to Honduras, our church mission team was moved by the faith of people who waited excitedly for us to build them a home that was a 20-by-15-foot room with a dirt floor and no electricity or water/plumbing. Yet, their times of worship were filled with more excitement and sheer joy than most us have experienced in our worship in years. We learned the relative value of material things to a joyous spiritual life.

Pray—A third thing to do is pray. Pray that God will move in your spirit to affirm His ownership of everything. Pray that you will see God's movement in the world around you and that you will respond to the call to use the resources God has given you for his kingdom.

Wrestling with material possessions is a reality for our society. But with God's grace, we can value what is true and lasting. True spiritual growth will occur in our lives only when we have gained a proper understanding of material wealth and then put that understanding into practice. 🌳

Wayne Hager is pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, North Carolina.

Does Obedience Demand Praise?

Luke 17:7-10

**“Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?”
—Luke 17:9**

A-Rod or Alex Rodriguez signed a 10-year, \$252 million contract with the Texas Rangers baseball club. What would his manager say if A-Rod began complaining that the opposing team was hitting the ball too hard for him to field it easily, or throwing it too fast for him to hit it? The manager’s reply probably is unprintable here, but the gist would be, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” A man who’s making more than \$154,000 per game has no room to complain.

We live in a society where people expect rewards for anything done acceptably well. Many employees expect and often receive bonuses merely for showing up and doing their jobs and nothing more.

Some people bring this attitude into the church. Some church members think their service to God through the church entitles them to a reward. Yet, that model does not hold true in the God-believer relationship, despite all the preaching to the contrary.

For all that God has done for us, our attitude should be heartfelt thanks and a willingness to serve selflessly and without expectation of recognition or reward. We have no right to expect anything else. Jesus did not teach righteousness by works.

Explore the Biblical Witness

In Luke 17:7–10, Jesus gave an analogy of how Christians relate to God—as slaves. We don’t like the word slave because of the negative connotations it carries. Mention of the word brings to mind the horrific treatment and conditions under which slaves have lived and still do live in many parts of the world.

In the first century, however, slavery was an accepted practice. Slavery operated on several levels then. Some people were enslaved for debt and worked for the one they owed until the debt was paid. Others were criminals who worked to repay their victims. Still other slaves were prisoners taken in war and given to members of the conquering army or to supportive citizens.

Using the practice for illustrative purposes, Jesus did not condone slavery any more than he approved of any other sin. Indeed, no one can own a slave and take seriously Jesus’ teaching to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Jesus taught that his kingdom is not of this world, but of heaven. He came to set us free from sin regardless of the physical shackles. However, since slavery was part of first-century society, Jesus used it as an example to teach a vital truth.

If a person were an indentured slave, a redeemer could buy the slave’s freedom by paying what was owed. Relatives often bought family members out of slavery if they could afford it. If ever you were in debt, you wanted to be in good standing with your family—especially those who had money!

How a slave was treated depended on the master, but the master owned the slave and could do with the slave, or have the slave do, whatever he pleased. Thus, to demand that the slave prepare dinner on top of the other duties was not unusual or harsh treatment. Jesus used a slave-master encounter to make a point about a believer’s relationship to God. He began with “Who among you ... ?” (v. 7), anticipating a negative response. “Surely none among us” would be the answer. No one who owned a slave would invite the slave to dinner.

Instead, the slave in Jesus’ example was expected to prepare dinner for the master, even after a hard day in the field (v. 8). Because this was a slave-master relationship, the master had the right to command the slave to prepare dinner and serve him before the slave was permitted to eat and rest. That was the nature of indentured labor. Slaves were thought of as just another beast of burden. They had no constitutional rights.

Furthermore, the master would not invite the slave to dinner because that would set the slave free. This was known as informal manumission. It was a ritual that signaled the release from enslavement.

In verse 9, Jesus asked another question that expected a negative answer: “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?” Certainly no master thanked a slave for doing his duty. Considering the alternatives to enslavement—prison or death—the slave was glad to work for his master and expected no reward.

In verse 10, Jesus changed the direction of the questioning from master to slave. If his disciples were slaves themselves, they would see their service as duty and expect nothing in return. Their work is what they ought to do.

Jesus later told a story about a Pharisee who reminded God of his service (Lk 18:11–12). By reminding God of his service, the Pharisee implied that God owed him a reward. Jesus countered this sinful attitude by telling about the publican—a sinner—who cast himself on God’s mercy and asked forgiveness. The publican was justified in God’s sight rather than the Pharisee.

Apply the Biblical Witness

What does God owe us? Our common conception is that if we are good servants then we deserve a blessing of some kind. This idea comes from the Old Testament theology of reward and punishment outlined clearly in the Book of Deuteronomy. If you do well, God will bless you; if you do evil, God will punish you. It was the common presumption in Jesus’ day, as it is among many Christians today.

Jesus clarified that Old Testament theology, fulfilling it. He didn’t abolish the law, but he clarified what God intended by the law.

God does not owe anything to us—not even a “thank you” when we do what God commands us to do. As odd as it may sound, this is part of God’s grace. God does not have to save us; God certainly did not have to send a redeemer to purchase our

freedom—to pay our debt. Yet, because God is gracious and not willing that any should perish, he provided redemption for every human being through Jesus Christ. If we replace God’s grace with an idea of what God owes us, we in effect reject God’s grace in favor of our own merit or worth.

Neither can we do more than God expects. There is no “above-and-beyond” the call of duty in God’s kingdom. No medals of honor are awarded. When Jesus said to go the “extra mile” or give the “coat also” (Mt 5:40-41), he reflected God’s expectation for his followers. Our salvation cannot be repaid no matter how much we give to or do for God.

Having established that God owes nothing to us, then we ask, “What do we owe God?”

There certainly is nothing we can do, no work so great that we can repay God for salvation. So, what should be our attitude? Jesus says we are as worthless slaves and should therefore do what we ought to do without any expectation of reward or thanks.

This puts a whole new light on our relationship with God. Yet, it is easy to fall into the sinful mindset that God owes a blessing or a reward to us because we’ve been good Christians or because we’ve done some good deed. Attending a worship

service does not earn special rewards from God. Worship is something we do because we love God and desire to show our adoration. Teaching a Sunday School class, tithing—even going halfway around the world as a missionary—earns no special reward from God.

Good behavior and good deeds are expected of us. It is the basic requirement for anyone who names Jesus as Lord. Because salvation is not based on works but on God’s grace, we should be grateful servants for the opportunity to work in God’s vineyard—in God’s mission of salvation for the rest of humankind.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded that we give our alms—our tithes and offerings, our mission service, our church work—in secret (Mt. 6:1-4). This was so that we would not expect reward or recognition from other believers.

Some within Christian faith expect recognition, however. A family in a small congregation gives financially to the church’s work only once per year—on the last Sunday of the year. Their offering is several thousand dollars, so the financial record in the weekly bulletin reflects the unusually large offering. Everyone knows who gives it and marvels that they give so much. The gift even is noted from the pulpit. What generous church members!

Yet, when the gifts of much less prosperous givers are compared, their contributions—made little by little all through the year—come to much more than this family’s single offering. The astute church member realizes that the “generous” family does not even tithe its income, much less present an offering. This supposedly generous family does not even do what is expected of every church member, yet they receive effusive praise. Their motive in giving is wrong. They have their reward.

Giving to God—whether our tithes and offerings, good deeds, or time on mission activities—so that no one knows what we give maintains the purity of the God-believer relationship.

We do these things because God expects us to do them, not because we might receive the praise of others or of God. Such purity of service seldom is found, even among the most faithful believers. Our humanity gets too much in the way. Our nature is to do things for which we will be recognized and thanked, and we’ve come to expect at least a “thank you,” if not applause, for our service in God’s kingdom. However, this attitude is not from God.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta is the most vivid example of one who selflessly served God and expected no reward in return. Even after winning the Nobel Prize with all its

money and accolades, she returned to her mission among the poor. She viewed herself as a servant of God.

The slave in Jesus' example did not complain that he had to prepare dinner for his master, although he was tired from working in the field all day. Why no complaint? Because living with and serving the master was so much better than the alternative to his slavery.

We who belong to Christ realize that we are much better off than our alternative—enslavement to sin in this life and eternal death in the hereafter! We serve our Lord by serving others—in secret, if possible—and without complaint, always! ☹️

Mike Mitchell is a husband, dad, pastor, oil seller and missions educator in Fort Payne, Alabama.

Order
7 Virtues & 7 Vices

This Sunday School resource from BCE examines the classical seven virtues and seven vices in the context of family life.

Call
1-800-469-4BCE
or visit
www.ethicsdaily.com

What Do You Owe the Government?

Luke 20:20–26

**“Whose head and whose title does it bear?”
—Luke 20:24**

Years ago, I had a good friend who was a Church of the Brethren pastor. He was a pacifist, a moral position I considered hopelessly naïve. This was during the Cold War when it was widely assumed that if the U.S. let its guard down, the godless Russians would overrun us with killing force. Who would have believed that when God finally felled the Iron Curtain, not a shot would be fired?

One day, after arguing my way through three cups of coffee, I grew exasperated with my friend. Indignant over his stubborn refusal to admit the right to bear arms—under any circumstances—I lashed out at him. “Talk of ‘turning the other cheek’ is well and good where others

are committed to that ethic. But that’s not the way it is! What does your sentimental gospel of peace and brotherhood have to do with the real world in which we live?”

He looked at me with hurt and bewilderment in his eyes. “Everything,” he answered softly. “Everything.”

He was right, of course. The gospel does have everything to do with the real world in which we live. The confession that Jesus is Lord—made glistening, wet and true in our baptism—is all encompassing. It is not confined to a small, mystical sphere we call “faith.” That confession lays claims to our ethics, our economics, and yes, even our politics.

But how the claims of Christ are translated into political realities—that is a matter about which conscientious Christians disagree. Even Jesus’ famous dictum about “rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s,” does not settle all the questions. We are still left to ponder what in the world belongs to Caesar, and what in the world belongs to God.

Explore the Biblical Witness

Jesus was asked in a highly charged context about the competing claims of God and Caesar.

With the cleansing of the temple (19:45–48), Jesus threw down the gauntlet to a corrupt religious establishment. A series of controversial stories followed (20:1–47) in which opposition to Jesus reached a fever pitch. The religious authorities decided to silence Jesus’ stinging criticism of their entrenched pride and privilege. The only question was how to destroy Jesus without arousing his popular following (19:47–48; 20:20, 26).

Thus the question, “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v. 22), was a ruse to entrap Jesus (v. 20). Despite the flattery (v. 21), those asking the question only feigned interest in Jesus’ answer. Their real intent was to skewer Jesus on the horns of a dilemma.

On the one hand, the people of Israel hated paying taxes to the Romans. Such taxes were a constant reminder of their helplessness at the hands of an occupying power. Further, the taxes Rome demanded supported a pagan cult of emperor worship and the lavish lifestyle of the Roman rulers. Of particular affront was the poll tax, a tax paid by everyone 14 to 65 years of age each time a census was taken. If Jesus supported such taxation, he would be despised as a traitor.

On the other hand, if Jesus spoke against such taxes, he could be

charged with treason against Rome. That was a capital offense. Indeed, it was ultimately such a trumped-up charge that led to Jesus’ execution (23:2).

The question put so innocently to Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” was in reality laden with plastic explosives. No matter how Jesus answered, the question was designed to blow up on him.

“Show me a denarius,” Jesus said (v. 24). A denarius was a silver coin minted by the Romans. Worth about a day’s wages for a laborer, it was the very coin used to pay the hated poll tax. By forcing his interrogators to produce the coin, Jesus revealed they were already submitting to Caesar’s rule.

Nodding at the coin, Jesus asked, “Whose head and whose title does it bear?” (v. 24). When Jesus’ questioners conceded the emperor’s image was emblazoned on the coin, Jesus told them what to do with it: “Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (v. 25). Foiled by Jesus’ wit and wisdom, his enemies were silenced (v. 26).

Jesus laid out two principles in balancing the claims of God and the emperor—or the civil government. They are (1) Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s; and (2)

Give to God the things that are God's.

In urging his disciples to give government its due, Jesus broke with those advocating violent revolution against Rome. He taught that those benefiting from the emperor's roads, courts and postal system could reasonably be expected to pay for them (see also Mt 17:24–25). Paul reflected this same spirit in Romans 13:1–7 where he argued that government is part of God's design for promoting order and restraining evil.

Yet Jesus was careful not to give civil government unqualified sovereignty over human life. No sooner did he concede the emperor's rightful claims than he riveted attention elsewhere: "And give to God the things that are God's."

To faithful Jews of Jesus' day, the emperor's image on the denarius was a violation of the Second Commandment (Ex 20:4). It was a "graven image," heralding the emperor as a god. By declaring that one's ultimate loyalty and love belonged to God alone, Jesus repudiated the cult of the emperor.

Government has a rightful if limited sphere of authority in human affairs: maintaining order and essential public services. But God's claims—made clear in Jesus—are paramount. If the state's claim and God's claim

conflict, God wins! As Peter later cried to the very authorities that tried to silence Jesus, "We must obey God rather than any human authority!" (Acts 5:29).

Apply the Biblical Witness

Despite the principles Jesus laid out for managing the competing claims of God and government, Jesus did not develop a comprehensive political theory. His consuming passion was the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of Caesar. Further, his followers were to live and proclaim God's kingdom under a variety of governments, ranging from totalitarian regimes like Rome to a representative democracy like our own.

What then might a constructive Christian citizenship look like in our place and time?

First of all, a constructive Christian citizenship would mean an end to blind patriotism. Despite deep love of country, Christians have but one Lord, Jesus Christ. His ultimate claim on believers towers over the claims of country and kin. The oft-heard phrase, "My country, right or wrong," represents the worst kind of idolatry. It is not even sound patriotism. When principle demands, a true patriot knows how to be a loving critic of his or her country. As Sen. Everett Dirksen declared at the height of the Vietnam War, "My

country, right or wrong. When right, to keep it right. When wrong, to set it right."

The positive contributions of government as outlined in Romans 13 must ever be balanced by the potentially demonic misuse of government powers as revealed in Revelation 13. Here government is a demonic "beast" promoting emperor worship and persecuting the church. The tragedy of the Holocaust went largely unchallenged by the German Church because blind patriotism was wedded to religious devotion.

Secondly, a constructive Christian citizenship means a healthy respect for the separation of church and state. Granted, the phrase "separation of church and state" does not appear in the Constitution. It is an apt summary of American law regarding church-state relations.¹ The American experiment has proved that the church and the state thrive best when each does not become entangled with the other.

Nonetheless, the historic Baptist insistence on the separation of church and state is much maligned these days. Many Christians look wistfully at Caesar's power, eager to employ it for religious ends. Those who long for government-sanctioned religion in the schools and civic halls of America should take a long, hard look at England or Iraq. In both

countries, the government is high priest to both God and Caesar. The result? England has become an overwhelmingly secular culture, overlaid with a veneer of public piety. In Iraq, presidential advisers call for genocide in the name of God.

In his second temptation, Jesus explicitly rejected the lure of political power to usher in God's kingdom (Lk 4:5–8). But the temptation persisted. Consider the current debate over faith-based programs funded by the government. Ironically, the very thing that makes these programs effective in the private sector—namely, that they are faith based—is what will be lost when government begins to fund and supervise them. Further, when the church succumbs to the lure of political power, it loses the moral authority needed to offer a prophetic critique of the state.

Thirdly, a constructive Christian citizenship means a responsible participation in the political process. The New Testament commends Christians in every age to pray for government leaders (1 Tim 2:1–2), obey just laws (Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13–15) and pay their taxes (Lk 20:25; Rom 13:6).

Certainly, for Christians blessed to live in a democracy, the bar is even higher. Democracy means citizens have a voice and a vote in how their lives are governed. As with every

other resource held in trust from God, careful stewardship is required. Christians should be informed about the pressing issues of the day and should enter into public debate with an articulate and civil voice. When elections are held, they should vote their convictions.


Surely the Lord who said we would be held accountable for every “idle word spoken” (Mt 12:36, KJV), will hold us accountable for every idle vote cast and not cast.

For some Christians, responsible participation in government may also mean holding elected or appointed office. A conscientious Christian in public service can be a blessing to many.

Finally, a constructive Christian citizenship means maintaining a vital, alternative community called the church. The most important service the church can provide the state is to be faithful in her witness to God’s consuming claim upon the world. The church lives out of a different vision than the culture at large, for the church is to be that people who live to proclaim and embody the confession Jesus Christ alone is Lord!

Kaj Munk was a pastor of a church in Denmark. His sense of Christian vocation led him to enter the Dutch resistance to Hitler. In January of

1944, the Nazis executed him for his prophetic words that continued to inspire his fellow Danes. Surveying the evil and tragedy looming large on every side, he asked, “What is therefore the task of the preacher today? Shall I answer: faith, hope, and love? That sounds beautiful. But I would rather say: courage. ... For what we as [a church] lack is most assuredly not psychology or literature. We lack a holy rage.”²

The church must never lose her capacity for “holy rage.” For, she does not exist mindlessly to bless the state and its aims. Rather, it is her job to hold forth a vision of love and justice that comes from God alone. In a world where despots are quick to mistake themselves for gods, the church embodies a revolutionary confession. Amid an ever-changing political landscape, she fixes her eyes heavenward and prays, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen!” 

Robert B. Setzer Jr. is pastor of First Baptist Church, Macon, Georgia.

1. The actual phrase first appears in a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Baptists of Danbury in 1802. See Henlee Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1961), 169.

2. Allan Boesak, “The Reuben Option” in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius

Plantinga Jr. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 137-38.