

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 Sep 14

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. Mark 1, verse 1.*

Hello Friend Reader. I've been so anxious all summer to get back with you about important things; more important than shoes and ships and sealing wax, or cabbages and kings. For several weeks, it's been on my heart to write about one of the Gospels. I can't say that I'm worthy to do it, or even adequately prepared. I mean, the Gospels, the Good News of Jesus; we've walked into the big leagues now, my friend. Yet it's on my heart and I think that means something.

You see, the point of all these words, of blogging about books of the Bible, is to connect folks to Jesus. New Testament or Old, the whole Bible is the story of God's relationship to man, culminating in Jesus of Nazareth, God Immanuel, the Three in One Himself who walked around in sandals in the sands of ancient Judea. A friend recommended starting with the Book of Mark and, after reading it several times, I agreed. Which is why we're here. Yet please don't rely on me: go there yourself.

When you open your Scripture, especially if you don't know about Jesus, you're at the beginning. There's no better place to start than at the beginning, you know. That's where we are with Mark. St Mark, John Mark, the believer who deserted Paul yet came back when he was needed most, the apostle whose bones are supposedly buried in Venice: he began his good news about Jesus by starting at the beginning.

That makes sense, doesn't it? After all, none of us really has it altogether. We each need a reset. Yesterday, in church, I looked around at my friends and more than a few strangers. Have you ever taken a good look at a congregation that's watching their pastor preach and thought what they're going through? Some of them have cancer, or maybe AIDS. This week, it's likely someone damaged their car. Or is in danger of losing their job (or lost one). Someone was raped; someone was robbed. In that group, there were adulterers, forgers, liars, alcoholics, homosexuals, serial judges, hypocrites, and possibly even a murderer or two. Friend, these are the folks in church! Do we expect those NOT in church would be any different?

Two thousand years ago, folks weren't that different. There were adulterers, liars, alcoholics, homosexuals and the rest back then too. To them, God appeared in person, walking in the flesh, touching them, talking with them, teaching and rebuking them, laughing and crying with them. He did what He had to do to save them from themselves, from their sins. He came to them, to us. He taught people, inspired men like Mark to write down the story, and spoke through it. All so we would know who He is and how much He loves us. And what He did for us.

All of us, un-believer and believer alike, need to start at the beginning every day in understanding that we are 100% loved by Jesus, 100% forgiven by Jesus, 100% understood by Jesus, and 100% wanted by Jesus. EVERYTHING we've ever done is moot and forgiven by Him. He accounted for it all, even the bad junk we haven't done yet. All we have to do is start at the beginning, starting with first principles, and say "I believe."

If you want to grow, that's the best place of all to begin.

*Lord Jesus, I believe in You. Build, love, and strengthen me to walk with You and grow in You.*

Read Mark Chapter 1 verse 1. If you're interested, compare it to where how Matthew, Luke and John begin their Gospels.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 September 2014

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" – Mark 1, verses 1-3.*

Do you know who John the Baptist was? In the story of Jesus, John played an incredibly important role, one prophesied for centuries before his birth.

He was Jesus' cousin. Mary, the mother of Jesus, went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, when she found out Elizabeth was (like Mary) pregnant. You've heard the story: how Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb when he heard Mary's voice. That baby was John the Baptist.

John was Jesus' contemporary. A few months older than his Divine cousin, John and Jesus might have grown up knowing each other well. It would make sense that they would see each other at family gatherings, or during festival pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem. Can you imagine what they would have talked about? They not only grew up in the same time, but they grew up with the same background and the same human aspirations. Both knew they were destined for uncommon lives because they would likely have been told of how angels visited to announce their conception. NOT your typical family reunion.

John was the man who baptized Jesus. I sometimes wonder how John must have felt. He was in awe of his cousin because he understood Jesus was the Son of God. Yet Jesus didn't take John into His confidence; John wasn't one of the Twelve. I wonder how that made John feel, especially since the Baptist had a strong following of disciples of his own. I wouldn't rule out that John felt some trepidation at seeing Jesus' rise in ministry and influence over the people of Judea. Yet, when the time came for Jesus to undergo the ritual of baptism, He went to see His cousin in the desert: the one who immediately recognized and proclaimed Him for who He was. That matters.

More importantly, though, John the Baptist was Jesus' herald. John was the voice in the desert, prophesied long ago by the prophet Isaiah. Centuries before it happened, with stunning accuracy Isaiah was a prophet who said there would be a man who would cry out in the desert that all people should, "prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." In the decade before Jesus made His presence known (and began public ministry), John the Baptist moved out into the desert, lived off of God's provisions there, and preached a message of repentance and God's mercy. His message was hard: turn from evil and repent to God because God is on our doorstep. In screaming it out, John's message was like herald trumpets that announce the arrival of a king...in this case, the King of Kings.

It's true, Jesus could have done all He did without His cousin's help. Yet, for the unbelieving Jews of ancient Judea, and for us unbelievers here today, the corroborating heraldry of John the Baptist served as a radical, vociferous testimony of He whose time had just then come.

The question for us, then, is, 'how are you and I heralding Jesus?'

*Lord Jesus, thank You for Your cousin, John the Baptist. For the lessons we can learn from him even today.*

Read Mark Chapter 1 verses 1 through 3. Consider reading the verses in Isaiah as well, in Isaiah chapter 40.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 24 September 2014

*And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River – Mark 1, verses 4 and 5.*

I once met Billy Graham. When I think of someone Godly, someone who has lived his life in service to advancing the Word of Christ, I think of Billy Graham. Over the years, he has mellowed from hellfire and brimstone evangelism to a more intimate and personal witness to the love of Jesus. Years ago, when given the chance to attend a Billy Graham crusade at RFK Stadium, I went. It was free, and I was amazed; intimidated, actually, at the sheer number of people there who publicly said, "I believe." I mean, I was one of those people who quickly changed the channel every time a Billy Graham Crusade came on (and that seemed like every week or so), yet here I was participating in one.

At the culmination of the service, Rev Graham conducted an altar call; can you imagine an altar call for thousands of people in a football stadium? Those of us who were interested went down to the altar and made our way up to where Billy was praying over people. For just a moment, Billy Graham and I prayed together and I went on my way. He wouldn't remember it today, but I do.

I remember it because the message Graham preached that night was the same one John the Baptist preached in the Judean desert two thousand years ago: repent of your sins and accept the forgiveness of God. I need to hear that message every single day. Do you? You know the answer, and it's ok if you feel ashamed to say "yes." Even if you say, 'no.' If you say no, then I think you might be someone I'd like to have a conversation with.

Tell me: would you stand in line for an iPhone 6 (or the newest of its competitors)? Would you drive out into the desert for Burning Man? What about driving all the way to northern Montana just to hike the elevated road at Glacier? Would you climb Kilimanjaro, or swim in all the world's oceans, or would you bend over backwards to risk oral herpes just so you could say you kissed the Blarney Stone? Tell me: if you might consider the thrill of doing all those things, would you consider the thrill of never having to carry around your innermost guilt ever again?

Before Jesus made Himself known, John the Baptist lived in the desert and preached the hard yet loving message of repentance. He told it like it was; he confronted people with the harsh reality of their sins, then told them they could trust fully in God and be baptized and washed clean of those sins. They could lay down their guilt; they could claim the thrill of feeling whole again, of walking away unbroken. Thousands of common people ventured out into the hot sand to hear John's message and to claim that rebirth.

It's the same message I heard from Billy Graham. Tell me: when was the last time you considered that you might need to hear it too?

*Lord Jesus, thank you for Your patient forgiveness. Daily I need to repent of the ways I've wronged You and others.*

Read Mark Chapter verses 1-8. Also read Matthew 3 verses 1-11, Luke 3 verses 1-20, and John 1 verses 15-28.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 25 September 2014

*John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey— Mark 1, verse 6.*

Let's start this out by saying "so what?" So what if this strange guy in the desert wore camel's hair, a leather belt, and ate organic natural food? Half of California does that! In words that seem to exemplify our time in history, "at this point, what difference does it make?"

Maybe a lot.

Matthew described John this way as well. Some scholars think that means Matthew took his testimony from Mark's. Some think that the wearing of camel hair and eating wild insects signified living an ascetic life of denial; hold that thought. And some others think that John might have been on to something because a diet of natural sugar and protein is highly recommended for anyone who wants to lead a lean but active lifestyle.

God's provision is where I think it goes. I mean, if you trust God to provide for your basic needs, then that gives you much, much more time to focus on what's important (namely, your mission to herald the soon-to-arrive Messiah). I wonder if John decided that he didn't want to sweat the small stuff, like food and clothing, and focus, instead, on confronting the sinners who came to see him and telling them about the deliverer who was well on His way.

In reality, perhaps the way it matters a lot is because all of those things could be true. We don't know whether Matthew copied Mark or who wrote first: the veracity of the testimony is what matters. And centuries of analysis and comparisons show that the Gospels are remarkably complementary to each other, not contradicting while each granting perspectives about Jesus that other witnesses couldn't provide. The ascetic claim has merit. If you live a life of self-denial in service of your God, others take you seriously. John had standing because he publicly, strenuously, vociferously walked the walk while talking the talk. And we can't discount that God provided highly nutritious natural food to a strident worker who always needed quick energy. In survival training, instructors teach you how to live off the land. Two of the foods that are highly recommended are honey and insects. John the Baptist knew this and he wasn't exactly a modern day prepper.

Yet it is because of these descriptions of John that, centuries later, we remember him as a serious and committed man. His testimony is reliable because he was down for the struggle as shown in how he lived past the basics. John didn't have to focus on where his next meal would come from because he kept that part of his life simple. He trusted God. It allowed him to focus all his energy on Jesus. THAT, perhaps, is the most important aspect of all.

Granted, it might be entertaining (to others) if you dropped by Buffalo Wild Wings to order locusts and honey; the reaction you get may not be what you expect. But if it helps you skinny down to only what matters most (like John the Baptist did) then perhaps those locusts wouldn't be too bad if you dipped them in the honey first. So what indeed.

*Lord, help me to follow John's example by giving up all worry over simple things so I can focus on the mission You give me today.*

Read the descriptions of John's habits in Mark 1 and Matthew 3.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 26 September 2014

*And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."- Mark 1, verses 7 and 8.*

The life of John the Baptist was summed up in the verses you read above. Indeed, the life of every person on this planet, either before John or since, is the same sum. His entire message, his entire purpose for living, was to announce that the Messiah was coming. We aren't worthy to justify ourselves in front of God; our wrongs are too glaring, too angry. John knew this and he preached it to the varied masses of his day. The Pharisees came to see him, and they were the power-brokers in the Temple. Businessmen came to see him, just like businessmen are today. The poor, the wretched, the miserable, the searching, the lonely: they all went out to listen to the strange man in the desert preaching his message of hard repentance and velvet-soft forgiveness.

Let's not idealize John the Baptist, though, especially since Mark is nearly done introducing him. Yet even in these two verses we learn a bit more about John and how he viewed his divine calling. Do you read, like I do, that he was realistic about it? John realized that he was only giving a symbolic baptism, only imparting a message of love and warning. He understood that Jesus was coming – and coming soon – and that He would have the power of God Almighty in Him. Real life would come from His rebirth. Jesus would do things nobody ever had, and doing that would change everything.

Yet John was humble. He understood his place as messenger and not message. John understood that, even by living a simple life of denial, he was a sinner and needed God's forgiveness. To even do the most ignoble of things for the Messiah was impossible because John realized he was unfit because of his sins. John wasn't like we were today, announcing everything we think and do on Facebook, or sending our selfies around the globe in the name of our personal vanity. John the Baptist was humble.

John didn't duck from his message either. It was a hard calling that God gave to him. Live a tough life. Preach a tough message to tough people whose hearts will be hardened towards you. Do it to foreshadow One who will be greater than you. The glory won't be yours, but His. Do you think, when John was meeting people at the Jordan, he knew what kind of death he would face as well? If he did, the Baptist didn't show it. He preached bold and loud.

He did that because he understood the stakes. The damned and dirty who trod out to see him were damned and dirty without God's forgiveness. Their spiritual loneliness could only be filled by the Divine; their depravity could only be washed away by turning away from their sins and starting anew. John understood that the chosen people of God had prostituted themselves throughout most of history and they needed a Savior. His place was to prepare them to meet that Savior, to do the groundwork so that, when the Savior appeared, His people might be ready to receive Him.

*Lord, thank You for Your patience, Your love, and Your message. Help me to be bold for You with them today.*

Read the descriptions of John's habits in Mark 1 and Matthew 3.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 September 2014

*At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. – Mark 1, verse 9.*

Ladies and gentlemen, Jesus. This is where He makes His appearance in the book of Mark. He journeyed with the rest of the Judeans out to the river Jordan, submitted Himself to His cousin John, and was baptized by John in the river. Immediately afterwards, Jesus left and went further out into the desert to live for 40 days without food and water.

Why would He do that?

That's the question of the ages. It's the question people would ask, several years later, when they stared up at Him while He hung on the cross. Why would God Immanuel, all man and all God, die for us? Before that, why would he, who had no sin, be baptized? Baptism was (and is) a sacramental ritual for sinners, and Jesus was no sinner. There was no sin in His life and He never fell to temptation like you and I do. Why would He be baptized? Look to a trained theologian for the proper ecclesiastical answer, complete with other Scriptural cross-references and eschatological background. I can't provide those. What I can give you is my untrained opinion.

We needed it. He loves us, and we needed it, so He did it.

The God-man was fully man and fully God at the same time. Here, because He loved all people, He acted on their behalf as full man. You and I, we need baptism. We need the reassurance that our sins are washed away. We need to know that we have been reborn and claimed by Jesus into His family. We need the symbolism of the moment. We need the anointing of baptism. We need the Holy Spirit to impart Himself into our lives through the miracle of the water and the Word.

Jesus didn't need that. He WAS already all that, but He did it anyway. Because He lived to fulfill all righteousness. Because He wanted to fully obey all of God's commands to humanity. Because we couldn't. Because He loved us enough to do it.

I'm sure there is a theological explanation that tells why this is, exactly what happened, and the far-reaching importance of the moment when the Lord was baptized in the river. Here and now, that's too much for me; if someone wants to email it to me, or comment on the blog, please do so. To me, I'm simply awe-struck by the miracle of God, yet again, wanting to identify with the imperfect creatures He made yet loves so much.

For me, it's enough to know that Jesus loved me enough to, as a man, do what I needed to do and be baptized. I was baptized as an infant; I have no recollection of it, though I am told it happened. I have no interest in being re-baptized, or refreshed, or any of that; once was enough for me. It's enough because it was enough for Jesus to come to me all those years ago, to graft me into the branches of His family tree in doing so, and to mark me and hold me close as His own.

Because I needed that.

*Lord, thank You for being baptized, for how You did all that we needed You to do.*

Read the descriptions of Jesus' baptism in Mark 1, Matthew 3, Luke 3 and John 1.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 September 2014

*Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." – Mark 1, verses 10-11*

That's something you don't see every day. Let's say 100 people were standing at the Jordan River when this man walks down to the water and is baptized by John the Baptist just like everyone else waiting there. It's what happened next that was unusual. Heaven opened up. A dove descends and comes to rest on Jesus. A voice speaks from the sky and everyone looks at Jesus in amazement. Then He leaves. Matthew corroborates Mark's version. While Luke doesn't mention it, John's version adds a bit more about how John the Baptist knew Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

A miracle, not something you see every day.

Note something about this unusual episode. God the Father speaks in an understandable voice. This is, perhaps, the first time He has spoken like this since the time of Moses, nearly a thousand years before. He speaks directly to Jesus and the people around Jesus hear the voice. It isn't a thunderclap, or babbling, or something only for the chief priests to hear (though perhaps they would have preferred it be so). It was God's own voice telling Jesus that He had pleased Him. It was God Himself affirming His Son, letting the world know that someone special was in their midst, and that they should listen to Him.

Do you believe that? It's a real miracle. This Sunday, our minister preached an excellent sermon on miracles. These past weeks he has preached on mission, message and method, and to close out the series he talked about miracles. Do you believe miracles happen today? There are hundreds of them mentioned in the Bible, but that was then and this is now, right? I mean, really? Miracles? Here in the post-modern twenty-first century?

You bet they happen.

I've never heard God speak out of a cloud, but that's not to say others haven't, or that He wouldn't, or couldn't. Yet I believe miracles happen all around us every single day, perhaps hundreds of them in each of our lives. Maybe even more. Sure, a skeptic could chalk them up to systems, chance, or human interaction but, sometimes, that seems so hopelessly insufficient.

At six in the morning, my wife and I drive to the gym when, perhaps, there are five hundred cars on the road in our town. A thousand tired, pre-caffeinated drivers fumbling in the dark with their dashboards, coffee cups, and cell phones. Do you think it's simply wide roads and street signs that keep us all from smashing into each other? Maybe there's more.

Your baby sleeping. Trees that lose their leaves in the fall only to grow new ones next spring. A heart that beats millions of times in the life of a centenarian. Gravity. That ethereal quality worth living and dying for that we call "love." Do you simply explain them away, or have you considered that maybe they are God touching you with His power in a thousand ways every day even when we don't notice it? Friend, that's a miracle.

It may not be Jesus-by-the-Jordan level, but it's real all the same and happening to you here and now.



*Lord, thank You for Your miracles in my life.*

Read the descriptions again of Jesus' baptism in Mark 1 and Matthew 3

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 October 2014

*At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. – Mark 1, verses 12-13*

“At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness,” not ‘after Jesus was baptized’ or ‘when Jesus was done eating that afternoon, or ‘later that week.’ It happened at once, immediately after Jesus’ baptism. When Jesus was walking out of the water and the crowd around Him was amazed at hearing the voice of The Father speaking to Jesus, Jesus felt the Holy Spirit – His Spirit – urge Him to depart and walk deeper into the desert.

Important things can’t wait.

If you do that today, you’re called impulsive. One time, my wife and I were going through a tough time. Personally, financially, emotionally, spiritually, even in our friendships, everything was tough. One day in late October, we were watching a Tennessee football game on TV when I said “would you like to move to Tennessee and start over?” Never pose such a question to a desperate woman unless you really, really mean it. I did and she was. By late December we were in Tennessee; by later in December we were on our way back home to Colorado because we couldn’t find an affordable place to live.

It was important and we felt it couldn’t wait. But it could. What we couldn’t (wouldn’t, actually) see at the time was that the important matter wasn’t running away from our problems but, instead, facing them.

Jesus didn’t have sin but He did have problems. After being baptized, he went into the desert and lived for forty days. No food, no water, no people, no bed to sleep in, no shelter: ONLY God’s provision. He fasted, He prayed, He cried out, He wept, He talked to Himself. At the end of it, when Jesus was tired, very hungry, and at His most vulnerable, His biggest problem showed up. Mind you, Satan hadn’t always been a problem. At one point, Lucifer was a trusted angel, one of God’s brightest creations. Yet those days were history. Now, evil incarnate presented himself to the Son of Man and tempted Him at His weakest points. Satan had important business with the Lord and it couldn’t wait.

Mark doesn’t say what happened while Jesus was being tempted; go to Matthew and Luke for that. All he tells us is all we need to know. The Spirit led Jesus into the desert to tempt Him; to serve as an example to us and to put Satan on notice that his defeat was pending. Jesus was tempted by the devil himself, not by some bush-league imp or personal demon but by the original author of evil himself. Jesus overcame all this and was then fed and nursed back to health by angels. And Jesus returned to do the most important thing of all.

It wasn’t like going to Tennessee. There, at least we had good weather, a hotel room, and hot food to eat even if we didn’t find an home. Looking back on it, I have learned that, had we trusted in God to provide all we need, perhaps the trip to Nashville wouldn’t have been necessary. We had lost our way. For the good of all involved, God led us in a different direction in important things. He can do that for you too.

*Lord, lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil today.*

Read about what happened in the desert in Matthew 4 and Luke 4

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 October 2014

*After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" – Mark 1, verses 14-15.*

Jesus doesn't waste time. He didn't waste time in getting to His mission; He doesn't waste our time today. He asks for us now, where we are in this moment, just as we are and complete with all our faults. Jesus doesn't wait until the time is opportune or He sees and opening. He is beside us, encouraging us, pleading for and with us in every moment.

You know the mission: tell people to repent and believe the good news. Does that mean wearing a breadboard sign on the street, crying out about the end times? Maybe; if that works for you, let me know. Does it mean being a witness for Jesus in all things at all times? Yes. Does it mean giving up things that are negative and bad in favor of Christ's positive and good? Yes it does.

Is Jesus putting you on a mission to waste your time doing something you can't do? No, He isn't.

Jesus doesn't ask us to do anything we can't do. He often asks us to do things we don't want to do, and often the things He asks us to do are emotionally and spiritually difficult. Jesus very often asks us to do things that make us uncomfortable, and sometimes they even hurt. Sometime, He may ask us to do something that causes us to choose between life and death.

Yet Jesus NEVER asks us to do things we can't do, or that He can't do, or that we can't do with His help. In everything, Christ asks us to rely fully on Him, to turn all our cares and concerns and crises over to Him, then to follow His lead. That's especially true when He calls us to stand up for Him when we're asked "do you believe all that Christian stuff?" Or when we are asked just what we do believe.

The more we do that, the more we find that He doesn't waste our time, that He either puts us in or allows us to get into situations where our faith in Him can be shared and grow. When we don't know what to say, as we rely on Him, His Spirit gives us just the right words at just the right time (including those times when we wished we'd said something better). As long as we are honest and true, our time with Christ is always used just right.

Just this morning, I was reading about two women in Nigeria who were recently confronted by Boko Haram terrorists who demanded they renounce Christ and proclaim their faith in Islam. In a no-win situation, both did so, both were then beaten, raped and left for dead. They talked at length about the desperate sadness they felt. Not about renouncing Christianity but about renouncing Christ. Yet even Peter was forgiven after doing the same thing three times during Jesus' last day, and he was Jesus' best friend. Just the right words at just the right time convinced the women of Christ's forgiveness for ALL of our sins. That is never a waste of time.

*Lord, lead today. Teach me what to say and when to say it, and help me to make the best use of the time You have given me.*

Read Mark 1 again.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 October 2014

*As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him – Mark 1, verses 16-20.*

I don't mind confessing: I sometimes earnestly wish I could pick myself and leave. The other day I shared a story about moving to Tennessee; that's a manifestation of this wish. My desire to keep my traveling job (that keeps me on the road about 30 weeks a year) is another. How I crave time alone; same thing. Sometimes I just wish I could drop everything I know and simply go: go to follow the Lord in wherever He's leading.

To me, the logical response to all this wishing is, "Dave, what's holding you back?"

Maybe God IS advocating that some people leave their responsibilities behind and simply follow Him; that could be. A lot of hippies did this in the 60s, but it didn't work out so well for them or their families. A lot of Detroit has done this in just the last few years. I read just yesterday that there are over 90,000 abandoned houses in Detroit because people simply walked away; how many of those people walked to follow Jesus? We may never know.

Yet for each of us, here and now, God is still calling. Perhaps the most usable lesson to draw in this is that we should be ready to abandon everything and follow the voice of Jesus instead of the voices around us. For some that may indeed mean picking up and moving out. For some it may indeed mean leaving everything on a moment's notice. In fact, if you think about it, THAT is the meaning for ALL of us.

Don't believe me? Then riddle me this, Batman Reader: how many of your sins is God willing to tolerate? How much of Jesus' message, starting with the ones we've read here this week, have said "repent of only some of your sins and believe?" No, the hard truth – and the saving grace – is that Jesus called His best friends to their highest calling: to proclaim to the world the good news of Jesus' salvation.

Yet that salvation demands a price, and that price is to give up everything. Freely give up ALL your sins, all your worries, all your junk, all your wrongs, all the ways you've failed. Give ALL those up to Jesus NOW, then follow Him. Follow Him, sometimes minute by minute, in letting Him wipe clean the guilt in your heart and the doubt in your mind. Follow Him on the next logical steps when He gives you the strength to leave things that hurt you and others behind and change how you live. Follow Him in where He then leads you to use your life story to help others.

THAT is what Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John to do. That's what He's calling us to do as well. Now.

*Lord, I turn from my past to follow only You.*

Read Matthew 4, verses 18-22, and Luke 5, verses 1-11.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 October 2014

*They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law – Mark 1, verses 21-22.*

“Teachable moments:” that’s a phrase I’ve heard a lot lately. It’s a favorite of a good friend of mine, who was saying it long before it was in vogue on the radio or TV. I know it isn’t one of Solomon’s proverbs, but I’m pretty sure King Solomon would agree with me that wise men look for and use every moment as a teachable one.

Do you like how, when Jesus comes back from the desert, He picks out His first disciples, then starts to teach? I think it’s reasonable to assume that Simon, Andrew, James, and John were with Him when He quietly went into the local church, sat down, and started to talk. He wasn’t talking like just anyone else. No, He sounded like He knew what He was talking about.

We instinctively know quality when we see it. For most people, excellence speaks for itself. There is a tangible, palpable difference in the ride between a Rolls Royce and a Chevrolet. Even untrained ears (such as mine) can tell the difference between quality music and bad music. It’s easy to tell the difference between a choice steak and a cheap one. You get the drift.

The people in that first synagogue knew it too, and they recognized that the Man from Nazareth was somebody special. He wasn’t a slick talker. It wasn’t that He recited the same old stories from Scripture. No, He talked about them in the context of life, and about what they really meant. He talked about them in such a way as to make the words themselves come alive, as if He was speaking from God Himself.

Because He was. They just didn’t know it yet.

But they knew quality when they heard it. And they realized that the rabbi with the new followers was using His time there as teachable moments. He was teaching them things about stories, hymns, and words they already knew by heart, yet He was teaching them things about them that they had never considered, or never truly understood. As if every moment with Him mattered. As if He considered each one of them – both moments and people – special and important as well.

Because they were.

Just yesterday in church, our new pastor said something that stuck with me. In a teachable moment, he said “people don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care.” Perhaps you’ve heard that truism before; I hadn’t and it resonated. It’s a way of looking at these verses from Mark 1. The people in Judea didn’t care that Jesus knew all these cool things...until they realized that He cared about them, about them knowing Him. When that realization came, things started to happen. We’re no different, especially those of us who don’t believe or struggle with belief. Faith and doubt walk hand in hand; that was another lesson from yesterday. So many people in our world struggle with knowing Jesus until they realize that He really, truly does care in ways nobody else does. And that He uses every moment in our lives in teachable ways to teach us more about His love.



*Lord, teach me today, I pray. Help my unbelief.*

Read Matthew 4, verse 23, and Luke 4, verses 16-22.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 7 October 2014

*Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"— Mark 1, verses 23-24.*

Whether we like it or not, EVERYTHING is under the dominion of the Son of Man. You, me, all our possessions, the weather, dogs barking in my backyard, Ebola spreading around the planet, newborn babies: everything. Even evil. Everything in this world, in this universe, is seen by the eyes of Christ. The allegory of "you can't take it with you" is 100% true because God has determined that the only thing we have that is truly ours is our soul. It's plain fact that the believer and unbeliever alike can agree upon. Everything that happens, good and bad, serves Christ's purpose, even when we don't understand how.

And because that is so, even the things that are evil recognize that fact. Even demons are under the control of Jesus. "An impure spirit" is an evil spirit. The Bible is rife with accounts of what demons and evil spirits did to people. In a teachable moment, Jesus allows the impure spirit to confront Him so that those around Jesus could see it confess His identity; so that we could see it too. Don't lose sight of that fact, that this episode occurs right after Jesus starts to teach and then is immediately confronted by evil. I don't think it's a coincidence that the Lord starts to connect with people before evil tries to split apart that connection. Isn't it true that the same thing happens to us today?

It brings up a question: are there still demons in the world? I don't know that I've ever told the story about my grandmother, who was the sweetest, kindest person I've ever known. She was also drastically manic depressive. One day, I was with her when her mood changed from high to low. In the space of just a few minutes, I watched her behavior, face and body completely transform, contorting and twisting her into someone almost unrecognizable. I understand manic behavior and depression; I know them well. Yet I will always believe more was going on with that sweet woman than just some psychiatric condition. I believe she was possessed.

I personally know people who have conducted exorcisms. I know people who believe they have met angels; I have my own experiences with that as well. Do I believe there are still demons in the world? You bet I do. Science can't adequately explain it, only faith can. I believe that much of what we consider to be terrible coincidence or heinous crime may be demonic in origin. That may not stand up in a court of law but it stands up to Scriptural scrutiny.

We won't go into the argument about "if Jesus loves us why does He allow bad things to happen?" Look to that last sentence of the first paragraph for the answer and don't get lost in navel gazing. It isn't always satisfying to realize that, in the face of terrible things, the only answer I'll sometimes get is "my grace is sufficient for you." But when I contemplate how I would have reacted to evil alone, without that grace of Jesus, I realize that it's not just what I needed to hear at the time but the best answer possible.

*Lord, everything is in Your control. Thank You for that.*

Read Matthew 4, verses 23 and 24.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 8 October 2014

*Just then a man in their synagogue, who was possessed by an impure spirit, cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"— Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. — Mark 1, verses 23-26.*

The demon called out to Jesus; did you see that? It wasn't that Jesus called out the demon. No, it was the other way around. The demon recognized Jesus for who He was and proclaimed it. That matters. It's a small thing to overlook, but it matters.

It matters because evil always surrenders to good. Darkness ALWAYS surrenders to light. In a pitch black room, a flickering candle always gives light and becomes the focus. In a world of hatred, murder, abuse, and death, kind acts of the heart always mean more than all the suffering Satan can pile on. The demon in the synagogue recognized that. When it recognized the Light of the World, it squealed. It could not ignore the light; it could not ignore the loving compulsion of the Son of God.

What did Jesus do? He didn't freak out. He didn't yell and scream. He didn't try to rationalize or diminish it: Jesus faced the evil. The Son of Man confronted the evil and didn't back down. Then he calmly but forcefully commanded it to be gone. And it was so.

Tell me: what's the difference for us? I'm not saying this to be flippant or trite. What's the difference? Sure, you and I aren't Jesus. We aren't God Immanuel; we don't have the kind of power He does. But you'd be wrong if you honestly believed that.

We have Him. Therefore we have that kind of power. Don't believe me? Face down your temptations today. Whatever pet sin is tempting you right now – spending, drugs, stealing, screwing around on your spouse, lies, deception, whatever – face it down and say "no more." It's not a Pollyanna approach. This is real life.

In the real world, this is how real people overcome the real evil that plagues them. First we face it, then we overcome it. To truly overcome evil, we only need Jesus. We need His love and His light to shine down the darkness that constantly tries to overcome us. To say no to our temptations; to put our sins behind us; to truly repent and move forward; to help other people meet Jesus; to live our lives to help others do the same.

One by one, evil by evil, we overcome evil when we believe in Jesus and turn our battles over to Him. We ask Him for His strength, His power, His forgiveness, His love, His presence to help us fight. When we stand, we stand wearing the armor of His light, and evil will surrender. Yes, it may fight back and it may fight fiercely; it's evil. Yet it will always surrender immediately or in time. Sometimes those battles are minute by minute; sometimes they're tough. Some of them might threaten to take everything we have. For Jesus, everything isn't much of a price to pay. Don't forget: He already paid it.

He already paid it because He knew that evil must surrender to good. It always has. It always will.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for fighting for me. Stand with me – stand for me – to overcome the evil that threatens me.*

Read Mark 1, verses 22-26 again

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 October 2014

*The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee – Mark 1, verses 27-28.*

You know what strikes me most about these verses? It's the phrase "a new teaching."

It's stupid. These people of ancient Israel had been waiting for the Messiah, the deliverer, since the Garden of Eden. They had witnessed thousands of miracles that God had performed to demonstrate His love, his power and, above all, His patience with them. The Jews of ancient Israel were, from their beginning, the people through whom God chose to teach all of us about His nature. God had been 'in their face' either directly or allegorically for thousands of years. Yet, in the time of Jesus, their love for God had grown stale. They had forgotten much of who they were even as they wrapped themselves around legalistic axles. They had forgotten that God's teaching is always new, that His love and forgiveness are new every day. That the Son of Man was coming to them to make all things new once again.

We are no different. To so many of the people in our world, this 'new teaching' – that Jesus is God and man, and has dominion over everything – is brand new. God has been revealing Himself to us for thousands of years in thousands of ways, yet so many people don't know Him. I'm of the opinion that MOST people on this big blue marble don't know Jesus and most of them have no idea who He is. Hundreds of new churches open every week all across the globe for the express purpose of introducing strangers to the Son of God. That means something.

There are many reasons why people don't know. Some have rejected God; some have simply drifted away. Some are ignorant of the Bible; some are just plain ignorant. Some have never been to church, and some are turned off by the very real hypocrisy and un-loving nature of American churches (and churchgoers). But there are many who have honestly never been exposed to Jesus, who have never even heard of Him. You don't have to go to the pygmy jungles of South America to find them. They're in your neighborhood, in your Facebook friends list, and maybe your family.

The reasons why people don't know really don't matter, though. The bottom line is that they don't know Jesus. That makes their ignorance both sad and spiritually catastrophic. When we assume room temperature, all that's left of us – our mortal souls – stands before Jesus. If He knows us –because we used our lives to know Him – we live with Him for eternity. If He doesn't, we don't. Separation from God and His vital love is called "hell." I don't ever want to be away from Jesus or His love. I need it today to help me recover from all the stupid things I've done in life. I need it forever to actually live. That's why it's so important for the news of Him to keep spreading everywhere: because so many others need Him too.

*Lord, forgive me for not sharing You better. Forgive my mistakes and teach me to improve for You.*

Read Matthew 4, verse 25, and Luke 4, verses 36-37.

## **Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 October 2014**

*News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee – Mark 1, verse 28.*

News travels fast. I live in Frisco, Texas where the big story this week is Ebola. On the day the first Ebola patient in America died (in Dallas, which is only a few miles away), a second possible patient was found here in my town. Within minutes of the story hitting the electronic universe, it was everywhere. Some were panicking; some (like me) were curious; some were blasé. Thankfully, the man's Ebola test came back negative. News travels fast.

Think about it. When we learn something important, most people want to share it. Whether it's good news or bad news, we have something to say and we want to say it. After taking the summer off, I could honestly not wait to come back to this blog and write about Jesus. I was excited and refreshed, having prayed and contemplated what I would say to you, and what you might think or say in return. Some folks receive these words by email, some on Facebook, some on Twitter, some on the blog. In all, it travels to about four thousand people per day on five continents, all through the modern-day miracle of internet technology.

Word gets around, you know.

It did in Galilee during the time of Jesus. I like to think that, even though those people didn't have social media, they could quickly spread news by just word of mouth. You know the cynicism about "a lie can run around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." Let's get real: that's true. Yet let's keep it real by admitting that good news travels fast as well. It's dependent on God's grace (through opportunities for communication) and the person who is communicating.

That's how, in only a few short years, news about an obscure, small-town rabbi with powerful teaching spread quickly. It happened by word of mouth, by one person talking with another. It happened because people talked about what He said and did. His following grew in spite of a dictatorial government oppressing the people of Judea, and in spite of the vicious opposition by those in the power structure (who cooperated with the occupying dictators). Jesus' following grew exponentially because people talked about Him. They were amazed that someone was in their midst who was saying and doing the things Jesus did. Someone who appeared to fulfill the prophecies they had been reading for so many centuries.

Because He did.

And when He did, news about it spread quickly, first throughout Galilee, then throughout all of the known world. Because news travels fast when people talk.

So let me ask you this: if you know that the Son of God came here, lived and died and rose from death to pay for all the junk you've ever done, what are you going to do with that news? Mind you, my friend, I'm not saying this to guilt you: I'm honestly asking you. You and I have this real good news, this Gospel of Jesus, and it's true. It's news. What are we going to do with it? What are you prepared to do?

*Lord, thank You for living and dying to pay a price I can't. Help me to share news about You in all I do and say today.*

Read John 4, verses 1-3, and Luke 4, verse 37.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 October 2014.

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.- Mark 1, verses 29-31.*

Why is it so hard for us to believe in the amazing?

Yesterday, my daughter, son-in-law, and grandson had Sunday dinner with us. It wasn't a special occasion, and the menu wasn't especially auspicious; pasta and sauce. And wine, of course; we enjoy wine. Anyway, my grandson and I were making faces across the table. Something about me wiggling my eyebrows made him giggle, so naturally I kept doing it. I've said it a lot since he was born: it's so much fun to be a grandparent. It's a huge blessing. In fact, it's amazing. Watching a life grow and develop is amazing.

Over the weekend, another Ebola patient was diagnosed here in Dallas. As I'm writing this, doctors have no idea how she contracted the disease. For my friends in Africa reading this, perhaps this seems like no big deal because thousands of people have contracted Ebola just this year alone and there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. Here in the US, because the health worker was apparently following all the rules that the Federal government prescribed, people are starting to get nervous.

It's amazing if you think about it. The seemingly all-powerful thermonuclear United States government is powerless against a string of DNA. What amazes me more is how believable that is, how many millions of Americans believe the amazing fact that there is a dangerous force working against us that seems to have our best medical measures on the ropes. Because there is.

We believe that and it's amazing. In time, children grow. In time, we will make progress in fighting this disease. In time all things happen, even those difficult to understand, because of God's more powerful, profoundly amazing grace. Knowing that, why shouldn't we believe that Jesus could heal someone dying of fever? Perhaps Simon's mother-in-law didn't have Ebola but she was still in a deadly condition. Her illness was beyond the influence of first-century medicine. Yet it wasn't beyond Jesus. He simply touched her and amazingly she was healed.

Why doesn't that happen now?

Perhaps the real question we should ask ourselves is "why aren't we amazed when it regularly happens?" We'd be naive to think it doesn't. For every terrible story of an Ebola patient who dies an agonizing death there are many other stories of people who came in contact with the disease and survived. Or heroic people who gave of themselves for others. For every awful account of someone dying a horrible, painful death of cancer, or AIDS, or any other disease, there are countless other stories of people overcoming those same conditions. If you let yourself think about it, that's quite amazing.

Like watching your grandson grow up.

That's because God Immanuel is still powerfully working through the ordinary to do the extraordinary here and now, in our post-modern unbelieving world. His touch is still more than enough to rejuvenate us when our own

medicine seems helpless. Or when we consider blessings like our grandchildren. Or when we realize how deep is the love of Him who amazed us with it.

*Lord, Your amazing love is sufficient for everything and more powerful than all my best efforts. Thank You.*

Read Matthew 4, verses 23-25.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 14 October 2014

*That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. - Mark 1, verses 32-34.*

We talked last week about news traveling fast. Today let's talk about "all." The WHOLE TOWN brought ALL the sick to Jesus and He healed them (ALL of them). Did you catch the enormous complexity in that?

So last week I was at our church's monthly men's get-together and we were talking about signs of the end times. One of those prophesied signs is that the Gospel (including Mark) will be preached to the entire world. I said that I didn't believe the end times were imminent because that hasn't happened; there are still many millions, perhaps billions, of people who haven't heard the Good News of Jesus. That's when one of the other men brought up an excellent point I had never considered. Before the Flood, the entire world was depraved. Not just sinful: depraved. Not just most people: everybody except Noah and his family. All people thought and acted in all sin all the time. That's why Noah, a sinner but still a righteous man in God's sight, was saved when everyone else was drowned.

All; everybody; everyone; each and every man, woman, and child on planet Earth. They were not only sinners: they were entirely depraved in their whole hearts. When you consider the possibilities of just how many people could have been born after Adam and Eve, the likelihood is that there were hundreds of millions of people at that time and every one of them was all sinful all the time. Sodom and Gomorrah sinful on steroids. All of them; all except Noah.

What's the point? All means everyone. It means everything. When the whole town brought all their sick to Jesus, they didn't leave anyone out. News about Jesus had spread quickly. Just that day he had healed Simon's mother in law. Now, in the evening, the entire town turned out (perhaps in front of Simon's house) and brought every one of their sick, afflicted, or suffering people to Jesus for Him to heal them. And He did.

Because they believed He would do it. That's the other ginormous thing we can't overlook here. They brought their sick to Him because they believed He would do something to heal them. They believed and it happened. He is and all of them believed. Do you see the profound miracle in that? It's the start of a movement. Not a political movement or a power movement, though there was tremendous power in it (just as there is today). No, it was a movement of the human soul. Of people realizing that, perhaps, the long-awaited promise had come true and the real deliverer, the one who could save Israel from itself, had finally arrived. He was, He did, and they believed. Not just a few: all of them.

It happened before. In an era when we can connect the entire globe in electronic communication, it is happening again. All; everyone; everything. Knowing that, I ask you again: what are you prepared to do?

*Lord Jesus, use me to reach out to others, to all whom I meet, with your profound and saving love.*

Read Matthew 4, verses 23-25 again. Read up on other accounts, then, of how Jesus healed many.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 October 2014

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Mark 1, verse 35.*

Something I've mentioned here before is how the pastor at my church, Mark Schaefer, periodically advocates to the congregation that we should each take 5 minutes with God every day. Every year he leads Spoke Folk mission trips with high schoolers and this is one of the practical faith activities they do while on mission. Spend five minutes alone with God, without anyone else around, listening to him. Clear your mind and just listen to God. Maybe prayers will come to mind, or calm confession, or imploring him on behalf of others. Whatever you do in that time, just take five minutes every day for time with just you and God.

"Be still and know that I am God." That's Psalm 46. It's the basis for my friend's five minutes activity. No doubt, it was one of the things Jesus had in mind when He would get up early in the morning, while it was still dark, left the house and went off to a quiet, alone place to pray. What did Jesus pray, or pray for? We'll never know. Did He pray to Himself (being the Son of the indivisible triune God)? Did He pray for others? Jesus was fully man and fully God, both at the same time. What did He pray for and why did He need to pray?

Truthfully, we may never know; to us, the content might not really matter. The lesson does, though, and for a few reasons.

Jesus was fully man. He fully needed communion with the Father through prayer. It was a physical as well as emotional and spiritual need. As a human, Jesus felt the need to turn His concerns, His ailments, His thoughts, His praises over to the Three in One who could tackle them. Jesus understood it was something we needed to do, as well as something He wanted to do. In this respect, we're no different from Him.

He taught us that we are praying to God the Father. Would you pray to yourself? Again, truthfully, we may never know nor fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. Was Jesus praying to Himself? I think not; it could have been construed as vain. No, I think He was praying to the Father, knowing the Father listens and is active. It tells us that, when we pray, we're praying to the listening active Father as well. That's good news.

He modeled how we should pray. Where, in the Lord's Prayer, He modeled what we should pray, here in Mark He models how we should do it. Go. Be in a private place. Assume a reverent posture, both physical and emotional. Get to a quiet place where you can clear your mind, where you can open up to Him. By 'going' we make it a discipline, setting aside something personal but special for God and ourselves.

All by taking just five minutes to be still and know He is God. Just like Jesus did. We NEED to do the same.

*My God, I pray to You, praising You for Your love, forgiveness, creation, and the life You've given to me. I'm sorry for the bad things I've done. I'm thankful for all the blessings You give. I'm concerned for others; please help...*

Read Psalm 46, verse 10, Matthew 14, verse 23, Luke 4, verse 32, and Luke 9, verse 18.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 October 2014

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. Mark 1, verses 35-39*

Wake. Pray. Minister. Sleep. Repeat.

If you aren't a Christian, you might not know what "the Great Commission" is. It's in the last chapter of Matthew, where Jesus commissions his disciples to go out all across the planet and make disciples of everyone else. Here in Mark, several years before He said that, is a foreshadowing of that charge.

Why did Jesus come here? To go somewhere else – to the next place – to minister there. He was preaching His own words, and many of those who heard those words realized they were the bread of life; read in the book of John for an explanation of that. Jesus' ministry here was to go where He needed to go to preach to people who needed to meet Him.

He did that by waking up, praying, ministering, sleeping, and then repeating the cycle again the next day. We don't know much about what Jesus of Nazareth did during the first 30 years of His life, but we know very well what Jesus the Son of God did for His three years in public ministry. He did those five steps all over the area we call Israel today. I'm thinking Jesus probably spent more than 5 minutes with God every day, but the bottom line is that he well-spent good time. Ditto, then, for the other activities during each day on the road. Wake, pray, preach, sleep, repeat: that was His routine.

What's yours?

I mean, in your job, don't you wake up, do your day, then return home for rest? I do; so do most people I know. Most folks who work usually follow a fairly fixed routine. Your job probably isn't to journey all over your state proclaiming the Gospel; that would be a cool job, though. But your "Galilee" is probably a lot like mine. It's where I live, in the area where I work. And in the area where I work and live I've been tasked to use my talents to God's glory to introduce others to Him. I do it in my own way: through words, (badly) through social media, through one-on-one time with friends and strangers, and in a bunch of other ways that I don't even recognize. Every day, my job is to do whatever I can to make the most out of the talents with which God has entrusted me to hook up other people to Jesus. In the course of managing projects, or buying groceries, or changing a tire, or drinking a beer with friends, or whatever you might find me doing when I'm awake there is no more important task. And then to do it somewhere else the next day.

Other than the obvious God-vs-man difference, what's so different between my life and Jesus'? Our mission is the same no matter where the mission field is. Wake. Pray. Minister. Sleep. Repeat: and all with a thankful smile. That is our commission.

*Lord, strengthen me for my mission for You today.*

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20, and read Luke 4, verses 14-22. Jesus got around.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 October 2014

*A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. Mark 1, verses 40-42.*

Here in America, there are two stories that have been traveling around the internet this month. Both are apparently true. One is the story of a woman who is dying of cancer and has vowed to kill herself on November 1<sup>st</sup>. She says she has nothing to live for and it is too painful to think of the physical agony that is dying of cancer. The other story is about a letter a woman has written to the child in her womb: the child she is vowing to abort next week because the woman "isn't ready to be your mommy." The letter says how the woman thinks the unborn child will be better off being aborted than being in a world where single Mommy would have to struggle just to make emotional and physical ends meet.

Let's reserve judgment on woman; we sinners must judge not lest we be fairly judged in return. Instead, let me ask you this: do you think Jesus is indignant about your condition? Jesus was indignant about the condition of the man with leprosy. He wasn't mad at the man himself. The man who had leprosy didn't get leprosy because he was sinful: he got it because it was leprosy. The disease got him and not the other way around. The way it reads, Jesus was mad that one of His beloved was sick.

I'd be mad too if someone, a complete stranger to those around me, came up to me begging and expressing profound faith in me. "If you are willing." What a statement! It's like saying "I know you can do this, and I know that I'm not worth your time, and I know you have so many better things to do, but I believe in you because I know you are who people say you are." Wouldn't you be moved if someone said that to you? Fully God yet fully man, Jesus was. Within seconds, Jesus touched the man and spoke, and the man's years-long affliction was cured.

Jesus was angry, offended, PISSED OFF that the person He loved was afflicted by sin.

Getting back to the women in the news, perhaps Jesus is indignant about their condition as well. It's a terrible, horrible thing to see someone You love dying in a terrible, horrible way. I wonder if that's what Jesus feels for the dying woman. And it's an awful thing to see someone You love so much overtaken by fear and shame to the point that they want to kill the miracle You have entrusted to them. It's awful to watch people go through the spiritual, emotional, and physical agonies these women must be going through; again, let's not jump to any other judgment. They're people in trouble and they need Jesus now more than ever. I'm wondering, then, if Jesus isn't indignant over their predicaments, angry that His beloved are afflicted with sin and death. Every time you or I sin, I wonder if the same thing isn't true.

*Lord, help me to avoid or turn back sin today, but when it happens, be indignant for me and love me.*

Read the entire story in Mark 1.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 October 2014

*Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. Mark 1, verses 43-45.*

In reading through Scripture, this has always perplexed me. After reading through several translations, it still does. Why does Jesus tell the people He heals to keep quiet about it? One website ([www.gotquestions.org](http://www.gotquestions.org)) gave a plausible reason: it was to spur the people to fulfill requirements of Jewish law before anything else. The hundreds of complex purification codes that the Jewish leadership put over their people were supposed to be ways to honor God. Even though they could be complex (say, how to wash yourself, in a certain order, with certain conditions, and an order in which to present one's self to priests for blessing), they were intended to give the people a way in which to reflectively contemplate God's forgiveness. Jesus wanted to make sure that people did no wrong in the eyes of the religious leadership of His day, so it makes sense He would tell the newly healed to go comply with the law.

Another reason (that the same website gave) could have been that Jesus didn't want people focusing on the miracles themselves. As the site said, "the same is true today. God would rather that we be focused on the healing miracle of salvation through Jesus Christ instead of focusing on other healings and/or miracles." That makes sense, too, if you think about it. We shouldn't get all wrapped around the axle about the miracle itself, taking our eyes off of He who caused that miracle and the miracle that is Jesus to begin with. It could be that Jesus wanted folks to focus on God first instead of just the healing, so He sent them away to not only comply with Jewish code but also give them time to contemplate and thank God on their own. That could be.

In reality, we don't know why. There are dozens of stories throughout the four Gospels, then through the book of Acts, Paul's epistles, and Peter's epistles that talk about how people were healed in Bible times. Both of the reasons given above could apply to most any of those healings, those miracles that God performed on common ordinary people. They were probably people not unlike you or me; in our times, they might be people we saw at the mall, or in the office, or at a gas station or in line at Six Flags. Just people you would see or meet in the course of living your life. And yet, in their lives, God performed these miraculous game-changing feats that altered both their spiritual and physical well being.

They were human just like us: of course they felt compelled to share what had happened. Aren't you glad there wasn't Facebook in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea? On this side of eternity, we may never really know why Jesus implored these people to keep quiet. What we know is that, in doing so, He taught us lessons too.

*Lord, let me do Your bidding in all I do today, yet accept my joyous thanks for the miracles You perform in my life.*

Read Luke 5, verses 12-16

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 October 2014

*Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. Mark 1, verse 45.*

I'm part of a growing church. It grew quite fast for a few years, then leveled off during a period of internal divide that nobody really understands, but is thankfully growing again. It's quite an amazing thing to be part of a movement where you don't know most of the people around you but you realize you're all moving in the same good direction together. The best part of it is that the thing isn't a numbers game. I don't know how many people attend our church now; I don't think anybody does. In a way, that's a great thing. It's my hope that things will continue along, that we will outgrow our building, and that I'll continue to walk in each Sunday and see a whole bunch of new faces, and stay edgy.

That kind of worship atmosphere appeals to me now. Mind you, there is zero wrong with traditional church, with a family church where everybody knows your name, where you've attended for years. I like old-time hymns and traditional music; in the era of rock band church, I miss them a lot. Yet there's much good to be learned in free-form contemporary worship as well.

I wonder if Jesus would have settled down in a traditional church. Or a contemporary one.

Perhaps the best answer would be, "yes but no, of course not." Comparatively speaking, He wasn't in public ministry for very long. Verse 45 reminds us that Jesus walked frequently, spoke freely, and worked radically. So much that He couldn't even enter a town without being mobbed. You could say Jesus was 'fly' before that became trendy. Yet we can't forget that Jesus also went to the synagogue, to church, every week of every year of His life. He perfectly upheld the entire Jewish legal code, demonstrating why it was impossible for us to do so. Jesus was in church before it was fashionable and long before electric guitars. And it was extremely traditional, with customs, liturgies, and rituals that spanned a thousand years or more (much like many of our traditional churches today).

Oh how it grew.

The crazy thing about it is that it grew without Jesus trying. The number of Jesus' followers grew exponentially in a fantastically short period of time. And it happened without new programs, without an outreach committee, without a new worship center, without sermons that go over time, and without new music to encourage young families "who have been turned off in the past." It happened because of Jesus. He loved, He met, He preached, He was, and the people came in droves. It didn't matter as much why they came as much for the fact that they did and they met Him.

That made everything change.

And it still does whether we give praise in the wonderful old family church on Maple and Main, or the rockin contemporary place a few streets over. Everything traditional now was once contemporary anyway. As long as Jesus Christ crucified is the main attraction, then how we're attracted or the setting in which it happens really doesn't matter that much at all.

*Lord, thank You for teaching me to follow You wherever.*

Read Matthew 4, verse 25, Matthew 8, verse 16, and John 4, verses 39-42.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 October 2014

*A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Mark 2, verses 1-5.*

I have a friend who doesn't believe any of this. He doesn't believe in God, says he very much doesn't want to believe in God, and that these stories from the Bible are just that: stories from a book written thousands of years ago and re-written many times since then. I don't argue with him over the truthfulness or historical veracity of Scripture: that's a losing argument with a closed mind. But before you (believers) go off saying "that heathen should X, Y or Z," let me tell you that my friend is a brave veteran, a decent and kind man, and a good man to know.

I wonder what he thinks of today's story. It's rooted in history and tradition. Here we get a glimpse of Jesus' truly audacious nature; Jesus' audacity IS the real hope, not a gimmick. Here, for the first time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus demonstrates it. Before now, Jesus was baptized in a miraculous showing, wandered in the desert, healed sick people, cast out demons, and gathered crowds to Himself. Yet it isn't until now that He steps out and says "yeah I really am all THAT and a bag of Fritos, too."

"Son, your sins are forgiven." Noodle the enormous complexity of that thought for awhile. Here was this teacher, this miracle worker with an increasingly ginormous following, and He does a spiritual throwdown. Huh? If you don't know much about that time in history, the Jews fervently believed that only God Himself can forgive sins; it's a belief that we Christians today perpetuate. Yet it was radical talk for first century Judea because, for centuries before, even during exile and wars and bitter occupation, nobody would have dared to say they could forgive someone's sins. According to the Jews, only God could forgive sins. For someone to forgive sins would be for someone to declare they were God. Jewish priests would condemn that man to death.

Like they later did to Jesus.

And here Jesus is doing a throwdown with them all by declaring to a paralytic that he doesn't need to worry about anything because his sins were forgiven. Did the man's sins or actions make him paralyzed? We don't know. All we know is that he was paralyzed enough for his friends to cut a hole in the roof and lower him down to meet Jesus in the hopes that Jesus would work some kind of miracle. And did Jesus ever work a miracle. We soon learn that He healed the paralyzed man. The bigger miracle is how He boldly announced His nature to the people around Him, and then He proved it.

Just like He proves it to us every time we remember this story. Just like He proves it to my skeptical friend in the same way.

*Lord, thank You for healing the paralyzed man, and for healing the paralysis in my heart.*

Read Mark 2.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark 16, 30 October 2014. In memory.

*“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. Mark 16, verses 6-16.*

I hope you don’t mind my skipping ahead a few verses. You see, my mother died last week, a week ago today, and I want to relate that it’s ok. It all happened so quickly; Wednesday night she was admitted to the hospital and by Friday morning she was gone. To be frank, I’m still in shock from it; the real depth, both good and bad, is something I haven’t really plumbed yet. Perhaps in time that will happen, and I have no doubt it’ll be tough. One of my pastor friends related, at mom’s bedside while she was dying, that it’s ok to be angry, sad, frustrated with death because we weren’t made for death.

That’s why I’m writing today. That’s why I say that it’s all ok. We weren’t made for death. My mom wasn’t made for death. Neither were you, nor yours, nor any of us. God intended for us to live, to live in perfect harmony with Him. Yet our ancestors frustrated His intentions with sin, separating the world from God’s harmony. That’s why we die. That’s why we grieve over death. That’s why it hurts so much to lose a loved one. This wasn’t what we were made for.

Her body in the casket didn’t look anything like her. At first, that threw me off. I mean, it’s a shock to see your loved one in a casket anyway. But this didn’t look like her at all. Her face didn’t look very life-like, and it really didn’t even look like I remember her (unless you wanted to think she was laughing or crying). Initially it was disconcerting that my last look at my mom’s physical form would look disfigured, and I thought about that while we were driving the long drive home from her funeral.

Then it hit me: of course it didn’t look like her. She isn’t in the casket; she isn’t there. We buried her body in that metal box in the cold Oklahoma ground and she isn’t there. She isn’t there because of the verses listed above, because her Savior and mine rose from His own death and lives today. He rose and proved Himself to His friends and His people. He rose and frustrated death because death would not frustrate Him any longer. Jesus died and came back exactly as He said He would. In doing so, He promised that, when we believe in Him, when we turn our lives over to Him, we, too, will rise from death and live forever with Him.

That’s why my mom’s body didn’t look like her because it wasn’t her. She moved on. That’s why it’s ok.

Death doesn’t make sense, not even in a biological sense. Even if you think all this faith business is hogwash, death is illogical. A few days after Mom’s death, a friend of mine also passed away. Jason Manthe was only in his 30s (where Mom died at 85) and he died of Alzheimer’s Disease. That terrible disease took him quickly, similar to how heart disease quickly took my mother. I’ve been trying to glean some sense from his passing and I simply can’t see any worldly good in losing such a fine man. It doesn’t make sense to me, and I can’t even begin to imagine how his wife and young kids must feel.

That is, until I realize that we were born to live, not to die, even as our carbon bodies die a little bit every day in a world that does the same. Jesus created us to live in love, in peace, with Him forever. He lived, died, and lives again to ensure that becomes possible for any of us. When you put death in the perspective of how Jesus conquered it, then instead of "Jesus wept" (John 11, verse 35) you are righteously, joyfully bound to conclude that Mark 16 is the only way to view death. Death is moot. It's something that happens as the passage to new life instead of the defining moment in a hopeless world. Death couldn't hold on to Jesus Christ and, because of that, and because my mother Grace and my friend Jason believed in Him, then death didn't hold on to them either. Wherever heaven is, they are more alive now than ever when I knew them.

And because of that, the journey continues.

*Lord, thank You for Your comforting resurrection in the face of sin and death. Thank You for saving my mother and friend and all who trust You with our lives. I praise you for lives well lived, and well-died, and ask for Your comfort and love in the days ahead.*

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 December 2014

*When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Mark 2, verse 5.*

Hello my friend. It's good to be back with you. I was gone for the last month after my Mom died at the end of October. The ensuing time has been both frustrating and rewarding; pretty much what you'd expect when you lose someone. Yet I know she went home to Heaven, and that all will be well in God's good time.

I know it because Jesus saw her faith. Just like He did the man in this verse. See, I don't think you can overstate the enormity of this verse. The Son of God speaks to a man, a paralyzed "sinner," and the man's maladies are wiped out. Jesus saw that the man and the men who had brought him there believed He was the righteous Son of God. He saw their earnest faith and that it was for real, not contrived, not fake, not just for the show, not just to get something from Him.

Can you or I really wrap our noggins around that? I mean, seriously? NOTHING in this universe was made without Jesus. Jesus saw the man where he was, just as he was. The man's friends had cut a hole in the ceiling and lowered him down just in the off-chance that the Nazarene miracle worker might work a miracle. And He did. Jesus saw the man where he was, assessing his true condition: faith, not paralysis, defined him, even as physical ailments debilitated him and the guilt of sin (that we each carry) weighed down his heart. And Jesus loved him anyway.

This isn't just some fable: think of it as a news report, as a chronicle of something that happened. Because that's what it is. Jesus healed the man in the way that he most needed healing. In the two thousand years since then, the same thing has happened countless times in countless ways because that's what Jesus does. He meets us, summarizes our faith, and acts accordingly. He does; He doesn't just talk. Jesus is action.

Don't believe me? I watched it happen. I held onto my mother's hand while she was dying. Mom didn't want to die; none of us really does. I think that, throughout her life, she was skeptical of faith, always holding out a question or two even as she knew in her heart that all the Bible lessons were true. She was a sinner like me and you, and death had finally come to meet her. That could have been a frightening prospect, yet in the few hours between declining health and going to Heaven, she let go of her skepticism and embraced her coming reward. Good pastor friends stayed with my family and I as we sat at her side, praying with us, preparing us – and Mom – for her time of deliverance. During her last moments of consciousness, Mom said her goodbyes and gave us her love because she knew her skepticism was unneeded and her sins fully forgiven.

I have full faith and confidence, just as I do in any truth, that Mom went to heaven and was met there by the Lord, the same Lord who forgave and healed the paralyzed man. I believe He said "welcome home." The enormity of that moment was made possible because of Jesus living, then dying, here on the Third Rock, leaving behind for us all the lessons we would ever need to join Him in what lies beyond. While He was here, Jesus met people where they were, in the middle of their struggles. And in doing so, He freed them from the paralysis of their sins. Just like He does us now.

*Lord, I've been a sinful man. Forgive me and heal me. I want to walk in following You.*

Read Mark 2.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 December 2014

*Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Mark 2, verses 6 and 7.*

Get ready to get mad. You're a hypocrite just like the Pharisees in these verses. You judge people just like they did. You blaspheme God just like they did. In this world of sin, you're one of the worst. You may think you're doing your best, and that you've come a long way baby, but deep down inside you're just a hypocrite like the 'sinless sinners' who judged the Son of Man.

Mad yet? Please, relax; I'm right there with you. I'm the worst of sinners, too. The truth is, though, I don't want for us to be hypocrites any longer but we're works in progress. I'm 'judgy.' I'm mean. I'm callous, cold, indifferent, moody, angry, vulgar, sinful and altogether damned left to my own devices. And all this is while I'm in church. Imagine how bad it could be outside! How about you? Yep: we're in a bad way.

That's because we indeed are no better than the Pharisees, who set themselves up as expert witness, judge, and jury over the ancient people of Israel. Like snarky Congressmen, Ivy League professors, or reporters from the New York Times, they knew better than the people around them; you could ask them and they'd tell you. After all, they kept 'all' of Moses' commandments; they worked hard. They prayed harder. They didn't do things like other people. They were upright, pious, well-dressed, moral, paragons of First Century Jewish virtue.

And yet, despite all that, their sin was inside and they were filthy dead with it. Notice that Mark says "sitting there, thinking to themselves." They weren't 'doing' anything wrong, only thinking, and it was still damning. They were educated and knew that the Scriptures told them how only God could forgive sins. They couldn't believe their eyes, however, that God Immanuel was actually there, at the table with them, in the same room. The Pharisees were so busy looking for the long-promised Redeemer that they couldn't see how He had found them. That blindness also blinded them to their own sins, their own shortcomings, their own judgmental failures.

Just like us.

Tell me: how many times do we remember that Jesus is with us now? How many times does Jesus speak to us in a day? Does your conscience ever tell you something that you ignore? Or do you see someone who needs help yet you keep walking? Ever lost your temper? These sins – and more – are mine; I'm betting they're yours as well. Yet Jesus still meets us where we are, in our sins, in our thoughts, and He loves us anyway. We are the paralyzed man who can't walk, who Jesus heals and forgives. We are the judgmental Pharisees, who refuse to believe the proof right in front of our eyes. We are the hypocrites, sinners, and low down dirty dogs who practice evil with even our best intentions. And then, despite all this, we also are given the opportunity to be Jesus, to look at others who wrong us and forgive them, to demonstrate mercy where none is deserved. To follow Him.

I'm sorry if I made you mad earlier; please forgive me that. I do hope it got your attention, though. Read up on the rest of the story to find out how Jesus responded.

*Lord, I have sinned against You. Forgive me, cleanse me, and love me.*

Read Mark 2, verses 6-12.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 December 2014

*Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" Mark 2, verses 8-12.*

If you're new to learning about Jesus, there's something you need to know: Jesus isn't a wuss. He isn't lightweight or namby-pamby. He isn't all the meek and mild, comfy, cozy, I've-got-a-crush-on-you Savior that we, who live in suburban America, make Him out to be. He is love; that is true. But love can rock your world, and despite our milquetoast interpretations, Jesus came to the world to rock it for the people who met Him. Like you and me. Like the people of His time here.

Jesus isn't a wuss. He doesn't play games and He doesn't do anything half-way. Here, at the beginning of Mark's gospel, he has met a paralyzed man, read the mind of a judgmental Pharisee, and is now proving to them that He is God. If you put yourself in the place of the folks there, in that room, this would be extraordinary, perhaps the most extraordinary thing you have ever seen in your life. You have waited through that entire life for God to redeem His promise to His people, to deliver them from their oppression and here is this man from Nazareth proving He might just be that deliverer.

But more than that. He's taking it to a new level, something they never expected. Jesus is doing a throw-down and saying He is God Himself. He is saying that all the Law, all the Prophets, all the history, and all the miracles that have been the story of Israel are summed up in Him. Nobody, not even the most hopeful or audacious of leaders, could do that kind of throw-down. They don't have the guts or the story. Jesus didn't just say it: He proved it. Jesus isn't a wuss. He has guts and a backbone of steel.

There are other things to say about these verses, and we'll talk about them tomorrow. For now, I think it's more important to simply recognize the fact that our Lord and Savior is down for the struggle because He initiated the struggle. Love is the toughest stuff around; if you don't believe that, then obviously you've never really loved. Jesus is pure love, and sometimes that means He does indeed impart the romantic, touchy, feely, and all warm in the heart feeling. Yet those satisfying and wonderful feelings are always backed up by the toughest backbone of anyone in the universe. They were all throughout the Bible, and if you look in our own world, they are here as well. Don't believe me? Talk to someone whose life He has changed. Talk with me.

*Jesus, lead me and remake me. Be courageous for, in, and through me. Don't go half-way in my life, either.*

Read Mark 2, verses 13-14.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 December 2014

*Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" Mark 2, verses 8-12.*

So we know Jesus isn't a wuss, that it takes unfathomable courage to speak His truth and do what He did. Fair enough. So what exactly did He do here?

I just finished reading *Jesus on Trial* by David Limbaugh. If you want an easy-to-read, common-sense apologetic (something that explains something else, usually of a religious nature), read this book. Mr. Limbaugh spends the entire book offering analytical, lawyerly proof that Jesus is who He says He is and that the Bible is true. He does so in the context of talking through how he (Mr. Limbaugh) lived most of his professional life as a skeptic of the faith. Limbaugh didn't reject the Bible or God as a whole, but he, like so many of us, found it hard to believe that everything it said was the inerrant Word of God.

He persevered in his skepticism until a friend asked him to examine the Scriptures from a lawyer's point of view. The process took several years and, in doing so, he came to understand that, beyond any reasonable doubt, Jesus is the Son of God.

The people of Mark's time were skeptical as well. "We have never seen anything like this!" We've talked about this before, how Israel had seen miracles for centuries, and how they had misplaced their focus on God even as God didn't misplace His focus on them. Yet the people there with Jesus, watching Him heal the paralytic man and then announce the forgiveness of sins, couldn't believe it. They weren't being asked to take anything on faith: they saw it with their own eyes and still had a hard time believing. They wanted proof.

So Jesus gave it to them. He proved He was a man yet God, that He would heal yet heal both heart and body. He proved He was who they had been waiting on. Centuries later, it would follow, then, that because we are only reading about these things it might be more difficult for us to accept that proof as valid, right? No, not really. Again, referring to Mr. Limbaugh's book, he outlines the hundreds of accurate and miraculous proofs presented in Scripture that point to the divinity and historicity of Jesus Christ. Jesus is, in fact, through both Scripture and outside accounts, the most well-documented figure in all of antiquity. If we still cling to natural skepticism, then perhaps the heart can be convinced by the mind and proof accepted for what it is.

Jesus came here to save us and left us proof that He is the God of Eternity. He didn't do it for Himself: He did it for us because we flawed people, like the Pharisees, still want proof.

*Lord, I believe in You. My belief in You is because of You, yet thank You for meeting me in my skeptical state.*

Read Mark 2, verses 13-17.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 8 December 2014

*Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. Mark 2, verse 13.*

We are attracted to celebrities, aren't we? This week, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge – aka "Prince William and Kate" – are in the United States. As I write this, they arrived in New York yesterday and were surrounded by throngs of paparazzi and onlookers. Or there's center stage at the Mall of America, where I spend some evenings walking. I've seen all kinds of celebrities on the stage in the center court; last year, I saw a number of people from HGTV on that stage. Whenever someone famous shows up, crowds gather.

Jesus became famous; duh. And there are many reasons why He gained quick fame. Miracle worker, Jewish patriot, hoped-for king, rabble rouser, esteemed teacher, kind hearted, new and unusual: He was all these things. Yet the Bible is replete with stories like the one from verse 13 about what Jesus did when large crowds gather. He taught.

He would begin speaking by telling parables, stories that seemed to have one meaning but were also talking about another. Or sometimes (as in the Beatitudes) He would extemporaneously recite what sounded like beautiful poetry. Other times, He spoke directly, telling people things they needed to hear. Maybe He would perform a miracle, or simply be Himself and act just like other people. Yet He always taught people in some way, teaching in and about each moment...and more. He taught them from the heart – from HIS heart. He taught them about God and His immeasurable glory and love.

I doubt you'll see Prince William, Kate Middleton, or the Property Brothers do that.

I doubt you'll see them do that because they aren't Jesus; that's true. Yet that's not what most celebrities do, and I would say it isn't why people flock to them either. Folks want to be near fame; that's also true. Yet I think people flock to celebrities because they sense that famous people have something desirable and we, as strangers in this strange land, want to be desired. People want some of the shine, the glow, that seems to emanate from people in the limelight.

Yet when Jesus used His fame, He used it to teach people; to impart lessons on things they needed to hear deep inside. Jesus didn't mug for the cameras or walk the red carpet. Instead, He met people right where they were and told them things that nobody ever had. Things like "love your neighbor," and "forgive your enemies," and "love the Lord God with all your heart." And "I forgive your sins." Instead of tarnished celebrity luster, Jesus addressed some of peoples' most fundamental spiritual questions, then gave them answers that helped and healed. No other leader, or rabbi, or celebrity of the day did that. Is it any wonder, then, in a first century, word-of-mouth culture, that news of Him spread so quickly over the relatively small area of Judea? And then worldwide?

So I say good luck to Prince William and his wonderful wife; have fun on your trip to the States. And good luck, too, to the folks from HGTV; my wife and I enjoy your programming. But as much as we enjoy watching folks like these, in the long run, they're pale and fading – just like us – when compared to the Godly, shining teachings of Jesus.

*Lord, let me bask in Your shining light today.*

Read Mark 2, verses 13-17.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 December 2014

*Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. Mark 2, verses 13-14.*

Follow...what does it mean to follow? I mean, I follow the news. We follow people on Facebook. Kids play Follow the Leader. "Will you follow," was the message from "Braveheart." But what does it mean to follow?

Consider Levi, also known by the name of Matthew, who became Jesus' disciple. Levi was a tax collector, meaning he was the dirtiest of the dirty in Jesus' time. Tax collectors were treacherous scum who collaborated with the Roman occupying force to defraud people of their money. Very often, the tax collectors of Jesus' time would extort much more from taxpayers than what was simply owed. Like now, when the tax man calls on you, you pay. They were lying, conspiring, powerful cheats. This was the kind of man who Jesus encountered on His walk beside the lake.

Jesus spoke to Levi/Matthew, and immediately Levi/Matthew got up and followed Jesus. Levi didn't go home to put things in order. He didn't say "first let me do something." He didn't go to buy a new pair of sandals. No, immediately – right there and then without delay – Levi left his job as a tax collector and walked away with Jesus.

Go ye (we) therefore and do the same, right?

Yes.

Yes, because Levi wasn't intimidated by the fact that Jesus was a prophet and rabbi of growing fame and stature. And we shouldn't be either. Jesus had spoken to Levi and touched him deep inside, addressing Levi's deepest need: the need to be loved. Nobody loved the tax collector, not even the Romans who oversaw his vocation. Yet Jesus loved him. Jesus loved Matthew enough to say "I want you with me right now, out of the life you're living because there's so much more than this. There's me. I want you, Levi, to be with me. Follow me."

So Levi did. Where Jesus walked, Levi walked. Where He rested, Levi rested. The people Levi met were the people Jesus met. You get the picture. It became a life-long friendship, namely that, for the rest of Jesus' earthly life, Levi was one of the men by his side. And for the rest of Levi's life, Jesus was his guide, inspiration, and Savior.

Go ye (we) therefore and live the same, right? Absolutely.

We absolutely need to do this because Jesus is calling you and me to follow Him right now, in these words, at this very moment. Maybe you already do; He's calling you to encourage you on your walk today. Maybe you don't know Him; He's calling you to introduce Himself. Maybe you reject Him; He's calling you to say He loves you, He forgives you, He wants you for just who you are. Wherever we find ourselves, Jesus is immediately calling to us, in whatever our predicament, to leave who we are now and follow Him. He promises the road we walk with Him will be worth it. It may be – no, it will be – tough, and much will be demanded of us during the walk. Yet He promises that we, like Levi, will love following Him because He loved us first.



*Lord, I will follow You now, wherever You lead me Strengthen me for this journey and thank You for choosing me.*

Read Mark 2, verses 13-17.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 December 2014

*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Mark 2, verses 15-17.*

Are you sick? I love it how some of the greatest spiritual leaders that I can think of consider themselves to be the sick sinners they are. I have great admiration for Mother Theresa, Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, Pope Francis, Pope John Paul II because one of the common threads that connects them is their humble recognition that they are sinners who, without Jesus, are nothing but sick in the soul, damned dirty dogs. We don't need to catalog their sins or shortcomings any more than we need to catalog yours or mine; they had them and so do we. Instead, the point is that they realize they need a Savior who is perfect and forgives them of all their sins.

More than that, they – and we – have a Savior who meets us in the middle of our sins. He isn't Allah, who demands we slavishly come to him. He isn't the god of serenity or meditation who says we can reconcile our lives to nature. No, Jesus is God Almighty, who humbles Himself and meets sinners still living in the world. Indeed, He meets us sinners still living in our sins, still unhealthy in our sickness.

Consider the dinner at Levi's. Levi had just started following Jesus. He invites Jesus and the other disciples to dine with him along with several of his other tax collector, "sinner" friends. Liars, cheats, whore-chasers, adulterers, pagan-followers; today we might call them "Lutherans" or "Baptists" or "us." Anyway, Jesus goes and Jesus meets them in their sins. He doesn't become tainted by those sins; He doesn't join in the fracas. Instead, He serves to serve them by forgiving them where they are, where they need Him.

He does the same for you and me. Whatever you or I have done, Jesus walks with us every minute of every day saying, "let Me help. Let Me ease your pain." It doesn't matter what we've done; nothing is too much or too big for Him to handle. He wants to heal us right where we are.

And there's more. He confronts the 'judgy' Pharisees, who were the experts in Jewish law; think of them as professors or maybe reporters for the networks. They judge these 'sinners' to be below contempt. How ironic is it that they judge Levi and his contemporaries while eating dinner with them, while sharing in their feast. And yet Jesus is right there with them, gently but firmly instructing them on a better way. Without demeaning them, He brings them up short on their judgmentalism, reminds them that they are sinners too, and offers them the same remedy He offers to anyone else: "let Me help. Let Me ease your pain."

It's powerful medicine. So I'll ask you again: are you sick? Whose healing do you need?

*Jesus, heal me of my many sins and sicknesses of my soul.*

Read the whole story again in Mark 2, verses 13-17.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark 11 December 2014

*Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Mark 2, verse 18.*

That's not fair! Have you ever heard kids say that? Even if you don't have kids, you've probably heard it. You may have even said it. Read verse 18 again and admit it: isn't that what these people were saying to Jesus? "How come they get to do this and we don't?" After 2000 years and billions of other people, what's changed?

Yet there's a word that jumps out because it's used multiple times in this one verse: disciples. John's disciples, disciples of the Pharisees, and (it's implied) Jesus' disciples: what is it about that word that seems so old fashioned? Dictionary.com defines "disciple" as "a person who is a pupil or an adherent of the doctrines of another; follower." Not every teacher has disciples, and not every student is a disciple. The relationship goes deeper. There's a connection that allows the student to embrace more than just the educational lessons offered by the teacher. The disciple absorbs the instruction, the patterns, the behaviors of the mentor. In today's parlance, 'mentor' is more commonly said than 'disciple.'

That's something I can relate to. I've had several mentors; men and women who taught me things, ways of thinking, ways of performing and behaving, that I've adopted as my own. Especially in our so-called post-modern world, it's more important than ever to have solid mentors. We each need people to serve as examples for us; folks who think and act in ways we would like to emulate. In the age when families in America seem to be both disposable and disposed of, our young people need solid, virtuous, and experienced mentors from whom to learn the ropes.

If you have a mentor, you are a disciple. If you are mentoring someone, you have disciples. To be a disciple is to follow. Not surprisingly, 'discipline' is derived from 'disciple' because to be disciplined is to both receive correction (including rebuke) and to have adopted the ways of the one to whom you are disciplined. Whether you know it or not, you're following in Jesus' footsteps.

And that's not fair, you see, because it isn't 'fair' to give up one's entire self to be a follower of someone else. Without descending too far into vulgarity, however, let me remind you that 'fair' is a four-letter F word. Life isn't fair; fair isn't even fair. Even Jesus isn't fair. Jesus is just, and truth, and love, and peace. When you think about it, 'fair' and 'fairness' aren't any of those things.

Neither is being a disciple of Jesus, yet the more I follow Him and the more I share my interpretations of His Word, I find that I don't care about fairness where He is concerned. To be a disciple of Jesus, I gladly give up ways I once thought were fine. I enthusiastically put myself aside so that He can increase in you. I hopefully live now knowing that His hope is more than just a wish. I thankfully look forward to being in eternity with Jesus and His church because I know I'm part of that eternity now. None of that is fair, but all of it is just the way it should be.

*Lord Jesus, You aren't fair as the world sees fair. You're so much better than that.*

Read the whole story again in Mark 2, verses 18-22.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 12 December 2014

*Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. Mark 2, verses 18-20.*

This is the first time in the book of Mark that Jesus predicts His death. "The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them:" that's a foreshadowing of the crucifixion. Jesus is saying "be happy all the time but be happy especially now because I'm with you here." He knew, even then, that we needed Him more than ever.

So why do we fast so often? I mean, Jesus isn't physically here with us but He is here in ways we simply can't see with our eyes. So why do we still fast? Fast? Yes, fast. Just like giving up food as a way of devotion, we daily give up Jesus as a monument to anything but Him. In a way, you and I are fasting for idols; we are fasting in our souls to celebrate idolatry.

But...but...but I tithe and I go to church and I sometimes help the poor and I listen to my mother in law and I do all the good things I'm supposed to do (unlike those reprobates in Hollywood, you know). I'm still an idol-worshipper?

You bet your biffy you are.

See, Jesus was with His friends and they were celebrating life. Every day with Him was a celebration of life because He is life; He was then and He is now. They were His disciples: His loyal followers. They had subordinated their lives to His, adopting His ways and learning His path. That made each day a celebration. I'm not going all Pollyanna here: it's the truth. They were learning to look past the world and all the muck that's in it in order to be His eyes, ears and arms in a world that desperately needed Him. To do that, they gave up the world, gave up on being fixated on small things or worldly pleasures. This isn't to say they became perfect; they were flawed men not unlike us (see what happens on Maundy Thursday for the proof of that). But they walked the walk with Jesus.

Tell me: when was the last time you or I gave up being fixated on small things, worldly pleasures, or things other than Jesus? When was the last time we walked His walk, acted as His disciples, fasted for Him? The sad truth is that, if we aren't following Jesus, we are following something that isn't Him. And if it isn't Him, then it's nothing good. Remember, John 15:5 says "apart from Me you can do nothing." Nothing means nothing good.

That means we're following idols if we aren't following Jesus fully; we fast for the world. I'll say it again: is it any wonder that Jesus started predicting His death – the action which would make eternity possible for us – so early in His ministry? Even then, even though his friends didn't know it, Jesus knew how we would constantly fall away from Him despite our best intentions.

*Lord, strengthen me to follow only You, to break my fast for the world and to fast only to celebrate You.*

Read the whole story again in Mark 2, verses 18-22.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 December 2014

*“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.” Mark 2, verses 21-22*

One of the things I find most compelling about Jesus’ teachings is that they are rooted in common sense things we can understand. If you were on living in First Century Judea, you would understand the concept of wine in wineskins. You see, potable, drinkable, sanitary water was hard to come by in that time and place, much like it still is today throughout most of Africa, Asia and South America. If you wanted something reliable to drink, you drank wine. It probably wasn’t the quality of a 2003 Opus One; it would have been more like 2014 Mad Dog 20/20. It wasn’t grape juice because that would spoil or naturally ferment anyway. No, they drank wine because the alcohol in the wine preserved something potable to drink.

Have you ever made wine? In addition to being an aspiring writer, I’m an aspiring vintner. My wife and I are opening a winery, hopefully in the coming year. We’ve made wine already and have learned a few things in doing so. One of them is that, when you ferment juice into alcohol, if you don’t give the carbon dioxide a way to escape, it will expand and burst your container. That’s what new wine does; it’s chemistry not spirituality. Hence, Jesus’ allegory about pouring new wine into old wineskins makes perfect sense. Skins – actual leather skins used in old days to hold wine – were only useful once. If you poured fresh wine into them, that wine would still ferment and, because there wouldn’t have been a way for the CO<sub>2</sub> to escape, the old, used skins would leak, ruining both the wine and the wineskin used to store it.

Isn’t that the way with new teaching? Teaching old dogs new tricks?

And then there is the example of cloth. When I was a kid, we didn’t have a lot of money. It cost money to keep a growing boy clothed. I would constantly, regularly wear out the knees and sides of my jeans. My mom, who grew up in the Depression, would do what countless generations before her had done: she would sew patches onto my jeans. That way, they would be re-enforced and I could get a few months more use out of them. When she did so, she would try to weather the patch, so it would wear better. I suppose I was like new wine, bursting out of my old wineskin blue jeans (or corduroys, which I still won’t wear to this day).

Isn’t that the way with new teaching as well? In good and bad ways, the new doesn’t always easily jive with the old, does it?

So I take Jesus’ lessons to heart because He expresses them using everyday things that everyday people like me can understand. He did that so that He might meet us where we are and recognize Him when He does. That He might convey understanding of things we needed to know. Knowing that, tonight I may just have a glass of new, cheap wine while wearing my worn Levi’s.

*Jesus, thank you for speaking in ways I can understand.*

Read the whole story again in Mark 2, verses 18-22.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 December 2014

*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Mark 2, verses 23-28.*

There is so much to unpack in this small story that it's going to take a few days. Thanks ahead of time for bearing with me.

You see, this story is so antiquated that, in the West of 2014, I wonder how we can even relate to it. Picking pieces of grain is against the law on a Sabbath (Saturday or Sunday, take your pick; the actual day is moot according to verse 27). What's the story of Abiathar the priest and King David? And what about the last two things Jesus says (in verses 27 and 28)? Sabbath for man and not man for Sabbath? And then Jesus does another throw-down again?

Radical stuff if you think about it. Radical then and radical now.

ALL of Scripture is radical stuff. When I read the entire story in these 6 verses, I'm struck by how little things have changed. Those who would try to snipe at us or undo us usually do so in almost trivial ways. Our society sometimes seems fixated on small things when larger issues go unresolved. Look no further than the information that's leaked out because of the North Korean hack into Sony Pictures' databases. In reading news stories about it, it's almost shocking to see the shallowness and triviality of all those involved. Shocking, that is, until I remember that it's movie stars we're talking about. But movie stars need Jesus too and He loves movie stars the same way he loves farmers, politicians, people who make panty hose for a living, and healthcare project managers.

What seems most radical about this story, however, is how gently 'in your face' Jesus is when He's confronted about His disciples' Sabbath 'work.' He doesn't speak in parables; He doesn't talk around the edges; He doesn't dance around the truth. No, He confronts the Pharisees, the most learned ecclesiastical experts of their day, by saying "have you never read." It's radical. NOBODY, not even a famous and inspired rabbi with a growing following, would dare to upstage the entrenched powers that be, yet this is what Jesus does here. He rebukes them by being "in your face with grace." Notice, too, how He concludes His remark by teaching them the simple truth about the Sabbath, itself a way of saying, "Boys, you're looking at this thing all wrong."

Would you go up to President Obama and tell him he's got things all wrong? Or Kim Jong Un? How about your boss on a bad day? Or the kid who's been bullying you? Radical stuff from a truly radical man; hardly the touchy-feely Jesus we portray in the American suburbs.

*Lord, I need Your grace in my face too!*

Read the whole story again in Mark 2, verses 23-28.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 December 2014

*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Mark 2, verses 23-28.*

Who provides for you? When things get tough, when you're on your own, when you have no where else to turn, who takes care of you?

The first king of Israel was Saul, and Saul was a terrible king. He was evil and deceptive, so God anointed David as king; you can guess Saul's reaction and what he did next. Like most rulers under pressure, he tried to stamp out disloyalty, going as far as executing priests whom he suspected of disloyalty. One of those was Abiathar's namesake and father, Ahimelech. Before Ahimelech died, he gave a hungry, fleeing David (and David's companions) holy, consecrated bread. This was the bread that was placed on the altar of God, in the tabernacle that housed the Ark of the Covenant. It was unlawful for any unclean person to eat that bread, so, on the surface, it would seem illegal for David to eat it. That is, until you read on (in 1 Samuel) that Ahimelech the priest vouch-safed for David by ensuring David and his companions had abstained from spiritually impure acts prior to eating the bread.

It took some noodling to figure out what all this has to do with Jesus confronting the Pharisees and then teaching them this lesson about the Sabbath. After awhile, I came to a conclusion that I think applies.

"I will provide for you no matter what." That's one of the things God is saying through all this.

The purpose of the lesson wasn't just to smack down the snarky Pharisees, though Jesus does this with merciful ease. No, after reading & re-reading it, one of the main things Jesus is teaching in this is that He will provide everything to us, even when it seems improbable, even when (we think) He shouldn't. The Pharisees were so wrapped around the practice of what you couldn't and could do on the Sabbath that they forgot the purpose of the day off anyway: resting in God. Rest in God because God gives all. So Jesus brings them back around and reminds them that He created the Sabbath as a way for men to get back in touch with God without the interference of daily routine. It was something He knew, right from the start, that we would need to cope with six days of that daily routine.

If you think about it, He does the same thing with everything, not just rest. Food, air, water, shelter, love, vocation, instruction: Jesus provides it all, all the time, even when we think we are at our worst. Just like He did, through the high priest, when a destitute David and his army came to call.

*Lord of all, thank You for providing for me today. Help me to be a grateful steward of Your gifts.*

Read the whole story again in Mark 2, verses 23-28.

## **Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 18 December 2014**

*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Mark 2, verses 23-28.*

Let's begin with a short follow-up to yesterday's post about God providing everything. One easily overlooked facet of the story is how we are free to do what we want. David and his companions were free to take the consecrated bread whether Abiathar offered it or not. They were desperate and hungry warriors; who would not have expected them to simply take it by force? Yet they sought out the priest who offered them, instead, God's provision. They trusted where trust wasn't expected. Jesus offered that lesson to the Pharisees, seemingly saying "don't get so caught up in what's happening that you forget why it's happening." He implored them to trust in God to provide what was needed. After all, as Psalm 104 said (a verse with which the Pharisees would have been intimately familiar): All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time.

So I now exercise blogger's prerogative and use this entry today to shout out 'happy birthday' to my son, Dillon, who turns 19 today. I'm using the rest of this blog to implore to him (and maybe to you) a few similar lessons.

God always provides. A young man should never forget this, especially when he lives on his own, and is trying to juggle the frustrating priorities of school, job, love life, and dreams. Through all of these things, God always provides. All we have to do to earn that provision is exactly nothing. He does it because He loves us. We should do the same.

Always trust God, even when it seems improbable. If we "do" anything in the process of God saving us, it's only that we believe and trust Him. Jesus implored us to do that in the lesson above, just as He does in everything He teaches. Sometimes days seem dark, and sometimes they really are. Even in the middle of those, trust that God is working to turn it for the best, and that He'll give you what you need at the proper time to stand.

Trust, too, in your instincts, talents, and independence. God gave them to you to use creatively and for His benefit as well as yours. You have special talents that make you unique and unlike anyone else. Remember that. Don't get a big head about it because you're the steward of those gifts and the bounty they can produce. But remember it and trust in them.

And after all that, seek rest. Don't be a Pharisee and get wrapped up in the what instead of the why. You'll get tired. Seek real rest by communing with your Maker. The longer you live, the more you'll find He is the only real rest there is. Rest in Jesus by reading His word, by talking with Him, by trusting Him to get you through, by involving Him in your decisions, by greeting Him in the morning and saying good night to Him at night. It won't take long until you realize how much better you feel because you're being made better.

*Father, please bless my son on his birthday, and bless those who read these words.*

Read ahead in Mark 3, verses 1-6

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 December 2014

*Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Mark 3, verses 1-2.*

“Looking for a reason to accuse:” smack dab in the middle of the beginning of this chapter is a huge statement; it’s one that plagues everything we do today.

Take North Korea: the headlines this week are full of how the North Korean government has supposedly hacked into Sony’s Hollywood systems and caused the US political aisle) are quick to find fault with the other side, either for Sony’s irresponsible movie-making concept or the US government’s lackluster response to a cyber act of war.

And then there’s the issue of Cuba, where the president of the United States has drastically modified the US’ generations-old policy towards that island dictatorship. Some have said that our embargo has only hurt the Cuban people; others have countered that it is only the fault of the Castro dictators that the Cuban people live in misery.

Or how about the murders of police officers; the killings of young black men; a bankrupt US government managed by two political parties that shadow box themselves into intransigent positions; Ford versus GM; Mormons versus Baptists; Bush versus Clinton; war on Christmas versus the rights of believers to enjoy the holiday: it seems like our entire lives are lately consumed with people – meaning us – looking for reasons to accuse each other. Sometimes those accusations are substantiated, even justified; sometimes it is propaganda. Yet especially now we, as a society, seem to be waiting to be offended so that we can look for reasons to accuse ‘the other guy.’

If you’re a Christian, don’t stop reading now because you think you’re doing alright. You’ve done it too, even if you’re living a ‘good life.’ If you don’t believe me, then tell me about the relatives you don’t get along with. Or the kid who bullied you once and how you hated them for it. Tell me about all the times you envied X, Y or Z, then tell me you haven’t looked for reasons to accuse someone of something. I’m guilty of it a dozen times a day, maybe more. My sins are scarlet, just like yours. Welcome to our world, my friend. Let me remind you that Jesus once said that, if the world hates us, it is because it hated Him first. In doing so, they unjustly accused Him.

The folks who wanted to accuse Jesus were watching Him to see if He would do something we, of today, would generally think to be good. They wanted to see if Jesus would heal on the Sabbath again, an infraction of their legalistic religious practices. They WANTED to see Him do something so they could have a reason to accuse Him and drive a wedge between Jesus and His growing movement of followers.

Since Christmas is this week, I truly hope you will have a very merry one, and that your holiday will be full of love, hope, and good memories. Yet I implore you to take this memory with you today and ponder what you intend to do about it: you and I are the Pharisees sometimes, waiting to accuse others of things they may or may not have done. Waiting to pig-pile on Jesus instead of being Jesus for them.

*Lord, please forgive me for failing You by accusing others.*

Read ahead in Mark 3, verses 1-6

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 December 2014

*Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. Mark 3, verses 3-4.*

Gutless cowardice makes me so stinkin mad. It infuriates me because, to be honest, I've been a gutless coward too many times in my life. I can't begin to tell you about all the times I stood silent – like the Pharisees – when I should have spoken up. Or all the times I was bullied in school and did nothing to stop it. I can't even remember how many times I used to be scared of things that really shouldn't scare us; things like the dark, or confrontation, rejection, telling the truth, my faults and sins, deadlines, or even getting caught in a traffic jam. I look back on those times and see myself has having been so much less than I knew I should have been and it makes me feel ashamed. Ashamed and yet so amazed even more that Jesus wants me just the way I am, gutless cowardice and all. There's nothing I could have done, or could do now, to change that, or earn it, or make myself worthy of it. It's that agape love He has to which we all aspire but from which we remove ourselves so woefully far.

So it makes me mad to read about this story for the umpteenth time, about how the Pharisees were such damned gutless cowards when they were confronted by the Son of Man. Here they are in person with Jesus Christ, the one whose coming has been foretold since Eden, and they're looking for a way to trap Him in His words. Yet when He does something confrontational yet loving (like healing someone with a physical deformity), do they speak up? Do they walk the walk? You know the answer.

Gutless cowards.

Tell me: would we be any different? I've already confessed my sometime-cowardice. I pray it would never return but, to tell you the truth, I don't always know. How about you? What are you hiding from? What bad things have you done, or are going on in your life, or are going on around you, that you refuse to stand up and face? Are you walking the coward's path in some way?

I bet you are. Not to insult you; please understand, I respect you for who you are. So it's in friendship and even admiration for you that I tell you I bet there are things you're afraid of, things that make you cower in pusillanimous, irrational fear.

The antidote to fear? Let's return to where Jesus is in verse 3 and stand up for Him. Let's be the man with the shriveled hand; the man who couldn't help Himself but knew Jesus could. Let's let Him take our hand and make us understand that 'He's got this.' That, cowering and fear or not, He wants us just as we are, that we don't need to do a thing – that we really can't – to make Him love us more for just who we are. That in Him there is power to stand so that no weapon – or fear – will prosper against us. During Christmas week, that's such an important thing to remember because that is the reason He came.

*Lord, forgive me my fears and doubts and the times I've been a coward.*

Read ahead in Mark 3, verses 1-6

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 December 2014

*He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. Mark 3, verses 5-6*

It's still early in the book of Mark, meaning it's still fairly early in Jesus' ministry, possibly around AD 28 (according to <http://biblehub.com/timeline/mark/1.htm>). I say that because it means that, early on in the time when Jesus declared His public ministry, there were high-ranking people opposed to Him; opposed to Him so strongly that they wanted Him dead. Those people were willing to plot with the official governing body installed by Rome (the Herodians). It wasn't something that started during Passion Week; it happened all along. Do you grasp the significance of that? It would be as if someone got the goods on the United States Government today and publicly, vocally, strongly, and with overwhelming public support worked to oppose it. Tell me: do you think the power structure in ancient Judea was any less intimidating or malevolent?

And how did Jesus look to oppose the public power structure? By gently but firmly confronting it through doing His Father's good. If you recall, in verses 1-4 He confronted the Pharisees by questioning them on the Sabbath. Already they were looking for a way to trap Him. So, instead of falling into their trap, Jesus rhetorically and practically counter-traps them by exposing the stubbornness of their hearts. Yet He gives them an out. In today's verses, Jesus proves that it is right to do the Father's will any time, Sabbath or otherwise. Instead of condemnation, Jesus spreads a little love by helping a stranger, then letting the action speak for itself.

Yet don't overlook the massive thing He also does in doing so. He gets angry; righteously angry. He wasn't angry at the Pharisees, but He did get angry and look at them in anger. See the difference; it matters. It's no small thing to tick off the Creator of the Universe but these Pharisees managed to do it. How? By hardening their hearts. It should have been a no-brainer: let the Father's love show in any way at any time whether it violated Jewish tradition or not. Yet they stubbornly refused to choose what was right, choosing, instead, the tradition over the love. That choice is what angered Jesus, namely that they would choose humanity over God, that they would choose human practice over God's glory.

Tell me: do you think Jesus gets similarly angry over our bad choices today? I don't know where heaven is, or where in it Jesus lives; I sometimes wonder if, at my dying, I won't be ridiculously surprised to learn that heaven was here all along but I, in my mortal humanity, could not see it. Jesus is there and here at the same time, absent from a physical presence that I could grasp yet very real and very present in ways only my heart can. When I choose what I can grasp over choosing who He is, do you think that distresses Him the way He became distressed over the Pharisees? After all, Jesus loved the Pharisees too. Early on, they showed how they could rebel against Him. Yet just as early, instead of hating them, He rebuked and loved them, too.

*Lord, forgive me of my sins, of my poor choices, of how I chose the world over You.*

Read ahead in Mark 3, verses 7-12.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 December 2014

*Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea. Mark 3, verses 7-8.*

The folks in Judea had heard about Jesus performing miracles. And about how He confronted the Pharisees. And about how His words were compelling yet caring, about how He spoke of the Kingdom of God as a place of real love and brotherhood. Many of them had seen or met John the Baptist, who spoke about Jesus. The people of Judea had heard about how people just like them had dropped everything to follow this new rabbi, just to hear what He said.

In 2000 years, what has changed?

I mean, the stories of people who follow Jesus and whose lives are transformed by Him are astounding. One of my heroes is Billy Graham, who has personally preached the Good News of Christ to millions of people in stadiums, churches, and meetings all across the planet. How many untold millions, maybe billions, of people in history and alive even now had their hearts changed by listening to someone like Mr. Graham, or to a local preacher, a minister, or a servant of the church and then letting themselves ask that question: "what about all that?"

Yet far more people learn about Jesus from folks like you and me. It's the Holy Spirit acting through us in moments of kindness. Last night, while driving along a narrow highway, an old man driving a motorhome in front of me hit something on the road. I don't know what he hit, but it seriously damaged his RV. When I finally got to the scene of the accident, amidst all the honking, broken pieces, and careless frustration, a young man had stopped his truck and was gently walking the frightened old man around, helping him sort out what had happened. The vehicles had different license plates, so I can only surmise that the old and young men weren't acquainted; they were strangers.

Jesus was walking with them. In a practical moment of fear and need, Jesus reached out through a stranger and helped another stranger. That happens far more than conversions in a church service or even by people reading a blog like this one. Yes, those things matter and they can help, yet it is Jesus' Holy Spirit living out through each of us that most effectively spreads His good news today.

There's my Facebook friend who turned her life of alcoholism, drug addiction, promiscuity, and desperation into one of serving others with her practical work, her practical words, and her testimonies in a growing Florida church: all because someone reached out to her in her need with a caring hug from Jesus. There is another friend whose heart was cold towards God for decades yet has only recently begun to warm to Him when she witnessed the real love of believers at a wedding then soon after a funeral. There is the fact that the world's largest Christian nation is now the People's Republic of China. Communist China, where the pagan communist government has worked to stamp out all worship except that of the state and yet the church still grows underground to over 100 million active members.

It's not about me or you. It's about Jesus: just like it was 2000 years ago. It's Him living through us.

*Lord, help me to always see how all in life is about You. Live through me to reach others.*

Read ahead in Mark 3, verses 7-12.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 31 December 2014

*Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Mark 3, verses 7-10.*

It must have been a shock to Jesus to see how people react. Here He was God incarnate, possessing all His power and majesty as the God of the universe yet actively putting that aside to live fully as a real man. So when He sees how crowds are thronging to Him, asking for His help, asking to hear Him speak, He must have been shocked. Do I really mean that the Son of God could be shocked by throngs of humanity? Yes, that's what I mean. Disappointed, leveled, shocked.

Yet Jesus kept His eye on the ball through all of this. He was overwhelmed by the outpouring of the people, by their needs and their desire for more of what He offered. With so many people crowding Him, Jesus couldn't effectively minister the way He intended. So he arranged for other practical means to continue with that ministry. Jesus convinced the disciples to have a boat ready so that He could get away from the crowd and speak to them from the water. It would be like a natural microphone, with His voice carrying over the water.

We need to keep our eye on the ball as well. Too often, in my prayers I'm imploring God to do X, Y or Z. Right now, my wife and I are in the process of trying to buy property to plant a vineyard. Many things have to line up for this to happen, and if it does happen, the credit must indeed go to God for making it work. The particular property we're attempting to buy has everything we could want. So it is that these days I find myself praying for God's work to do those things so that they go my way. I'm trying to not get my hopes up, to remember that, no matter what happens and no matter how things turn out, God will be active in all of it. Yet I find myself, more and more, acting like one of the crowd pressing on Jesus to do something for them. It becomes too easy for me to lose sight of the fact that He is about more than stuff, more than farms, or vineyards, or qualifying for loans, or my plans. If this plan doesn't work out, Jesus has others in store for me. That isn't just some platitude or rationalization: it's the truth.

Do you think Jesus is shocked by my prayers, or yours, or the attitude of our hearts? In eternity, He is still fully God and fully man. Knowing that, do you think He is aghast that we would want, ask for, or do the things we do? Or do you think He knows us better than that? As one year ends and another begins, let us pray for His peace either way.

*Lord, I've fallen so short in using the talents you give me. Forgive me for how I neglect all the good You do in my life. Help me to keep my eyes only on You..*

Read ahead in Mark 3, verses 7-12.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 January 2015

*Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him. Mark 3, verses 11-12.*

Now that's a superpower I wish I could have. Do kids ever ask you that question: what superpower do you wish you could have? Every now and then my son will ask it; usually the conversation turns into joking or bathroom humor when that happens. Here, however, I'm being serious. I wish I had the superpower to make impure spirits fall down before me and cry out for mercy.

News flash, sports fans: I have it. So do you.

The whole Jesus thing – the “ask whatever you want in my name and it'll be given to you” thing – is real. It's true. It really is a super-power. You can use it now.

Our world demands to be taken at face value, that is, at realism. We are constantly implored to reject the supernatural as being impossible or illogical. God is dead; Jesus is a myth; faith is a crutch for the weak; religion is an opiate for the masses: our pessimistic (and Leninist) human nature tells us these things. Yet isn't it fascinating that the biggest movies of our time are stories about the supernatural, or super-heroes, or super-powered fantasies. Why, it's only the beginning of 2015 and already some smart folks are prognosticating that the biggest movies of this coming year will be about the super-heroic Avengers, Ant Man, and the next installment of the super-infused Star Wars saga.

We crave the ability to make evil cower, to put the demons that haunt us at bay and make them submit. It's something that we aren't able to do on our own because of our own human failings, so we yearn to be better than we are, to have super-human abilities like Superman, Iron Man, Batman, Darth Vader and the like. How disappointing it is to always find that life isn't a movie or a comic book.

Yet how wonderful it can be to learn that such power is within us, that such abilities are at our fingertips when we walk the walk of Christ. I'm not the Son of God; neither are you; let's not get the big head and think more of ourselves than we are. Yet the Son of God truly does promise us that what we ask for in His name will be given to us, including the power to make demons cry out in submission to His Name: just like what happened here in Mark.

Don't believe me? Confess your skepticism to the woman who has faced down the demons of her past to finally quiet them. Tell it to the alcoholic who pushes away the drink instead of swallowing the poison one last time. Tell it to the man who is tempted to cheat just one more time and then quit, but quits now instead and does something better. Tell it to the person who prays to God for strength and to whom is given the opportunity to be strong. All of them – all of us – face down our demons day by day, and with the power of Christ in our voice and in our veins, we battle, persevere, and emerge victorious. Just like Jesus did and just like He taught us. *That* is a super-power I am thankful to already have.

*Lord, strengthen me with Your strength, and be my sword, shield, and will in my daily battle.*

Re-read Mark 3, verses 7-12.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 7 January 2015

*Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. Mark 3, verse 13.*

Let's ask two simple questions: does Jesus want you? If you haven't received a personal calling, a personal message, from Jesus of Nazareth; if you haven't experienced an on-the-mountaintop moment; if you don't feel born again even though some preacher says you are; if Jesus doesn't call you by name in a way you can understand, does Jesus want you?

Then the second question is just as easy: how do you know?

Ah, to go into Wednesday pondering such theological questions.

Of course you know the answer to number one: yes, Jesus wants you. Mark 3 says that He called those He wanted, and they came to Him. Mind you, in this section, it is specifically talking about Jesus calling His first disciple; Peter, James, John and the rest: this section of the book is where they are first mentioned. Yet don't lose sight of the fact that, before naming those men, Mark says verse 13. Jesus called to those He wanted and they came to Him. It isn't, therefore, illogical to make the correct assumption that whoever Jesus calls He wants and that this calling can be more than just the twelve disciples named soon after. It includes you and I.

Jesus wants you just like He wanted those disciples. He made you with specific talents, gave you the heart and mind to gain experiences (both good and bad), and put it on your heart to want to know Him more even when you didn't understand, or fought against it. Jesus wants you just as you, just the way you are now, just as who you are now. He didn't ask the apostles to be men they weren't; Jesus didn't ask they be anyone other than who they were right then and there. In two thousand years, that hasn't changed. Jesus wants us for who we are, and will use our lives for His love and His glory just as we are. Does that mean we don't change for the better? Of course it does (and doesn't). He wants the best for us, and that may indeed include us giving up things that are bad for us; a 'sin diet.' But the first step comes in Him coming to us as we are. He does that because He wants us.

So how do we know? Perhaps the best answer is the old children's hymn: "yes Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so." Were you looking for me to give you some grand insight, some hidden secret, or some secret Christian handshake? There isn't one, you know. I know Jesus wants me as me because He said He did. He said it in His actions; He said it by the way He talked with people. He says it when His Spirit speaks to me through my conscience, letting me know what I should or shouldn't do about a hundred decisions per day. Jesus loves me just because He says He does. His word is enough. Jesus wants us just because He says He does. Jesus means what He says and, in this simple verse, He tells of so much more just by calling simple men, then accepting them as they were.

*Lord, accept me as I am. Forgive me, and help me to want to change where I should so that Your love and kingdom may increase.*

Re-read Mark 3, verses 13-19.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 8 January 2015

*Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. Mark 3, verse 13.*

I know we talked about this same verse yesterday but I ran out of space before making a point that should be talked over.

They came to Him.

Know this: there is nothing the apostles, Jesus' followers, you, me, Mother Theresa, Pope Francis or anyone could do to save themselves or ourselves. We don't 'earn' our salvation; we don't do anything to deserve it, or make ourselves worthy of it, or curry Jesus' favor to gain it. The idea of "work righteousness" is a misleading rabbit hole we'd do well to stay away from...save one simple action: we acknowledge belief. We profess our faith and go to Jesus. Each of us still must choose: Jesus or everything else. We must either choose everything else and all the separation from love that entails, or we must choose Jesus. When we choose Him, we come to Him. When we do, we find He was already there, waiting for us. It's really more of Jesus already proving Himself, giving us all we need, providing everything – especially salvation – and us acknowledging an obvious 'aha moment' that Jesus' Spirit enabled us to see.

And that's where the 'work' stops. It's the only thing we do in response to His prompting and His pro-action in our lives. Professing faith in Jesus, responding to how His Spirit reaches out to us first, is the only participatory action we take in the process that is salvation. Everything else has already been done for us; everything that's needed was done by Jesus on Calvary.

Those whom Jesus called during Bible times were the first to experience His call. It was a practical thing, you see. Jesus was in a remote location in Judea, preaching around growing crowds. It wasn't that He needed help to get His message out. Instead, WE needed it. He instituted the practical thing called "Christian ministry;" even it was nothing new, for personal human ministry was as old as Eden. Still, He called a few of the crowd, those to whom He had reached out and brought into His human inner circle, and He formally touched their hearts with an invitation. It said "follow me." Not "do this, that, and the other," or "be better than everyone else." Just "follow me." You could say Jesus was offering them a contract: follow me and let me do the rest.

It's the same contract He offers to us. Follow Jesus and He'll do the rest. He'll give us the chances to grow in faith, to let Him re-mold our ways of thinking, to guide us in making better choices. When we follow Jesus, He guides us as we discover that we want to live better, to do better than we did before. Jesus saves us from ourselves, freeing us to live in better ways that we couldn't do before His calling. He's been reaching out to us from the day we were born, yet for a myriad of reasons, you and I sometimes ignore the call. But He doesn't. He still calls to us, just like He called to those apostles, and they came to Him. We come to Him because He called for us. His call is always the right one.

*Lord, receive me. I hear Your call to my heart and I want to follow only You.*

Re-read Mark 3, verses 13-19.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 January 2015

*He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means "sons of thunder"), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Mark 3, verses 14-19.*

Two thousand years after they lived, the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ are still some of the most impactful men who ever lived. Only one of them lived to old age: all the others died in youth or middle age, Judas (of course) dying by suicide even before Jesus died. Yet what they did in the years after the day described in these verses forever changed history, our outlook, our relations with others, and human hearts.

Notice that Jesus didn't equip them with Ivy League educations, formal project plans, a fat bank account, or brand new smart phones. Jesus had plucked them out of their regular lives and He promised them nothing other than Himself. They would soon find that Jesus was enough, that just knowing Him, preaching Him, being Jesus for others who didn't know Him, representing Him, was enough. Jesus knew that these men would do the best they could and that, with Him as the center of their efforts, it would work out just fine. How many of our churches today would fall apart without fancy graphics, praise bands, or all the sexy bells and whistles we associate with Sunday worship? Isn't just Jesus still enough even if you're Joel Osteen?

Notice, too, that verse 14 says "that they might be with Him." It segues on what we were talking about yesterday: Jesus wanted these common men to be with Him. He wanted them for who they were, for the talents He had given to them, for what He knew they could do (even if they didn't know). Out of the thousands of respected, experienced leaders of the first century Mediterranean world, Jesus picked twelve commoners with no particular attraction to carry his message to the world. More than any of this, though, Jesus wanted them, their company, their hearts. He created people to be in His image, to be in communion with Him, and He wanted their company. Jesus wanted them because He wanted to share His divine love.

And then notice that the next verse says "that He might send them out to preach and to have authority." He didn't say "go to seminary and get all Bibled up, then go out and start an organization." He intended to spend time with them, then send them out to share His words and His authority. I admire the churches today that take a mentoring approach to teaching young called servants. I admire them because that's what Jesus did. He called His friends, He taught them His Word, then He sent them out.

So once again I'll say something that you're probably tired of hearing by now: just like He does for us today. The approaches that worked for these simple men of Judea still work for the simple people we are today. They still work because their foundation still is Jesus.

*Lord, I want to go Your way.*

Re-read Mark 3, verses 13-19.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 12 January 2015

*Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." Mark 3, verses 20-22.*

Are you afraid? Fear: isn't that at the nub of what was really going on here? Picture Jesus, being Himself – that is, unconventional, radical, caring, teaching – being invited to a friend's house. The folks of the town heard about the famous teacher and they crowded Him; Taylor Swift kind of crowds. They gathered in crowds so dense, so pressing and needy, that Jesus and His friends couldn't even sit down for a meal. Imagine the subway at rush hour, or piling into a football stadium for the Super Bowl, or the Mall on the pay day before Christmas. This was more crowded. And some of the crowd seemed afraid.

His family was around him. I take that to mean that the location of this house was either near Nazareth, where Jesus had grown up, or that His mother, brothers, or sisters traveled with Him at this time. We don't really know. All we can say is what Mark does: that they tried to shut Him down. They tried to shut him down because they seemed afraid. Afraid of Jesus' words, afraid of the crowds, afraid of something: it's another thing we don't know. But they were so afraid that they felt an urgent need to corral Jesus and 'take charge of Him.' As if they could. What's more, they felt so strongly about it that they were willing to lie about it. "He is out of His mind." That's a bald lie.

It's hardly what someone says when they love you. "Don't listen to Dave: he's crazy." "That guy is a loon." You get the picture. Hardly loving words, especially since their words fed those of the rabbis (who also followed Jesus around), who wanted to shut up Jesus in any way possible. 'He is possessed by the devil.' That's what the leading Jewish interpreters said.

So here's a news flash: they seemed pretty afraid as well. I suppose there were some who had genuine concern to protect the integrity of the rich Jewish tradition. Their fear would seem understandable since what Jesus said & did was so confrontational and challenging. What He said, however, didn't contradict God's commands or His love. Indeed, had they listened closer, perhaps they would have let go of their fear. And I suppose, too, there were those who were afraid of what could happen to them if the people listened closely enough to Jesus and maybe wised up. That, too, is understandable, if inexcusable. So they were afraid enough to jump to the conclusion that Jesus must be Satanic.

Tell me: how are we different? We get to know Jesus by His word and Spirit; are we afraid of what He says, afraid of what it could mean to us? The Judean people knew Him in person. They saw Him as the man He was, and came to know Him as fully man and fully God. My pastor said this yesterday: Jesus had to be both for Him to do what He did. Yet some became afraid of Him...just like some of us. Why?

*Lord, forgive me my fears.*

Re-read Mark 3, verses 20-34.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 January 2015

*So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables. Mark 3, verse 23.*

I go back and forth on this concept. I like to think I'm educated, experienced, and informed. I much prefer that people tell me the plain truth; don't sugar-coat things; don't dance around the point. If I were a man in Jesus' time, how would I feel about Him telling me things in parables? I wouldn't have been in Jesus' inner circle; neither would you. That means we would most likely be counted in the crowd to whom He spoke in parables. When He spoke in parables (instead of plain language), Jesus spoke obliquely, using stories and figurative language to make a point. I'm not sure how much I'd appreciate that.

And that's where I'd be dead wrong.

<http://www.simplybible.com.au/f664.htm> says "The parables were evocative not provocative. By couching his teaching in parables, Jesus made certain points much clearer to true-hearted people than even plain language could have made them. At the same time, he was speaking indirectly and figuratively so that lawyers had nothing to accuse him of. When it would have been counterproductive to speak plainly in public, Jesus spoke in parables—a prudent strategy." Evocative: that's a perspective I hadn't considered before, but Jesus evoking images and lessons in people is much wiser than my self-centered response to thinking I hadn't gotten the straight scoop from the Almighty.

Remember that, in today's verse, Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people. In this crowd there are strangers, newcomers to His following, and curious onlookers. There are also members of His family who had just said He was loony, as well as Pharisees who are already looking for a way to take Jesus down a notch. Would Jesus have given them fire and brimstone, a confrontational and harsh repudiation of all they had done wrong? How effective would that be? I mean, couldn't they get that from the Jewish leaders or their Roman overlords? That kind of teaching-led-astray is part of the reason Jesus came. And it would have played into their misunderstanding of who Jesus was.

At my church, the recently finished sermon series was entitled "That reminds me of a story that Jesus told." Pastors Mark, Will and Anthony spent most of late 2014 going through parables and the messages they revealed. After listening closely, it became more and more evident that the parables of Jesus weren't just oblique references or stories that beat around the bush. Instead, they were beautiful, poetic references designed to speak directly to people's hearts while opening their minds. The parables were a way for people to relate; more people, in fact, that could relate to direct teaching of direct concepts. Think about that: we learn more when we can relate than we do from simple lecture. We learn when we can relate, when we noodle something instead of simply blindly accepting it.

In that light, I'd be wrong – self-centered and cocky, in fact – if I clung to my selfish outlook about why Jesus did or didn't include me in his plain-truth ministry. He actually did, talking with me in a way I can understand. Jesus spoke in parables so that more people could understand Him than would by Him saying things they might not have wanted to hear. When we think about it that way, hearing His parables actually becomes a very beautiful gift.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for speaking in parables, for giving me truth I need in a way I can handle.*

Re-read Mark 3, verses 20-34.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 January 2015

*So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. Mark 3, verses 23-26.*

If you're a student of history, you'll note that these verses in Mark 3 were quoted by Abraham Lincoln. He used them in a famous speech, given in his acceptance of his party's nomination for an Illinois Senate seat in 1858. Lincoln quoted the verses and put them in the context of the Union at that time. "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free," said Mr. Lincoln. Lincoln had spoken eloquently before, and already had something of a growing national reputation when he gave the 'house divided' speech. Isn't it fascinating – and telling – that some of the Great Orator's most famous words quoted Jesus of Nazareth? That reminds me of a story that Jesus told. It certainly reminded Lincoln, whose religious affiliation and belief set we have debated since the day he died, but who, in fact, was a well-versed and largely self-taught scholar of the Bible.

The story that Jesus told was one He told in refuting the Pharisees who were, once again, goading Him. They had said He was possessed by the devil. Isn't ironic that, when someone challenges something which we hold dear, we find it very easy to go personal, to attack them for who they are instead of just what they are saying? That's what the Pharisees did to Jesus. They tried to hit Him where He hurt. Yet instead of simply smiting them or hurting them – as Satan surely would have done– Jesus reasons with them, appealing to their minds and their hearts with logic that stands the test of time.

At least that's what Abraham Lincoln thought. And did.

Isn't it true for us as well? How often do we read stories of people who said God told them to do outrageous or terrible things? Had they been more steeped in the Scriptures, could they not have seen how God does not ask us to do things that are contrary to His nature? It would be natural for Satan to delude us into thinking that the person with whom we have an affair is actually who God put in our lives forever, yet tell me just when has God considered adultery to be a good thing? And maybe a jury would understand why one man killed another in a 'justifiable' way, but just when has Jesus endorsed murder?

Those things would be contrary to God's holy nature, meaning that, if He thought, said, or did things that are contrary, His house would be divided against itself and could no longer stand. That means something for us, especially when we are trying to determine what God is saying to us in everyday events. Would God ask us to do things that are contrary to Him? Would He put us in positions where our only choice is something sinful? You know the answer. So did Abraham Lincoln. So did Jesus.

*Lord, let me follow only Your will, testing temptation by comparing it to Your words and Your will in my life. Praise be to You for Your mercy and teaching.*

Read Mark 3, verses 23-30.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 January 2015

*In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. Mark 3, verse 27.*

Jesus doesn't promise everything will be rosy. Permit me a minor whine. I've had a very productive and good week this week, but it's been tough. In the space of 3 hours one day, while on travel out of state, my eyeglasses broke (and I need them to see), my computer's hard drive died (and I lost all my applications, emails, and data), and my house sold (which is what we want but it's scary). All this added up to an enormous mountain of stress, and I became testy and irritable. Mind you, the eyeglasses can be replaced (I did so yesterday), the hard drive was replaced (and since I had been using the computer for only a week, the data loss, while inconvenient, was minimal), and selling the house is a blessing (both for the new owner and for us to take positive steps in getting a new property soon).

The point is that Jesus doesn't promise that life will be Easy Street, or that things will go perfectly once we allow Him into our lives. In fact, He promises just the opposite...or had you forgotten the verses where He tells people that, to follow Him, we must deny ourselves and take up our own crosses? What Jesus promises is that He will abide with us, that His strength can be our strength and that, because of this, we can prevail over anything.

Yet don't forget this: Jesus also insinuates that even the strong can be brought down, especially by evil. Verse 27 says so. The creeper can enter the strong man's house; crime can occur; terrible things can occur in our lives. The creeper can subjugate the strong man; we all have our weak points; we all have our vulnerabilities. The creeper can, then, have his way in the strong man's house. The strong man can be brought down; the high can be brought low; pain and death happen. Jesus Himself affirms that this is the case. He's telling us "if you live in the world, you will have a world of hurt."

For this, the only real thing we can do is rely on His strength. Just a few verses before, Jesus reassured us that He is who He says He is: divine and all-love God. And he assures us that, in the world, worldly things happen; a house divided against itself cannot stand. The world, when plagued by worldly problems, will come to worldly ends. God Immanuel does not give us strength every day, but He does give us the way to be strong, to gain strength and use it to be strong. The more I live in this world the more I see that the foundation of all real strength always is and always must first be rooted in living in strength through the Savior. Only by allowing Him to live in us, mentor and lead us, can we face down our constant troubles and overcome the petty evils that threaten to overcome us.

The problems I described above are really nothing more than first-world problems; small stuff that can get us down but never fully take us down.

*Lord, be my only strength.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 19 January 2015

*Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.” Mark 3, verses 28-29.*

This is going to be tough to wrestle with, especially if we use only these verses to interpret their meaning. Verse 28 says all sins can be forgiven, but then verse 29 effectively negates the word “all” and replaces it with “everything except one,” right? Is Jesus contradicting Himself?

Let’s remember first principles. Our sins are forgiven. Verse 28 says that, and it’s a concept that goes back to the beginning of time. In Eden, God prophesied that Jesus would crush Satan, vanquishing sin. That required forgiveness, yet mankind kept sinning. Despite our sins, centuries later the prophet Jeremiah said, “I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me” (Jeremiah 33:8). God loved His people and willingly forgave them. Don’t believe me? Think about Israel finally entering the promised land. Or how God restored King David. Or how Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. God loved His people and forgave them, time and again, when they truly repented and returned to Him.

And still we kept sinning.

Later, Jesus modeled the very essence of forgiveness. John 21 tells of how Jesus restored Peter after Peter personally, publicly disowned Jesus. He restored Peter’s faith and confidence, and then sent him off to live boldly for the Gospel. Peter’s friend, John, also reminds us (in 1 John 1:9), “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Confession is the key. Owning up to our wrongs, then taking them to Jesus. After all, with every sin we commit, isn’t Jesus the first who is hurt? We are simply grasping what Jesus has already done.

But there’s more. We are to freely forgive each other. Later in the book (in 11:25), Mark says, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” And, in chapter 26, verse 28, Matthew speaks of Holy Communion, quoting Jesus: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus forgives ALL of our sins, so we are to do the same.

So what about that contradiction? Don’t forget a few key things. In Matthew 10:33, Jesus says “But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.” He’s talking about people who deny His existence.

Do you or I deny who Jesus is? Do we turn away from Him, denying Him to other people? Do we deny that He is who He said He is? Do we do it in words or our hypocrisy? Is it any wonder, then, that God would deny us His eternal reward, that such denial would be a curse against God? Remember: all that is not of God is sin, yet is freely willing to forgive any wrong we commit against Him. Taking that to a logical end, denial of God is blasphemy. Where blasphemy is cursing God, this makes sense. If we mean it in our hearts when we say “I don’t believe in Jesus,” then we are blaspheming God. When you think of it in that light, there really is no contradiction.

*Lord, forgive me yet again.*

Read Mark 3, verses 23-30.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 January 2015

*He said this because they were saying, "He has an impure spirit." Mark 3, verse 30.*

Mark finishes off this vignette with an explanation. Jesus reasoned, implored, touched, refuted, rebuked, and forgave: all in the space of 6 verses. Why did he do it? Because of lies about Him.

Now, let's be fair: some people who heard Jesus talk may indeed have thought He was demon-possessed. They saw this rebel, this upstart, who dared to defy the entrenched politico-religious authorities of the day. The temerity of the man! Surely he must be crazy (as his family had just said). Barring that, the only other option was Beelzebub (as those politico-religious authorities said). It stands to reason some of them thought that was the truth.

Yet when you take away that consideration and simply recall what was going on, you're left with the knowledge that Jesus was simply responding to a pack of lies. He wasn't demon-possessed; Jesus wasn't even self-possessed. He had no political or military prowess, nor did He appear to even have an interest in such things. Whatever made the world tick didn't interest this 'nobody' from the nowhere village of Nazareth. And while there were stories about miracles involved in His birth, who could really rely on stories, on rumors, to really gain a sense of the man?

So when the speculation as to who and why He was finally washed away, we're left with the knowledge that, though Son of God, Jesus was also a real man about whom, and for various reasons, many lies had been spread. He was possessed. He was selfish. He was a fraud. He was a failure. Nobody. Somebody. Savior. Scoundrel: when folks didn't seem to know what to say about Jesus, they simply prattled off the lies. Thanks to the Gospels, the Epistles, and the first-hand accounts of His day, we actually know more about Jesus of Nazareth than we know about any other person from antiquity. And still the lies persist; and still we spread the lies. Even when we don't spread them, we believe them.

Our world is polarized today. You can't troll Facebook without seeing shared stories of how up to no good the other side is (no matter who you perceive the other side to be). I've fallen for them myself. Thanks to my friend John (who originated this quote), I think Facebook is a mile-wide-inch-deep microcosm of who we are in America today. If that's true, we're a pack of lying liars who all too easily believe the lies told about the other guys. I disagree so strongly with my opponents that I find it believable that they're a bunch of rotten human beings. And I know I'm right because, well, I'm right.

Sound familiar? Now is a good time to remember John's "mile-wide-inch-deep" quote.

Perhaps it sounds familiar because we aren't so different from the people of Jesus' day, many of whom followed Him devoutly, but many of whom also believed the lies that seemingly reputable people told about Him. Perhaps, too, this is a good time to remember that, while Jesus rebuked the people who meant harm to others, He also dealt with opponents using love, grace, and patience. Jesus knew the score, and He knew others were lying about Him. Yet Jesus moved from a posture of righteous love, and He didn't let these things take His eye off the ball.

*Jesus, too often I believe the lies about You. Forgive me and renew me to stand, to be faithful, and to forgive as You forgive.*

Read Mark 3, verses 23-30.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 January 2015

*Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." Mark 3, verses 31-35.*

It's my privilege to be part of several groups of people who are just about the best people you could know. Now, I'm sure we can all say that about the friends closest to us, and that's a good thing, a real blessing. I am fortunate to say that there are two groups with whom I keep in contact that I think of quite literally as family. One is my shipmates from the three years I spent at sea while I was in the Air Force; yes, you read that right. We keep in touch mostly on Facebook and email, but I have several phone numbers and we'll occasionally catch up that way as well. The other group is the small group of men with whom I worked at an obscure assignment in Colorado Springs. We did systems work together, and we were part of a self-appointed elite group who felt we were doing the best work anywhere in addition to actually being the best anywhere. Personally, I'd stack the folks in either of these groups against ISIS and we'd leave those Islamo-Nazi lunatics in a pile of confused and hurting refuse when we finished with them at a time of our own choosing.

My friends, they're my brother and sister and mother.

Now, it's a very safe bet to assume that Jesus wasn't talking about militarily vanquishing a group of Muslim fanatics. But I think you can understand my analogy. I've been privileged to call good people 'friend' and 'brother,' and I've been privileged to do so both in and out of church settings. During several overseas mission trips I grew close to the men and women with whom I traveled. Perhaps they're closer to the idea Jesus was conveying, yet there's something about having served in the military, having been ordinary people doing extraordinary things that draws you together.

Yet if you think about it, in following Jesus, you're an ordinary person doing something extraordinary. You've staked your claim on something that the world sees as illogical and childish. You're like the disciples, who were ordinary 'nobodies' who lived extraordinary lives in service of the Savior. You're the kind of person Jesus is looking for. Jesus is looking for His own martial group; a group who, to quote the Founding Fathers, will pledge their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in His service. Jesus wants people who will fight their temptations and fight off the world to stand up for Him, to carry His message to others, and to do His work in a world that really needs Him.

Chances are, when you find yourself in a group of like-minded Jesus followers, you're going to quickly realize that they are your brother, mother, and sister. They're family to you because we are all family in Him. That's the biggest part of His message in these verses.

*Jesus, you're my brother, God, Savior, creator and friend. Let me be as close to others as You are to me so that I can represent you honorably to them.*

Read Mark 3, verses 31-35.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 January 2015

*Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Mark 4, verses 1-9.*

This is known as "the Parable of the Sower." Read it again, then think about these questions: is it about the sower or the seed? And, is it about the seed or the soil?

Let's start with the farmer. Of course Jesus alludes to the farmer being God; that's the only logical explanation. It is God the farmer who plants the crop and later harvests it; it is God the farmer who tends the soil, who 'does the work.' It's ironic that farming is considered, by the citified, to be a bumpkin vocation because, without the bumpkin farmers, the citified elite would starve. It's further ironic, don't you think, that Jesus talks about Himself as a farmer? After all, He had grown up in a village, presumably learning a trade. While He must have known farmers Jesus wasn't, by trade, one of them. And yet here is one of His more famous and elegant parables and in it He takes the form of a farmer.

Then there is the seed. The seed is His Word: Gospel, the Good News, the knowledge that God is love, God forgives all our sins, and God wants all mankind to be with Him. No matter where the seed is sown, it's good seed. Think of the allegory of God's word to seed. From a seed grows a large plant. Tended in love, warmth and with life, the seed itself brings forth more life...yet only through death. The plant that springs from the seed must itself die before it reproduces many times more than itself. Isn't that the case with Jesus as well?

Finally, consider the soil. We are the soil. Some of us are hard clay, tough soil in which the seed can't take root. Some of us are rocky, stony ground in which the seed might lodge but usually not sink deeply. Some of us are shallow, and like Jesus said, not allowing His word to take root but, instead, to be scorched and withered. Then some of us are good soil, fertile ground in which the seed can take root, grow and produce both life and crops.

This is nothing new. Nothing happens without God; nothing about this process or any of its components is about us. Read the parable again and you must certainly come away with the appreciation that it's about Him, about Him growing in us in the weary unfriendly world.

*Lord, let me sow good seed for You.*

Read Mark 4, verses 1-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 27 January 2015

*Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Mark 4, verses 1-9.*

Let's take another look a couple more things about it that matter before we move on from this parable.

"Went out to sow his seed:" the work of the Lord is work indeed. The work of Christ is to tell others about Him, and that takes hard work. This world is a place set against Christ, and most people in the world don't want to hear this message of salvation, love, and peace because it requires effort from them. But have you ever been involved in a big project? On a project team, though everyone has common goals, meeting those goals requires thousands of daily interactions, achievements, and individual contributions. Everyone's contribution matters. It takes work to achieve a major objective. Christ knew this, and He knew that there could be no objective more serious than the eternity of a human soul. He knew that the message He preached would challenge many and upend the order of things, and that to spread that message would take work.

That work would be necessary because the ways of the world – the things of the world – will still be around no matter how we receive God's word. The Pharisees and other sects of Jesus' day were pulled away from hearing Jesus' word. Are we any different? It isn't just modern technology, affluence, or peer pressure competing with the Gospel for our hearts. There are untold other temptations and realities with which we must grapple just to stay alive. Strip away the trappings and veneer of the twenty-first century and you'll find the core matters of the heart aren't much different from those that were covered over by more primitive veneers during the first-century time of Christ. Lust, greed, anger, lying, envy, hurt: those aren't things that are unique to those of us living today. Jesus knew that too.

Finally, Jesus knew that not everyone would listen. "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." This is a message for everyone that not everyone will take to heart. Everyone has ears but does everyone truly listen? Don't we each know people who hold fast to their faith as they are dying, while knowing other people who reject Christ with passion? I know them; I bet you do too. Jesus knew His message would require hearing with the heart instead of just hearing with our ears and not everyone would be willing to listen.

*Lord, whatever happens in my life today, I am following You.*

Read Mark 4, verses 1-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 28 January 2015

*When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" – Mark 4, verses 10-12*

Jesus is invoking the memory of Isaiah. If you lived in Jesus' time, you would have been intimately familiar with the life of Isaiah, who, next to Moses, was perhaps Israel's greatest prophet. Isaiah prophesied after the united kingdom (under Saul, David and Solomon) split into the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He lived during a time of war, when the Assyrians (of the north) had overrun Israel and the Babylonians (of the east) were threatening Judah. He prophesied both historically and metaphorically, speaking against the sinful Israelites. He constantly implored them that they were going to bring God's wrath on themselves for turning away from Him by worshipping idols and not keeping God's commands in their hearts. Yet, hand in hand with that, Isaiah also prophesied that a Messiah would come to deliver them. Indeed, some of the most identifying prophecies that point specifically to Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah were first uttered by Isaiah.

These were things that mattered to the Israelites of Judea, who, 600 years after Isaiah, were looking for that deliverer as an earthly king. Their forefathers had been overrun by several empires, and Israel itself had ceased to exist as a political entity hundreds of years ago. Yet the Jewish people, the direct descendants of the first Israelites (of Isaiah's time and before), still clung to their identity as God's chosen people, on being the people through whom God demonstrated Himself to the world and who He had promised to deliver. They had a rich heritage of miracles; of course they were proud of who they were. That was their undoing...just as it is ours

So Jesus brought them up short on that. In verse 12, Jesus quotes Isaiah chapter 6, verses 9 and 10 to describe why He said the parable the way He did. The people of Jesus' day were no different than the people of Isaiah's day. Listening to Jesus' words but not listening for meaning. They wanted that political, military deliverer to avenge their centuries of being ruled by pagan outsiders. Yet here was Jesus, revealing Himself as a different kind of messiah, one who would free their hearts, minds and souls so that matters of the world wouldn't control them any longer. The people of Jesus' day were living out Isaiah's words, having harbored calloused hearts and a dulled sense of love. They saw Jesus but wouldn't – not couldn't – grasp who He was and how He was identifying Himself as the deliverer they needed instead of the deliverer they wanted.

Tell me: don't we need the same Jesus? We look for someone to deliver us from threats, from our responsibilities, from the consequences of our actions and bad choices. We want someone to make the hurting stop, and yet we fail to grasp that someone already has, that Jesus has already accomplished that. Just like the Judeans of the first century, we the people of our time are seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding.

*Lord, thank You for Your words spoken through Jesus and Isaiah. Teach me with them today and always.*

Read Mark 4, verses 1-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 January 2015

*Jesus said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables?"*  
– Mark 4, verse 13.

Did you notice the subtle tone in which Jesus confronted, corrected, questioned, loved and taught using only a few words? Do you do that in your regular communication? I know I don't. I'm a project manager, and I prefer that my communications with people be blunt and direct. One doesn't have to be a jerk when communicating with others because the goal is to communicate, to convey and gain mutual understanding. That doesn't happen too often if I'm directive, accusatory, condescending, or, well, 'jerky.'

If you read it again, you find that Jesus isn't condemning the people who were questioning Him. He isn't beating them down with their ignorance, or talking down to them as if they were stupid. Instead, Jesus poses rhetorical questions to them, forcing them to spiritually engage with Him and intellectually examine what it is He has to say. That seems like a lot for a first century rabbi to do, doesn't it? We consider the people before us to have been more primitive, yet this is incredibly complex. That makes perfect sense, you see if you consider Jesus to be exactly who He says He is.

It's actually one of the things I like most about Jesus: that He says so much in what He says, conveying deep and intricate meanings without talking too much. In the Parable of the Sower, He's teaching God 101. God offers His salvation to everyone, but not everyone lets it take root. He does this by using figurative language to paint pictures that are descriptive and appealing as well as provocative and convicting. I don't know of too many modern speakers in our time who can do that very well, but the Rabbi from Nazareth does.

He then asks people about what He's told them. They offer questions back to Him, and He demonstrates both His loving humility and His endless patience in hearing them out. Rather than smack them down, He continues to teach. It's as if He's saying, "ok, are you with me so far? Listen up now because this is important." Rabbis teach rhetorically, but Jesus uses that same rhetoric while making it personal to the person. Allah doesn't do that, instead decreeing all that we must do to approach the love he only offers conditionally. Buddha doesn't do that, instead, sending us off navel-gazing to look for inner peace where there exists only inner turmoil. Scientology, Mormonism, and any other 'ology' or 'ism' you can think of don't do that, confusing commitment with real faith and love. But Jesus does it, and He does it without judging or being unloving to Muslims, Buddhists, Scientologists, Mormons or even Baptists: all of whom He loves and cherishes and wants for eternity just as He does you or me.

I think what strikes me most about this verse is, once again, how Jesus meets us where we are, here in our sins and wallowing in our ignorance. He doesn't use those against us but, instead, looks to walk us past them into being who He sees us to be. He does it through teaching and questioning, urging us to live the life He has in store for us instead of us just settling for what the world has to offer.

*Lord, help my unbelief. Teach me out of my ignorance. Forgive my thick skin. Lead me in Your better way.*

Read Mark 4, verses 1-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 February 2015

*The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear, Satan comes at once and takes away the word sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground who, when they hear the word, receive it at once with joy. But they have no root; they last only for a time. Then when tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Those sown among thorns are another sort. They are the people who hear the word, but worldly anxiety, the lure of riches, and the craving for other things intrude and choke the word, and it bears no fruit. – Mark 4, verses 14-19.*

Thanks for your patience in walking through this parable; I hope I'm not exasperating you. It's just that there are some themes in here worth sharing and now's a good time to do that.

And I appreciate you patiently reading. After all, this past Sunday was the Super Bowl. Even if your team didn't win, it's an occasion when nearly a billion people on the planet are all focused on doing the same thing. Imagine what we, as a people, as humanity – the people of God – could do if we were all focused on doing the things God wants for us. Instead, we get wrapped all around lesser things like wealth, power, war, envy, and politics (but I repeat myself).

Because of that, the word is out there, available to all, and heard by all. Not long ago I had a discussion with my pastor in which he said he thought that the Gospel had already been preached to the entire world. I brought up the platitude about pygmies in the Amazon, and folks in the slavery of Iran and other places where radical Islamism doesn't allow other information to be shared. Yet his point stuck with me: the Gospel has already been shared in every language on Earth.

Therefore Satan is still very much at work. I like how Jesus treats Satan as a fact. Satan is a real being; there really is a devil. Jesus treats him as a real being and as a real force in the world. Do we? Or do we treat Satan like a mental illness, like just another condition we can cure with pills? That isn't how Satan views us. He thinks of us as tools, as things to use in his quest for power, war and dominion. How ironic is it that he's already defeated.

Tell that to the millions, though, who don't realize that falling away is a choice. We don't have to cleave away from Jesus and His peace. We choose to. We choose to fall away every time we choose anything that is sketchy or not of God. Surf the porn site and you aren't choosing God. Let your anger get spun up and you aren't choosing God. We don't need to be Adolf Hitler to not choose God. We each do it a thousand times each day.

And yet we are here for a better purpose. We are here to bear fruit. We are here to share Jesus with the world, using the talents He gives us, being ourselves. We aren't here to pay attention to Satan, or to fall away, or even to watch the Super Bowl. We're here to live Jesus for those who don't know Him. Nothing else matters.

*Lord, govern my life and let Your purpose be my only purpose.*

Read Mark 4, verse 20.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 February 2015

*Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.” – Mark 4, verse 20.*

I want to be a farmer. When I was a boy, I spent a little time around farms and farmers. Early on, I fell in love with the idea of working the soil to produce a crop. Or raising animals, the hard work and the simpler pace. To me, there's something magnificent about living close to the earth, growing food from it, and sharing that with others so they can thrive. It's hard, sometimes unforgiving work, but it's what I would like to do with my life. Right now, my wife and I are taking active steps to move in this very direction.

As we've discussed before, this matters because farming is a good practical analogy for what we're supposed to do with the love Jesus entrusts to us. And it isn't hard to understand. If you've been in love before, or if you've ever loved anyone, even a family member or a young child, you know how love grows itself. The feeling only increases if you nurture it. It's then becomes even more dynamic when it's shared. God's Word grows when people share it, especially when we let it remake our lives to where people can see how it's all for real. When that happens, they want more of it. When they want more of it, they can become closer to God and the crop of love Jesus planted grows that much more.

We can also produce a crop thirty, sixty, or a hundred times what was sown if we let our sinful base instincts take over. Don't believe me? Only five or ten percent of 1930s Germans were Nazis, but the entire nation bore responsibility when those few percent bore the worst fruit possible...and millions died because of it. The vast majority of Muslims in our world today are peaceful people who want to live their lives in peace. Yet there is a small percentage who have misused that religion, producing a hundred or a thousand-fold crop of utopian evil that calls itself "brotherhood," or ISIS. Let's not fool ourselves into thinking it is only good that can produce a crop for harvest.

Yet, like the song says, such a crop will be the trampled out vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. Good always triumphs. Satan and all his petty evil are already defeated. True, those who farm evil, like those who grow illegal drugs, are sowing crops of destruction. Yet their evil is already overcome by something far more powerful than they could ever envy to be. If you don't think right, love and Christ are more powerful, then you have much to learn and a very long row to hoe.

Farmers produce good crops. Even our high-tech world would grind to a quick halt if the food supply ran out. Isn't it also true that we grind to a halt without love? Just ask the hopeless people occupied by ISIS or Boku Haram. Jesus loves ALL of us and wants all of us to be with Him in eternity, even those we'd write off here in the world we know. He wants them to be part of His harvest as well. We should work to do the same.

*Lord, grow a crop of love in me that I can share in my world today.*

Read Mark 4, verses 21-23.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 5 February 2015

*He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."- Mark 4, verses 21-23.*

If you're a football fan, this is the week of beginnings and endings. The ending, obviously, comes with the Super Bowl: the culminating event in the American football season. Playing in the Super Bowl is the ultimate dream of every football player, especially those who are just starting out in Pop Warner, middle school or high school districts. On the other side of that spectrum is National Signing Day, which was yesterday. That is the day when prospective high schoolers identify which schools they would like to attend (and represent on the football pitch). 99.8% of the young men who sign to go to college won't play in the NFL, let alone in the Super Bowl. But I think it's a safe thing to say that many of them dream of doing it. They have talent, and this week is the start of their journey towards making that dream come true.

You could say that these young men were meant to play football. I love watching the sport, and I wish now I had played more of it when I was younger. I didn't have that kind of talent, however, and my future probably would have still found me where I am today: blogging, working as a project manager, and looking to open a vineyard. Those are where some of my talents lie, and here's a news flash about our talents: they are gifts from Jesus that He intends for us to use in furthering His kingdom. The kids signing for college and the men who battled in the Super Bowl were using their talents as well, though it's up to them whether or not they used them for the furthering of Christ. You have talent too; what are you doing with it?

There's another lesson to be had here: nothing is truly secret. What is secret MUST be brought out. Hostile secrets are anathema to human nature. They were meant to be revealed. That isn't endorsing gossip: it's explaining human nature. Humans aren't meant to keep secrets because secrets eat you up from the inside out, especially if it involves our wrongdoing. We fool ourselves into thinking that we can do things that nobody will ever learn about. God isn't nobody and He already knows when we do them. If you stop to think about it, even when we confess terrible sins, the healing almost always begins because of it. *That* is human nature.

Not only, but if we keep our talents secret, and if we try to bury them or deny them, it's like we're spitting in God's face. He gave us these abilities to use them in ways that spread His message to others as well as bettering ourselves in the process. If we deny those gifts, aren't we subtly denying God as well? I love football and I love the thrill of sports, and I love doing what I do best (even if it isn't football), and I love getting right with the world. But I don't want to ever spit in God's face. He's far too good to me.

*Lord, let me use the gifts You give me as You intend.*

Read Mark 4, verses 24-25.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 February 2015

*“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” Mark 4, verses 24-25.*

My wife and I just watched “American Sniper” and these verses come to mind in describing the movie. It’s a very compelling movie; I highly recommend it, though if you’re queasy about watching people get shot, this movie will send you over the edge. When you see Chris Kyle’s story, you can’t help but think about how some people give and are given more (and then they keep on giving, even past the point of breaking), and how some people lose even what little they have.

It’s all because of what we bear in our hearts.

When we love, love grows and we’re given more. Those platitudes about dying rich without having a cent to your name are true; you know they are. God is love is Jesus is love is the Spirit is love. When we let the love of God re-mold our hearts, we are like the farmer sowing seed in good soil. The fertile soil of our hearts is ripe ground in which to grow a hundred-fold crop of Jesus’ love. He harvests that by using us to share it with others. And then they get to do it. It’s a matter of the heart, and it – and not the famous and powerful – really does make the world go around.

Consider, then, the poor guy who doesn’t love. I pity him. I honestly pity people who don’t love, who don’t know the love of Jesus. I find myself wanting to do something to reach out to them, to share Him with them in some way. Perhaps the best way is simply to listen, to be a friend, to meet them on their level and be there for when Jesus wants to turn the soil in their heart. When we don’t do this, I pity us, and I pity the people who don’t know love because if they turn their hearts cold, even that coldness will leave them when they catch up to eternity. And we all do: death and beyond wait for us all. To those who don’t know the love of Jesus and don’t share love, eternity must be a punishingly lonely fate. The better way is to find them and love them while we can.

That was one of the take-away’s I got from American Sniper. He loved while he could, and in unconventional ways. Kyle loved deeply: his family, his country, his brother Seals, and even the strangers. Being a sniper was a job to him, yet it ate at him with every life he took even when that was justified in protecting others. It tore him up and changed him; in some ways it became an obsession. Yet he was able to pull away from it and serve in other ways. That service was what eventually got him killed. Some may say “what was it all for?” Some might ask that same question about Jesus willingly going to the cross.

Mind you, I’m not comparing the murder of Chris Kyle to Jesus dying for our sins. Yet it is good to remember that all gave some but some gave all. For those who give, when the love of Jesus lives in their hearts, giving all is actually a very small price to pay.

*Lord, let me give my all for You today.*

Read Mark 4, verses 26-29.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 February 2015

*He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." Mark 4, verses 26-29.*

What do we actually DO?

See, I'm thankful for all the folks who read this blog. There are several thousand who read it worldwide. Thanks to the internet, friends of friends, and, above all, the grace of God, all those folks read the daily musings of a North Texas Christian who struggles with faith the same way they do. Sure, you read and I write, but to be honest, I don't really do much. I just don't. Something else is at play and you know who that is.

Or there is work. Right now, I'm a project manager, working for a program manager, who is working for an executive team. On my team there are currently three other leads and soon to be 10-15 individual contributors. We are doing business and technical work to prepare for a government-mandated change in medical diagnosis codes which is scheduled for this October. A project team is symbiotic: each person's role matters and both depends on and is dependent on others performing their roles. My role is the focal point for the others but, in reality, like this blog, I don't do much and I rarely do anything alone. Something else is at work and you know who that is.

God-willing, I'll soon leave that job behind. My wife and I are working to purchase a farm that we plan to turn into a vineyard. Our house is for sale, we have found the property, we have applied for agricultural financing, and we are working hard to pack up, plan for planting grapes and other crops, and looking for used winery and farm equipment. In the buying process, though the goal is ours, we are dependent on so many other factors. Assuming we are able to buy the farm, then comes the hard work of viticulture. We would do our part, but in truth, just like the parable Jesus quotes, it isn't by the handiwork of man that vines would produce grapes for wine. Something else is happening and you know what that is.

We are born to work; mankind was made to do it. Even before the fall, God made man to work the Garden of Eden. We were made to live here in such a way as to enjoy God's bounty while tending to it so that it might produce more for others through Him. That is the purpose of our lives: to grow a crop for God. Our work matters and our work continues, yet no matter what we do, the life of God goes on with or without us. We should be thankful, pleased, and even Godly proud of what we do here, yet it is with humble rebuke that Jesus reminds us to not get the big head. Nothing we do here on the Third Rock happens without God first blessing it. Life is that blessing and we do well to remember that He, not we, is the cause of it all.

*Lord, thank You for the blessings of Life, work, and purpose. May it all be to Your glory .*

Read the rest of Mark 4.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 February 2015

*Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." Mark 4, verses 30-32.*

I'm reading a book called "The Real Lincoln" from 2002. It's a libertarian and brutally frank look at Honest Abe, his agenda as president, and his lifelong political stands concerning slavery, tariffs, and internal improvements (which we'd think of as roads and bridges). To me, Lincoln is extraordinary because of his drive to better himself, his unrelenting passion, and his poetic use of the King' English. Abraham Lincoln's faith in God has been debated since the day he died, yet he had read and re-read the Scriptures more than most ministers of his day (or ours). After reading several dozen books about the man, I come away understanding that, while Lincoln didn't publicly embrace the kind of Christianity (or even Deism) with which I could identify, he did possess undeniable faith that inspired him and helped him to understand the times in which he lived.

That's the thing about faith: it inspires and helps us to understand. The more we walk in faith, the more passionate we become about it, and the more we become the fertile ground in which it can prosper. It doesn't take much, either, to start something big to growing. That's the point of these verses. When we grasp onto the living words of Jesus, a huge faith begins to grow from the smallest determination.

One of the things my minister talked about yesterday was taking Jesus at His word, about understanding that, when Jesus says He can heal us, He means He can actually heal us no matter the affliction. I have friends who have practiced faith healing that truly works. Not long ago, a friend of mine was telling me how God quickly answered a prayer she said in desperation and it was the start of healing years of sad turmoil in her life. We should learn to take Jesus at His word and honestly, fully, and simply believe that He does and will heal us when we are afflicted.

That simple, full and honest belief all starts with faith. Lincoln had faith in his abilities, in the ability to see the right in what was happening around him, and in the words of our Founding Fathers. I think we are all drawn to people who have faith because people who express faith express leadership. They inspire. They profess. They move forward in confidence. All these things happen because of grasping, then keeping, simple faith.

There is another thing that must be said about these verses, you know, about "the kingdom of God." We'll talk about that tomorrow.

*Lord, thank You for the gift of faith, for learning that 'seeing isn't believing but believing is seeing'*

Read the rest of Mark 4.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 11 February 2015

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." Mark 4, verses 30-32.

"The kingdom of God:" what is that?

Gotquestions.org says "The kingdom of God is the rule of an eternal sovereign God over all creatures and things ([Psalm 103:19](#); [Daniel 4:3](#)). The kingdom of God is also the designation for the sphere of salvation entered into at the new birth ([John 3:5-7](#)), and is synonymous with the "[kingdom of heaven](#)." Biblestudy.org says "the Kingdom of God is the rule and governance of his Family over all things," and that this phrase is used in the New Testament (mostly in Luke and Mark) more than sixty times. The United Church of God (at [ucg.org](#)) says "The word translated "kingdom" throughout the New Testament is the Greek word *basileia*, which denotes "sovereignty, royal power, [and] dominion" ( *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, "Kingdom"). A careful examination of the Bible reveals that the next phase of the Kingdom of God is nothing short of a world-ruling monarchy that God will establish on this earth through Jesus Christ!"

You betcha on all those and more. Me, I'm not ecclesiastically trained. I will gladly defer to those who are and welcome any education or opinion on this topic; please email me if you like. Here and now, I'll simply stick with what Jesus said and draw a few conclusions.

The Kingdom of God is here and now. How do I know that? To quote Mr. Clinton, "it depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is. 'Is' means now, in the present tense. It is because He is because He is the great I AM. Jesus' kingdom is right now, right here, in this place, of this world and in this world. In it, He rules, He reigns, He is.

It's in eternity. It is the to-be-established kingdom that Christ will institute (and restore) when He ends all time. But more than that, it does and will exist now as part of eternity because eternity exists outside of our reference and time; noodle that thought for a while. The kingdom of God is the kingdom come but also the kingdom that has come and has come of God.

The Kingdom of God is growing, strong, vital, fruitful, supportive, beautiful and plentiful...like a thriving plant. If it wasn't so, why would Jesus have used such an analogy in this parable? I think He used it to show that His Kingdom is all those things and more. It's far more than we could even imagine.

Finally, if it is like a mustard plant, you can put its fruit on a hot dog...ok, maybe not so much, or maybe so. I won't speak for Jesus, but I like hot dogs and hope He does too.

My pastor is fond of saying that we, as followers of Jesus, aren't just waiting (and preparing) for eternity: we are part of eternity now. In a way, that's another way of saying we are part of the kingdom of God here and now, in the lives we lead. That's another good way of looking at it, too.

*Lord, Your Kingdom come, Your will be done now and in eternity.*

Read the rest of Mark 4.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 12 February 2015

*With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable.<sup>21</sup> But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. Mark 4, verses 33-34*

Do you use your private time for teaching?

My kids are grown. One is married with a son, one is working full time and is about to move to Maryland, and the third is a student at college. Mind you, I don't have many regrets about how my wife and I raised our kids. I can say that we did our best, and perhaps that is the best thing a parent can say. It is a blessing from God to be able to have and raise children, and it's an even bigger blessing to be able to do the best you can in raising them to be strong, independent, Godly young men and women.

Yet when I look back I wish I had done a better job at being a Godly man for my kids. I spent most of their young lives earning a living as a traveling consultant. You do the job you can and do the best you can at that as well, but I'd be lying to you if I didn't say that I enjoyed both the pay and the perks of traveling. To have it all meant I was away from home over half the time or more. Worse, I made some terrible choices and did things that directly or indirectly affected my family, especially my kids.

When I was home, I tried to spend time with each of them but usually felt pulled in too many different directions. I did not do what Jesus did. I did not teach those closest to me the kinds of things He would want them to know. In this respect, though I say I believe I did the best I could, in reality, I still chalk up some of their struggles to my own failures as a father and inadequacies as a role model and teacher.

Now that they are grown, I still work as a traveling consultant. My wife and I have a stronger spiritual life together than we did when they were kids. We're still doing the best we can, and sometimes that isn't enough. But usually it will do. We are learning to involve Jesus in every aspect of our lives; that's part of "doing your best." I still sometimes feel pulled in too many different directions, but I'm learning to do better for them in private: to spend time in God's word, to listen and not talk, to regularly communicate with them even when we're apart. It's the single best way I know to mentor them because, even when our kids are grown, they still want our involvement and our guidance.

What's the point? Who you see is who you get. That's the way Jesus interacted with his disciples. It wasn't that He taught them different things in plain language than he said in public in the parables. It's just that He was more intimate with them in private, 'going deeper' into opening their eyes to who He is. Away from the crowds, He could open up more, be more relaxed, and take the time to explain further with a loving touch instead of a rushed hand. Just like a father would.

*Lord Jesus, I pray You would open up to me and teach me Your heart.*

Read the rest of Mark 4.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 February 2015

*That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" Mark 4, verses 35-41.*

With power in Jesus, we can do anything.

You see, I'm like the disciples: it's all about me. Don't you love how they try to blame Jesus for their predicament? Nobody forced them to get into the boat; they went willingly. The sea was an inland sea, and while the squall must have been frightening, please: get a grip. They could have made it through. When they discover they might be in danger, they wake up Jesus and rag on Him. "Don't you care what happens to US?" "You chose US!" "WE matter." What does Jesus do? He saves them, corrects them, rebukes them, and loves them. He isn't afraid and asks them, not accuses them, why they are letting their petty fears get the best of them.

There's a lesson in that: fear nothing. As long as we abide in Jesus' grace, we have nothing to fear. He even says so: "why are you so afraid?" Jesus was with them. More importantly, Jesus had imparted faith into their lives. Faith in God through Him. Because of that, they need not have had any fear. Neither should we. Afraid of walking in the dark? Be cautious but don't be afraid. Afraid of the bully at school? Be prepared but don't be afraid. Afraid to face your fears, or face your past, or face the music after you've done wrong? Be ready, but don't be afraid. As long as you abide in Jesus, fear will flee you and enable you to do magnificent things...

...things such as quieting a storm with simple words of faith. I personally know men who have participated in exorcisms that have driven out demons. I personally know people who have spoken healing over others in pain and watched that pain turn immediately to relief. I personally have known weak people made strong in heart and body. The commonality in all these things: faith in Jesus. It reminds me of something my pastor said last week: we seem to forget to take Jesus at His word. If He says we can do something through Him, He means we can do something through Him. All things are possible through Jesus.

Yet notice He keeps it real: "SO afraid." Jesus acknowledges human fear is a natural reaction, not a character flaw. He sees that we immediately feel trepidation at some things because that's a physiological reaction to stimulus. It's a defense mechanism He made into us. Yet He then says "trust me, not your fear." Get over it and get back to Me because I'm bigger than all that.

*Lord, You're bigger than my fears. Help me to overcome them.*

Read the rest of Mark 4.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 February 2015

*They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" Mark 4, verse 41*

Are we so amazed, in shock, or intimidated by the idea of Jesus that we don't grasp who He is?

The disciples weren't asking because they didn't know who Jesus was; He was their friend in person. They 'got it.' Yet they were amazed when they actually got to comprehend the meaning of what they 'got.' Think about it: they're standing there in this boat in the middle of a big lake (sea). Jesus has just told the storm to stop and it did. They totally blow past the lesson He teaches them. It's kind of like the guy who says a bunch of things to you, but you key in on just one of them and ignore everything else. They see that Jesus has stopped the storm and are stuck in that moment. I suppose we might be too.

In fact, I suppose that many of us are. We're amazed and intimidated by the fact that this Jesus, this guy from thousands of years ago, is actually alive, here, living in our hearts but also acting in reality in real ways in this real world. It's mind boggling and I wonder just how many of us remain stuck in that moment, unable to get past it because of our amazement.

True: some folks become genuinely afraid when they're amazed. Not long after this, Jesus took Peter, James and John up on to a mountain where He was transfigured. His three friends saw Jesus shine like lightning and then saw the very real Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. Moses had been dead for centuries; Elijah never died. That doesn't happen every day, and the disciples' reaction was genuine fear. Not just respect, but scare-the-crap-out-of-me-because-"it"-just-got-real fear. Many of us have that same reaction even though Jesus tells us time and again to let Him master our fear and not let our fears master us.

Yet we are easily amazed by small things. Hey, I'm amazed I've lived as long as I have lived and not gotten into more trouble. Or been shot, beat up, or killed for things I've said and done. I've met or seen every president going back to Gerald Ford, and find that these extraordinary men are actually just men. I'm amazed by my grandson, and how crops grow, and the coincidences in history (which I don't actually think are coincidences). My wife says she's amazed by sunsets, life, the infinity of things, and the fact that I do dishes. What amazes you?

How about Jesus; He amazes me. I'm completely blown away thinking that the person who thought of me caused me to live. He has this phenomenal cosmic power (better than Aladdin's genie, in fact) yet chooses to use it for the betterment of this sinful third rock. When He expresses His majesty, He does it both in the spectral colors of the sunset and in the softness of a sleeping child. And that, thousands of years before I was born, He thought of me and died for me. I'm amazed by that, floored in fact, so much that I can't comprehend it.

So were the disciples. It wasn't that He calmed the storm. It wasn't the healing and the miracles. It was that they got a real look and a real taste of just who and what He was. And is still today.

*Lord, let me be constructively amazed by You.*

Read the rest of Mark 4.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 February 2015...for Aunt June

*And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." Mark 5, verses 25-34.*

We are skipping ahead a few verses today. Someone in my family passed away yesterday and I want you to know a little bit about her. My father's sister, June Terry, passed away yesterday at the age of 71 after a nearly 30 year battle with scleroderma; more on that in a minute because it's extraordinary.

If you knew her, you knew someone special. Aunt June was one of the kindest people I've ever known. She was outgoing, sensitive, positive, and talented. She had a beautiful singing voice and belonged to several chorale groups around Philadelphia. My immediate family grew up on the other side of the country from Dad's family in Philadelphia, so we never go to spend much time with them. When I grew up, the Air Force stationed me back east and I was blessed to get to know some of my relatives there, including Aunt June. You can't say this about many people but I can say this about June: I never heard her utter a cross, malicious, or cruel word against anyone. It wasn't for reason either because she had as much reason as anyone. She lived a tough life and lived through some tough circumstances, yet they didn't define her. Faith defined her. Faith in God, faith in hope, faith in what is good in people. I never said it to her – don't we all say that too much? – but I very much admired her for that.

My Dad was a great cook (he prided himself on it), but he said he couldn't hold a candle to his sister. He bragged about her lasagna, her spiced pot roast, and her ability to turn bread and water into a scrumptious feast. I had dinner with her more than a few times and couldn't agree more. I'm lucky to have recorded some of the family recipes she made best.

But we don't just remember people for their cooking, unless, that is, they cook up inspiration. Aunt June did just that. I mentioned above that she battled scleroderma for most of 30 years. That makes her both a medical anomaly and a medical miracle. Scleroderma is a rare auto-immune disease that, in some forms, hardens your internal organs from the inside out. That's the kind Aunt June had. It's chronic, debilitating, painful, and ultimately fatal. Like the rest of her life, though, I never knew her to complain about it. That wouldn't have been in her nature. She was pleased to know (but never admitted) that many others in the US will benefit from drug studies and research conducted on her because she was extraordinarily long-lived with the disease.

Personally, I think her hopeful outlook was a manifestation of her faith. When she had nothing left to live for, she lived for heaven. She became the woman Jesus healed when the woman touched His robe. It wasn't her body that He healed: it was her soul. None of the problems of this world could plague her inside where it mattered most. Where the soul matters, Aunt June held fast to her Savior and God. For me and without misrepresenting who she was or making her into someone she wasn't, June Terry was a hero of the faith.

Yesterday she got to meet Jesus face to face and hear Him say, "well done, June. I'm so pleased you're home." Today, she woke up in heaven and she'll be there until the rest of us amble along. Those of us left

behind here are sad to see her depart yet glad to know she's truly healed, truly happy, and truly at home forever.

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 18 February 2015

*When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. Mark 5, verse 2.*

Did you pick up on the nuance? The demon-possessed man went up to meet Jesus. Remember the context: Jesus and the disciples had sailed across the Sea of Galilee to the far (east) side, to 'the land of the Gerasenes.' There they come upon a graveyard where there lives a man who is out of his mind. He's out of his mind because he's demon-possessed. Not long from now, we'll find out that there is more than just one spirit possessing the man. There are many, which identify themselves as "legion." According to my pastor friend, Will Kemp (from this Sunday's sermon, in fact), that means there could have been thousands of demons possessing this one tortured man. And they went to Jesus. More than that, they were drawn to Him, like flies to a picnic.

Sin makes us bold, you know. Or is it that the sin living in us, like the good, is attracted to Jesus anyway? Some of the most audacious times in my life were times that I was openly reveling in sin, acting in ways so bad that I'm embarrassed to confess – or remember – them. When we're full of sin, we're full of bravado, full of false confidence (and maybe false courage, if that poison is your particular pet). "Ten feet tall and bulletproof" is the term for a drunken fool who is too bold for his own good and too drunk to know it.

So it was with these demons. They knew Jesus was coming; they saw Him in the distance. The demons knew who Jesus was. The verse says that the man came out of the graveyard to meet Him. He couldn't stay away; he couldn't help himself. He was drawn to this man from the other side of the lake because the demons inhabiting his body knew Jesus was God. If demons are the cast-out fallen angels destined for hell, then they knew exactly who Jesus was because, from eternity, He had been the one to cast them out of heaven.

Now here they were, all together again, and there is a spectacle to be played out. We'll talk more about it tomorrow. Before we part, however, let me ask you this: do you feel drawn to Jesus? I do.

Sometimes I feel that I need something so good to take the place of all the junk with which I've mucked up my life. I feel drawn to the forgiving white light of His presence because, in that light, I know He will forgive my failings, teach me better ways, heal my hurts, and give me the opportunity to be strong for Him once again. Yet I sometimes wonder if the sin that seems to rule me on this earth is not also drawn to Him as well. Sin can't help itself; like the Apostle Paul said, it lives in him and rules to master him in a constant battle for his soul. I sometimes wonder if it's not sin also being drawn to Jesus, knowing that He holds oblivion for sin in His words. Do you think evil craves for more evil – I do – and do you think it's also possible that evil also may crave for relief? I think that's possible as well.

*Lord Jesus, I'm drawn to You. Reassure me once again of Your forgiveness for all my sins.*

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 19 February 2015

*This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones. Mark 5, verses 3-5.*

Does sin bind us the way this man was bound?

The man from the tombs was troubled. He had the 'Legion' of demons tormenting him from the inside-out. He couldn't live in a town; he couldn't live in a house. The man didn't have a job, couldn't be trusted around other people, and was both terrified and terrifying all the time to everyone who met him. His strength was enormous, like a miniature Hulk; strong enough that iron chains couldn't hold him. He physically mutilated himself because of his condition, and his cries and anguish were real and loud and unnerving. This all happened because of the evil inhabiting him.

And yet this man probably went on to do great things in the name of Jesus. This past Sunday, my pastor reminded the congregation that, after this episode in Mark 5, Jesus and the disciples later returned to the region of the Gerasenes. Where before there had been a community of anxious, frightened pagans, there was now a group of Jesus-following believers. Nobody knows how that happened, yet, it seems likely it happened because of the testimony this man from the tombs soon shared with his townsmen.

Can you believe that? And it happened even though he had formerly been possessed by thousands of demon angels? We can't noodle that supernatural thing; it's beyond our 'modern' understanding. Yet the condition of the man isn't beyond us because it's the same one that plagues you and me today. We are bound by our sins. If we let it happen, we can be defined by them. We pay the earthly penalties and consequences for our wrongs, and if we refuse to believe in Jesus we will pay an eternal one when He removes His love from our lives.

Don't believe me? Ever got a speeding ticket? That's a legal infraction; because we break even earthly just law, we sin. Accordingly, there is the fine, the insurance points, maybe even court actions or the loss of driving privilege. All of that happens because we exceed a defined limit. It's no different with other sins. Ever have an affair? Guilt, destruction, pain, division, anger, and hurt are all that ever result. Ever murder someone (or harbor a grudge)? How does that make you feel inside? The list goes on and on whether we follow Jesus or not. Even those who do not acknowledge these wrongs as "sin" can understand the negative consequences of them; even they can understand how our wrongs can bind us. Shouldn't we believers acknowledge it more?

How much more amazing it is, then, to discover how Jesus frees us from this. We'll learn about it tomorrow.

*Jesus, I believe You and only You can free me from my sin, from the heart-pain that has resulted from it and my actions. I pray now for Your comfort and reminder yet again.*

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 February 2015

*When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In d's name don't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. Mark 5, verses 6-10.*

The demons knew who Jesus was; we talked about that yesterday. If demons knew who Jesus was, then so do Nazis, ISIS terrorists, KKK racists, the LRA in Sudan, atheists in college towns, and any other kind of petty or large evil person...even you and me. Jesus is self-evident even to those who deny it and want to replace Him with themselves or some other shoddy image.

What's more: those same demons acknowledged Jesus as God. True, there's a fine line between this statement and the one in the last paragraph, but isn't it also true to say that there's a difference between knowing who Jesus is and publicly acknowledging the fact? The demons in the man cried out through him that they not only knew Jesus but acknowledged Him as God. Thoughts became words and actions.

Still, many kinds of demons meant that the man endured many kinds of torture. I have only known a few truly schizophrenic people but those I've known are the closest thing I can imagine to being demon-possessed. The voices in the man were indeed real and they tortured his thoughts, his actions, his dreams, his every emotion and movement. Can you imagine living like that? It's not even a life, really. It's more like simply existing.

So what did Jesus do about it? Jesus commanded the demons to stop and they did. The demon (the representative of the 'legion' which might have been one or thousands) was told to come out of the man and it did. It couldn't resist the simple command of the simple Man from Galilee.

Now comes the big question: so what? To some, this is a nice story about how Jesus did a kind thing for a stranger. So what?

Well, for starters, you can either accept that line of reasoning or accept that the story is true. It either happened or it didn't. And if it didn't happen, then, yes, it's just a nice story. But then that's all you've got.

Or...

...Or, you can accept that it really happened. That the story is an account of something that really happened a very long time ago. That there really was a man living in a cemetery. That He really was tortured by imps of hell. That there really was a man named Jesus who really did command the demons to come out of the man, and that they did. And if all that is true, then whatever else is said about Jesus must also be true; you can't simply cherry pick the Bible. And if the rest of His life is true as well, then it's also true that what He did for the stranger in the land of the Gerasenes He can do for you or me today. Now that is a good thought for the day.

*Lord, I believe all that is said in Scripture concerning You. Thank You for what You did for the man living among the tombs.*

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 February 2015

*A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. Mark 5, verses 11-13.*

When I read these verses, I hear Mick Jagger. You know the song (and you'll probably be singing it in your head now). "You can't always get what you want...but if you try sometimes...you just might find...you get what you need."

You see, the demons didn't really get what they wanted. Sure, they asked to go into the pigs and Jesus let them, but what they really wanted was to go into Him, to torture Him, to destroy Him, to take His place (as if that were possible). That's what evil always wants: to take Jesus' place and be Jesus. The demons were evil, and their 'father' was Satan, the father of lies. Everything they said was based on a lie. So I think that the demons didn't want to actually go into the pigs, getting what they asked for. No, I think they wanted Jesus' permission to go haunt someone else. Naturally, He didn't give it.

But, in a way, Mick Jagger still makes his point: they got what they needed. They needed to be vanquished, eliminated as a threat. Evil is empty, void of love. It needs to destroy, and that's what the demons did. They rushed into the pigs, inhabited them, then destroyed the pigs. Maybe this means pigs don't have the intellectual power or tenacity of people; would someone please tell Congress?

Congress or not, we recognize evil, and in the 2000 years since the time of Jesus nothing about it has changed. It isn't politically correct to call out X, Y or Z as evil, but we do the world and each other an injustice when we don't. ISIS is evil. Enslaving children and women is evil. Serial killers are evil. We all understand that. What about more mundane things, things we take for granted? I have a pastor friend who says that he sees more regular commonplace evil living in the suburbs than he ever saw living in Southern California; I tend to agree. Spiritual apathy, greed, abuse, envy, malice, slander, lying, adultery: the list goes on. Tell me, are those common things good or evil? And they're rampant here in Pleasantville, home of where everyone wants to be.

After all, here in the suburbs, you can't always get what you want. But you usually get what you need...and sometimes what you deserve. What does evil deserve (and, in consequence, what do we deserve)? To be destroyed. Go to the mall any Saturday afternoon and look around. Tell me it doesn't sometimes remind you of a suburban herd of pigs, waiting to rush off the cliff. Destruction: that's the fate we deserve, and it's the fate we say we don't want. But when we turn our lives away from meeting people where Jesus meets them, I say different. It is what we want; it is what we choose. And if we turn enough away from Him, it's the fate we too well deserve.

Somewhere I hear Mick Jagger trilling yet again.

*Lord, I get both what I want and need only because of You.*

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 24 February 2015

*Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region. Mark 5, verses 14-17.*

I'm afraid of what I don't understand. When I'm confronted with something sudden, something unexpected, or something I don't understand, I fall back to fear. This past weekend's episode of "The Walking Dead" was about fear of the unknown. The group of survivors was presented with a chance to be safe, to be accepted into an unknown group of secure fellow survivors. The leader (Rick's) reaction? He was immediately wary, afraid, cautious, even afraid. That's me. When I'm presented with the unknown, I'm immediately wary. In other words, afraid.

How about you? I'm no different from the folks who came up on the man from the tombs who was, suddenly, in his right mind for the first time in a long time. How about you? Would you feel any different? You know the answer.

And, in our defense, wariness is not always a bad thing. It's a natural, God-given defense against things that could (or might not) harm us. Until we know more, like Rick in "The Walking Dead," it's a healthy thing to be wary. Even to be afraid. But that's where the fear needs to end. We recently talked about this, about how Jesus is bigger than our fears and how, through Him, we can completely master every fear.

Unfortunately, we're more like the pig-herders, who saw that something extraordinary had happened, something they couldn't quite understand. They had grown used to the man being crazy. You could say they were complacent with it; you might even be able to reasonably assume they preferred it that way. It's the whole 'devil you know' thing (pun intended). When he was in his right mind – and when they saw how their livelihood – the pig herd – was destroyed to make the man whole – they didn't know how to handle him. Their reaction? "Go away Jesus. Don't go away mad. Just go away."

Tell me, friend reader, are we any different? You and I, we are complacent with evil in our backyards. 'As long as it doesn't affect me, I don't care what they do.' NIMBY. You get the picture. I mentioned yesterday how I believe evil lurks even in the suburbs. An example of that is how a neighborhood just down the street from mine recently drove out a girls' shelter that wanted to set up shop there. We have a huge teen abuse and drug problem in Frisco and this shelter wanted to help for a number of reasons, not the smallest being the neighborhood's proximity to a good school. Instead, the residents of the neighborhood drove it out. It's sort of like they pleaded with Jesus for Him to leave.

Admit it: we're no different. Are we the townspeople, the zombies, or the unkind neighborhood? We're afraid of what we don't understand and we sometimes refuse to let Jesus conquer those irrational fears.

*Lord, I confess my fears to You. Teach me to conquer them. Fight for me.*

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 25 February 2015

*As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed pleaded to remain with him. But he would not permit him but told him instead, "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you." Then the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him; and all were amazed. Mark 5, verses 18-20.*

This confession may be shocking: I'd really like nothing better than to live the esoteric life of contemplating my faith in Jesus. I'd like to talk through deeper matters of faith with people who are more learned than myself in Jesus, the faith, and how to grow its fruits; scholars, professors and such. For me, it would be heaven to talk and debate these deep matters of the heart, then sleep, wake, and arise to do it all again. That's not the kind of man I usually am in public but, in reality, that kind of faith-based academic life is one I would love to live.

But to paraphrase Alan Jackson, "I'm here in the real world." That just isn't me. I wish it could be, and maybe part of my one-day life in heaven will include that. Here on the Third Rock, however, that just isn't what I was put here to do. Every time I think I might someday end up in the group of ecclesiastical navel gazers, reality comes crashing in. The longer I live, the more I equate "reality" with "Jesus Christ."

So it is that I find myself identifying with the man from the tombs. Jesus had healed him. Not only healed, but completely restored. The demons had once destroyed everything about him, and then this Jesus came along and set his ship right. The man's reaction? "Lord, let me follow you."

Jesus' reaction? "Thanks but I have a better idea." Leave here and go talk about what was done for you. In so many other places, Jesus told those (whom He healed) to comply with Jewish law and keep quiet. Here, however, He told the man to go talk about it. Specifically, He told the man to go home and talk about God, about how God personally intervened in his life and made everything new.

The man had wanted nothing more than to bask in Jesus' glory, to contemplate His glory and His mercy for all the rest of his days. Jesus had something else in mind. He sent the man out to preach God Immanuel to hundreds, maybe thousands, of his countrymen who had always and only known the man to be insane. As we talked about the other day, it's not inconceivable that a substantial body of believers in the land of the Gerasenes became believers in Jesus thanks to the personal testimony this man from the tombs shared.

I would rather stay and sit, but Jesus says 'go and do' for Him. These days, I find that comforting, especially in a scary time when my world is changing and I don't fully understand where God is sending me. The only thing I know for certain is that He always provides and will put the words in my mouth when He wants me to share something. I'd rather sit and bask in His glory but He has better plans in mind, no matter what they may turn out to be. So it is for me. So it is, my friend, for you as well.

*Lord, lead me. I will follow You.*

Read Mark 5, verses 1-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 26 February 2015

*When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him. Mark 5, verses 21-24.*

Two stories intertwine in this next section. First comes the story of the daughter of Jairus (or is it the story of Jairus?). Then there is the story of the unidentified woman of faith.

What do you want your faith to do?

If you don't know the stories, stop now and go read verses 21-43 (then do it again at the end). They're both stories of faith interposed in stories of physical healing. I don't know that it's possible to read them and not come away with two things. One: Jesus can physically heal. He could in the first century and He can now. And the second thing is that healing through faith is more powerful than that physical healing because faith healing cures the soul as well as the body.

So, again, what do you want your faith to do? Are you looking more for to be physically or materially healed, or do you want something different? Not more, not better, just different. Jairus was a synagogue leader who believed that Jesus could heal his daughter. The woman was a nobody with nothing to offer except all she had (and that wasn't much). Both of them believed that Jesus could heal simply because He was the Lord. They wanted a physical healing, one for a family member and one for herself. What they got was much more.

Do you want to be healed and live?

There's NOTHING wrong with wanting to be physically healed. Several of my good friends have cancer right now and they want to be healed; who could blame them? My mom passed away several months ago and while I never heard her complain about it, I think she knew she was declining to death over the week or so before she actually passed. She didn't want to die, but she knew it was happening. Who wouldn't want to be healed?

And yet who, also, could deny that is better to have peace of mind inside than to have the best health on the planet. I know when I'm at my physical best (and that isn't often) I feel so much better when I first feel better inside. It's about peace of mind, peace of heart. In the timing of today's verses, don't forget that Jesus had just healed the demon-possessed man of the tombs and, in doing so, the greatest gift He gave to the man was peace; freedom from torment inside. When the man had that, he was healed so he could live.

I don't know which of the stories is 'better.' We need to be physically healthy as much as we need to be spiritually healthy. Here on the Third Rock, both spirit and body are united. In death, they are separated until, at the end of time, Jesus reunites them. We need one as much as other yet I can't help but think the better of the two is to be healed inside.

*Lord, I'm sick and broken. Heal me from the inside out.*

Read Mark 5, verses 21-43.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 27 February 2015

*A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." Mark 5, verses 24-34.*

After Jairus corners Jesus we hear the story of the bleeding woman.

She was healed because she believed. Was she healed because she touched Jesus or was she healed because she believed Jesus could heal her? The verses says she was healed because she had faith in Jesus. What's more, I think the last verse is such a profound expression of real love. "Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." Tell me: if a politician had the power to heal, do you think he would tell a total stranger "go and be at peace?" Do you think if the president had that power, he would send someone away? My bet is that if any human – president or any one of us – had that kind of power we would use it to make sure other folks knew it was all about us.

But not Jesus. Instead, He heals her, a stranger. He gives her a chance to confront him, and then He goes the extra mile to help her know He loves her. "Go in peace and be free:" that isn't the message of Allah, or a tyrant, or a politician, or John Q. Public. But it's the message of Jesus. It's what He does.

After the story of Jairus – which isn't over yet – we are left to find that we are the bleeding woman. You and me, we might not be bleeding or enduring intense suffering; or maybe we are. Yet each of us is flawed; we each need some kind of healing. We desperately need to believe that the Son of Man can and does heal us in ways nobody else can. We need it because this is the only hope in a hopeless world. You and I can't reach up to touch Jesus' robe, but we can touch Him through His word, by opening up to Him heart to heart, by learning to trust Him to guide us in decisions small and large, and by pursuing His ways of love to govern everything we think and say and do. When we do that, we find that He soon turns to us and says "your faith as healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

*Lord, only You can heal. Heal all my diseases. Heal me because only You are God.*

Read Mark 5, verses 21-43.

## Practical Proverbs, from Mark, 2 March 2015

*While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?" Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe." Mark 5, verses 35-36.*

The message of Jesus has never changed, never wavered, never compromised. Since the day He first uttered these words to Jairus, they have held fast and remained true. "Don't be afraid; just believe."

You believe. Do you pray?

For what I'm about to confess, please don't think me cocky or holier-than-thou. I've started to pray for enemies. ISIS? I pray for them. The politicians who I think are destroying the country? I pray for them. The kids who bullied me for years? I pray for them now. This is a recent development. While I've prayed for years, it's only been a recent thing that I've started actively praying for those who I think are my enemies.

It's making a difference.

It goes back to what Jesus said in verse 36: "don't be afraid, just believe." You see, I had some deep, internal fears for many years. Over time, I faced most of them to the point that I could honestly say that I feared nothing of this world. I simply didn't, and some of the reason for that was that I faced up to them and overcame them. More to the point, before facing my fears, I prayed for Jesus' help. He gave it. I ascribe my ability to overcome my fear to Christ who gives me everything.

Yet I found there were still things that upset me; there still are today. Jesus never says that we will be friends with everyone here on the Third Rock. Indeed, only fools could think that simply trying to be friendly for people who genuinely hate you could change them. Jesus never said we should approve of fools, or that we should condone their foolishness...just like He never said we should compromise with evil in any way. What He did say, however, is that we should love our enemies. Not try to love them, not work on it: love our enemies. That means doing something.

In my life journey, I've found the quickest way to start that process is to pray for those I'm against. I don't condone ISIS, radical Islam, or those who would compromise western values for the false promise of security with terrorists. I don't endorse the political or social beliefs of people who I think don't have what's best for our country at heart. I don't have to become a bully. But it's not my place to judge the hearts of other people even as I disagree with them. All these people are loved by Jesus the same way He loves me. He wants them in eternity just like He wants me (and you) there. Do you want to see Jihadi John in heaven? Jesus does and we should too. Knowing that, I'll trust that He knows what He's doing. So I pray for those I oppose even as I still in some ways oppose them. Accordingly, I no longer fear.

Jesus told Jairus to overcome his fear (of losing his daughter) by believing in Him. He had just told the woman who He healed that her belief had healed her, that she was whole again because she overcame her fears through Jesus. We can do the same. What say you?

*Lord, forgive, protect, and love my enemies. I know You love them, too, so I trust You.*

Read Mark 5, verses 21-43.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 March 2015

*He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. Mark 5, verse 37.*

I need healing. Badly. Physically, I would love to drop a few pounds, thin up, get my running endurance back, not be plagued by problems I can see ahead if I don't do something about it now. Emotionally I have worked hard to put a past of bad choices behind me; though they no longer haunt me as they used to, I'll admit that, from time to time, guilt over them bubbles up and sticks me. Spiritually, on my own, I'm dead. I've thought about hell lately, not about my going there (which, thanks to Christ, I don't see happening) but about what it is. Though my thought is based only on my sophomoric wonderings, I wonder if hell isn't the absence of Christ. Think about it: as long as we live, there is hope for us. If we turn our backs on that hope – Christ – all our lives, would it be so surprising if Jesus simply removed all vestiges of His hope from our lives eternally? An eternity without love would be a burning fire of punishment.

So would a life without healing. Without the love of Jesus, all my best feelings and emotions are not love. Without the love of Jesus they are nothing if not hell, merely tortured aspirations to love but never the real thing; close but no cigar. Without the love of Jesus, I am sick and need healing. I need it a lot. How about you?

Yet I'm a private vocal man. In public, "the show must go on." I'm a lot of talk, sometimes; it's a character flaw I'm working to correct. I like a joke, to laugh, and to enjoy, but sometimes it's pretty cheesy. In truth, I'm still something of an introvert who tries too hard some times to present himself as an extrovert. I need to be healed quite desperately, and I prefer it be done in private. Here I am, confessing these things in a forum that is anything but private (and I'm doing it willingly, without duress) yet, when I need healing I don't want it plastered all over the billboards (or message boards).

How satisfying it is, then, that Jesus does heal us in private. Deep inside, where our deepest emotions still boil, He reaches through all the noise of the world and heals what needs to be healed from the inside-out. He did it for Jairus' daughter. He has done it for countless believers throughout history. He wants to do it for me and for you. Jesus knows, too, that we are personal people, that we have inner-most beings who are private. He comes to us to heal that part of us first, knowing that the rest can follow when this happens.

Though He was very much in public when Jairus came up to Him, Jesus quickly shied the crowds away and went in to see the sick girl. Why did He bring Peter, James and John? We can only speculate, but this wasn't the only time Jesus worked with just His closest friends around. Are we any different? Most of us have friends and acquaintances, but only a select few to whom we are completely candid and intimate. We should expect Jesus to be the same.

*Lord, heal my sickness. Take away my sins and heal me from the inside. I believe in You.*

Read Mark 5, verses 21-43.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 March 2015

*When they came to the home of the synagogues ruler,<sup>22</sup> Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "'Talitha koum!'" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up. Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this,<sup>26</sup> and told them to give her something to eat. Mark 5, verses 38-43.*

Do we laugh at Jesus when He says (in His word) that He can do whatever He says?

Already in Mark He has had this miraculous baptism, driven out evil spirits, healed hundreds of people, cured a man with leprosy, healed the man who was paralyzed, called out the Pharisees, chosen twelve commoners and imbued them with amazing power, amassed a following of thousands, calmed a storm just by talking to it, vanquished a legion of demons and healed a perfect stranger (in a large crowd) who simply brushed up against His robe. Now He's at Jairus' house, telling the hired mourners there that the girl they think is dead is actually asleep. They've seen her die; her heart has stopped; her body is getting cold. She's dead. And Jesus says "she is not dead but asleep."

Would we laugh at that? Would we be like Sarah, who laughed at Jesus when He told her, millennia before, that she would have a son when she was in her 80s?

"Of course I wouldn't laugh at Jesus." Riiiiiiiggggghhht. Um, I'm going to go all Martin Luther on you and remind that that, yes, you would. If we say we would believe Jesus when He says He can do miracles in our lives then why haven't we embraced the miraculous power of healing that He's placed in each of us? We can heal? Absolutely we can. Don't believe me? Call up a friend who you know is down and just listen. Reach out and do something kind for a stranger without any expectation of reward. Do more than is required when someone asks for your help. ALL those things and more are simple acts that cost us nothing yet heal the broken spirit of folks like us who need it.

And that's not even counting physical healing. Jesus did that too. He did it, in fact, for Jairus' daughter, making thankful fools (and maybe a few new converts) out of the wailing scoffers. If Jesus says we can do something, then we can do it. Is that license to be irresponsible? Of course not, nor is it license to do something foolish, or to unwisely test God. Yet it is license, even a commandment, to believe. That's what He was telling Jairus to do, then the mourners at the house. "Believe in me. I will do this extraordinary thing." And He does it.

He's telling us to do the same. To use the faith He gives us to do extraordinary things in our ordinary lives. That's nothing to laugh at.

*Lord, forgive my laughing doubt. You're empowering me. Lead me today to do extraordinary things for You.*

Read Mark 6, verses 1-6

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 5 March 2015

*Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. Mark 6, verses 1-6.*

Yesterday at work we were having a discussion about Jesus; yes you heard me right: at work. I was talking with a co-worker who had read "Zealot: the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth." I haven't read the book; only synopses of it. It's written by a Muslim author who (according to Wikipedia) "argues that Jesus was a political, rebellious and eschatological Jew whose proclamation of the coming kingdom of God was a call for regime change, for ending Roman hegemony over Israel and ending a corrupt and oppressive aristocratic priesthood." It actually sounds like a set of good points, though the author misses the primary purpose of Jesus and His ministry. But the point made by the various synopses (and by my friend) was that, while Jesus was many things, one thing that He could definitely be called was "radical."

"Radical" is also the title of a book by David Platt. In it, Platt argues for radically re-thinking the church's approach to ministry because the founder of the church was a radical. Jesus lived radically, called on His followers to do things that, in first century Judea, were radical. Love your neighbor; take up your cross and follow Me; to gain your life you must lose it; hate evil and love God: these were radical ideas shared by God Immanuel who had instituted a confrontational, conventional-wisdom-on-its-head ministry to bring many sons to glory.

Glory: glory to God His Father was why Jesus left the land of the Gerasenes and went home. He went back to His hometown where (just like at Cheers) everybody knows your name. The people of Jesus had known Him when He was nobody, when He was only Mary and Joseph's son, when He was a growing boy and an awkward teenager, when He attended the synagogue every week. This time, however, Jesus sat and listened to the town elders talk...and then He began to teach. He began to teach with radical words that they had never heard. He taught them in words and ways that left them amazed, hungering for more. They had heard about His exploits, the crowds, and the miracles, and now He was back home, teaching in their midst, teaching them about the glory of God the Father by opening their hearts to His wisdom and love.

Flash forward two millennia: what's your experience with Jesus? Are you amazed by Him? Are you skeptical, questioning, maybe ignorant about Him? Are you threatened by the radical or comforted by the lover of your heart? Would you be one of the folks who sees Jesus as a radical and a political instigator? Or would you be someone who sees Him as the source of love, the fount of all life because God is the source of life and God is love and God gave us life to live and love Him in?

You know there's no wrong answer. All of them are correct. Jesus was a zealot, and a radical, and a herald of glory, and all love. Those reasons and more were why He went home: to share with the people He knew best the message that eternity truly does matter most. Try talking about that at work today.

*Lord, I am thankful You're all You are, that You are in my life to share Your radical glorious love.*

Read Mark 6, verses 1-6

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 March 2015

*Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Mark 6, verses 2-3.*

This is me.

Time and again I have been rightfully accused of being a know-it-all, of acting condescending towards others, of always trying to get the last word, of being cocky and superior. Guilty as charged on all counts. The best thing to do with the truth is accept it, and the truth is that I do look down on some people, especially those who don't agree with me; after all, I'm right...right? Count me in with the Jews at the synagogue that Saturday when they got all pissed off at Jesus for being just Jesus.

They were PO'd because, in their eyes, He wasn't being 'just Jesus.' They had pigeonholed him as being 'the nobody.' He wasn't educated; He wasn't a trained cleric or rabbi. Jesus was just 'the carpenter' who had plain and simple parents, brothers and sisters. This new and improved carpenter wasn't the kid who had grown up there. This guy had guts. Who was Jesus to talk to THEM like He was? How dare He do that!

Self-righteous sinner SOB's, right? Yep. If they would talk like that about the Son of God right in front of His face, what do you think they would say about other people they judged? About you or me? Arrogant, condescending, last-word-getting, cocky, superior know-it-all's. Also known as "small town;" elsewhere in Scripture people talk down about Nazareth, their town, saying "can anything good come from there?" They're also known as "big city," where the cosmopolitan beautiful people look down on those not good enough to be cosmopolitan beautiful people (also known as "just people").

They're also known as 'you and me.' No offense, but I'm not responsible for you. You're responsible for you; I have enough to handle on my own, and while I love you as my friend, you have enough on your hands, too. You have to pony up and be responsible for your own self. There: doesn't that sound condescending?

Tell me: do you think Jesus got attitude with these know it all's? My guess: you bet He did. But perhaps it's a reasonable assumption to make that Jesus' attitude wasn't exactly the attitude you or I would have. Remember: Jesus is all man and all God (all at the same time). If you or I get our hackles up, it's reasonable to assume that Jesus did too. As man, I bet His eyes got wider and heartbeat faster. As man and God, however, He took the high road. He listened. He respected. He said and did nothing to contradict the things He had just taught to these men.

That is not me. That's not you either; sorry again but the splash of cold water for us is needed now and then (lest we become cocky know-it-all's). WWJD? Good question, but perhaps the better one should be "What should I do knowing how Jesus acted?" And even better than that: "what is Jesus telling me right now?" After all, He does talk to us day by day, sometimes minute by minute. And when He does, it's never meant in offense.

*Dear Jesus, speak to my heart. Forgive my arrogance, my unfeeling posture.*

Read Mark 6, verses 1-6

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 March 2015

*Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith. Mark 6, verses 4-6.*

Just last week, my wife and I moved. We relocated from Frisco, TX to Paris, TX, which is a little over a 90 mile shift east. We spent the week doing moving things – unpacking, shifting things around, making calls – and getting to know the new town. Perhaps the hardest part of moving is simply establishing new patterns of living, new places to store your socks and kitchen spices. The reason we moved here was to position ourselves to act on some life-plans we've talked about doing for several years now. We want to plant a vineyard and make wine for a living as a way to reach out to connect others to Jesus. Connect people to Jesus through wine? Yes, you read that right. We have a story to share, a passion for both the Lord and wine, and are now in a place where there are literally ripe fields to do what we've dreamed about doing.

We've been back to Frisco several times, and in truth, we'll actually keep going back there at least once a month or more over the next year. It's not that we're cutting ties with our former home: it's just that we couldn't do what we wanted to do there. To be honest, I'm not sure our three kids are fully on board with what we've done. One lives out of state and is least impacted, but the other two live nearby and our move out of town affects them greatly. Yet we prayed about this for a long time, and we discussed it with them, and believe we have used the resources available to us in the best, most God-pleasing ways we could where the move is concerned. Now it's all in God's hands; it always has been.

I suspect some people think we are crazy. When folks hear about this middle-aged couple wanting to start a Christian winery, they respond that it's cool, a neat idea. I suspect some of our friends, however, think we have lost our minds. Nobody has said anything negative about the move, but a few have been decidedly lukewarm at best.

The reason goes back to Jesus' story, this one where He found that you never really can go home. The people of Nazareth had known Jesus when He was just one of them, when He was a good local man but not this rising celebrity of Judea. Perhaps they were unwilling to accept that the man they knew and the man who returned to visit them were one and the same. You can never really go home once you've left and come back from someplace new. Things change; you change; other's change too.

So it is with us. It was hard to leave our 10-year home behind. We met wonderful people, raised our kids there, knew love and its opposite there, and experienced both dissolution and redemption. I suspect that, when we've been gone awhile, we will go back to visit and realize that things are different now. We won't be the same but neither will be those who stayed behind. It's just God's way of things.

*Lord, bless us and keep us wherever You lead us, wherever You would have us call home.*

Read Mark 6, verses 1-6

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 24 March 2015

*Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. Mark 6, verses 6-7.*

“Authority over impure spirits:” you and I have that just as much as the disciples did. It’s true that Jesus hasn’t personally ministered to you or I in the context that He used with the apostles. You or I haven’t followed Jesus from village to village, and He hasn’t personally called us by name, at least not in the exact same way He did Peter, John and the rest.

But we have that authority all the same. If you think about it, we have a relationship with Jesus that the apostles didn’t. They got to experience His human, temporal life. We get to know Him differently. We get to know Him as history and most of humanity does. And in doing that, He calls us. Yes, He has called you. Jesus of Nazareth, the same man written about (and by) in the book of Mark, has called you by name.

Don’t believe me? You or I couldn’t even begin to talk with Him, to even contemplate Him, if He hadn’t first introduced Himself to our hearts and heads. I can’t explain how or why that is; I simply know that it is. To paraphrase Scripture, we can’t even comprehend Him – anything about Him – if He hadn’t already planted the desire in us. And when He does that, He begins to impart in us the authority over impure spirits. Authority over demons? Perhaps, but I’m talking about something more relatable.

If you’re tempted to surf to that nasty website again, you have the choice to say “no.” If you want to respond in an argument, you have the choice to refrain. If you’re being pulled in a direction you don’t want to go, you have the authority to pull away. If the drink calls you, one more toke tempts you, just one more hit before I go: you can resist. Jesus has created you with free will, even when that will seems weak. We have the ability to say no, to turn, to change.

And that, friend reader, is the authority over impure spirits. It’s the opportunity and the ability to say “I will follow You” today. Yes, sometimes it’s very difficult, even without the peer pressure. Sometimes the worst temptations are the ones we hide and must resist alone, yet Jesus gives us authority over those as well. It doesn’t matter what we’ve done, how we’ve let Him down – how we’ve let ourselves down, either – or how many people we hurt along the way. Jesus meets us where we are and gives us the authority we need to start driving out the impure spirits by simply saying “no.” The weapon once used in rebellion can now be wielded in Godly resistance.

In that respect, I’m betting we actually aren’t much different from those twelve Apostles. We might tend to over-glorify them, to think they were men possessing faculties we simply do not have. Nothing could be more in error. They were common men, common people like us. In and through them Jesus revealed His power in ways He never had before. He gave them authority over impure spirits...just like He reveals Himself in the majestic person He created in you. You have authority. Use it well today.

*Lord, through You I command the impure spirits to depart from me. Thank You for this ability.*

Read Mark 6, verses 6-12.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 25 March 2015

*These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." Mark 6, verses 8-11.*

"Just go and trust Me." That seems to be the message Jesus imparted to the Disciples as He sent them out to get down & dirty in ministry. He had already given them the authority to do whatever was needed in His name, including driving out demons. Now He says to them "in addition to that, get a move on. Just go and I'll take care of everything."

Can you imagine doing that?

I just moved and I can't imagine it. My wife and I, we did this in an orderly fashion. I mean, we seriously started looking for a farm in late December, put up our house in January, had over 50 viewings and 2 offers, and just got paid for it yesterday. We spent much of February packing, house-hunting in Paris, and planning for the move (which, I might say, was probably the toughest but smoothest move to a new home that we've ever done). After praying, trusting, and following, I can honestly say we did what we believed Jesus wanted us to do and that we're being blessed for it.

But we didn't do what these verses said. In them, Jesus said simply "go and trust me." Drop everything and follow me. Condense that further and what He was really saying was "trust me." "Trust me with EVERYTHING, every detail, every outcome, every possibility, every word you don't know how to say yet. Trust me to provide everything you need." Throughout this recent move I can't honestly say that I've done much of that.

Instead, I like to have a plan; so does my wife. In fact, she's a better planner than I am and I usually talk things through (sometimes just to myself) dozens of times before I actually do them. Is Jesus acting through me? Sure He is. And does Jesus want us (maybe even expect us) to be good, prudent stewards of the gifts He gives us? Absolutely. Ours is a God of order, not chaos.

But when you strip those things back, you still find that He's there, commanding but imploring us, to simply trust Him to take care of everything. Whether it's authority to drive out evil spirits, planning for a move, chairing a meeting, letting go of your past, going to the store to buy avocados, or whether to turn left or right at the unmarked crossroads, Jesus implores us to trust Him first in all things. Everything else we can know begins with that.

Imagine doing that today

*Lord I trust You yet I've not fully trusted You. Forgive my failing and help me to simply follow.*

Read Mark 6, verses 6-12.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 26 March 2015

*They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. Mark 6, verses 12-13.*

This is the other half of the story we talked about the other day. The other day, we talked about how Jesus empowered His disciples to go out and do these things. Now comes the proof that they did them. They went. They acted. They forgave and healed. They 'brought it.' They 'did;' they didn't just 'try.'

That matters. It matters because we can't just talk. We have to do something about it. Talking is good preparation but if we're talking about doing and not actually doing, then we may just be accomplishing nothing. It's not that God needs our works. He doesn't. God doesn't need us to do anything to earn the favor He already gave us through His Son being murdered for all the wrongs we've done. Instead – and here's the shocker – we need it. We need other people to bring the message of Jesus to us. When we know about the Good News, we NEED to share it with other people, to pass it on down the line because other people need it too. In all this, actions really do speak louder than words (even though it is the Word putting itself into practice through our actions).

It's like work. You can talk about work or you can do work. I'm helping to lead a team of 20+ people who are executing a project. They're executing a project we planned for nearly 2 years, one that we began and had to table last year (thanks to politicians). For many weeks and months, those of us acting as project caretakers talked about doing things. We planned, organized, discussed, met, and rehearsed; that was all we could do at the time and it was preparation for things to come. Now the leadership team has hired the people and I'm helping to manage their work. In just a matter of a few weeks, their hard work has taken us from 5% complete to almost 30% complete. They did it by DOING, by putting into practice the things we had planned for them and then empowered them to do. I couldn't be prouder to be part of a group than I am to be part of this one.

"Do or do not. There is no try." Yoda said that in *The Empire Strikes Back*. And Yoda was a Jedi master (as well as just a movie character). Jesus is real, and really asks us to do for Him, to commit through Him in whatever we do because, when we do that, we can do anything. The Disciples found that out.

Whether we knew it or not, in those movies, Yoda channeled Jesus. Jesus is the original Yoda, the original "do, not try" man. And Jesus' message is "do through Me. There is no trying in Me. There is doing. I want you to do through Me." That's what He told Peter, John and the rest to do, and that's what they did. They did it in the mighty name of King Jesus who can do anything. Through Him, so can we.

*Lord, help me to do for You, not just to try.*

Read Mark 6, verses 14-29.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 27 March 2015

*King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago." But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" Mark 6, verses 14-16.*

Folks believe some really crazy stuff. Have you ever considered that maybe some of it is real?

Consider these statements: Alar on apples will poison you. Elvis eats lunch at a Burger King in Kalamazoo. A black man will never be elected president. If you play the Beatles' White Album backwards, you hear messages from Satan. You can't grow wine in Texas.

Which of those are true and which of them are flat out crazy? Truth is that all of them have been considered to be true by rational people not unlike ourselves. Some of those statements were true at one time but untrue now; some are just dumb or wacky (Elvis actually eats at KFC...). Folks believe some crazy stuff.

So is it implausible that there's this Jewish king named Herod who executes this great prophet (named John the Baptist) and there are those who are saying John has come back from death? Put yourself in Herod's shoes: do you believe it or not? Fact is, Herod didn't really know what to believe. Mark's Gospel hasn't gotten that far yet into describing Herod's story; don't worry, we'll get there soon.

But poor Herod didn't know what to believe. He had John killed and now there are reliable sources – knowledgeable people in whom Herod places his trust – who are telling him that John is back and bolder than ever. You and I know now that it was Jesus about whom these folks were talking, but poor Herod didn't know any better.

When you don't know any better, you can believe in some really crazy stuff. As we'll see in the coming days, Herod was pretty nervous that his sins would come back to haunt him. What he didn't realize was how crazy things would soon get and how haunted he might become because of it. Like I said, he didn't know any better and the talk was just plain crazy.

So here's a prayer to rock your world: I pray you don't know any better. After all, it's plum crazy to believe that there is this two thousand year old man named Jesus who said (and proved) that He was (and is) God. The government of his day (including Herod) had him murdered because He was a threat to their status quo. Two nights plus later this same Jesus comes back to life...and it turns out that He had promised to do exactly that. What's more, this Jesus spends the next few fortnights meeting hundreds, maybe thousands, of people all of whom will swear that He's alive and well...just like He said He would be.

Folks believe some crazy stuff. My hope for you is that you go a little crazy like that today. Stretch your belief and believe in something your brain tells you must be impossible. Now go have an apple, listen to some old Elvis music (or even the White Album, but forward please), and enjoy a glass of Texas wine this weekend.

*Lord, help me to be crazy for You.*

Read Mark 6, verses 14-29

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 March 2015

*For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.<sup>22</sup> When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. Mark 6, verses 17-29.*

Following Jesus may cost you everything. Don't we see that in the story of John the Baptist? How about in our lives?

Over the weekend, I was talking online with an atheist friend. This man and I worked together nearly 30 years ago, and I posted an item on his Facebook page, agreeing with the Christian aspect of a particular subject. My friend completely launched his rhetorical missiles in return; really harsh, in some cases vile statements about faith, Christianity, God, the Bible and Jesus. My temper usually gets dandered up at such things but this time I think I heard God's better Spirit telling me, "let it slide." I simply wished him a good night and logged off.

And, in a way, my friend also opted for the apparently lowest-impact response to this fact, namely to say "um, God, no thanks." In doing so, he chose the course of least resistance. Disbelieve in God and check out from all the God-circumstances (as far as he knows). Perhaps he doesn't want the feelings that come with following God, and in the eyes of the world, perhaps that's even a good thing. Look at what happened to John the Baptist. He was Jesus' cousin, friend, and prophet. All John did was do his job and it cost him his life. Look at the Apostles, Jesus' closest friends. All of them but one died horrible deaths for doing nothing more than following and proclaiming Jesus. Look at what's happening to Christians in the areas that ISIS has overrun today. They're being murdered wholesale: all for following Jesus. IN the eyes of the world, can you blame people like my atheist friend for wanting to run away from God?

Yet what my friend fails to see is how Jesus is working on and in him already. How he couldn't even contemplate God (let alone disbelieving in Him) if God hadn't first planted that knowledge & spark in him. How there is no peace in this tortured world without the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. How, in Christ, there's so much more than meets the eye. How, to die for Christ is to live for eternal gain. How losing everything the world offers for Jesus is to take hold of something so much more valuable, something that will last forever. John the Baptist understood this. I pray my friend learns it as well.

*Lord, let me live only for You.*

Read Mark 6, verses 30-44.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 31 March 2015

*The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." Mark 6, 30-31.*

Do you ever feel overwhelmed? Do you ever feel like the world is piling on you and you're at your breaking point? The never ending cacophony of liberal/conservative haranguing in the press, the up/down cost of gas and milk and living, the defined-down standards of our educational system, the pressures of work and how technology really doesn't make things easier, the holier-than-thou's at church and the country club (which may be the same place and people), the real problems of how to put food on the table when there just isn't enough to go around: do you ever feel overwhelmed by it all?

Consider this: there is rest in Jesus. He designed life not for us to be overwhelmed but to seek rest in Him.

Just this morning, the subject of peace came up in three places at nearly the same time. First it was in an online devotion I read. A few minutes later, it came up in another devotion my wife and I are doing (this one written by, of all people, Jimmy Carter). Finally, it comes up here. I think God must want me to know about peace today. And I think that, because He may just want me to know about it, I'd like to share some peace with you. After all, the first thing Jesus said to His disciples after rising from death (which by the way, happens this coming Sunday), was "Peace be with you." Not "how ya doin guys?" or "wassup?" or anything as pedestrian as that.

No, Jesus arrives on the scene and says "Peace." Real peace because He knows the only real peace in the world is found through Him. It wasn't the first time He had invoked peace. He does that here in today's verses, inviting (and commanding) His closest followers to come with Him to get rest. He knows they have had a lot on their plates the last few days, and He knows that they may feel overwhelmed and taxed. So He invites them to seek rest, to seek peace, by diving deeper in Him.

He does it because there is rest in Jesus. The rest for the soul that translates into rejuvenation for the body is really only found in Jesus. Yes, there's relaxation found at the beach. I love the beach and will be spending a week there in just a few months. There is rest found in hobbies; I can't wait to plant my garden this week! There is solace in quiet, and out here in the East Texas country one of my new favorite activities is sitting on our porch with my wife, just listening to the wind in the trees. I had forgotten how peaceful that can sound.

Yet these things are nothing compared to Jesus. In Him, there is healing from the guilt and shame that, like a parasite, hugs close to every sin we do. In Jesus, there is a way to turn away from giving these things power and be better. And in that, there is peace knowing I can, through Him, overcome those things and not let them further overwhelm me.

*Lord, let Your peace fall on everyone in my life. Let it and not anguish rule.*

Read Mark 6, verses 30-44.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 April 2015

*So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. Mark 6, 32-33.*

Sometimes you can't get enough of a good thing.

One of the first-world issues with which I'm dealing this week is 'which concert to select.' This Spring, two concerts are coming to North Texas and I really want to see both. Jimmy Buffett, who I've seen four times before, is playing on May 30<sup>th</sup>. Huey Lewis is opening for him. I think it'll be a great concert. Competing for my viewing pleasure are the Rolling Stones, the Strolling Bones, who I've never seen in concert and who have been playing concerts since before I was even on Planet Earth. The Stones are playing in Arlington a week after Buffett plays Frisco, and while I don't know if anyone is opening for Mick & the boys, I do know that they won't be touring for many more years since, these days, the members of the band are more prone to hip replacement than youthful vigor. For all intents & purposes, you could say the same thing about Jimmy Buffett who's no spring chicken either yet, as I mentioned, I've already seen him before.

Now, I don't go to many concerts; it's been two years since I've even been to one. In a world of 6.5 billion people where 6.490 billion have never even been to a concert, this is still a pretty good statistic. I really would like to see the Stones in concert before one of them breaks a hip or something like that.

Am I seriously drawing a parallel between rock concerts and the work of Jesus? Sure! Why not? Is there a reason why I shouldn't? After all, common people like me like to go see famous singers strut around and sing songs with which we can sing along. It was common people (and uncommon people and rich people and poor people and all kinds of people) with whom Jesus palled around. The disciples were common people who were commonly exhausted by spending time on the highways and hedges of Judea preaching about the Good News. They were exhausted because working with needy people (also known as "us") is exhausting. It's emotionally taxing, physically draining, and spiritual exhilarating.

So Jesus does a common thing and invites them to rest. After all, real peace and real rest is found only truly in Him. Yet do they get to do that? Do they get to go away and relax? Nope. The people dug what Jesus and the Apostles were doing. They were into the message of love, repentance, forgiveness, and Godly power that these unusual Galileans were preaching. It wasn't in-your-face but it was. It didn't lord over them; it didn't beat them down with rules and laws and a bunch of other stuff. The message that Jesus and His followers brought was new and vital, and the crowds couldn't get enough. Long before Mick Jagger and Jimmy Buffett, crowds were into the kind of message Jesus brought. Think of the crowds in Judea as an extended rock concert long before electric guitars, light shows or Fin-guys walking through the crowd.

And I bet it was exhausting. Good exhaustion, I'm sure, to be a disciple and know you're working directly for the King of Kings, but it must have taken a toll.

*Lord, bless the crowds who can't get enough of You. And bless rock concerts, too.*

Read Mark 6, verses 30-44.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 April 2015

*When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. Mark 6, verse 34*

Remember the context of what's happened. Jesus has been on the move and so have His disciples. He healed a sick girl, then went home where He was rejected by the townspeople whom he had once called "family." He then sends His disciples out to perform ministry while He continued teaching. While they're apart, we learn that John the Baptist – Jesus' cousin and most public prophet – has been murdered. Now the apostles are back and are exhausted. Jesus takes them to a solitary place, away from the crowds, so they can all catch their breath. Yet the crowds follow. Remember: sometimes you can't get enough of a good thing.

And you know how it is with crowds. They're needy, pressing, loud, lost, wandering, pensive, impatient, and can be tough to deal with. This crowd, they were hungry for both food and soul-food. They needed a meal (and would soon get one; a meal to remember in fact) and they needed to heal. More than the food for the body, the crowd following Jesus desired food for the soul. They wanted more of what the Man from Nazareth was giving them.

What does Jesus do? Exhausted, spent, overwhelmed, tired Jesus looks at them and gets that winsome look in His eye. He then starts speaking to them, "teaching them many things." From Mark's Gospel, we don't know exactly what He taught them. It's likely He taught them parables. And Matthew says that He 'healed their sick.' When the crowd desired more of what Jesus offered, He gave it without hesitation or self-focus.

There are so many things to glean from just this one verse. Have compassion even when you're at wit's end. When you're at wit's end, dig deeper. When you dig deeper, bring out your best. And when you bring out your best, bring it out for everyone and not just those closest to you.

Me, I'm stuck in amazement on the point of how, when Jesus and His disciples were exhausted, they kept on giving. Last weekend, my wife and I raked about ½ acre of leaves. The courtyard in front of our new house was covered in leaves, so we spent 10 hours raking them up, moving them across the driveway, and then burning them. At the end of the day, we were spent. All we wanted to do was rest, so we did. Yet that's not what Jesus did. When the world told Him "you're tired. Take five," He looked at a group of total strangers and helped them.

Can we do that? Sure we can. Even when we've raked leaves all day. I'll be honest: at the end of that day I was dog-tired, but if someone actually needed something from me, like you, I probably would have tried to summon the energy to give it. Tell me: have you ever stopped to help someone change a tire? Or helped a friend move after working all day the day before? Ever read "just one more" story to your kids (after finishing two already)? And have you ever stayed up for hours, listening to someone who just needed to get something off their chest?

Can we have compassion on others when we feel like we have nothing left to give? You bet we can. And it makes Jesus smile.

*Lord, help me to have compassion for others.*



Read Mark 6, verses 30-44.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 April 2015

*By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered, "You give them something to eat." Mark 6, verses 35-37.*

Do we whine to God? And does God want to hear it?

In this part of the story, Jesus' disciples were exhausted physically and emotionally. In their defense, they'd been through a lot. Isn't it sort of understandable that they (more or less) passed the buck to Jesus. "These folks are here to see you. It's late. We're tired and hungry. Your problem, Boss." Like I said: whining.

And then there is me. It's been a great month so far. In truth, I've been blessed with more than a few answered prayers. Work has gone great. Last week, I planted a ginormous garden: something I have wanted to do for years. And this past weekend we spent a great Easter with friends at church and then family at the house. Huge blessings were to be enjoyed all around. Sunday night, I got sick: sick with a virus or something, and I spent all day Monday flat on my back, much of the time sleeping. What did I do during the time I was awake? "God, please make me better. I'm sorry for whatever I did but please make me better because I feel awful!"

Yep: whining.

Now, it's ok to lean on Jesus when you're sick. In fact, He wants us to. Yet what I really wanted was God to just take care of this thing for me because, well, it was interfering with my life and, ya know, that's SOOOOOO important! I was down and out and I turned to Jesus but I whined about it. At least the disciples had been out doing Jesus' work. What had I been doing? Smoking a brisket and planting green beans. Yet we have this thing in common: we were grumbling and complaining to God.

So I'll ask it again: do we whine to God, and does He want to hear it? What's more, do we send people away when they come wanting, needing Jesus? And when we do that, do we whine to God to pass the buck instead of facing our own inadequacies?

You know the answers.

And when we do these things, we're still not that different from those Apostles. Remember that these pillars of the Christian faith were men long before they were pillars. They made mistakes. They fought, failed, and fumbled. And they learned faith, first at the feet of the Lord, and they by living through faith in Him in whatever followed. None of them lived easy lives after that. I'm sure they would have loved to live in the country, growing vegetables, but that wasn't how things turned out. Like them, we make mistakes. We whine to God. We turn away folks who want and need our help. We pass the buck, even to Him, when we should 'man up' and own our foibles. And through it, Jesus still is waiting for us, encouraging us, forgiving us and reminding us that He already did everything necessary to repair our relationship with the Father.

*Lord, forgive my whining, heal my diseases, and help me to do Your bidding.*

Read Mark 6, verses 30-44.

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## **Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 April 2015.**

*But he answered, "You give them something to eat." Mark 6, verse 37.*

Think about those six words: you give them something to eat. They're command, question, empowerment and charter, challenge and mystery.

As you know by now, we're in the story of the five loaves and two fish. It's the one in which Jesus feeds 5000 men. Did you know that it was just men who were counted? If you didn't, that means that Jesus actually fed many, many more than just 5000. Chances are the number was between twenty and thirty thousand or more (if you include women and children). It wasn't the disciples who did the miracle; they punted to Jesus. And Jesus didn't punt: he picked up the ball and threw a touchdown. But enough of my football analogy.

Before Jesus went all Roger Staubach, however, He commanded, questioned, empowered, and challenged His disciples while all the while keeping up the mystery of His crazy ministry.

Time to think about it again: Jesus commanded the twelve tired men to give thirty thousand hungry, dirty, loud strangers something to eat. In a few verses, we learn that the disciples respond in logic (and a little whining) instead of in faith. But in reality they did what we would do. If my boss told me to go feed thirty thousand people, my first response to him would be an incredulous "how." Yet Jesus commanded them to do it anyway. Do you wonder why? Maybe He was commanding them that, because they had just spent time in remote areas doing healing and miracles, they should continue to rely on their faith to feed the hungry group. He told them to have faith. How would you or I respond to that?

In the same verse, he questioned them. More to the point, he forced them to question themselves. "How are we gonna do that?" "What does He mean?" I'm sure Peter, James, and John had some go-to defensive posture just like we would have but do you think they honestly tried to noodle what Jesus was telling them to do, or did they simply see only the natural, earthly aspects of it? My money is on door number two.

Yet Jesus empowered them. When He commands, He gives us all we need to do something. He told the disciples to give the people food. He knew what they didn't (and what we wouldn't either): everything we need can be found in Jesus through faith. Faith can produce food. Faith can heal. Faith can help and give hope. Faith is our bridge to forever. Jesus knew this, and whether the disciples knew it or not, He was giving them all they needed to finish the job.

And finally, in those same words, Jesus challenged them. He gave them a hefty order: feed thirty thousand strangers. We soon learn that there are only five loaves of barley bread and a couple of puny fish. He was testing them but, more than that, I think He was challenging them to stretch their faith, to lean on it to produce more than just some magic trick. As we'll see, they weren't up to it. But Jesus was and that's more important. Tell me: does Jesus command, question, empower and challenge you with His mysterious ways? Do you read these words and find He's telling you things you never thought were possible?

*Lord, I'm scary amazed at how You use the supernatural in the natural world. Thank You for commanding, questioning, empowering and challenging me here today.*

Read Mark 6, verses 30-44.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 April 2015

*They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand. Mark 6, verse 37-44.*

So Jesus commanded the disciples to feed the thousands of people with them and the disciples whiffed. What does Jesus do? He feeds them, of course. He feeds them in one of the most famous miracles of His life. There are so many lessons to draw from this but the one that hits me closest to the heart in this season is how God is a god of plenty.

When God satisfies our needs, He doesn't do so barely. More than a decade ago, I laid off a half-dozen managers on an account which I was helping to manage. It was my job to do so, and they knew their positions were being cut; nothing personal. One of the managers I rolled off was a genuinely good man but he was extremely troubled by the layoff, and with good reason. A year later, I ran into him on an airplane and he told me how being laid off was the best thing that had happened to him. He was forced to make priorities of what mattered in his life (namely his faith and his family), and he moved his family to Washington State, where he got a new, better-paying job and a new life. He told me something I've remembered every day: "when God blesses you, He gives you more than you can hold on to. He doesn't turn on a spigot to drip into your hand: He turns on the hose full blast. You have to share it."

Now, I won't go Pollyanna on you, especially if you've ever struggled to live paycheck to paycheck, or if you have struggled (or are struggling) to juggle paying for food versus medicine or medical care. Planet Earth is a tough place to live if you choose to live under human conditions. Left to our own devices, we're hopeless. Jesus did live a fully human life but also lived as fully God as well. And when He blessed someone, He didn't go half-way. Jesus always provided plenty, more than was needed, and always in bounty.

He still does today, like my friend found out. When God heals us, He performs a miracle of nature, against improbable odds. When He provides us with food, clothing, shelter, love, family, or anything, He does so in ways that surpass just our bare-bones needs. Even a simple twenty-four hour day is more than enough time to turn every day from failure to success, one minute at a time. Do you have a bed in which to sleep? You're being blessed with so much more than you need. Food on your table? Massive blessing, and if you live in the West you have access to more than you could eat in a year. Church in which to worship? There are solutions to all life's problems that become readily apparent as soon as two or more of us gather in His name. Good health? That is a medical miracle in a world that is full of disease and danger.

God is a god of plenty and abundance, beginning with His abundance of love. It is we who chose and foster poverty when we know there is a better way. That's one of the biggest lessons from the feeding of the five thousand.

*Lord Jesus, praise to You for all the plenty and bounty with which You bless us. Thank You for providing for all my needs. Thank You for being the God of plenty.*

Read Mark 6, verses 30-44.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 14 April 2015

*They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" Mark 6, verse 37.*

One more thing about this story, the feeding of the five thousand; just a small question, if you will.

Sometime in the last few years, making over \$100,000 in America became a commonplace thing. If you gross \$100K in your annual pay, you're now counted as distinctively middle class; average and nothing special. If you gross \$100K in salary, after all taxes, you're generally netting between \$50,000 and \$60,000. Let's say you net \$60,000. According to today's verse, if you were one of the disciples, you would be saying to Jesus, "you want me to spend \$30,000 to feed a bunch of strangers?"

Noodle that thought for a moment. Then it's time for a gut-check.

You see, would you really give half your income to feed a group of tired, loud, restless, smelly strangers? \$30 buys A LOT of mac and cheese, you know. There is some thinking that it was Judas Iscariot who said this verse since Judas was the keeper of the Disciples' money (and Jesus eventual betrayer), or at least that's how it was once explained to me. No matter, the words were spoken long before Holy Week. And folks in first century Judea didn't make \$100K; they didn't make even \$30K. They might not have made even the equivalent of \$300. The amount really isn't the point: it's the staggering figure. A half a year's wages just to give a crowd a one-time meal? And the point behind that? The point is the reason for the gut-check.

What do you really believe? Do you really believe that a crap-ton of strangers are worth your hard-earned dollars? Sure, we can say "if someone was hungry I'd give them something to eat" (and I believe you and I would mean it). Well, here's an instance of someone being hungry (the five thousand men) and Jesus' closest friends are balking at the idea of feeding them. What do you think they really believed? They, who walked hand-in-hand with King Jesus while He was ministering, living, breathing and, yes, EATING here on the Third Rock, balked when He asked them to feed the hungry. Do you think the Disciples really believed they could feed such a crowd? Or that they should?

Thank God Jesus was handy with a miracle, you know? And when we are done reading and re-reading the story of how He fed five thousand men on fish and barley bread, that nagging question still nags: what do you REALLY believe?

Do you really believe the Son of God actually did these things? And if you say yes, do you believe Him when He says that you and I can do the same if only we fully trust in Him? That's the toughest question you'll face today, maybe even in your lifetime. No pressure, my friend: it's only eternity hanging on your answer, specifically your eternity. Because if you truly believe in your heart that what Jesus said was all true, then nothing is impossible for you. If you truly believe in what Jesus said, then you quickly must conclude that nothing is about you even as nothing is impossible for you. It doesn't matter whether you make \$100K or \$100 million: the scratch is irrelevant. What do you really believe?

*Lord, forgive my weak and puny faith, and create in me a home for Your heart.*

Read Mark 6, verses 45-56.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 April 2015

*Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. Mark 6, verses 45-46*

You have seen me write here that I like movies. I have a fairly extensive collection of them, in fact; my wife says I have a DVD obsession (and she has a point). There's a movie due out this summer that I want to see because I think it will make a point with which I agree. The Kendrick Brothers are releasing another Christian movie called "War Room." From the previews I've seen, the theme seems to be how prayer is a powerful tool for us to be actively engaged in fighting for what God believes in. That theme matters in today's verses.

Keep in mind what has just happened. Jesus just fed the 5000. Prior to that the Disciples had spent several weeks on their own, ministering and healing. They were all spent. They were exhausted, even Jesus (who was fully God but also fully man all the time). They needed the power of God to recharge them. And they needed God's holy weapons in their hands to ward off the temptations and desires that creep up on us when we are vulnerable (such as when we are exhausted).

So Jesus modeled the example (and did it for Himself as well) and went off to a quiet, private place to pray. Jesus knew better than anyone how prayer is a two-way activity. Putting our thoughts, concerns, feelings, actions, everything in front of God is our part, as is opening our hearts to His answer. And God does routinely answer prayers, actively putting real tools in our hands with which to engage in spiritual combat here and now. The weapons He places in our hands are faith, love, tolerance, listening, wisdom, and all those fruits of the Spirit mentioned in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. Even more, however, is how God actively intercedes in the world through and around us in ways we can't even predict (and may not even know are happening).

The way to "get on God's level" in all this starts with prayer. While it's good and powerful to pray in public (before meals, with others, routinely, etc) it is equally important that we each make regular private prayer in our own 'war room' an important part of our lives. Please understand: I'm not trying to guilt you into doing this. I'm simply repeating a fact and urging you to do something about it in your own way. Public prayer matters and publicly standing up for your faith with others matters, especially in 2015 America. Yet private prayer in your own 'war room' also matters deeply. It matters because it's the time when God can personally recharge you, and when you can take your own private matters to Him to let Him begin to work them. God isn't a magic genie; prayer isn't a wishing well. The answers and solutions He gives may not be immediately apparent (or they may) and they almost certainly won't be easy. Yet sin is never easy and its consequences are always much more serious than we expect. Because of that, we need to arm ourselves with the full armor of God (see Ephesians 6) and get battle ready in our own war rooms. We are all warriors. Suit up and engage.

"War Room" hits theaters this August.

*Lord, I take my all to you. Equip me to fight in the war for You.*

Read Mark 6, verses 45-56.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 27 April 2015

*Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Mark 6, verses 47-50*

"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." That's a tall order.

Hello, friend, and it's good to be back. My wife and I just returned from a cross-country trip to see our daughter, family, and to work. Lots of folks said to me "you're driving that far?" and I responded "it's no big deal." To me, it is no big deal because I can take courage through Jesus in anything, especially something as simple as driving between the lines.

Think back on the context for these verses. Jesus had made His friends get into a boat while He went up on a mountainside to pray. Perhaps He could see them off in the distance; perhaps He could see them struggling to keep the boat in place. Do you think the disciples felt afraid at that time because, later, they saw Jesus walking out on the water they were terrified. Not upset, not stressed, not just afraid: they were terrified.

And then a miracle happens. The obvious miracle is the walking on water, right? If you're one of the disciples, this would scare the snot out of you. Even if you're following Jesus, that's not something you see anyone else doing. The disciples – the men we think were so in-tune with all things spiritual and true – thought Jesus was a ghost. When He called out to them, they realized it wasn't a ghost but was their Master.

Yet what about the less obvious miracle; did you catch it? The Creator of the Universe is personally telling His followers to "take courage." He has given them the good weapon of courage and has given them the ability to take and use it. That's huge.

Now, I don't know about you but I've never seen anyone walking on water. If I did, I might just get scared like Peter and the rest did. It's not something you see every day and, if you do, chances are something supernatural would be happening. Yet I think the deeper miracle is what the Almighty does for His followers. He tells them to "take courage." It's something they can do because even in their most terrifying moments Jesus is with them. He is encouraging them to have faith that they can overcome anything through Him.

What's so different for us? Can you and I take courage in anything because we know Jesus walks the water in our lives? You know the answer. And because we can take courage, then nothing is beyond our doing. Nothing at all, whether it's righting a boat, driving 5000 miles in 10 days, staying married 30 years with the same person (and happy anniversary today to my sister and brother-in-law, by the way), or simply showing up at work every day and giving each one our best. If anything, we need courage for that.

*Lord Jesus, be my one and only courage in this life.*

Read Mark 6, verses 45-56.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 28 April 2015

*Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. Mark 6, verses 51-52*

Tough love time: do you harden your heart when you are amazed?

As I mentioned yesterday, my wife and I drove across the US this month; it's why I didn't write in this blog for about 10 days. I don't know where you live, but I'm guessing there are things about it that you really like and some that also leave you lukewarm. Me, I love East Texas though every time I travel somewhere else I see places that make me think "I'd like to live here." I loved DC; lived near there for three years and love the Maryland Bay area. The Smoky Mountains are beautiful; in fact, most of Tennessee is gorgeous and I'd love to spend a lot more time there. I adore south-central Pennsylvania, and southern Indiana, the Wisconsin Dells, the Twin Cities, and pretty much all of Missouri from Kansas City south. And these are just the places we saw on this trip. From other trips I could name many more.

Can you say I'm easily amazed? It's just geography on a fallen rock. After you've seen so many different places, it all becomes overwhelming. By the end of each long day's drive, both my wife and I were spent, just ready to find a warm bed in which to collapse. We had stopped paying attention to the beauty – and to miracle of Jesus keeping us safe throughout an improbable, quick trek across some very long distances – and the amazing became boring. Call me Peter, or maybe James, John, or Matthew. Throw me in that boat with the Disciples and I wouldn't have understood about the loaves either. In fact, I sometimes wonder if I truly understand much of anything.

Ditto the disciples. They had been with Jesus and had watched – had participated – in how He fed 5000 men with five loaves and two fish. They had ministered in His name to hundreds of people all over Galilee. You would think that, after all this, these twelve men would have understood that Jesus wasn't just some priest or prophet. But the verse said "their hearts were hardened." Do you think they did that, or that it just happened to them? I think that, because their hearts were hardened, they were more easily amazed, and because they were amazed they were more easily hardened in the heart. That would explain the seeming mood swings the Apostles seem to have, swinging from abject terror to spiritual fulfillment in the space of a few words. In a way, it's a gift from God that He gives us the ability to 'shut down' when we're overwhelmed, but it can be a difficult thing to reconcile. In the Disciples' case, they let their dull ignorance overcome them and give way to fear. By the time Jesus climbed into the boat, they were terrified.

So maybe a little gut-check is in order for me now that I'm back home safe. Do I get dull and hardened when I'm overwhelmed or scared? You bet I do. That's the time to stop in place, cry out to Jesus for a hand, and let Him right my ship. No matter where I find myself, the best place is at His side.

*Jesus, I need You to forgive my hard heart, my dull ignorance, and my arrogant self-reliance. In Your name I ask this.*

Read Mark 6, verses 45-56.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 April 2015

*When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed. Mark 6, verses 53-56*

One of my favorite TV shows is ending. “Mad Men” has only two more episodes to go before Don Draper and company sign off into TV eternity. If you haven’t watched it, through 7 seasons, Mad Men has told the story of life and advertising in the 1960s. As a period piece, it impeccably captures styles, furnishings, products, attitudes, and reactions to the monumental events of those times: all told through the lives of the characters, most of whom are shallow and even despicable in some ways. It’s well-written quality TV and I’m going to miss watching it.

I’ll miss it because I’ve learned a bit about advertising from watching. The purpose of advertising is to get you to do something: to acquire something you weren’t even thinking about. Advertising convinces you that you need something, gets you thinking about something you might not have considered before. The TV show portrayed the glamorous world of golden age Madison Avenue as gritty, hard work done by intensely flawed but completely human people. Their ongoing work was to better themselves by building the perfect ad.

If you think about it, a good ad spreads quickly because of its smartness, simplicity, quality, and short message. Sort of like the Gospel, though I can’t picture Jesus as Don Draper. Watch the show and you’ll see Don needs some Jesus; don’t we all?

But the point remains: the Gospel is smart, simple, quality and succinct. It speaks for itself and gets you thinking. It did for the folks in Mark 6 because they had heard the Gospel from Jesus Himself. They knew His quality message wasn’t some cheap imitation and it wasn’t some ruse or shallow thing that would fill them for a second yet still leave them empty inside. When the people realized Jesus was coming, they flocked to see Him. They brought out their neediest friends and took them to see Him. This had been happening for months all around Judea because word of mouth spreads fast. When they heard Jesus and heard about Him, they wanted more and more.

Isn’t that the case with our lives as well? When we hear about something, do we want it? If you see the ads for food, do they make you hungry? When you read the weekly ads, do you page through and think you might just need something new? Word of mouth spreads fast, which is why advertising works, which is why I found Mad Men to be so entertaining.

Jesus had the best ad of all: I’m God and I died for you because I love you. It’s a great tag line: smart, simple, high quality and brief. Don Draper couldn’t have done better; neither can I. It’s the word that spread fast in ancient Judea: it’s the Word that still spreads like holy fire today to bring many sons to glory.

*Lord, I crave Your crazy message of love. Use me today, I pray, to share Your word with someone.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 April 2015

*The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles). Mark 7, verses 1-4.*

“Wrapped around the axle” is one of my favorite metaphors. I credit my friend John A with first using it and I’ve adopted it as one of my go-to phrases when my team gets, well, wrapped around the axle over some small issue.

It perfectly describes the Pharisees. Come to think of it, it describes you and me.

You see, (if you don’t know much about them) the Pharisees were devout Jews. They impeccably practiced Judaism and strived hard to obey as many of Moses’ many commands as they could? You thought Moses only handed down Ten Commandments? That’s true, but God also spoke more commands through Moses, to the people. Those commands, such as what to eat, when to wash, with whom to associate, were all meant to help the people live out those Ten Commandments. And those Ten Commandments were meant to point the people towards their undeniable, irreconcilable need for God in all things.

Leave it to a bunch of preachers and teachers to get all wrapped around the axle about something like that.

But how are we different? Do we get overly focused on little things? Do you or I become so absorbed with doing things that we forget why we’re doing them? That was the Pharisees’ problem. They had forgotten why they were observing these codes, adhering to the religion without clinging to the faith. They got all wrapped around the axle over problems like hand-washing, ceremonial cleanness, touching other people, what to eat and where, when to ‘work’ and not to work.

Tell me, friend reader, have you done that lately? I know I have. I manage a 2000 line project plan that contains most (not all) of the details in the work my project team is doing. It’s easy to get wrapped up in accomplishing the small details while losing sight of just why we’re doing them. It’s easy, too, for me to criticize the hypocritical Pharisees without recognizing my, um, Pharisaical nature in my everyday life.

Wrapped around the axle again. The cure for the common axle-wrap is, you guessed it: Jesus.

There’s a song on Christian radio right now that sings, “just say Jesus.” When you don’t know what to say, just say Jesus. When you find yourself mired in the details, just say Jesus. When you are at wits’ end, stressed over the kids, lost in the country, scared of tomorrow, or overwhelmed by 300 channels of satellite TV, just say Jesus. When you’re getting all wrapped around the axle, just say Jesus. That’s the point of the whole Bible, you know: for us to just say Jesus. For us to focus on Jesus instead of the details because, when we focus first on Jesus, the details work themselves out.

*Lord, help me to avoid getting all wrapped around the axle over things that aren’t You.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 May 15

*So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" Mark 7, verse 5.*

Wikipedia says a straw man argument "is a common reference [argument](#) and is an [informal fallacy](#) based on false representation of an opponent's argument. To be successful, a straw man argument requires that the audience be ignorant or uninformed of the original argument." Ladies and gentlemen, this is the kind of thing the Pharisees were trying to do to Jesus.

Sadly, this is typical to our public discourse today. You can't listen to or watch any discussion of politics today without straw men falling down all around you. It's how our leaders, from the president on down, make their points and side-step things that society needs. Straw men are rampant on social media, too. I'm more guilty than most of constructing them and slaying them to make a point over someone else. And they're the staple of shock TV. Maury Povich and company aren't nearly as popular as they once were, but their way of setting up & tearing down others for shock and ratings value is still just as alive.

Straw man arguments are a way of transferring blame. We use them to set ourselves up as above or beyond the blame while attaching that blame to our opponent by destroying their argument in a slightly dishonest. That's what the Pharisees were trying to do. Washing before eating was and is common practice. Unwashed hands were only 'defiled' if you subscribed to the over-literal way in which the Pharisees interpreted God's practical commands. Because these teachers and preachers were so wrapped around the axle over the details of the law, they forgot that the law was given for man not man for the law. Thus, they set up their opponents using a fallacious argument so as to convict said opponents before they could even adequately respond. "The tradition of the elders:" as if that tradition was correct or better than the tradition of Jesus; puuuuullleeeeezzeee.

And we find out that Jesus would have none of it. He already knew of the better way. That's next.

Yet we can be thankful for what the Pharisees did. They're more than just a good foil for Jesus' intended purpose. They're a good mirror for us to gaze into and see ourselves reflected back. After all, we do what they did. We set others up for the fall for not measuring up to what we want them to do; do you do this like I do? And when we look in that mirror, sometimes more than a little hypocrisy stares back at us. That's the dirty secret with a straw man: all too often, hypocrisy walks hand in hand with it. So it was for the Pharisees: so it is for each of us today

*Lord Jesus, I'm sorry for when I've torn down others using bad arguments, and for my hypocrisy. Forgive me and give me an opportunity to make amends.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 May 2015

*He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." Mark 7, verses 6-8.*

SMACK! It's a hard & fearful thing to be brought to task by God. If Jesus' words seem harsh, it's because they are. Now, before we spin off on a tangent of "well how could a loving God X, y or z" let's remind ourselves of a few key facts.

Jesus confronts the sinner with their sin. In this case, He confronts the Pharisees with their sin, specifically getting wrapped around the axle on some rules meant for man's good but twisted by man for control over other men. It wasn't the rule that was bad: it was how the Pharisees applied that rule. Such application showed idolatry ("I know better than God") and arrogance ("Do as I say, lesser human"). Jesus doesn't go off gossiping about what the Pharisees say and do: He responds to them there, in public, where they had first confronted Him.

Jesus holds them accountable. He called the Pharisees "hypocrites" and convicts them using words with which they, as teachers of Jewish Law, would have been familiar (the words of Isaiah the prophet). Jesus doesn't make more of the sin than it is; He doesn't bring up other past sins or try to cloud the issue. In confronting them with their sin, He tells them that they did it, that "You have let go", not passing the buck or trying to water down the issue. We can only truly change if we are held accountable, if we understand that there are boundaries for our behavior and penalties for transgression.

Jesus makes it personal without personal attack. In confronting the Pharisees and holding them accountable, Jesus doesn't belittle, denigrate, or attack them as people. He could; let's face it, we would. But He doesn't do that, opting, instead, to simply let His words mean what they do. They're piercing, direct, and harsh; they're even rightfully accusatory. But they aren't demeaning.

Jesus' words offer a different path. This is more implied. Did you notice the emphasis Jesus uses, namely that He outlines their sin but, in doing so, identifies the other direction they could take. "Their hearts are far from me" implies "draw your heart to God." "Worship me in vain" implies "worship me in love." "You have let go of the commands of God" means "come back to my righteous law." Read up on Jesus and you'll find that's always consistent. He never accuses without holding open the door (and the possibility) for repentance and return.

Finally, Jesus' love doesn't compromise. He talks about the heart, about what it is inside a man that makes him man. When He talks about sin, when He holds us (and the Pharisees) accountable, when He makes our sins personal, and when He offers us a different path, Jesus is keeping His holy love holy. That love wouldn't be love if He didn't. Jesus says what He says to the Pharisees – and to us – not just to convict them (while offering insight for others to see) but He does so out of tough love.

He still does for us, each and every day.

*Lord, please confront me with my sin, hold me accountable, offer me Your path, and bless You for Your holy love.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 5 May 2015

*And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." Mark 7, 9-14.*

How do you and I set aside the commands of God?

Yesterday, we talked about how the Pharisees were hypocrites then, more importantly, how Jesus was the loving and stern confrontation that they needed. It's a given that we aren't much better. In the 2000 years since the days of Jesus we haven't evolved very much.

My wife and I are watching the "AD The Bible Continues" series on Sundays. As fiction, it's sort of melodramatic; thankfully it isn't too heavy handed or overly dramatic; no Cecil B. DeMille treatment. Anyway, the storyline weaves both the Acts of the Apostles and things that could have happened in Roman Judea in the first century. The political intrigues and palace coup plots aren't from the Bible, but they are believable. Taken in the context of how Rome would probably have governed, the TV show is believable.

And it presents a perspective that I hadn't thought of, namely in showing how very human were the twelve men in whom Jesus entrusted the building of His church. They were flawed, trying their best, full of emotion, pain, and turmoil. The rulers of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, are portrayed as typical politicians, conniving and debating, dithering on one hand while acting out of hand with the other.

All the characters in the show, including the Apostles, set aside the commands of God in one way or another. They choose human decisions rather than what God would want. Granted, some of that is story-telling. I mean, the people on the show are actors working from a script. It's isn't real, and it injects twenty-first century reactions into first century situations.

But the reactions of the men and women are played as if they are, and it's believable. It's believable because they say and do things that we would. I can believe Peter is realistic because he says and does things that would be familiar to me.

Do you think Jesus would talk to me, then, like He did to the Pharisees, telling me that I'm nullifying the words of God? Let me answer this way: if He didn't it wouldn't be because I didn't deserve it. I do nullify God's words. I do it in many different ways. I set aside the commands of God in so many different ways that I often forget how much I do it. When I look at some woman in lust, when I curse out again, when I let that old grudge darken my mood, when I lose my temper, when I judge the guy on the other side of the aisle, when I say things that hurt my wife, when I do ANYTHING that is in any way contrary to Jesus I nullify and set aside the Word of God. And so do you.

*Forgive my failing You in all my sins, Lord.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 May 2015

*Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. Mark 7, 14-16.*

I'm sometimes ashamed of things I say and have said. Jesus could have been talking about me in these verses because, if you've met me at various stages in my life (including sometimes even these days) you might be really, truly shocked to see me writing about Jesus and what He means to me. You might be shocked to find I deeply believe in God and struggle every single day to 'walk the walk and talk the talk.' More often than not, I fail at it miserably. Thank God He is good all the time and that He forgave me long ago for being sinful, stupid and Dave.

I remember middle school when I hung out with the other outcast kids in Oklahoma. We used to swear and tell dirty jokes and think we were so grown up and cool. Yeah, that sounds pretty typical (and lame) but I wonder how many kids I turned off with the dumb attitude I wore on my shoulder.

Or as a young man in the Air Force. I once got chewed out by my supervisor for cursing on a recording we made. That F word? One of my favorites. Analysts would be reviewing our recordings and we were supposed to be professional. That time, I was far from professional. In fact, I was just a young punk. I wonder what the analyst who listened to my track thought.

My kids know how to swear; they learned it from me. Mind you, I'm not throwing them under the bus, but if you know them then you know they are earthy, and that they sometimes can let the language fly. They're adults now; they're responsible for their own words and actions. But they first learned them from listening to their profane and impulsive father. Now things are worse.

The list goes on and on. When I re-read today's verses, I can identify with them because Jesus convicts me every time I read them. He could have had me in mind when He first said them...

...in fact, He did. Yes, Jesus did have me in mind when He spoke these words. He knew me even then, just like He knows you now. Don't forget the context in which He first uttered them: He was responding to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. But He was also talking about what we do with our 'wrapped around the axle' moments. Do we learn from them or do we follow through on the evil they hatch? There's the tongue-twisting phrase from the Apostle Paul that I'll paraphrase here: the things I don't want to do (or say), these I keep on doing. That's me. That's my dirty mouth and worse. And He forgave it anyway.

The beauty of Scripture is that it's ALL a story of Jesus. All of it, from the history to the prophecy, is the revelation of Jesus, of God imparting knowledge of Him into our hearts and minds. Hand in hand with that is remembering that I'm forgiven; so are you. Yet there are verses like today's that, taken on their own, convict and spotlight me and shine a light into dark places I'd rather not see.

*Lord, I crave You and Your forgiveness. Forgive my stupid sins and make me clean again.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 8 May 2015

*After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.). Mark 7, 17-19.*

Did you know that there are still 3 people alive today who were born in the 1800s? All three were born in 1899. One lives in Italy, one in New York and the oldest living person (as of today) is a 115 year old woman who lives in Michigan. Her secret to long living: live by the Golden Rule. In fact, one of the things that is common to all three "super-centenarians" is that they have faith.

Negativity truly won't get you far in life. I tend to think that the Pharisees were negative people, sort of like those of us who get all wrapped around the axle today over small things like politics...guilty as self-charged. Anyway, I tend to think that the Pharisees were so pre-occupied with the minutiae of living that they clouded out the bigger, better parts. In making dozens of rules for people to live by, they codified their personal negativity into legalistic rules. Jesus called them up short on it and forcefully but lovingly pointed out both their errors and a better way.

Then, to make things worse, Jesus' closest followers sided with the Pharisees. It wasn't intentional; it wasn't as if they decided "yeah, those guys have a point." It's more likely that they were simply ignorant. On the surface, it seems Jesus is intolerant of that; "are you so dull?" By our standards, it's almost as if He's mocking them. But we need to look deeper to see that He's honestly questioning them, turning their questions back to them to get their neurons churning. He does this while then teaching them something obvious: that 'defilement' is a learned condition. Food, air, water, even disease don't make people ceremonially unclean, nor did they ever. Moses had given God's laws to the Israelites to point them to the deeper truth that defilement was a condition of the heart, not dirt on one's hands. That's what Jesus was teaching.

Can you imagine living in three different centuries? I can't. On Tuesday, I went to the cemetery where my grandparents are buried, and Tuesday was Grandpa's birthday; he would be 107. Many members of my family are buried there; it's as close to a family cemetery as we have. I remember a few of these people; some of them were pretty negative, but most weren't. I looked up to my grandparents, though, and admired them. I still do. When I was researching the people from the 1800s who are still alive today, I realized that these people were alive when my grandparents were born, alive when they died, and are still alive today, and it has been over 20 years since my Grandma passed away; God's mercy amazes me. The family members whose graves I visited were old, even ancient, when I knew them yet they are surpassed before and after by even older folks still around today. And those people say they know why. The secret is knowing Jesus and taking Him at face value without all the rules.

*Lord, thank You for life, for Your living and dying for me, and for elders to teach me right from wrong.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 11 May 2015

*“For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) Mark 7, verse 19*

No matter what someone tells you, everything you want to eat is permissible. Free choice reigns, baby.

Those religious people who say you can’t drink alcohol? They’re full of it. The vegans who say it’s immoral to eat meat? Not Biblical in any way. Muslims and Jews and their pork aversion? Crackpot. Anyone who says you can’t eat or drink something and tries to hammer you with the Bible as to why you shouldn’t: go ahead and lovingly hammer back. What Jesus is saying here is “it’s just food, guys.” And, yes, let’s go there: Jesus had the same bodily functions that you and I had. His body worked the same as yours or mine; I hope He was in better shape than me. When He consumed food and drink, the same thing happened to Him as happened to us. It’s just food, y’all. It goes in the body; it goes out of the body. It’s fuel, not faith or future.

Mind you, you can’t take Jesus’ words out of context. One verse in the Bible here isn’t simply condoning everything the way we might think it is. Remember: heart first. The Apostle Paul, echoing Jesus’ commands, reminds us that, if something is bad for you, then it could lead to sin. If something causes someone a problem – say a beer before an alcoholic, junk food in front of a dieter, or bacon and sausage on my plate any time of the day – then we should gut-check (no pun intended) our motivation before offering it or consuming it in their presence. We need to always check our hearts before we jump into eating and drinking things that may be problematic for our peers. Sin is the problem, not bacon, eggs or beer.

Even the religious folk I mention up above: we need to do a gut-check in how we respond to them. My wife and I are hunting for a church to attend here in Paris (Texas). Last month, we went into a friendly non-denominational church south of town. It had the contemporary, open vibe we were looking for, and we liked the fact that they were doing things in this small, economically challenged community; be the church, don’t just go to church. Yet I don’t think we’ll be going back there because the minister spent part of the service decrying demon alcohol. She kept preaching about how awful and sinful alcohol is, and made this aspiring vintner and wine-business owner feel unwelcome. How many of us do this with the best of intentions in how we walk our daily faith-walk?

The point of all this is to make sure that, whatever we do in living to carry out Jesus’ commands, we do so with the kind of loving attitude He has.

*Lord, bless those who struggle with food issues, and always remind me to do a heart-check in how I respond to others.*

Read Mark 7, verses 1-23.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 12 May 2015

*He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person." Mark 7, verses 20-23*

What do you call a group of sexually immoral people, thieves, murderers, adulterers, slanderers, and envious lewd arrogant folly-chasing cretins? Answer: your local church.

Yes, I'm saying it: the First Baptist Church of Wherever (usually the biggest building in town) is a bunch of sexually immoral, lying, cheating so and so's. So is the First Methodist Church, the Whatever Lutheran Church, St. Anyone's Catholic Church, Bad Hair and Cheesy Smile Assembly of God, your local synagogue, every mosque and any group that gets together regularly to give praise to our savior Jesus. Churches wouldn't suck so much if it weren't for all those sinner hypocrites, you know? It's sort of like hospitals: they wouldn't suck so bad if it weren't for all the sick people.

Perverts, cheating liars, dirty stealing dogs: Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, Christians of every flavor, Democrats, Republicans, American Legionnaires, and the Rotary Club that meets at Bob's Big Boy every Thursday at noon. These are the kinds of people who make up churches; these are the attributes of the sinners who live as the church of our Lord. Face it, folks: we're screwed. Jesus said so. If you don't believe me, re-read Jesus' verses above and take out "person" then substitute your name, you dirty dog you. "What comes out of Dave is what defiles him...all these evils come from inside and defile Dave." On my own, I'm beyond repair.

Pretty damning, don't you think? Of course you know where this is going; you'd have to add "willfully ignorant" to that list of sins if you didn't. Don't forget that Jesus was saying these harsh things in the context of trying to teach a bunch of Pharisees (also known as "sexually immoral people, thieves, murderers, adulterers, slanderers, and envious lewd arrogant folly-chasing cretins") that what they were doing wasn't nearly as important as what they believed inside. Because what they believed inside defined them and made the things that come out of them perverted, immoral, murderous and the rest.

Let's groove to our 70s vibe instead. Sing after me: "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." Or "put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee." Or "Oh happy day when Jesus washed my sins away." Put away the lousy music of life, then channel some gospel; perhaps trade in Megadeth for some Hillsong. Instead of letting our hearts be defined by the death of this world, let's let that Man from Galilee do His work on us from the inside out. That's what Jesus was saying when He implored His followers (and those Pharisees) with these last few verses. "I'm God. I love you. Let me erase all the junk inside you and reveal the inner gem I see."

When He does that – when we let Him – it's amazing how the words that could describe us will change. Imagine how good His church could look then when we simply radiate His morning light instead of trying to shake off our night shade.

*Lord, let Your change work through me. Forgive my sins, and help me to do better for You.*

Read Mark 7, verses 24-30.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 May 2015

*Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Mark 7, verses 24-30.*

I must admit: at first read, this story put me ill at ease. There's the whole thing about Jesus not ever getting any privacy. I like my privacy from time to time and I bet Jesus occasionally craved some private time as well. Yet He never seemed to get any. That irks me.

And then there's the thing about insinuating the woman is a dog. What is up with that? Is Jesus just irritated? We don't think of the Son of God being upset, but let's be real and say He could have felt that way. Yet reading the verses makes it seem more likely that He was also testing the woman. He uses this parable, describing how the Word of God would be given first to the Jews before other non-Jewish people would come to know it; after all, the Jews were/are the people through whom He revealed Himself. The Greek woman – a foreigner in Judea – seems to know this; it sounds like she's familiar with the story of Israel. She plays along and acknowledges God's revelation, and accepts it. The story, thus, isn't a slight against her: it's using a story to make a point. Don't forget that this account also comes on the heels of Jesus reminding us how it is our words that show us to be defiled. He wouldn't and didn't defile Himself by personal insults or slights. Instead, Jesus questions, then actually honors her, especially her faith.

Finally, a word about the Greeks. In their day, the Greeks were the most educated, intellectual people on the planet. 'Their day' (when Greece was the most prominent, powerful nation on the Earth) was actually several hundred years before Jesus' time, yet the Greeks still prided themselves on knowledge, logic, thinking and pride in their culture. We don't know if the woman with whom Jesus was talking was educated, intellectual, or anything like that. We can see she was intelligent and wise, both in quoting Hebrew Scripture and in her foresight in recognizing Jesus for who He was. She was also brave and faithful, putting her trust in this stranger who was making Himself known to be the long-promised Messiah. Those were summarily rewarded.

To be frank, much of Scripture can put me ill at ease. At times, it's supposed to make us uncomfortable because only then can it serve as a mirror, reflecting back our sins while at the same time offering us knowledge about God's forgiveness and comfort in times of adversity. No matter how I feel about it, what Jesus says is much more important.

*Savior, thank You for the nature of Your Word.*

Read Mark 7, verses 31-37.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 14 May 2015

*Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. Mark 7, verse 31.*

We need to go with our faith. What would Jesus do? Stop stalling by asking that trendy question and pay attention to what He did. He went.

Now, I'm a big proponent of overseas mission work. I've been on overseas mission trips to Asia and Africa. I've done mission work in Minnesota, California, Montana, Colorado, Oklahoma, and here in Texas. This blog is my mission work every day and it's my privilege to share it with you, to send it to where you live in the hope that it helps you, and that you'll send it on to parts unknown. Between us, over 4000 people a day see these words.

Big freaking deal. It's what I can do but it doesn't mean much. I'm capable of more and I haven't done more. If this is the best I can do then I have let down my Lord.

Yes, I mean that. There are still so many places in the world where people haven't heard about Jesus, and there are even more where people don't want to hear about Him. They're right under our noses. My last foreign mission trip was to Uganda four years ago. My life was in turmoil then, heading out of the most tumultuous year of my life. My head and heart were upside down; I had turned my life inside out and was destroying people I loved. Ten days in Uganda changed me, exposed me to the heights of faith in the depths of poverty. I met some of the finest men and women there, and they are my brothers and sisters to this day. To say the trip moved me was an understatement because I felt I was doing what Jesus wanted me to do: go on the road and love like He would.

Yet almost immediately after my last foreign trip, a friend of mine upbraided me, saying I shouldn't have gone overseas. That there are real people really suffering in real ways here in the United States. At first, what she said ticked me off. The more I thought about it, however, the more I saw her point. Anybody up for doing some outreach this week along 8 Mile, or maybe on Charles Street in Baltimore? Been to West Philadelphia to hand out tracts, or have you worked in a soup kitchen in Oak Cliff lately? Me neither. Indian reservations, prisons that hold 2 million Americans, depressed towns all throughout Appalachia and the deep south, those war-zone urban areas challenged by Crips and Bloods, and the oh so complacent suburbs where consumption is the American Idol of choice: my friends, right here in the US of A is a foreign-like mission field in itself. After all, have you read the survey (published by Pew this week) saying how, since 2009 the percentage of people in the USA professing themselves to be "Christian" has shrunk by 8%? Seventy percent of us still call ourselves "Christian" but 30% not so much. Do the math and that's almost 100 million under the red, white and blue who don't want Jesus. That's a ripe field for us to go be Jesus.

Is it any wonder, then, that Jesus led by example? He didn't sit on His brains to ruminate, cogitate and contemplate. Jesus went. Go we and do the same.

*Lord, empower me to go where You lead me.*

Read Mark 7, verses 31-37.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 18 May 2015

*There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Mark 7, verses 32-35.*

Jesus does this thing, these steps, then heals a deaf mute in Tyre. There are dozens of stories in the Bible about Jesus healing people. What's so great about this one?

I submit there are two things about it that set it apart. Jesus looks up to heaven and then sighs deeply; that's number one. And number two is that word: Ephphatha or, in the king's English, 'be opened.' Amazing

You see, I seriously believe our sins grieve Jesus. Taking all our sins on your shoulders is tough; you and I can't begin to fathom how tough it was (and is). That's the rub of it: is. Our sins, today, here and now, must grieve Jesus. It wasn't enough that He took on Himself all the trillions of sins of mankind up to that time. No, He took on Himself all the sins that were to come, of billions of people not yet come to Earth. Nobody at the time would understand what was happening and some would die in vain. Over the next few millennia, billions more would die because of sin, many never knowing Him. How could that not grieve Him?

What's more, human suffering grieves Him. I think that's why He looked up to heaven, where He knew the God of eternal love resides, and then looked back at his perfect creation, the deaf mute man, who was suffering from imperfection. We don't know how the man came to be deaf and mute, only that he was. Jesus looked at him and loved him. He saw that the man – the creation who had been made in God's own image – was suffering from a less than God-like condition. It must have grieved Him; it must have made Him deeply sad inside.

So He did something about it. He responded to the crowd by taking the man aside, doing this little ritual, and then uttering those amazing words, "be opened." Do you grasp the deep beauty of what Jesus says here? "Be" is a condition and an action; it 'is,' which is a tense and verb in the same conjugation. To be and in being: they are words that describe something done to a person as well as the way they are. Have I lost you yet?

Then consider it this way: I understand it better if I remember that, in French, 'to be' is the verb 'etre.' You learn that in first year French. What I find amazing about it this is that part of conjugating 'to be' is 'I am.' Jesus is commanding I AM, God, Himself, to actively be with this man. When that happens, it opens him. Jesus opens his ears; He opens his mind; He opens his heart. An entire world is opened to the man because the Great I AM has done so for him.

And all that out of an ancient word of Aramaic (and French). There's a lot that's great about that.

*Lord, You are the I AM. You are being, future, and all hope.*

Read Mark 7, verses 31-37.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 19 May 2015

*Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Mark 7, verses 36-37.*

This is nothing new: it's recorded in Scripture (before now) that Jesus healed, told the person he healed to keep mum about it, then the person went out and talked; let's not rehash an old point. Besides, what the people did is human nature, good or bad. Instead, let's talk about one part of verse 37: "He has done everything well."

When was the last time you did everything well?

I'm intensely proud of the team I'm helping to lead. We just passed the half-way point on our project timeline and we are just over 50% complete. That's testament to the talents of good people and their hard work. But they haven't done everything well.

Over the weekend I set out quite a few chores to do and I got most of them done. I spent time with my grandson and my wife & daughter (which isn't a chore, mind you). I also weeded my garden, hung a few pictures, fixed 2 door locks, hung wind chimes, cleaned up wood, finished laundry and ironing, filed four months of business paperwork and a few other things. It was a very full time, but I didn't do everything well.

Sunday night, my favorite TV show, "Mad Men," went off the air; series finale. After watching it and reading any number of synopses, I find I like the way they ended the show. Loose ends were tied up enough to where you're satisfied. The main character stripped away all the junk in his life and rebuilt himself (yet again), then (it is assumed) returned to write the most successful TV ad in history (the 1971 Coca Cola singers ad). It was a great ending, but, again, the writers didn't do everything well.

And yesterday morning, my wife and I had breakfast at my favorite breakfast place. The food was good, but in a mostly empty restaurant, the service was a bit poor. As you can imagine, they didn't do everything well.

You can see where I'm going with this, can't you? We expect things in our lives to be done well, and as fallible, fallen human beings, all too often we don't do them well. That doesn't stop us from wanting others to be perfect; we simply cut ourselves maximum slack where our own efforts are in question. It's even true of perfectionists.

How surprising it is, then, to happen upon someone named Jesus who did everything well, perfectly in fact. Is it any wonder that, when people were amazed at Jesus' words and actions, they would talk about it? The same is true today. When we let Jesus truly touch our hearts, nothing is ever the same. He affects every aspect of our lives, even when it's painful. And when He does, we quickly come to see that He does everything well just like He did those thousands of years ago. So well, in fact, that everything He does is for a good reason and never out of anger or hurt. That, too, is nothing new and it's very much something to talk about!

*Lord Jesus, I praise You for all that You do so well!*

Read Mark 8, verses 1-13.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 May 2015

*During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance." His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand were present. After he had sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. Mark 8, verses 1-10*

We've been here before, right? Not quite. And even if we have, what's the underlying issue?

I'll admit: I had to do some research on the differences between the feeding of the 5000 (as you'll remember, in Mark 6) and the feeding of the 4000 (here). One site said it was merely a numerical difference. Another site said they were the same thing. Another site, still, said that the differences were in the audience that was fed: the 5000 were primarily Jewish while the 4000 were Gentile. Yet another site talks about the differences in the original Greek words used to record the events (and there are many). There are hundreds, probably thousands, of sites on the Interwebs that talk about this topic. One thing is for sure: the episodes were, to a point, quite similar.

Yet that underlying question is still there: what's the big deal?

One site (<http://www.angelfire.com/nt/theology/mk08-01.html>) said it best: "Jesus is setting the stage for what is to come. In several years, the newborn church will be faced with the question of whether Gentiles can become Christians. And these disciples will remember the principles that Jesus is teaching them." That's no small matter.

Whether we believe the accounts are one or two (or many others), the lesson is that Jesus provides for ALL of us, no matter who we are. Maybe in our world today it's incomprehensible to think of people who don't know about Jesus. Yet I in my life alone I have personally met thousands. I'm betting you have too and we already live in a world where, thousands of years ago, Jesus Himself declared all foods clean and all people to be God's children. In reality, if we know Jesus (or even know of Him) you and I have no excuse for not introducing people to Him. We don't do the conversion; we aren't the ones feeding them. It's our job to simply use our talents to facilitate the introduction and get out of the way for Jesus' Spirit to do the rest.

If you consider that, then it doesn't matter whether it's 4000, 5000 or 100,000. The number that matters is one: one Savior.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for the accounts of all the people You fed. Thank You for providing so much for all of us.*

Read Mark 8, verses 1-13.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 May 2015

*The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it." Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. Mark 8, verses 11-13*

We don't need no stinkin signs. There: I've gone and paraphrased one of the most over-used cliché comic drops ever. Did you know that the first place anyone said "we don't need no stinking badges" was in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, first in the 1920s book and then in the 1940s movie? It wasn't the exact same wording, but it was close enough for Mel Brooks to parody it 30 years later, then to etch it into our pop culture consciousness.

And that consciousness is actually echoing Jesus. The Pharisees asking Jesus for a sign is really just mocking Him; "we'll ask for your sign, Jesus, but we don't need your stinkin sign." Did you notice, yet again, how He answers them without berating or belittling them, yet His answer smacks them right back into where they started? "You're right: you don't need a sign. No sign will be given. I'm all the sign you need, pal."

What signs are you or I looking for? Do you play the same game that I play, trying to bargain with God about what you have done wrong? "If I see x, y or z, I'll know it's a message." Fool's game. Or, "God, forgive me just this once...again...for doing that." More fool's game.

The truth is that the only response we can count on from God when we do this is the same response Jesus gave to the Pharisees. "Why do you ask for a sign? I'm all the sign you need, Dave." Yet time and time again I forget that simple truth and then get all wrapped around the axle over small details that, in the grand scheme of things, are mostly unimportant. Things like signs.

Signs aren't all bad. Road signs are helpful. Advertising can be helpful, as well as both provocative and mindful. Sometimes I need a sign to tell me where to go or what to do. On the surface, you'd think that's what the Pharisees needed: some sign. Yet they were the educated teachers and preachers of God's law 'back in the day.' Jesus reminds them of this fact by questioning them. Then He tells them "stop focusing on what isn't important and turn your focus to what is."

Am I extrapolating much from just these few verses? Of course I am, but IMO it makes sense to do so. It's one of the things I like about the words of Christ. They pack a lot of punch into a little bit of message. It's only natural that He would intend for us to ponder and ruminate on His few words...so long as we don't go all Pharisee and wrap ourselves around that same axle of thinking too small. We don't need no stinkin sign to tell us that.

*Lord, help me to focus more and then only on You. It's tough, and I sometimes forget to do it, or get sidetracked. Forgive me, re-focus me, and encourage me to do better.*

Read Mark 8, verses 14-21.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 26 May 2015

*The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." Mark 8, verses 14-15.*

Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod. Two thousand years later, that yeast is still working. Don't believe me?

Did you know that, every day since the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the Boudin Baking Company in San Francisco has maintained the same starter for its sourdough bread? That's right, the exact same bread starter – the foundation of all their bread, literally millions of rolls in the last 109 years – has been maintained every day for over 39822 consecutive days. Through World War I, through the Great Depression, through World War II, through the entire Cold War, through the terms of 14 presidents, and through any number of subsequent earthquakes and aftershocks, the exact same bread starter has been used, re-stocked, and re-used the next day for every single loaf they bake. Literally speaking, that one small company has kept alive the same yeast used to bake first bread over a century ago. In reality, the starter goes back even farther than that.

And did you know that there are grandchildren of John Tyler still alive today? Just a few weeks ago, we talked about how the world's oldest living person is now 116 and retired in Georgia. She has lived in three centuries. Well, there are grandchildren of President John Tyler still walking this earth today. Not great, great, great grandchildren: grandchildren; as in "my dad's dad was President of the United States." That's no big deal, except that John Tyler took office in 1841: 174 years ago. Years later, he died as a member of the Confederate government during the Civil War. Tyler was long-lived and had a prodigious amount of children late in life, two of whom also had children very late in life (in the 1920s). Lyon and Harrison Tyler are both still very much alive. And to think John Tyler was born in the late 1700s himself; extraordinary.

What's the point? The more things change, the more they stay the same and something extraordinary – like 'the yeast of the Pharisees' coming down through centuries and generations – is still very much with us today. It's sort of like the Boudin starter and the Tyler family: something good from long ago but brandishing a double edge that could be dangerous today. That 'yeast' is pride.

Stephen King once wrote that "the mother of all sin is pride." I agree with that because every sin couples itself with pride (and idolatry, if you think about it). Each of our sins is a "me first" statement to God and the world. Pride makes us say and do some terrible things. It can also spur us on to greatness in the name of God. I believe that, when Jesus warned His disciples to beware the yeast of the Pharisees, He wasn't telling them to watch out for baked goods. Instead, He was telling them to not get too big for their britches. If you think about it, that's good advice for all of us.

And on that piece of advice, I'm going to go watch an old movie (maybe even one about John Tyler) and have some bread.

*Lord, forgive my pride. Check me hard on it, and remind me to humble myself in love before you for all time.*

Read Mark 8, verses 14-21.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 27 May 2015

*The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?" Mark 8, verses 14-21.*

"So you ride yourselves over the fields and you make all your animal deals and your wise men don't know how it feels to be thick as a brick." Those are lyrics from an old song by Jethro Tull. Now Jethro Tull's front man, Ian Anderson, would probably say the song is about art and that we each should interpret it as we would. Me, I see that, while the song isn't about the Disciples of Jesus, those last four words could definitely describe them. They really do seem to be thick as a brick.

Except that they probably weren't. They were just typical. The Disciples? They're you and me, baby!

Think about it: Jesus is saying this cryptic thing talking about yeast and the Disciples are thinking about food already. It only makes sense that they would grasp the obvious instead of the eternal. Jesus is talking about pride, talking about God's blessings of abundance, talking about how He will provide despite our sinful attitudes and the Disciples are thinking Panera Bread. Would we be any different? Doubtful.

Jesus is harsh: He really is. He's up-in-their-face-confronting-their-ignorance harsh. To those who favor the touchy-feely lovey dovey kind of Jesus, here's your splash of cold water. Face it: this is a harsh world and sometimes harsh rebuke is appropriate, especially where there are bigger matters concerned. Notice, though, that, once again, Jesus is harsh with His friends but He doesn't demean them. He doesn't belittle them or make them look small. Instead, He confronts them, He reminds them of the self-proving miracles He performed (and in which they participated), and He puts the question to them: "do you still not understand?"

Well, do you?

I'll admit it: I sometimes don't. In fact, I usually don't. In more ways than a good Christian man should have to honestly confess, I've been around the block. I'm worldly, street-wise in many things, experienced in too many venal and mortal sins, and I've been a damned dirty dog in way too many ways. Sadly, I'm thick as a brick. Cue Jethro Tull.

Jesus could have been talking to me, asking me yet again, "do you still not understand, Dave?" If you look in the mirror, I'm betting you'll have to admit He could be talking to you as well. Or Ian Anderson; any of us, in fact. So what are we going to do about that? Perhaps the better question ought to be "what did Jesus do about that?"

*Jesus, forgive my stupid self. Forgive my thickness and how I turn from Your ways and Your understanding. Teach me anew today.*

Read Mark 8, verses 22-26.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 28 May 2015

*They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village." Mark 8, verses 22-26.*

Another healing where Jesus doesn't want the guy to talk about it. He doesn't even want the man to stop and talk to anyone. Instead, He sends the man home. Gee, what do you think Al Sharpton would do in the same situation? Or Joel Osteen? How about you or me?

But we aren't Jesus and it's a dangerous fool's game to presume we would know His mind or His will. If we cling to the ways of the world, the ways of our past, we can't. Believe it or not, I think that's the message Jesus was sending to this (formerly) blind man. Give up the past and focus on me. He was telling the man to go home and get started on living a new life using the gift Jesus gave him.

The man must have been beloved in Bethsaida; he was known. Since it says Jesus 'restored' his sight, perhaps the man had once been able to see. That makes sense since he describes people as looking like trees: something that a man who had never seen either trees or people would be unable to easily do. Jesus gives the man a gift and tells him to go home, to return to the place the man knows best, and then to begin again. Do you think the man kept quiet? From these verses, we don't know.

But think about what Jesus is telling the man to do. Start at home; go back to what you know, and only there start telling people what God has done for you. Isn't that the same thing He usually tells each of us? Where it matters most, be unafraid to share what God has done in our lives. After all, it is in our homes that people know us best. The mission (for others to accept Jesus) stands a much better chance of success if those receiving the news do so from someone with whom they're familiar.

Jesus healed my life. You've read before of my marital problems from several years ago. I'd give anything to go back and not hurt people the ways I did, to un-do those terrible things. But I can't do that. What I can do is talk about how Jesus brought my wife and I back together and how He healed our lives, how He helped us to build a new life instead of going back to just live in the old one. In a way, I was once blind and Jesus opened my eyes. Then He told me to get to work honoring Him by honoring my wife, then my kids, then friends and so on. It made all the difference. These days, I'll tell anyone who wants to listen my story. If it helps to connect just one more person to the Lord, it's worthwhile and it started at home: just like the blind man.

*Lord, thank You for healing me.*

Read Mark 8, verses 27-30.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 May 2015

*Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. Mark 8, verses 23-30.*

Jesus spent a lot of His time testing His disciples. Brace yourselves because I'm going to say it: part of me thinks that's annoying. Yes, it's annoying and, yes, I think it's ok and not even sinful to say that I feel annoyed by something the Son of God said. Annoyance is an emotion that tells us there is something we don't like; more often, it's something we don't want to accept or acknowledge. I would feel more than a little annoyed if someone I loved kept testing me; I might, in fact, start to question that love. It would hurt, like I wasn't trusted.

But it's not for lack of trust that God tested these 12 men. Just yesterday I was reading about Abraham and Issac, how God (that same Jesus) tested Abraham by asking him to slit his son's throat. Would you or I be as trusting as Abraham was? In an era where we are inculcated at all levels to trust our feelings, I think not. Yet we also know that we live in a world that constantly tests us in so many ways. Do you set up project controls to gauge the performance of others? Do you check and re-check your calculations when you make a budget or file your taxes? Do you give kids extra responsibility to see how they handle it? You know that not all these tests are done out of insecurity or doubt. More often, we do them in love.

Perhaps, then, Jesus posed this test to the Disciples out of love as well. Instead of an annoyance, perhaps He said it to get them to admit to themselves things they had been considering but maybe had not coalesced into a single concept. I think He did it to help them see the obvious truth of who He was proving Himself to be...and then to prepare them for the hard days ahead when they finally understood what that really meant.

Perhaps, too, you need to ask yourself the question Jesus asked Peter: "Who do you say I am?" When you get fired from your job; when you call your wife early in the morning and she already seems angry at you for reasons you don't know; when you get an unexpected windfall; when you are promoted; when your parents die, who do you say Jesus is? Is He the loving Lord, Messiah, friend, Trinity and Savior? Is He real or a fable? Is Jesus just another guy who said and did nice, maybe even great, things but still couldn't get you out of whatever trouble or success is plaguing you? Who do you really, really believe Jesus is?

That's the toughest test we will ever take, and we take it daily. Even when we doubt, those doubts are a test; that kind are the worst of all. Yet we have to remember that Jesus does it out of love, to build us up and constantly prepare us as well, in this case for the eternity up ahead. That matters most of all.

*Lord, in times of test, I cling to You.*

Read Mark 8, verses 31-33.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 June 2015

*He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Mark 8, verses 31-33.*

I spent 12 years in the Air Force; eleven on active duty and one in the Reserves. Much of who I am, the way I act, and the way I think was formed during those years including the fact that I learned how we should always speak plainly. Say what we mean; don't embellish and don't waste words; regularly read this column and you see how I struggle with that last one. My last job in the Air Force was at a place where we wrote custom software. One of our guiding principles – and I think it's one big reason why we were successful – is that our leadership always stressed how we should speak plainly and take responsibility. If you operate in a politically charged atmosphere, you quickly learn that most politics revolve around avoiding blame, and that's an unhealthy attitude if you're writing beta software for operational users. When things break or fail – and they always do – the best way to solve the problem is to get to the root of it, pony up if you or your actions broke it, and then offer what you can to implement a solution.

That's good advice which has served me well in everything I've ever done since. More than this, it's Godly advice because it's one of the things Jesus was stressing to Peter when He rebuked him in verse 33. Shirking responsibility, self-aggrandizing, or even being lazy are attributes of the enemy, not of God. We may think Peter meant well here but he really didn't. Strip away our feelings about 'good intentions' and we can see that Peter was speaking selfishly. He was probably speaking for the rest of the group, too, but it was obliquely selfish. Jesus quickly brought his friend to task for this.

Another thing I learned was to accept criticism, even when it hurt. One time, I was eligible for a quarterly award. Every quarter, military units recognize star performers. When I was a young airman, I very much wanted to win one. Most of my friends had, several of them several times in fact. It seemed unfair to me that a stellar guy like me wasn't being recognized, so I went to our NCO in charge. I admired this man, and it stung when he quickly, caringly reminded me that I hadn't done anything stellar or really noteworthy. Sure, in my own mind I should have been Airman of the Quarter many times over but, in fact, the only person who thought my performance was exemplary was me. It was a good perspective to learn, both that I should hold myself to a high standard yet also to not 'get the big head.' Re-read the verses today and I think you see that this is also something Jesus is inferring to Peter. 'Get behind me Satan. You aren't as big a deal as you think you are.' Good advice in anything.

*Jesus, thank You for Your rebukes and Your loving correction. Forgive and re-build me.*

Read Mark 8, verses 34-38.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 June 2015

*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Mark 8, verse 34.*

I hate guilt trips so let's not take one, ok? But let's also keep it real and acknowledge a few things. Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner doesn't have it as tough as taking up his cross and following Jesus to death. I don't have it as tough as taking up my cross and following Jesus to death (and neither do you). The orphan child living in a broken crack house with criminal addicts for parents who has witnessed murder and overdosing doesn't have it as tough as taking up his cross and following Jesus to death. You get the picture.

Does that seem harsh? I mean, some folks have it bad, really bad. There are folks within earshot of where I'm sitting here in Bloomington, Minnesota who are living much tougher lives than I'll ever know. Despair, suicide, unending physical abuse, mental torture: there are friends and family in our midst, in our circles, who are going through things like these through no fault of their own. Those are terrible, awful things that I've never had to endure and it's terrible and awful that they have to endure it. And it isn't as hard as what Jesus is saying, what He is commanding us to do. You may not like hearing that (reading it actually) but it's still the truth.

Jesus promises us more torture, more pain, more suffering, more unending unquestioned agony than anything we've ever known as just the first steps on a faith journey with Him. Verse 34 guarantees that. Contemplate that phrase "take up their cross." It is a promise of that torture, pain and suffering in pursuit of Jesus and His ideal. It's also a command for us to put to death all the things in this world that hold us back from pursuing Him. Things like guilt, our past, sexual temptations, anger, lust, greed, ungodly work, selfishness: Jesus is telling us to put them to death on that cross, then follow Him. Give them up, execute them, then turn in a radically different direction.

Keep in mind that He said these things just after Peter had selfishly insisted that Jesus was lying to him about being harassed and murdered by the Jewish priests in the time (that was then) to come. Jesus sharply rebuked His best friend about this, then speaks the words in this verse to the Disciples and others around them. In order to stand in the presence of God with Jesus by their side, these people would have to be willing to endure the most painful, shameful agony known to man and do so willingly.

Can you imagine that? What are you prepared to do about what He's already done for us?

I'm not making light of the terrible plight some of our fellow men endure in this world. Christians savagely beheaded by ISIS, victims tortured by kidnappers, anyone being raped or mutilated, Holocaust survivors, and a hundred other examples: these are terrible things. As we contemplate the touchy-feely Jesus of contemporary Christian worship and the saccharin faith of contemporary Christian music, let's keep it real. Remember that following Jesus might be the hardest thing we could ever imagine doing. The payoff is so worthwhile but make no mistake about the path to get to that payoff.

*Lord Jesus, I need Your help to carry my cross. Encourage me to follow only You.*

Read Mark 8, verses 34-38.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 June 2015

*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Mark 8, verse 34.*

After writing about how terrible and hard it is to take up our cross for Jesus, I don't want to let another point slip by unobserved. As we talked about yesterday, Jesus said something that is, by our standards, harsh. It's tough for us to get past that. And it's almost like He's being contradictory, even schizophrenic, since Jesus is the same man who said "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." When we look at Jesus' tough words about taking up our crosses through the prism of our 'modern' emotions, they are pretty bitter pills to swallow.

Here's what I think of emotion: don't let it steal your joy. Jesus didn't create us to focus us on emotion or on agony. Instead, He allows the agony so that it leads to joy. It's for joy that we take up that cross: the joy of satisfaction in living for something (and Someone) better than ourselves. It's for eternal joy that Jesus took up His cross; to share in this is why He exhorts us to take up our own. Rather than getting wrapped around the axle and not getting past the torture of crucifixion, accept the joy of what Jesus is saying. He calls the crowd and they draw to Him; they draw to Him because they know He has a reputation for love and miracles. When they draw to Him, Jesus levels with them telling them that His message is radical, that it will cost them dearly to follow Him. He's being honest with them. In a few verses we also find that He talks about why His cross and ours are so important. Boil them down and the reason is joy.

Think about it. Can you be happy, know real joy, while you hold onto that grudge, that anger, that chip on your shoulder? Is it possible to know joy without the giving and receiving of forgiveness? Answering 'yes' to either of those questions would not be honest. When our emotions are all in upheaval, we don't know joy. Those sins and those emotions must be submitted to God in Jesus via the cross. The reason for the cross was to slay the sin of the world, remolding those who believe in Him to be the people of joy we were meant to be. On the road to eternity, the way to joy travels through the cross.

There's a song on Christian radio that says "we were made to thrive" (Casting Crowns). Joy unspeakable, faith unshakeable, love unstoppable, anything is possible; more words from the same song. They could easily be talking about the joy of dying in this life for Jesus. We were indeed made to thrive. We were indeed made for joy, for the joy of kneeling forgiven before our God and Savior King Jesus, then standing beside Him forever as both his worshipper, brother and friend. To get to that point, we must take up the joy of the suffering that is the cross. It refines us, puts to death our old Adam, and carries us forward into becoming the people in joy who Jesus wants us to become.

*Lord, bless You to bless me with Your joy. Thank You for Your cross, and for the joyful burden of mine.*

Read Mark 8, verses 34-38.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 5 June 2015

*For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. Mark 8, verse 35.*

In my opinion, if you haven't memorized many verses from the Bible, this one would be a good one to memorize. It's the essence of Christianity. It's the mission of the cross. It's the hope of all humanity, even unbelievers. And it's the best motivational speech ever given.

Tell me: have you ever completely lost yourself in something? Before I joined the Air Force, my dad said to me "it's a good thing to lose yourself in something bigger than yourself." I didn't fully understand what he meant, but now I do and it's a very Godly thing. The military has a mission, and every mission is made up of other sub-missions. As a service member, you immerse yourself in the mission; the mission is priority number one, more important than your family, friends, or even your life. The mission is what you do, who you are, your purpose and reason for being. When you are in the military, the flag represents the country you serve, and you serve the country by doing your mission. And when you immerse yourself in the mission, realizing you are serving the country and are covered by that grand old flag, you find your purpose. Great satisfaction and pride flow down like water.

Jesus is the ultimate mission. Serving Him means serving the kingdom, and we serve the kingdom by doing what we do – anything we do – without expectation of reward or recognition. Jesus recognizes us through immense grace every day, and for our lifelong devotion to Him, He promises the reward of an eternity in communion with Him as fully God and fully man all at once. That's all in addition to the joy of serving Him here and now. Can you imagine anything more satisfying than losing yourself in service to God, the creator and true love of the universe, by living for whatever He would have you do? It's the reason why martyrs die for Him and die satisfied.

Our mission, then, becomes using our talents and our lives in the service of the mission that is the cross. If we give all to Jesus, we will lose it. Now or later, eventually we will all die yet that death becomes merely a passageway to that eternity instead of an ending to all things. If you manage a project team, do so to the best of your abilities and do so in Godly ways and you're doing your part in the mission. If you raise children, raise them in Godly ways and give them your best in love and you're doing your part in the mission. If you preach to crowds, fix car engines, code software, teach students, clean plumbing, read the newspaper, act on TV or ride a tractor, whatever we do, when we do it in service to Jesus we become willing to lose our lives for Him. And in losing our lives for Him, we save our eternal lives forever.

Like I said, commit that to memory. Commit it to your heart, then commit, don't sacrifice, to the mission of the Man from Galilee.

*Lord Jesus I commit myself and all I am to You and Your mission of grace.*

Read Mark 8, verses 34-38.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 June 2015

*For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? Mark 8, verses 35-37.*

We last talked about committing to Jesus' mission, about doing our best in whatever it is He has us doing. Now Jesus makes a logical argument as to why we should do this.

Last Saturday, my wife and I went to see the Rolling Stones in concert. It had been years since I had been to a rock concert, and she and I had never gone to one together before; no, I don't count those four times at Jimmy Buffett since I'm not really sure what kind of music Jimmy fits into. Anyway, you know the Rolling Stones. Together, the four core members of the band are nearly 300 years old, but let me tell you: they can still punch it out. Mick Jagger moves better at 71 than I moved at 31 and they had 70,000 people really jamming.

"Sympathy for the Devil:" you know the song. It's a cynical but catchy ballad where Satan explains himself to the human race before threatening us with destruction. "Hoo hoo...hoo hoo...hoo hoo...hoo hoo. Pleased to meet you. Hope you guess my name;" I bet you're humming the song right now. When this number came around, the band played up the big-screen visuals of fire, flames, and smoke, and they all came out dressed in red. How ironic is it that one of the Stones' biggest hits is about feeling sorry for Satan.

Jesus is arguing against sympathy for the devil here, and He's arguing, instead, about sympathy for the believer. He's talking about how following Him will cost the follower everything, but that it will be worthwhile. It will be worthwhile both now and in the afterlife. Don't believe me? Ever hear of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? He was a German priest who voluntarily flew back to his home in Nazi Germany just before the start of World War II to minister to Christians who were being oppressed by Hitler. He knew the score but stood up to the Nazis anyway. A week before VE Day, Hitler had him executed. I fully expect to meet Mr. Bonhoeffer in heaven one day and ask him several hundred questions.

I can expect that – and so can you and the Rolling Stones – because Jesus promises that He will save the most precious part of us to live forever. The soul God gave each of us, the essence of man and the spark of all life in us, is what Jesus will preserve so we can live on with Him. One day, at the end of all things, He will even reunite us with our remade bodies in a miracle that neither you, me, Pastor Bonhoeffer, Keith Richards, nor Lucifer himself can fully understand nor really comprehend. But Jesus promises it anyway. Along the way, He promises a tough life of satisfaction.

...which the Stones belted out as their encore finale Saturday night. They kept proclaiming "I can't get no satisfaction." Maybe, if they have real sympathy for the devil, there's a reason why.

*Lord, thank You for preserving my soul, for making it possible for me to live with You forever. And God bless rock & roll.*

Read Mark 8, verses 34-38.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 11 June 2015

*If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. Mark 8, verse 38.*

I like old things; antiques, old pictures, old houses and log cabins, traditions; do you like these too? Now, I live in a traditional part of North Texas. Out here in the Paris boondocks, tradition still rules. The old ways still work; the old things still matter. Yet I've spent most of my time in Texas living north of Dallas, where 'new' is the thing and consumption is fashionable. I loved my life and friends in Collin County, but also couldn't wait to leave, couldn't wait to live in a place where we could get back to the basics. Now in a new old farmhouse, my office is upstairs, where I work on an old-fashioned roll-top desk in a room filled with 100 year old maple bedroom furniture, which belonged to my great-grandparents. When my mom died last year, I inherited many of her antiques, and I'm thrilled to own them now. I'll enjoy them for a span of years before handing them off to someone else. The more I look at some of these old possessions, the prouder I am to possess them if only for awhile. I'm not ashamed of the old ways for, indeed, the 'new and modern' ways of today are simply a fresh veneer on the antique ways of old.

Jesus is old fashioned. It's the tragedy of the ages how many of us turn our backs on Jesus, ashamed that we think He is outdated, uncool, or that He's judgmental, that He wants too much from us. Isn't it the other way around, that we want too much from Him? We want Him to condone our sins and approve of our broken attitudes; we want unholy compromise. Instead, He circles around us and offers us a way out from the path of destruction we choose. Yet He makes this promise: if you're ashamed of me all your life, I'll be ashamed of you when it's all over. That, too, is an antique truth but it's one we had better heed if we want to live.

I'll say it again: Jesus is old fashioned. And yet He isn't either. He is new every day, with new mercies and fresh blessings every minute of each day. The more we know Him, the more we find that He's always a breath of fresh air, and yet He is older than anything else we know. The teaching, the love, the justice, the perfection He gives are older than Eden, and they have been offered to mankind since Adam first opened his eyes. The eternal salvation and terrestrial peace of heart that Jesus gives are also as old as Eden for they were promised from the very minute Jesus confronted Adam and Eve concerning their sins. Yet it is this ancient truth – that Jesus is our only hope and path to heaven – that is freshly offered to new people every day. It's antique but brand new.

Come see me in the country some time. We can sit on the front porch with a glass of tea (or a glass of wine) and talk about the antiques in our lives...and the old-time faith that is new and inviting every day.

*Lord, thank You for Your old fashioned ways. I'm not ashamed of You or to be Yours.*

Read Mark 9, verses 1-13.



## **Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 June 2015**

*And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." Mark 9, verse 1.*

You and me: we should be dead by now. You know it as well as I do that, to paraphrase the apostle, we face death all day long. Every day that we make it to work safely is a miracle. Ditto waking up, digesting food, staying healthy from disease, nurturing a beating heart, and sleeping through the night. Some might say those are simply the outcomes of impossible to predict random acts of chance and interaction. I say they're mini miracles that testify to the existence of God in the very details of our lives.

So how astounding is it that God Himself would say that some of those to whom He was speaking would soon see an astounding miracle promised for centuries. That isn't some miniature detail anyone would overlook. It was a big deal, yet Jesus threw it down and, in context of what came next, it was prophetic.

Here's another throw-down: it'll happen to you today as well.

Huh? First some of that context. Keep in mind where Jesus was. He has just fed four thousand men, healed a blind man, (yet again) confronted the Pharisees, upbraided His friends, predicted His own death, and told people to get on His level regarding what they should expect from their faith in Him. Now He's saying that not only will people who believe in Him die but that, before they do, they will see God coming in power. As we will see, shortly after this comes the Transfiguration and that display of power Jesus promised.

In my opinion, He also promised a different kind of power to us every day.

Are you thinking about Thor and his hammer? Or Zeus smiting puny men with thunderbolts from Olympus? Sauron marching to crush Middle Earth with a million ugly orcs? Or perhaps a vengeful Allah vanquishing all enemies of Islam with his priestly army of fanatics? These are the images of god-like beings wielding power that come to mind when we humans are left to our own devices. We think of power as the omnipotent use of force, of the physical being overtaken by the meta-physical, of forces beyond our control or understanding manipulating our lives from a position of strength.

Except that's not how Jesus worked. Or works now. See, He promised the Disciples that He would display His power, and a few days hence He did. Yet He also promises us the same thing every day. I believe He delivers on that promise, and I see it in the majesty of sunsets, in the feel of my grandson hugging me around my neck. I feel it in my beating heart, in the love of my family as we sit at the kitchen table, as I work in my garden where God gives me vocation and food. I see it at work in how He comforts distraught friends, how He turns around destruction to expand His kingdom of goodness, and how He works quietly through we sinful humans by our spreading word about Him. Do you know Jesus? Then you know Him in power and miracles.

I think it's a miracle that we're still alive to talk about this, given all the ways the world could kill us every day. Turn to Jesus and you see it really is.

*Lord, thank You for Your miracles and power in my life.*



Read Mark 9, verses 1-13.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 June 2015

*After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Mark 9, verses 2-9.*

Have you ever read about the Transfiguration? The first part of it is listed above. Read it again and then consider what you think about it. Then consider how very, very much in it we can unpack.

There are friends. Jesus was close friends with all twelve of His disciples, yet it's safe to say that Peter, James and John were His besties. When He walks up the mountain, Jesus doesn't take just one witness but those three besties so that their testimony would be considered reliable when they were finally allowed to tell about it. Think about that. Was it that He didn't trust the others? Doubtful. More likely, I think it was because He cared about them. Perhaps they weren't emotionally ready to carry this knowledge of the amazing thing that happened. These three were the leaders.

Speaking of leaders, there are Moses and Elijah. Moses had died many hundreds of years before, and Elijah had not died but had been taken while alive also centuries before. Yet there they were with Jesus, and they were instantly recognizable to Jesus' friends. These were great figures in Hebrew history, as pivotal as George Washington and the other Founding Fathers are to Americans today...and maybe just as remote, as much for their ancient age as for the almost mythological things they did. Yet, again, there they were in person: alive and well.

Naturally, the three Apostles were terrified. I would be too, both in awe of what I was seeing and in the stark proof that it all just got very real. Heaven opened up a little and the three mortal men got to see a glimpse of Jesus in His heavenly attire. It was a vision of what would come, as well as a realization that the God-man really was exactly who He said He was. What's more, it was all clearly supernatural; more than just out of the ordinary. That might seem a little scary.

Finally, God the Father speaks. There are many instances in the Bible of God speaking to men and we attribute them to God as triune, or even as Jesus in a pre-incarnate form. Yet there are actually very few of the Father Himself speaking in His own person to men. Here is one; Jesus' baptism is another. He clearly identifies Jesus as His beloved Son and those who were there to hear it – Peter, James, John, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus Himself – all heard it.

That's a lot to unpack in just a few verses.

*Jesus, thank You for Your transfiguration.*

Read Mark 9, verses 1-13.

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Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 June 2015

Posted by [aspiringwriterdt](#) June 17, 2015 Posted in [Uncategorized](#) Tags: [Byrds](#), [David Crosby](#), [Doobie Brothers](#), [Jesus](#), [miracles](#), [pot](#), [time](#), [transfiguration](#)

*After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Mark 9, verses 2-4.*

Jesus gives us just the right amount of time. Or, as the Doobie Brothers (or the Byrds) might have said it, "Jesus is just alright with me." He's alright because He made it alright at just the right time with just the right amount of time.

Riddle me this, Batman reader: was six days enough time for Jesus to prepare His close friends for what they would see? Truth be told, we don't know if He prepared them in any way. We don't know if He said or did anything that said to them "get ready for something you've never seen before that will challenge everything you believe about Me." In fact, other than as a frame of reference, we don't know why verse 2 even says "after six days." Perhaps it's a moot point.

Or perhaps not.

You see, it's just the right amount of time for them to begin to reset their minds from the verbal bombs Jesus had dropped on them about taking up their crosses and losing their lives for Him. We're human; we need to unpack and process. What had happened before was an emotional, physical stress, so Jesus gave His friends enough time to process it, and then (like Emeril Lagasse), He kicked it up a notch.

So Jesus takes them up on this mountain and rocks their world; the Doobie Brothers would have played along in good rock and roll harmony; David Crosby would have just smoked pot. Jesus did it for them (and us), you know. The whole transfiguration wasn't for Himself, and it wasn't for Moses or Elijah. They had already seen Jesus in His heavenly splendor. No, it was for the disciples to see and draw faith...then for each of us to do so as well.

And that continues to happen at just the right time. Every now and then I need a little gift of encouragement; every now and then I would love to see a little hint of Jesus' splendor. But you know my feelings about miracles: they happen every day. Yes, I really would love to see Jesus face to face and just fall to my knees in reverence, but I honestly believe Jesus also shows us sides of His personality every single day through everything around us. Rainbows in the sky (themselves reminders of God's covenant), newborn babies, the smile on the face of a friend, a few minutes of quiet solace in a hectic day, blades of grass and the beauty of mountains: the list could go on and on of all the ways Jesus pulls back the curtain right in front of us to give us a glimpse at just the right time of who and what He really is. More and more, I've come to believe that appreciating beauty is the lens through which we view the personality and splendor of God. That happens at just the right time and usually just when we need to see it the most.

Amazing. Just alright with me, in fact, no matter who sings the song.

*Jesus, thank You for encouraging me with Your beauty at just the right time every day.*

Read Mark 9, verses 1-13.

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Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 June 2015

Posted by [aspiringwriterdt](#) June 22, 2015 Posted in [Uncategorized](#) Tags: [afraid](#), [fear](#), [humanity](#), [Jesus](#), [terror](#)

*Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.). Mark 9, verses-5-6.*

Let's talk about terror again, about feeling terrified. And let's do so without getting all judgy or preachy about it. You and I can say, from the vantage point of hindsight and so-called 'modern' thinking, how small the disciples were; how they should have been elated instead of scared to see what they were seeing in Jesus' transfiguration. Of course we would be wrong. We'd be wrong because we're terrified all the time and in some ways that may not be a bad thing.

Here is a partial list of things that I, as a 48 year old man, still give me pause and fear: spiders, being alone in the dark, losing my family, burning to death. Wake me out of a sound sleep at 3 AM with loud sounds and you'll have me completely terrified in an instant. This kind of terror isn't what one would feel if confronted by ISIS, or the kind that a politician would feel when he realizes the press is no longer interested in him. Instead, it's simply feeling startled, intimidated by the sudden ferocity of having one's senses assaulted by matters out of your control.

Is this irrational? Absolutely it is, and I freely embrace that; some would say I embrace irrationality too freely anyway. No matter, I think it was the sheer irrationality of the transfiguration that had Peter, James and John terrified when they saw what was happening before them. I can't blame them. Their senses would have been overloaded. Their intellects would have been challenged by past and present, eternal and earthly, all crashing together in an observation of what God's world really looks like when time and the ephemeral no longer matter. They must have quickly realized that this man they knew as friend and teacher really was the all-powerful God of all the earth. Can you imagine how that would have made them feel?

And yet, these were the same all too human men who would return to humanity in all too human ways. When it ended, they would return to their friends, sworn to secrecy until the time was appointed to tell others. John would see Jesus die and rise, and provider for Jesus' mother for the rest of her life. Peter would deny he even knew Jesus before knowing the worst of despair and then the heights of forgiven elation. James would one day die a martyr's death.

Thus, maybe it's unfair if we look down on the three apostles for feeling terrified and frightened to see Jesus as He really was. If Jesus suddenly appeared to me, I doubt I would react any different than the Apostles did if, indeed, I reacted so well as they.

*Lord, forgive me my fears, strengthen my faith, and thank You for any way in which You reveal Yourself.*

Read Mark 9, verses 1-13.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 June 2015

*Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Mark 9, verse 7*

Hello again, my friend. I took last week off to spend time with my family at a beach house in south Texas. During that time, the Supreme Court mandated that same sex marriage was legal under the Constitution. No, I'm not going to discuss that issue here, and no I'm not going to expound on my views concerning it. I'll simply ask this question: would we listen if God was talking to us about His Son?

Just tonight, I was reading online about famous atheists like Brangelina, Jodie Foster, Seth McFarlane, Kevin Bacon, Julianne Moore, Morgan Freeman and others. They supposedly wouldn't listen to God because they don't believe He exists; this from their own words. I wonder if they'll listen when He talks with them once their days here on this Earth are done. By that time it'll be too late.

Does that mean we should listen to God in part out of fear about what would happen if we didn't? In part, yes. Do you obey traffic laws in fear of getting caught if you don't, or do you do so sometimes because it's just the right thing to do? I'm betting your answer is "a little bit of both," and that seems about right. I'd say it even seems Godly because God says 'trust me' and that's hard to do when we can't even see the One who's asking us to trust Him. It's natural to feel some hesitation about believing without seeing, but we do it every day.

How comforting (and shocking) it must have felt, then, for Peter, James and John to hear God the Father Himself proclaiming "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" We've talked about how they must have felt fear and trepidation at the transfiguration. But how must it have felt to have God the Father actively talking to them? I'm betting it was moving, and intimidating, and maybe even humbling. Do you think they listened? Their actions later bore it out.

So would we listen if God was talking with us about His Son? Atheists pose this question over and over, and I've always wondered where they go for comfort when terrible things happen to them. Gay activists have been posing it all weekend, many of them throwing the faith of believers right back in our faces (to be honest, that kind of a gut check isn't all bad).

Perhaps in reading today's verse we can find that God is ALWAYS talking to us about His Son. He does it in these words. He does it in civil debate over contentious issues, imploring us in silence to always come to Him first for any and all answers. He does it in the magnificence of nature, in the random safety of a million interactions in the city, in the miracles of living, and in every wave that washes up on the beach. He may even be speaking to us through this debate on how to follow Him through the tangled mess we've made of marriage. God the Father may not speak to us in His own voice to our ears, but He does speak to us directly to our hearts through His Word and these verses.

*Lord, I hear Your voice even when I don't always listen. Thank You for Your voice and Your patience with me.*

Read Mark 9, verses 1-13.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 July 2015

*They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant. Mark 9, verse 10.*

We've debated this same thing since the day the three Apostles first did so. It's one of the fundamental justifications that folks who struggle with faith give for why they do struggle. Do we really, truly believe that Jesus rose from death?

Join the club if you've ever doubted that anyone could do this. We're in good company. Jesus' Apostles debated it as well as evidenced by verse 10. When Jesus kept referring to His rising from the dead, they simply didn't know how to take it. As we've discussed in the past, these were men who were familiar with the stories of Judaism. Perhaps they had even had minimal training in the synagogues, but it's doubtful they were highly educated. Scholars they weren't but they still knew the stories of the Patriarchs, Moses, Elijah, and all the miracles God had performed for Israel over the millennia. And yet they didn't know quite what to do with this new information.

I'll admit: sometimes I don't know what to do with it either. See, I fully believe in Jesus. I believe everything He said, everything He did, everything He said He would do. The miracles? I believe they happened. The virgin birth? I believe it happened. The crucifixion and the resurrection? Yes, I believe they actually happened. Still, I'm sometimes stuck in the same moment as Peter, James and John, wondering what Jesus meant when He said He had to die and rise from that death. Why was it necessary? I know the ecclesiastical book answer but isn't there something more? Why a death for a life, or a death for all lives? It's the question of the ages.

Right now it's a good time to remind myself that “it's not about me.” Jesus was predicting these things so that all of us, not just me, could have a permanent, eternal relationship with Him. That's all I need to know. Even though we struggle with how He would do this, He did it for us anyway. Yet each of us needs to eventually decide one way or another: do we truly believe? If you're like me, even after you decide in the affirmative (something I did so long ago that I don't even really remember when it happened) you still sometimes find yourself doubting that anyone could actually do what Jesus said He could, would, and then did.

When those doubts come, I take comfort from known that we are indeed in that good company. Even the Apostles didn't always understand Jesus and they walked, talked, ate, and lived with Him in person for years. Not only, but (later Apostle) Paul later reminded believers that they needed to be renewed in their faith, by God, every day; see Ephesians 4:23. Doubt is human; questioning is natural. The illogical in the face of the illogical is still illogical and sends us into questioning. Yet we should always remember that faith is the beginning of reason when we realize that Jesus is the ultimate source of all truth and the truth behind every answer. Even when we doubt His truth or His miracles (like the resurrection) He is always present to renew us through faith in Him and give us the faith knowledge to press onward.

*Lord Jesus, forgive my doubts, and let me find all answers in You.*

Read Mark 9, verses 1-13.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 July 2015...in memorium for a friend

*They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant. Mark 9, verse 10.*

Before moving on from these verses about the Transfiguration, I want to say a few words about a friend who just passed away. That's a funny phrase, "passed away." It seems we say it to soften the blow of death in our lives, as if our loved one has just joined with nature in some ephemeral process that fades us into the winds. That's not what happens at all, even for those who put their faith in Mother Gaia. No, we die. There's a reason for it and lets not go into that right now; suffice it to say that death happens to all of us by God's comman. I won't sugar coat it or blow smoke at you, and I won't try to comfort those who are hurting now because death hurts like hell when someone you love is the dying one.

And for folks like my friend Mark, it happened yesterday. The thing is that it's a good thing. For him, for Heaven, even for those he loved yet left behind.

My friend Mark died after a long and heroic battle against cancer. We were friends from church and friends online; we even attended a few social gatherings over the last nine years. You couldn't say we were close or best friends, but we were good friends all the same. When my family first joined our church, Mark and his wife welcomed us and were always open smiling people. I grew to appreciate his talent in music (he was a twenty-first century hippie), and the fact that he sang with the praise band. Later, I grew to admire the sheer guts he displayed in fighting that damned disease as long as he could. That's a special kind of courage there.

He and I also debated extensively over the last six years on all kinds of political, social and ecclesiastical matters. He had a solid conscience, a discerning mind, and a bohemian outlook: all things I sometimes find in short supply when I question the man in the mirror. I wouldn't be surprised if my friend had told you that he thought my political beliefs were bat-guano-crazy; I think some of his were. I also know that those things don't really matter much because the man I called my friend was one of the most solid, faithful, dependable and good men you'd ever want to know. If you could choose a team of that kind of person, you'd have chosen Mark for your side. Whenever we would debate something, if Mark responded, I always had to tell myself "maybe he has a point" because, more often than not, he did.

He, too, wrote a great blog and spent his last few entries talking about leaving things for the folks you love. About things that really matter. His muse was the lady at his side, and she inspired him to say things from the heart, things that mean more than just words.

Thus, Heaven is a brighter place today for the presence of such a good man there. Mark's in Heaven because He believed in the life, death, and life of Jesus Christ. The music, the bohemian outlook, the keen mind, the faith and family: all those are made complete for him today because he's there, face to face, with the Lord as you read this. It really happened; he made it all the way. He did it because his Lord made it possible for Mark to say "I believe" and then encouraged that faith to grow all the way to the end. That's a great testament to life.

And it's one my friend left for his family and friends temporarily exiled here on the Third Rock. Even in exile there is hope; even for the exiles there can be faith. That faith matters in a tough world with things like senseless wars, senseless debates over senseless politics, senseless killer diseases, and senseless sin in all of us. Music is angel-speak to help us get past the rough edges of that senselessness, and that's a language my friend understood well. Now he sings it in heaven, with the angels, for Jesus. Some day we'll see him again and join in the chorus. I think he'd like that.

Mark Gertenbach is survived by his wife, three children, and hundreds of friends and extended family in Texas, the Midwest and elsewhere. Go rest high on the mountain, good friend.

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 July 2015

*And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him." Mark 9, verses 11-13.*

Are we in the end times?

Last week, a big story in the media was the 'reappearance of the Star of Bethlehem.' If you missed it, the planets Venus and Jupiter converged after sunset on June 30 to appear as a bright, brilliant star for the first time in 2000 years. Kind of blows your mind to think that, in our lifetime, something just occurred identical to an event that was probably seen, through human eyes, by Jesus during His time on Earth. Now, I won't go into debating whether or not this was the Star of Bethlehem. As astronomical events go, if this one brings you closer to the real Jesus, that's good. Hopefully it does the same for many people.

I mention the event, however, to pose the question "are we in the end times?" One sign of the end is the return of Elijah to set things straight before the coming of the Messiah. Scripture tells of wars and rumors of wars, of governments acting in ways they haven't before, and of signs in the heavens. If the Bible is our measure, someone could credibly say that we must be near the end of history.

The Apostles believed they were witnessing the end of the world. Jesus' own words seemed to confirm it. As He, Peter, James and John were descending from the mountain of the Transfiguration, they asked Jesus about a fine point of Jewish doctrine, namely that Elijah would return to herald the Messiah. The three apostles knew they had just seen Elijah in person, so they must have been wondering what it all meant. Was the end about to happen?

Instead of confirming (or denying) the Apostle's suspicions, He tells them "All those things you're looking for? Don't sweat them. Eyes on me, guys." Jesus is telling His closest friends that the signs have already come and gone and we didn't even notice them. The more important thing to notice is Jesus Himself. Keep your eyes on Jesus and watch where He is leading you in life.

The same is true for us. Jesus tells us in other verses to be aware of the things going on around us, to be advised of the signs in the world and the signs in our times in order that we should be ready for His imminent return. But my take on today's verses is that the signs of the times aren't as important as the signs in our lives that point us back to Jesus. Sure, it would be helpful to know if the end was happening soon, but it's a better use of time to see how I could help my neighbor in need, or how I could be Christ for someone who doesn't know Him. I already know my future, and I already know how history ends. What time we have left here should be used to help point people to Jesus so that, when He comes, more of us will go home with Him. We don't need a star to point towards that.

*Lord, I'm ready for You to return now.*

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 7 July 2015

*When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. Mark 9, verses 14-15.*

The crowd in these verses could be a crowd in America today. Media fireflies swarm around Candidate A because they've anointed Candidate A as the Next Big Thing...until something bigger comes along. In high school, the in-crowd picks on the new kid until a newer kid comes along...and then he isn't what they expect. At work, you're swarmed by people who just want someone to help them get their work done, someone with a little bit of knowledge and a little bit of leadership initiative. Crowds are crowds no matter where you find them in time.

To me, the reaction of the law-teachers is natural. The teachers of the law were the Judean power structure (and they knew it). If anyone came along, they were a potential threat to that structure. Of course the teachers of the law would question, pivot on, and marginalize anyone whose words or actions could cause ripples in the carefully constructed pond. You can almost picture how the news traveled. "Have you heard? Some of those Galileans who follow that Jesus are here in town." "Really? Go find out what they want. Take X and Y with you." And then it would start.

But that crowd? They're like any crowd. They want to be fed, want to be led, want someone, something who is truly genuine. When they saw Jesus' followers, they swarmed them because they saw that 'genuineness.' When they saw the teachers of the law cornering Jesus' disciples, they got even more interested. And when they saw Jesus Himself, they dropped everything they were doing and ran.

Don't gloss over that phrase "they were overwhelmed with wonder." Politicians, former senators, and political straphangers don't impress me. Ditto the beautiful people from the red carpet. I've met enough famous people to discover they use the bathroom the same as the rest of us; the same as Jesus did, in fact. Yet this crowd in Judea saw something unusual in Jesus. They had heard the rumors about Him; they had seen the miracles He performed. Many of them had likely heard His teaching, which was spoken in kindly authority, words of love with a velvety steel core. Forgive, love, be patient, be ready, be strong, love your enemy, love your neighbor, love God: these weren't the rote-lessons that the law-teachers taught. No, the people were overwhelmed with wonder because Jesus was wonderful.

So, I say it again: this could be a crowd in America today. This could be us at the State Fair, or at your local mall. Despite how things are tough all over, despite how the mores of society seem to be devolving quickly, despite the worry, the unemployment, the endless cycle of crises both real and manufactured, we still long for something real, something genuine, something kind but with loving authority. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we still very much long for Jesus.

*Lord Jesus, I long for You. I want to be where You are, like You are, live my life like You ask me to.*

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 July 2015

*What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." Mark 9, verses 16-19.*

This one is tough for me to understand. On first read (even after dozens of readings, in fact), it's hard for me to shake the idea that Jesus is just being harsh. He's being harsh with the stranger from the crowd, and He's being harsh with His disciples. In reality, Jesus is telling it like it is. Read more about Him and you find He always does that. My struggle with the verses comes from the lenses through which I view them.

Some context please. Jesus walks up and a crowd rushes him. In the crowd, the teachers – the folks who are supposed to be translating God's love for God's chosen people – are arguing with Jesus' disciples, presumably because they, the disciples, are a veiled threat to the power structure of the 'church.' Up walks a man who wanted a miracle from the disciples, and he needed one. His son was demon-possessed, but the disciples could do nothing about it. They tried all the tricks Jesus had taught them about driving out demons but nothing happens.

Jesus response? "You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you?" You can almost hear the impatient exasperation in Jesus' voice. You can picture Him being weary, as if He's saying to Himself, "they just don't get it, do they?" He sees His disciples, those men in whom He's invested so much time and trust, and they're registering a big zero on the healing front. He sees His trusted teachers, trying to score points off those Disciples, trying to find a way to hold onto their power, get rid of Jesus, and not incite a revolution all at the same time. He sees His cherished people, the apple of His eye, who are needy and always wanting more, more, more; wanting more of the miracles but missing the miraculous love of God behind them.

Our response to Jesus? "Man, he's pretty harsh." Now, I'm not out to start some 'feel sorry for Jesus' movement, but drop back ten and consider how He must have felt. As fully man, He's worn out, honestly asking Himself and those around Him "how long will I put up with you if you refuse to believe in My heart." As fully God, He's exercising mercy and patience yet again. As both, He's providing a lesson for us in how to do all those things. It's ok to feel worn out, to express when we're at wit's end, when we don't know what else to do. Yet, when we recognize those feelings coming on, it's even more ok to breathe in and out, and ask how Jesus would want us to act. I'm betting that mercy and patience are what He would usually counsel.

*Lord, forgive me for misunderstanding You and Your meanings. Grow my understanding of You and help me to temper my responses.*

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.

May only

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 July 2015

*So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Mark 9, verse 20.*

In the face of real human tragedy, suffering, terror, and the uncertainty of a world spinning out of control, evil always surrenders to Jesus Christ. It always has; it always will. At the end of time, the love of Jesus will triumph and grow, while the pity of evil will be consigned to be banished forever.

Buzz, Tom, Mark, and Eric. Those are the names of four men close to me who have battled cancer in the last few years. Two of them lost the battle; one is in the ICU right now, fighting; one is in chronic treatment. Cancer is evil; there's no other way to adequately describe it. Statistically speaking, more folks are dying of cancer today, probably because other diseases have been eradicated or are under control. But when it comes, it comes with insidious evil. Yet don't forget this key point: cancer is subject to Jesus, and if Jesus wants to confront your cancer, your cancer loses.

Nuclear deal with Iran. Our nation has negotiated deal with the devil because the devil in Iran has said, over and over, that they want to acquire nuclear weapons to use them against America and America's allies. I don't know what our leaders are thinking, assuming that there are rational people in control in Iran but the fact is there aren't. They're fanatics and they want to destroy us. And they may get that chance...but let's not forget something critical: against Jesus, nuclear weapons, fanatical Muslims, and lame-brained agreements that aren't worth the paper they're signed on are powerless and futile.

Changing dynamics in America. In case you haven't noticed, of late, American society has gone through some pretty hefty social upheavals. The government has reached farther into peoples' lives than any time since the 1930s. Gay marriage has been legalized, and racial tensions are at highs not seen in forty years. Compared to Jesus these are meaningless and don't matter one single bit.

Depression that comes and goes. I've battled depression all my life. Maybe it stems from trying to please an overbearing mother and a disinterested father. Perhaps I'm trying to work past my own insecurities. It could be that depression really is just a neuro-chemical imbalance; I honestly don't know. And I honestly could care less because it doesn't matter. Jesus is stronger than my depression. In fact, His love and His hope are the only real cure for it.

None of this should be surprising. The boy who was demon possessed was brought to Jesus. Before Jesus could even speak to it, the demon threw the boy into convulsions. It could see that Jesus was more powerful than anything it could conjure. The best that our worldly troubles can do is cancer, war, upheaval, and hurt; the best evil could do to the boy was to torture him from within. Yet those evil troubles are powerless against Jesus and they know it. It shouldn't surprise us when evil plagues us; evil preys on us when we're weak. And it shouldn't, then, surprise us how evil cowers in terror when exposed to the love, hope and peace of Jesus.

*Lord Jesus, You are stronger than anything. You are stronger than the evils that plague me. Work in my life to overcome them, and help me work for You to help others overcome theirs.*

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 July 2015

*Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Mark 9, verses 21-23.*

These verses and the one that follows are, in my opinion, perhaps the most profound ones in the entire Bible. They're words that Jesus could speak with anyone of us.

You the situation; we've already talked about it. A man brings his son to be healed because the boy is demon possessed. The apostles can't heal the boy, so the worried father brings him to Jesus. The father is distraught, frantic and skeptical after the disciples couldn't perform up to expected par. He comes to Jesus hoping (think "hesitant wishing") that Jesus will be able to do something to help the son he loves.

Jesus' response seems to be shocked and surprised, yet it isn't. Is Jesus saying to the man "Get on my level!" "If you can?" It almost sounds like Jesus is incredulous that the man would even question that He could heal. But Jesus isn't Allah; Jesus doesn't expect us to serve Him or kow-tow to Him to earn His love. No, Jesus is speaking as an object lesson. He is educating the man, challenging his unbelief and educating him about its limits.

"If you can:" those words of power are, more often than not, weapons of doubt when placed in our hands. We doubt if we can; we doubt that even He can. It's even part of our nature to doubt, to question, to be skeptical, especially in the face of miracles. Taken to an unhealthy extreme, that skepticism can grow into disbelief or unbelief.

That's where Jesus meets the upset man, confronting his unbelief. And then He takes Him a step further, refusing to leave the man in his unbelief. "Everything is possible for one who believes." It's a statement of such power and profundity and it changes everything. It's a flavor of "if you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can move mountains." It's not just healing that is possible: it's EVERYTHING.

Noodle that for a minute.

Everything becomes possible when we believe in Jesus. Got cancer? Jesus can heal it. Got terror? Jesus can comfort, then overcome it. Got hurt that's hard to let go of? Jesus can walk you through getting rid of it. There is nothing in this entire universe that isn't smaller than Jesus; everything is under His dominion. Because He gives us Himself, through faith, then everything is possible. Move that mountain, heal that disease, grow those crops, right that broken heart: everything becomes possible.

Profound, my friend. More profound than anyone else you could think of on their best day. Read ahead in your Bible and see how Jesus rocks the world in the very next verse.

*Lord, I believe that, through You, everything is possible.*

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 July 2015

*“If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Mark 9, verse 23.*

But what if what I want to do doesn't happen? Before moving on to one of the most profound statements in Scripture, we need to tackle this really tough question.

What if I'm praying earnestly, believing honestly, submitting reverently to Jesus and I still can't move the mountain? What if I've prayed for healing and healing hasn't occurred? What if I've tried and failed, repeatedly? Is it my fault? Is my faith inadequate? Has Jesus given up on me?

What easy questions for a Monday...

Before giving an answer, may I refer you back to the verse. Don't go down the rabbit hole of doubt without firmly realizing that nothing you do, and nothing you don't do, could shake Jesus off you. Everything that we are, everything we think or say or do is under Jesus' dominion, and nothing in all creation happens without His knowing of it. When Jesus says everything is possible for one who believes, He means it. He means it in ALL circumstances, at all times, even when we feel lost.

What if you pray earnestly and the mountain (either physical or rhetorical) doesn't move? Is it all about you, my friend? It's not about you or me, you know, and just because I may pray for something to happen doesn't mean that God, who is omniscient and omnipresent, will allow it. You and I simply have to trust that God has a purpose, that things are arranged as they are for His higher purposes. So rather than getting wrapped around "why not" (or even "why"), perhaps the better approach is to simply say "thank you, Lord" for whatever is and adjust our prayers accordingly.

What if my prayers aren't answered and healing doesn't occur? I've thought a lot about that recently. Two friends of mine have died in the last year. My aunt died a few months ago. My own mom died just last October, and though I prayed earnestly for healing, that physical healing didn't happen. Does that mean my prayers weren't answered? Not at all. Indeed, I know in my heart that Tom, Mark, June and Mom are in heaven, with Jesus, living out eternity as a reward for their faith. Indeed, again, my prayers WERE answered in that I know this simple truth to be simply truth. What's more, some of my other friends and family who are dealing with dread conditions are still very much alive and kicking here, teaching lessons with their very presence. Those are bountifully answered prayers.

Finally, is it my fault, and is my faith inadequate? And Has Jesus given up on me? Not in any way, my friend, and you know this in your heart to be true, even when your heart is clouded in our human doubt. Put your hand on your artery and feel your pulse. Blink your eyes a few times. Breathe in and breathe out. The thing you feel is life, and that life is a gift from Jesus Himself. If you can feel, you're alive. That means Jesus hasn't abandoned you because, as long as you live, He will always be with us. No amount of faith or fault can shake that: He promised it when He left, saying He would be with us always. That includes now, in our doubt, when our faith is shaken, even when we do all we can and what we desire doesn't come to pass.

*Lord, I need to say it again: I believe that, through You, everything is possible.*

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 July 2015

*“If you can’t?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” – Mark 9, verses 23-24.*

These are perhaps the most profound words in the entire Bible that express simple, unvarnished, honest faith. I find it intensely comforting that someone face to face with Jesus Himself would exclaim these words to Him, exposing the very nerves of his soul, baring everything to the Son of Man. It’s comforting because we can do the same.

The boy’s father was distraught, desperate. His son was dying, Jesus’ Apostles were powerless, and Jesus seemed to be dithering. All the father wants is what any father wants: for his son to live. Yet here is Jesus seemingly stuck in this teachable moment. He isn’t accusing the man but He is forcing the man to get down to brass tacks on what matters most. Immediately the man responded; not a week later, not after taking some time to consider Jesus’ words: immediately. And the amazing thing is how the man gets on Jesus’ level, going where the Lord is leading him.

I hadn’t really considered these verses very much until a few months ago in church when our worship leader, Anthony, remarked on them during his devotion. As I listened to Anthony I was struck by how profound the words are, confessing in the fewest words possible the nearest and dearest concept of faith. “Jesus, I believe in You but I still have my doubts. Help me overcome my doubts.” The man said them right to Jesus’ face. Can you imagine the desperate humility and courage it must have taken to say them? Indeed, I think those words are the battle that every unbeliever, atheist and agnostic fights every day of their lives. Some give up on the battle; some are plagued by doubts; some grow cold; some bask in the wonder of the logic.

But don’t go away thinking it is only unbelievers who struggle with belief. Every believer, from St. Peter on down to us, struggles with their faith at some point in life. Doubts, anxieties, questions, stress, and exhaustion all plague us from time to time. They cause us to waver in things that we know are true; more to the point, we let them cause us to waver. If one can waver in love, in the law, in the ways of this world, or in the friendship of other people, then one can waver in one’s faith in Jesus. It isn’t rejection: it’s doubting; doubting as much in our own strength as in His strength to help us persevere and overcome.

In those moments, it’s good to come back to these verses and remember two things about them. One, Jesus promised that everything is possible if we believe in Him. He meant those words especially for people living in doubt. Then, the man in front of him confessed his simply humanity and exposed the bare surfaces of his heart and his overwhelming need for what only Jesus could do. And in doing so, Jesus delivered in ways that still resonate for us here today.

*Lord, I too struggle with unbelief. Forgive me for this, and strengthen me inside to close out the darkness by shining on it Your light of belief.*

Read Mark 9, verses 14-29.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 July 2015

*When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."— Mark 9, verses 25-29.*

Yesterday I read an article from CNN that berated Pope Francis for talking too much about the devil. Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, whatever name he goes by: he's so First Century. Here in our post-modern world, we've outgrown Satan. CNN is tired of hearing the pope talk about the prince of demons. For whatever reason, they claim, the pope should stick to helping the poor, attacking capitalism, scouring out pedophile priests and a bunch of other things. Satan is so yesterday, so pre-Internet and today's techno-marvel world.

Dangerous, my friends: it's dangerous to turn your back on Satan. It's just what he wants us to do.

On the other hand, if you read a great many web sites or listen to many Biblical preachers today, you hear over and over that Satan is winning. These people think the exact opposite of CNN; they agree with Pope Francis that Satan is a very real being who is really, truly working against us in everything we do. According to this thinking, Satan is winning on homosexual marriage, appeasement of enemies, defining down pop culture, misuse of the law, misuse of the church, and a hundred other things. Varying degrees of concern are furthered even more by saying how these kinds of things are signs of the end times (and they are). Should we worry if we start seeing things like this happening, knowing that the end of the world may be nigh? Maybe...

...But first let's step back from the tree and take a look at the forest; at this point, we need to.

In looking at this particular forest I would remind our friends at CNN that all of Scripture tells us how Satan is a real being. Il Papa is simply reiterating the Bible and we would do well to follow his lead, at least in this case. Satan isn't a construct, and he isn't a figure of a colorful imagination, and he isn't anyone to be trifled with. Satan is real and really is up to no good.

Yet I would also reiterate to my doom-crying friends that Jesus commanded a spirit to come out of tortured child and it did. The fact is that Satan is already defeated. His imminent and eternal defeat won't stop him from continuing to try to yank people away from faith in Jesus; sorry, y'all, but that's our burden to bear. In bearing it, we would do well to remember that Jesus can drive out demons. Demons (and Satan) are terrified of Jesus because of what they've done. Even when we fail to drive them out, we should still cling to Jesus because in Him is found the power to make Satan cower as evidenced by what He did for this boy.

*Lord, watch over me and protect me from the demons that cower before You. I believe You are more powerful.*

Read Mark 9, verses 30-36.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 27 July 2015

*They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. Mark 9, verses 30-32.*

Have you ever been afraid of an answer?

When the Powerball or Mega Millions lotto drawings get big, I usually buy a ticket. I know: it's a form of gambling and a voluntary tax all in one. But it's also a huge return on investment. If I win anything, even if it's only \$5, it's a return on my initial investment in the percentage of hundreds; can you imagine the return if I ever won the real jackpot? Yet I'm always reluctant to check on the numbers after each drawing. It's as if I'm fantasizing about my life as a millionaire and I don't want reality to pop the bubble.

And have you ever asked your spouse or significant other a tough question that you just knew you didn't want answered (even though you knew you needed an answer)? "How much did it cost?" "Are you angry with me?" "Is it love or something else?" Forget the lotto: these are the real hard answers to hear, these are the times when it gets tough to live in the real world.

Jesus was leveling with His disciples. He was telling them plainly what was soon going to happen to Him. Before this, He had mentioned His passion and resurrection, but had seemed almost oblique, mysterious. This time, while they were walking through Galilee, He spoke plainly with them. No sugar-coating, no extra adjectives, no poetic language: Jesus spoke plainly and told them the priests would take Him, murder Him, and watch Him bring Himself back to life. The disciples' reaction: huh?

They were afraid out of ignorance. Or was it that they were afraid out of ignorance and real fear? Jesus was challenging their entire belief system by saying the leaders of their church would murder the very person they had come to know as God Immanuel. If I'm Peter, James, or John, my reaction would have been, "say that again, Jesus. Would you mind repeating that please?" And that was their reaction. They didn't know what to think or say. In part it was out of just plain not understanding, and let's give them the benefit of the doubt in how they learned of this news. They had watched Him drive out nasty demons, then went on walkabout. They're befuddled, busy, and even burdened with weariness. And now Jesus is predicting His death at the hands of the very people entrusted with teaching God's chosen people about God's love. Huh?

But let's keep it real too. They were afraid. This was tough stuff to hear, much tougher than wondering if I won the Powerball or how much that new car would cost. If what Jesus was saying was true, then everything God's people knew would be thrown on its head. Faith, religion, law, society, economy: toss them all around and something new would result, something unknown. If that didn't scare them, what would? If it doesn't give you trepidation as well, what will?

Have you ever been afraid of an answer?

*Lord, I am sometimes afraid of what You tell me. Comfort my fear and overcome them in me.*

Read Mark 9, verses 30-36.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 28 July 2015

*They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Mark 9, verses 33-34.*

Two days ago, my wife and I drove from Texas to Minnesota. If you're counting miles, that's over 1000 of them in one day; it took us just over 16 hours (with several stops along the way). We talked about many things along the way, and we listened to a lot of music. Sometimes she napped and it got very quiet (and sleepy) in the car. During those times, I thought about many different things, including things I probably shouldn't think about. Where I've gone wrong in the past, my tawdry sins, fantasies about how things would be different if we had just a few dollars more in the bank, things to say in meetings this week (and things I wish I had said in past meetings): a hundred different thoughts go through your mind when you're driving that far while fighting white line fever.

I wish I would learn to use that time to pray more. In truth, I did some of that, too, and that's a good thing. But rather than thinking about other things, it would be better if I simply talked to Jesus about those matters on my heart and brain. If you're like me, I don't always do that because I don't want to air my dirty laundry to God. It's kind of a stupid thing because, ya know, He knows about it anyway. It's not as if I can hide them; I couldn't if I tried. He's Jesus and He knows all my thoughts and memories inside and out.

Yet hide my thoughts I do. I think that, out of respect for me, God doesn't pry into my brain and use my sinful thoughts against me. He does that for all of us. Instead, He lets those thoughts nag at us through guilt and a guilty conscience, working to turn guilt into motivation. This is one of the beautiful gifts of faith. I say that because there's something healthy about confessing to Him the things we've done wrong. One of our couples' devotions this week talked about confessing a blanket of sins instead of every one individually. The devotion derided that blanket confession, and I voiced my disagreement with it. The confession depends on context and timing, I think. Sometimes maybe all you can do is confess everything.

No matter how it's done, there's value for us in rooting out our sins and confessing them to God. They point out our inadequacies and when we've chosen failure. They point out our desperate need for Him in our lives. Self-reflection then self-confession allows us to talk to God in a personal way, re-establishing the bonds with Him that He seeks out even though we had shut them down. And it lets us get things off our chests, enabling us to better let go of guilt that could plague us into depression instead of motivating us to do better. This is why Jesus questioned the disciples, giving them a chance to reflect and confess instead of simply hammering them with their shame and guilt. They knew they had done wrong, so Jesus met them in their sin and gave them an opportunity to reflect.

And they didn't have to drive 1000 miles for it to happen.

*Lord, thank You for the gift of confession and prayer with You.*

Read Mark 9, verses 30-36.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 July 2015

*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." Mark 9, verse 35.*

Jesus is telling us "put Me before yourself and everything else." Walk the walk in the most extreme walk possible. How's that working out for you? Probably about the same as it's working out for me. We suck at it. Now, we're not going down a road of guilt-trips here. You know we're both sinners and we fall miles short of the glory of God; we get it. But did you grasp the empowering challenge Jesus laid down?

You and I: we GET TO make ourselves servants. You and I: we get the opportunity to change, to turn the page on things that defined us before but we don't need to let define us any longer. We GET to let Jesus remold us.

Jesus uses this moment to educate, to love on these twelve men who've pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to follow Him no matter what. They've been squabbling over the smallest of concepts: vanity. Who's the best; who is most favored. Jesus catches them in the act and confronts them over it. When they blanch, He uses the moment to lay out a bold truth, then lay down the boogie and play that funky music (till He died, in fact).

"My friends, I'm the ball. Keep your eyes on the ball. If you want to be greatest, follow my lead and serve. Don't just serve Me: serve Me by serving each other, strangers, those who hurt you, and anyone else I put in your path. When you do that, you'll see how your focus on the small matters of life will become even smaller."

Wow. Can you truly dig that? Everything that we value that makes us proud, that makes us feel accomplished and righteous is worth nothing compared to serving other people as God serves them. "That's all well and good, Dave. That was Jesus; then, not now. What about now?"

Same advice, my friend: keep our eyes on Jesus; keep our eyes on the ball. When we serve, we are modeling the way He as God selflessly serves us. He does it through the actions of others; He does it when the milk of human kindness flows. What's more, Jesus serves us every single morning simply by our waking up and drawing breath. Every day is a miracle; the illogical, beautiful thing that is life is a constant miracle. Consider, then, how serving it is for the God who makes that life to give it to us free of charge. Consider further how He serves us by giving us a way out of the guilt of our countless sins through the serving sacrifice of His Son. If we keep our eyes on that, if we focus on Him and rebuild our redeemed lives around how He would have us live, then we don't just have to become servants to model Him: we GET to become servants to model Him. We get to listen. We get to use our time to help. We get to be Jesus for others who may not know Him.

And in it, He is given glory. That is a tough challenge, one that most folks won't take up. What's it worth to you?

*Jesus, I accept Your serving, blessed challenge. Teach me to be a servant today; help me to act more like You.*

Read Mark 9, verses 30-36.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 July 2015

*He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." Mark 9, verses 36-37.*

I've been blessed to spend most of the last four years working in my hometown, Minneapolis. In that time, I've gotten to know much of the city, learn my way around, and visit with some of the family left here. My immediate family moved away from here in 1975; it's hard for me to believe that actually was forty years ago last month. Only a few people I knew here are left, and I don't know where any of my boyhood friends live. Occasionally, I drive by places I remember from my childhood (I once toured our old home when it was posted for sale) and it takes me back to a very long time ago.

My childhood wasn't a bad one but it wasn't spectacular either. An overbearing mother, a less than assertive father, constant moving around, teenage identity crises, being bullied a lot, not fashionable or even attractive, insecurities and an inability (sometimes unwillingness) to make friends: these were the measures of my youth. I visit the places I remember from forty years ago and sometimes the memories of way back then start to flood back. Those memories are sometimes good, but not always.

I suppose that all this means I'm getting older. People say you reflect more the older that you get. In my case, that's true. I was born in the 1960s and, to me, that world seems so ancient, so long ago. The places I knew in childhood look different today, and I sometimes find it hard to bridge the gap between what I knew back when and what 'back when' is today. I've always prided myself on living in the here and now, so this is uncomfortable turf. It has taken many years of faith-walking to let go of grudges, reconcile the past to now, and to accept my ability to make today into something better than yesterday. Don't get me wrong: my yesterday's weren't all bad; most weren't bad at all. Still, even the best of us hold onto a few regrets and I'm no exception.

So I sometimes find it difficult to swallow that Jesus tells us to come to him like children. My time here at 'home' has taught me that this isn't my home any more, that home is wherever Jesus leads me. And wherever He leads me, He tells me that He's got His arm wrapped around me and that He wants me to take my very inner self to Him in the innocent way a child would. Trust Him, listen to Him, obey Him, accept Him, love Him, enjoy Him. In return, He wants me to enjoy myself, to find joy in simple things, to be open to love and being loved, to serve, and to not clutter my faith with nonsense. Jesus gives us the picture of welcoming Him in the way we welcome children, that we are in fact welcoming Him when we accept others the way they are.

My time in Minneapolis is coming to an end. In a few months, it will be on to someplace else; maybe it will be closer to my home and Hunnie in Paris.

*Lord, thank You for childhood, for everything that happens in it. Thank You for memories and second chances.*

Read Mark 9, verses 38-40.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 31 July 2015

*Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me.” Mark 9, verses 38-39.*

This isn't permission to sin and be absolved. This isn't carte blanche to do whatever we want, say we believe in Jesus, and then get away with it. Sadly, that's what many folks seem to think. It's not what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is talking about folks who believe, who cling to His name in good and bad, in doubt and strength, in sin and redemption. Not so many years ago, I was a despicable man. Adulterer, liar, slanderer, arrogant, angry, pathetic, untrustworthy, unreliable: that was me. I did things, said things, acted out in ways that were dishonorable to Jesus, to my wife, to my family, and to myself (in that order). That wasn't how I saw things, or how I looked at myself. I can honestly tell you that I believed, and I tried to do good because I believed in doing good, in being good.

Trying isn't doing.

The sad part is that God was working in me and through me even then and I ignored it. I meant well, felt well, spoke well, and tried hard to be well. God was blessing me in so many ways but I was a hypocrite. I was the kind of man who would do miracles in Jesus' name and then speak things in His name but be disingenuous.

Here's part of the miracle: He believed in me even when I didn't live out my belief in Him.

The Jesus I spoke of then and now is the real God-man who loves us enough to hold us up to the highest standards, who gives us justice and rebuke when we need them. It seems He pours burning vinegar on our wounded souls when we're hurting and rebellious. It's only when we allow ourselves to see Him as He really is that we see, instead, how He is a doctor, scouring out our wounds so that He can heal them with His good medicine. When He heals us, we see how we can't act in ways that make others think we believe and not actually believe in Him. To act in such a way is transparently phony, something people can see through. Is it any wonder that Christians make the church look so awful?

If you let Jesus run your life, it's impossible to speak and act apart from Him.

Jesus taught me discipline and honesty. He encouraged me to leave behind ways I was ashamed of, to try to make amends for wrongs I had done, to tell others how such an imperfect and flawed man as me was gifted to serve Him and others by sharing my story of what He was doing. It's been a tough ten years; I'm far from perfect. Many folks who know me know how unconvincing I can be, how I struggle with pride and vanity and language and anger. Yet Jesus is always encouraging me by reminding me that the good I speak and do is Him, not me, and that doing such things is impossible without Him. In Jesus, there is only doing, not just trying.

*Lord thank You for redeeming unworthy me, for living in the world through me.*

Read Mark 9, verses 38-41.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 August 2015

*For whoever is not against us is for us. Mark 9, verse 40.*

There's a lot we could talk about with this verse. The terrible Iran deal that all but guarantees war; the factionalism of American politics these days (heck, world politics); the divisions in society with gay marriage, drug legalization, and permissiveness: in all these, if you take a side, whoever is not against you is for you.

That's not all that Jesus was talking about. No, Jesus was talking about believing. Whoever believes in Jesus is with you. Whoever doesn't isn't. Your denomination, your church customs, your traditions: those things matter and they're important. But they don't matter much and are relatively unimportant compared to simply professing belief in Him. If we have that in common, we have more than enough. If we share that belief, then we're standing on common ground. We're for each other because we're for Jesus.

Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of the death of a friend of mine. I think I've written about Tom in the past. He died of cancer just a few months over a year from the time the doctors first diagnosed it. He was a good man, and I have a few choice memories of him that get me past the fact of how much I hate cancer for what it did to him. Tibbetts was a man who could disagree with you and call you out on just why, but when I knew him he would let things lay at that and still raise a glass with you when the talking was done. My life became better for knowing him; my grandson is named for him. Tom's gone now; his body is buried in Beloit. I saw his grave there a few months ago, and I was sad for the fact that the headstone wasn't up yet. It seemed unfair because he was a larger than life guy who died large even as he lived large. Tom's living large still because he believed in Jesus, because he subordinated his life to Jesus. He's standing on the common ground of heaven. He was for Jesus, now Jesus is with him.

And I think about Pope Francis. It's doubtful I'll ever meet the pontiff. And for all those who are screaming of how Francis is 'the antichrist,' well folks, kiss my grits. I don't agree with all of Francis' stands but I don't think it's arguable that he's a diligent servant of Christ. He's devout, honest, forthright, and powerfully driven to use the powers of his office to help the poor of our world. To me, that's Christ-like behavior. I'm no Roman Catholic; couldn't be one because I fundamentally disagree with many of their practices. But I believe a man like Francis is with me, a brother (and a leader) in the faith. Accordingly, we're on the same team and I look forward to meeting him in the life everlasting.

We can disagree all day long about the myriad of ways in which we're different, or you're right and I'm wrong, or stupid things like that. We can disagree about the right color to paint the classrooms at church, just when Jesus enters into Holy Communion, whether the Apostle John was a boy or a man, and a bunch of other things that really don't matter much. When you boil away all that dross, the golden metal of Jesus should be the only thing that's left. As long as we believe in Him, in that, then we are in union.

*Jesus I am for You.*

Read Mark 9, verses 38-41.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 5 August 2015

*Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward. Mark 9, verse 41.*

Is Jesus talking about heaven or earth here? Is He talking about an eternal reward in the life everlasting with Him, or is He talking about being rewarded more temporally here in ways we can relate to now?

Yes.

Yes? It's really that simple? Yes it is. This is simple? Actually, again, yes it is. Not answering the questions above would be a dodge, and if our Lord does anything, He doesn't dodge. Jesus is upfront, teaching and loving even in justice, and always getting to the nub of an issue. If He answers things in ways that seem oblique to us, it isn't He who is oblique.

Of course Jesus is talking about that earthly reward, the things you get here. He's not going all Joel Osteen, preaching a prosperity gospel of "get rich through My wishing well, guys." Not hardly. But Jesus is promising us a reward here and now: Him. In Him is more than enough for everything we could comprehend; in Him are found solutions to any issue we could devise. What's more, we don't have to live our lives in Him: we get to. That's a concept we've explored before and it's worth doing so again. Faith is a 'get to' kind of thing, a real groovy kind of love kind of thing. We don't have to do it: we get to live our lives following Jesus. Make no mistake about it: Joel and the other perfect-hairs have it wrong. Jesus doesn't promise us riches or prosperity; if anything, He promises we will walk a tougher earthly road by following Him. And yet, in reassuring us, He also promises us the unending wealth of Himself, which makes us richer and more prosperous inside than we ever could be with billions and bling.

We get to live with Him now. We are part of eternity now. It is part of our lives here and now, and that can change everything. If we get rich off it, well, count that as another good blessing. But money isn't the point: Jesus is the point. Jesus is the point now, in our lives here and now on the Third Rock so that we might share Him with others and they might be rich in Him as well.

And, yes, of course Jesus is talking about life everlasting. It really is a both/and kind of answer, a having your cake and eating it too on a level we hadn't thought of. Jesus is talking about how, when we profess Him to the world, He smiles and prepares our places with Him forever. All too often, we use heaven as the ultimate cop out; something we can promise to people but never have to deliver, never have to prove. The truth is we really don't have to prove it because Jesus already did. In this verse, He reminds us that His words are true and reliable. Because of that we can count on receiving a permanent reward with Him in heaven forever. Being for Him means we aren't against Him and He is never against us, always for us.

Yes, it really is that simple.

*Lord, thank You for Your promises of my reward, and for making all of it possible.*

Read Mark 9, verses 42-50.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 August 2015

*“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.” Mark 9 verse 42.*

Tell me, even if you don't fully accept this Jesus, would you REALLY want the creator of the universe mad at you? He who created everything by speaking, He who rose Himself out of death, He who could do all those physical miracles, He who did miracles through Moses and Elijah and the prophets: would you really, truly, honestly want Him pissed off at you?

Make no mistake about it: Jesus is laying it down here. “Mess with My believers and you'll get so much worse.” He's not promising to mete out mafia justice or hip hop street cred; those are far too pedestrian. No, Jesus is talking forever. He's getting down to the heart of the matter, just like Don Henley would want Him to. Mess with believers and you answer to Jesus. Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” The context of that verse is how there are consequences for disobeying God, who is Jesus of Nazareth. Those words were dictated to their author years after Jesus spoke His original throw-down, yet they're another way of spelling out what is in store for those who deliberately draw others into sin.

Now, let's keep it real here: you and me, we each cause others to sin. Who's the worse sinner: the guy laughing at the dirty jokes or the guy telling them? The man cheating on his wife or the woman cheating with him? The worker who steals from their employer by padding their expense reports or the manager who lets him get away with it? We each draw others into sin; we each contribute to the many sins of others. Is Jesus promising us eternal damnation for that?

Maybe, that is, if in doing these sinful things we go the extra step of denying Jesus to others. “Screw it, everybody's doing it.” Yep: sinful. “Screw it, everybody's doing it and your God is a myth.” Yep: sinful and over the line blasphemy. You're in Jesus' danger zone (even without Kenny Loggins' song in your head). If you believe in your heart that Jesus isn't who He is, you've got a problem and He's going to call you on it.

Yet consider the flip side of this warning Jesus gives us. He mentioned it in the verse prior to this one. We can't deny Jesus in anything we do, even our sins, if we truly believe in Him. If we truly believe in Him, even when we make terrible mistakes, we can come to Him and honestly repent. We can honestly turn from those misdeeds and all our ugly junk and follow Him again. We get to do that; we get to receive His unending grace, not because we deserve it or even because we do something, but instead just because He is the God who He says He is. He is love and in His perfect love, that awesome grace flows down whether we sin or not. It's about Him, not us, so much so that He bled and died for us out of that perfect love. In Him, we can't deny Him even if we try.

I don't know about you, but I'd much rather be found on Jesus' good side.

*Lord Jesus, I believe in You and only You.*

Read Mark 9, verses 42-50.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 11 August 2015

*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.” Mark 9 verses 43-48.*

Do you think Jesus is talking about hell here? If you didn't answer "yes," perhaps you need to read it again. Is He talking about eternal burning in an unending fire? Maybe; there isn't enough information to know whether this is direct reference or a metaphor.

Why am I asking this? I'm on the bandwagon of people who decry our nation's ignorance of hell. Just this past month, a group of Satanists unveiled a statue in Detroit of Satan; it's their 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment right, just as it's someone else's to call that "dumb." Don't these people fear hell? ISIS murders innocent people by the thousands in ways that are, um, creative and titillating: don't they fear hell? People do unspeakable things to little children, or even to defenseless animals that are part of God's creation for our enjoyment: don't they fear hell?

I live in the south, so there's no shortage of churches that will give you your fill of hellfire and brimstone preaching that will, in the least, motivate you to contemplate the domain of the devil. Let's face it: it's a sobering yet healthy thing to confront the idea that there really is evil in our world. The place our just and loving God has reserved for evil once our world has ended is hell. The previous verses in this chapter are only a few of some throughout the Bible that tell us of how damnation awaits those who consciously refuse to believe in Jesus. Whether it's literal fire, the absence of love, or something else, it will be more unpleasant than anything we could imagine.

But here's where I'd like to go in a different direction. Instead of just asking again "don't they fear hell," perhaps we could better serve our world by asking "how can I introduce them to Jesus?" The presence of evil isn't evidence of the absence of Jesus so much as it is the acceptance of the consequences when we turn away from Jesus. The longer I live, the more I see Jesus is with me every minute, even when evil prevails. He's there even when evil shows up on our doorstep, in our hearts, throughout our words and actions when we turn in even subtle ways. Satan can only exploit us if we let him.

Just like he can only exploit those folks who let him have his way in their lives. Jesus is with us throughout. Instead of standing by, watching while others choose destruction, how about we bridge their self-made gap to Christ? "Do you know Him?" "Can I take a few minutes to tell you about Him?" Those words might mean the difference between someone using their Jesus-given gift of free will to move forward for Him instead of downward towards the realm of the evil one.

*Lord, keep me from temptation and forgive my sins.*

Read Mark 9, verses 42-50.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 12 August 2015

*Everyone will be salted with fire. Mark 9 verse 49.*

On the surface, this verse might seem difficult to understand. Remember, Jesus said it in the context of talking about hell, punishment and consequences. Again, on the surface, the verse looks like it could be talking about divine vengeance. Would you want the creator of the Universe to personally salt you with fire? Flavor you, sprinkle you, season you through and through, preserve you with fire? It sounds agonizing.

And yet...

And yet I researched the verse in several places. The most agreeable answer I found was from, of all places, yahoo.com. It said "These are some references of God cleansing us in this way... removing the dead, evil and unwanted things in our lives. I've always like the story of how gold and silver is purified. It is heated into a liquid. The dross and impurities then floats to the top surface and are skimmed off. You know it is pure when you can see your reflection in it. God wants to see His reflection in us." Wow.

Yahoo then went on to quote a number of verses to support this concept. Look them up: Matthew 3:11, Luke 12:49, 1 Cor 3:13-15, Hebrews 12:29, and 1 Peter 1:7. As I said, look them up; I believe they support the author's position.

Jesus fully intends to salt us with fire to purify us from the uncleanness we embrace when we embrace our sins. Have you ever tried to consciously turn from real temptations? I know in my own experience how tough it is. The rewards feel so much better than the sins, but the sins can be so tempting, so deceptively alluring and so foolishly comforting and difficult to reconcile. In a way, resisting their temptations is refining, and it sometimes feels like evil is hurling fire against my soul. Yet Jesus is still at work, battling for me and encouraging me to resist every time for just one more moment.

In those moments, He is refining me. Little by little, He builds up my confidence and my integrity and it is a refining thing. Resisting the alcohol, the lies, the tobacco, the flesh, the arrogance: living past these things sometimes feels like I'm being melted down while the slag of my sins is being skimmed away. What's left is the spice of life, the very essence of Jesus wanting to live His life through mine. He wants to see Himself shining through my eyes, my actions, my words because He can then reach others and build them up as well. It's a love thing, rescuing gold from tarnish and wreckage. You are golden as well. Underneath your pet sins shines pure gold, waiting to be refined.

These kinds of translations make sense in the context of this entire chapter of Mark, especially in the context of the verse that comes after this one; read up on it and we'll chat tomorrow. For now, let it be enough to know that God refines us every day. If something is challenging you, if something bothers you, if something is pitted against you, if something is testing and hurting you and putting you through a wringer, take heart in knowing that, through these unpleasant tests, God Immanuel is with you, working on you, refining you to make you better than you were before. That's easy to understand and easy to eventually see.

*Lord, forgive me, refine me, filter out the dross of my life, and remake me to shine for You.*

Read Mark 9, verses 42-50.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 August 2015

*“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” Mark 9 verse 50.*

This verse gives credence to the verses yesterday and the analysis of them that God is refining us by salting us with fire.

Tell me: have you ever lost your way?

I'll admit: from time to time, I feel like I have. We all go through up's and down's; times when we just can't seem to get motivated, or when we feel our game is off. On a long-term project, it sometimes feels like you're fighting against a crowd that never gives up while you never make real progress. When following politics, it seems like the other side is always winning, that your side always seems to fold just when they fail to realize they're actually holding all the cards. In your marriage, there are times when you feel you just really don't connect, that you just don't understand each other and have seemingly grown apart.

Have you ever considered that maybe these times are actually a gift from God?

Huh?

I mean it. The up's and down's can actually be a blessing because it's in the down times when we get to assess what's really important. A good coach will say attitude is everything, and that's true. Yet even with a healthy attitude most of the time, the best of us still get in a slump (especially if you're a Chicago Cubs fan). In those slump times, we get to ask ourselves if we're salty, if we still have our mojo, if we're still on track. And when we find we aren't, there is always the North Star of the Gospel to help us find our way back.

In this way, God refines us. He salts us to poison the well of our sins. He salts us to increase our potency. He salts us to remind us that we are His and that He yearns to live His love through us. And He salts us to remind us that He is allowing or using our sins to do things that we couldn't do while we were reveling in those sins. On the other side of it – and being prepared to deal with future sin – we gain clarity. More appropriate, we are given clarity by God. We get to see how we have been salted and refined so that we might edify others through our experience.

God tells us to have faith and hold on to our saltiness. He refines us through the bad times and implores us to hold onto our flavor even when the bland things in life try to wash it away. And in doing so, Jesus reminds us to flavor each other with His salty gospel. We are to always work to be at peace with each other, yet the more we 'work' at this, the more we find that the only peace that matters is the peace of God which transcends all understanding. Peace isn't the absence of conflict. Real peace is the presence of Jesus. You'll find it tastes salty but pleasing and full of contentment.

*Lord Jesus, make me salty for You. Refine me with Your grace, salt me with Your love, and teach me to salt others for You.*

Read Mark 10, verses 1-12.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 August 2015

*Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" "What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." Mark 10, verses 1-4.*

Did you notice the sleight of hand when it came to divorce? The Pharisees start questioning Him. Jesus answers with a question, and they did a little word switcheroo that tried to bait and switch the conversation.

Nothing has changed.

A few years ago, my wife and I nearly divorced; I've covered the reasons why many times before. Yet it was Jesus who made the difference in our lives between divorce and reconciliation. We couldn't have come back together without His intervention in our lives and in our marriage. I say this because, until that time, I had looked at marriage the way the Pharisees did. We're permitted to do this or that because of X or Y. It's true that, in other places in the Bible Jesus spells out conditions for divorce, but nowhere does He lay out that it's a desirable option. Indeed, here in Mark 10, Jesus is spelling out the exact opposite and it goes right over the heads of the hard-hearted Pharisees.

They looked at marriage the way I used to: disposable. The Pharisees didn't spell out the conditions for it or why a couple would divorce. They simply looked at it as a permissible thing. Moses the lawgiver even said so...but that wasn't what Jesus asked them.

In fact, thus far in the chapter, Jesus hasn't said anything at all about divorce. Instead of outlining twelve-step program, Jesus responds with a question to make them think: "What did Moses command you?" He was saying "what did I say to you through Moses?" And, like I probably would have, they responded by getting bogged down in details while dodging Jesus' question. Instead of answering the question – what did Moses COMMAND – they change the subject: Moses PERMITTED.

That matters because nothing much has changed. I say this from experience because, when my marriage was dying, I was letting it die. Actually, I was trying to kill it. It was all about me, all about what I felt and didn't feel, what I was and wasn't getting from the relationship, my wants and not what mattered. To me, divorce was permissible. But when Jesus manned me up, I saw that I wasn't giving to the relationship, that my transgressions were what broke it down, and that I needed to confess, forgive, seek forgiveness, and change. More than all that, I came to see how Jesus wants us whole in Him first and foremost above anything else, even our marriages. Once we go to Him, things can change.

I know that so many people have legitimate reasons for divorcing, but I wonder how many people truly bring themselves to put it all at the cross before pulling the trigger. Moses permitted us to divorce; our system permits it; our code of conduct sometimes even seems to demand it. But that isn't what Jesus commanded. He said that what God brought together no man should pull apart. THAT is what Moses commanded.

*Lord, thank You for healing my marriage, for my wife, and for all the blessings You give my family through our marriage.*

Read Mark 10, verses 1-12.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 18 August 2015

*"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Mark 10, verses 5-9.*

God made them male and female...we needed the law because our hearts were hard...we have been us since the beginning of creation...two will become one....what God has joined together let no one separate: these are the foundations of marriage. Only someone with a willfully blind eye could not see how God intended men and women for marriage. No, this isn't a forum for advocating traditional marriage; I'll leave that to others.

Instead, let's focus on the hardening of the heart part.

It takes two to tango and two to divorce. God brings together; people separate. What's the difference? Of course it's sin. Some kind of sin, some kind of separating factor is always at the heart of why people divorce. Even when people marry and simply decide that they aren't a fit, something separates them, something to which they hold fast even when they are intended to cleave together; something hardens a heart. Boil it all away and it's always some kind of sin, even a very minor one.

It's true, a couple can't save their marriage if they don't want to work at it. A friend reminded me of this yesterday and her point is valid: you can try and try and try and sometimes, if both aren't trying, it just doesn't work. Is it any wonder that a marriage would fall apart if both don't work at keeping it together? And abuse? Jesus doesn't ask us to suffer real abuse because real abuse is sin.

Instead, Jesus always brings us back to the fact that, as married people, we are separate but one, we are woman and man yet a couple in Him. He is the third partner in every marriage. When we divorce, we're divorcing Him as well. In my own experience, I found that, to repair my marriage meant really repenting, really accepting the consequences of the wrongs I had done, turning myself around, then starting to really follow Jesus in ways I hadn't before. In my case, that meant reconciliation because it just so happened that God was telling my wife "try again even though you have every right not to."

What's the point here? As with the previous verses, Jesus doesn't command us to divorce or marry, to stay together or split. Instead, He tells us to cleave first to Him and let Him guide us, especially in marriage. Heaven must hold a special place for people who suffer abuse and cling to marriage, and for people who suffer neglect and still hold on. I wonder, sometimes, if the thing that makes them special is how they cling first to Christ and let Him lead them just one more day in a marriage that may seem dead already but that, instead, may have many more good years ahead. Those years can only become good when we let Jesus soften our sin-hardened hearts. He reminds us that divorce is something we allow not something He commands because all things are possible in Him.

*Lord, I pray, soften hearts made hard in troubled marriages. Heal and lead them.*

Read Mark 10, verses 1-12.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 19 August 2015

*When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." Mark 10, verses 10-12.*

If you divorce for any unsanctioned reason, you're living in adultery. In several places in the New Testament, Jesus explains God's policy on adultery; see Matthew 5, Matthew 19, Mark 7, and Luke 16 among them. Unless you've been the victim of adultery, if you divorce and remarry, you're guilty of adultery yourself. What's worse, when we live unfaithfully in many ways, we're guilty of adultery against God Himself. Idolatry, coveting are forms of adultery. Blasphemy and apostasy are spiritual adultery. Lust in our hearts and lust occupying our thoughts are adultery. There are many ways we can cheat on our spouses and on the third partner in our marriage who is Jesus.

Yet on that happy note Jesus may just be giving us a ray of hope.

You see, Jesus was outlining boundaries that we shouldn't cross. He was discipling His disciples. They asked Jesus a question and He gave them God's answer. In it, He built them up. Implied between those lines of the law was a marriage of grace and beauty. The opposite of divorce is marriage; the opposite of adultery is faithfulness. The opposite of sin is grace, and the opposite of evil is God. In drawing out those white lines of what constituted adultery, Jesus was also reminding His followers that the marriage God intended didn't include rebellion, idolatry, coveting, lust or adultery.

Instead, Jesus intended for His married followers to live as God intended, man and woman united into a bond stronger than either of them alone. "What God has joined together, let no one separate." Jesus didn't intend for us to divorce; Jesus didn't intend for us to live in marriages of hurt and sin and pain. Jesus intended marriage to bless men and women for the procreation of children and the furthering of His Kingdom. When divorce happens, Jesus intended that it would be an exception, not a rule because adultery and divorce cut us to the core in ways other things can't.

Don't lose sight, too, of how He did this in private. In public, the Pharisees had questioned Him, trying to set Him up and cage Him in with their verbal sleight of hand. They tried to humiliate Him in public. He responded by correcting their errors without humiliating them in return. Yet when He wanted to teach His next valuable lesson, He took it behind closed doors to an audience who He knew would listen. If you think about it, He still does the same thing. I can't help but think of how He brings down the mighty and builds up the humble. Then He teaches us in private, deep inside us where the public can't intrude. Such is the reward for humbling ourselves because, when we humble ourselves before God, God rewards our humility with His grace.

In my experience, there is nothing more humbling than to take your sins of adultery to God and honestly ask Him to forgive you.

*Lord, forgive me for my terrible sins. I'm sorry for the things I've done. If there's a hole in my relationships, fill it with Your presence. Let my story help someone else.*

Read Mark 10, verses 13-16.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 August 2015

*When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." Mark 10, verses 10-12.*

Before moving on from the very uncomfortable subject of divorce, there are a few things more that need to be said. "What if I'm divorced? What if I'm the one who's been wronged? I believe in this Jesus but this all seems so "judgy" and typical of what's so publicly wrong with Christians today. If I'm divorced, am I excluded from Jesus' love?"

A couple of years ago, my wife and I hosted a bible study. A few of the participants were divorced, and when the subject of divorce came up, we all got into a testy discussion. One friend made the point that nobody who hadn't gone through the trauma of divorce could fully understand how torturous it really was. Perhaps he did indeed have a point, especially when discussing the issue with people who had endured up's and down's in their marriages but hadn't all ended them in divorce. Perhaps, too, his point was no more valid than that of the person who claimed that, just because a person wasn't of X skin color they couldn't possibly understand what it felt like to be of Y skin color.

But before swinging too far to either pole, let's not forget a few basic truths about Christianity. First, Christians don't have a corner on morality; we're no better than any other sinners. Also, Christians don't commit 'better' sins than other sinners; mine are as scarlet as Ted Bundy's, Bill Clinton's, or yours. Then, no one sin is worse than any other. Even a small rebellion is still a rebellion in the eyes of a just God. Finally, if you're divorced, you may just have good reason. It isn't my place or right to judge your situation any more than you should someone else's.

All this being true, the fact of good Christians getting divorced doesn't legitimize divorce overall. The Bible doesn't do that. While Christ's words don't fully prohibit divorce, they never endorse it. Talk with any divorced couple and they tell you that it wasn't what they wanted at the start of the marriage. Living through a breaking marriage or past a broken one doesn't exclude us from God's grace nor does it make our sins worse than those who are married. What matters more than any of these things is Christ. Anything else doesn't really measure up.

If you're divorced or going through a divorce, I love you. I'm no better than you. Your life has ended up in a place where I don't believe you ever intended to be. My heart goes out to you, and I hope I'm speaking for the vast majority of believers in saying that. I hope, too, that you find comfort in the words of our Savior. Scripture says what it says about divorce, both the parts where Jesus condones it and the parts where He condemns it. I'm simply repeating what it says. In the end, when you're standing in front of Jesus and He asks you "do you believe in Me", your answer of yes or no will mean as much as the answer of the couple who were married for sixty years. It's not about me or sanctimonious believers: it's about Jesus and His eternity that matters most.

*Lord, watch over those going through marital troubles and divorce.*

Read Mark 10, verses 13-16.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 August 2015

*People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. Mark 10, verses 13-16.*

We can all grasp the obvious hint from these verses: have the innocence of children to receive the kingdom of God. To receive Christ's peace, be as humble, inquisitive, innocent, trusting, and believing as children.

Tell me: do you think Josh Duggar can ever be innocent again? Or Hillary Clinton? Do you think that CEOs, union bosses, land-rich but cash-poor farmers, and insurance industry workers terrified about losing their jobs can ever receive the kingdom of God again like children? What about the doctors in those Planned Parenthood videos, the doctors who scissor open baby skulls to extract human brains: can they ever again receive the kingdom of God like children? ISIS head-slicers, Jared Fogle, meth addicts in Indiana, angry looters in Ferguson, political consultants, and your neighbor who doesn't take out his trash: can any of these people ever receive the kingdom of God like children?

I'll admit: we believers don't make it easy for the fallen to let this Jesus pick them up. Pastors sometimes talk like oblique jerks playing "I've got a secret." People like me are hypocrites; people like you may not follow through with the walk to match the talk. Folks who hold themselves up as living to a higher standard fall hard, and other folks are watching: folks who may not know this Jesus and aren't sure they want to if the best the faithful can do is us. No wonder it seems so tough for people to come back to the faith after they've fallen away.

Read up on those verses again and maybe key in on a few key words: "Jesus was indignant." He got downright ticked off that His disciples were preventing innocent, curious children from coming up to see Him. There was a larger lesson to teach and He wanted to teach it to the children so He could teach it to all of us.

If someone can't get to Jesus, Jesus gets indignant about that.

You've heard the platitude: you're enough for Jesus to die for. Yet it's true. It's what He did; it's what really happened. It's not just something said to buck you up: it's the God's-honest truth. What's more, when the world or the world's inhabitants (like us) create barriers that prevent repentant, curious, humble sinners from coming to Him for forgiveness and healing, Jesus gets indignant. Beware to those in His way.

Jesus wants you. Jesus wants me. Jesus wants Josh Duggar and anyone he flirted with on Ashley Madison. Jesus wants Hillary Clinton and her server experts, Iranian mullahs, unemployed people, the woman who reads Tarot every morning, and every other kind of person you or I can think of to come to Him like innocent children and ask Him to simply love us. When we do that, we find He already does and for a very long time now.

*Lord, I come to You broken, hurting and needing You. Forgive me and share Yourself with me, and help me to start again new today.*

Read Mark 10, verses 17-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 24 August 2015

*And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. Mark 10, verse 16.*

I long for this. In the worst of my infidelities, I honestly wanted to die and finally feel Jesus just hug me; me, who felt horrible about the things I had done. In the hardest days of this four-year project I'm finishing, I sometimes want to simply go away and feel Jesus just put His hand on me and comfort me. In the throes of worship, when I sometimes feel attuned to what God is saying, I want Jesus to put His hands on me and bless me. In the times when I'm lonely or scared, I just want to feel the presence of Jesus to know that He will get me through these tough times.

In truth, I've never felt the physical touch of the Savior. This blessing awaits me in the life to come. But in further truth, I have to confess that I've rarely felt the inner peace that I take for His spiritual touch. It isn't because of anything He's done but, instead, usually because of barriers that I put up between us. I know: got skin, got sin; this is true. So I find that my longing for Jesus' touch is even stronger because I'm so acutely aware of how lonely this life can feel without it.

Do you ever feel like this? I'm sure that it's a common thing, psychologically speaking, that is. We're people and we feel alone, vulnerable, remorseful, stressed and the like. When we do, we long for the touch of someone who is loving and familiar. Maybe it's something that's taught to us as infants, when our mothers first cradle us in the warm security of their love.

That's how it feels to be embraced by Jesus: like motherly fatherly love. Jesus is God is Father, Son and Spirit all in one, yet I think that most of us, myself included, associate His loving embrace with motherly love, with that feeling of being protected and nurtured by the one who gave us life. If you think about it, that makes sense because Jesus gives us both life and mothers. Indeed, Jesus had a mother and surely must have felt these same feelings of longing and security, maybe even more so given that, even from a young age He knew His divine side fully. Perhaps He felt even more secure in Mary's arms, and even more longing to feel at one with someone who loved Him unconditionally.

Keep in mind that Jesus took the children in His arms after His disciples tried to shoo them away. Jesus chided them for that, reminding them that all people should come to Him as innocently as children. Having done this, it's not surprising that He would then bless the children, imparting into their hearts and minds His reciprocation of their love for Him. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little envious, yet I'm sure this envy is the same one so many millions have felt in the 2000 years since Christ departed. We're envious of the Apostles, of the people who physically walked with Jesus, who got to see Him in person and hear His comforting voice.

And feel His spiritual touch. I know inside that this is good, even enough, yet sometimes I forget while walking the streets of this world. I long for Jesus.

*Lord, I pray for Your comforting touch. Ease my pain, forgive my sins, I pray in Your holy name.*

Read Mark 10, verses 17-31.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 25 August 2015

*As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone." Mark 10, verse 17-21.*

Do you grasp the enormity of what Jesus is saying to the man?

This stranger runs up to Jesus while Jesus is walking to Jerusalem. Jesus is walking to Jerusalem knowing He will meet adulation and crowds who will, five days hence, watch Him be murdered. This man doesn't know any of that. He has heard about Jesus and wants to meet Him. Perhaps the man is full of himself and wants a little of Jesus' fame to rub off on him. Perhaps the man is a spy from the Sanhedrin, sent out to size up Jesus before He gets to the city walls. Perhaps the man is genuinely curious, confused in life and looking for a meaningful existence.

In truth, we don't know. All we know about the man (at this point) is that he ran up to Jesus and assumed a position of worship. The man then tells Jesus He is "good." Jesus' reply: He doesn't say He isn't good. He simply reminds the man of the depth of his words, that if He's saying Jesus is a 'good teacher' then he is insinuating that Jesus the Good Teacher is God because "no one is good, except God alone."

Enormous. That definitely falls into the "get more than you bargained for" category.

How do you think the man felt when Jesus said this to him? Do you think he was bewildered, shocked to be called out and called back? Based on later verses, we learn that the man is wealthy and conceited; it's likely that he is trying to test Jesus for some unknown purpose not the least of which is pride. Jesus knows all this and yet He doesn't smite the proud man. Instead, He offers the man every chance to come clean and have a genuine relationship. "You say I'm God. Tell me: what do you REALLY believe?" Can you imagine Jesus' penetrative stare?

I don't know about you, but that's daunting for me. All too often, I try to hide my sins from God, thinking that if I do x, y or z, Jesus won't know about it; ludicrous. When I read verses like these where Jesus makes Himself known obliquely yet boldly, I'm reminded that He does the same thing to me every day. He is always beckoning me in His word, my conscience, my schedule and a thousand ways every day to come to Him with everything. Instead of smacking me down, which I deserve, Jesus blows my mind by letting me come to the conclusion that He is who He says He is and He's made it ok for me to come to Him.

That's one of the things Jesus did for the man in these verses. He tipped His hand just a little in order to let the man know that He was in the game to win, specifically to win the man's soul. He does the same thing for you and me.

*Lord, I believe You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. You are Him and You are good.*

Read Mark 10, verses 17-31.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 26 August 2015

*You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'* "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Mark 10, verse 17-21.

Is this you? Do you try to justify yourself to the God who made you? I do. In fact, I don't have to go very long in the day before I have an arm's length list of my sins in small print. Most days I post updates to this blog by 7 AM and, even by that early time, my laundry list of sins is long, storied and ugly even if they're only in my head. My reaction when I think about them? "Well that's not so bad."

Actually, it is.

You see, when talking with the man in these verses, Jesus didn't even list all the Commandments (which the Jews prided themselves on keeping). He listed just a few to whet the man's appetite. He listed some of the more heinous ones, the ones that you could easily keep in public and private both. Don't kill, don't screw around, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, and don't forget to honor Mom and Dad. These are the easy ones. If they're the white lines on our road of how to live our lives, then it's fairly easy to stay in-between them. The man thought that's all Jesus was saying and, in thinking it, confessed how Jesus had talked right over his head. "Teacher, I do those things. Look at how good I am for doing them!"

Not so much, pal.

I say that because I'm that man, because I've been him. And so have you. No, you might not like my saying that but it doesn't make it any less true. I look at my sins and think they aren't so bad compared to other people. My ego isn't as big as Donald Trump's (or Hillary Clinton's for all that it matters). I haven't screwed around like a rock star. I don't steal by padding my expense reports. I don't lie and when I do it's only white lies. "Look at how freaking wonderful I am!"

Did you notice how Jesus' teaching went right over my head as well? I hope it didn't sail over yours. "Dave, I'm not talking about the specifics of your sins. I'm talking about your intent with them. It's your heart, not your hands."

Totally missed it.

So did the rich man on the road to Jerusalem. He may have started out to either meet or trap Jesus; either interpretation holds water. But the longer he walked with Jesus, the more he revealed that his intention wasn't just to get along and learn. Yet Jesus threw him several lifelines – just like He does to you and I every day – and the man (just like us) didn't see, didn't understand, or didn't care about them. His reaction was no better than that of other Pharisees: "see, Lord, I'm not as bad as those sinners over there." He was and is and so am I and so are you. How amazing is it, then, that this Jesus loves us anyway and sees past our conceited wrongs enough to still clothe us in His own righteousness?

*Lord, forgive my many sins, both ones I remember and the ones I've selfishly forgotten. Teach me Your better way today.*

Read Mark 10, verses 17-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 27 August 2015

Posted by [aspiringwriterdt](#) August 27, 2015 Posted

*Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" Mark 10, verses 21-23.*

There is an Extinction Level Event (ELE) that could happen to Planet Earth next month. Sometime between September 15<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> a comet is due to pass close by our planet. The internet is atwitter with speculation that a 2.5 mile wide piece of that comet is actually headed for us, supposedly to impact off the coast of Venezuela, and that the governments of the world are frantically trying to find ways to both blow it up (before impact) or ensure the survival of at least some of humanity after impact. Of course there's no proof of this but that doesn't stop some folks from speculating that disaster and mayhem are imminent and the government is refusing to tell us about it.

The fact is that there is an ELE happening every day of the year somewhere in our lives. It's an extinction level event if someone doesn't know Christ and that's a tragedy. It's even more of a tragedy if someone knows Him and yet doesn't pay attention to what He says; all too often this has been yours truly. And it's even more tragic when someone knows Jesus and then consciously falls away, disavowing belief in Him.

Consider the man in these verses. His situation is tragic and an ELE. It's not that the man didn't know Christ: Christ was walking beside him. Instead, the man thought himself better than the rabbi whom he had just called "good teacher." Perhaps the man is simply another flavor of the guy who knows Jesus and then falls away. Or perhaps the man is not unlike folks we each know, people who are so enticed by the sensual pleasures of this planet that they don't believe they need a loving God to remove their sins from them. Some of us don't think we're sinful at all.

Here's another fact: those folks are you and me. We're the rich man who walked away sad when Jesus told him, "give up on everything you know and follow Me instead. I'm worth it." Apparently the man refused to believe it. We're no different. I'm the man who thinks he's doing so well that I don't need God. You're the person who is so focused that 'I'll make time for God later.' Pope Francis is the man who is so wrapped up in doing what he's doing that he loses sight of why he's doing it (for Jesus' sake). Let's not even talk about media people or politicians. We can self-justify all we want but what that justification is saying is that we really don't think we're that sinful and, therefore, we really don't need this Jesus person.

That's an Extinction Level Event. That's an ELE for the future of the person who thinks it because, one day and that day could be today, the ELE will become an eternity level event. In that ELE, we each must die the death because of sin. When we disbelieve in Jesus through our thoughts, words, or actions, we're proving to Him and to others whether eternity really does matter most to us.

*Lord, once again forgive my sins.*

Read Mark 10, verses 17-31.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 31 August 2015

*The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." Mark 10, verses 21-23.*

Let's face it: there's good reason to be stumped over what Jesus said here. Remember, he's addressing what had just happened on the road to Jerusalem. The rich man had puffed himself up and was questioning Jesus, who responded kindly and threw the poor soul a few lifelines, each of which was ignored. So Jesus then comments: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

If we were the Disciples, we might react by saying, "well, that's it. We're just toast." Or something like that. Yet before going down that depressing path, let's step back and look at a few other things.

One, Jesus wasn't ASKING them how hard it was to live in God's presence: He was telling them. It was a statement of fact, meant to point out, once again, that man in his sinful state couldn't possibly hope to stand in front of a just God and live. Man, in his sinful state, couldn't possibly hope to atone for all the wrongs he had done no matter how many doves, lambs and sacrifices he offered at the Temple. Man, in his sinful state needed something more. Jesus then proceeds to back this up with the outrageous comparison between the camel and the eye of a needle.

Then, Jesus helps to assuage His disciples' obvious angst over "who then can be saved." It seems that we, too, have this same angst, always puffing up ourselves with our own greatness while always surrendering to the magnitude of our pressing problems by declaring that they are too big to solve. It simply isn't true. It simply isn't true because Jesus Christ led across the quantum leap of logic we're missing by declaring "with man this is impossible but all things are possible with God." This simple yet astounding declaration puts to rest all doubt we may ever have. Is it a supernatural cop-out? My friend, the truth is never a cop-out.

Finally, what kind of wealth was Jesus addressing when He talked about "the rich?" Was He talking about those with great material wealth (and, thus, worldly attachment), or was He talking about a wealth of pride? Was Jesus cautioning us on an attitude of the heart? You know the answer. After all, it is sinful pride of the heart that keeps us from truly coming to God with what matters most to us. All the money in the world can't buy happiness but God's peace does. When Jesus was imploring the wealthy road traveler beside Him to sell everything and follow Him, He was being both figurative and literal. The underlying commonality that bridged both methods was simple, however: submit your heart to God and follow.

If you don't think you need God, count yourself as worldly rich. If you think you have enough, you need much more than simple provision.

*Lord, let me be poor in the eyes of the world as long as I'm rich in Your peace and love.*

Read Mark 10, verses 17-31.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 September 2015

*Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!" "Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Mark 10, verses 28-31.*

Read to understand what Jesus is saying here. This isn't Joel Osteen; this isn't prosperity Gospel. This isn't bad-hair-and-three-piece-suit preaching from some corny televangelist. Instead, Jesus is saying God will provide for us in all things and all ways and richly, sometimes even in material riches. The blessings will be even more apparent when we follow Him.

In truth, you don't even have to follow Jesus for God to richly provide for you. If you are reading these words with sight in your eyes, air in your lungs, and a heart beating in your chest, God has richly provided for you. You did nothing to deserve it; that's a taste of 'grace.' God created your life out of lifelessness and He preserves you as you are every day of your life whether you love Him or not. True, some days are better than others; sometimes life really can be terrible. Some days we feel pretty far from God. But it's still life, and through each day of it, if we get to 11:59 PM and we're still alive, then God has provided for us in yet another 24-hour stretch of blessings. He does this for over 7 billion souls alive on Planet Earth right now, and the vast majority of them don't even know or believe in Him.

So it stands to reason that, if you let the peace of Jesus rule your life instead of simply the pursuit of prosperity, then your pursuit of life will be richly blessed. Those blessings may come in the form of a fat checkbook or sometimes they may come only as that steady heartbeat; that's up to God. It's up to us whether we trust Him or not. Either way, you're blessed and when you let Christ rule your life your cup overflows. Know peace? It's because you know Jesus. Know satisfaction in a job well done? It's because you're using the talents Jesus gave you for some kind of good. Feel loved? You're feeling Jesus. The list goes on forever. If you have the love of Jesus Christ in your life, you're richer than Donald Trump on a good hair day. Apart from Him, we can do nothing.

Yet don't get lost in the fuzzy wuzzy nature of all this. Jesus also promises persecution. He promises that, in setting yourself with Him, you will set yourself against the world. The world doesn't go down without a fight. For professing your faith, you will lose friends, you will lose family, you will lose things with which you're comfortable, you'll become a target. It's not because of Jesus: it's because the world is a sinful place. It's because sin in the world hates love in the world, is genuinely terrified of the love of Jesus that shines light into every dark place where sin lives.

Even Joel Osteen knows that.

*Lord, thank You for all the ways You bless me.*

Read Mark 10, verses 17-31.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 September 2015

*“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” Mark 10, verse 31.*

Jesus' Gospel is a light burden to bear; He even says that in the book of Matthew. Yet at the same time, while the love of the Gospel is light as a feather, the penalties of a harsh world are still heavy as stone. The world sets itself against believers. Don't believe me? Then what about that county clerk in Kentucky who is defying the Supreme Court edict on gay marriage? Or bakers in Colorado and Oregon who are being persecuted for not baking cakes for gay weddings? What about Christians in Libya, Iraq and Egypt who are being murdered for simply being Christian? Only a fool could say these things aren't persecution. Yet, to the world, only fool could cling to a faith in this Jesus when the cost is everything up to and including death.

Foolish indeed.

What's more, Jesus Himself says everything we know will be turned on its head simply by accepting the light burden of His Gospel. Accept Jesus and accept that facts on which you rely, friendships you've had for years, even blood family will be things you look at differently...and those things will look at you differently as well. Some will turn on you. If you think you have it all together, Jesus says you don't and He'll put you at the back of the line. And if you think you're a sinner deeply in need of forgiveness, Jesus says that He's forgiven you and you'll move to the head of the class.

More foolishness indeed.

The first will be last and the last will be first. Those who the world thinks are all together aren't all together in Jesus' eyes, and those who Jesus eyes as having things all together are eyed as crazy by the rest of the world. My friend Patrick pastors a church in North Texas (Soulthirst Church in The Colony) and, lately, that's a theme on which that church is focused. Jesus' love is crazy in the eyes of an unbelieving world. Forgive enemies, love those who hurt you, trust an unseen God, practice grace, live the fruits of God's crazy wild Spirit: utter foolishness and downright insanity to most of the world.

Yet those who surrender to that foolishness, that crazy love of Jesus, get to see the utter depravity with which we too often wrap around ourselves. We get to see the despicable nature of our sins and realize there is a better way. There is only one other Way, only one Way to heaven, only one Way to peace now and peace forevermore. The catch: you get to give up all the junk that you haul around. Guilt, shame, anger, resentment, grudges, hatred, temptations, a lurid past: those are who you were and Jesus took away all penalty for them. You don't need to let them define you any longer because a holy God only sees you covered in Jesus and looking perfect.

As Patrick's ministry partner Bill said on Sunday, "if that's crazy, give me insane."

And it's a lot tougher to live than it seems, especially in a world where, like Michael Corleone, "they keep trying to pull me back." You too. Jesus doesn't promise to make the world go away. Instead, He promises to be with us always as we slog our way through it. And in that crazy journey, we find it isn't as tough as we think.

*Lord I want Your crazy love in my life.*

Read Mark 10, verses 32-34.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 September 2015

*They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." Mark 10, verses 32-34.*

Consider what has just happened. As Jesus and the His Disciples are walking to Jerusalem they are being followed by crowds of strangers. In all this, Jesus politely but definitively rebukes a wealthy man and, in doing so, teaches a valuable object lesson. He then stresses that everything we know about 'living a good life' means nothing in God's eyes, that only those dead to the world will be considered alive to Christ, and that it is impossible for us to be rich enough to get to Heaven.

Now He's predicting His death.

Several times before (just in Mark He has mentioned it explicitly twice and implied it at least three other times and that was just in Chapters 8 and 9), Jesus has talked about His coming death. Here, in Chapter 10, He spells out more details even as He and His friends are walking towards the scene of the coming crime. What's more, He is specifically telling them that the very religious authorities to whom they have submitted (in faith) through their entire lives will seize Him, murder Him, and bring about the greatest miracle in all of history.

Put yourself in the place of someone walking there beside Jesus. Do you think your mind would have been scrambled by now? I think it's practically a guarantee. In the space of a few days' walk from Galilee to Bethany, Jesus has upended everything you thought you knew. He has thrown spiritual, economic, mental, political, ethical and practical knowledge into chaos and all without any kind of threat or violence. His words cause people to question everything they have ever known and every way in which they've ever interacted with others.

He's still doing it today. He's still doing it because His love is illogical. It's crazy; it makes no sense. It was foolishness to the men and women walking with Him in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judea. And it is foolishness today for those who, to paraphrase CS Lewis, populate all of human history with their pursuit to deny God by making other things gods in His place. It's simply crazy to believe in something you can't see while denying what you can see; that's how the logical world looks at faith in Jesus. It's even crazier to cling to that unseen thing and justify it as good because a good man who said He was God died.

Except that it all actually happened. Except that Jesus gave us His crazy life. That he clings to us illogically through His crazy love today specifically because He died that death in our place. It's been proven nearly statistically impossible for one person to have fulfilled every Bible prophecy and live a sinless life to atone for all our sins and promises we didn't keep. Yet Jesus did it anyway. It's crazy but it's true.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for living and dying for me.*

Read Mark 10, verses 35-45.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 September 2015

*They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. Mark 10, verse 32.*

I like books about warriors, and one of my favorite war authors is Richard Marcinko. Years ago, he wrote a book called "Rogue Warrior;" it's an autobiographical book about his work in the Navy SEALs. One of the maxims about which he wrote was "lead from the front." It's good military advice; it's good advice overall. You don't lead a group by giving orders and standing in the back of the pack: you go to the front of the pack and demonstrate. You don't shy away from challenges or combat: you fight from the center, where the fighting is thickest. In doing so, you inspire, you motivate and you lead.

Now, Jesus is no Special Forces warrior but He could have taught Marcinko a thing or two about leading from the front because it's what He did every day of His ministry. In verse 32, Jesus is in front of the group, leading. Keep in mind that it wasn't just Jesus and the Apostles: it was a larger group, a Galilean gaggle of followers who had come to find out that there really was something about this rabbi who offered new teaching. They had seen Jesus and the rich man; they had heard His words of power and authority.

And they were afraid. They weren't a rioting group of rabble but they were afraid. They were afraid of being caught. They were afraid of what could happen if they had to come up against the very entrenched Jews at the Temple. Truth being told, they were also probably afraid of the things Jesus taught. Yes, the crowds who flocked to Jesus' sermons were awe-struck by the love in His words and the power those words conveyed. I'm betting they were afraid of both that power and of actually having to live up to the things Jesus was talking about.

Through it, Jesus led from the front. He didn't hide when things got hairy: He jumped in and led. Jesus calmed their fears and led them where they needed to go. He's still doing it today. Richard Marcinko might just agree.

We can do the same. Over the weekend, my wife and I went to see "War Room," the new movie about prayer warriors. It's a Jesus-Richard Marcinko kind of thing in a unique way. In the movie, a struggling wife and mom is trying to hold her family together in an all-too-typical situation where they are being pulled apart. She is taught to lead from the front by fighting the enemy – the devil – through prayer. The story teaches that prayer is an active battle plan, that it is our way to involve God in our daily battles and our real struggles by getting right in the middle of the fighting and praying for God's intercession with whatever we're praying over. Very lead from the front.

And it's very much the way Jesus designed things. In our daily lives, He constantly counsels us to count on Him through prayer and through actively confronting our problems. He leads us from the front, facing our problems and strengthening us to face them down and defeat the devil who is the real cause of them.

*Lord Jesus, teach me to lead from the front as You do.*

Read Mark 10, verses 35-45.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 September 2015

*"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." Mark 10, verses 33-34.*

Why did Jesus tell the Disciples these things? You know, couldn't He just have let it happen without making a big deal about it? It was traumatic enough for those who witnessed it, especially if the real crucifixion was anything like "The Passion of the Christ." And for those who lived through it, afterwards everything changed and the Apostles spent most of the rest of their lives being hunted as criminals. Why did Jesus tell these men about how He would die?

If you haven't considered it before, there are several very good reasons.

First, He needed to tell them He was fulfilling prophecy. In doing so, they would know without a doubt that He was who He said He was and that all He had said and done was true. There are HUNDREDS of individual prophecies about the Christ in the Bible (meaning in all of Jewish antiquity). Mathematically, it is nearly impossible for them all to be fulfilled in one person, yet that is what Jesus was saying would happen in Him. He knew these (relatively) uneducated men wouldn't understand or remember every prophecy but they would know enough (just from their upbringing) to see how Jesus was identifying Himself as the one and only Messiah. He told them what would happen so that they would know, without a doubt, that He was that Messiah. They would know this was a miracle and that He was the one true God.

Then, He needed them to be prepared for when it actually did happen (which was only a few days away). If you care for someone and you know something bad is going to happen, then you try to prepare them as much as possible for it, right? That's what Jesus was doing. I mentioned the movie "The Passion of the Christ." The Jews of Jesus' day were familiar with crucifixion and how it was used only for the most rebellious and vile of criminals. If the act was as gruesome as Mel Gibson portrayed it then the Disciples would have been familiar with it and would have been shocked, even disheartened, at seeing their Teacher subjected to it. Jesus told them these things to prepare them for the shock of His death...and then for the even bigger shock of His resurrection.

But I think, most of all, Jesus told His closest friends these things just because He loved them. Yes, it's an act of love to prepare someone, and to identify Yourself as Messiah. Yet I think Jesus was doing more than just telling these men a simple truth. I think He told them just because He loved them. Peter, John and the rest all mattered to Him, enough to die for in fact. After all, why does He tell us, especially after all these years?

It's love. Jesus told them – and us – these things simply because He loves us.

*Lord Jesus, I thank and praise You for Your unending love. I love You too.*

Read Mark 10, verses 35-45.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 September 2015

*Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Mark 10, verses 35-39*

Are you audacious, bold or even arrogant? Are you confident when you pray, or does it seem awkward? Are your prayers wishes or honest requests? Do you boldly ask for things or tackle questions and issues head-on? That's what the Disciples were doing. In a way, these verses are some of the most brutally honest and realistic because James and John, the Sons of Thunder, were doing what you and I would do. In a way, I think they were more honest than you or I would be.

You see, we SHOULD ask Jesus for anything in prayer in audacity, boldness and confidence. Do we? Usually not. As I mentioned yesterday, my wife and I went to see "War Room." Audacity, boldness and confidence in prayer are some of the big messages we took away from the movie. God wants us to talk with Him confidently, boldly and with an audacity of hope that even Mr. Obama couldn't imagine. He wants us to talk with Him about things that matter to us, things we believe – and don't believe – and he wants us to be genuine. Jesus wants our reality, our truth because He is reality and He is the only real truth. If you haven't seen the movie, go see "War Room" and gird up for battle.

And life is a daily battle, isn't it? Sometimes it is very much a battle to be true to principles throughout the day. I know that, for me, authenticity in my faith can be a real struggle. I really, truly believe in Jesus. I really, truly believe all He said He is, all that He did, and all the ways He is at work in the world today. Yet every day I really, truly struggle with coarse language, with 'walking the walk' as an honest believer. I'm judgmental. I'm shallow. I fail at gossiping, at patience and humility, at empathy for my brothers and sisters. My bold audacity is indeed arrogant sometimes. I'm a sinner and because I'm a sinner I desperately wage war against an unseen enemy every day.

If I were to say to Jesus what James and John did, I think He might react in a similar way. Or, perhaps, He might honestly tell me, "no." I believe He would tell me that I really don't know what I'm asking. And I also believe He would love me anyway, that (just as He does now) He would see that I'm placed where I need to be so as to best do my part in His work. Jesus doesn't NEED me to do anything for Him, but He wants me to. And to do what He wants me to do, He asks that I audaciously, boldly and confidently share with Him all my innermost thoughts, hopes, dreams, and prayers.

*Lord, I bring to You all my inmost thoughts. You know them anyway. Hear me as I pray, and reinforce me to boldly, audaciously pray with You, pray for others, and do Your work.*

Read Mark 10, verses 35-45.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 September 2015

*Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." Mark 10, verses 39-40.*

It's been five years since my 25<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. Do the math and I've been out of school for thirty; duh. There are times when I wish I could crawl up into a ball and go back to my hometown and just be a kid again. I graduated from high school in a small town in southern Indiana where I had only lived for two years. While there, I met my wife, made some life-long friends, grew up, learned about Jesus, and set myself on the path that I'm still walking today. I thank God for every day I lived in Mitchell and the people there. Five years ago, I organized our class reunion. Out of just over 120 graduates we had over 90 show up for the party. That's a pretty good number, and it was due to the hard work of everyone involved.

In those five years I've sometimes felt that I was going through hell. In those five years I've also sometimes felt as if I was on top of a mountain and couldn't be happier. I'd give anything to take back the bad things I've done, to un-hurt those I've hurt along the way. But in that same time there has been so much more good. I'm thankful for seeing my marriage rebuilt, my daughter married, my grandson being born, two of my kids graduating, and a hundred other things I could list without my smile fading a bit. And regrets? Like Sinatra and Elvis, I have a few but, then again, too few to mention.

You see, I don't let myself be obsessed by regret even though I've done things in life of which I'm ashamed and do regret. If you let yourself be defined by your sins then you miss the point of God's grace. What's more, Jesus PROMISES us that life will be difficult, that there will be times of unspeakable pain on our path to eternal rest with Him. That path is part of what counts, mainly in how we use our talents, days and journey to reach other people with the message "Jesus is looking for you." You can't live out that message if you wallow in 'coulda woulda shoulda' or regret. Verse 39 of guaranteed the Apostles that the world would extract a price in pain from each of them. The same holds true for us.

Yet knowing that, I take great comfort in realizing that there are some things out of my control. Verse 40 says as much, stating to James and John that God is ultimately in control of everything and that He has places in mind for all of us. I need to be a good steward of my talents, time and treasure, but I don't need to live wrapped around the axle about things over which I have no control. God has appointed me for the life I live and He's equipped me to live it fully, even when I mess up and always in His grace.

Happy anniversary, Class of 85. Can't believe it's been 30 years but the best is still yet to come.

*Lord, thank You for times to reminisce, for Your grace, for life experiences, and for today.*

Read Mark 10, verses 35-45.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 September 2015

*When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Mark 10, verse 41.*

Being a believer doesn't exempt you from human emotions, feelings or reactions. Believers in Jesus, followers of Jesus get angry, upset, tired, irritated, pleased, happy, indifferent, and the whole range of emotions and feelings just like folks who don't believe in or follow Jesus. If you think that saying "I believe in Jesus" will make everything unicorns and rainbows, friend, you're following some Jesus different from the one who is who He says He is.

The Jesus of the Bible is the Jesus of the Trinity. He is Lord and Savior of a race of broken sinful people called "human beings." Millions, maybe billions, of people in the last two thousand years have declared their devotion to and for Him, and all that devotion began with Him mentoring twelve imperfect, sinful humans known as "the Apostles." In this story, as you know, James and John have asked Jesus for something He can't give. They have overstepped the bounds of righteousness because they were imperfect sinners falling into emotion and feeling. We don't know all the sidebar conversations that the Apostles were having but one thing becomes readily clear: as soon as the other ten Apostles heard what James and John had asked for, they became indignant.

Dictionary.com defines 'indignant' as "feeling, characterized by, or expressing strong displeasure at something considered unjust, offensive, insulting, or base." That's seriously ticked off. Not just upset: strongly upset, angry and riled up. The other ten Apostles heard that James and John had asked for special privilege and they got fighting mad at their brother Apostles.

Stop the picture and take it all in. These are Jesus' twelve closest friends. Two of them have asked for special favors, and the other ten are calling them out on it. Calling them out, in fact, vociferously and angrily. You can almost feel what they were feeling and these were the people who knew Jesus better than anyone else on Planet Earth. They had dedicated their lives to following Him, learning from Him, worshiping and serving Him...and they were just like you and me. They got PO'd.

That's why I say that being a believer doesn't exempt you from the same feelings that non-believers have. If you believe in Jesus, you're still you. You're still a sinful human subject to the whims of your emotions and feelings: just like folks who don't believe in Jesus. What's more, you're a believer in an unbelieving world with a devil set against you; a devil who is determined to trip you up by bombarding you with those emotions, feelings, reactions and many things that are beyond your control. On your own, like James and John (and the other ten indignant Apostles), you're basically screwed.

The difference is Jesus. The difference between your being screwed and having zero hope in this world or the next is the life and death of Jesus Christ of Nazareth who was and is and is to come.

Read the next few verses to find out how Jesus said the Apostles should now act instead of react.

*Lord Jesus, I'm full of flaws and failures. Forgive me all of them and help me to master my emotions.*

Read Mark 10, verses 35-45.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 September 2015

*Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10, verses 42-45.*

The disciples are pissed off, so Jesus throws down and reminds them of why He came and how they should now act because of Him. As you noodle that thought, don't lose sight of the immensely profound thing that Jesus just said and did.

Along that thought path, let's talk work. My project is exactly one week out from go-live. If you don't work in business IT projects, that means the new codes and changes we have worked four years to implement go into live business production one week from today. Tensions at the client are enormously high, and my team is struggling hard to get through last minute issues, side-bar white noise, and the sniping that comes with being this close to implementing large-scale changes. Yesterday, most of us on the team put in a 17 hour work day.

Know what? Jesus could be speaking to my team instead of the Twelve Apostles. He could be reminding those of us in Minnesota to remember that, in all ways and at all times and especially in times of stress and duress, to serve is to serve Him. Every thought in our heads and every action of every minute should be spent serving others in ways large and small.

Tell me: how's that working out for you? Does it go against your grain to have someone remind you that you should have the heart of a servant when, sometimes, you want the heart of Conan the Barbarian? Even if the someone telling you is Jesus, God Immanuel, King of Kings and Lord of Lords?

You know the answer. We're fatally, brutally flawed and sinful creatures. Left to our own devices, we would make constant war on each other. Thank God that He is playing a long-ball game called "life" and that He is endlessly merciful to creatures who don't deserve it.

If you want to get past moments of stress, remember to serve. If you want to have your demands heard and addressed, remember first to serve. If you want to be served, serve others first. If we truly want to change the world, let's do it first by doing it for others just like Jesus. In doing so, we'll find it's deeply profound and worthwhile.

Jesus confronts the conventional and reminds us that He didn't create us for conventionality. He lived and created us to be unconventional, to address hate with love, to address demands with confidence, to address stress with calmness. Jesus isn't giving the Apostles (or us) some cheesy pep talk. Instead, He is empowering humanity with the tools to address mankind's deepest need for fulfillment and satisfaction. In doing so, He reminds us that love is more powerful than anything else, and that if we use that love as a willing servant does, then we can overcome anything. Even a software go-live.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for Your servant example and for Your patient mercy. Teach me yet again to serve You by serving others in wherever I find myself this day.*

Read Mark 10, verses 46-52.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 24 September 2015

*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10, verse 45.*

We are happiest when we lose ourselves in a cause. My dad didn't give me much advice in life; he wasn't one to make profound observations on life. That's not to say he didn't say things I remember because he did. I simply don't remember him specifically spelling out many things explicitly for me to remember. Dad was more of the kind to expect my sister and I to learn simply by watching and listening.

Yet one of the things I do remember him saying to me was said when I was a young airman in the Air Force. He told me “Lose yourself in a cause. You'll find yourself.” I remember it for it's marked difference between his usual observations, and for the fact that it's spot-on correct. It's also something Jesus could have said and, in a way, it's a derivative of verse 45.

We are hard-wired by Christ to be happiest when we are immersed in serving others. Serving in the military, serving in church, serving Thanksgiving dinner, serving wherever life takes you: we as people are happiest when we subordinate ourselves to do things for others. When we do this, we are living to our fullest potential.

Jesus pointed to the example of His service to the world as the model for our behavior. He lived, taught, died, and would live again as the penultimate lesson on how we should live our lives. Everything Jesus did was some kind of act of service. Water into wine in Cana? Serving the wedding. Calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee? Serving the terrified Disciples. Observations on divorce, adultery, anger, and a hundred other topics? Service to humanity by imparting God's wisdom. And dying on the cross? The ultimate service.

It's ultimate because it is a ransom for many. It's the only ransom that could be paid for our sins. You or I couldn't do it; neither could the Pope, Mother Theresa, Joel Osteen, Billy Graham or Donald Trump. Only Jesus could pay the true price for the guilt and punishment that our trillions of sins require.

Yet notice Jesus doesn't say “ransom for all.” It's true: Jesus' death and resurrection is the price paid for the redemption of all mankind. All humankind is given this benefit because of what Christ did, because of God's grace. Yet not all of humankind will claim that benefit. Will those who live this life in disbelief of that miracle benefit from it; will they live eternally with Christ in heaven? It's a tough answer to hear but you know the answer is “no.” It's not me saying that: it's Scripture. I prefer to not play God and judge what He does or does not. It's enough for me to take Him at His word and believe that, when Jesus says “No one comes to the Father except through Me,” He means it.

And if you want to go to the Father, you must first die to self and live to serve.

*Lord, refashion my heart, my thinking, my every action to want to serve You by serving others.*

Read Mark 10, verses 46-52.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 September 2015

*Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus"), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." Mark 10, verses 46-49.*

What did Jesus say? He said "call him." Do you grasp the depth of that, of those two simple words? He's calling you too.

A couple of weeks ago, my wife and I saw Garth Brooks in concert. During the song "Calling Baton Rouge," I videoed the performance and sent it to my daughter, Samantha, because (when Sammie was a little girl) she used to get all excited when Garth sang her name in the song. Garth's song may have been about calling a girlfriend in Baton Rouge but my daughter thought he was calling her.

Yet there's a better call than one from Garth. Jesus calls us.

Jesus is calling you.

He's calling you and me just the way He called Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus was a blind beggar with no hope. I find it interesting that the Bible mentions him, an obscure stranger, by name. Maybe it's something we're supposed to remember, and maybe we're supposed to remember him by name because Jesus called him like He's calling us. Bartimaeus made his living by begging for money because there was no other way; he had no other way to earn. He used his condition of no hope to early the only way he could.

Sort of like you and I, both of us people who use our time and talents as best we can to get by in a sometimes hopeless world...

...except that Jesus calls us. Except that Jesus sees us where we are and knows us by name and in a sometimes hopeless world gives us His hope to make the world irrelevant. In the middle of our muck and our sins, Jesus calls us. He calls us to cling first to Him in everything we think, say and do. He calls us to know that everything that could ever be done to save us from the terror of our sins He has done on the cross. He calls us, then, to let Him remold our thinking, our hearts, and our actions. And He calls us to follow.

Those words help me to remember that celebrities are great but Jesus calling me is better than a call from Garth Brooks or Jack Black, who I saw in person yesterday. They're profound because they me that the Son of God knows me personally, that He desires a relationship with me personally despite all the things I've done to deny and abuse and rebel against Him. And He desires that our Father see me as holy and pure so that we can live out the rest of my days here in ways that serve Him and His great mission as well as live eternally with Them beyond here.

*Lord, thank You for calling me in Your Word, in my heart, in my mind, and when I least deserve it. You rock my world. Teach and strengthen me to do what You want me to do today where I am.*

Read Mark 10, verses 46-52.

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## **Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 October 2015.**

*Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. Mark 10, verse 50.*

When was the last time you REALLY got excited about something?

Yesterday was a go-live at my client. Yesterday, the ICD-10 diagnosis codes went live at every health insurance company in the United States, and at every hospital, doctor's office, medical facility, or healthcare provider of any kind, including my client. Starting yesterday and going forward, if you receive medical services that are processed at any healthcare facility in the country, unless they are done for workers compensation purposes, they will use ICD-10 codes. I've helped to lead a team at one company for most of the past four years (with occasional side-tracks to other locations as well). You wouldn't think that something as small as a medical diagnosis code would get people really excited, but this has been a BIG deal in the healthcare community and a great many people have been VERY excited about it.

Sort of like blind Bartimaeus. In fact, during meetings yesterday afternoon, I looked at some very excited (and nervous) participants and wondered if they would be as excited as Bartimaeus was at receiving his sight from Jesus. Would they jump up and be grateful? Would they see it wasn't about them (while it sort of seemed like it was)? Would they begin to see at all or would they simply keep walking around blind?

Jesus had called Bartimaeus. He had singled him out from a crowd of total strangers because the blind man had gone the extra mile to be noticed. He had called out louder and louder for Jesus to notice him because blind Bartimaeus needed help that he realized only Jesus could give. Bartimaeus may have felt desperate, or hopeful, or nervous, or even a little apprehensive; perhaps he felt a mixture of those things and we'll never know. What we do know is that Jesus responded to him and Bartimaeus became excited about meeting Him. He became excited and jumped to his feet and went straight to Jesus.

Tell me: have you ever gotten excited like that about Jesus? When was the last time you got excited about something but, more importantly, when was the last time you got excited about meeting Jesus in any way? He calls me and you every day in ways both personal and public. I can't tell you the last time I jumped up to my feet and ran straight to Him. More likely than not, when Jesus calls to me I respond by saying "in a minute, Lord." Or "let me finish this thing I'm doing." Jesus calls me and comes right to me, right to me in the middle of all my muck and my mire. Do I respond the same to Him? Do I act like grateful Bartimaeus? How about you?

So far so good with my client and most of the companies and providers I know about. I'm sure there are issues somewhere, but a lot of excited people did a lot of work ahead of time to prepare for using these new codes and that helped to minimize likely problems. Still, the next time you visit your doctor, ask them about ICD-10 and what it meant to them. Be prepared for an earful of an answer, though. Chances are they may get a little excited about it.

*Lord Jesus, I'm excited about You. I'm excited You called me; I'm excited You saved me. Teach me today to share my excitement about you with others.*

Read Mark 10, verses 46-52.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 5 October 2015

*“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. Mark 10, verses 51-52.*

There is so much to unpack in just these two verses; we could spend a week just talking about desire, honesty, faith, promises, gifts, receiving, graciousness or following. Let's confine this to what Jesus does instead of what we want.

Notice that Jesus doesn't do a magic trick. He doesn't waive a magic wand, or say “all about me, guys.” Jesus doesn't go ahead and simply do the miracle and walk away without helping the man. And Jesus isn't Allah, demanding servile fealty of humiliated subjects. Instead, Jesus ASKS the man what He, the Son of God – God With Us, Immanuel – can do for him.

What do you want me to do for you? Can you imagine if God in the flesh came up and asked you that question? Would you ask for something? Would you be Solomon and ask for wisdom? Would you be a media hog and ask for TV time? Or would you just ask Jesus for a hug (which might be what I'd ask for)? Jesus asked this question of the blind man, Bartimaeus, even though He already knew what was on Bartimaeus' heart. Jesus didn't ask the question for Himself: He asked it for Bartimaeus.

So Bartimaeus responded and then Jesus acted. Yet notice what Jesus says: your FAITH has healed you. Bartimaeus knew in his heart that Jesus was God Immanuel, that Jesus could help him. He believed it, and when Jesus posed the question to him, Bartimaeus responded honestly. To me, that's a profound thing. The power of faith and the unmeasurable depth of real faith are profound matters of a loving heart.

We can want almost anything. In this old world, many things we want aren't worth wanting; let's be real. Yet there are things we can want for honest reasons. To stop a hurt, to help someone (even ourselves), for God's reasons and not ours: even in a world of sin there are healthy reasons to want something. It's even ok to want things that are healthy, especially if something about our situation isn't healthy. Yet God does indeed know what's best for us and can respond to us rightly and personally in ways we don't always recognize when our wants become our wishes. Sometimes, whether we want it or not, God gives us things or allows things into our lives because He knows that we need them. My question becomes “is what I want about me or God?” That's the nub of it all.

No matter whether this is your situation or not, I hope and pray that you're like Bartimaeus. He got to pray to Jesus in person, to extend his deepest desire to his God standing in front of him. He was blind but then he got to see and it was a fruit of a deep faith from which we can learn all these centuries later. The key is having faith in Jesus and bringing our deepest loves, thoughts and desires to Him, then waiting on the answer He always gives.

*Lord, I want so many things, but what I really want most is You. I want Your love and peace in my life. I don't deserve it but I ask for You anyway.*

Read Mark 10, verses 46-52.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 October 2015

*“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. Mark 10, verses 51-52.*

Before moving on, there’s something else to be said about these two verses that I feel compelled to share. It’s the heart of them. It’s not about me. It’s about Jesus.

Duh!

No, really, I mean it. There’s nothing Bartimaeus could do to make Jesus love him any more; there’s nothing Bartimaeus could do to be worthy of Jesus’ gift of sight, or even the gift of sharing the same airspace with Jesus Christ for just a few minutes. It isn’t about Bartimaeus receiving his sight in this fantastic miracle of love. In fact, it isn’t about Bartimaeus at all. If you or I were in the story, it wouldn’t be about us either. It’s about Jesus loving Bartimaeus and doing something for him. It’s what Jesus did and not what Bartimaeus did.

If you’re like me, you spend more of your time wondering about you’re angle, about what all this means to you, about how you should think or respond or whatever. Lost in the shuffle of all that selfishness is that monumental statement “what do you want me to do for you” that Jesus spoke to this blind stranger. The creator of the universe, the man with whom Adam and Abraham and Moses all personally interacted, the advocate of Job, the fire in the burning bush and the whisper of life in every living being on the planet walks up to a perfect stranger in a crowd and asks him how He, the Savior, can serve. It’s not about me. It’s about Jesus.

Just yesterday, a co-worker and I were talking about how we had led our project with a service attitude. Not to be beaten-down servants, or to be cowards in the face of weaker people: we were talking about how proud we were to be on a team where our attitude has been to serve. To do our best for other people while subordinating ourselves to their goals. We talked about how this is the true attitude of a Believer, how it’s impossible to be a follower of Jesus without this attitude. It’s impossible because it’s what Jesus modeled for us.

And because He did it – because He rendered for us the ultimate service of dying in our place, as our punishment – there is nothing standing between us and the majesty of God. I couldn’t do that; the Apostle Paul couldn’t do that; you couldn’t do that; neither could Bartimaeus, my co-worker, Billy Graham, any Catholic pope, Joyce Meyer or Donald Trump on a good hair day. Only Jesus could die for us; only Jesus could redeem us. Only Jesus could show us that all of life is about the supreme gift of love that He is and gave for us and still gives us every day.

Bartimaeus saw that. He got his sight and immediately followed the first thing he saw, and the first thing he saw was the Savior who served him in his deepest need. It’s not about Bartimaeus. It’s not about you. It’s not about me. It’s about Jesus and all was, and is, and is to come.

*Lord, let all my life be my service to You. It’s not about me. It’s about You.*

Read Mark 11, 1-3.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 7 October 2015

*As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.' Mark 11, verses 1-3.*

Strange and prophetic verses; in reality, Jesus is directing His disciples to do something that will fulfill a prophecy from Zechariah (Zechariah 9:9) as well as to identify Himself as the one true King. There are hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament that talk about the Messiah; this was simply one of the more public ones. It was something Jesus understood even as the Apostles apparently didn't.

Now consider what they were actually doing. The cynical part of me says "yeah, try doing it in downtown Baltimore today." Or maybe inner city Detroit (or inner city anywhere). In fact, try doing it in the suburbs of any American city, or out in the redneck woods of East Texas where I live. Try going up to some stranger's house, taking one of his prized possessions, and then just saying "it's for Jesus." You can imagine the reaction awaiting you; hope you're wearing Kevlar.

That same emotional reaction would have awaited the Disciples as they walked up to a stranger's house and took away his property (in this case, a donkey). Do you think the owner would have been irate? Do you think his go-to reaction would be to confront the disciples with a weapon, or an argument? Perhaps some more focused questions would be 'are we so different from the people of Jesus' time? Are we any less protective of our belongings, or skeptical of God Himself? Do we honestly think that our modernity makes us superior or truly different from these people who first knew Jesus face to face?'

Noodle that for awhile.

If a stranger came up to me and said "I need your car but I'll bring it back in an hour," I wouldn't let him have it. In today's America, it wouldn't even be safe. Yet Jesus told the Apostles that they could get this donkey and no harm would befall them and that's what happened.

Tell me: do you think Jesus asks us to do things that will make us inherently unsafe? The only honest answer has to be "yes, sometimes He does." But consider that word 'unsafe.' Jesus is asking us to trust Him, to cast away our notions of safety and security (and property) and trust Him with all that's most important to us. He may very well ask us to inject ourselves into things, postures or positions that will challenge the safety of all we know, yet what Jesus is really doing is saying "trust me." He said it to the Disciples, to the owner of the colt, and maybe even to the colt itself; we'll never know about that last one. What Jesus puts on our hearts is more real than our distrust of the world around us.

And all of it was foreseen centuries before it ever happened.

*Lord, when You ask, help me to hold nothing back, to give everything to You, to trust You completely.*

Read Mark 11, 4-11.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 12 October 2015

*They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. Mark 11, verses 4-6.*

Obviously, these verses are the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made in verses 1-3. Like I said, this is an ancient prophecy; ancient even at the time when Jesus fulfilled it. If you aren't familiar with all the prophecies fulfilled by the Son of Man, I'd encourage you to read up on it. You might consider starting here, then seek out the deeper instruction from a Bible-believing church: <http://www.accordingtothescriptures.org/prophecy/353prophecies.html>.

Knowing all that, tell me: when was the last time someone really kept a promise to you? Think about it and really, truly answer. Prophecy is a kind of a promise, specifically a promise made by God to do something in the future. He spoke through dozens of both famous and innocuous people all throughout the days of the Old Testament. Now and then, God laid down a marker that would teach people of old about the kind of man who would come to redeem them from all the ways they had failed Him. When He did that, the Almighty was making a promise.

Has God ever promised something to you? People will fail each other; we do it all the time, and it seems we especially fail those who love us the most. In fact, people failing each other – sin – seems to be the only thing that is common to all humanity in every generation. Yet that's really just a superficial thing to say. It's short-sighted and filtered by the opaque coating of sin. Strip away that coating and you see that God is both the one who strips it away and the one who binds us together through time.

He binds us with the promise of His divine, forgiving, crazy illogical love. He promised it from the beginning by creating Adam in love, intellect, and free curiosity. He promised it practically from the very moment that Adam and Eve were shown their sin. He promised it through dozens of judges, kings, princes and prophets. And He promised it in the hundreds of ways that described what the Messiah would do, look like, be, and act out.

People fail you all the time. Co-workers, spouses, friends, family: we let each other down in more ways than any of us could list. Through it all, God has promised to always be with us, always abide with and in us, to never abandon us, and to never let us go no matter what happens. It was foretold. It was fulfilled. It is still continually fulfilled today.

*Lord, I praise You for all the ways You prophesied through men of old, and for making those words come true in the past and in my life today.*

Read Mark 11, 4-11.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 October 2015

*When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Mark 11, verses 7-10.*

To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, we hold these truths to be self-evident. So did the crowd on that Sunday morning in Jerusalem. They had heard of this Jesus for years and now He was there in person. Many in the crowd had seen Him, listened to Him, followed Him, gotten to know Him, and realized that He was the long-promised Messiah. And there He was, finally, entering Jerusalem to make things right.

For so long things hadn't been right. For so long, religion and God had seemed like separate things. And the Romans and their Herodian puppets had ruled over Israel with iron tyranny. The countless laws, rules and regulations required by both the Romans and the religious made life insufferable and poverty unending. For so long, things had been so wrong, so far from the life in the land of milk and honey that had been promised to their ancestors. The Jews of Jesus' day had been promised a king who would set things right, who would restore the heart of Israel back to what it used to be, what it should have always been.

And here He was: here was the King who had been promised. The people in the streets knew who Jesus was because it was self-evident, because a swelling crowd of followers had been growing since He set himself on the road to Jerusalem. Word gets around in a small town and Jesus passed through many small towns. By the time He got to the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus was fully known and eagerly expected. The city expected Him to become its royal leader who would make Israel great again. The centuries of disgrace and servitude would be at an end.

Yet the crowd also acknowledged the self-evident truth of Jesus' divine nature. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." That wasn't something said about the chief priests and Jewish elders. It wasn't said about the House of Herod, or the Roman overseers, or even the Roman emperor Tiberius (who fancied himself a god). It would only have been said about the Son of God and that's who the crowds were saying Jesus was. They had heard His words; they had heard how He fulfilled hundreds of prophecies, about how He kept God's promises and how He lived a life without sin. They had come to know that Jesus was the promised one, seeing how He was unlike anyone else they had ever seen or heard of. They had seen His miracles and heard about the amazing love that He preached. They had fallen in love with His message of forgiveness, patience, wisdom, peace, servanthood, and following God. "Hosanna" they all cried and they gave Jesus the kind of welcome due to an approaching king. They welcomed Him like the King of Kings He was.

And in five days they would want Him dead.

*Hosanna to You, Lord Jesus. Blessed are You who was and is the Lord, who came as the King of Kings serving as the servant of all.*

Read Mark 11, 4-11.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 October 2015

*Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. Mark 11, verse 11.*

In some ways, this verse seems to conflict with accounts from the other Gospels. Matthew 21 goes from Jesus' entry into the city right to clearing the Temple. Luke 19 does much the same thing, giving insight into some of what Jesus said. And John 12 doesn't say anything about it at all. Which is it? Maybe the question ought to be "why do you think that matters?" If you look at the timeline of events, what's said in Mark 11 doesn't directly contradict Matthew 21 or Luke 19. If anything, Mark 11 verse 11 adds more insight into that timeline.

So last night I was driving through St Paul, on my way home from a Whole Foods ("Whole Paycheck") market where I bought some organic honey. As I was driving I went by Macalester College, which is my Dad's alma mater. In the early 1960s my Dad went to Macalester (on the GI Bill) while my mom worked at a hospital. They used to live in that area of town, known then as "Mactown." In Mactown I saw a place called O'Gara's Restaurant. Neon on the sign out front said it has been open since 1941, and I thought about stopping in to have a quick drink; I may still. I wanted to go in because it's an old-looking place that may look very similar to how it did during the time, 50 years ago, when my young parents were likely some of its patrons. But it was getting late and I had been up since 0230, so instead of stopping in for a cold one I drove back to my hotel.

"But since it was already late" applied to me just as much last night as it did to Jesus 2000 years ago. Instead of getting wrapped around the axle of (what to me are) unimportant details, I like the verse today because it paints Jesus in a very human picture. I'm sure He intended to go to the Temple as soon as He arrived in the city, but acknowledging that it was getting late in the day, instead, He went out to the suburbs to stay with His friends.

Jesus being conscious of time; Jesus going someplace; Jesus being constrained by events of the day; Jesus spending time with His friends: these are all very human behaviors. I'm awestruck by the grandeur of God's grace given freely through this man who is His Son, and I'm so aware that only He could rescue me from my sins. Yet I'm occasionally comforted by the human side of my Savior. He was fully God and fully man at the same time, something I lose sight of because I know He is God. Jesus felt the night breeze on His skin. He knew hunger, and feeling sleepy, and the respect one must have when living by another's schedule. I live my life like that, and I find it comforting to know that Jesus did too. Yes, it's important to know about the fidelity and veracity of Scripture as a whole, but I find it much more loving that my God would also paint Himself in a picture that I can appreciate because it could be one in my life as well.

*Lord, thank You for living as both man and God. I love you for both sides of Your nature.*

Read Mark 11, verses 12-25.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 October 2015

*The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. Mark 11, verses 12-14.*

Words mean things. Jesus cursed this tree and, as we'll read in a few verses, the curse worked. Did He do it to be mean to a tree? No, probably not; vegans and tree huggers, rest easy. Instead, He did it to teach us a lesson. Do you or I really say what we mean? And how much effect do our words truly have?

I have a Facebook friend who is always taking courses in how to conduct ministry. She's a reformed alcoholic who let God remake her life of despair into one of joy and service to others. She says that people don't always believe her when she gives her testimony and talks about the bar scene, the drug scene, the promiscuity scene, and the always being miserable scene. We're online friends and have never even met in person, yet I find her testimony to be compelling and utterly remarkable. If there's one thing I know about my friend (other than she likes steak and peanut butter) it's that she means what she says. She's determined to live this new life in Jesus to the fullest nearly as strongly as she's determined to never go back to the ways that used to occupy her heart. God gives her that determination, and I admire her for it.

Almost as much as I admire my wife. A few years ago, yours truly was the one living the pathetic life of drinking, partying, and promiscuity. It was a double life, one based in lies and in juggling reality and fantasy; mostly it was just dishonest. When my wife found out, she said she loved me and I believed it...just as I also believed her when she moved out. She was forthright, upright and ruggedly, brutally honest in saying that she wanted to be together but she wouldn't allow me to walk on her or our life together any longer. In a strange way, I had been waiting for years to hear that. She was never a doormat but I didn't know the real depths of her love. It was when she stood up so strong for God and us, in that order, that I knew I had to change. In fact, it was her courage that gave me the will to stop, to turn my back on the way I was living. I admire and respect her endlessly for that.

The common thing that my Facebook friend and my courageous Hunnie have in common is that they mean what they say. They mean what they say because what they say is said through faith in Jesus. The Lord and giver of life gives the only real meaning there is to every word He said. In turn, when we speak in Him, we can be completely assured that everything we say will have meaning and power. Can we turn a fig tree to wither? Absolutely? Anything becomes possible, even miracles. If you don't believe in miracles, talk to my friend or my wife about the faith miracles in their lives.

*Lord, I believe in You, that only You can give power and meaning to life.*

Read Mark 11, verses 12-25.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 October 2015

*On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" Mark 11, verses 13-17.*

So much has been written about these verses; what more could I possibly add? Jesus' righteous anger; cleansing the House of God; infiltration of sin; den of robbers versus house of prayer: what more could someone like me hope to add to the constructive discourse on this story?

Just this: Jesus does this every day in my life.

I don't let myself be defined by my past any longer. That's one of the gifts of faith in Christ. As a believer, you GET TO turn from those things you've done that once defined you. You don't have to: we get to. It's not that all earthly penalty of them goes away. Sometimes we have to live out the consequences of the things we once did that we're now ashamed of; at least that's how things have played out with me. Lies, drunkenness, anger, judgments, adultery, fornication, profanity, arrogance, sloth: I still feel the effects of my past sins in my daily life today.

Instead, every day Jesus overturns those tables in my heart and confronts me with them when the Ghosts of Sins Past try to knock on the door of my psyche. He didn't make me to be a vessel for sin even though that's what I have made my life into. No, Jesus made me to fulfill a specific purpose in His greater plan for my life and the lives of those around me. He created me to live a life in communion with Him, both now and in the eternity to come. He gave me talents, abilities, and circumstances so that I might learn to use them in service to others for Him. Whether it's my job, my home, my family, my possessions, even my very private thoughts, Jesus blesses me so that I might use those blessings to further His purposes in the lives of those around me.

Every day, then, He reaches into my heart and does battle for me against the forces of sin, guilt, and regret that would overtake me if I were left on my own. He teaches me through His word, through the words of others, and through ways I can't even begin to tabulate to turn back regret with praise, to resist temptation with focusing on thankfulness and gratitude, to combat my sinful faults with prayers. When memories of guilty pleasures haunt me, He encourages me through His Spirit to focus on praying for others, on bringing to Him my innermost thoughts, on helping me root out what's really on my mind in those moments.

It's a daily struggle, and I sometimes am weary of fighting the battle. My body and soul are supposed to be temples for God's splendor even as I have desecrated them with my hateful little sins. Thanks be to Him that He comes to me seven times seventy seven times to overturn the tables of sin that I build inside this temple.

*Lord, thank You for fighting for me daily, for blessing me in ways I don't deserve, for helping me to battle the temptations of sin.*

Read Mark 11, verses 12-25.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 October 2015

*And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.' Mark 11, verse 17.*

There's a clause in verse 17 that I'd like to talk about because it is the invitation you've been waiting for.

Last week I was talking with a friend about a mission trip I took to Communist China six years ago. On my laptop background there is a picture of several children I met there in a remote mountain village. My friend and I were talking about how those of us on the trip communicated with those kids. Not only were there obvious language barriers. It was also communicated to us that we, as Christians, were not to initiate conversations about Jesus with any of the local villagers. But, if the villagers initiated such conversation, we were free to respond. My friend, who is a skeptic, asked "how could you talk about this Jesus if you weren't allowed to even mention Him?"

Good question and it hits on verse 17.

I replied to her that we got to 'be Jesus' instead of talking about Him. We got to act kindly, serve others through our work, be patient, listen and smile. We got to act in ways that we thought Jesus would around strangers; see 'fruits of the Spirit' in Galatians 5. In this way, perhaps these kids would remember that these Americans who called themselves Christians and followers of Jesus were motivated by something other than themselves. We couldn't talk about Jesus but maybe we got to do something better by simply acting the way He might have.

The reason for this is because 'my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'

You see, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit want all people of all kinds everywhere to know this Triune God personally and intimately. It isn't an invitation just for white people, or Americans, or Baptists, or people with some secret password. God wants His house – you and wherever you are – to be a house of prayer. He wants you and I – His church – to be people who are living vessels of worship in the world, everywhere, for ALL nations. God wants all people of all races in all places to know Him. And if they don't know Him, then you and I get to facilitate the introduction.

The best way to facilitate that introduction is by walking the walk of a faithful believer.

I'll admit: I struggle with that. On mission trips it's easy to act in ways you might not at home. Back at home, however, my words and actions all too often contradict the desire in my conflicted heart to better serve Jesus. I know I can do that best by living out those fruits of the Spirit; as the hymn says "they will know we are Christians by our love." All too often, though, I fail spectacularly, which is why I constantly need Jesus to keep coming back to me and reminding me that He forgave me and made it possible for me to turn from all that. When I do that, miracles happen, like showing a little love to some orphan kids half way around the world, then, years later, sharing that story with folks who want to know more.

*Lord, let the house of my heart be a house of prayer for You. Help me to act out my love for You.*

Read Mark 11, verses 12-25.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 28 October 2015

*The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. Mark 11, verse 18.*

Let's talk about Donald Trump. No, I'm not endorsing Mr. Trump, nor am I going to use this time to insult or demean him. Trump is (mostly) the current front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination. Yes, there is a LONG time to go until the election, so being the front-runner of anything at this point in the election cycle is largely meaningless. Instead, let's talk about how folks are out to 'kill' Mr. Trump.

And 'kill' is not a hyperbolic word. Many Republicans and Democrats would love to write the epitaph on Donald Trump's public career at the earliest possible moment. In this presidential election, it is outsiders (on both sides of the aisle) who are shaking up conventional wisdom and taking the establishment political classes to task. In ways good and bad, unconventional candidates are saying and doing things that both threaten the power of established 'rulers' and engender support from a voting population that is largely disinterested and mostly disgusted. Trump, Carson, Sanders, Fiorina, even the no-name professor from Harvard, are saying things that resonate with voters in ways that seem to baffle traditional political advisors, consultants and candidates. According to the elites, that simply can't be allowed.

The only thing that doesn't seem to baffle them is their perception that, if traditional politician X fails to secure the presidential nomination, the power of the establishment is threatened.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell about how Jesus was murdered for the same reason. Yes, the reason 2016 outsider candidates are a threat to the current political establishment is exactly the same reason why the religious establishment of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea felt threatened by the 'insurgent ministry' of Jesus Christ. Jesus was just busy being Jesus, being God Immanuel. He taught love, peace, patience...and confrontation of evil. His very human existence was an existential threat to the power structure of the elites in Jerusalem (both Jewish and Roman). He had built a huge following of passionate believers; what if those followers decided to turn on the Temple or on their Roman overseers? At the very least there would be serious bloodshed. Indeed, revolution was all too possible. That couldn't be allowed.

So Jesus had to die. The powers-that-be didn't want to just end Jesus' political and ecclesiastical careers: they wanted to end His life. If Jesus didn't die – if the overseers couldn't find a way to get rid of Him – then the amazed believers would see they no longer needed Temple worship...or temple taxes. If the passionate followers decided they no longer feared death because the Jewish rabbi had taught them so, then they would no longer fear Rome.

What would happen if all of Trump's support (or Carson's, Fiorina's or anyone's) turned into active voters? Governments only derive their powers from the consent of the governed. What would happen if all those folks who supposedly support the political outsiders decided they didn't need the establishment parties? Would the desire for political reform rise and succeed or fail and die? What would happen if all of us who profess to be Christians and followers of Jesus Christ actually did what He said? Would we have to die as well?

*Lord, I want to die this life for You.*

Read Mark 11, verses 12-25.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 October 2015

*When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" Mark 11, verses 19 – 21.*

Remember this story from a few days ago? Now as then, words mean things. Tell me: do you believe it when someone says them to you?

Jesus told a fig tree to wither and it did; the proof was evident when the disciples saw the withered tree. Churchill told Parliament and anyone else who would listen that Hitler was a danger to Europe; remember World War II? Ever hear about the myriad of problems facing the US Government today?

What do you believe when someone says "repent and turn to Jesus" or "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me?"

When we visited the first part of the story – Jesus telling the tree to wither – we talked about meaning what we say. I believe most people do mean what they say, or at least most people want to. We want honesty; we demand or ask it of others. Accordingly, we should mean what we say so that what we say is both honest and forthright. We should mean what we say whether it is expressing our faith, telling a tree to wither, discussing work, playing with our kids, or anything else. God takes us at our word: we should mean it.

But if we each mean what we say, then it follows that 'the other guy' (in our conversations) means what he says as well. What should our reaction be to that? Do you believe it? Do you take people at face value (like God does with you) or are you skeptical? Do you parse words from meanings or intentions? Are you (like me) someone who hears but doesn't always listen well? If this is how we perceive – and treat – the words of others, what does this say about how we perceive and treat Jesus?

Jesus told the tree to wither. The Disciples who heard Him say it were either baffled or didn't pay attention to the words. Yet the next day the tree had withered and the Disciples believed that Jesus had meant what He said. They believed after seeing the sign. Do you or I need a sign?

Not only, but the Disciples saw the withered tree withered FROM THE ROOTS. It was 100% dead from the inside out and from the bottom up. Have you ever considered that, when we don't mean what we say and when we don't believe others and trust their words, Jesus considers us to be withered from the bottom up? Jesus asks us, expects us, to believe what He said, and to act on what He said in our lives. Do you think He considers us to be withered wood when we don't? Should we be shocked when our sins have consequences? Should we be surprised if our hearts and minds are unrepentant and then, at the end of all things, Jesus calls us to task for it?

Are you a dead tree? Am I? Believe it, my friend. He means what He says. Thanks be to Jesus for His forgiveness.

*Lord I believe Your words. Teach me to better listen to others, to You, and to let my actions then follow in belief.*

Read Mark 11, verses 12-25.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 November 2015

*“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Mark 11, verses 22-23.*

Yesterday I asked “do you believe.” Here’s the why; here’s the assurance of faith.

Jesus is telling us that we can perform any miracle, no matter how large, imposing, daunting or logically improbable. Read that again, then stop to absorb it. What He’s saying can change the way you live.

You see, it’s not enough for us that we fallible people believe. Jesus logically tells us the spiritual truth that He has done everything necessary to save us from the justice due for our sins. He tells us His truth, then proves it repeatedly in a hundred ways: all of which come to the cross (which, at this point in Mark, hasn’t occurred but is – literally – dead ahead). Yet He knows us. He knows we want more, that the sins of our intellect aspire to desire more. Hence, He gives us faith, preaching and proving that, through faith in Him, the miraculous power that is His can be ours as well. Jesus overcomes all.

Don’t go getting the big head. You and I will never be God. We can’t be Jesus. He’s the same Savior who spoke the truth that “Apart from me you can do nothing” (see John 15). He means that in the exact same way that He means that we can do anything through Him. Anything.

Move a mountain. Make a child. Undertake a big project. Kick a habit. Save a life. Fly. Anything is possible through Jesus. Literally things aren’t any more complex than this. It’s a simple truth.

So what about that ‘doubt in their heart’ bit? Tough one, to be sure. “If I have faith and I command something to happen and it doesn’t, does that mean I don’t have enough faith?” Perhaps, but what’s your motivation and have you talked with Jesus about that? “If I have enormous faith and things don’t turn out the way I wanted, does that mean my faith was insufficient?” Maybe; I’m not God and I don’t know for sure about your situation...have you asked God about it? “I just can’t.” To paraphrase both Jesus and Yoda, “that is why you fail.”

We each have doubts; we’re human. The ONLY way to handle doubt (meaning “squelch or erase doubt”) is to take our full concerns to Jesus. I just finished reading the book of Job for the umpteenth time and came away, yet again, with the knowledge that human ways aren’t always God’s ways, but God’s ways are better even when we don’t understand them. When doubt clouds faith, the only place to go is to the cross and to align ourselves, once again, with faith in Jesus so that He might grow and expand our faith once more. If we truly say we believe and that Jesus’ words mean what they say, there is no other option.

The assurance of faith, that through Jesus all things in this life become possible, is the guarantee of forgiveness, the spark of empowerment, and the true source of freedom and human liberty. Through faith, the sky is the limit. What say you?

*Lord, I put all my faith in You. Wherever You are leading me today, I ask only to believe in You that I may follow.*

Read Mark 11, verses 12-25.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 November 2015

*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. Mark 11, verses 24-26.*

Two things strike me about these verses. They're another example of Jesus meaning what He says; does He ever not mean what He says; I mean, really? And the other part is how He reminds us to seek forgiveness for any wrong we've done.

I suspect that you're like me in thinking that last part is especially hard. That guy I was arguing with on Facebook? Jesus tells me to be reconciled to him before even praying silently. The wife I've hurt a thousand times with my callous words? Jesus tells me to ask for her forgiveness before I come to Him for anything. The kid I hit back in sixth grade, the guy I insulted on an airplane this summer, the guy I cut off in traffic, that woman who stole my parking space and then received from me some demonstrably un-Christian words: Jesus tells me to go to them and forgive them before I do anything else.

Tough, man: that's a really, really tough thing to do.

Jesus is cutting us to the core. He's saying "don't talk to me about your innermost love if you're holding that love back from someone else." In one verse, the Savior is assuring us that He means what He says, that if we earnestly ask Him for something it will be ours. Joel Osteen followers take note: that may not mean a Lexus. No, Jesus is assuring us that the things that really matter – the matters of the heart – will be ours if we take our honest requests to Him. And in the very next verse, Jesus then reminds us to let go of our junk before we bring our heart-felt matters to Him.

Astounding. And it's tough. It may be the toughest thing you could ever do. Just one verse before Jesus assures us that faith will make anything possible because His faith is true and full. Here He tells us that the vehicle He gives us to exercise our faith – prayer – makes that 'anything possible' into a tangible tool for living. Yet in the same breath Jesus reminds us how we would misuse that tool if we do so while harboring any kind of un-forgiveness against our sisters and brothers.

Yep: tough. Really, really tough thing to do in life yet it's what Jesus asks us to do, even commands us to do.

Think about it: it's the tendency of the world to tell us to do opposite. It's easy (and fun) to gossip. It's natural to react in anger, to vent. It's understandable to want revenge. It makes sense that we would react when people hurt us. You know where this is heading: the old guilt trip. Yet Jesus doesn't call us to feel guilty: He calls us to change. He calls us to repent from our wrongs, and the biggest part of repenting is turning away, changing our behavior. Then comes forgiveness.

We can do neither without making use of the lifeline God gives us in prayer. So every time we feel pulled by the past, grab on to the lifeline, then first forgive anyone who has wronged you or you have wronged.

*Lord, teach me to forgive as You forgive. I believe in You.*

Read Mark 11, verses 27-33.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 November 2015

*They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?" Mark 11, verses 27-28.*

Here's yet another example of how little things change. In a way, stories of the petty ways in which the Jewish Temple leaders treated Jesus give even more credence to the truth of them. The chief priests and elders schemed, conspired, nit-picked, and finally plotted to bring down this interloper from Galilee. They used every dodge and ploy at their disposal in trying to box Jesus into rhetorical corners, yet He refused to play along. If Jesus was 'the big dog,' they were the pack of little Chihuahuas nipping at Big Dog's heels. Yet if you get enough little dogs, even the Big Dog's life can be in danger.

How little things have changed. Our politics today are rife with stories of how the media and the powers-that-be try to take down anyone who seems to threaten the establishment status quo. In corporate America, the quickest way to losing your job is to rock the boat (even as every new CEO promises to 'turn things around by changing how we do business;' freaking rah already). Do you know people, maybe even family members, who gossip and tear down other people for no reason other than petty envy? And what about you? Where do you or I fit on the spectrum of mis-behavior?

If Jesus walked up to you or me and said, "Friend, let me help you change your life," would we respond with "who do you think you are?" Or "who made you the boss of me?" or some other churlish retort.

Noodle it long enough and I believe you'll see how we really aren't different from the chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders in these verses. In their defense, some of them were only doing what they thought was best to protect God's Temple against the violent tendencies of Rome and the plotting intrigues of their Gentile neighbors. The Jews of Jesus' day were used to being treated like second class citizens yet they still fiercely clung to their ancient status as God's chosen people. Anyone who came along and was perceived to be a threat would naturally be suspected, likely targeted for elimination. Should it be surprising to us, then, that they questioned Him, "who do you think you are, pal?" "Not so fast, young man. Who gave you permission to rock the boat?" At what point did prudence turn into venom?

Eons later, we respond every day in the same way. I respond by immediately being suspicious of the corporate VP who sends me snarky emails about my project; they immediately make me question her agenda. You respond by questioning when your kids tell you that their teachers know best on American history, Islam studies, and other subjects du jour. We each act the same with new neighbors, strangers in the mall, and politicians with whom we disagree.

I wonder: how many times have we missed opportunities to act like Jesus with strangers who honestly didn't know Him. How many times have our words and actions hindered His Kingdom when we could have helped it? Are we the Big Dog or the little yappy toy? We haven't changed.

*Lord, forgive me. Help me yet again to not question You and to do my part for Your work.*

Read Mark 11, verses 27-33.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 November 2015

*Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin' ..." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." Mark 11, verses 29-33.*

Jesus isn't being evasive here. If you think so, re-read the verses a few times. I believe you'll see that he's actually trying to offer yet another life-line.

Consider that Jesus knows the score when He has this exchange with the chief priests. He knows they're trying to set Him up. He knows they're plotting to murder Him. He knows what's going to happen at the end of the week, on Good Friday. Yet, even at this late date, instead of smashing the priests into little bits of priestly mush, He offers them yet another chance to submit to His love and justice. Jesus asks them a question instead of pointing out their wrong-doing. He poses an issue to them, hoping to stir their hearts and minds one more time.

Has He ever done that to you? I can't tell you how many times in every day that it happens to me, whether it's my petty judgmentalisms, or my arrogance and pride, or the lust in my eyes, or the anger that is all too often my go-to reaction. When those times come, I deserve to be smacked down by the Almighty, to have Him put me in my place. That's what a human god would do; that's what Allah would do; that's what people do to each other.

Instead, Jesus speaks through my conscience, through the moments in the day, and poses to me yet again the questions I need to be asked. I know it is the voice of God because it doesn't lead me into further sins, or into tough times without there being a light at the end of them. The life-lines He throws to us are designed to pull us back, to tug us out of the quicksand instead of letting us choose to sink further. It's usually quiet, unassuming, speaking words in my conscience, trying to keep me on the straight and narrow. Do I listen? No, not always; thanks be to God for His patience with me.

And consider this, too: Jesus knows the score with you and me right now. Those sins you and I want to deny we ever did? Jesus knows about them. The junk we hold onto that we know we shouldn't? Jesus knows about it. The hopes and dreams that haven't come to pass? He knows them. Despite all of our crap, Jesus comes to us anyway and asks us that same question: do you believe in Me? Believing in Him isn't carte blanche for misbehavior: it's carte blanche entry into eternity when we don't deserve it. He offered that same free pass to the chief priests yet they passed it by. We should not do the same.

*Lord, help me to always listen to Your words, to follow where You guide me. Thank You for throwing life-lines to me, your grace being the gift I don't deserve but am so very thankful for.*

Read Mark 12, verses 1-12

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 11 November 2015

*Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Mark 12, verses 1-9*

Prophecy and warning. Remember the context of these verses. Jesus is in Jerusalem during the last week of His life; this story is told, perhaps, on Monday or Tuesday of that week. He knows the rulers of the Temple are conspiring against Him, looking for some way to corner and kill Him. Despite that, He tells this parable to both lay out what would soon happen to Him and to warn those who would do it that God's wrath wouldn't be denied. Years later, the message for us is the same message Jesus gave to them: "He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

I thought God loved us. Would He who loves us also want to kill us? Perhaps the answer is in the question "do you believe?"

Will God kill us for our disbelief in Him? That's what Jesus is saying in this parable. The free gift of eternal life is available to ALL mankind. All races, both sexes (even Bruce Jenner), all nationalities, all religions: if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that He and only He has the power to forgive your sins, and that His death on the cross paid for those since once and for all, then you are saved. There's nothing more to it than that; there's nothing more for you to do. God's grace is a free gift and done for you by Him.

Reject it at your own eternal peril. That's what Jesus says in verse 9. The second death – the death of the spirit – is eternal separation from God, who cannot allow unholiness into His presence. Rejecting Jesus means rejecting His covering holiness, His once for all sacrifice to the Holy Father. That leads to death, both eventual physical death and, much worse, the death of the spirit. It's what He was warning His accusers about.

As an aspiring vintner (as well as aspiring writer) I like that Jesus uses the analogy of a vineyard to paint His prophetic picture. But it isn't for love of wine that He says what He says. He says it for love of you, me, and even those long ago priests who were looking for an opportunity to kill Him.

*Lord, I believe in You, that only You can save me.*

Read Mark 12, verses 1-12

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 November 2015

*Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" Mark 12, verses 10-11.*

Verse 11 is a quote of Psalm 118, verse 22. Word for word, Christ uses this ancient hymn of prophetic thanksgiving to declare to the chief priests – and to us – that He is the completion of God's temple (indeed of all endeavors), that He was rejected by the people who were supposed to embrace him, that human knowledge is useless compared to the things of God, and that His life is the greatest blessing that God has ever given us. The hymn was ancient even at the time He fulfilled it: it had already been around for hundreds of years.

Think about it: The psalmist wrote these words hundreds of years before Jesus even lived. How could someone know that the Son of God Himself would become the living stone that is the cornerstone – the foundation – of all salvation? How could some obscure words from a temple song have such deep meaning? How could such a miracle happen? It's a God-thing; that's the only explanation.

The capstone: without it, the building would be incomplete and would come apart. The capstone is the stone that holds all the others in place. Think of it as a keystone in an arch; the stone in the middle that bears the weight of all the other stones in the arch pushing opposing in opposite directions. Pull out that capstone and the arch (and all the other stones over it) collapse. Leave it in place and it can stand indefinitely.

That's Jesus. That's the stone, the only man in all of history with the qualifications, genealogy, and ability to hold humanity together. Without Him, the arch falls; humanity falls apart. Don't believe me? Think of places without Christ, without hope, without faith. Without Jesus, you get ISIS, Paris attacks, 9/11, modern Iran and Nazi Germany. Without Jesus, you get humanity left to its own devices. Is it any wonder that, when we live without Christ, disaster, murder, and hopelessness ensue?

So why did the builders reject the capstone? Why did the chief priests reject Jesus? Why have you and I?

"But Dave, I haven't." Oh really? I won't guilt you out but I will ask you if you've honestly done what you know you should to help your fellow man. If you haven't, then have you kept Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself? I haven't; what about you?

"Well, if I had been alive then I would have helped Jesus." Oh really (again)? Centuries ago, Martin Luther answered similar statements from people who said they would have helped the Baby Jesus in Bethlehem instead of letting Him be born in some dirty, germ-ridden stable. "You would have helped the Baby Jesus, would you? Then what have you done for your neighbor who is Christ in your midst?"

Tell me: what have we done for our neighbor? If we neglect them, are we rejecting the Capstone just like the Jews? Maybe I haven't ordered Jesus' murder but my lack of love must surely hurt His soul just as much as those misguided priests. Especially since you and I have the benefit of being able to interpret Jesus' words with more ease and more resources at our disposal than any people at any other time in history.

*Lord, forgive me for the ways I've rejected You. Teach me continually to do better.*

Read Mark 12, verses 1-12

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 November 2015

*Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" Mark 12, verses 10-11.*

A few more words need to be said about this idea. They're words of great hope.

"The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes."

In one breath, Jesus talks about how the Jews have really screwed up (and how we keep doing the same thing). They've rejected the foundation of life, Jesus Himself, for something else. Despite this, God uses their rejection in ways that thwart them and in ways that make it possible for us to live forever. The Lord did this, not the Jews, not us, not ISIS, not President Obama. The Lord did this. And it is marvelous in our eyes. It is the most marvelous thing on which we could ever fix our eyes.

It is the miracle of the virgin birth in Bethlehem. It is the healing of hundreds, perhaps thousands, just in His lifetime. It is the forming of thousands of broken hearts into whole vessels of love. It is the death of the innocent Son of God on that brutal tree at Calvary. It is Easter Sunday.

The Lord has taken every evil thing you and I could ever conceive of doing and turned them around to serve His higher good. He did it, not you or me. He has set His Son before us as the fulfillment of all our wonders, all beauty, all purpose, all knowledge and all love. He has done this incredible thing and it is marvelous any way we could behold it. And it's all because of love. His love. His perfect, just, sacrificial, atoning marvelous love.

If you think about it, EVERYTHING the Lord has done is marvelous in our eyes. Your body, that miraculous amalgamation of systems, cells, chemicals and specialized flesh: it is a miracle. No, I don't believe we evolved: I believe we were created by God because the human body is a marvelous miracle of love. In fact, all living things are marvelous. That a tiny single-cell creature can still be alive is just as marvelous as pondering the vastness of a rain forest. All life is miraculous; all life is marvelous in our eyes. Without life, we wouldn't comprehend anything. God is life.

Have you considered the vast cold beauty of the universe? We learn more about it every day. Marvelous. Or that rain forest and trees in general. Food, shelter, fuel, shade, air, beauty: marvelous. Quantum physics (that seem, more and more to point to design rather than random chance)? Marvelous. Grace, words, eyesight, gravity, pleasure, even sex? All of them are naturally illogical things that are marvelous to ponder.

And all these are things that the Lord did. We didn't do them; they were done for us out of love. The Lord made all of them possible for us, given for us, because He was also the stone the builders rejected who became the capstone. Jesus is the summation of all creation; He is the reason things were created. That we might live in His love forever, to share and grow and worship in it. That we can conceive them is marvelous; that they were done is marvelous in our eyes. That the Lord did them for us is marvelous for all time.

*Lord Jesus, I praise You for Your capstone love, for Your marvelous giving love.*

Read Mark 12, verses 13-17.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 18 November 2015

*Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away. Mark 12, verse 12.*

Cowards. You see, I'm the chief priests. I'm one of the cowards. So are you.

There's the big story online this week about whether or not the United States should take in refugees from the Middle East, some of whom may be enemy (ISIS) sleepers. How do you reconcile the Great Commission and Jesus' command to love our neighbors with the very real imperative to not foolishly risk national security or American lives? How do you stand up for things you strongly believe in and not beat-down the other guy rhetorically, not compromise your faith? Myself included, everyone on Facebook seems to have the right (and pious but shallow) answer. Instead of doing something courageous, however, most of us (myself included again) don't really extend ourselves to do more than give some pretty worthless opinions. Not very Christ-like. Pretty cowardly, in fact.

Then there's work. My client is going through hard times. They have lost a significant portion of business. In a few weeks, just after Christmas, most of their employees will be out of work. If you don't know who to pray for, please pray for these good people who are facing some scary days ahead. Yet in the middle of those scary days, there is work that still must be done. Some of the folks are 'retired on duty,' suffering from 'short-timer's syndrome' and not focusing on tasks at hand. I can understand the attitude; I've been there. But there's still that pile of unfinished work that we need to get done. Instead of facing tough issues, more often than not, most folks simply skulk away and gripe, myself included yet again. Coward.

Or there's that relative who's always bringing you down. They constantly complain about something, telling you the same things over and over. You can talk and talk and talk with them but no matter what you say they always turn the conversation back to themselves and talk over you again. They may not even realize they're doing it. You love them; you worry about them; you wish there was some way you could help but instead of telling them what you really feel, you retreat and things never really change for the better. Yep; again.

Cowards. We're all a flavor of coward in some way. Each of us has some kind of junk in the trunk. Rather than face it – rather than 'fess it up to Jesus and let Him heal it – we hold onto it and let it rot.

Here's some news: God didn't make us for cowardice. Jesus didn't die for cowardice. He wasn't a coward. Jesus was a hero. He did the tough, necessary work to gain our salvation, even for the chief priests who would reject and kill Him. In doing so, He gave us all we need to turn from the cowardice of our sinful choices. Why, then, do we keep going back to them? Every time we do it's like we're spitting on Jesus' selfless sacrifice.

How can I go on in this life of cowardice? Thanks be to God for His mercy and His courageous Son who slayed my sins for me.

*Lord, imbue me with Your faultless courage. Forgive my cowardly moments and strengthen me to stand for You when the moment comes.*



Read Mark 12, verses 13-17.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 19 November 2015

*As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." Mark 13, verses 1-2.*

I grew up near the city. We were always 'townies' whether the town was large or small. Until just this past March, I never lived in the country even though I always wanted to. Now, my house in the country is nothing fancy. My wife and I specifically rented it because we wanted to live in a temporary place where we could decide if this was the place where we wanted to live. It's my hope that we're close to being able to buy that land, to build up our business, to plant a vineyard where we'll grow wine grapes, and, most of all, to establish a new means where we can carry to a new level the 'second chance' ministry that has been put on our hearts.

And, at the end of all things, none of it will be left standing. Jesus said so.

But I'll confess: I still enjoy the city. I grew up in Minneapolis where, in the early 1970s, the IDS corporation (which no longer even exists, I believe) built its headquarters building downtown. I once thought it was the biggest building in the world, but it obviously wasn't. Anyway, not long ago I walked by the front of the building and looked up at the top. It's impressive to see something so tall and magnificent rise up to the sky. I've done the same thing at the Empire State Building, the Bank of America building in San Francisco, the (former) Sears Tower in Chicago, and even the old World Trade Center buildings before Osama took them down on 9/11.

At the end of all things, none of them will be left standing. Jesus said so.

Cities are mankind's monuments to commerce, community, and hubris yet they pale in comparison to even the words spoken by the Son of Man. He who spoke the universe into existence and created us from dust still has dominion and power over the same creation. I'm sure even Jesus is impressed by the Burj Khalifa but even that building is nothing compared to the simple power of Him. Everything was under His control from the beginning; everything still is.

I find that thought comforting as the world around us seems to be spinning out of control. War in the Middle East, a country (even a world) divided like never before, hard times that don't ever seem to end; you name the crisis. If you let it, worry about these things can overwhelm you, especially if you're alone in the big city. So I find it comforting, especially when my wife and I are "porching" in our rocking chairs near Paris, that Jesus is still Lord of Lords even over the most magnificent and imposing of human creations. No matter where you are, no matter where you're from, all you see around you there and now is still under the control of the same Jesus who was there at the start.

And He has big plans for it all.

*Lord, You are so much more magnificent than anything else I can imagine. Thank You for your grace, mercy and peace.*

Read Mark 12, verses 13-17.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 November 2015

*As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" Mark 13, verses 3-4.*

We always want to know the future. Just this past Sunday the pastor at the church we sometimes attend in Paris gave a sermon on the end times; check it out at <http://www.calvaryparis.com> if you want to know more. In Phil's sermon, he talked about amillennialism, pre-millennialism and post-millennialism. To those (like me) who don't care much for insider baseball, in Christian circles those are eschatology philosophies: ideas about how Christ will end the world. One talks about a single return of Christ, another talks about a series of returns, and another talks about a series of returns coupled with literal fulfillment of some prophesied events. Like I said, check out the sermons if you want to know more.

The point I'm shooting for is that Phil's sermon is another example of that statement I made in the opening paragraph. We want to know what the future holds. Some seek the carnival or dark arts of fortune telling and mediums; others obsessively plan and endlessly speculate. It's normal; it's understandable; it's not unusual.

It's what Jesus' disciples wanted to know in verses 3 and 4.

Peter, James and John were being prudent. They wanted to be able to interpret the signs of the end of the world so that they could prepare for what would happen. Was their intention selfish? Perhaps, but (as we'll see in the coming verses) it's more likely that their desire to know was honest because Jesus answered them without calling them out over it. Keep in mind, this all occurred during the last week of Jesus' life, perhaps on Monday or Tuesday of that week as the thirteen men ministered to followers in Jerusalem. Not even the three disciples – indeed nobody but Jesus – knew what would happen starting Thursday night; had they known perhaps these verses would read differently.

Jesus had just said that every stone of Herod's imposing temple would be torn down. It was a fantastic and improbable thing to contemplate; in less than 40 years, it actually physically occurred. Yet there in Jerusalem that day the disciples were told it was imminent and they were amazed at even the idea. They had no way of knowing that Jesus was talking about something completely different even if the actual prophecy of physical destruction would also come true in the lifetimes of some who heard it that day.

So it's natural that we would want to know more, want to know when to be ready for the end. Whether the interpretation of the end times involves a single return of Christ or a Tim LaHaye-style rapture and tribulation misses the point. We are to be ready today, here and now, and not worry about what the future will hold. We see signs every day in our lives that tell us to love now, share Christ now, be Jesus for someone now regardless of what else is happening in the world. At any point in our lives the world could spin out of control, and at any minute Jesus could return. It isn't up to us, or Peter, James, John, Pastor Phil or Tim LaHaye. It's up to Jesus in His own good time.

*Lord, I am ready for You to return now. Help me to stay vigilant, honest, and prepared.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 November 2015

*Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you." Mark 13, verse 5.*

I hope you keep reading this blog; indeed, I hope you read and then share it with someone. It's my goal, my hope and plan, that it be distributed to as many people as possible so that others might become curious about who this Jesus really is.

But let me make something crystal clear: if anything I say deceives you in any way, stop reading and never read it again. If anything I say leads you away from true faith in Jesus, I pray that you contact me and point out my sin to me, but stop reading.

You know as well as I do that, in our so-called modern world, there are shady people everywhere. Slick politicians twist facts to wear them light silk suits. Kids and adults alike lie with great ease. Reality TV presents 'the real world' in heavily edited sound-bites that really just present to you only what someone else wants you to see and hear. The news media don't report unbiased, 'just the facts' news anymore. Deceit abounds.

This is just how things have always been. Deceit goes back even to Eden, with Adam and Eve blaming anyone other than themselves for their sins. They did it after being deceived themselves.

It's a deliberate act. Someone has to do something to deliberately mislead you. When it happens, you also have to do something deliberate to accept the deceit: you have to believe it. Both can be hard to do yet how easily do we give credibility to those who deceive us? That's what Jesus is saying to us. He isn't saying that people won't deceive us; He isn't saying that it doesn't happen, or that people don't do it deliberately. But He is issuing a challenge to us to gut-check ourselves when people (even those we trust most) try to deceive us. "Watch out that no one deceives you." Be on the lookout because it will happen, because people will try to.

People will try to deceive us because Satan deceives people. Like I said, it has happened since the entry of sin into a perfect world. We embrace the sin; we embrace the deceit. Don't believe me? Just look at my own past. I'm ashamed to admit I spent whole spans of my life living in deceit. Affairs, lies, conspiring, double-lives: that was me. I who now follow Christ followed Him even then yet used others for my own selfish desires. Admittedly, it's years in the past now but it's still part of my history; these things still helped make me who I am today. Indeed, living through them and learning from them helped make this blog a reality.

What changed it? Jesus. The cure for the common sin is Christ. It's why He pointed out the obvious fact of human deceit to His disciples. He knew just what we embraced when we embraced sin. Without deceit, sin can't exist. Yet with Christ, neither deceit nor other sin can rule our lives. All He asks is that we believe. In believing, we find we are built to keep watch, to keep vigilant. As Paul said later, God won't let us be tempted beyond what we can bear, even when it gets tough.

So I ask you again to keep watch. If I step over a line, please let me know. I'll do the same for you.

*Lord, help me to watch out for those who would deceive me and turn me from You.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 December 2015

*Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. Mark 13, verses 5-6.*

Since the moment Jesus left we've been looking for His return. In fact, our desire to be close to God has been pretty much the central focus of humanity since the moment God caught Adam and Eve in their rebellion. We want to be close to God because God is loving perfection. Sin living in us even tells us that we can be God, that it's our right to take His place in our lives and that we don't need Him anymore.

Have you heard of the Mexican proverb: if you want to hear God laugh tell Him your plans? Somehow I think Jesus laughs sadly at the way we follow so many smaller things instead of Him.

Yet follow them we do and with great enthusiasm, and at the end of the day we are still looking for Jesus to come back and set things right. Every year at Passover, Jews end their Seder meal by saying "next year in Jerusalem" in the hopes that they will see the Messiah by Passover next year. They do so ignoring that Jesus is that Messiah.

History is replete with wannabe messiahs. Jim Jones, David Koresh, Adolf Hitler, every communist leader since Lenin, even some politicians in our world today with oversized egos and undersized abilities: all of them have wanted to be 'the man with the plan' in one way or another. At the very least, they crave the center of the spotlight. And while some of those people actually did (and do) have extraordinary talents, most are / were just tin pot dictators with a God-complex. That doesn't stop otherwise smart, even highly educated, people from earnestly following them. Like I said, we long for Jesus and will put up with something less just for a taste of His comfort.

Knowing all this, is it surprising that Jesus warned the disciples to be on the lookout for false Christs and false teachers who say one thing but mean another? The New Testaments gives specific information on how to know when Jesus returns. Luke 9, Matthew 24, Acts 1, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians, Titus 2 and all over Revelation give specific identifying characteristics of Jesus that deceivers and the devil will not be able to falsify. That won't stop people from doing so. As always, people long for Jesus and many will be willing to settle for a cheap imitation.

Our job here is to discern what's false and what isn't. Only by sticking close to the words of the Savior can we do this. He Himself cautioned His friends – and us – to keep watch, to pay attention, and to test the words of those who would come and say "I'm Jesus." If what those pretenders do and say doesn't hold up against those Scriptures I mentioned (and many others as well) then they aren't Jesus. Indeed, Jesus says that, when He finally does return, every eye will see Him and know Him and that every knee will bow to acknowledge Him, even those who don't believe in Him.

*Lord, I'm watching for Your return. Help me to keep vigilant to stand against those who profess to be You but aren't.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 December 2015

*When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. Mark 13, verses 7-8.*

Watch out and be ready. Read the signs.

Every day we are looking for signs for the second coming of Christ. As you can read, it's something that Jesus Himself told us we need to do. Watch out and be ready. Look for the signs and heed them. Heed them to be ready.

Now, I am not going to speculate on whether or not we are in the end times. Dozens of generations before ours thought they were because they saw wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famines and violence. Remember the fall of Jerusalem less than a generation after Mark's Gospel was written? Or the fall of Rome a few centuries later. The Crusades a thousand years ago, the Muslim invasion of Europe in the 1400s. The Hundred Years' War; The Thirty Years' War; World War I and especially World War II. The generations that lived through those things must surely have thought they were witnessing the end. So it is with ours.

Maybe it's never happened in my lifetime or maybe I'm just paying attention to it now but the signs are appearing again.

And the moral of the story is still "watch out and be ready." Right now; today. That's what Jesus told us.

I can honestly say that I hope it happens. I honestly hope for the time when this life can end and the life without time can begin. Perhaps it will indeed happen in my lifetime. Just today, with ISIS on the move again and with Russia threatening nuclear war with Turkey, wars and rumors of wars are abounding. I heard a radio ad (not a preacher, an advertisement) speculating on whether or not we are witnessing the start of the war prophesied by the prophet Ezekiel over 2500 years ago. High profile radio hosts are openly talking about how we are in the beginning of World War III but we haven't faced up to it yet. Some are saying "end times." Watch out and be ready.

Watch out and be ready so that no one deceives you. Watch out and be ready so that no one deceives you into thinking they are the returning Jesus. He is coming and soon but none of us know the date or time. All we can understand through our view of the trees is that only Jesus can truly see the whole forest and He will return to govern it when God the Father deems it to be the time. Until then, we have only one job.

Watch out and be ready. Watch out and be ready by helping others to do the same. Help others to do the same by using the talents Jesus gives each of us to His glory, for His purpose, in His ways. Share our stories, use our abilities, do what we can to be Jesus for other people so that they, too, may ready themselves for Jesus' imminent return. Heed the signs by reading and interpreting the signs. Be ready to stand, then to leave, when Jesus comes back for you. Watch and be ready.

*Lord, I anxiously await Your return. Until that happens, help me to understand the signs and be ready for You.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 December 2015

*You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. Mark 13, verse 9.*

Jesus was personally predicting for His best friends what would happen to them. He was fore-telling their fate and telling them that, as they neared their end, for His sake they would be persecuted and tortured. He's also telling us the same thing. The same thing can happen to us. In some ways, the same thing WILL happen to us. You and I will meet opposition, struggle financially, and likely struggle physically, maybe even violently, for standing by Jesus.

Well isn't that just great!

Actually, it is. It really is. You see, thinking about torture that way can lead you to think only "all glory to Jesus." AGTJ if you will. Jesus was telling His friends that they would suffer like He would suffer. In doing that, He was promising them eternal rewards that would fulfill their deepest desires for true communion with God.

So that's great? Of course it is. You get to have spiritual peace here on earth by being in union with Jesus here, by reordering your life around His priorities and learning to think and act in different ways. Best of all, you get to share that peace in ways you can, in ways He empowers you to do. When this life is done, then you have the peace of knowing Him forever because you get to be with Him in paradise, where there is no sin, no sadness, no anger, no complications to life.

Of course, there's that whole torture thing. No way around saying it: that sucks. Being flogged: painful; excruciatingly painful. Handed over to the government: terrifying. Standing before the leaders to witness Jesus to them: daunting at best. Seeing your friends and family persecuted, denying you, denouncing you: wrenching. Sometimes the thought of all that makes me feel afraid, and I can honestly say that I fear nobody in this world.

Here's where I think of Aragorn, turning to his friends as they face the armies of Mordor. He smiles, he raises his sword, and he says "for Frodo" before defiantly running towards the battle to do justice on the unjust. I'm no Aragorn; perhaps you aren't either. But I'm jazzed by the idea of standing for Jesus, of 'taking it to the man' who works to keep me down and wants to destroy what I have because I believe in Christ. I was a warrior once and stood tall in ways some may not have imagined; it was all so improbable. Yet, in Christ, I'm a warrior still, armed with His confidence, His words, and His faith. I'm armed with Him and dangerous to any without faith. Devil be damned, I send him on his way. I stand for Jesus and I'm ready to fight. What say you?

So when Jesus predicts that, to follow Him, I will suffer, then like the Apostle Paul I'll rejoice in those sufferings. Bring it, baby. That's not gloating. It's simple faith. And it's pretty great after all. AGTJ.

*Lord, I stand in You. I'll admit: I'm sometimes afraid of what could happen to me. But I know that You are with me, that You will never put me someplace or in some way beyond what I can bear. Help me to stand. Help me to righteously defy the world for Your sake.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 December 2015

*And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Mark 13, verse 10.*

Awhile back, my pastor friend, Mark, was talking about the end. He mentioned that he DOESN'T think we are nearing the end of time because the Gospel of Jesus – the good news that Jesus is God and forgives all sin and died as God's only perfect atoning sacrifice specifically to redeem us – hasn't been preached to all nations. Despite all the new media, instant worldwide communications, and efforts to preach Jesus to billions of people in every language we know, he contends that the gospel still hasn't been preached to all nations. There could be (and likely are) hundreds of millions of our fellow humans who haven't heard about Jesus, who haven't been given the introduction to Him.

I agree with Mark.

Now, I won't speak for my friend but I will say I don't think he's a millennialist, a believer in the Rapture and Tim LaHaye/"Left Behind" kind of apocalypse. I think my friend is a typical Lutheran, stressing "be ready now" because we're part of eternity now. No matter how much we debate how the world will end, Jesus promised it would end and that He would return to bring about eternity.

Yet, here and now, on this earth, believers in Jesus are already sealed as part of His eternity, already a part of heaven. We're finishing our time here and, yes, determining post-terra firma implications to our eternity by what we say, believe and confess. But Jesus has already done everything necessary to make possible and guarantee our eternal destiny. He promised that we would be with Him, that God would accept us believing sinners on behalf of His sacrifice, because of His grace and love. No matter whether or not there's a Rapture and all that follows, the best lesson we can teach about "the end" is "be ready for it now." "Don't wait; believe and follow Jesus now and be ready if He returns now, millennially or otherwise."

Keep in mind where this verse is said. It's said at the temple just days, even hours, before Jesus will be arrested and unjustly murdered. The verse itself comes right between other verses that talk about the end times, about watching for signs and standing up for Jesus despite being persecuted. That matters.

It matters because, here, Jesus is reminding us why He came, why He matters. He is the good news; Jesus is the reason for the Gospel. Preaching and sharing Him with the world is why He came. He wants that to be done because He loves ALL people of all races and nationalities and colors. Jesus wants all men and women to be in communion with Him forever and He was reminding His followers that, before the end of time is brought about, He wants all people to be given the opportunity to follow Him. So, smack-dab in the middle of telling His friends that they need to watch out and look for signs that (He said) will point to the end of time, Jesus reminds them that the purpose of time is to allow us to share Him with each other. To bring more believers into Jesus' eternity.

No matter what you believe about how the world will end, that's a great first principle to always keep in mind.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for Your words about eternity. Thank You for using me to share You with folks who might not know You.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 December 2015

*Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Mark 13, verse 11.*

I'm finishing up my project now. Since this is the end of the year, and since we were blessed to have a spectacularly successful go live in October, the time has come to close down the project. It's a melancholy time, satisfying to know that my team – a bunch of rock stars – did exemplary work while being the best group you could ever want to know, yet bittersweet knowing that this time together is ending.

What's more, since the main project is winding down, I volunteered to take on a short-term project for my client. I led a small team to write requirements for a new transaction the client wants to use, and in just under a month we made great progress, finishing the draft requirements and putting project structure around some things that had languished for most of a year. Unfortunately, I wasn't a fit and the client rolled me off the project no-notice this week, assigning it to another project manager. I'm a little bitter about it, mainly because of the way they did it and the fact that our small team progressed very far very fast.

I feel like I got fired even though I didn't. I still have a job, working for my consulting company, and I will likely be moving on to a new client in January. This kind of thing happens regularly, and if your customer wants someone else to do the work, that's their prerogative especially since I had only a few weeks left with them anyway. Still, as I said, it leaves me feeling upset, betrayed.

What do you say when things like this happen?

Here's the blessedly tough and real thing God wants me to say: "Lord, bless their decision." Like Job said, "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." In reality, the ONLY way to get through tough times, especially when they gob-smack you without notice, is to take them to God and pray for those involved. When you get tough news, roll with it by rolling onto Jesus.

I'm a big fan of self-talk, of talking to myself and rehearsing what I'm going to say. I used to do it a lot, practicing what I would say in briefings and presentations. But I don't do it much anymore. Instead, I do indeed prepare as best I can, familiarizing myself with facts, data, and what's needed. Then I let the words come out righteously. I let God's Holy Spirit put the words in my mouth and follow where they lead. I've never been led wrong by doing this.

That's how I know that the right thing to do when you get bad news is to rely on God to speak to my heart, then speak through my voice instead of just me.

Especially when I want to respond in unkind ways to people to whom I had devoted much time and effort. Yet the better way is to pray for them, to understand that it's business and usually not personal, and that even in business people are often doing the best they can under bad circumstances. In that light, it becomes even more important to rely on God.

*Lord, I rely on You for my words, for my responses, for what I say and do with others.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 14 December 2015

*Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. Mark 13, verses 12-13.*

The verses are talking about how things will be at the end of time; this is common knowledge. Have you considered, though, that they apply to more than just end times prophecy?

You see, all those things described in verses 12 and 13 are happening now. You know as well as I do that they've been happening all throughout history. The first murder was brother betraying brother. If you don't believe that people will hate you because of Jesus, then you need to consider the fate this year, here and now, of Coptic Christians in Egypt and Iraq; they survived Mubarek and Saddam Hussein but ISIS has exterminated them. Children rebelling against their parents and having them put to death? Check Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, even today south of the border in Mexico thanks to the drug cartels.

If you stand up for Jesus, you're a target. You always have been. You will be.

Consider the fate of the 12 Apostles. At the time Jesus spoke these words, they didn't know it but they were only days away from being hunted fugitives, and Judas Iscariot had only hours left to live. Eleven of the twelve men would die gruesome deaths; only John would live until old age but even he would be tortured numerous times.

Consider these things and then maybe consider that Jesus wasn't just telling us how things would end for the world: He was telling us how things could end every single day. Yes, the price of following Christ would be high. Could it be any other way when we set ourselves against the world? If you think of it that way, we are bringing the 'old Adam' to his end every day we profess to believe in Jesus, and the old Adam doesn't die easily. He's thick with sin and doesn't want to let go. He's us. We made him and he doesn't want to go.

I don't want to die a painful death. I don't want to be tortured or crucified or anything like that. I want to die like my mom did last year: surrounded by family and in my sleep. Yet if God wills that I must die for Him in some grotesque or exquisitely painful way then bring it baby. It's not false bravado talking: it's faith in Jesus. I love, respect and fear the one who could destroy my soul even as he lets my human life expire. I know He loved me enough to live and die and live for me. Because of that faith in Him, I know that I won't die at all. That while my life here will end, I will only pass into the next life and that it will be so much better than anything I could ever imagine here.

Still, I won't go easily. There is much living left to do, many things I would like to finish that are now, as yet, undone. But when the battle comes, I have my sword, I have my armor, and I have my faith. I have my Lord. I need nothing more.

*Lord, let me live well for You in the remaining time You give me.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 December 2015

*When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that this will not take place in winter, because those will be days of distress unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again. Mark 13, verses 14-19.*

Yes, these words are still talking about the end times. Yes the 'abomination that causes desolation' is a reference to the Antichrist, whoever he will be. Yes, people can flee but there's really no place safe to go...

...And then just hold on to that thought.

If there's no place to flee, then there's no place where God can't find us. Think about it: God will allow all this calamity, hurt, chaos and, yes, death, to happen so that His glory might be spread out further amidst the world. When it happens, there will be no place to flee, no place where we can hide from it. Yet the miraculous, crazy thing is that, if there's no place we can't hide from the persecution, then there's also no place where God can't reach us. The very last thing Jesus said when He ascended to Heaven is "I am with you always even unto the end of the age." "I am with you always." Always. Always means all the time everywhere.

As bad as it will get – as bad as it can be – He will still be with us in person and Spirit. Always.

I don't know what the abomination that causes desolation will look like; none of us does. It will probably be worse than Washington DC with a pot of money, or Bruce Jenner in an identity crisis. Our world focuses on the trivial when the Creator of the Universe speaks in ways to prepare us to live in serious times. It's true how it seems that our generation is seeing terrible times and terrible things that couldn't seem to be worse, at least not in how we conceive of them. I'm sure those who lived through the world wars, or the Black Plague, or the fall of Rome, or the fall of Jerusalem (that was only a generation away when Jesus spoke these words) thought the same.

The goofy thing is that they were right. So are we. God tells us that we should be prepared for Him to come back right now. That things can go bad in an instant right here, right now. "Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak." Isn't that apropos for us as well even if we aren't living through the end of the world? God can call us home today. Jesus says "be ready now. I am coming soon" even when we don't know how long "soon" may be.

Yet whether it is tonight, tomorrow, or in another two thousand years, "soon" will be just the right time. The days leading up to it will be tough; putting it mildly, they'll suck. And even in the worst of them God will be with us, Jesus will be with us, His Spirit will be in and working through us. That's not so tough to understand.

*Lord, I pray: abide with me always.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 6 January 2016

*If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. Mark 13, verse 20.*

Jesus wants everyone to be saved. It doesn't matter whether you believe or disbelieve, whether you are a Christian or some other religion, or what is the color of your skin: Jesus wants a one-on-one relationship with you now, on this Earth, so that He will have one with you forever.

So Christmas was only a few days ago; ditto New Year's Eve. Not long ago I read about how Christmas was ordained to be on December 25<sup>th</sup> and, contrary to popular myth, it wasn't an attempt to confiscate an existing pagan holiday. It was by deliberate action of early church leaders corresponding to a popular notion of the time. December 25<sup>th</sup> was determined because it corresponds to 9 full months from the date of Christ's crucifixion. This is because of a belief, held in the early church that prophets and priests died on the day they were conceived. Do the math and, based on the Jewish calendar, that corresponds to December 25<sup>th</sup>. The more you dive into trying to learn just why people commemorate events on certain days, the more you become aware of a crucial thing.

It doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter whether Christmas corresponds to Saturnalia or a tradition concerning the birth dates of prophets. It doesn't matter whether Easter would be a fixed date on the calendar or whether it floats around based on the first full paschal moon in a lunar cycle.

It doesn't matter. Repeat that phrase until it sinks in.

It doesn't matter because the only thing about the calendar that matters is how Jesus uses it to convince us to be ready today, now, for His return. Indeed, time is given for us, not for Him. He is eternal, existing both in and out of what we understand as time. Jesus doesn't need a calendar. When God the Father deems that He will return, He will return no matter what the Julian calendar says. Until then, God will use the calendar to continue to point us toward our undeniable, imminent need for His redemption. He will allow sin and evil to influence and act upon us so that we might reject them and come to rely fully on Him for all things. Jesus knows the consequences of sin and how it seeks to destroy. Today's verse reminds us that, through His use of time, Jesus will display mercy by intervening at just the right time. Specifically, the verse is talking about the end of all things, but if you extrapolate from that, you see that the verse applies to all times, all days, every moment. Jesus intervenes in our lives now so that we might know Him better.

That means at Christmas time. Or New Years, Easter, Saturnalia, the spring solstice or the day before your next daughter's wedding. Jesus wants us to come to Him right now in praise, love, thanksgiving, and mercy so that He might work through us to reach others. The date on a calendar is simply just one way He does so.

*Lord, thank You for ordaining the days of my life at just the right time, for always being present, for time as a tool to better know and glorify You.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 7 January 2016

*At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time. Mark 13, verses 21-23.*

Just a little over a month ago, we talked about the concept in these verses, about false Christs. See verses 5 and 6 as well as Luke 9, Matthew 24, Acts 1, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians, Titus 2 and all over Revelation. Let's not tread on covered ground.

Instead, consider these words: "I have told you everything ahead of time."

Jesus has informed us. In saying "I have told you everything ahead of time," Jesus has been the news anchor. He has been imparting to us information that we need to know in order to make informed decisions. What an amazing concept that is! Two thousand years ago, God personally came here to tell us, His creation, things that He knew we needed to know. "Everything" means just that: 'I have told you all there is.' It's not just "you have sufficient information," though that's part of it. It's more. It's everything. It's everything that is needed, everything that's important, all of Him. That's some newscast.

Jesus has prepared us. Because Jesus wants all people to live with Him in eternity, He gave us the information and the tools to do our part. He gave us all that we needed – back to that 'everything' thing, you know – to prepare us for both the tough end times to come as well as living past them into eternity. The end goal isn't something as small as surviving tough times or even death. No, the end goal is eternity. Jesus is a Hall of Fame batter, always keeping His eye on the ball. To that end, He gave us all that we need to know to prepare us to assume our place on His team for eternity, forever.

Jesus has forewarned us. Yes, these are verses that warn us of how Satan will try to deceive us into believing that he is the Messiah. Jesus told us here in Mark and in those other books all we need to know to be forewarned against false messiahs and all the trouble they'll wreak. He gave us all we need to stand fast. Face it: we're gullible. Let's not kid ourselves: iPhones, the internet, robotics, and all this sexy technology can sometimes be lipstick on a pig. We aren't any wiser or smarter than our ancestors in most matters of the heart. And the heart is where Jesus deals. The heart is the battleground for which Satan contends. Accordingly, Jesus warned us to be on our guard.

Most of all, consider that Jesus has confided in us. Really, truly noodle that thought, that the Son of God, that God Immanuel, that the great I AM Himself talked with us personally, as a friend, as a brother as well as a Savior. He trusts us. He told us things dear to His heart that He wanted us to know because He loves us. Satan doesn't do that; there is no love in him. But there is only pure love in Jesus, and He wanted us to know that. Instead of commanding us, Jesus confided in us.

That's a lot to consider. But doing so will change everything.

*Lord Jesus, I praise You! Thank You for confiding in me and loving us!*

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 8 January 2016

*But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Mark 13, verses 24-27.*

“This is the end, my only friend, the end.” Jim Morrison sang that in one of his darker moods. That’s understandable, don’t you think? The end could be tough to contemplate, especially since Jesus’ words about it seem mysterious. It’s hard to write about these verses because it could be easy to misconstrue them. Does “gather his elect from the four winds” mean a rapture? Or does it simply mean ‘from all over the world?’

I’ll take door #2, Monty. The context of the verses around it (as well as similar verses in other Gospels) point to Jesus saying that He would take all believers with Him to eternity at the end of the world. It doesn’t seem to point to a mass Left Behind-style rapture that is popular with many Christians. It could also very well point to preaching the Gospel all over the world instead of how believers will be removed from the world. There is much to understand from the entire concept.

Still, you could have endless arguments over all the verses and when you boil them down, they all reduce to “get ready now.” Just like the other verses we’ve talked about in this section, the gist of the message is “be ready now.” Be ready now because only God the Father knows that time of Jesus’ return. It could happen at any moment.

Yet we’re not without clues to remind us to be ready. The distress; the dark sun; the dark moon; the falling stars; the disorder in the heavens: all of these things will happen as signs. They aren’t the actual coming of Jesus: they’re heralds, reminders that His return is promised, maybe even imminent. To be honest, signs like them have happened hundreds of times in the past and people must have thought it was the end of the world, yet it wasn’t. I hope they were clued into the idea of being ready.

And when Jesus returns it won’t be in secret, or in mystery, or only to a few people. As the Revelator said, EVERYONE will see Him in the sky, in the clouds, just as He Himself promises here. How do I know this? Because He said so in those exact words and I believe Him. “So if Jesus is explicit about coming in the clouds but figurative in the other words, how do you know the difference?” Again, context; look for the context. Get yourself a study bible that cross-references such verses. Look it up on line. Most of all, don’t stay hung up on it. The mechanics or semantics of the message aren’t the message itself. It is the message – I am Lord and I am coming back – that matters, not the way it plays out.

That way, when Jim Morrison’s words play out and it really is the end (my friend), you’ll be ready.

*Lord, prepare me daily for the end, for Your return, to be with You now and forever.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 11 January 2015

*“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Mark 13, verses 28-29.*

You know the obvious message of these verses is “pay attention to the signs.” As we’ve been talking, another is “be ready now.” Have you considered another message they convey?

God keeps trying.

The last week I’ve been working on a new project, this one in Washington DC. It’s actually a sales pursuit and I don’t know if it will pay out or pan out yet. I’m one of 10 on a team trying to land a deal, and there’s no guarantee that we’re going to be successful. In reality, the client may hear our pitch and simply say, “thanks but no thanks” even though we’ve worked many hours to do our best. Yet knowing all that, we’re still trying because that’s what people do. It’s what you have to do to try to be successful.

Closer to home, my wife and I are struggling in opening our winery business. It hasn’t moved as fast as we thought it would, and purchasing the property we want for the vineyard is proving to be difficult. At times, we’re each getting discouraged because even though we have a passion for the idea, sometimes the dream ebbs and flows. But we’re still trying.

And then there’s weight loss; forgive me for some self-indulgent talk. I’m the heaviest I’ve ever been in my life. When I was a young skinny kid I vowed to defy my genes and gravity and never get heavy. I failed. Now, just north of 5’11” and 220, I’m much heavier than I want to be or is healthy. Exercise and diet have been a see-saw of disappointment, and while I’m currently among the New Year’s ‘resolved,’ it’s tough going. But I’m trying even if I’m not always successful.

Just yesterday I watched the movie “Unbroken.” You’ll remember it’s the story of Louie Zamperini, the Olympic distance runner, WWII POW, and forgiveness-embracing evangelist. Zamperini dedicated his life to Jesus, vowing that, if Jesus saved him from death in the war, he would spend the rest of his life evangelizing. That’s what he did, eventually reconciling with all of his Japanese war tormentors who would meet with him. Louie Zamperini lived a long and successful life in the Spirit because he always kept trying even when it meant spiritual and physical torture.

All these are stories that reflect how God keeps trying in our lives. He never gives up on us. He always tries to reach out and communicate, to bring us back to Him even when we reject Him and run away. To prove it, He regularly, continually gives us signs of His presence and His promises so that we won’t lose heart and stick with Him. It’s not just to be ready and pay attention to the signs: it’s to cling to Him in every minute of our lives because He is always trying to connect to us.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for always trying to reach me even when I don’t try to reach You. Never give up on me, I pray. I will follow only You.*

Read Mark 13, verses 1-31.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 13 January 2016

*Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Mark 13, verses 30-31.*

It's easy to overlook the commitment that God is making with us in these two verses, yet perhaps we do so all the time.

These verses come at the end of the section that talks a great deal about the end times, reminding us to seek Jesus now. To seal the deal of our salvation (no pun intended), Jesus gives us assurances that what He's said is dependable. "I'm promising you now that what I say will happen in your lifetimes." The world ended in the lifetime of the Disciples? Perhaps not the planet, but the world of their upbringing did. A few years hence, when most of them were still alive, the Disciples saw or heard about the destruction of Jerusalem, including the sacred Temple. The Romans marched in and wiped it out, then scattered the Jews for nearly 2000 years. Many reputable Biblical scholars point to the destruction of Jerusalem as having fulfilled the end times prophecies described in Daniel, Revelation and other places throughout the Bible. I'm not one of them; I'd advise you to Google it for yourself. Let's just summarize by saying that verse 30 makes the promise that those who heard it would see the end.

Then, just after making that promise, Jesus permanently seals the deal. It's as if He says "don't get wrapped around the details, folks. I keep my promises and I always will." Everything we know, every single thing that is, every bit of matter in the universe will go away and be destroyed; that was evident to the believers of first century Judea. Yet when all that we know is gone, Jesus will still be. He who is the great I AM and the Word which became flesh was and is and is to come.

It's the only promise we can rely on.

We can't rely on Barack Obama (or anyone in the government, actually). We can't rely on Stephen Hawking. We can't rely on the academic self-appointed intelligentsia. Hollywood? Can't rely on it. Jobs? Can't rely on them. Bank accounts (or the Powerball)? Your new car? My grandson? Your Friday night plans? The neural matter between our ears that holds our thoughts and dreams?

Zippo. Can't rely on them. All those things will pass away. All of them are perishable and deteriorating, even dying. Not Jesus. When the knowledge and tangible things on which we've built our lives are gone, Jesus remains. He will remain; He does remain; He is.

Perhaps that's the better promise of the two given in these verses. It's great that we get to fulfill prophecy, but what matters more is that Jesus is. His words are reliable, true, and life even when reliability, truth and life seem to be no more. In our worst moments of despondence, God the Father, Son and Spirit still is committed to us and committed to redeeming us from the consequences of sin. His love is the glue that holds our world together, and even when that world seems to be falling to pieces and going away, His promise and love still remain because He is.

*Lord, I thank You and praise You for being committed to me, a sinner. Thank You for remaining when all else fails. Thank You that Your Word will never pass away.*

Read Mark 13, verses 32-37.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 18 January 2016

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Mark 13, verse 32.*

We've talked about this before, about how end times prophecies boil down to our being prepared for the world to end any minute now. Admit it: the idea of the world ending, of God calling an end to time and of everything that we know or has ever happened coming to a conclusion seems far-fetched. It seems preposterous, illogical (worse: it's logic-defiant). The end of the world seems contrary to everything God created us for, right?

Wrong.

In fact, the end of time is exactly the event for which God created us. God created us out of His perfect love and grace. He created us to be in full communion with Him forever, to enjoy His blessings and share His love with us with Him for all time. However, the sin that we embraced so long ago stands in-between us and realizing God's real plan. He's holy and can't have anything to do with our sins. Enter Jesus, who atoned for our sins and clothed us with Himself so that we can stand in front of the holy triune God blameless and made holy again. God created us to share His love perfectly, as He does, and in our current state we can't do that.

Yet when that will happen nobody here knows. Jesus' own words in this verse confirm this truth. He says them just after assuring us that His words are truth and are reliable, that when everything else goes away He and His words will remain. Jesus Himself doesn't know. The Spirit of the Father and Son doesn't know. NSA doesn't know; neither does Barack Obama, Billy Graham, Joel Osteen, Donald Trump, Rick Warren, your pastor, your BFF since fourth grade, nor any person we can think of. Only God the Father Himself knows when it will happen.

Maybe it follows that either me or you would think “so why doesn't He just tell us?” Kind of presumptuous, don't you think? Let me answer your question with a question: “would you really want to know?” Don't bother digging up the “why” to that question; that's your business. But would you really want to know when the end of time is happening? Wouldn't it cause some of your passion for life to cease, the very thing that makes humanity into what we are? If we knew when things would end, how many of us would simply give up and not truly live? Worse, how many of us would sink further into debauchery in the false belief that this life is all there is, so we'd better live it up now because at X time we're done.

That's not what God intended for us at all.

Nobody we can conceive of knows when all this will conclude; perhaps it will happen before you read my next blog entry; even so, come Lord Jesus. And if it doesn't, then let's thank God for another day to make the most of the lives He gives us. Let's live today to find ways to advance Him in our lives, to dedicate our time and talents to His work, to be Jesus and share Jesus for someone who doesn't yet know Him. Doing that, then it won't matter when comes the end of all things.

*Lord, I praise You that you, my God, have ordained an end to this world. Come Lord Jesus in Your good time.*

Read Mark 13, verses 32-37.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 19 January 2016

*Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" Mark 13, verses 33-37*

I promise: we're almost done with the verses from Mark that talk about watching out for the end times. But riddle me this, Batman: do you think just anyone would spend this much time talking about such a subject if it weren't important? No, I'm not talking about you or I. Of course we're talking about Jesus. But have you considered all the rhetorical pictures He has painted to communicate this message clearly? He spent all of chapter 13 talking about it.

First Jesus talks about how not one stone will be left of the Temple. He describes an inconceivable vision of extreme destruction, one that the Disciples find hard to absorb. Then Jesus talks about watching out and being constantly aware, of being on guard so that events (and their fulfillment) do not come as a surprise. In fact, He mentions watching or keeping guard three times just in Chapter 13 alone.

Then Jesus talks about how the persecution of the end times will split families, about how it will be the greatest test man has ever undergone. About how there will be signs in the heavens and miracles that won't be explainable. He discusses His return and how, just before it, there will be both signs pointing to its inevitability and false prophets who try to distract believers from paying attention. Jesus describes in detail how He will return in glory, and about how He has told us all we need to know to be ready to see Him appear.

Finally, Jesus closes, reminding us that He's not kidding, that these things will really happen because His Words are reliable and true. He implores us yet again to remain vigilant, to watch out and be ready for it can happen at any time. He candidly says that even He doesn't know the specific moment. He only knows that He will return.

Do you think Jesus would spend so much time talking about this if it didn't matter a great deal? I've mentioned here before about how my church has a motto, "Eternity Matters Most." It's derived from Mark 8:36, which says "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" Having everything you think you want means nothing if you don't have eternity with Jesus. A few chapters down the road, Jesus reiterates that theme, imploring us through all of chapter 13 to watch, be ready, and look forward to the day when He returns to make all things new. He does so because it's a big deal, because it's the penultimate point of His time here. Jesus spends so much time telling us these things because having us with Him in eternity is why He came in the first place. Because our eternity matters most to the king of all eternity

*Lord Jesus, my eternity matters most. I will believe in You, follow only You, and be ready for Your return.*

Read Mark 14, verses 1-11.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 20 January 2016

*Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. "But not during the festival," they said, "or the people may riot." Mark 14, verses 1-2.*

These verses further entrench my disgust for all things political. That's anachronistic because I follow politics. The silly season of American politics in which we find ourselves now has always fascinated me. I enjoy history; I love to read about it and see places where big events happened. Like it or not, most of those events are memorable because there were political activities or overtones involved in them. These days especially, it's important that we, as citizens and voters, keep up on the views of those who seek to govern us. Not just anyone can or should be president, or in any elected office actually.

Yet fascination and civic duty notwithstanding, more often than not I find myself disgusted by the politics that are played out in our lives. So many decisions, so many actions, are dictated by the whims of the politics of those who have been put in charge. Politics were the biggest reason why I "divorced the Air Force" and got out at 11 years active. I was disgusted that nearly every decision I made, as a junior NCO, was politicized by (who I perceived to be) a great many unqualified people around me. In the space of just a few years, my part of the service went from being agile and able to having to seek approval for nearly every action we took from numerous uninvolved parties in the non-combat chain of command. Politics.

At work we play politics, gauging what we should and shouldn't say so as to not offend the most people on our team. In church we structure the leadership around politically elected officers who, to be honest, can sometimes be as partisan or ineffective as any member of Congress. Ever been to a family reunion? Ever held your tongue at the dinner table or listened to a cousin, uncle or parent rant on about something in pop culture?

Politics: they're through and through in our lives and they disgust a great many folks. Today's verses that talk about what the Jewish chief priests and elders said and did only reinforce that disgust. If you think about it, the priests and elders did what they did for politics. It was to hold on to their power, to preserve their political and ecclesiastical power in Jerusalem. They didn't want to rock the boat; they didn't want things to change unless it meant change in their favor and this itinerant rabbi from Galilee threatened a very different kind of change. He had to be stopped.

But the priests were afraid of what the general population would do if said population found out about the politics that the ruling class was playing. There could be rioting or violence. More likely, there would be a loss of tithing and income at the Temple. No matter what could happen, it would mean a threat to the status quo and the power base of those in charge.

All because of politics. The Son of Man was murdered because of disgusting petty power politics.

*Lord I pray that you forgive me when I fail You, when I put the politics of this world above Your mission.*

Read Mark 14, verses 1-11.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 21 January 2016

*While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Mark 14, verse 3.*

Has something extraordinary ever happened to you?

There are a number of extraordinary things happening in just this one verse. Jesus and His disciples are relaxing. That's extraordinary when you consider that they have come to Jerusalem with the intention of watching Jesus die (even as the Disciples don't yet fully grasp that fact). In the middle of the week, they are relaxing, not obsessing or fussing or trying to find ways to avert this gruesome fate.

And they are relaxing with a man known to be a leper. Have you ever seen someone with leprosy? In the West, it's not common anymore; antibiotics have largely eradicated it. Yet it's enormously disfiguring. I remember seeing a leper when I was a boy in Pennsylvania. He was a regular at a small diner where we frequently ate. He had all the grotesque skin growths and lesions, and I remember being fascinated by him. When I finally got up the courage to say hello, I found he was a friendly man. Perhaps he was like Simon the Leper. We don't know much about Simon, whose name may have been Simon, Gamaliel, or even Lazarus (brother of Mary and Martha). What we do know is that, if he was a leper, then he had been a persecuted outcast from society because that's what happened to lepers in ancient times. Leprosy was a fearsome, deadly disease at the time when so little was understood about biotics and hygiene. Is it any wonder that people would react in fear? Yet here is Jesus and His group of close friends eating dinner with him, sharing bread and dipping in the same bowls, sharing cups, and sitting in close quarters with this leprous man. Extraordinary.

And there is the account of the woman who poured the perfume on Jesus' head. Expensive perfume (or nard) would have cost many months' wages for a typical woman of first century Judea. Such perfume was difficult to make and rare to find, yet here is this poor woman (it might have been Jesus' friend, Mary) breaking an expensive jar and pouring priceless oil over Jesus' head. Reading further in the story we learn how Jesus says it is in preparation for His passion and burial. It's also an extraordinary story of one woman's intense personal devotion to Jesus and her faith in the fact that He was God Immanuel. She knew Him; she had seen Him; she believed in Him.

While it's extraordinary – unusual, maybe even shocking – that an ordinary woman would do such a thing for this Nazarene rabbi, perhaps the most extraordinary thing that happened in the verse is that she displayed faith. The faith wasn't about her: it was about Jesus. It was about putting her hope for salvation and all the trust in her soul into Jesus and Jesus alone. The more you think about it, that's the most extraordinary thing of all.

So has something extraordinary like that ever happened to you? And have you put your whole faith in the extraordinary Man from Galilee?

*Lord, I put all my faith in You and you alone. Help me to live an extraordinary life in Your service.*

Read Mark 14, verses 1-11.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 25 January 2016

*Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. Mark 14, verses 4-5.*

Mark doesn't say it but he's most likely talking about a conversation led by Judas Iscariot. Judas was responsible for carrying the Apostles' money, and he used to frequently dip into the purse. Thus, it makes sense that he was indignant that the expensive perfume was being 'wasted' because it could have been a huge windfall for the taking.

But tell me something: do you and I act like Judas with our treasure? You bet we do. Huh? "You're insulting me by comparing me to the man who betrayed Jesus Christ?" Yes, my friend, that's exactly what I'm doing. I'm doing so in love; please let me explain.

Just a few days ago I was sitting in the sauna praying. When I'm alone in the sauna at the gym I often pray. It's a time of personal solitude, and I believe it cleanses both body and spirit. Today, I was praying thanks for a bunch of random things. My family, food, that gym, health, our home, a job, belongings, pets; you name it. I prayed thanks to God for everything that came to mind, considering that every blessing, even small ones that I sometimes don't consider, is a gift from God Himself.

Here's a confession about it: praying was tough. It was tough for me to open up to God and really, truly give heartfelt thanks for all the ways He takes care of me. Maybe it was because I was in a sauna. Maybe it was because I was trying too hard. Maybe it's because I was actually still guarding my heart from Him and didn't fully open up.

Wanna know a secret? I think that was what started Judas down his destructive path. He didn't fully give Himself over to Jesus' message. It was the genesis of selfishness, ambition and sin. Judas didn't start out as Jesus' betrayer: he became Jesus' betrayer because of the sins he embraced. Pride, arrogance, selfishness, ambition: they were some of Judas Iscariot's sins. They are exemplified in the verses quoted here today. Those sins were Judas' downfall. They're ours too.

You and I dip into the purse and sin against Jesus when we choose anything over Him. No time to simply give thanks? Take a coin. Holding onto that grudge? Grab a drachma. Still running around on your spouse? You're Judas. You're betraying God's Son by choosing something that isn't Him or of Him. In that way, we're no better than Judas Iscariot. Indeed, we keep doing it over and over even as we know exactly who Jesus is. Judas was one of Jesus' closest friends and even he didn't fully realize exactly who Jesus was; he didn't have the luxury of knowing about Easter. We do. If you think about it, doesn't that make our betrayal even more acute?

It's not about how much you give or even what. It's about the heart from which we give it. Where is yours? Whether it's praying alone, giving of your time, putting into the collection plate or anything else, where is your treasure focused?

*Lord, thank You for Your generous heart. Rebuke, teach and mentor mine to better follow Your lead and give selflessly.*

Read Mark 14, verses 1-11.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 28 January 2016

*“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.”*  
Mark 14, verses 6-7.

You know, if these words were uttered in 2016, I suspect some of us would jump to be offended by them. “How dare Jesus insinuate that we don’t do enough to help the poor!” “How rude of Him to insinuate that there will always be poor people!” “How dare Jesus say He’s better than us because He says He deserves to have a priceless bottle of perfume poured on Him!” Pretty shrill, don’t you think?

Yet I truly do think that we, as a society, really do sound that shrill. Our tone wouldn’t be about Jesus: it would be about us...just like that of Judas and the Apostles who were dissing the woman with the perfume. After all, social media is ‘all about me.’ The best description I’ve ever heard about Facebook is that “it’s an inch deep and a mile wide.” That plays well for the shrill age of offense. If you troll online boards, you’ll find that complaints about being offended are a common and recent topic. With so many factors bombarding our lives, it seems as if folks today find all kinds of reasons to be offended. Turn those around and you quickly see that being offended isn’t about Jesus: it’s about me and you.

Don’t be surprised, then, to hear that it’s nothing new. Whatever Judas’ motive, both he and the other Apostles were offended by the woman who anointed Jesus with the expensive perfume. Is it surprising, then, that Jesus would rebuke them on it? What’s more, He not only rebuked them: He told them to back off, then reminded them of why she was doing it. Doesn’t that still happen to you and I? Aren’t we offended when someone rebukes us with things that we don’t want to hear, especially if those things are true?

What’s more, Jesus gave them a dose of reality. To paraphrase, “I’m the Son of God and my human life is almost over. Poor people aren’t the Son of God and they’re going to be around for a very long time. Get with the program, boys.” Jesus not only shamed Judas (and anyone who agreed with him) for his sin of pride, but He schooled them (read ‘taught,’ not ‘humiliated’) on why it was important that this woman’s act of faith be honored. Millenia down the road, it’s easy to see that we need the schooling as well. We need to be reminded that the Son of God is worth setting apart, worth honoring, worth dedication and remembrance with the best things this life has to offer. That’s a very real thing to recognize because it brings the real Jesus of AD 33 into the real world of AD 2016.

Knowing all that, I wonder how many people are still offended. Call me skeptical, maybe even cynical, for predicting that countless folks are still looking for a reason to be offended by the Son of God and the very radical ministry He performed. Go ahead and blow up my email for this. It’s ok. I’m not offended. If it means you’re focusing on Jesus in your heart, then offend all day long.

*Lord, may any offense in this world bring You glory and spread Your Word.*

Read Mark 14, verses 1-11.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 January 2016

*She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Mark 14, verse 8.*

One of the books on my nightstand is a recent book by Billy Graham called "Where I Am." It's about eternity, and it walks the reader through Scripture verses that talk about preparing for eternity by living in God's Word now. That's a tough thing to do, in case you're wondering. If you're doing the best you can, doing what you can to walk God's walk, you know that it's rough. It can take everything you have, that you are probably (like me) woefully short of the perfect expectation God has set for us.

And that's the point, isn't it?

You see, we are supposed to do what we can. We are supposed to use the gifts God gives us to their fullest, using them with the talents, time and treasure He provides to do what we can in wherever God has us. Yes, we're supposed to be responsible with them, to prepare to use them and to educate ourselves on the best ways to use them. We're supposed to be stewards of all God gives us every day of our lives, living in each moment and acting on each moment as God tells us through His Spirit. Through it, God builds His glory, glorified in our weaknesses.

And it can be rough. Think of Billy Graham. He's currently 97 years old and in declining health. Yet his recent book is still 'bringing it' to advance God's word. Rev Graham can't drive any more, and he can't walk across a stage at a 50,000 member crusade, and he can't even stand in a pulpit anymore because he has Parkinson's Disease. But he can still write, and talk and dictate, and he can teach & preach in the ways God has him able to use now.

Think of Steve Harvey. I recently saw a video of an ad-lib talk Harvey gave to one of his Family Feud audiences. In the video, Steve talked about using the gifts God gives us to the best of our abilities, and 'jumping' with them. We have to jump in life. We have to do what we can, the best we can. Whether we are successful or not, whether it gains us something or not, whether what we desire is produced or not isn't the point. The point is having faith in God that He will sustain us no matter our situation and enable us to do whatever He wants done with those times, treasures and talents.

Then think of the woman who poured perfume over Jesus' head to anoint Him for His burial. It might have been Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus; Mark doesn't say specifically and who she was doesn't matter as much as what she did. The woman did what she could with the tools at her disposal (the perfume) and the treasure God gave her (Jesus and a heart that loved Him). Perhaps doing this small thing used up the only worldly wealth she ever had. That it was perceived by God Immanuel as a great gift, and that we're still learning from it two thousand years later tells me that she didn't waste her money.

Do what you can today, with what God gives you, where He has you, as He leads you.

*Lord, I dedicate today to You. Help me to serve You in every way I can here today, wherever You lead me today.*

Read Mark 14, verses 1-11.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 February 2016

*Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her. Mark 14, verse 9.*

You know where we're going with this: what do you want to be remembered for? But I'll narrow it down for you. What do you want Jesus to say about you?

Is that too guilt-motivated for you? Does it make you feel on edge, maybe a little upset because I'm confronting things about yourself that you don't want to acknowledge? Fair enough. So I'll narrow it even further for you. What do you want people to know about your dash?

That's a topic of recent conversation in my life. Last week, Will Kemp, a friend of mine, was pastoring at another church and 'the dash' was a topic in his sermon. Specifically, he talked about the dash on a tombstone between a person's birth and death dates. It seems crazy that a little punctuation mark could signify a full life but it does. We each get one, and it's the most underwhelming but powerful statement on that stone. It is the space between those boundary dates. It stands for all that you lived.

What do you want people to say about your dash? What do you want to think, say and do while you are above the dirt that will inspire people to speak well of you when that stone marks the only piece of ground you'll ever truly own?

Sure, we could outline a bucket list of things to record that would amaze people at all you did in life, but in reality that's just a list. And we could list thousands of friends to talk about you, testifying that you were a good and faithful person, maybe even a real believer in Jesus, but it's just a list. And we could list the jobs you worked, the money you made, the Facebook posts you posted (or in my case, the places you've checked in), and all the United States you visited. But those are just lists.

You know where we're going with this. It's not to guilt you into it. It's to inspire you to be like the woman with her perfume. You and I do nothing – zip, zero, nada – to earn our salvation. We do nothing in this world to be worthy of saving. Jesus did it all. Yet if you reject Him, you choose to reject what He did. Your dash would say "gone forever."

Wouldn't you rather it stood for "see ya later?" God has said that this world will continue until He ends it, that the seasons will continue until the end of time. Jesus has said that He will be with us always, "even unto the very end of the age." That means He will be with us here in every moment until this world ends. And it will end, whether our lives end before it or not. When this life ends, there's no more time to say "I believe" or to help others on their journey of believing in Jesus. That little dash will say it all.

For what do you want to be remembered? What will your dash say about you? When you stand before Him – and we will – what do you want Jesus to say about you? It's time to get out your perfume.

*Lord, I believe in You. Let those words and those alone be all I am remembered for, then let them inspire me to do Your bidding in my life today.*

Read Mark 14, verses 1-11.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 February 2016

*Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over. Mark 14, verses 10-11.*

Just after witnessing the woman anoint Jesus, Judas went to the Jewish priests and betrayed Jesus. Maybe he was PO'd that Jesus had encouraged the huge 'waste of money' that came with dumping the priceless nard over Jesus' head. Maybe he had had enough of all the pussy-footing goody goody do-good nature of Jesus and His "love everybody" message. Maybe Judas had a bad day.

In reality, he had a really bad day. One of the other Gospels refers to the betrayal by saying "then Satan entered" Judas. The day Satan enters you is the worst in your life because only terrible things flow from that. To be honest, I think Satan entered all of us years ago, as babies. Ever heard a two-year old say "no?" Yep: sin. They learned it somewhere, and they applied it because Satan had already taken up residence.

A bad day for Judas, indeed, when you betray the Son of Man for a sack of coins.

But do you want to know a secret? I've always felt sorry for Judas; Pontius Pilate, too. My sorrow for them is (obviously) tempered by my after-the-fact knowledge they didn't have. I know Jesus was resurrected. I know He is the Son of God. I know the history of the faith and what it means to have His Spirit working in my life. Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate had to experience events in real time. What we read as history are events through which they lived as they were happening. They didn't have Bible concordances and two thousand years of interpretive Christian perspective. We can look down on their terrible choices and we should, yet don't lose sight of knowing that they made those bad choices without applying any fore-knowledge of just who Christ said He was. They lived through it; we didn't.

I feel sorry for Judas because he became even more destitute and pathetic than he was before. I'm betting he was the smartest of the disciples, that he had canny sense and was both analytic and street-wise. He made a choice to cast his lot (pun intended) with those who sought to kill Jesus. He knew what the priests had in mind, and he knew that his action was risky. Perhaps he calculated that he would somehow benefit from this choice, from this betrayal. Otherwise why do it? Don't forget that Satan had entered into Judas, though. With Satan indwelt, all bets would be off.

Yet I feel sorry for Judas because that choice brought him only misery, death and (I assume) damnation. Jesus loved Judas. Let that sink in. Jesus Christ loved Judas Iscariot. Jesus didn't want Judas to be further deceived by the great deceiver. Jesus wanted Judas to live a life in praise of Him, sharing His Spirit with Judas so Judas could share it with others. Jesus died on the cross for the sins of Judas Iscariot just like He did for yours, mine, and Adolf Hitler's. And Judas betrayed Him anyway. By Good Friday afternoon, when Jesus died, Judas had already hanged himself. I feel sorry for him, that the consequences of his choices were so dire and awful.

*Lord, forgive all who sin, who betray You with our sins, who let You down. Forgive and rebuild us, Savior Jesus.*

Read Mark 14, verses 12-26.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 February

*On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. Mark 14, verses 12-16.*

If you don't know the story of the Last Supper, then my prayer for this is that you learn something about it. I'm not yet going to dive into the deep spiritual meaning that Jesus' Spirit imbues in each of us through His real presence in the elements of bread and wine; relax, peeps, we'll get there. Instead, let's just focus a bit on the history of it.

You know what I think about coincidences (in case you've forgotten, it's 'there aren't any'). It's no coincidence that Jesus would use the ceremony of the Passover seder to give His gift of the Holy Supper. The rich symbolism of Passover was ancient even in Jesus' day; to paraphrase C.S. Lewis, "this is deep, old magic." BEFORE freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, while they were watching the Egyptians suffer through the ten plagues (that were designed to inspire Pharaoh free God's chosen people), God came to Moses and commanded him to paint lamb's blood on the lintels and doorposts of every Hebrew home. The Hebrews were to stay inside their homes and eat a meal of lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs while God's angel of death passed over each home where it saw the entryway blood.

Read that again and let it sink in, then consider the story with these words.

While they were still in their sins, God personally came to sinner slaves and, through the blood of an innocent lamb on the entrance to their hearts, purposefully forgot to kill those inside. To commemorate this, the sinners followed God's command to eat a meal that would remember this action of God's holy grace. Lamb signifying the death of an innocent; unleavened bread to remember freeing them in haste from their sins; bitter herbs to remember the unsatisfying taste of their slavery to sin. Blood that God would see and remember their sins no more. The meal became a milestone in every believer's life.

Sound familiar?

The first Passover happened over a thousand years before the life of Christ. And every year since they had been delivered, even when in captivity in Babylon then dispersed in the diaspora, the Jewish descendants of those Hebrew slaves had eaten this meal in remembrance. Jesus the man was a descendant of Israelites; so were His disciples. So, on that Maundy Thursday, the night before He was murdered on Good Friday, Jesus used the ecclesiastical, spiritual, historical and personally emotional significance of the Passover meal to institute what we Christians know as Holy Communion. It's not a coincidence.

Noodle that today, then give thanks and glory to God.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for using the beauty of Passover for Your Last Supper and Your Holy Communion.*



Read Mark 14, verses 12-26.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 4 February 2016

*When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely you don't mean me?" "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Mark 14, verses 17-21.*

"Every weld is different." My son told me that just yesterday. He attends a small college in Sherman, TX where he's learning to be a welder. We were talking about his classwork and he remarked that every weld is unique; like fingerprints, no two are the same. The best a welder can do is to be able to say "that's a good weld," then go on to the next one.

Profound.

Really, it truly was a profound statement and I'm proud to be the dad to a son who connects those particular dots (and pieces of metal). Re-read his quote, then consider it in the context of today's verses.

We're all different; God made each of us individually and "very good" in His perfect eyes. Each of us has things that are unique and can serve God's purposes. Even those who are disabled, dying, downtrodden, no-damn-good-dirty-dog-sinners, and, yes, even politicians have unique abilities and talents that are just as valuable as those of the beautiful people and sanctimonious churchgoers who assume they have it all together. Everything we have is a gift from God, and Jesus as God gives to each of us beautifully.

Even to Judas Iscariot.

It wasn't that Judas' gift was his place to betray Jesus. It wasn't that Judas was pre-ordained to be a sinner, to be the betrayer of Christ. That simply isn't true, and an honest study of these verses and others that corroborate and explain them will lead you to the inevitable conclusion that God never creates us to sin. God didn't create Judas to betray Jesus, but when Judas did so, God used it for His redemptive plan. "But if Judas hadn't betrayed Jesus then who would have?" Answer: I don't know. Neither do you, or your pastor, or the pope, or Billy Graham, Benny Hinn, or Barack Obama. The only thing we can assume is that God would have found a different way to redeem His people because that's what He promised to do.

Jesus loved Judas. Judas had unique abilities, and was a very good weld. Is it any wonder, then, that such a devoted God would mourn the woe that would come to the man He had created as an individual to love but who would send Him to a cross instead?

Every weld is different and God is a master welder. My son taught me that the way you test a weld is to try to break it. You drop your welded metal onto the floor and if it breaks, then it wasn't a good weld and you need to re-do it. At the Last Supper, Jesus dropped Judas on the floor, and Judas broke. How unfortunate for him that there wasn't time for a re-do. How fortunate for us is the same.

*Lord, I pray for the soul of Judas Iscariot. And I thank You for making me individual, and for loving me that way.*

Read Mark 14, verses 12-26.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 5 February 2016

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Mark 14, verse 22.*

Let's talk transubstantiation. That's a fancy seminary term that most folks probably wouldn't use in regular conversation; gee what a wonderful way to start the day! Can you imagine that word on Wheel of Fortune, or in a spelling bee?

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transubstantiation> defines it as "the belief in some Christian religions that the bread and wine given at Communion become the body and blood of Jesus Christ when they are blessed." I believe in this concept.

You might know the drill. The pastor (or whoever is distributing communion) blesses the bread and wine (or grape juice) and says something to the effect of "on the night when He was betrayed, Jesus took the bread and after giving thanks, He gave it to His disciples and said, "take and eat. This is my body, broken for you." In the same way, after giving thanks, He took the cup and said, "take and drink. This is the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins. Do this in remembrance of Me."

Sometime in that process is when the transubstantiation takes place. God uses that bread to not just represent Him but to actually be Him. Ditto the wine/juice. To be honest, I really don't have a hang-up if someone says "but they are just representations of God. They're just symbols." Fine with me. If that's what you believe and it works for you, go for it! There's nothing harmful about it. Personally, I'm focused on that word "is." To paraphrase Mr. Clinton (in a completely foreign context) "it all depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is." It's a concept I've discussed many times with pastors and friends. For me, that "this is" part is just what it says. It's like Jesus saying "this bread is my body." He didn't say "this represents me:" He said "this is." Ditto the wine/juice (again).

But to be perfectly frank, let's not get wrapped around the axle over small things. I'm calling the word of Christ small? Perhaps, but I'm hopeful that He'd side with my argument here. Getting hung up on whether it's bread or flesh isn't the point. The point is God's grace in the sacrament. Jesus didn't give us this sacrament for us to argue about it. He gave us the sacrament as a means of grace, as a way to build us up and strengthen our faith. He gave us this way to charge our spiritual batteries because He knew we'd need it. Indeed, consider the timing of when it first happened. That Last Supper was just a few hours before Jesus' passion, when He would be murdered and the Disciples scattered, tested and persecuted. When you consider the beauty of that Passover moment and how He loved each of those men as individuals (just like He loves us), then it's a beautiful moment of grace that He would give us this piece of Himself to share with each other in both remembrance and celebration of Him.

Knowing that, transubstantiation isn't such a hard thing to understand after all. Nor does it really matter. We now return you to your non-spelling-bee-word time of day.

*Lord, thank You for this concept of transubstantiation, for being in the bread and wine as Your body and blood. Thank You for these precious gifts of Your grace.*

Read Mark 14, verses 12-26.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 8 February 2016

*Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." Mark 14, verses 22-25.*

I enjoy wine. I've talked here before about how it's a dream (indeed, an active plan) of mine to make my living as a vintner. I like wine and I love everything about the production and sale of it. Planting grapes, growing and harvesting them, pressing the juice, making and aging the wine, then selling it to interested customers: I love it all. My wife and I are more red wine drinkers. We like a few whites, and we like (and want to produce) some fruit wines, but red viniferous wines are what we like best; merlot, temperanillo, cabernet franc, etc. Do you enjoy wine, and if so what do you like most?

One of the things I like most about wine is contemplating all the "w's" surrounding its production. What was the soil like, and the weather? Who cut the grapes and transformed them from fruit into juice into must? What did they talk about; what was going on in their lives? Where was it aged and when was it bottled? Who had a hand in getting it from the vine to my glass? You could question forever all the possibilities of this.

Jesus used wine in the Last Supper to give us the communion in His blood that strengthens and preserves believers today. It's no coincidence that He did this. Indeed, during their seder, Jesus used the third cup of wine they drank (known even then as "the cup of redemption") to bless and institute communion. The unleavened bread they ate signified leaving the sin of slavery in haste, of how there had been no time to let bread rise before being driven out of Egypt. Yet the wine was different. Red wine looked like blood; it was a physical reminder of that blood of the Passover lamb who was slain to give that blood on each Israelite's doorway. God used that blood to redeem them from their bondage. Later, God demanded blood be sacrificed and sprinkled on the altar of the Temple in atonement for sin. He did it in terms of remembering His promise – His covenant – with Adam, Noah, and Abraham to deliver men from their sins.

How beautiful it is, too, that Jesus would use this cup of redemption to remind us that we wouldn't need to shed any more blood in sacrifice. He took that burden on Himself so that we wouldn't have to. And to do it He used wine. Do we know whether it was wine or more like strong grape juice? No, we really don't. The Bible says it was wine and I'm sure folks smarter than me (that includes most everyone) could tell you about any difference between first century wine and a bottle of Welch's finest. Personally, I don't think it matters much.

Especially since I enjoy wine. There are times when I'm enjoying a glass that I contemplate the wonder of Jesus and communion. That means more than a bunch of pointless arguing.

*Lord, thank You for the blessing of wine and using it to give us the new covenant in Your blood.*

Read Mark 14, verses 12-26.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 February 2016

*When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Mark 14, verse 26.*

A word about music and hymns, actually hundreds of them.

Pick up a hymnal at any church and you'll find somewhere between three and six hundred of them printed in the book. Some are ancient, going back to before the days of Jesus. Some go back to the middle ages. Some were written by famous people. Some are nearly brand new. One of the things I find most difficult about going to new churches (especially contemporary ones) is when hymns and songs are shown on overhead screens. The words are shown while the band or choir sings along, but you have no music to read in accompaniment. This makes it difficult for me to follow sometimes, especially when the band gets ahead of the overhead projector.

Yet I'm thankful for music. To be honest, I'm not much of a musician. I like to sing, but I'm embarrassed by it. When I was growing up, over the years I played piano, violin, viola and trombone; today I've forgotten most of what I learned about any of them. From time to time I like to pick up a guitar and I've learned a few chords yet not enough to say "I can play guitar." But none of this means that I don't like music. I like it very much. I've spent hundreds of dollars on music downloaded to my iPhone. If you pass my car on the road and I'm alone in it, look over and you might just find me singing. And I have great respect and admiration for people whose muse inspires them to actually write new songs.

What's the point? The point is that I'm not uncommon. The radio dial is full of music stations. You can download any of (literally) millions of songs online through any number of services. Go into most any store and you'll find music playing in the background. And a big part of any movie is the music on the soundtrack: it harmonizes with the story or the action you see to better appeal to our senses. Music is a big part of our lives. It's no coincidence that young people, especially, are affected by music because music appeals to both emotion and reason in ways we can't really explain.

It was a part of the Last Supper. If you attend a Jewish seder today, you still sing a psalm at the end. That's what Jesus and the Disciples did. The "hymn" they sang at the end of their meal was a psalm, centuries old even then. It was a hallel psalm; a praise song that included repentance and revelation, sin and anguish, praise and thanksgiving. The song they sang was a cap on the evening's celebration and a replay of its solemnity. It was a way for the Disciples to express their sorrow and joy at this living future in which they found themselves, as well as an expression of unity with their Hebrew past. It was common then; it's common now.

So if you're like me and embarrassed to sing, then consider that Jesus Himself used to sing, that He did so freely and enthusiastically on the night on which He was betrayed. It makes the miracle of that time seem more human and beautiful.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for music. Thank You for singing, for the gift of song, for using music to speak matters of faith to our hearts.*

Read Mark 14, verses 12-26.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 February 2016

*“You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ Mark 14, verse 27.*

A friend and I were having a Twitter discussion today. It was about the Gospel and how big churches grow based on money, power, and programs but not the Gospel. From time to time we discuss matters like this, and today my friend made the point that he didn't think most people who attend mega-churches are there to hear the Gospel of Jesus. I contended that, whether they're there to hear it or not, the Gospel is actually what hollow lives crave. Whether or not they do, or take that message home with them, or even acknowledge it is another matter.

But my friend's point got me thinking, especially when I consider it within the context of today's verse. Are we simply sheep who have fallen away?

In one sense, we aren't. We're believers seeking Jesus, following Jesus. He tasked His very Disciples with that very charge: “come follow me.” So we do. When we do, we're sheep following the Shepherd. He guides us, helps us, keeps us together, teaches and cares for us. Gathering together in His name, whether in small groups or mega-churches, is true fellowship with Him and His church.

Yet in another sense we are the sheep who have fallen away. Every minute of every day, I harbor sins against my Savior. Thoughts, words, actions: I'm thick with sin and can't live a minute innocent of it. I've come to ignore my shepherd willfully and frequently. I forget His voice; I turn from His commands; I deny His perfection; I spit on His gift to me. Long ago, Jesus quoted the ancient prophecy of Zechariah by saying “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” He was predicting what would happen to His disciples on the night in which He was betrayed. In a larger sense, He was also predicting what we, His church, would do to Him on a regular basis both as individuals and as His corporate and worldly church.

I deny Him. We deny Him. We are struck by Satan through the problems of this world and the sins we embrace. It's an age-old battle in which we fight, one that goes back to Eden. Anything but God; anyone but God. Indeed, every one of our sins is a subtle idolatry, a quiet choice to be scattered from instead of gathered to our Lord. When Jesus predicted that His best friends would all soon fall away from Him, in another sense He was also predicting the same for us. It doesn't matter how many times we gather to worship Him, offer Him tithes, sing in the best choir or praise band, or any deed we do for the church. If we fall away from Him in the heart, none of that matters. Jesus wants us to stand with Him with a whole heart first, before anything else, before anyone else.

We've fallen away, my fellow sheep. My friend's point is valid even as it is cynical. We daily fall away from Jesus even as, deep inside, our deepest need is for the fulfillment, satisfaction, and love that only He can offer. As today is the beginning of Lent, what will you contemplate about this fact in the forty days to come?

*Lord Jesus, I have fallen away from you. Daily abide with me, forgive me, and renew me that I may learn to live only for You.*

Read Mark 14, verses 27-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 11 February 2016

*But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee. Mark 14, verse 28.*

This verse carries us realistically into the supernatural. Up until now, Jesus has alluded to His death and resurrection. He has performed miracles even as many of those could be rationalized away. He has said and done amazing things, and He has confronted authorities, prejudices, convention, and things that good people would rather have left unsaid. Now Jesus lurches forward into a clearly, undeniably supernatural realm in ways nobody else could.

Bet you didn't think that much power could get packed into just thirteen words of one verse! Sure, it happens all the time...but you know, in fact, it really does. Whether we're comfortable admitting it or not, ours is a supernatural world. Things happen that defy logic; things that we just can't explain. Heck, the internet is full of them; try Googling the topic some time. Carlos Santana believes that music has supernatural healing powers; yes, he really did say that. We seek comfort in the very real times of crisis in our lives by clinging to the physically impossible probability that there are such things as a Savior and life after death. We crave the supernatural when the natural gets us down.

Is it any wonder that Jesus would "go there" during this last real teaching time He had with His Disciples? Consider the verse.

"After I have risen:" Jesus He puts it on the calendar. He has spoken openly about being betrayed, arrested and killed even if the Apostles didn't understand it. Now He talks about those things as a past-tense matter, stating that He would rise and there would be time afterwards. Maybe that doesn't seem like much, especially in the hindsight of knowing it actually happened. Consider, then, the idea that He was actually saying (not predicting: stating) that He would resurrect from actual physical death and decomposition. Purely supernatural but talked about as a matter-of-fact.

"I will go ahead of you:" Action. Doesn't Jesus always go ahead of us? Don't forget that this verse comes immediately on the heels of the ones talking about how all of those Disciples would fall away and only minutes after that supernatural Passover supper. As we have also fallen away, isn't it an amazing thing to know that Jesus is omniscient and omnipresent in our lives today, even while we're still living minute by minute in our sins? The Apostles weren't supermen; they didn't have physical or mental strengths greater than ours. They were just men. Because they were just men, Jesus was promising that He would go ahead of them. They had sought earthly and spiritual comfort in His presence. Now He was promising them that He would both remain with them and that He would be active. He would "go" as they would "go."

Finally, "into Galilee." Jesus was reporting a reliable news story ahead of time. "I'm coming back, I'll be on the move, and here's where I'm going, where you can find me." Jesus would go home, back to where His ministry started. He would go back to where He had first encountered these friends of His. "Find me there" He was saying. "Here's where you can look for me." He was giving them directions that they would need for the time just ahead when they would find themselves isolated, scared and confused.

Realistic yet purely supernatural; truly out of this world. I'm hoping Carlos Santana would approve.

*Lord, I praise You for your real but supernatural life and love.*

Read Mark 14, verses 27-31.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 12 February 2016

*Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same. Mark 14, verses 28-31.*

Why did Jesus say this?

Last week, I attended a men's Bible study out here in Paris, Texas. It was the first one of this year, and the pastor was recanting some of his personal history in the context of five "R's" that he wanted the men of the church to remember throughout the year (revelation, realization, reliance, repetition, relationship). During his talk, he mentioned how, as a young Marine, he woke up on a beach one time, hungover with a strange naked woman beside him. His conscience bothered him because he thought of himself as a Christian yet was spending so much of his personal time living in markedly un-Christian ways. He said that God's Spirit convicted him, prodding him to the realization that he could turn and follow Jesus unconditionally, or he could live unconditionally as a worldly man but couldn't, in good conscience, still call himself a Christian.

Why did Jesus say this to this man?

Let's be fair: the Disciples probably thought they meant well. Jesus was plainly telling them that He was about to be arrested, tortured, and murdered and that none of them would lift a finger to stop it. If your best friend said something like that to you, wouldn't you immediately become indignant? You'd jump to defend yourself; "now wait just a minute!" In part, you'd do this out of love for your friend. But in being fair, we also need to be honest: you'd also do it for yourself, to ward off a perceived attack on your dignity. Yes, we really do usually think (and act) as if 'it's all about me.' Peter, John and the rest were no different.

In true friend-form, Jesus then responded with the truth. "This is what's going to happen. When I'm at my neediest moment, you're going to deny me. You're going to run away from me and lie about Me to save your own skin." He wasn't doing it out of anger or spite: it was a matter of fact. Yet I'll give you another motivation that may not seem too apparent. It was out of love.

Why would Jesus say this to His friends? To convict them, of course. He said what He said so that they would feel it, internalize it, contemplate it, and know all the more the power of His Word on that Easter Sunday just a few eternally long days later. Jesus had yanked them into this supernatural event and used supernatural fore-knowledge that He shared with Peter. "Before the rooster even crows, you'll deny me not just once but three times." Perhaps that number three has meaning as well. After all, three is a significant number in Scripture...think Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Think "on the third day." In convicting them through their consciences, Jesus was also using a Scriptural reference to turn a painful event of recollection into a Gospel-proclaiming lesson of powerful truth.

Next time you do something outrageous and you feel the sting of your conscience, think "three" and that maybe God is trying to tell you something.

*Lord, I pray You convict me daily of my sins, turning the pain of my remembering them into Your glory here and now.*

Read Mark 14, verses 32-41.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 February 2016

*They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Mark 14, verses 32-34.*

Jesus and His Disciples went to a rocky garden on the periphery of Jerusalem for some private time and prayer. The eleven men with Him had lived a long day. So had Jesus, and all of them had to be physically and emotionally exhausted. When they got to the garden, Jesus then asked His three closest friends to continue on a little further. He was overwhelmed. You and I can grasp that feeling because, in these stressful times of economic depression, tense relations, and political upheaval, it's easy to become overwhelmed by the world around us. Then add on personal issues, anything that hurts, bothers, or haunts you and your sense of being overwhelmed increases drastically.

Now think of Jesus at that point. All those things were swirling around Him. Add to them the fact that He had released Judas to go get the men who would start the process of killing Him. He knew it was happening. Jesus knew that a criminal's death was only a few hours away, and that in-between these early morning hours and that Good Friday afternoon, He would be beaten, flogged and tortured. He knew the physical agony that was ahead and He knew there was no other way. His followers would turn on Him. What's more, He was assuming onto Himself all the sin of mankind, knowing that His Holy nature and the Holy Father and Spirit who comprise His Trinity could not abide that. Jesus knew they would abandon Him and yet they wouldn't. In a mystery too deep for us to comprehend, Jesus understood the depth of the sin penalty that He would take upon Himself knowing that He would be all alone yet never alone.

He was overwhelmed with sorrow over all of it. He was overwhelmed in ways that you and I can't even begin to comprehend. All He asked was that His closest friends would simply be with Him. "I'm scared, guys. Just be with me while I go through this." He said it knowing that Peter would soon deny even knowing Him a minimum of three times. He said it knowing that James, John and the others would scatter when the temple guards came to seize Him. It wasn't much to ask and He asked it.

They failed Him.

So do I. So do you.

All Jesus asks of us is that we let Him drive. He wants us to allow Him to bless us, to allow Him to bear our burdens, to mentor us, to surrender our control to Him so that He can teach us a better way. He wants to teach us to stand for Him so that He can fight for us. I fail him every day at this; so do you. Yet we have a duty to Him to stand that watch, to stand up for Him and stand against what is wrong in our world. We don't have this duty to work out our salvation: we get to bear it as fidelity to our Savior. So did the Disciples. So do I. So do you.

*Lord, please forgive then strengthen me to stand for You. Thank You for your sacrifice, for dying for me.*

Read Mark 14, verses 32-41.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 February 2016

*Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Mark 14, verses 35-36.*

I'm a big fan of the Kendrick Brothers and their movies. "War Room, Courageous, Fireproof" and others: they're excellent, openly Christian movies dealing with hard topics in realistic, faithful ways. One of their earlier movies was called "Facing the Giants" and I believe that today's verses express the theme of that movie.

"I'll praise you, Lord, in the good and the bad."

Now, let's keep it real: that's tough. I mean, it's probably the toughest thing in the world to do. It's easier to forgive your worst enemy on the hardest day of your life than it is to truly, honestly, gratefully praise God when those worst times happen. And happen they do; we both know this to be true. Just when things couldn't get any worse...they do. Just when you think you have had enough...something else happens. Just when you're feeling the most overwhelmed...the world really closes in.

Please understand: I'm not being pessimistic here; really, I'm not. I'm stating that this is a tough old world, that the natural order of things in this fallen world is chaos. At the heart of sin are idolatry and chaos. Indeed, I believe chaos stems from idolatry (from putting anything other than God in God's rightful place), that idolatry creates chaos, and that the logical consequence of sin is chaos. If things seem to be getting worse and worse it is because, in fact, in many ways we might think they actually are because we live in sin. In those times, praise God.

It's not that we want, or desire, or crave the bad times. God help the man who does. Yet God also help the man who doesn't give thanks to Him for being in those times. It's not a cliché to state that, when you're down at the bottom, the only direction to go is up. In the middle of the worst trials, God is still present; God is still active. God allows those hard times to be in our lives so that He might work all the more for our benefit, for His glory. That's how love works.

Yes, I'll definitely praise God for that annual bonus, for the new house we want, for the health of my kids and grandkid, for a thousand small blessings every day; more than I can even remember. We want to give praise and thanks to God during those good times because Jesus did first. Yet we also want to praise and thank Him during the bad times as well, maybe even more so. Why? Because Jesus did first. There in Gethsemane, God was active, God was at work. Jesus inferred it by talking to the Father in active language, intoning that He knew deep inside that the fact of God was at work in each of the unfolding events that Good Friday morning. Jesus didn't want to undergo the torture of crucifixion, and He asked His Father if there were any other way. Yet He also praised God at the same time; "not what I will but what You will."

Even the Kendrick brothers would think the same, especially when facing our own giants. Not what I will, Lord, but what You will. I'll praise You either way.

*Lord, I praise You today, just where I am. Thank You.*



Read Mark 14, verses 32-41.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 17 February 2016

*Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Mark 14, verses 37-38.*

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak:" no more helpful words were spoken that early Good Friday morning.

Notice how Jesus poses the question to Peter (and, in turn, James and John) that both accuses of slacking but also speaks to their conscience. Jesus doesn't slam the Disciples. Instead, He states a fact – I really need your help – while speaking to the better angels of their nature. Then Jesus "goes there," reminding them – and us – of a few key things about humanity.

Watch and pray so that you do not fall into temptation. God made each of us with the inborn ability to watch, to be alert, to be cognizant, mindful, attentive, and active in our lives. God Immanuel tells us to watch around us because the fallen world of sin is the world we live in. He calls us to be in that world, to hold fast to faith in Him but live in that sinful world with other sinful people like ourselves. Why does Jesus tell us to watch? So that we don't fall into temptation, of course. Jesus understood temptation; He was fully man while still being fully God. Yet when Satan tempted Him in the desert, Jesus was literally starving to death. He was at His physical and emotional lowest and that's when Satan pressed for advantage. Jesus was telling His friends that the best way to resist temptation is to watch out for it.

The spirit is willing; words of hope. Jesus knew the depth of the human spirit; He knew that it was for love that God created each one of us with a spirit. And He knew that He, in His Spirit, would return to the world after He had ascended home. When that happened, the Spirit of God would move the spirit of man to faith, to accept this resurrected Lord as the only Savior of mankind. He knew this would be possible, that it would happen, because Jesus knew that the spirits of men are willing, that we crave God and innately seek God even as we deny Him.

Yet we deny God because the flesh is weak. Even when we watch, even when our spirit is willing, man's flesh is weak. We want the sin. We want the praise, the power, the glory. All the stuff of comfort? Want it. All the adulation and fame and adoration of other men? We crave them. We want and crave those things because we forget that our flesh is weak. We're sinful from birth, weak in the flesh and tempted to seek comfort in the flesh instead of comfort from the Cross.

Jesus 'got' all of that, and I marvel at how He spoke with instead of speaking to these men who, being men, fell asleep when they should have been standing watch for Him. Peter and the others should have been keeping guard, attending their friend. Instead, they did what we would do. Thank God for His patience with them and us.

*Lord Jesus, You are kind, wise and patient with us. Thank You for these blessed qualities, for teaching me about myself.*

Read Mark 14, verses 32-41.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 18 February 2016

*Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Mark 14, verses 39-40.*

The spirit is indeed willing and the flesh is indeed weak. Knowing that, we can easily relate to the sleepy Apostles.

Let's cut a little slack to the Apostles because, well, after all, they're human. They were tired. No, they were exhausted. These verses occurred very early in the morning, perhaps around 2 or 3 AM. After tramping all around Jerusalem on Thursday, then the last supper, then some incredibly wrenching personal time with Jesus, they were exhausted.

"I would have done better. I would have stayed up."

Sure you would, pal. Don't forget there wasn't a Denny's open at that time. Around AD33 you couldn't run to the local QT to get a cup of fresh coffee. You and I might have wanted to stay awake and keep watch, but in the end, after chatting with our mates, we probably would have quietly sat down and nodded off...just like they did. It's all the more real when you think that they weren't sitting there in North Face jackets with thermal sleeping bags. No, on a cold Judean night in the springtime (think 40-50 degrees), they sat on the hard ground, perhaps against stone walls, wearing thin robes, skirts or tunics and sandals. I'm thinking they didn't stretch out to relax. I'm betting they huddled together to keep warm.

Then they were alarmed when Jesus came back and He was disappointed in them. They didn't know what to say.

Now, I'll confess how I'm getting old by saying that I don't see how young people can sleep so much. My kids, they can sleep for hours, sometimes 8-12 hours at a stretch. I don't think I could count on one hand how many times I've slept that long in my entire life and I'm nearly 50. Try waking up one of my kids when they're asleep and you'll get a disoriented, probably crabby hot mess. Ask them a question and you'll likely get a vacant response. Should it be surprising, then, if that's the same response Jesus got from His sleeping disciples? And they hadn't even been asleep for 10 hours.

Yes, they should have kept a better watch; so should we. Could they have eased Jesus' anxiety over what was happening? Perhaps; we'll never know. Jesus wanted them to keep watch with Him just like He wants us to keep watch with Him every day of our lives. He upbraided them to watch out and resist temptation because He knew that their best defense against a Satan on offense was to watch and be ready when sin tempts. He'll do that same thing for you and I, speaking to our hearts, speaking to us through conscience. When we are tempted, He'll speak to us in ways that appeal to our hearts. "Don't do it." "You shouldn't." "Stop now." Those are good things to know because we will each find ourselves in moments of temptation every single day. It's a fair bet to assume that, like the Apostles, we won't know what to say when that happens.

*Lord Jesus, abide with me. Remind me to avoid temptation and help me to resist.*

Read Mark 14, verses 32-41.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 19 February 2016

*Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" Mark 14, verses 41-42.*

If you drive through the American South, you see all kinds of religious billboards. Many of them implore you to know Jesus as soon as possible because we don't know when He's coming back. I used to see one south of Savanna, Oklahoma that said "watch and pray for we know not what hour the Son of God will return." There are others that quote dire verses of Scripture announcing hellfire for those who reject Jesus' open invitation to free salvation. There are still more that have sayings like "Talk with me before it's too late. Sincerely, God." Announcing God's impending judgment on us isn't necessarily regional; I suppose signs like these are everywhere. I've simply noticed more of them here in the Bible Belt. Guess what? They're all true. Today's verses prove it.

It's before sunrise on the morning of Good Friday. Jesus is exhausted while His Disciples have had fitful intermittent rest on the cold Gethsemene ground. After imploring them to keep watch for sin, Jesus returns to them a third time and brings them up short. The night is over; no more rest; no more interruptions. It's time to get up because there's work ahead today. It's going to be the hardest day of your lives.

"Today I'm going to die."

The Son of Man was delivered into the hands of sinners. Make no mistake about it: the temple guards who seized Jesus were sinners indeed. They were players in a staged drama predicted since the fall of man. These 'innocent' actors were only doing the bidding of their priestly overseers. The overseers were only doing the bidding of the chief priests. The chief priests had only initiated this arrest because Judas Iscariot came to them with news they wanted to hear. Judas Iscariot only betrayed Jesus to the priests because he was a sinful twisted man. He was sinful and twisted because he listened to Satan. Satan was evil because he reveled in sin.

So do I; so do you. We're thick with sin and no better than Judas or the guards. The Bible tells us so. Jesus said so. All those billboards scream out the fact. Here's the good news.

Jesus faced His betrayer. The verses and chapters of Mark after this all describe the story of how He faced His betrayer, how He loved Him anyway, and then how He went to His death as an innocent lamb to slaughter. He did this because the Disciples slept instead of kept watch for sinful temptation. He did it because Judas Iscariot, the chief priests and those temple guards were dead in their sins if He didn't. He did it because all the sins I've done today and every day of my life demand more of a penalty than I can pay. He did it because the same thing can be said about you and everyone we know. Will you face down your betrayer today? Will you face your sins and own up to them, then face Jesus and repent of them? Bibles and billboards remind us how it's imperative that we do so.

*Lord Jesus, I'm sinful through and through. Thank You for Your holy sacrifice, for facing your betrayer, for dying for us.*

Read Mark 14, verses 43-52.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 February 2016

*Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Mark 14, verses 43-45.*

There are a few ways to look at Judas. You could look at him as one cold fish. That makes sense because it would take a really cold soul for someone to kiss you and betray you, knowing you're going to face some kind of persecution. You could look at him in pity, wondering if his voice didn't crack when he said "rabbi" (meaning 'teacher') to Jesus. You could think of him as someone naïve, swept up in something bigger than himself, as if there was some unfulfilled part of him that had looked for Jesus to do something that didn't happen.

When you boil it down, does it really matter how we view Judas? We're no better. Judas spent years learning from and praising Jesus, then at the very last of his life, using his words and actions to send Jesus to His death. Don't we do the same?

No matter how we view Judas, one lesson we could draw from today's verses is irony. As I mentioned, Judas was one of Jesus' closest friends. He was a man who gave up everything to follow Jesus, then somehow saw the real cost of following Him as too high to pay. For whatever reason, Judas sold out Jesus, then found out that it was actually he himself who was sold out. How ironic.

Then there is the fact that Judas wasn't actually in the garden of Gethsemane with the other apostles all night. When Jesus told Peter that he would betray Him, Judas wasn't around. It turns out that Judas Iscariot, whom we think of as Christ's betrayer, wasn't actually first at all. Sure, we could debate this, but I suspect that debate would lead us to this point, namely that, as participants in eternity, we all originally betrayed Jesus with our sins...just like Peter and Judas. How ironic indeed.

Finally, consider the irony of those ways in which we might view Judas. You could look at Judas and think you're simply looking in the mirror. Awhile back, I mentioned that I felt sorry for him, and I do. Judas let sin take control and it took him to dark places from which he couldn't recover; I've done that. He did sorrowful things that left him pathetic and abandoned. Don't we each sometimes feel abandoned? If our Savior was willing to die for us and everyone who lived thousands of years before we were even born, aren't we also original sinners? The betraying sins of Adam and Eve might be just as timely today for us, in the one-second-here-and-now of our lives, as anything we have ever done. In that light, when I look in the mirror, Judas Iscariot stares back at me.

Much to think about indeed.

*Lord and Savior, I pray forgive me for my sins and my betrayals of You.*



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 February 2016

*The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." Then everyone deserted him and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind. Mark 14, verses 46-52.*

Bible scholars think the young naked man was John Mark: the same Mark whose book we've been examining. If it isn't him, then why include this strange and, frankly, inappropriate passage in the narrative? No matter, I think John Mark's reaction would be the same one that each of us would have had if we had been present when Jesus was arrested?

"You think I'd go running naked into the night after the church security tried to arrest me?" Yep. I'm saying exactly that. Don't worry or feign modesty because I'm right there beside you, streaking towards Jerusalem.

Think about it. We've been following Jesus for awhile. We aren't part of His close inner circle, but we've been following Him long enough to put our faith in Him, to know that He's got big things planned. Just what those 'big things' are we can't really say, but we want to be around when they happen. You see, He's been preaching truth and love and endurance and facing up to your problems. Nobody we know of has ever spoken like this, and based on what we know from what we've seen and heard, we agree that He is the Christ: the Holy One of God promised since the time of our ancient forefathers. He has finally come, at long last, to restore our nation in more ways than one. We adore Him and believe He knows us fully.

Just five days ago, we walked in the glorious procession behind Him as He entered Jerusalem like an arriving King. Yet He didn't lead military columns or come in to vanquish the local government. Instead, He went to the Temple and did what we've wanted to do for a long time: clean it out; it's sort of like what we wish He would do to Congress. Anyway, ever since then, He has been teaching, and dining with close friends, and He's been different; passionate, insightful, wise and kind, but different. If Jesus is the Christ we've been waiting for, then things aren't going down the way we always thought they would.

Now come these armed guards, sent by the temple priests, and they've arrested Jesus. They've tied Him up and are frog-walking Him away. They've beaten some of His Disciples, and a swordfight broke out. When the guards came for you and me, we didn't put up much of a fight because we were confused, addled, scared. Instead, we struggled to break free and then get away but lost our clothes. Where they've taken Jesus, we don't know. All we know is that something bad is going down and it's going down quick.

So on that chilly Judean Good Friday morning, if I were in Gethsemene at all, it wouldn't surprise me at all if I was running away with John Mark. Naked, exposed and very afraid.

*Lord, forgive my naked fear. Forgive me for not standing by You, for running away when You needed me most.*

Read Mark 14, verses 53-65.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 24 February 2016

*They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire. Mark 14, verses 53-54.*

Does Jesus do your heavy lifting? If we warm ourselves by the fire in the middle of the cold night, are we really being warmed inside or is it just a half-measure to ward off the hostile cold?

I'll be honest: Jesus does ALL the heavy lifting. He does it for me and for you; He does it because of His grace and not because we deserve it or earn it or anything the preacher says to do. Everything that was ever needed to make me right with the Holy Father of the Trinity was done by Jesus. Even my choosing to believe in this isn't my action alone; I couldn't even believe if Jesus' Holy Spirit hadn't first inspired and enabled me to do it.

So I just live my life, sinning from day to do. Some days it's petty things like a white lie or living in advantage of His blessings. Some days it's an outright big one, like rage or adultery in my thoughts or grudges or any one of a hundred things that separate me from my Lord. In those times, He reminds me again and again that He forgave all of my sins, that I have no penalty from the Father for them even though they deserve eternal damnation. He reminds me that I don't need to do these stupid things, that I don't need to hold onto guilt, that I'm His. If you don't think that's heavy lifting, try reminding an addict that he has the power to give up his addiction if only he'll take the gigantic small step of starting to trust. Jesus does that a thousand times a day for the addict sinner known as me.

And through it all, what do I do? I warm myself by the fire. I join in with Peter and the other curiosity seekers who won't actually go stand beside Jesus and fight for Him (or even show solidarity with Him). No, I'm there trying to keep my hands and face warm in the chilly morning air. It's cold out here and I am more concerned with thinking I can ward off the cold than with being true to my heart. I'm one of the folks joining in with the very guards who arrested Jesus and brought all this into being. You and I can judge Peter for being a coward, for these moments when he actively, enthusiastically denied knowing his best friend and Savior, the man he told (in more friendly and comfortable circumstances) "you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." "I'd never do that, Dave," you say. "I just wouldn't."

Yes you would. So do I. I do it with every rebellious thought that rushes through my sin-encrusted mind.

Know what Jesus does? He does the heavy lifting. He does the hard work of making those rebellious thoughts and actions into vapors of the past. He does it with offering me the blood on the cross. It's a free offer, no guilt-motivation involved. It's the only thing that can really, truly keep me out of the cold emptiness of oblivion.

*Lord, thank You for doing all the heavy lifting of forgiving sins.*

Read Mark 14, verses 53-65.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 25 February 2016

*The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even then their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"<sup>61</sup> But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Mark 14, verses 55-61.*

I wonder if first century Judea was an 'age of offended' like ours.

It's true, 21<sup>st</sup> century America isn't an occupied nation, subjugated to the controls of outside tyrants (that is, unless you don't count that 'the other guy's' policies are wrong for the country, no matter who 'the other guy' is). Still, it seems pretty undeniable that we live in a time where social, political, and conventional media facilitate our whipping ourselves into offended frenzies over things that probably don't matter much in the long run. Just this morning, I read an online article by a writer offended that Phil Robertson called some women (on his TV show) "subdivision women." The context was a Duck Dynasty competition between city and country girls over who could gig the most frogs. I watch the show and I think I understand what Phil was saying, yet the writer apparently didn't and, for whatever reason, found offense with it.

Please.

Please indeed because it's just another he-said-she-said moment; another instance of something dividing us for no particular reason. It's another instance of us being seemingly unable to agree. Take this story in today's verses. Jesus is (literally) dragged into this ecclesiastical kangaroo court, where the pre-determined verdict is supposed to be confirmed by real evidence. Except that's not how it plays out. When the eyewitnesses begin to recount their stories of hearing Jesus say and do things, they can't seem to agree. Then Jesus has the temerity to not say anything about it; oh the horror of an innocent man simply letting His accusers' words speak for themselves!

It seems to me that the chief priests were 'totes offended.' They were looking for a reason to be angry, to find offense with what Jesus said...except they couldn't. Strip that away and isn't it pretty similar to what we do in our not so modern world today? We pre-judge, make up our minds about something and then look around for ways to validate that belief instead of letting the world simply live out, play out as it does? Strip that even further back and doesn't that point to a matter of our sinful hearts?

Jesus seemed to think it did. Perhaps that's one reason why He didn't say anything about it. Perhaps that's one reason why Jesus did the heavy lifting for us of looking beyond our human faults and offering His perfect life and perfect blood in a criminal's death so that we wouldn't have to. Perhaps instead of being offended by that, we should humble ourselves in adoration of Him for it.

Perhaps that's something Phil Robertson might understand differently from 'the offended.'

*Lord, crush my judgments, forgive me the destructive folly of my sins, help me to overcome my sense of being offended, and please always teach me Your better ways.*

Read Mark 14, verses 53-65.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 26 February 2016

*Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Mark 14, verses 60-62.*

Words mean things, and the way, order, and even the cadence in which Jesus replies to the chief priest here matters very, very much. Jesus deliberately said exactly what He said to state not only some powerful truths but also to offer the erring high priest yet another lifeline.

Men versus God; the age-old conflict. Notice how the high priest talks about what men are doing. He doesn't believe this Jesus is God, that Jesus is the Son of Man who He claims to be. Since the days of Aaron, it had been the high priest's life to revere God, to live his life in service to God. Each priest had awaited and anticipated the coming of the Christ, the deliverer sent to redeem Israel from its sins. Now there came a man who said He was the Christ, who proved He was the Christ, whose followers believed He was the Christ. What does the high priest do? He falls back on "what did these men x or y?" Would we do the same?

I am. That's a powerful thing. In a way, Jesus was just answering the question in the affirmative; that's true. Yet this translation of the Bible says something extraordinary because, when one of the ancient Jews would answer this particular question the way Jesus did, He was (once again) proclaiming Himself to be God by taking on Himself God's holy name. Remember that Moses asked God what name he should use when the Israelites asked who God was and God answered "I AM. Tell them I AM has sent you." In being asked if He was the promised divine Messiah, Son of God, Jesus answered not only "yes" but using I AM as His own title. To an unbelieving priest, that would be heresy worthy of death.

You will see. This is a promise. Jesus knew what was happening, that this little drama was going to conclude at Calvary. He was using what time He had now, with the authorities, to tell them what would happen. It wasn't just a prophecy about His resurrection. It was also a promise that they, even though they disbelieved Him, would see Him clearly revealed as who He said He is in the time to come. It's a promise for us as well.

Finally, "coming on the clouds," predicting His eventual post-resurrection return. It's not different from how God Himself predicted Jesus' eventual victory on the cross (now at hand in Mark) from the very instant He confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden. Jesus doesn't give them a day; none is needed. Instead, He tells them how to know it's real, to understand that this is a fact and that God will reveal it in this way in His own due time.

In all of these words, Jesus spoke out of love, offering His beloved, yes the priests, a way out and the hope of salvation even as they conspired to violently end His life.

*Lord, thank You for all You said and did for these people.*

Read Mark 14, verses 53-65.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 February 2016

*The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him. Mark 14, verses 63-65.*

Would we do any different? Put yourself in the place of the priests. They were conflicted in many ways. Their conventional wisdom was threatened. The balance of power in both their religious and political worlds was in danger. Their popularity was in question. Their senses of right and wrong were askew. And their history demanded that they do exactly what they were doing. Huh?

Yep. Everything they had ever learned or believed as devout high priests of the temple of the Most High God demanded their indignant response now that this Galilean rabbi was calling Himself I AM. They had been trained since boyhood that the Messiah would come and that he would fit in a certain mold. He wouldn't be from Nazareth (even though Jesus was born in Bethlehem). He wouldn't challenge their place. He would restore the political standing and economic prosperity that the nation had known under King Solomon.

This Jesus of Nazareth didn't quite measure up. Then He sealed His fate by insisting He was God, that He was indeed the Messiah who had been promised since the days of Adam and Eve. Should it surprise us that they were genuinely angry enough to demand Jesus' execution. Is that an over-reaction?

Again, consider their day and time. They lived as an occupied nation under the rule of a brutal conqueror. Rome didn't just march in and set up voting stations. They conquered Judea, executed all who opposed them, and enslaved the conquered Judeans. Any freedoms that the Israelites had known before were eliminated. Instead of living as God's chosen people under the rule of Israelite political leaders, the citizens of Judea lived as people under the rule of a Roman dictator. The dictator emperor's representative was a military governor who was empowered to do anything he pleased to keep order and, more importantly, to extract treasure (think "taxes") from the Jewish occupants of this new province. Your home could be seized, you could be arrested without notice, you could be executed for things we would take for granted. This is what it meant to live under Roman occupation. To make the point, thousands of soldiers were sent to be at the governor's disposal as he carried out the emperor's will.

Over time, the high priests had worked out delicate arrangements on how to keep the peace with their Roman overseers. Call them politicians or patriots: the leaders of the Temple still did what they could to preserve the old Jewish order with as little bloodshed as possible. Now came this wandering preacher from Nazareth who was upending the delicate apple cart that the Jewish leaders had constructed. He did it while preaching simultaneous Godly peace and civil insurrection of the soul. Should it surprise us that the priests wanted Jesus dead if they could find a plausible way to kill Him?

I'm not saying we should feel sorry for Caiaphas or the others, though maybe that wouldn't be out of hand. But perhaps we should genuinely consider their predicament to understand more why they did what they did.

*Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do.*

Read Mark 14, verses 53-65.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 March 2015

*While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept. Mark 14, verses 66-72.*

"I don't know or understand what you're talking about ." Peter could be someone in our pop culture today. If you corner one of the Glitterati and they don't want to answer your questions, they spout off an answer similar to Peter's (if they answer at all). But let's not be judgy here; let's not assume that it's only the rich and famous who cower in the face of simple truth. 12 year old kids avoid the truth. So do politicians running for president (or who used to be president). You don't always get a straight answer out of your pastor. And me? I love you, friend reader, but you're only reading what I've selectively chosen to share. Let's keep this real: that's a way to avoid sharing the whole truth.

Don't you know it gets worse for Peter. And for us. The young girl found out about Peter, then she told others. What does Peter do? He doubles down on his cowardice. Peter doesn't just run farther from the truth. He adds in elements of drama queen, profanity, and histrionics. 'NO I DON'T KNOW THAT SON OF A %\*^&! NO I'M NOT ONE OF THEM, YOU FILTHY %\*%&y##\* @\*@\$&%(!' You get the picture...

...and this is Jesus' best friend. This is the man on whom Jesus said He would build His church. In just a few minutes, Jesus will be taken to Pilate where He will be questioned, humiliated further, and tortured. In just a few hours, soldiers will spread out Jesus' arms and drive thick rusty nails through them, nailing Him to a cross for the trillions of sins He never committed before, on or after that day. Including Peter's three denials...including the thousands of ways you and I have denied Christ in our lives.

How many times have I said "I don't know what you're talking about" when someone has asked me about my faith, what I believe, who Jesus is to me. Yes, I'm more comfortable now talking about it than I was many years ago. What about all those years when I wasn't? How many people lost out on a chance to hear about Him because I was a coward? How about you?

We can't obsess about those times. They're forgiven sins anyway. But to 'go and sin no more,' what can we do today to prepare for those times ahead when others may ask us about Jesus?

*Lord, forgive my cowardice concerning You. Forgive me, strengthen me, teach me, and encourage me to be bold for You.*

Read Mark 14, verses 53-65.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 2 March 2016

*Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept. Mark 14, verse 72.*

Do you ever wonder how Adam felt after the fall? Do you think he might have lived out the rest of his life in regret over making such a small, foolish choice that made all the difference in the world? Adam and Eve had lived in perfect harmony with God and with each other. They had lived their lives exactly as God had intended for humanity to live: in unifying communion with Him, enjoying His glory, His creation, and His love without end. Then Adam chose sin. He chose the thing that would separate Him from God by believing something other than God. Do you think that Adam lived out the rest of his life regretting that moment? Or was he too busy learning how to live in this post-sin world to give it much thought? We'll never know...but we know the feeling.

What about one-term presidents? George H.W. Bush, Carter, Ford, Hoover, Taft, Benjamin Harrison, Arthur, Hayes, Andrew Johnson, Buchanan, Pierce, Fillmore, Polk, Tyler, Van Buren, and both son and father John Adams: these are the men who were one-term presidents and alive at the end of those terms. Polk vowed to serve only one term; Tyler was dumped by his party. The rest stood for re-election and lost. I've read that Bush and Carter spent time after losing re-election in depression. It must be a terribly hard thing to be president and be rejected by the people you've dedicated your life to serve. Do you think the others regretted having run and lost?

What about your sins? Do you regret them? I've done some pretty heinous things, and I honestly wish I could take them back, to un-do them and live in different ways. I try to not live in regret but sometimes it bubbles up and overwhelms me.

Maybe this is a taste of how Peter felt. Peter broke down and wept when the impact of his sins hit him square on in the gob. When was the last time you genuinely wept? Me, it was the time I watched my family drive away after my sins of infidelity finally caught up with me.

End game: let's forget how me, you, Adam, the presidents or Peter felt. Put all those feelings aside because remember this: 'it's not about me.' It's not about me because it's about Jesus. We can navel-gaze all day long and try to analyze how or why we feel the way we do about things. Strip away that navel gazing and we'll find that it isn't about us. Our self-focus is just idolatry, just another way for the old Adam to choose anything but God. How did Jesus feel when Peter proved Him right? How did Jesus feel looking down from the cross at John and the Mary's there knowing He was powerless (by choice) to do anything to help them or stop what was happening? How does Jesus feel when I choose to mess up a hundred times every day? More important, how does Jesus feel now knowing that He remembers my sins no more because of His atoning sacrifice at Calvary? THAT matters most.

Thinking about that, it doesn't matter how we feel. It's about Jesus. Anything else isn't Him.

*Lord Jesus, may every minute I live today be focused on You and only You.*

Read Mark 15, verses 1-15.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 3 March 2016

*Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. Mark 15, verse 1.*

You have to start early in the morning if you want to make a full day out of something. Wanna catch the big fish while they're biting? Gotta get to the lake early in the morning, before they feed. Want to finish a bunch of Saturday chores? Get up and get going early. Want to put in extra hours on the job? You guessed it: up and at 'em already.

So it was with the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council. They'd been up all night, conspiring and working out this little charade for Jesus' mock trial. When Judas came to them with his idea of how to betray Jesus, they probably convened a quiet emergency meeting to decide what to do about it. It took planning, scheming, communicating to make the arrangements so that all would be ready when Judas gave the signal.

That Thursday night, the Sanhedrin, like Jesus, probably stayed up all night. They weren't sure just when Judas would show up, so they met, ate and drank together, and walked through their plan. It wouldn't do to have anything go south, so they rehearsed who would say what and what they would say. I bet they practiced their lines, talked about the best ways to box Jesus into rhetorical corners. When Judas showed up and said that his Master would be vulnerable in the garden just outside the city walls, they put their plans into motion. Summon the guards; pay off the gullible; lie to save face.

A few hours later, the guards bring a tired but determined Jesus to meet with the council and they begin to interrogate Him. The plan is unfolding as expected except for one small detail. Jesus won't play along. He doesn't answer their questions; He doesn't meet their scolding, their threats, their violence with the reactions that were predicted. Jesus says nothing, doesn't act out. Indeed, His countenance looks like He's not even angry with His accusers. Jesus looks like He actually feels sad for them, that He feels worse for how THEY feel that for what they are doing to Him.

This only makes them furious.

Their plan now thwarted, the Sanhedrin elders move to Plan B. If Jesus won't talk to them, He'll definitely talk to the Roman governor. The goal in this unfolding end-game is for Jesus to die. The priests know they don't have that kind of muscle, that only the Roman overseers can order the death of a Judean. Even though He has done nothing to physically intimidate them, they tie up Jesus as if He's some kind of physical threat, and then they (literally) drag Him off to the governor's palace. There, they believe, Pontius Pilate will extract from this 'Messiah' the proof needed to sentence Him to death.

That is, of course, if Pilate agrees to cooperate. That is, you know, if Jesus decides to talk. Was there a Plan C if Plan B failed?

When you're conspiring against the King, you need to get up very early in the morning. Even then, things might not turn out the way you expect.

*Lord Jesus, have mercy still on those who conspired against You. Forgive them and me for our sins.*

Read Mark 15, verses 1-15.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 7 March 2016

*“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate. “You have said so,” Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.” But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. Mark 15, verses 2-5*

You know that you don’t have to answer questions. Here in the US, TV crime shows make a big deal out of ‘Mirandizing’ people who are arrested, reading them a scripted statement that informs them of their Constitutional rights. That’s in response to a 1960s-era Supreme Court case where the plaintiff, a man named Miranda, was ignorant that he had the Fifth Amendment right to not say anything to the authorities who questioned him.

Long before there was a Constitution, Supreme Court, or television, Jesus took the 5<sup>th</sup>. The representative of the civil government, Governor Pontius Pilate, questioned Jesus about the severe accusations that the Jews brought against Him. The only things that Jesus says to Pilate are statements that speak to Pilate’s heart, things to make him think. Pilate asks Jesus the mocking question “are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus responds with word play, both confirming what Pilate says and throwing him a lifeline. I’ve always wondered what Pilate really, truly thought at all this. The Book of John sheds more light on their conversation, with Pilate either mocking or questioning (or both) the very concept of the truth Jesus embodied. Do you think the governor ever really wondered?

Notice, too, how Jesus is checking out of the conventional wisdom. He isn’t playing the expected game. His priestly accusers expected that Jesus would buckle under the intimidation of the governor, who (literally) held the power of life and death in his hands. It’s as if they expected that the man they couldn’t get to talk would sing like a canary under the sway of Rome’s military authority. Jesus flipped their CW and they didn’t even notice. That’s sad, if you think about it. It’s pathetic because not only is it obvious that they don’t understand who Jesus is, it’s obvious, too, that they don’t want to.

Yet consider how Jesus turns His accusers’ words around, not as weapons but as tools with which He can teach. What He does with Pilate He does to give Pilate the chance to contemplate the miracle of God standing before him. It’s one of those moments when Jesus proves how God loves everyone, not just his chosen people. Jesus even does this with the priests by not responding to them. It’s as if He lets their empty accusations hang in the air, speaking for themselves in the hope that they will see the gross sin of it all and turn away.

Finally, notice how Jesus still amazed those who held His fate. Pilate’s words in this drama tell me that he was both mocking and genuinely torn over this Jesus. There were political, social, military, and ecclesiastical aspects to consider over what each player said and did; Pilate was well aware of this. Through it, Jesus amazed him. Pilate seems moved by Jesus’ reaction, almost incredulous at how Jesus kept His composure knowing full well that doing so would result in His death. It wasn’t just that this rabbi was brash. It was His countenance, His authority coupled with His peace that impressed the Roman governor to try, again and again, to free Him.

All because Jesus took the 5<sup>th</sup>.

*Lord, I’m constantly amazed by You.*

Read Mark 15, verses 1-15.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark 8 March 2016

*Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. Mark 15, verses 6-15.*

Nobody knows who Barabbas was. Nobody knows exactly what insurrection is the one referred to here. And nobody knows just exactly whether Barabbas himself had murdered someone, ordered a murder, participated in one, or really the exact circumstances that landed Barabbas in prison. His presence in the story of the passion is for contrast, to provide a foil to pit against Jesus, someone who had done something so heinous and vile that there would be no way the Jews would allow Pilate to release him instead of Jesus. That's not how things turned out. This you know.

Tell me, what's so different today? I won't 'go political' but did you ever follow the story of Leonard Peltier? Peltier is an American Indian activist serving out double life sentences for murdering an FBI agent. There are reasons why his trial and imprisonment are controversial and I won't go into them today. The point of bringing him up is that he was convicted of doing something so egregious that the law says he cannot ever go free.

Or there is Mumia Abu-Jamal, serving life without parole in Pennsylvania. Jamal is a former Black Panther radical convicted of murdering a Philadelphia police officer in 1981. Same point: he was convicted of something so awful that he can never live free again.

Charles Manson. John Wayne Gacy. Ted Bundy. Ted Kaczinski. Timothy McVeigh. OJ Simpson. Imagine any one of them, Mumia Abu-Jamal, or Leonard Peltier in prison there with Jesus, and when the warden says "I'll give you Jesus or one of these guys," instigators whip up the crowd to demand the freedom of 'one of the guys.'

What had Jesus done up to that point? Nothing. Nothing at all. He hadn't committed a crime. He hadn't ridiculed the government. He hadn't accused the church leaders of anything they weren't actually doing. He hadn't even told a white lie. Jesus had done nothing wrong, yet the Jewish leaders, then the Jewish crowd, demanded His death.

And what was Pilate's reaction? "Are you serious?...yes you are....ok, I give up. Crucify Him." Pilate caved.

We caved. We made it happen. We today who are so enamored of the Kardashians, The Bachelor and Bachelorette, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, and a thousand other tawdry malcontents are members of that crowd. We don't want to turn our lives around. We demand anything but what we need, not realizing that the only other option is to get what we deserve. We demand the killers. We demand Barabbas.

*Lord Jesus, forgive me for siding with the crowd, for my sins that took You to Calvary.*

Read Mark 15, verses 1-15.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 9 March 2016

*Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. Mark 15, verse 15.*

Have you ever watched "The Passion of the Christ?" My wife and I went to see it in the theaters when it first came out years ago, and I remember being transfixed by the imagery of it. Every year during Lent I try to watch it to remind myself of just what crucifixion really looked like. The movie is so vividly gruesome and violent. If you want to know the truth, I think it was understated. That goes hand in hand with the Gospel of Mark.

Consider those four words: "he had Jesus flogged." Have you seriously considered what it was like to be flogged? ISIS would find it entertaining. First century Romans would flog only those criminals whose crime was so severe that it merited the worst kinds of punishment. Often the 'floggee' wouldn't survive. The way it worked was that the Romans used a whip with multiple leather lashes on it. Attached to the ends of the lashes were pieces of metal or bone. According to [http://qira.cadouarn.pagesperso-orange.fr/english/back\\_matter/flogging.htm](http://qira.cadouarn.pagesperso-orange.fr/english/back_matter/flogging.htm), flogging would consist of no set amount of lashes because the Romans were bound by no law except their own. Typically, Hebrew whippings were limited to no more than 40 lashes while the Romans could (and did) administer as many lashes as they liked. The whip would indeed lash and welt bare skin while the metal or bone would dig into the skin, creating deep cuts or contusions. As the Roman soldier whipped his victim, when he reared back to lash again, very often one of the lashes would embed in the victim's flesh and rip it out.

If you're cringing, it's for good reason. Mel Gibson made a gory, violent, wrenching movie about Jesus' last hours and he may have just gone easy on it.

Pilate had Jesus flogged knowing fully well that He was innocent. The crowd demanded Jesus' crucifixion knowing fully well that an innocent man would be savagely tortured for no good reason. The high priest and his cabal of hypocrites arranged for this torture knowing fully well that Jesus had never done anything to deserve it. You and I would scream and cower while tied to that post at just the first lash. Imagine if you didn't know how many you were to receive knowing, at the end, your torturer would force thorns on your head, then make you carry a 100 pound cross up hill to where you'd be nailed to it. That's what Jesus endured. That's what He chose.

More than any of that, Jesus went to it all willingly. He could have stopped it but He didn't. To paraphrase Max Lucado, Jesus chose the flogging. He chose to put Himself there in the praetorium while men He created in love brutally savaged Him. They flogged him until the flesh was torn from His back and sides. They whipped Him until excruciating agony understated the pain Jesus felt with every lash. They brutalized Him in ways no human should have to endure and He chose it all. Jesus chose the whip, the flagrum, the blood loss, the hamburger flesh. The boy from the peaceful manger was being slowly, deliberately murdered in the worst way possible.

And He chose it so we wouldn't have to.

*Lord Jesus, I can't imagine what You suffered. Thank You for doing it on my behalf in a debt I can never possibly equal or repay...and don't have to.*

Read Mark 15, verses 1-15.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 10 March 2016

*The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. Mark 15, verses 16-20.*

When was the last time you mocked Jesus?

My grandfather was one of the most faithful Lutheran men I have ever known. He was a big farmer businessman from Minnesota, and (especially towards the end of his life) he took his faith seriously. I looked up to him (literally); you could say he was one of my heroes. He was also one of the most profane men ever. The name of Christ sometimes rolled off his tongue seemingly without thought or effort. Was he careless or was he mocking Jesus?

And then there are the Sopranos. My wife and I watched almost every episode of the show back when it was still in first release. For awhile, we kept an episode-by-episode running total of how many F-bombs were dropped. The name of the Lord was also extensively misused (very often in the same sentence as those F-bombs). Were they mocking Jesus or was it just graphic television?

During this political season, it seems to be open season on 'evangelicals.' Not that evangelicals are being physically targeted (except for their votes). No, it seems like every political pundit is talking about how X candidate can get the 'evangelical vote.' It's as if this bloc of voters is monolithic, without individuality, and will only vote for someone who is perfectly suited to how they worship Jesus. All too often, the pundits and commentators seem to deride evangelicals in trying to depict and predict them. Are they deliberately mocking or are they just being journalists?

But let's not get too wrapped around the axle. You don't need to be a Harold Stassen Republican farmer, James Gandolfini, or someone paid by MSNBC to mock Jesus. And you don't need to act like one of the guards who flogged, tortured, and humiliated Him in the hours before He died on the cross. It's true, they mocked Jesus intensely. I never dragged anyone who's just been beaten half to death. I never spit on someone, or rammed a crown of thick thorns into their scalp. I've never beaten anyone with a long stick, or pretended to worship someone. They did and I didn't have to.

This isn't a guilt trip for you; it's simply a statement of the truth. When I've judged my brother or sister who cut me off in traffic, was overweight, or was simply different from me, I've mocked Jesus. When you brag endlessly about how great you are and all the things you've done here on the Third Rock, you're mocking Jesus. When Trump and Obama are just being themselves, they're mocking Jesus. Look at porn, scream at the neighbors, don't trust Him, "yeah I know but:" they're all small ways we mock Jesus just as realistically as if we had been there in the Praetorium.

*Lord Jesus, I'm truly sorry for the times I have mocked You. Forgive me and renew me to do better.*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 15 March 2016

*A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. Mark 15, verse 21.*

How often are you made to do something you really don't want to do?

Consider Simon from Cyrene. He's not native to Jerusalem; he's visiting there. One Friday morning, when the city is full, he is caught on a street that would come to be known as the Via Dolorosa. Perhaps he's minding his business; perhaps he's there with family. We don't particularly know why he was there; we really don't know much about him other than that he was from Cyrene, which is in northern Africa. All we know is that he was Shanghai'd into helping Jesus walk to His death.

Back to here and now. If I haven't said it before, I don't like batting cleanup. If you're not a baseball fan, to bat cleanup is to be the fourth hitter in a lineup. Three guys get on base, so the manager sends a hitter to bat who can hit them home. In a way it's an honor; in another way it's a burden.

At work, I have a penchant for working in positions where, very often, my role is to finish the work done by others. To be honest, it aggravates me. I don't like having to come in part way through an effort and be stuck with someone else's choices. Yet the irony of this is that batting cleanup is my specialty. I've developed skills, abilities, and intuition that allow me to apply myself in going in and bringing order to chaos, and successful completion to endangered crisis. This is just a niche in which I've carved out experience.

Do you think Simon of Cyrene probably had experience carrying crosses? I'm betting not. But he was forced into a situation where he had to bat cleanup. He probably didn't go to Jerusalem that Friday morning thinking "I'm gonna help a man die today" but that's the way it turned out. The Romans saw that Jesus was exhausted, that He couldn't walk another step while carrying that heavy cross. The cross was probably between 100 and 200 lbs, and remember that Jesus had been awake since Thursday morning and had spent the last few hours being viciously tortured. He was in agony, made even more agonizing knowing that the pain was only beginning. No Roman soldier would be forced to carry that cross, so they pulled Simon out of the crowd and forced him at sword-point to help the King of the Jews.

Sort of makes my complaining about work seem pretty trivial, doesn't it. I mean, if my cross to bear is the ability to swoop in, help someone be successful, and get paid handsomely for it, tell me where is there any cross to bear?

You know the answer. No, as always, this isn't a guilt trip for you. It's simply to help you ask yourself: how often are you asked to do things you don't want to do? Then, how much of a burden are they? Are they pulled-out-of-a-crowd-and-forced-to-carry-a-cross-for-a-convicted-innocent-felon burdensome? Are they the burdens of Jesus? You and I aren't God and can't be God, but we can change our lives to live as He asks us. What are you prepared to do?

*Lord, take my burdens. Forgive me my shallowness and my sins, and help me to change to better live as You would ask me to.*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 16 March 2016

*They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Mark 15, verses 22-24.*

Sometimes the Bible is overly dramatic. Sometimes the verses are so descriptive that it's almost too much, almost melodramatic, like watching a Cecil B. DeMille movie. The imagery 'goes there,' doesn't leave much to the imagination. Worldwide flood, ten plagues, talking donkey, humiliating the prophets of Baal, Philip disappearing from the eunuch, the Revelation: name all you want, they're sometimes a lot to swallow because, in some ways, it seems over the top.

And sometimes, as in verse 24, it's powerfully under-played. Consider these four words: “and they crucified him.” Consider those words closely because everything you know, everything on this planet, hinges on the powerful understatement they convey.

There is no salvation without the crucifixion. You're eternally dead in your sins, and the holy triune God of eternity doesn't know you, can't acknowledge you, hates your sin, and damns you forever. There is no forgiveness, there is no happiness, there is no satisfaction, there is no love without Jesus dying on that horrible cross. What's more, everything you know about the world is changed. There is no western culture without the crucifixion. There is no church, no Protestant Reformation, no brilliant Renaissance, no Enlightenment ideals, no Declaration of Independence, no industrial revolution and western prosperity, no Western laws and traditions that support the rights of man. Everything we know politically, economically, militarily, socially, culturally, artistically, ecclesiastically, and even physically changes, morphs into something unrecognizable, without Jesus' death on the cross.

“And they crucified him.” Four pretty powerful words, don't you think?

“Oh come on, Dave. Now you're the one being overly dramatic!” Really? The crucifixion is the central event in human history; we measure culture, law and most of our activities today from it. The events that descended from it permanently dispersed ancient Judaism, brought about the demise of the Roman Empire that crucified Him, and inspired the rise of the Western society that recognizes Him. The systems of justice, economy and society on all seven continents are measured against the life and legacy of Jesus, culminating in His selfless sacrifice of Himself. Everything we judge to be decent and pure, we do so because of what we know of Jesus Christ. And in just four words, Mark describes what humanity did to its creator. “And they crucified him,” as if it is the subdued ending to a vast saga, which it was. Those simple words are the four-word coda on the music of our soul, as if a great fugue had concluded with a still whimper, then dying notes fading into silence.

Consider the agony of being crucified, of being tortured for hours, dragged through the street in humiliation, subjected to persecution no innocent man should conceive, then having thick spikes driven repeatedly through your body. On the cross, you don't die of blood loss, you die agonizing in asphyxiation: you heave your body up on the spikes holding your feet to the cross, gasping just to draw a breath. And that's what's up ahead. And it changed everything. The Romans, Jewish priests, and bystanders there at Calvary didn't know that “and they crucified him” would soon come to mean “and it changed everything.” It's not a four-word coda: it's a symphony..

*Lord Jesus, thank You for being crucified so that my soul wouldn't be. Thank You for doing what I can't. Thank You for the cross.*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 22 March 2016

*It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: the king of the jews. Mark 15, verses 25-26.*

“We hold these truths to be self evident:” Thomas Jefferson wrote that in the Declaration of Independence. It seems almost crazy to us that the document which founded our nation should contain these words. It’s like they’re a big ‘duh’ to the world. Of course freedom is self-evident. It simply is; everyone knows that...

...except that, in 1776, everyone didn’t. In fact, Mr. Jefferson’s statement was revolutionary beyond simply fomenting a war. Neither common people nor government officials looked at the rights of man as self-evident. They were things that were given by those above to those below. Specifically, rights and freedoms were what the government or the powerful told you they were. You didn’t have the right to free speech, or to attend the church of your choosing, or to criticize politicians, be secure in your home and possessions, to assemble peacefully, or any of the other freedoms later protected (from our government) by our Constitution. The only thing that was self-evident was that the common man or woman was, as we would consider it today, uncommonly oppressed.

It was nothing new. Jesus was the King of the Jews, both literally (being descended from King David, himself anointed by God) and figuratively (as God and spiritual King). This was the title with which the Jewish chief priests had mockingly labeled Jesus. When Pilate questioned Jesus, he asked the Lord “are you the king of the Jews” to which Jesus replied “it is right that you say I am” in a bit of masterful instruction. Pilate, too, seemed to mock Jesus with this title, yet because Pilate was a non-believing Roman, perhaps it really is so that Pilate was as much asking as he was mocking. This side of heaven, we won’t truly know.

Yet the advertisement which Pilate had nailed to Jesus’ cross was still self-evident. It simply was a statement of fact. That was, in fact, what happened. Pilate had the sign made, then nailed to the cross over Jesus’ head. It was written in several languages, so that those who witnessed the execution would know both what the Romans thought of Jesus and the Jews, and (unwittingly) that they were executing the one true King. The sign said what it said and meant it.

It means the same thing still. Deist or not, Thomas Jefferson might just agree.

*Lord Jesus, You are the one true and only King. You are the King of the Jews. You are the King of Eternity. You are my King.*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 23 March 2016

*They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. Mark 15, verses 27-32.*

This past Sunday, on Palm Sunday, Fox TV broadcast "The Passion:" a live-action Tyler Perry musical drama about the last days of Jesus. It was told by modern actors, set in modern-day New Orleans, to the tune of modern pop music with very few lyrics modified. One scene acted out one of the verses above. In it, Jesus has been apprehended and is being hauled away in a police wagon. He wears an orange jumpsuit, like other common criminals, and is in the vehicle with 2 other men. One hurls insults at Him; the other defends Him. Later in the show, a crowd is shown screaming for Jesus' crucifixion, the release of Barabbas, and Mary's anguish. The drama didn't show the actual crucifixion, though it was alluded to by a group of pallbearers carrying a lighted cross through downtown New Orleans.

What struck me about the whole TV show was that it was contemporary and believable. Yes, there was some 'mushy theology' involved, some misquoting of Scripture, and some things that were done out of line in how they actually appeared in the account of Holy Week. Big freaking deal. We shouldn't get wrapped around the axle of details when we can consider what was being done. I'm told that the Monday morning ratings and reviews for the show weren't good. They don't matter.

Someone used their position to share the story of Jesus' death and resurrection in a way that was modern, understandable, and plausible. But it begs the thought: would we as so-called modern people do the same things that the people of Jerusalem did 2000 years ago? Would we heap scorn and murder on the Son of God if He showed up here today? Would we ridicule Him? Would we demand His death? Would we nail him up with thieves and criminals? Would we insult Him while He was dying?

Consider the brutality that is reported regularly in our news these days. ISIS murders thousands of people – Christian and Muslim alike – in the name of their pagan religion. In Chicago, there are a dozen or more murders every weekend, sometimes every day. Our presidential candidates are conducting their campaigns by appealing to the most base emotions and experiences of a largely uninformed voting public. Leaders in politics, entertainment and business scorn the public, relying on spin and deception to advance their various agendas while getting richer by the minute.

Would we insult the Messiah as He hung there dying? You bet we would.

Good ratings or not, God bless Tyler Perry for what he did. Thank You Jesus.

*Thank You Jesus, my Lord, for inspiring people to tell Your story, to share the precious sacrifice You made for us.*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.



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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 24 March

*At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Mark 15, verses 33-38.*

Extraordinary: that's the only word that can adequately describe these events. These things happened all within such a short period of time – within the hour of Jesus' death – that it's simply extraordinary.

Notice how the hard-hearted stayed hard-hearted until the very end. Apparently they weren't moved by the raw emotion of watching an innocent man die. Granted, the chief priests didn't believe Jesus was innocent at all. They wanted Him dead. Yet it's a gruesome, awful thing to watch someone, even someone you despise, being tortured and then crucified. From these words (as well as corroborating & amplifying words from the other three gospels), it doesn't seem to have phased them.

Notice that some acknowledged who Jesus was before He died, that He had the power to call for Elijah. There were some in the crowd who recognized the possibility that this Jesus may actually be divine, that He might just be who He said He was after all. Were they mocking Jesus in saying what they did? Perhaps, especially given the words about the sponge and "let Elijah get him down." Yet don't overlook the bare fact that, for the first time in this whole process, someone took a step back and said "hmmmm."

Notice, too, that, at the same time Jesus died, the veil to the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple was torn. It signifies that there was no longer a veil separating God's presence with God's people. They had seen Him face to face, and He had done all that was necessary for sinful people to stand in His holy presence without being destroyed by that holiness. The people there on Calvary didn't know about what happened to the veil until after the fact, but it served as yet another physical proof that Jesus was indeed God Immanuel: God With Us who they just had murdered.

Finally, notice the overwhelming, simple faith of the centurion. He was a military officer; think Army colonel. And he was a pagan, an unbeliever, a soldier doing his duty for the Roman Empire. And he was the first believer after Jesus died. This non-Jew, this Gentile, this man outside of God's promised holy nation, was the first man who looked up in regret at the job he had just performed and acknowledged, "this man was the Son of God." As he stood beside the cross, looking up at the bloody, wounded, dead body of Jesus of Nazareth, the centurion confessed what his heart and mind agreed. He was the first convert after the crucifixion: the first of billions.

It's extraordinary.

*Lord Jesus, I'm moved to tears by the story of Your death. Thank You for dying for the sins I deserve to die for.*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, Good Friday, 25 March 2016

*And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Mark 15, verse 39.*

Today is Good Friday. I recently saw a BC comic strip that beleaguered why the day on which Jesus was murdered was called "Good Friday." One character couldn't see the good in that. Another of the characters responded (to the effect) 'if you were going to die on that day and he volunteered to take your place, how would you feel?' "Good," replied the first man...to which the second walked away saying, "have a nice day."

The centurion understood why it was called Good Friday. If you consider the simple enormity of what God Himself did for you and me, you'll understand it as well.

Take me. Yesterday I attended a Seder at my church here in Texas. It's a concept that my wife and I had been doing for most of a decade that we introduced to our church in North Texas. At another Seder in the same place exactly seven years ago, I first met the woman with whom, later that year, I would stray. I guess she and her husband had been attending our church for awhile but I really never noticed them until she came up and effusively thanked me for sponsoring the event. Her personal life was a disaster; mine was struggling. Over the next few months we became friends, then more, then all hell broke loose. When it was over, we had destroyed two families, so many people were hurt, and I haven't hosted a Seder meal since.

I spent a lot of time reflecting on that yesterday and last evening. Sure, it was awkward, but the woman moved somewhere else long ago, so I'm thankful it wasn't more awkward. My wife had left me, but we eventually reconciled and came back stronger. My kids were distraught and despised me for what I'd done to their mom and our family, but we've built back as we've grown into something wonderful. I lost a great many friends who didn't want to have anything to do with a cheating dirty dog like I was, but I've made many more since. I was caught cheating red-handed, but I was able to really repent of that and change. My sins were public, destructive, and cut to the heart of what it means to be a Christian, but since then I've served in other ways as a church leader, as a struggling believer, and even in sharing this blog, these words.

It's all because of Good Friday. It's all because of the sacrifice that the centurion witnessed. It's all because of the thing done for us that the comic strip described.

It's contrary to human nature to forgive, but that's what Jesus' death means for us. It's unusual that people will be able to move past the moment when you egregiously hurt or offend them, but that's one thing that Jesus' death means for us. It's impossible for any of us perfectly atone for the unholy sins that we enthusiastically do and escape the holy wrath of a holy Father, but that's what Jesus' death means for us.

It's all because Jesus died that we can stand before, with, and beside God, the Three in One, and live forever. It's all because of what happened on Good Friday...because Good Friday gave way to Easter Sunday.

*Thank You my Lord Jesus for dying on the cross for me.*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 28 March 2016

*Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there. It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid. Mark 15, verses 40-47.*

It seems a bit anti-climactic to talk about things that happened on Good Friday when today is the Monday after Easter, yet please indulge me a bit while we do. It's good news.

Awhile back, my pastor friend, Mark, exhorted our congregation to be "Easter people." Yesterday, during Easter service, he reiterated this theme in a slightly different way. We should be people who live joyfully knowing that God Immanuel, Jesus our Savior, kept His promise and rose from His murdered death. He was killed, embalmed, and put in a grave on Friday. On Sunday morning, Jesus was back in action, just as He said He would be. It means He is exactly who He said He is, and that our believing in Him means we're eternally set free from the overwhelming guilt over our doing unholy things. I can let them go; you can let them go. God doesn't see our sins any more. He sees us perfect because He looks at us through the window of Jesus and His perfect life and death.

The Good Friday lesson to remember is that we get to lay our sins in the grave. Jesus took them away. They are dead; they have died, gone away, and are no more for us. Yes, notice the dedication and devotion with which Jesus' followers still pursued and believed in Him even as He died. They loved Him; they did right by Him even after He was gone and their hopes apparently crushed.

But don't lose sight of the fact that, with Him, all our sins are dead forever. We no longer have to be burdened by them. We are part of eternity here and now, and because of what He did, we GET TO start fresh. To truly repent, to change, to adjust, to make amends, and best of all to forgive. To forgive and then move forward knowing that, no matter what tough things the world has in store for us, we're Easter people who know that we can't ever be truly destroyed.

Most of all, death itself is destroyed. God didn't create death, but He allowed it as the consequences of our free will to choose things other than Him. Death is the absence of God because God is life. Death is un-love because, the opposite of death is God, who is all love. God didn't create us to die: He created us to live in harmony with Him, our loving, Holy, and just creator. When our ancestors (and later we) chose differently, God respected our choices knowing that our choices carried the penalty of death. God hates death so He Himself, Jesus, the God-man, came, lived, and died to destroy death. He died on Good Friday to restore balance to mankind's destiny, then He began a new destiny for us on Easter Sunday by rising, living, and moving forward in a world that could finally see Him for who He was and is. Jesus hated death; He hates it still. So He offered Himself as the cure for the common death. On the Monday after Good Friday and the Easter to which it gave way, this is the best news of all.

*Risen Lord Jesus, bless You for all You did in dying and living for us. I'm so thankful for all You've done!*

Read Mark 15, verses 16-47.

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## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 29 March 2016

*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. Mark 16, verses 1-8.*

Put yourself in the shoes (ok, sandals) of those women. In the same way Luke described the shepherds who saw Jesus on the day He was born, "they were sore afraid." These poor women were grieving, and they had come to the garden tomb after the Passover Sabbath to anoint Jesus' dead body. It's true that they had revered Him as their Lord, the promised and hoped-for Messiah, and the one who would make all things new. But He was dead now. The Jewish priests had arranged for His murder. The all-too-willing Romans had carried out the murder. The disciples were hiding, afraid for their lives. And Jesus' body was buried in a stranger's fresh tomb. They had contemplated this thing, probably talked about it, all through the long Saturday Sabbath. Very early on a cool Sunday morning, these three followers of the wandering rabbi went to the cemetery to do their duty.

Imagine their surprise. Imagine their shock. Imagine being overwhelmed at what they were witnessing. Imagine that they were probably scared to death. All they had expected to find was the big stone in front of the tomb, maybe a Roman guard there to make sure nothing was out of place. Out of place indeed; it was a whole new level of that.

"Don't be alarmed," said the angel. Would you be alarmed if a brilliantly dazzling supernatural man told you not to be? I'd be speechless. And as if that wasn't alarming enough, the angel gives them the greatest news since God said "let there be." "He has risen."

"He has risen."

Would you be surprised, shocked, overwhelmed and terrified? It would be sensory overload, something racing too fast for your brain to fully absorb, like something you dreamed could happen but didn't really think ever would. I mean, let's be real. The Messiah had been talked about for thousands of years; it was almost like a legend, even in a time when legends were still popularly believed.

And yet here it was, happening in front of their eyes. Put yourself in their place. How would you feel?

*Lord Jesus, I confess I would be scared and overwhelmed like the women were that Easter morning. Forgive my unbelief and help me to understand more of Your supernatural power.*

Read Mark 16.



## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 30 March 2016

*“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” Mark 16, verses 6-7.*

God does for us what we can’t do for ourselves. This week after Easter, that’s good to remember. That can be difficult as the church year goes on because it’s a few weeks until Pentecost, then a long, long span until the next big event, which is Advent in December.

Really? Yep. I mean, who besides those wrapped up in ‘churchy stuff’ follows that kind of thing these days? You’d be surprised: there are millions who do. Such things still matter; very much, in fact. And during the summer, when the sun is shining and there are fun things to do, it becomes so easy for us to let our faith in Jesus get stale. Today, when the feeling of being with a bunch of like-minded believers is fresh, it’s easy to feel great about God. In a few months, that feeling will wane and it’ll be easier to slip into the groove of “it’s all about me.”

Before that happens, notice that the first person to tell humanity about the resurrection isn’t a person at all. It’s an angel; it’s a supernatural being. The first person to speak to humanity was supernatural (God Himself). The first person to speak to Mary when she learned she would be a mother was supernatural, the angel Gabriel (who had also spoken to the prophet Daniel centuries before). And the first person to speak to believers after Jesus resurrected was another angel, this one unidentified.

What was the believers’ reaction? Fear. Sure, it’s understandable that these humble, mild women would be afraid. It was, after all, an extraordinary thing. Don’t forget that the other men and women who had been closest to Jesus were in hiding, afraid of what the Sanhedrin might do. If the priests were bold enough to take out Jesus, it wouldn’t be a stretch for them to take out Jesus’ inner circle. Indeed, it was a courageous thing for these women to even show their faces yet they did so early in the morning, before the rest of the city was stirring. Is it surprising that they would be afraid when confronted by the angel?

But that fear is telling. It’s our reaction today. 9/11 attacks? We were afraid. The (almost weekly) terrorist homicide, random shooting, or heinous crime in Chicago? Fear. Truly polarizing candidates trying to prey on our fears of what ‘the other guy’ will do to the Republic? They get away with it because we let those fears seem real. It’s almost as if fear is wired into our psyches.

Hence, God reaches out to us to grab our attention. He does this because we can’t. We’re paralyzed by our fears; we’re paralyzed by our sins. When faith is stale, God shakes us up. In the past, He used the supernatural to crash into our so-called natural world. Many – myself included – say He still does so today. He does it to do what we can’t, to do for us what we can’t do for ourselves. Namely, to save us...like He did on Easter Sunday. Millions of people desperately need it.

*Lord, thank You for doing what I can’t, for saving me, for giving me so much better than I deserve.*

Read Mark 16, verses 9-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 31 March 2016

*When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. Mark 16, verses 9-14.*

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most eye-witnessed events in antiquity. More people gave corroborating eyewitness accounts of seeing Him alive after He was dead than people who witnessed the assassination of Julius Caesar, William Wallace's victory at Stirling, the driving of the Golden Spike, or even the attack on Pearl Harbor. Legends don't have that kind of evidence. Legends aren't spoken of by multiple unconnected sources within a generation, but the death and resurrection of Christ was.

All too often people couch their unbelief (or dis-belief) in Jesus by saying "there's no proof" yet I hope you'll see that this just isn't the case. There are more post-resurrection accounts of the existence of Jesus of Nazareth than there are of the ancient kings of England, yet nobody disputes there were kings before the Anglo Saxon invasion. In the four gospels there are more corroborating proofs of the life, death, and post-death life of Jesus than there are descriptions of Abraham Lincoln's mother. In the words of those who saw Him up close, there is more convincing evidence of the real existence of Jesus the Christ than there is existing evidence that proves who shot JFK.

Yet we don't doubt any of these things while so many people doubt Jesus. What more proof do you need?

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, according to my study Bible, the earliest versions of Mark don't contain these last few verses. They may indeed have been added later, and they may (or may not) have been added by John Mark himself. Like so much else in the world, we don't know. If this bothers you, perhaps ask yourself why. And consider this: Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence most likely didn't say "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Lincoln's first draft of the Gettysburg Address may not have said "of the people, by the people, for the people." Over a thousand years ago, at the council of Nicea, it was decided by scholars of the day that (today's) ending of Mark fit with the rest of the book. That's good enough for me.

Yet when you boil down the story of Jesus' resurrection, the proof isn't the majesty and beauty of it. The proof is that, by faith, you receive the miracle of His redemption. For that no proof is needed. It's proof enough of itself. Legal evidence is impeachable and potentially corrupt. Jesus isn't. He proved it so.

*Lord Jesus, I believe in You because You are who You say You are. Nothing more is needed.*

Read Mark 16, verses 9-20.

## Practical Proverbial, from Mark, 1 April 2016

*He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. Mark 16, verses 15-20.*

It's ironic that today is April Fool's Day. It's a day when people play pranks on you, hopefully all in good fun. It's a day when you might have to ask yourself what you believe about what you're being told. And it's the day I change up how I'm writing this blog.

It fits because Jesus' charge to His Disciples – and thus to us – is to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." That's a charge we shouldn't take lightly. In fact, it's what we should be doing in every moment of our lives. Should we be talking about Jesus in everything we do? Yes, actually we should; it's what He commanded and asked us to do. Practically speaking, if we do everything as unto the Lord (see Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6 for more), then every time we use our abilities, live out our Godly passions, or speak well with our neighbor, we're preaching Jesus. We're preaching that He saved us for such a time as this (see Esther for that one). Be the church, not just in the church building. Live Jesus by living as He would. Six years (and several books ago) I undertook that task with this blog and now I'm going to re-tool it to do that same thing but in a slightly different way. After a few weeks away to regroup, let's re-convene here to talk through more practically proverbial items to help us each live Jesus a little more in these daily wars we fight called "life."

Yet remember this: it's not about me. It really isn't. Jesus sent those 12 men, I don't know how many women, and dozens of other followers out into the world to talk about God, God's love, God's justice, God's mercy, and God's peace in a world that needed all of them. The world still does and (like the song says) 'we are the world.' If we are the world and our task is to talk about Jesus, then in being part of this world, it can't be about us. It shouldn't be. In truth, where would the fun be if it were about me? Focus on me and you'll find a chubby middle-aged consultant who's simply doing his best to get by. Just me and I'm just those things. Just Jesus and me and Katie bar the door.

And if you read those verses again, you'll see they're all about Jesus. I know that some folks use them to justify picking up snakes and drinking poison. Brother, like Jesus said, "do not put the Lord your God to the test." Yet in all we do, dangerous and timid alike, we get to talk about the risen Lord, the forgiving God, my brother and my friend, Jesus, and He who spoke all things into creation. It's not a 'have-to' kind of task. We get to do this. We get to do this until He comes back in the same way He left. I'm not too worried about what that'll look like or when it'll happen. I'll be content just to know that it will.

That's what makes it easy to walk away a little, change things up, and go into the world to talk about Jesus. I'll be gone for a few weeks, then crash back into your electronic mailbox. What that'll look like, I don't know. It may or may not be a practical proverbial; a name change might happen. One of my new projects is called "manage God's way;" we'll see next month. Until then, follow Jesus, do your best, rock on, and love generously. Really. No foolin' about it.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for the opportunities to live out my faith in You. Thank You for friends, readers, fellow believers, and fellow life-warriors.*

Read something from your Bible daily.

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