



DELETING JESUS

RECOVERING DISCIPLESHIP IN THE WAKE OF 2016

BRENT DAVID MILLER

Deleting Jesus

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In the Wake of 2016**

By Brent David Miller

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This book is dedicated to Kaeleigh and Caleb.

May Jesus be your center.

‘Therefore anyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.’

Matthew 7:24-25 (NIV)

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*‘The Christian ideal has not been
tried and found wanting. It has been
found difficult and left untried.’*

- G.K. Chesterton

Prologue

‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! Am I now seeking human approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.’

Paul, in Galatians 1:6-10 (NRSV)

Not long ago, I received a text from an upset friend. She had been following a well-known pastor on social media and was dismayed over a meme he had shared. It was an image of several United States Marines bearing the caption: ‘God’s job is to judge our enemies. Our job is to arrange the meeting.’ Perplexed that a follower of Jesus - and a pastor at that – had shared such a thing, she replied to his post by quoting Jesus’ command to love our enemies (See, Matthew 5:43-44). When she checked back a bit later, she discovered that her reply had been deleted.

My friend is a stubborn character (in a good way), so she reposted Jesus’ words. She then went about her business, figuring (wrongly) that the pastor lacked the chutzpah to delete her message twice. But when she checked back, not only had he done so, he had also blocked her from posting further comments on his page.

Unperturbed, she logged in under a different name and posted Jesus’ words a third time. As she did so, she discovered that she was

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not alone: several others had posted Jesus' famous words. 'Ha!' she thought, 'He'll never have the guts to delete us all.' But once again she was wrong. This time, the pastor deleted all replies from the offended Jesus-quoters and blocked her again (and presumably everyone else).

It was at this point that she contacted me to vent her frustration.

I'm not sure what she expected me to do, other than to serve as a lightning rod for the discharge of her righteous indignation, but in the course of texting back and forth, I typed these words:

'Well Lori, don't feel so bad. He didn't really delete you. He deleted Jesus.'

The Trouble with American Christianity

I am an American Christian. That is to say, I am a follower of Jesus who happens to live in the United States of America. I say this at the outset to make clear that this book's target audience is Christians living in the United States. While some of what follows no doubt applies universally, I do not presume to speak with equal force to those in contexts other than my own. Indeed, my experiences with Christ-followers from other countries, especially those from the developing world, provide me with hope that things might be different elsewhere. Thus, while I hope this book will be of use in other contexts, the observations contained herein pertain primarily to Christianity as I have experienced it in the United States of America.

I am also a white guy living in suburbia. I have been privileged to serve in churches with a fair amount of diversity, ministered alongside Christian brothers and sisters from various cultures, made ministry forays into urban contexts, and am part of a multi-racial family, but it is nonetheless the case that most of my Christian life

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has been lived out in the context of a predominantly white, suburban culture. Thus, again, I do not presume to speak with equal force to other contexts. The observations contained herein pertain primarily to the American, mostly white, suburban sub-type of Christianity that I have experienced.

One more caveat. For most of my life, the Christians around me have leaned toward the ‘conservative,’ often dubbed ‘evangelical,’ side of the theological and political spectrum.¹ Indeed, at various times in the past I have called myself both ‘conservative’ and ‘evangelical’ (at least in the theological sense), although quite frankly I don’t know what those words mean anymore. There was a time when I *thought* they meant - in the theological realm - that a person agreed with the orthodox principles of Christianity as handed down by the apostles and early Church fathers and mothers - and in the political realm – that he or she believed in such things as the sanctity of human life and religious liberty. Today, while I still believe in those things, many self-styled conservatives and evangelicals call me a ‘liberal’ (I have no idea what that word means anymore either). Consequently, I don’t consider myself a conservative, liberal, or evangelical Christian anymore. I would prefer people just called me a follower of Jesus. Or, if you must label me beyond that, you might try something like ‘Jesus Freak,’ or ‘Fledgling Anabaptist’². Any of those would be fine with me.

¹ Not all evangelicals are conservative. But in the public consciousness, it often seems that way.

² Anabaptism is a movement that emerged in the 16th century as part of the Radical Reformation. Anabaptists were characterized by their commitment to believer’s baptism, the imitation of Christ, the separation of Church and State, simple living, community, justice, reconciliation, nonresistance, and peace. Today their spiritual descendants include the Mennonites, the Amish, the Brethren, the

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I mention all of this because, again, most of what I will say in this book is meant with a specific audience in mind: a conservative-evangelical American Christian experiencing life in a context where the dominant culture is defined by suburbia and whiteness. To be sure, people whose experience is grounded in other Christian subtypes may well see themselves or those they know reflected in the critique I offer, but I make these caveats to make clear that not everything in this book applies to all Christians (or, to be fair, even all white conservative evangelical suburban American Christians for that matter).

Having laid all of that out, it seems to me, after journeying 43 years or so with Jesus across the landscape I have just described, that many Christians have a serious problem. Like the pastor my friend Lori was following on social media, they are deleting Jesus. They are rejecting the radical way of Christ in favor of the way of the world. They are forsaking the Gospel of Jesus Christ for a gospel that is in fact no gospel at all.

I do not say this with a wagging finger. Indeed, I have been as guilty as anyone in this regard. It is to my shame that it has taken me so many years to come to the place where I am willing to unconditionally surrender to the way of Jesus, and even now I am acutely aware of my ongoing struggle to synergize what I believe with how I live. I have far to go in my own journey of discipleship. I write this book in patience and in love. Love for my brothers and sisters in Christ and love for his Church. I believe that the American Church is missing the mark in many ways, but I write as someone who has missed it too, and with the understanding that there are many good-hearted, well-intentioned Christians who are simply the

Hutterites, and self-identifying Anabaptists within various other denominations. I count myself among the latter group.

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recipients of inherited blind spots passed down as Gospel truth for generations. My hope for this book is that such Christians might, as I hope I have done, open their eyes and rediscover the radical way of Jesus.

Sorry to Mention Politics, But...

Today, if you ask a non-Christian to describe what they believe a Christian to be, you may well be met with a list of troublesome words like bigoted, intolerant, closed-minded, hateful, right-wing, war-mongering, and hypocritical. This image was hardly improved during the course of the 2016 Presidential campaign, when some of the biggest names in the Christian world threw their unqualified support behind a candidate who agitated racial hatred, bragged of sexually assaulting women, mocked the disabled, tossed about bellicose rhetoric, and otherwise bullied his way into office. During the campaign, I heard many of my brothers and sisters in Christ, people whom I had long admired, not only voice support for this candidate, but defend his actions. At times, this has caused me to wonder whether we read from the same Bible or follow the same Jesus.

I do not mention this as an endorsement of the other side. As I said, I do not consider myself to be liberal or conservative. I do not identify as Democrat or Republican. I do not believe that the Church of Jesus Christ should *ever* yoke itself to *any* political candidate or party. The hope of the world is Jesus, not politics. Which is precisely why the heresy of Christians worshipping at the altar of Trumpism must be confronted. It has created a situation in which many non-believers perceive Christians to be allied with a bullying demagogue. As a result, they are confused not only about what Christians are, but also *who Jesus is*. That misguided Christians have clouded the world's perception of Christ is nothing new, but it nonetheless breaks

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my heart in more pieces than I can count. It is my hope that this book, in some small way, will help people see that the way of Jesus is not the way of Donald Trump. It is not the way of Hillary Clinton. It is not the way of any politician, political party, or nation. It is the way of Calvary, and it is as beautiful as it is unlike anything the messed-up world of politics could ever conceive.

This is not a book about Donald Trump; it is a book about following Jesus. Indeed, many of the chapters in this book will make no mention of the President. But his campaign and election, together with the support he continues to enjoy among so many professing Christians, provides us with an opportunity to examine where the American Church has gone wrong. The truth is that the American Church had been deleting Jesus long before Donald Trump came along. Nonetheless, in the wake of 2016, we have a rich opportunity to re-examine our roots, discover where we went astray, and recover what it means to truly follow Jesus.

The Approach of this Book

Each chapter in this book will cover a single topic. It will identify the ways in which Christians have deleted Jesus and contrast them with the true teachings of Jesus. We will discern the way of Jesus by exploring what he himself taught and modeled to his disciples, as recorded in the Gospels. We will also examine the practices and beliefs of the early Church, as evidenced in the writings of the New Testament. This book takes as a given that the Biblical record is the God-inspired authoritative word of God and the guide to Christian faith and practice (See, 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The New Testament is our primary witness to what the early Church understood about Jesus and his way, and our clearest window into the meaning of everything he did and said.

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We will also examine the writings of Christians who lived during the first three centuries of the Christian era. Such writers often knew either the apostles or the students of the apostles (or at least the students of those students). They lived in the years before the influences of the world had time to seduce the Church. Their writings therefore shed considerable light on what the early Church understood Jesus' life and words to mean. Rather than read the Gospels and words of the New Testament with a twenty-first century lens, we will read them with a first through third century lens, and thereby gain a clearer understanding of the words spoken by Jesus and recorded by the New Testament writers. Certainly, the early Christians had their blind spots too, but when their writings are in harmony with the clear teachings of Jesus and the New Testament, and espouse positions contrary to those of the surrounding culture, we would do well to listen to what they have to say.

Finally, after surveying what the New Testament and early Church writers have to say with respect to each topic, each chapter will conclude by applying what we have learned and issuing a call to faithfully follow the radical way of Jesus.

In deciding which topics to address, I have had to be somewhat discriminating, keeping in mind the target audience for this book. I understand there are many ways that the various wings of American Christianity, both right and left, delete Jesus. Conservative evangelicals will no doubt be upset that I have no chapters on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, or pre-marital sex. The lack of such chapters should not be taken as endorsement.³ I may well one

³ I am, in fact, pro-life, from 'womb to tomb,' as the saying goes. I also believe that God's design for marriage is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. Human sexuality is a gift from God intended to be enjoyed within the context of that covenant relationship.

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day, if the Lord leads, write a book about the ways in which ‘progressive’ Christians delete Jesus. This, however, is not that book. Along these lines I might add that the very fact that some Christians will approach this book with a deep desire to hone in on their favorite issues might suggest that there are indeed blind spots in their discipleship repertoire, and that taking a hard look in the direction of those spots might be beneficial toward developing a more holistic approach to following Jesus.

A Warning

Some readers may be shocked, or even offended, by some of the chapters in this book. The discovery of what the early Christians believed about certain issues might lead some folks to toss this book in the nearest trash receptacle. And so, I warn you: don’t continue reading unless you are willing to have your world rocked. If you aren’t, you might as well pass this book along to someone else. This book is dangerous to your preconceived notions of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. If it is your wish to stubbornly carry on as you are, you might as well stop here.

But - if you want to grow closer to Jesus, and are willing to keep an open mind, reading this book could be a life changing experience for you. This book just might help you draw closer to Jesus. It just might bring you to a place of complete surrender and obedience. You may leave this book knowing Jesus better than you ever have before.

In the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel, there is a scene that impresses me deeply. It comes on the heels of Jesus feeding the five thousand. The people, thrilled by his power, try to make him a king. Jesus sneaks away, but the next day the crowd catches up with him. He begins to teach them once more, telling them all sorts of things that are hard to take. His teaching does not live up to their

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expectations, and even many of those who had previously committed to follow him are taken aback. Finally, they can take no more. His teaching is too hard. It requires too much. John, in what would become in the centuries ahead the most ominously captioned chapter and verse of the Bible, records the people's reaction: *'At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him'* (John 6:66).

You can almost hear Jesus' heart break, can't you? As he sadly watches the people walk away, he turns to those remaining and asks, 'you're not going to leave me too, are you?' (See, John 6:67). To which Simon Peter gloriously replies, 'Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (John 6:68-69).

So will it ever be with those who hear the words of Jesus. Some cannot handle them. They fly in the face of what they know, or else demand things of them they cannot bring themselves to give. They hear the words of the Maker of the Universe, the Word made Flesh, and simply walk away.

But others - oh the glorious others! - become disciples.

Here's hoping that when all is said and done, you will be found among them.

Chapter One

Power

‘Jesus called them together and said, ‘you know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

Mark 10:42-45

During the 2016 campaign for the White House, then Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump made strenuous efforts to court the support of Evangelical Christians. In doing so, he offered them a Faustian bargain. In exchange for their support, he promised to give them political power. In subtle and not so subtle ways, he made the case that American Christians once had great power, that they had lost it under Barack Obama and the liberals, and that he could give it back again. ‘Join me,’ he seemed to say, ‘and I will make you great again.’

To be fair to Mr. Trump, this was hardly the first time such an offer had been made to American Christians. Politicians of all stripes have long held out the promise of power to Christians in exchange for their support. What made Mr. Trump’s offer particularly disconcerting was that he was asking purported Christ followers to overlook his racist comments, mockery of the disabled, abuse of women, history of extra-marital affairs, promotion of physical violence toward protestors at campaign rallies, war-mongering, xenophobic utterances, and a host of other shenanigans incompatible

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with the way of Jesus Christ. Never before (at least within my lifetime) had American Christians been asked to compromise so exhaustively in the pursuit of political power.

Now, of course, not every Christian accepted Mr. Trump's bargain. But polls suggest that most did. Believing he would give them the power they sought, that he would appoint conservative Supreme Court Justices and otherwise use the power of government to advance their favorite causes, they gave him their support. Most self-identifying evangelical Christians in America, especially white evangelicals, voted for Donald Trump. Polls uniformly put the level of white evangelical support around 80%. These Christian voters were willing to overlook everything else, all of Mr. Trump's indiscretions and un-Christian behavior, in exchange for the promise of political power.

There have been all sorts of explanations as to why this happened. Some believe that causes near and dear to the hearts of many Christians, such as the Pro-life movement, drove many voters to do what they did. Others have pointed out that concern over the appointment of liberal judges and justices by a Democratic President, which might have led to decisions undermining popular and long-standing conceptions of religious liberty, explains the evangelical rush to Trump. There is no doubt some validity to such explanations. But I believe that the decision of so many Christians to accept Mr. Trump's bargain was, at its core, the result of a failure to understand what Jesus taught about power. Many American Christians seem to feel that they need to use the world's power, political and otherwise, in order to get things done. They believe that you can and should use the power of the world to save the world.

Jesus disagrees.

Very God of Very God

Christians profess a mysterious faith in the God who is Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three persons in one Godhead. If that is a difficult concept for you to grasp, know you are not alone. Back in the Fourth Century, Augustine, the great Christian thinker, was walking along the beach, struggling to comprehend the Trinity, when he came upon a small boy digging a hole. He asked the boy what he was doing, and the boy ridiculously responded, ‘I’m digging a hole so I can put the ocean in it.’ Augustine immediately realized that he was in fact doing something just as ridiculous: trying to fit an ocean-sized God into a pond-sized human brain. He learned that day that he could not fully understand the Trinity; he could only stand in awe of the mystery and majesty of the God who is Three in One.

Athanasius of Alexandria captured that mystery and majesty when he wrote:

...the Catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance.

For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, and the Holy Spirit is uncreated...The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal...

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So likewise, the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet there are not three almighties, but one Almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet there are not three gods, but one God.¹

We begin with the Trinity in this lesson on Jesus and power to make clear that according to orthodox Christian belief, *Jesus is God*. He is coeternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is, as the Nicene Creed famously puts it, ‘very God of very God.’ All power belongs to him.

Which sets the stage for the curiously strange way that the Almighty, Eternal God of the universe chose to show his power to the world.

The Christ Hymn

We begin listening to Jesus by turning to that portion of Paul’s letter to the Philippians known as ‘the Christ Hymn.’ Addressing power struggles in the church at Philippi, Paul exhorted believers there to imitate Jesus. In an attempt to convince them to do so, he quoted what was likely an early song about Jesus. It begins:

‘Though he was God,

he did not think of equality with God

as something to cling to.

Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;

¹ The Athanasian Creed, 4th Century AD. Translation by Philip Schaff. Public Domain. Note that the word ‘catholic’ does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but to the universal Church of Jesus Christ.

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he took the humble position of a slave

and was born as a human being.

(Philippians 2:5-7(a) – we will get to the rest of the hymn a bit later).

The way of Jesus Christ is curious indeed. Jesus, very God of very God, chose to enter our world, not in a display of power, but in abject poverty and humility. From the beginning, the story of Jesus is the antithesis of what the world would call power.

These lines from the Christ Hymn call to mind the Nativity story. We picture the angel Gabriel standing before Mary, informing her that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit and bring forth a child who will be the Son of God (Luke 1:35). We imagine Mary giving birth to Jesus in a stable (Luke 2:6-7). We imagine the hurried flight to Egypt to escape the mania of a lunatic king (Matthew 2:13-18). We imagine how, for long and silent years, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, not in a Roman palace with all the privileges of state, but in the humble home of a poor tradesman in a despised town (See, Matthew 2:19-23; John 1:46).

In terms of an all-powerful God coming up with a plan to save the world, that is about as ridiculous as sending a young girl from Kansas to battle the Wicked Witch of the West.

It gets even crazier from there.

The Temptation of Power

Not much is known of Jesus' early years. He grew up in Nazareth, a small town in the region of Israel known as Galilee. For much of his life, he followed in the footsteps of his adoptive father Joseph and

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worked with stone and wood (Mark 6:3: Matthew 13:55).² He likely worked from a shop in Nazareth, but may also have traveled about to nearby villages, towns and cities to find work. In both Nazareth and in his travels, Jesus experienced the life of a first century Galilean Jew.

Which means that he knew what it meant to live under Roman occupation.

Jesus knew what it meant to be subject to Rome. To have the Romans ride into town, set up shop, and fleece people of their hard-earned money. He knew what it was like to be taxed to death by a foreign power. He may well have experienced the indignity of being forced to carry the packs of Roman soldiers walking through the towns. He saw his neighbors mistreated by their Roman oppressors. Jesus knew all about oppression, and he, like every Jew living in Galilee, despised it.

Jesus also knew the longing in people's hearts for the Messiah who would set them free. He knew what they expected the Messiah to be: a powerful man who would raise up an army, march on Jerusalem, throw out the Romans, and establish the kingly reign of God on earth. He would be a king like the kings of the world. He would toss out the Roman Empire and establish the New Empire of Israel. Jesus understood where such feelings came from. He understood the emotions that inspired them. In fact, he felt them himself.

² While many English translations identify Jesus and his Dad as carpenters, it makes more sense to think of them as builders in a broader sense. The Greek word rendered 'carpenter' is *tektōn* and refers to a builder or artisan. In a land where most structures were built with stone, it is likely Jesus worked with stone far more often wood.

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The only difference between Jesus and his contemporaries was that Jesus *was* the Messiah.

When he was about 30 years old, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by his cousin John. It was a pivotal moment in his life, the beginning of his public ministry, and the moment when he heard the voice of his Heavenly Father say, ‘You are my dearly beloved Son, and you bring me great joy’ (Luke 3:22). Just think: for 30 years he had been hanging around Nazareth, working in his Dad’s shop, traveling around Galilee cutting stones and chiseling inscriptions, waiting for the moment when his ministry would commence, and finally, the time had come to begin. It was time to go save the world.

The Gospels tell us that after hearing his Heavenly Father’s voice, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There, for forty days, he wrestled with what it meant to be the Messiah. He fasted and prayed to learn his Father’s will and way. And all the while, the dread enemy of humankind, Satan, was working overtime to tempt Jesus to follow the way of the world.

The Gospels record three ways that Satan tempted Jesus, and while each of the three is significant, it is the second one, (as recorded by Luke, it comes third in the Gospel of Matthew) that is pertinent to our present purposes: the temptation to seize power and control the kingdoms of the world.

‘Then the devil took him up and revealed to him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ‘I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them,’ the devil said, ‘because they are mine to give to anyone I please. I will give it all to you if you will worship me’ (Luke 4:5-7).

Wow! Just think about that. Satan, the prince of the world, the one who stands behind and infects all the empires of the world (even

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the best of them) revealed to Jesus ‘all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.’ In a flash, he revealed to Jesus, not only Rome, but the Holy Roman Empire, the British Empire, the Mongolian Empire, the Parthian Kingdom, the Kingdom of Ghana, the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of the Aztecs, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, China, France, Luxemburg, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, the United States of America - every kingdom, every empire, every nation that ever wielded or would wield the power of the world. Jesus saw them all in a moment of time, and knew that if he wanted them, they could all be his.

It is a matter of debate whether Satan had the power to give these kingdoms to Jesus. But what is beyond question is that Jesus could easily have taken them. He was the Son of God. He was the maker of all things. He had the power of Heaven at his disposal. He could have called upon twelve legions of angels to fight his battles for him (Matthew 26:53). If Jesus had wanted to, he could have grabbed power just as Satan suggested. He could have raised up an army, thrown out the Romans, and established a benevolent Empire to rule the world.

Just imagine all the good Jesus could have done with so much political and military power. Think of the oppression that would have ceased. Think of the laws he could have passed. The armies he could have commanded. The Parliaments he could have controlled. The Supreme Courts he could have packed. Satan had a pretty good point when you stopped to think about it. Having the power of the world at a person’s disposal, especially at the disposal of someone like Jesus, could be a very good thing. Such power, benignantly wielded, could have rid the world of evil and brought in perpetual good.

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Not to mention what Jesus could have avoided. It is highly probable that even this early in Jesus' ministry, he knew the road that lay before him. His cousin John had already called him 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (See. John 1:29), and Jesus knew all about lambs and sin offerings. The fact that his Father's will and way involved dying - on a cross no less - for the sins of the world surely weighed heavily upon him. Satan offered a way out. He could take the way of power rather than the way of Calvary. He could avoid pain and do so much good in the process. The temptation to say 'yes' to Satan's offer was great indeed.

But he said no. Luke records:

'Jesus replied, 'The Scriptures say, 'You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him'' (Luke 3:8).

Jesus had been tempted to take hold of all the world's power, to use the power of the world to save the world, and he said no. He turned down the opportunity to wield the power of the world's empires, and instead chose to obey his Father. He rejected the way of worldly power and followed the way of the cross.

Jesus knew that you cannot use the power of the world to save the world. That was not his Father's way. True, he could have established his own empire, but that would hardly have been the kind of Kingdom he and the Father had in mind. Jesus had come to build a Kingdom of love and peace, not revenge and violence. He had come to show the world another way. He had come to show the world another power: the power of Calvary Love.

Satan did not give up that day in the wilderness. Luke tells us that he only left 'until the next opportunity came' (Luke 3:13). We can

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imagine that opportunity came often, and the Gospels record several more times when the temptation to use the power of the world to save the world manifested itself in Jesus' life.

All four Gospels include the story of Jesus feeding the 5000. Jesus had been teaching the multitudes, and it was getting late in the day. His disciples attempted to rustle up some grub from the massive crowd, but only one person, a young boy, had possessed the foresight to bring anything with him: a lunch of five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus took the boy's lunch, gave thanks to his Father, and ordered his disciples to pass the loaves and fish around. Miraculously, there was enough for everyone (See, Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-42; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13).

John adds a detail to the story that the other Gospel writers omit. He writes:

‘When the people saw him do the miraculous sign, they exclaimed, ‘Surely this is the Prophet we’ve been expecting!’ When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself’ (John 6:14-15).

Here is a concrete example of the Messianic expectation of Jesus' day: the expectation that the Messiah would be a king like the kings of the nations. In the face of Jesus' miracle, they immediately concluded that Jesus was the one. He would be their king, and they were ready to draft him into the job that they might ride along as he threw out Rome and set them free. Here was the temptation to use the world's power all over again; the temptation to use the power of the world to save the world.

Notice Jesus reaction: ‘he slipped away into the hills,’ once again demonstrating that he wanted nothing to do with political or military power. He had something else in mind.

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It was one of Simon's greatest moments. Jesus had turned to his disciples and asked them who the people believed him to be. The disciples answered that some thought he was John the Baptist, others Elijah. Jesus nodded as they spoke, his brow furrowed just enough to express deep thought, and then asked, 'what do you think?' Simon proudly blurted out his answer: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!' (See, Matthew 16:16). Jesus was pleased with Simon, and officially dubbed him Peter, 'the Rock,' adding that it would be upon this rock that he would build his church. (See, Matthew 16:13-19).

The disciples surely liked what they had heard. But then Jesus revealed the 'something else' he had in mind. He told his disciples that he would go to Jerusalem, suffer terribly at the hands of the religious leaders of Israel, be killed, and thereafter rise again on the third day. In other words, rather than seize power and fulfill the normal expectations of the Messiah, he would give his life away.

Peter (formerly Simon) could not believe it. He had just called Jesus the Messiah, and here Jesus was talking about doing the exact opposite of what the Messiah was supposed to do. So, he took Jesus aside and reprimanded him (can you imagine? Reprimanding Jesus!). 'Heaven forbid, Lord,' he said. 'This will never happen to you!' (Matthew 16:22). Jesus response was swift and to the point:

'Jesus turned to Peter and said, 'Get away from me Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things from a human point of view, not from God's.' Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'if any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If

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you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it' (Matthew 16:24-25).

Jesus saw Peter's words for what they were: another demonic temptation to seize power as the world understood it. So he rebuked his confused disciple to make clear that was not his way. Then, even more remarkably, he turned to his other disciples and told them, not only how he was going to die, on a Roman Cross, but that they were supposed to follow in his footsteps. They, no less than he, were not to travel the path of worldly power. They, no less than he, were meant to live and die another way.

On more than one occasion, Satan tempted Jesus to use the power of the world to save the world. Every time, Jesus shut him down. He rejected the power of kings and embraced the power of Calvary Love.

True Power

The apostle Paul understood the power of Calvary Love, as well as the world's inability to comprehend it. In 1 Corinthians he wrote:

'The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. As the scriptures say,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.'

So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is

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foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Greeks say it's all nonsense.

But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest human strength' (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

With characteristic bluntness, Paul makes the point that, from a worldly perspective, the way of Christ is sheer foolishness. And honestly, what else can you call it? What else can you call a way that leads an all-powerful God to leave the safety of heaven to be born among animals and sheep? Shouldn't he at least have been born in a palace? And what about the way he went about saving the world? Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one who would set Israel free. Yet he refused to do what every sane person knew the Messiah would do: raise up an army, toss out the Romans, and establish an Israeli Empire. Every ounce of worldly wisdom shouted at Jesus to do such things: to use the power of the world to save the world. But Jesus went in another direction. He followed the counter-intuitive way of Calvary Love. He trusted, not in chariots, but in his Father. He never carried a sword, let alone asked anyone else to wield one. Instead, he told his followers to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44), drop their swords (Matthew 26:52), and take up their crosses (Luke 9:23). Then, in the most foolish move of all, he took up his own cross, forsaking the temptation to call upon the angelic legions that could have saved him, and allowed his enemies to have their way with him.

This is how Paul put it in the previously mentioned Christ Hymn:

'When he appeared in human form,

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he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.'

(Philippians 2:7(b)-8).

This was Jesus' way to save the world. To a world that is perishing, it is utter folly. But to those who are being saved, it is the wisdom of God and the power of God. For we know how the rest of the story goes. As Paul writes:

'Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.'

(Philippians 2:9-11).

Do you get what Paul is saying? Jesus died on the cross, and *because he did so*, he has been given the name above all names and is the one before whom every knee will one day bow. Jesus, in rejecting the way of power and human wisdom in favor of the way of trust and weakness, won. He revealed what true power and true wisdom are. And so Paul put it bluntly. There is a way that seems right to the worldly mind, a way of power that will seemingly get you through all your scrapes. But those who seek it are in fact headed for destruction. It is simply foolish to rely upon human wisdom to accomplish the purposes of God. The only way to partner with God as he accomplishes his purposes, the only way to be saved in every

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sense of the word that matters, is to follow the way of foolishness, and travel the path of Calvary Love.

Paul, in introducing the Christ Hymn to his Philippian brothers and sisters, wrote: ‘you must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had’ (Philippians 2:5). The Christian’s attitude toward power needs to be the same as Jesus’ attitude. Period.

Sleeping with the Enemy

Thus far we have seen that Jesus’ attitude was to avoid the acquisition of worldly power and pursue the way of the cross. Sadly, many of his modern followers have gotten that backward. They either pursue power, or, at the very least, link arms with those who wield it, thereby entangling themselves in the very methods and schemes Jesus rejected. Such entanglement should be out of bounds for the follower of Jesus.

In 2 Timothy 2:4, Paul wrote of being a soldier in the peaceable army of Jesus Christ: ‘soldiers don’t get tied up in the affairs of civilian life, for then they cannot please the officer who enlisted them.’ In other words, those who follow Jesus must guard against becoming entangled with the politics of the world. It is one thing to be aware of what is happening, vote, or advocate for a cause close to Christ’s heart. It is quite another to become so enmeshed with the world of power politics that you compromise your allegiance to the one you are meant to serve.

The Book of James is adamant on this point. In it, James, the brother of Jesus, writes:

‘You adulterers! Don’t you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again, if you want

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to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God!’ (James 4:4).

And just when you think the New Testament writers couldn’t more forcefully make this point, we come to the book of Revelation. Revelation is a book of hope concerning the ultimate victory of God over Satan and the power of the world. In it we discover, among many other things, how God views worldly power. In chapter 13, such power is referred to as ‘the Beast,’ which is not what you would call a flattering description. But in chapter 17, it gets even worse:

‘One of the seven angels who had poured out the seven bowls came over and spoke to me. ‘Come with me,’ he said, ‘and I will show you the judgment that is going to come on *the great prostitute*, who rules over many waters. The kings of the world have committed adultery with her, and the people who belong to this world have been made drunk by the wine of her immorality.

‘So the angel took me in the Spirit into the wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns, and blasphemies against God were written all over it. The woman wore purple and scarlet clothing and beautiful jewelry made of gold and precious gems and pearls. In her hand she held a goblet full of obscenities and the impurities of her immorality. A mysterious name was written on her forehead: ‘*Babylon the Great, Mother of all Prostitutes and Obscenities in the World.*’ (Revelation 17:1-5, emphasis added).

Many Bible scholars conclude, rightly in my view, that the identity of this mysterious woman is the Roman Empire. Rome was a city that sat on seven hills (See, Revelation 17:9). But many would

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also agree that this image refers to world power in a broader sense. The original ‘Babylon’ was an actual empire that reigned over a significant portion of the world during Old Testament times, but in Biblical language, it became something of a metaphor for world power. Thus, when we look at this passage, we need to think about more than ancient Babylon or first century Rome. We need to expand the reference to world power in general.

God, through the vision given to John, refers to such power as ‘Babylon the Great, Mother of All Prostitutes and Obscenities in the World.’ He goes on to say, in graphic imagery, that his people should not become involved with such power:

‘Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, ‘*Come out of her*, my people, so you will not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues’ (Revelation 18:4 NRSV, emphasis added).

The image is pornographic. Entangling yourself with the power of the world is, in God’s eyes, akin to sexual union with a prostitute, and the remedy for such sin is to do precisely what you should if you were to find yourself having sex with one and suddenly realize how wrong it was: stop having intercourse with her immediately. ‘Come out of her.’

The New Testament record is clear: when the Church of Jesus Christ mixes with the power and politics of the world, when it sells its soul and principles in order to cozy up to those in power or use the power of the world to save the world, it is doing nothing less than sleeping with the enemy.

The Early Church

During the first three centuries of the Jesus' movement, believers did not wield political power. Christians were persecuted, not embraced by the Roman Empire. They were hardly welcome in the halls of power (except when they were on trial). Nonetheless, during this time, at least two Christian writers indicate that the Church walked in step with the teaching of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament. The disciples of Jesus, these writers insisted, had no interest in participating in government, let alone exercising political or military power in the name of Jesus.

Tertullian – Second Century AD

‘But as those in whom all ardor in the pursuit of glory and honour is dead, we have no pressing inducement to take part in your public meetings; nor is there aught more entirely foreign to us than the affairs of state.’³

‘All the powers and dignities of this world are not only alien to, but are enemies of, God.’⁴

Origen – Third Century AD

‘We are to despise ingratiating ourselves with kings or any other men – not only if their favour is to be won by murders, licentiousness, or deeds of cruelty, but even if it involves impiety towards God, or any servile expressions of flattery and obsequiousness, which things are unworthy of brave and high-principled men’⁵

³ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 1885; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 3.45 (Tertullian's *Apology*, chapter XXXVIII).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.73 (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, chapter XVIII).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.664 (Origen, *Against Celsus*, chapter LXV).

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...Celsus also urges us to ‘take office in the government of the country, if that is necessary for the maintenance of the laws and the support of religion.’ But we recognize in each state the existence of another national organization, founded by the Word of God, and we exhort those who are mighty in word and of the blameless life to rule over churches...it is not for the purpose of escaping public duties *that Christians decline public offices* but that they may reserve themselves for a diviner and more necessary service in the church of God – for the salvation of men. And this service is at once necessary and right.’⁶

Edward Gibbon, in his *History of Christianity*, wrote of the early Christians, ‘They refused to take part in the civil administration or the military defence of the empire...It was impossible that the Christians, without renouncing a more sacred duty, could assume the character of soldiers, of magistrates, or of princes.’⁷

In short, the early Church was not interested in either exercising or becoming entangled with the power of the world. They were too busy following the way of the Cross, which they knew to be more powerful than anything the world had to offer.

Choosing Barabbas

The scene at the Governor’s headquarters was chaotic. Pilate, who represented the power and might of the world’s greatest empire, wrestled with the problem that was Jesus. The religious leaders had come seeking Jesus’ death, but even Pilate, as cruel as he was, could

⁶ Ibid., 4.668 (*Against Celsus*, chapter LXXIII).

⁷ Edward Gibbon, *History of Christianity* (New York, 1891), pp. 162, 163.

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see Jesus had done nothing to deserve such a sentence. Eventually, he came up with a plan.

There was a custom by which he could release a prisoner to the people at Passover. Pilate therefore offered the people a choice. He would release whichever of two prisoners the people desired: Jesus, the man who refused to exercise the power of the world; or Barabbas, a known insurrectionist and murderer, a man who wanted to throw out the Romans and establish an Israeli Empire. If Barabbas had a slogan, it might have been something along the lines of, 'Make Israel Great Again.'

The people, of course, tragically chose Barabbas (See, John 18:40). They chose the way of power. In making that choice, they sent Jesus to the cross.

I get chills when I think of the choice made that day. But what really breaks my heart is that many Christians are making the same choice today. They are choosing Barabbas. They are accepting the devil's bargain. They are casting aside their integrity to participate in an unholy coupling with politicians who promise power in exchange for fealty.

And, as they do so, they are rejecting the way of Jesus.

None of this is to say that followers of Jesus must completely withdraw from all political involvement. I am not suggesting that it is sinful for a Christian to vote or advocate for causes consistent with the common good. While some may conclude that such withdrawal is the best course for them (and I will not gainsay their decision), I am not saying that is a conclusion all Christians must reach. I for one have not reached such a conclusion.

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But I am saying that when Christians lust and barter their souls for political power, thinking that by doing so they advance God's Kingdom, they delete Jesus. Especially when they throw their lot in with political characters who represent the antithesis of Kingdom values. The devil's bargain is tempting, but as Jesus proved in the wilderness, no legislative agenda, no Supreme Court, no executive power is worth the exchange. You cannot show people the way of Jesus Christ by employing the power of the world. When you try, you only contaminate the Gospel and drive people further away from God. There are better ways, Kingdom ways, of achieving the good things we seek.

Jesus never intended for his people to align themselves with the powers of the world. His intention was that we would live in the world, but not be of it (See, John 17:16; 1 John 2:15; Romans 12:2). His intention was that we would, by living differently and eschewing power, show the world another way, and lead it to salvation.

This is how the Kingdom of God operates. This is the way of Jesus. The way his followers must take. We must not attempt to save the world by using the power of the world. We must follow the way of the Cross.

Which is, of course, the most powerful way of all.

Chapter Two

Enemies

*'In Christ, on the Fifth Kalends of November,
Slept Gorgonius, Friend of All,
And Enemy to None.'*

Epitaph to an Early Christian in the Catacombs of Rome

The Protestant Reformation was a time of great upheaval. Martin Luther's stand against the abuses and errors of the Catholic Church unleashed unprecedented theological, ecclesiastical, social, and political transformation across Europe, as various Christian movements began to discern the meaning of the scriptures for themselves, rather than acquiesce to the traditions and interpretations of Rome. One of these movements, often identified as the 'radical' wing of the reformation, was that of the Anabaptists. These believers desired a return to New Testament era discipleship, and, among other things, challenged the prevailing practice of infant baptism, promoted the separation of church and state, and refused to take up arms in support of the state. In an age when church and state worked hand in hand, such challenges were considered blasphemous by both the prevailing ecclesiastical and political powers. The Anabaptists soon found themselves hunted and persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant governments alike.

One such Anabaptist believer was a Dutchman named Dirk Willems. Willems had embraced Anabaptist ideals and been re-baptized as a young man at Rotterdam.¹ As the years went by, he

¹ Willems and others were dubbed Anabaptist, or re-baptizers, due to their view that infant baptism, the practice of the Catholic and other Protestant Churches,

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continued in his faith, allowing his home in Asperen to be used as a meeting place for like-minded believers. Several persons were re-baptized at his home. This drew the ire of the authorities, who had Willems arrested.

At a time when Anabaptists were routinely burned at the stake or drowned for their beliefs, Willems knew full well the fate that awaited him. So it is no surprise that he took the first opportunity to escape his captors. A prison guard noticed his flight and took chase. It was winter, and Willems managed to elude capture by traversing a pond that had been covered with a thin layer of ice. His pursuer, who presumably was not as light of frame as Willems, attempted to follow across the ice, but broke through and fell into the freezing water.

Had Willems not noticed the guard fighting for his life, he would have gotten away scot free. But he did notice. Unwilling to allow the guard to die, Willems quickly returned to the ice-covered pond and pulled him from the water. The saved man, touched by the gesture, desired to let Willems go, but by the time he had been drawn from the water his supervisor had arrived on the scene. Willems was taken back into custody. He was eventually tried, convicted, and burned at the stake.²

Today Dirk Willems, unknown to most of the world, is a household name in Anabaptist circles, whose adherents hold him up as an example *par excellence* of a person who loved others the way

was ineffective for salvation. They would therefore be re-baptized at an age when they were able to make an informed affirmation of faith in Jesus.

² See, Thielman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, translated from the edition of 1660 by Joseph F. Sohm. Public Domain. Available on the web at www.homecomers.org/mirror//dirk-willems.htm#741. Accessed April 4, 2018.

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Christ loved us, a person who was willing to risk his life to save his enemy.

Christians marvel at stories like this. Whether it's Dirk Willems, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr., or the story of a missionary willing to give his or her life for the sake of an enemy on a hostile mission field, we listen with starry-eyed devotion to stories of believers who love their enemies. Yet when it comes to loving our own enemies, many of us not only ignore the example of such men and women, but also the one who inspired them. From interpersonal conflicts to the so-called 'culture wars' to politics and to the battlefield, the attitude of many Christians toward those who curse, hate or spitefully use us (or are just plain different than us) is more akin to anger than love.

Ironically, while we admire those who love their enemies, there is perhaps no teaching of Jesus that has been more roundly ignored by Christians throughout the ages than his command to love them. When it comes to loving the way Jesus loved, the American Church has continued the age-old practice of deleting Jesus.

A Hard Teaching

To be sure, Jesus' teaching on loving enemies is a hard one to swallow. But he taught it, so here it is:

'You have heard that the law says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat too. If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it for two miles. Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow. You have heard that the law says, 'Love

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your neighbor, and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:38-48).

This passage is among the hardest in the Bible. So hard that it has tended to generate two equal and opposite errors within the Christian community. The first is to ignore it entirely. People do this by pretending it isn't there, or by spiritualizing it to the point of irrelevance by pretending it's a metaphor disconnected from the real world. Either approach is ludicrous: you can't just pretend the words of Jesus aren't there, and all you need to do is look to the cross to see that Jesus meant to apply them to the real world (more on that later). Jesus said, 'love your enemies,' and we need to deal with it.

The second error people make is to think that Jesus commanded his followers to be doormats. The domestic violence victim is told to stick it out and submit to her husband. The person whose spouse is a serial adulterer is told to grin and bear it. That sort of thing isn't what Jesus meant either. There are all sorts of Biblical truths and principles, including examples from the life of Jesus, which make clear that there are times when people need to (non-violently) protect themselves, confront those who wrong them, or otherwise extricate themselves from potentially harmful situations. Loving your enemies does not require you to stay in a toxic relationship, nor does it call you to perpetually live in the line of fire. It most certainly does

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not require that you endure abuse or violence. To any readers living through such a scenario, I urge you to get help and find a place of safety.

That being said, Matthew 5:38-48 represents a real command from Jesus to his followers regarding the way they are to engage their enemies. In contemplating Jesus' words, I have found the answers to three crucial questions: (1) how should we react when someone wrongs (or threatens to wrong) us; (2) why should we react that way; and (3) what can we expect to gain by obeying Jesus' command to love our enemies? It is to the first two questions that we now turn. We will answer the third toward the end of this chapter.

How Should We React When Our Enemies Mistreat Us?

In Matthew 5, Jesus speaks of three scenarios in which an enemy mistreats another person, together with three unnatural responses to such action. The first scenario involves someone who slaps someone on the cheek; the second someone who literally sues another for the shirt on their back; and the third a situation which every Jew in Israel would have been familiar with: a Roman soldier's demand that a civilian carry his burden for a distance of up to one mile.

The natural reaction in each situation would be to get angry and get even. To strike back at the person who hit you. To hire a lawyer and fight the lawsuit. To resist the Roman soldier, or, if that turned out to be impossible (as it usually was), carry the burden while nursing an understandable grudge.

Jesus tells his followers to forget all that. Instead, of striking back, turn the other cheek. Instead of defending the lawsuit to keep your shirt, give the plaintiff your coat as well. Instead of carrying the burden one mile, offer to carry it two! Jesus asks us to turn our natural responses upside down. When people do us wrong, he says,

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don't get mad or get even. Get generous! Instead of responding with anger, respond with an attitude of radical generosity.

Hard to do? You bet it is! But if you think that's tough, wait. It gets worse. Jesus next commands his followers to not only respond with generosity, but to love the people who are wronging them! 'Love your enemies!' he says. Good Lord! It's bad enough to have to be nice to your enemies, but for crying out loud, Jesus says to love them!

Now, to understand what he means here, it will help to define Jesus' terms. First, let's identify what Jesus means by an 'enemy.' From the examples he gives, an enemy is someone who mistreats, or intends to mistreat you. The guy who slaps you on the cheek. The gal who wants the shirt off your back. The Roman who desires to treat you like his personal slave. We can envision many more situations. The boss who underpays you and treats you like garbage. The kid in class who calls you names. The bully who steals your lunch. The neighbor who erects a fence that encroaches on your property line. The politician who wants to regulate homeschooling. The gay activist who sues the baker for not wanting to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex couple. The atheist who wants to silence the prayer before the town council meeting and advocates the taxation of churches. The foreign soldier standing on the other side of the trench with a machine gun in his hand. The terrorist chanting, 'Death to America.'

Jesus says, 'I want you to love these people. Every one of them.'

Yikes.

Of course, Jesus is speaking about a special kind of love. There are various words for love in Greek, and here Jesus is speaking of *Agape love*. *Agape love* is a love born of the choice to desire and

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seek the best for someone, whether they deserve it or not. It is, as that definition implies, the highest love of all. It is God's love, the love that desires the best for us, even when we do not deserve it. Making the choice to love an enemy in this way doesn't mean that you must like what she is doing, or even like her. It doesn't mean you have to get a warm, fuzzy feeling in your chest when you think about the guy who wronged you. It just means that you make the choice to desire, pray for, and seek their welfare, which certainly includes their coming to the realization that their conduct is wrong. It's simple really. Jesus is telling his followers that when we are mistreated by others, instead of getting angry, instead of getting even, instead of nursing grudges, instead of hoping they get run over by a car, we should hope for their reclamation. We should pray for them. We should desire them to become everything God desires them to be.

If we are to be obedient to Jesus, our reactions to those who mistreat or threaten to mistreat us should always be consistent with those ideals.

But Why?

It is no surprise that we have trouble accepting Jesus' approach to our enemies. Benjamin Franklin said, 'those who turn their swords into plowshares usually end up plowing for those who kept their swords.' Many would similarly argue that in a dog eat dog world, loving your enemies is bound to get you into nothing but trouble. And so they conclude it is better to get even; better still to get them before they have a chance to get you. Why in the world should we seek what is best for our enemies?

I'll give you three reasons.

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First, we need to love our enemies because Jesus commanded it. Those of us who call Jesus Lord do not have the privilege of quibbling over his commands, any more than, in military culture, a private has the option of disregarding the order of a Five-Star General. If we want to call ourselves disciples of Jesus, we have no choice but to love our enemies.

Second, love for enemies brings freedom. Now at first blush, that sounds nonsensical. It seems that when Jesus asks us to turn the other cheek, give away our coat, or go the extra mile, he is asking us to give up our freedom. But in reality, he's teaching us how to take it back. When someone does wrong to us, we ordinarily take one of two approaches. We either strike back, which fuels the cycle of violence and vengeance, or we do nothing, and become passive victims of abuse. Jesus offers a third way by empowering us to take control of the situation. A friend of mine was once on the receiving end of a long tirade of unfair criticism that crossed the border into verbal abuse. She calmly sat as the other person went up one side of her and down the other, and then, when her 'enemy' stopped to take a breath, responded, 'Are you finished? Or should I turn the other cheek so you can keep going?' The person was so flummoxed that she stormed out of the room and never bothered my friend again.

Now I know that not every situation turns out that way, but the point of that story is that my friend, rather than striking back or doing nothing, had, by simply offering to turn her other cheek, taken charge of the situation. And when it was over, she was free! Free to move on with her life without the lingering taste of bitterness, anger or resentment. So often, when we strike back, we wind up stewing in our own juices for days, reliving the situation over and over again. Jesus offers a way to escape that. He offers a way to carry the day without resorting to the tactics of our enemies.

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Finally, we need to obey Jesus' command to love our enemies so that we can become children of our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:45). As I mentioned above, *agape* love, the love that desires the best for others even when they don't deserve it, is the kind of love God has for us. It's the kind of love that led the Father to send his Son into the world to die for us. It was, as Paul so famously said, while we were still sinners that God did that for us (See, Romans 5:8). With his command to love enemies, Jesus tells us that when we choose to love in that same way, we become God's children. The implication being, that if we choose not to love that way, we are not his children.

Altogether, these reasons offer a compelling case for obedience regarding Jesus' command to love our enemies: Jesus said it; love leads to freedom; and we have no choice if we desire to be God's children.

Jesus in Action

When it came to loving his enemies, Jesus didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk. The Gospels provide many examples of Jesus *agape-loving* his enemies; seeking the best for them whether they deserved it or not. The following examples from Jesus' life provide incontrovertible evidence that Jesus meant what he said.

Tax collectors were among the most hated people in Israel (they aren't too popular today either). Jewish tax collectors were men who contracted with the Roman government to collect taxes and fees from the Jewish people. They typically collected enough to both satisfy the Romans and pad their own pockets as well. They were the quintessential enemies, the lowest of the low. Decent people had nothing to do with them. Yet Jesus was known to associate with them (See, Luke 7:34; 15:1-2). He once invited himself to dinner at the home of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of Jericho (Luke 19:1-

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10). He even called a tax collector, Matthew (aka Levi) to be one of his core disciples (Mark 2:13-16). In reaching out to tax collectors, Jesus exhibited a love for enemies.

The Pharisees were constantly on Jesus' back. They repeatedly attempted to trap him, and plotted to kill him (See, Luke 22:15; John 11:53). Yet throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus engaging them, reaching out to them, and having dinner with them. Even in the moments when he confronted them strongly, his desire was for their reclamation. In his interactions with the Pharisees, we see God's desire for all to come to repentance (See, 2 Peter 3:9). Many of the Pharisees considered Jesus their bitter enemy, but Jesus never returned the favor. He constantly sought to correct and lead them into his fold.

At the Last Supper, Jesus knew that Judas had already made plans to betray him (John 13:21). Yet at the table Judas was seated in the place of honor, next to Jesus, and was given a piece of bread as a sign of close friendship.³ Even in the garden, when Jesus betrayed him with a kiss, Jesus called him 'friend' (Matthew 26:50). Think about that: moments after Jesus had risen from the ground of Gethsemane, soaked in blood, sweat and tears, knowing that Judas had set in motion his journey to the cross, Jesus referred to his betrayer, not as an enemy, but as a friend.

Pilate was the Roman Governor who sent Jesus to the cross. As Jesus stood before the man who represented the evil empire that enslaved Israel, Jesus not only spoke gently to him, but told him about the Kingdom and Truth (See, John 18:36-37). Whenever I read the account of Jesus' trial before Pilate, I sense two powerful undercurrents: first, Pilate was troubled by the thought of executing

³ See, W. Robertson Nicoll, *Expositor's Greek New Testament* (1897).

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Jesus; and second, Jesus was troubled for Pilate's soul. If you doubt me on that, put this book down, pick up your Bible, and read John 18:28-19:16. I think you will see what I mean. Even as he stood before Pilate, Jesus loved his enemies.

Yet nothing compares to what happened at the Cross. There, Jesus exhibited the ultimate love for his enemies. It would first behoove us to remember that at the cross, Jesus was dying for the sins of the world. He was taking all sins – yours and mine – all that we have ever committed, and all that we ever will commit, upon himself in order to reconcile us to God. We all put Jesus on that cross, and he was willing to go there for us. We, by our sin, had chosen to live as enemies of God, yet God never considered us to be his enemies. Instead, he sought what was best for us, and loved us to the very end.

Consider the criminals who were crucified with Jesus. Initially they, together with the religious leaders and passersby, mocked Jesus (Mark 15:29-32). Yet by the end of the day, Jesus promised one of them that they would soon be together in paradise (Luke 23:43). Jesus bore no grudges against those who had cursed him. He simply loved and forgave them.

It is impossible for me to imagine Jesus' Cross without remembering the Sermon on the Mount. One moment, I picture Jesus preaching to his disciples about loving and praying for their enemies; the next, preaching the same message at Calvary as he asks his Father to forgive the men driving nails into his feet and hands (See, Luke 23:34). That juxtaposition convinces me that Jesus' command to love our enemies was no joke. He meant it. He loved his enemies to the end, even as they crucified him. I am forced to conclude: 'if the Son of God loved his enemies under such circumstances, how can I ever think of doing anything less?'

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Even after the Resurrection, Jesus was still loving those who had cursed and spitefully used him. Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times, even cursing as he did so (See, Matthew 26:69-74). Yet Jesus prayed for and then restored Peter to the fold (See, Luke 22:31; John 21:15-19). He did so without any recrimination. He did so in love. There can be no doubt that had Judas still been around, and had he been willing, Jesus would have done the same for him as well.

From start to finish, the Gospels tell the story of Jesus as a man who loved and prayed for his enemies. Yeah, he meant what he said.

Acts - Keeping Love Alive

After the Ascension, Jesus' new community of believers were tasked with being his witnesses. They were to carry on his way and lead others into the Kingdom. Not surprisingly, one of the ways they did so was by loving their enemies. In this, they kept the love of Jesus alive.

Early in Acts, after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter stood before a crowd and preached. Interestingly, he noted the guilt of some of those present. In Acts 2:23 Luke records that he said, '...with the help of lawless Gentiles, *you* nailed him to a cross and killed him' (emphasis added). The implication being that some present that day had played a role in the death of Jesus. Yet Peter did not hate them. He did not scold them. Instead, he told them the story of Jesus: his mission, his life, his death and his Resurrection. He told them that they could repent and be baptized and receive forgiveness for their sins (2:38). In other words, he sought the best for them even though they did not deserve it. He showed *agape* love to the ones who crucified his Lord.

The Apostles and other early believers continued the practice of loving enemies throughout the events recorded in Acts. You can

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search its pages from start to finish, and you will never find an instance of any Christian doing anything less than loving their enemies.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. He was stoned to death after confronting the religious authorities. Luke records what happened as he died: ‘...he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’ (Acts 7:60, NIV). Sounds a lot like, ‘Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’ Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died with love for his enemies on his lips.

Ananias was a disciple of Jesus who lived in Damascus. One day, Jesus told him that Saul, the persecutor of the Church, whom Ananias knew was coming to round up and imprison Christians, was his chosen instrument to bring the Good News of the Kingdom to the Gentile world. Ananias was ordered to go to Saul to lay hands on him and restore his sight, which Saul had lost in an encounter with the Risen Christ along the Damascus Road. Ananias not only went, but when he came into the room where Saul was staying, laid his hands upon Saul and called him his ‘brother’ (See, Acts 9:17). Such was the love of the early Church. Those who had once been enemies were now brothers.

Later, when Saul, then a follower of Jesus, traveled to Jerusalem to meet with Church leaders in the wake of his conversion, the folks there were understandably suspicious. But when Barnabas intervened and explained that Saul had seen Jesus and become a believer, he was welcomed with open arms (See, Acts 9:26-28). It is a remarkable testimony to the early Church’s love for enemies that the man who had nodded with approval as Stephen’s murderers pelted him with rocks (See, Acts 8:1; 22:20), and subsequently hunted down and imprisoned believers in both Israel and beyond,

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was embraced as a brother by the very ones whom he had once hunted.

And then there is the attitude of the Apostles toward the Romans. Remember, Rome was the enemy. Rome crucified Jesus. Yet, again, you find no hatred or animosity toward Rome in the Book of Acts. When Jesus asked Peter to meet and eat with Cornelius the Centurion of Caesarea, the only qualms Peter had to overcome concerned Jewish dietary laws; the fact that Cornelius was in the employ of the enemy was not among Peter's concerns (See, Acts 10-11). I do wonder whether they eventually had to talk about that, and if Cornelius may have, once he became a believer, resigned his commission (more on that in the next chapter), but as far as Peter's meeting him for the purpose of bringing him into the Kingdom, his Roman status was irrelevant. He was not an enemy. He was a man who needed Jesus.

Paul, formerly Saul, often stood before the Romans and other authorities in his ministry. So often that I won't even cite the references (you can easily find them all by spending an hour or so flipping through Acts). He always saw them, not as enemies, but as people who needed Jesus. Even when he was their prisoner, Paul's concern was for their salvation. If there were moments when he saw them as his enemies, he never showed it. He was too busy loving them to Jesus.

In fact, that's what you see everyone doing in the Book of Acts. Even in the face of persecution, the early Church kept love alive. The believers truly modeled what Jesus had said. They loved their enemies and prayed for those who persecuted them. They showed the world what it meant to live as 'true children of their heavenly father.'

The Letters of Paul and Peter

Paul's letters bear further testimony to the transformation that took place in his heart regarding enemy love. Consider these words from Romans:

'Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them...Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live at peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the Lord. Instead, 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame upon their heads.' Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good' (Romans 12:14; 17-21).

Amazing words coming from the one-time lead persecutor of the Christian Church! Paul's heart had clearly been captured by the way of *agape* love. Indeed, for him, it was the way that made life worth living:

'But now let me show you the way of life that is best of all. If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but I didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor, and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it, but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

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Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not depend on its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. *But love will last forever!* Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

When I was a child, I spoke and thought as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

Three things will last forever – faith, hope and love – and the greatest of these is love’ (1 Corinthians 12:31(b)-13:13, emphasis added).

It’s a shame many only hear these words at weddings. Paul was describing the greatest life of all – the life that seeks the best for others, even enemies, at all times. The life that never gives up on anyone. The life of *agape* love. This, Paul says, is the life that will last forever. Paul’s message is clear: even when things look bleak, and it seems love is losing, don’t stop loving. You may not be able to see it now, but one day you will. Because in the end love will win.

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And then there's Peter. The one-time hothead who carried a sword with him to the Garden of Gethsemane (See, John 18:10). Addressing Christians who were experiencing suffering and persecution for their faith, Peter advised that they pick up swords and prepare to strike their enemies down, right? Not.

‘So then, since Christ suffered physical pain, you must arm yourself with the same attitude he had, and be ready to suffer too...Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to the world.

If you are insulted because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you' (1 Peter 4:4(a); 12-14).

There is not a hint of anger or vengeance in his words. There is only love and the understanding that when persecuted, the best thing to do is to face our enemies with the attitude of Christ, which, you should know by now, was an attitude of love even toward those who hurt him.

Church history records that Peter was crucified upside down. Paul had his head lopped off beside the road outside of Rome. Who can doubt that as they died, they had the same attitude as Jesus? Who can doubt that as they died, their enemies could see his love in their eyes?

The Early Church

After the Apostolic Era came to a close, the baton was passed from generation to generation in the early Church. The writings of

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the Church Fathers bear further witness to the early Church's passionate commitment to love enemies.

Aristides – Second Century AD

‘Their [Christians’] oppressors they comfort, and make them their friends. They do good to their enemies.’⁴

Athenagoras – Second Century AD

‘For we have learned, not to return blow for blow, nor to go to law with those who plunder or rob us, but to those who smite us on one side of the face to offer the other side also.’⁵

Justin Martyr – Second Century AD

‘We who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies, and endeavor to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ, to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God the ruler of all’⁶

Clement of Alexandria – Second Century AD

‘He bids us ‘love our enemies, bless them who curse us, and pray for those who despitefully use us.’ And he says: ‘If anyone strikes you on the one cheek, turn to him the other also;

⁴ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 9.276 (Apology of Aristides, Chapter XV).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.129 (Plea for the Christians by Athenagoras the Athenian, Chapter I).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.167 (*First Apology of Justin Martyr*, chapter XIV).

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and if anyone takes away thy coat, do not hinder him from taking thy cloak also.’⁷

Tertullian – Third Century AD

‘For our religion commands us to love even our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us...For all love those who love them. It is peculiar to Christians alone to love those who hate them.’⁸

‘For men of old were wont to require ‘eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,’ and to repay with usury ‘evil with evil’...But after [Christ] has supervened, and has united the grace of faith with patience, now it is no longer lawful to assail even with word, nor to say ‘fool’ even, without ‘danger of the judgment.’ Anger has been prohibited, our spirits retained, the petulance of the hand checked, the poison of the tongue extracted. The law has found more than it has lost, while Christ says, ‘Love your personal enemies, and bless your cursers, and pray for your persecutors, that you may be sons of your heavenly Father.’⁹

Cyprian – Third Century

‘Even our enemies must be loved.’¹⁰

Theonias of Alexandria – Late Third/Early Fourth Century

‘Do no one an injury at any time, and provoke no one to anger. If an injury is done to you, look to Jesus Christ; and even as ye

⁷ Ibid., 2.293 (Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, chapter 2.286).

⁸ Ibid., 3.105 (Tertullian, *To Scapula*, Chapter I).

⁹ Ibid., 3.711 (Tertullian, *Of Patience*, chapter VI).

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.546 (*The Treatises of Cyprian*, 49).

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desire that He may remit your transgressions, do ye also forgive them theirs.¹¹

Lactantius – Early Fourth Century

‘If we all derive our origin from one man, whom God created, we are plainly of one blood; and therefore, it must be considered the greatest wickedness to hate a man, even if he is guilty. On which account, God has enjoined that enmities are never to be contracted by us, but that they are always to be removed, so that we soothe those who are our enemies, by reminding them of their relationship. Likewise, if we are all inspired and animated by one God, what else are we than brothers... Therefore, they are to be accounted as savage beasts who injure man; who, in opposition to every law and right of human nature – plunder, torture, slay and banish. On account of this relationship of brotherhood, God teaches us never to do evil, but always good.’¹²

Such is the witness of the early Church. It was understood that when Jesus said to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek and pray for those who hurt us, he meant it literally.

To Love is Gain

Earlier in this chapter I wrote that we would return to the question: what can we expect to gain by obeying Jesus’ command to love our enemies?

In a word: everything.

¹¹ Ibid., 6.161 (Theonias of Alexandria, *The Epistle of Theonias*, chapter IX).

¹² Ibid., 7.172-173 (Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, chapter 10).

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We have already noted that when we love our enemies, we gain freedom from bitterness and anger in our hearts, as well as the blessing of being God's beloved sons and daughters. But there is more.

For starters, there is the glorious fact that sometimes, when we love our enemies, they become our friends. Sometimes, when we respond to those who hurt us with love, it rocks them to the core and changes them forever. In the Gospels, we see this happening at the Cross. There were at least two people that day who were transformed by Jesus' love: We have already noted the criminal who asked to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom (See, Luke 23:42). But there was another enemy who became Jesus' friend that day: a Roman Centurion. The Centurion began that day as the man in charge of Jesus' crucifixion. He made sure the nails were driven into Jesus' hands and feet. He supervised the hoisting of the cross beam into place. Made sure the sign mocking Jesus as the 'King of the Jews,' was hung properly over Jesus' head. Oversaw the long, slow process of death by asphyxiation. He was, no doubt, a battle-hardened man. And yet, by the end of the day, after watching the way Jesus died, after hearing him cry out prayers of forgiveness for his enemies, after seeing agape love in its most perfect form, he stood at the foot of the cross and said, 'This man truly was the Son of God' (Mark 15:39).

Abraham Lincoln once said, 'Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?' The glorious truth is that sometimes, when we love our enemies, we win them over. They change. They leave the ranks of our enemies and join the ranks of our brothers and sisters.

Sometimes, loving our enemies does something even more wonderful: it changes the world. Certainly we see this in the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King and others loved their

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enemies and made a better world. History is replete with examples of men and women who followed the way of love and changed things. Who knows how many times an act of love toward an enemy has changed the course of history? It certainly did in 33 AD, when a carpenter-Rabbi from Nazareth shouted his love for his enemies while hanging on a Roman cross. The world has certainly never been the same since. The truth is that enemy love changes people. Sometimes it changes everything.

Of course, I would be dishonest were I not to acknowledge, that sometimes, when we love our enemies, things don't go as wonderfully as we would hope. Sometimes, loving our enemies doesn't change them at all. At least not for the better. Sometimes, it only enrages them. It's a sad truth that the more you become like Jesus, the more some folks will hate you for it. Jesus told us this would happen (See, John 15:18).

But here's the thing: even when your enemies rage in the face of your love for them, you still have everything to gain by loving them.

This is what I've learned in my life: when your enemies keep on hating you, despite your love for them, you have a choice to make. You can either become angry and bitter and strike back, or, you can surrender yourself to God, turn everything over to him, and cry out with Jesus, 'Father, forgive them – they don't know what they are doing!' True, as I warned in the introduction to this chapter, you may need to take a step or two to protect yourself, such as extricating yourself from a toxic situation. But even then, you can still choose the way of *agape* love. You can still seek and pray for what is best for them, even when they don't deserve it. You can still follow the example of Jesus.

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And if you do, you will receive the greatest gift: *the gift of knowing Jesus more*. In the third chapter of Philippians, Paul, imprisoned for his faith, wronged by his enemies, deserted by most of his friends, and inching closer and closer to the day when the Romans would chop his head off, wrote of the sheer joy of sharing the sufferings of Christ. Here are his words:

‘Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him...I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead’ (Philippians 8-9(a); 10-11).

Friends, sometimes, when we love our enemies, they will hurt us all the more. But that’s what happened to Jesus. And so, when people hurt you, and you respond in love, you will become more like Christ. You will draw closer to Christ. You will understand him more. You will know him more. That, brothers and sisters, is nothing less than the gift of eternal life: ‘this is eternal life,’ Jesus prayed, ‘that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’ (See, John 17:3). Suffering while loving our enemies helps us know Jesus. Which explains to me one of Jesus’ other hard teachings – the one where he said we would be blessed when people persecuted us for being faithful to him (See, Matthew 5:11). For we will be. Because we will know him more. We will know him and experience him in ways we never dreamed were possible.

I suppose it may be easy for me to say these things. My walk with Jesus has been fairly easy. I have never been threatened with

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crucifixion or martyrdom. My ‘sufferings’ at the hands of ‘enemies’ has been rather mild in the vast configuration of things. But I have known rejection. I have been bullied. I have known cold hearted indifference. Hatred. I know what it is like to be lied about, betrayed, and hurt. You probably do too. When such things have happened, I have been tempted to fight back, to get angry, to nurse grievances, and to grow bitter. To delete Jesus. Truth be told, I’ve spent too much time doing all those things. But after many years of getting it wrong, I’ve finally made the choice to love, and in making that choice, I have not only experienced freedom, but found an intimacy with Christ I never would have known if I had done otherwise. For this I am thankful, even for the tough stuff. In fact, since the tough stuff brought me closer to Jesus, I wouldn’t trade any of it for the world.

Love your enemies. Pray for those who hurt you. For even if it doesn’t change them, it will change you. You will become a child of your heavenly Father. You will draw closer to the heart of Jesus. You will know Jesus more.

And who knows? Together, you might even change the world.

Chapter Three

War

*'When Jesus said, 'love your enemies,'
he probably meant don't kill them.'*

Unknown

Let's begin with Mark Twain.

'It was a time of great and exalting excitement. The country was up in arms, the war was on, in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism; the drums were beating, the bands playing, the toy pistols popping, the bunched firecrackers hissing and spluttering; on every hand and far down the receding and fading spread of roofs and balconies a fluttering wilderness of flags flashed in the sun; daily the young volunteers marched down the wide avenue gay and fine in their new uniforms, the proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweethearts cheering them with voices choked with happy emotion as they swung by; nightly the packed mass meetings listened, panting, to patriot oratory which stirred the deepest deeps of their hearts, and which they interrupted at briefest intervals with cyclones of applause, the tears running down their cheeks the while; in the churches the pastors preached devotion to flag and country, and invoked the God of Battles beseeching His aid in our good cause in outpourings of fervid eloquence which moved every listener.

It was indeed a glad and gracious time, and the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightway got such a stern and angry

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warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way.

Sunday morning came — next day the battalions would leave for the front; the church was filled; the volunteers were there, their young faces alight with martial dreams — visions of the stern advance, the gathering momentum, the rushing charge, the flashing sabers, the flight of the foe, the tumult, the enveloping smoke, the fierce pursuit, the surrender!

Then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory! With the volunteers sat their dear ones, proud, happy, and envied by the neighbors and friends who had no sons and brothers to send forth to the field of honor, there to win for the flag, or, failing, die the noblest of noble deaths. The service proceeded; a war chapter from the Old Testament was read; the first prayer was said; it was followed by an organ burst that shook the building, and with one impulse the house rose, with glowing eyes and beating hearts, and poured out that tremendous invocation:

God the all-terrible! Thou who ordainest,
Thunder thy clarion and lightning thy sword!

Then came the “long” prayer. None could remember the like of it for passionate pleading and moving and beautiful language. The burden of its supplication was, that an ever-merciful and benignant Father of us all would watch over our noble young soldiers, and aid, comfort, and encourage them in their patriotic work; bless them, shield them in the day of battle and the hour of peril, bear them in His mighty hand, make them strong and confident, invincible in the bloody onset; help them

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crush the foe, grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory -

An aged stranger entered and moved with slow and noiseless step up the main aisle, his eyes fixed upon the minister, his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet, his head bare, his white hair descending in a frothy cataract to his shoulders, his seamy face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness. With all eyes following him and wondering, he made his silent way; without pausing, he ascended to the preacher's side and stood there waiting. With shut lids the preacher, unconscious of his presence, continued his moving prayer, and at last finished it with the words, uttered in fervent appeal, "Bless our arms, grant us the victory, O Lord and God, Father and Protector of our land and flag!"

The stranger touched his arm, motioned him to step aside - which the startled minister did - and took his place. During some moments he surveyed the spellbound audience with solemn eyes, in which burned an uncanny light; then in a deep voice he said:

'I come from the Throne - bearing a message from Almighty God!' The words smote the house with a shock; if the stranger perceived it he gave no attention. 'He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd, and will grant it if such be your desire after I, His messenger, shall have explained to you its import — that is to say, its full import. For it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of — except he pause and think. God's servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two — one uttered, and the other not.

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Both have reached the ear of Him who heareth all supplications, the spoken and the unspoken. Ponder this - keep it in mind. If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! lest without intent you invoke a curse upon your neighbor at the same time. If you pray for the blessing of rain on your crop which needs it, by that act you are possibly praying for a curse on some neighbor's crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it.

'You have heard your servant's prayer - the uttered part of it. I am commissioned by God to put into words the other part of it - that part which the pastor — and also you in your hearts - fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You heard the words 'Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!' That is sufficient. The whole of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory - must follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!

'Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth into battle - be Thou near them! With them - in spirit - we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them

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out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended in the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames in summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it -

For our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!

We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

(After a pause.) “Ye have prayed it; if ye still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits.”

It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.’¹

At this point, some of you should put this book down and think about Twain’s words for a while. Because if you are anything like the people in Twain’s fictional church – or for that matter, the vast majority of those in the American Church today – you probably don’t see any sense in the heavenly visitor’s prayer either.

¹ Mark Twain, *The War Prayer* (1905).

The Adoration of Mars

No sane person would suggest that war is a good thing, and yet plenty of people throughout history have managed to cast it as something glamorous. That this is so is bad enough, but that it should be so among Christians is truly shameful. Throughout my life, I have been perpetually saddened by the fact that when Americans begin to beat the drums of war, it is usually those in the Church of Jesus Christ who bang the loudest. Aside from those in the arms industry, war seems to have no better ally than those who claim to follow the Prince of Peace. It has been my observation that when a war begins, no demographic group supports it with as much fervor as American Christians.²

I acknowledge that the issue of war is a tough one. Many Christians feel that while war may be evil, it is sometimes necessary to prevent worse evils from occurring. I have, somewhat uneasily, held that position for the greater part of my life. I've sympathized with, bought into and believed the paradox that war cannot be avoided if we are to achieve peace and justice in the world. But after thirty years of struggling with that paradox, I have decided that in matters of war and peace, as in everything else, it all comes down to obedience. The question is not 'is war necessary?' but, 'what did Jesus say about it?'

² For example, in a Pew Research Group Study conducted at the height of the Iraq War, 77% of Evangelicals and 62% of Catholics and Mainline Protestants supported the war. By contrast, only 44% of respondents who identified as atheists or having no religious affiliation supported the war. 'Different Faiths, Different Messages: American's Hearing about Iraq from the Pulpit, But Religious Faith Not Defining Opinions.' Pew Research Center, Washington DC. March 19, 2003. www.people-press.org/2003/03/19/different-faiths-different-messages. Accessed April 27, 2018.

The Peaceable Kingdom

In previous chapters we dealt with Jesus' renunciation of worldly power and command to love enemies. As we seek to apply Jesus' teaching to the difficult subject of war, it will help to reiterate his teaching regarding nonresistance. Specifically, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

‘You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also’ (Matthew 5:38-39).

This strong ethic of nonresistance would seem to have major implications for the issue of war. If we are not to fight back as individuals when threatened with harm, how can we think of doing so *en masse*?

Still, some folks would argue that since war is a national issue, Jesus' words relating to individual conduct do not apply. The kingdoms of the world have, after all, always used the sword against one another. Just look at the Old Testament! With such logic, many dismiss Jesus' words about cheek-turning as irrelevant to the question of war. Jesus wasn't addressing the nations, and so the matter of a nation waging war isn't addressed by his words. The Old Testament way, practiced by Israel and others, is still in force. Nations may use force against their enemies to advance noble goals.

I believe such folks, focusing as they are on a distinction between nations and individuals, miss the point. It does not matter whether Jesus was talking to the kingdoms of the world when he said to turn the other cheek. What matters is that he was talking to those who

belong to *his Kingdom*. And in his Kingdom, no citizen would ever dream of using violence. His Kingdom is the Peaceable Kingdom. It is a different kind of Kingdom, with a different kind of King.

A Different Kind of King

Every year on Palm Sunday, Christians all over the world celebrate the ‘Triumphal Entry.’ They envision Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey, as people waved palm branches and sang loud ‘Hosannas.’ Not everyone, however, contemplates the event with the care it deserves.

The Gospels tell of how Jesus, in preparation for his triumphal ride, ordered two of his disciples to go to the town of Bethany on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives to procure a donkey for his use (See, Luke 19:28-35). The request certainly fueled their Messianic Expectations. The prophet Zechariah had prophesied long years before that when the Messiah came to Jerusalem to take center stage, he would stand on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4) and come riding to Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Moreover, Jews commonly believed that when the Messiah came, he would enter Jerusalem from the east.³ That Jesus was approaching from the east side of Jerusalem and requesting a donkey surely set their hearts afire. We can imagine that when the disciples explained to the donkey’s owner why they needed it (see, Luke 19:34), word quickly spread throughout the area. The Messiah, the miracle worker from Galilee, was finally coming to do what the Messiah was meant to do!

³ Ezekiel 43:1-4 foretold that the glory of the Lord would enter Jerusalem through the eastern gateway.

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It is not surprising then that as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, a crowd gathered. The people spread their coats before him, paving the way for the King of Glory and shouting, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’ (Luke 19:38 NIV). John’s Gospel informs us that as the people shouted, they ran to get palm branches (John 12:12). Palm branches were a symbol of Messianic expectation. Back in 164 BC, when Israel was occupied by the Seleucid Greeks, the martial hero Judas Maccabeus, along with his brothers, had raised an army, thrown the Greeks out, and established, for a brief time, a period of independence for Israel. When the victorious Jewish forces paraded into Jerusalem, guess what the people waved? Yep. Palm Branches (See, 1 Maccabees 13:51). The fact that people ran to get palm branches as Jesus rode up the Mount of Olives reveals their expectations. They expected Jesus to be a Messiah *a la* Judas Maccabeus. Jesus would raise up an army, toss out the Romans and establish Israel’s independence. The pieces were falling into place. They had a miracle worker, a donkey, the Mount of Olives, the Eastern (Golden) Gate, and palm branches. Now all they needed was the war to kick things off, and Israel would be free!

Of course, expectations are funny things. Had the people taken two minutes to think about things, they would have realized their mistake. Kings in those days rode horses when they came in war. They rode donkeys when they rode in peace. Jesus was not coming as a conquering king. He was coming as the Prince of Peace. Now, again, as we noted in chapter one, Jesus could have done otherwise. And with all those people around him, cheering him to be what they wanted him to be, I suppose it’s possible that the old temptation from the wilderness raised its ugly head once more. There were so many about him willing to proclaim their allegiance to him. He could have had thousands flock to his side, wielding swords and pitchforks, coalescing into an army strong enough to toss out the Romans. And

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that didn't even include the angelic legions at his disposal. He could have led a revolution. He could have won a war. He could have used the 'necessary evil' of war to fight the greater evil of Rome, and thus ushered in an era of peace. He could have used the power of the world to save the world.

But Jesus didn't do that. Why? Well, for one thing, such an action would have avoided the Cross, which was necessary for the salvation of the world. But for another, Jesus knew that violence begets more violence. It simply was not his way.

It broke his heart that no one else understood that. Luke records that as Jesus crested the Mount of Olives and beheld the city of Jerusalem, he began to weep:

'How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes. Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you on every side. They will crush you to the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you did not recognize it when God visited you' (Luke 19:42-44).

Jesus knew that in a few days, the ones he came to save would reject both him and his way, and that as the years dragged on, the people of Jerusalem would cling to their hopes for a warrior king, and that their hopes would culminate in disaster. In 66-70 AD, Israel's pent up desire to defeat the evil of Rome by means of the sword would be unleashed in open war against Rome. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells of how the Romans came and besieged Jerusalem, setting up ramparts and hemming it in while famine ravaged the city. He writes of the bloodbath that took place once

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Rome broke through the city walls. Soldiers burned homes and indiscriminately massacred everyone – men, women, and children. In what we can only hope was hyperbole, he claimed that the blood ran through the streets so deeply that it was able to put out the fires. In the end, Caesar ordered the razing of the city, the Temple included, so that one stone would not remain upon another. Thus ended Israel’s dream of independence from Rome.⁴

Jesus saw all of this as he gazed upon Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. He knew that her people desired war, and he knew where war led. So he cried, lamenting the fact that they had failed to grasp the nature of his Kingdom, that it was a different kind of Kingdom, and that he was a different kind of King.

Later in the week, Jesus would stand before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. In response to Pilate’s pressing about his purported title, ‘King of the Jews,’ Jesus said, ‘My Kingdom is not from this world. *If* my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my Kingdom is not from here.’ (John 19:36, emphasis added).

The tragedy of Palm Sunday is that the people didn’t understand that ‘if.’ Jesus’ kingdom is not from this world. It is not an earthly kingdom. It is the Kingdom of Heaven that breaks into the world. Citizens of earthly kingdoms fight. Citizens of Heaven’s kingdom follow the way of the Cross.

Drop Your Sword

Prior to his arrest, Jesus gathered with his disciples to celebrate a new version of Passover. They celebrated the Passover in a way that

⁴ See, Josephus. *War of the Jews*. Book 5, Chapter 12 and Book 6, Chapter 8.

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signaled a new Exodus. Jesus was about to initiate a new deliverance from slavery to freedom and from death to life. He was about to place a new Israel, born from the old, at the crossroads of civilization to show the world another way. Christians refer to this celebration as ‘The Last Supper.’ Jesus said and did many wonderful things that night. But there is one exchange between Jesus and his disciples that doesn’t get a lot of press in Christian circles these days.

Jesus called to the minds of his disciples the time when he had sent them out to spread the Good News of the Kingdom without money, gear, or extra sandals. They had relied solely upon the hospitality of those they met in their travels, and astonishingly, their needs were met every step of the way (See, Luke 9:3-6; 10:1-20; 22:35). The disciples surely smiled at the fond memory, as well as the promise of God’s provision to those engaged in his service. But then Jesus added some ominous words:

‘But now,’ he said, ‘take your money and a traveler’s bag. And if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one! For the time has come for this prophecy about me to be fulfilled: ‘He was counted among the rebels.’ Yes, everything written about me by the prophets will come true’ (Luke 22:36-37).

The words must have been confusing. They seemed to fly in the face of everything Jesus had previously said. He had told his disciples to love their enemies rather than retaliate against them, and now he was telling them to buy swords. What on earth could Jesus have been thinking?

The answer is found in subsequent events. For as soon as Jesus mentioned buying swords, his disciples tossed a couple out onto the table (or otherwise revealed them) and said, ‘Look, Jesus! We have two swords already!’ (See, Luke 22:38).

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You see, the disciples, to this point, had never understood Jesus. They hadn't understood his words, and they hadn't understood his way. They were still hoping for that militaristic Messiah who would raise up an army, toss out the Romans, and establish the Israeli Empire. Jesus had tried over and over again to set them straight, but they would hear none of it. To them, the sword was the answer. It was the only language the world knew. The only power that could set things right.

Jesus, in speaking of buying swords, was simply calling out into the open what he already knew his disciples were thinking and carrying. I mean, seriously, do you think that Jesus, the Son of God, the smartest man who ever lived, had walked the length and breadth of Israel with these guys for three and one-half years without noticing that they were carrying swords under their tunics? Of course he had. He knew all about their expectations, and he knew about their swords. He knew they rightly believed that the only language their world understood was the power of the sword. And he knew that they wrongly believed that the power of the sword was the only power that could set things right.

So he called them out, and began to teach them another language, another power, another way.

Jesus looked at the swords lying on the table and said, 'Enough of this' (See, Luke 22:38(b)).⁵ I can imagine the sad, sardonic expression on his face. He had achieved his purpose with his words. He had brought their true feelings out in the open. He did not have the strength to talk about it any longer. It was time to act out the lesson.

⁵ Greek, 'Hikanon estin.'

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So they made their way to Gethsemane, where Jesus wrestled with the cup he was to drink in the silence of the garden under the light of the Paschal moon. In time, the enemy came: Judas, the Temple Guards, and about 200 Roman soldiers. They carried torches in their quest to snuff out the Light of the World. They were armed to the teeth to arrest the Prince of Peace.

The lesson was about to begin.

The Gospel accounts of what happened are so familiar that I will not belabor the details. In brief, Jesus offered himself to the mob, and Peter, who possessed one of the swords, sprang to Jesus' defense. He drew his sword from its sheath and struck at the first enemy he could find: Malchus, the High Priest's Servant. Fortunately for Malchus, Peter was no warrior, and so his poorly aimed blow managed only to cut off the lower portion of Malchus' ear. We can imagine the scuffle that ensued, as the disciples, guards, and soldiers rushed to the precipice of a bloodbath.

Suddenly, above the din of the disturbance, Jesus shouted: 'Enough of this!'

'Enough of this.' The echo of Jesus' words from the upper room stopped the disciples in their tracks. I am sure they made the connection. Just in case they missed it, Jesus continued, *'Drop your sword. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword'* (See, Luke 23:51; Matthew 26:52).

A clearer rejection of violence would be difficult to imagine.

The disciples did not fully realize it at the time, but in a few days, none of them would ever dream of carrying a sword again. For they would come to realize that there are far more powerful weapons in the arsenal of Jesus' Kingdom.

The Most Powerful Weapon

Jesus' rejection of the sword did not mean that he wanted his disciples to passively ignore evil. Hardly. Jesus' consistent approach to changing the world was engagement, not withdrawal. Jesus despised evil as much as anyone else. He simply offered a new way to conquer it.

One of the more powerful Gospel stories is the one about the day Jesus took his disciples to the city of Caesarea Philippi. Located at the northern boundary of Israel, its name honored two despots: Augustus Caesar and Herod the Great's son, Philip. The city stood at the southwestern foot of Mount Hermon and boasted numerous shrines to false gods, as well as a large cave that came to be known as the Gate of Hades. The city was a reminder of everything wrong in Israel; an affront to every Jewish man and woman. Standing on the outer boundary of their land, and representing all the encroaching pagan influences of the world beyond, it was only natural for the Jews of Jesus' day to see it as nothing less than the 'gate to hell' (See, Matthew 16:18).

It was at this place that Peter famously confessed that Jesus was 'the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' (See, Matthew 16:16). It was also at this place that Jesus said in reply that it would be 'upon this rock' that he would build his church, and that the 'gates of Hades' would not prevail against it (See, Luke 16:18).

I've always loved that story. I can just imagine Jesus pointing at the pagan shrines and the cave representing the gate to the underworld and emphatically telling his disciples that nothing would ever be able to stop the forward momentum of his Kingdom. It's one of those stories that has inspired Christians throughout the ages to keep going, even during terrible opposition and persecution.

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I think, however, that most people misunderstand what Jesus meant when he said that the gates of hades (or hell) would not prevail against his church. Most people think of the church being assailed by its enemies and somehow managing to stand. But the image Jesus painted wasn't about the Church defending itself from the onslaught of an evil world. The image was of a Church on offense, charging against the evil powers of the world.

A gate, you understand, doesn't move. It just stands there.

The image Jesus provides is one of siege warfare. It is an image of an army coming to take a walled city. The army comes against the city with battering rams, catapults and trebuchets, beating at the gates until they can stand no more. Once they fall, the invading army pours through the gates and overtakes the city.

Jesus wasn't telling his disciples to think of themselves as the besieged. He was telling them to think of themselves as the besiegers. They would not be on defense. They would be on offense. Against Rome. Against the fortresses and strongholds of evil in the world. They were to lay siege to and bring down the strongholds of their enemies.

If this sounds like Jesus was calling his disciples to war, he was. Jesus knew as well as anyone that the world was evil. He knew that Rome was powerful. He knew that forces, both spiritual and martial, would romp across the face of the world until the day of his Second Coming. Jesus was no naïve idealist; he knew the world was an evil place. But he also knew how to defeat evil, and he called upon his followers to pick up the one weapon they would need to win the fight.

Calvary Love.

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Return with me for a moment to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has just told Peter to drop his sword. He has emphatically stated that it is the height of folly to wield one. To say his disciples were perplexed would be an understatement.

Jesus then did something extraordinary. He reached down into the dirt, picked up the portion of Malchus' ear that had been lopped off, and healed his enemy (Luke 23:51). It was an immediate reminder to his followers that he intended to replace violence with love.

But then the disciples watched in deep perplexity as Jesus was taken into custody, bound, and dragged away to die. What was the use of love? Jesus had been arrested. He hadn't even given the sword a chance!

The lesson was just getting started.

As events unfolded, Jesus continued to follow the way of love. He never called upon those twelve legions of angels that could have fought to protect him. Instead, he allowed the authorities, the powers of the world, to have their way. He allowed them to convict him. To scourge him. To crucify him.

And the whole while, Jesus did nothing but love. He loved his enemies. He prayed for those who spitefully used him: 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing!' (Luke 23:34). He continued to love and pray until the bitter end, giving his life so that they - his enemies - could live.

It was beautiful of course. It was the kind of thing that has brought tears to many eyes for nearly two thousand years. But on the day Jesus died, it must have looked as if he had been wrong, and that Peter and the others had been right. The sword was the only language

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the world understood. It was the only power that could set things right. For the power of the sword, expressed through the power of Rome, had seemed to have carried the day.

But on the Sunday morning following that fateful Friday, Jesus rose from the dead. He conquered the grave. And in the light of the Resurrection dawn, he proved that there is another language, another power that overcomes the language and power of the sword. There is a power that is unstoppable. The most powerful thing in the world.

Calvary Love.

And guess what? His disciples got it. Peter threw away his sword. And not just Peter. None of the disciples ever talked of carrying one again. Instead, as we will soon see through their words and witness, they picked up the weapons of Jesus and charged the gates of their world in a whole new way. They prayed for their enemies and modeled the language and power of Calvary Love to the generations that followed.

I find it interesting that so many Christians claim that Jesus never said anything about war. He rejected every opportunity to be a military Messiah. He came into Jerusalem on a donkey, in peace. He cried over the fact that the people of Jerusalem would choose war instead. He emphatically stated that his followers were not to use the sword and showed that the way to conquer enemies is not with the weapons of the world, but with the weapon of Calvary Love. Yes, following this way may cost some of us our lives, as it did Jesus, but in the end, there is Resurrection. In the end, love wins.

Jesus had a great deal to say about war. To the disciples and early Church, his message was clear enough for them to conclude that violence was simply not an option for the follower of Jesus Christ.

Lesson Learned

That the lesson Jesus taught his disciples was learned is beyond reasonable dispute. As with the command to love enemies, you can look through the Book of Acts from start to finish and discover that at no point did any follower of Jesus even consider using violence to solve a problem. In story after story, we see only a people of prayer following the way of Calvary Love.

Consider the words of Peter. The man who once trusted his sword to get him through his scrapes found a new reliance on the power of love and the hope of Resurrection. Writing to persecuted believers, he said:

‘Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because he raised Christ from the dead and gave him great glory. You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God’ (1 Peter 1:21-23).

‘Don’t repay evil for evil. Don’t retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. This is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing. For the Scriptures say, ‘If you want to enjoy life and see many happy days, keep your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn away from evil and do good. Search for peace, and work to maintain it. The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to

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their prayers. But the Lord turns his face against those who do evil' (1 Peter 3:9-12, emphasis added).

Peter had not only thrown away his sword, he became an advocate for nonresistance and peace.

Paul had a similar attitude. The man who once led goon squads (no doubt armed ones) on house to house raids to arrest Christians found a new way of fighting his battles. In one of his letters to the believers in Corinth he wrote:

'For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds' (2 Corinthians 10:3-4 NIV).

Paul not only says followers of Jesus don't fight with the weapons of the world; he goes as far as to say that the weapons they do fight with are more powerful than the weapons of the world! They have the power to do what worldly weapons cannot – destroy the strongholds of the enemy. Paul had certainly learned the lesson of the Cross.

Indeed, I would argue that the great 'More than Conquerors' passage so many Christians adore applies to the question of Christian participation in war as much as to anything else. In Romans, Paul was addressing, as so much of the New Testament does, Christians undergoing suffering for their faith. Such Christians were constantly exhorted to follow the way of the Cross, the way of peace and nonresistance. I am sure there were times when they wondered if what they were doing was sheer folly. Paul's words provided assurance that it was not:

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‘What then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son – but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither life nor death, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 8:31-39 NIV).

Do you grasp what Paul is saying? He is saying the Calvary Love of Christ is the most powerful force in the universe. Through it, Christ has saved us, and nothing can separate us from him. Even when our enemies turn violent, even when we are threatened with death for our steadfast adherence to the way of Jesus, even when the sword is used against us and our lives are taken, those who follow Christ are the conquerors.

I’m willing to bet my last dollar that if you asked Paul, ‘So Paul, should a Christian ever use the sword against his enemy?’ he would have said, ‘Not on your life. Hold fast to the way of Jesus Christ,

even in death. For that way, and that way alone, lies victory. That way, and that way alone, lies Jesus. Calvary love is the only way.’

Power in the Blood

The victorious way of the Cross is further highlighted in the Book of Revelation. Written at a time of severe persecution against the Church, Revelation makes clear again and again that those who follow the way of Christ, even when they die, emerge victorious. Here is how John described one of his visions:

‘... I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar,

‘Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!’

And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living beings. And they fell before the throne with their faces to the ground and worshipped God. They sang,

‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength belong to our God forever and ever! Amen.’

Then one of the twenty-four elders asked me, ‘who are these clothed in white? Where did they come from?’ And I said, ‘Sir, you are the one who knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are the ones who died in the great tribulation. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white (Revelation 7:9-17).

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Revelation is a heavy book, and there's a lot in there. But at the core of this passage is the vindication of the martyrs: those who gave their life for the sake of their faith in Christ. Those who would not waver or compromise what they believed to please the world. The ones who overcame are not the ones who fought back with the weapons of the world. They are the ones who fought back with the power of the Cross. They may have lost their lives, but they gained eternity. And so they stand around the throne and the Lamb, waving Palm branches (oh my, Palm branches – finally someone gets it!) singing that Salvation comes, not from would be Messiahs who lead armies and nations, promising freedom but bringing misery and death, but that Salvation comes – from where? – God and the Lamb.

Yes my friends, the world is filled with evil. There is an enemy who seeks to kill, steal and destroy (See, John 10:10). But there is a way to defeat him. There is a way for good to triumph over evil. And it is not the way of war. Writing of the enemy's defeat, John says:

'Then I heard a loud voice shouting across the heavens, 'It has come at last – salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down to earth – the one who accuses them before our God day and night. And they have defeated him by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony. And they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die' (Revelation 12:10-11).

To a world, including the nominally Christian corners of it, that insists that war is a necessary evil, that the only way to defeat evil and protect the good is to fight with the weapons of the world, the New Testament says, 'you're wrong.' There is a way to defeat evil and protect good, but it is not to be found in the weapons of the world.

It is found in the power of Calvary Love. Jesus followers conquer evil with the blood of the Lamb.

The Early Church

Skeptics who have made it this far have no doubt made all sorts of arguments to convince themselves that my reading of the New Testament witness to nonviolence is incorrect. That I am gerry-rigging a string of Bible passages in support of my argument. That I am simply seeing in the Scriptures something I want to see (let me assure you that is certainly not the case; my flesh is fighting against my heart and soul even as I write this chapter; I am as tempted to use the weapons of the world to solve the world's problems as anyone). But before you dismiss me out of hand, consider the witness of the early Church, which, during the first three centuries of Christian history, unequivocally stated that it was wrong for a follower of Jesus to participate in war.

Justin Martyr – Second Century AD

‘We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie or deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.’⁶

‘We who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons - our swords into plowshares, and our spears into implements of tillage.’⁷

⁶ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1.176 (*The First Apology of Justin Martyr*, Chapter XXXIX).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.254 (*Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter CX).

Irenaeus – Second Century AD

‘The new covenant which brings back peace, and the law which gives life, have gone forth over the whole earth, as the prophets said: ‘For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem; and He shall rebuke many people; and they will break down their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and they shall no longer learn to fight.’...the law of liberty, that is, the word of God, preached by the apostles (who went forth from Jerusalem) throughout the whole earth, caused such a change in the state of things, that these [nations] did form the swords and war lances into plowshares, and changed them into pruning-hooks for reaping the corn...that is, into instruments used for peaceful purposes, and that they are now unaccustomed to fighting, but when smitten, offer also the other cheek.’⁸

Clement of Alexandria – Late Second Century AD

‘For it is not in war, but in peace, that we are trained.’⁹

‘Let our seals be either a dove, a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind...If there is anyone fishing, he will remember the apostle, and the children drawn out of the water. We are not to draw an outline of...a sword or a bow, since we follow peace.’¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 1.512 (Irenaeus Against Heresies, Chapter XXXIV). ‘Swords into plowshares’ quote is from Isaiah 2:3-4.

⁹ Ibid., 2.234 (*The Instructor*, Book I, Chapter XII).

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.285-286 (*The Instructor*, Book III, Chapter XI).

Tertullian – Late Second Century AD

‘For what wars would we not be both fit, not eager, even with unequal forces, we who so willingly yield ourselves to the sword, if in our religion it were not counted better to be slain than to slay?’¹¹

‘The Christian does no harm even to his foe.’¹²

‘[God] puts His interdict on every sort of man-killing by that one summary precept: ‘Thou shalt not kill.’¹³

‘To begin with the real ground of the military crown, I think we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians... Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword?’¹⁴

‘Now inquiry is made about this point, whether a believer may turn himself unto military service, and whether the military may be admitted into the faith, even the rank and file, or each inferior grade, to whom there is no necessity for taking part in sacrifices or capital punishments. There is no agreement between the divine and human sacrament, the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters – God and Caesar. And yet Moses carried a rod and Aaron wore a buckle, and John (Baptist) is girt with leather, and Joshua son of Nun leads a line of march; and the People warred: if it pleases you to sport with the subject. But how will a Christian

¹¹ Ibid., 3.45 (*Apology*, Chapter XXXVII).

¹² Ibid., 3.51 (*Apology*, Chapter XLVI).

¹³ Ibid., 3.80 (*De Spectaculis*, Chapter II).

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.99 (*De Corona*, Chapter XI).

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man war, nay, how will he serve even in peace without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? For albeit soldiers had come unto John and received the formula for their rule; albeit, likewise, a centurion had believed. Still, the Lord, afterward, in disarming Peter, unbelt [disarmed] every soldier.’¹⁵

“‘And they will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;’ in other words, they shall change into pursuits of moderation and peace the dispositions of injurious minds, and hostile tongues, and all kinds of evil, and blasphemy. ‘Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,’ shall not stir up conflict. ‘Neither shall they learn war any more,’ that is, the provocation of hostilities; so that you here learn that Christ is promised not as powerful in war, but pursuing peace.’¹⁶

‘Is the laurel of triumph made of leaves, or of corpses? Is it adorned with ribbons, or with tombs? It is bedewed with ointments, or with the tears of wives and mothers?’¹⁷

Origen – Third Century AD

‘...we have come, agreeably, to the counsels of Jesus, to cut down our hostile and insolent, ‘wordy’ swords into

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.73 (*On Idolatry*, Chapter XIX). There are a couple of interesting things here. In using the term ‘sacrament’ Tertullian contrasts the oath taken by a military officer and the oath taken by one who chooses to follow Christ, which he considers wholly incompatible. (‘Sacramentum,’ in Latin, refers to a military oath). Note as well the way Tertullian anticipates the arguments of his adversaries to the effect that ‘people waged war in the Old Testament, so it must be OK for Christians to do so too.’ One hears similar arguments today. Tertullian says that such arguments are making ‘sport’ of a serious subject. For him, as with the other ante-Nicene Fathers, the disarming of Peter disarmed every Christian.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.339-340 (*Tertullian Against Marcion*, Chapter XXI).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.101 (*De Corona*, Chapter XII).

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plowshares, and to convert into pruning hooks the spears formerly employed in war. For we no longer take up ‘sword against nation,’ nor do we ‘learn war anymore,’ having become children of peace, for the sake of Jesus, who is our Leader, instead of those whom our Fathers followed’¹⁸

Cyprian – Third Century AD

‘[Christians] do not in turn assail their assailants, since it is not lawful for the innocent even to kill the guilty.’¹⁹

‘Let us look briefly into a few things out of many, that from a few the rest may be understood. Adultery, fraud, manslaughter, are mortal crimes. Let patience be strong and steadfast in the heart; and neither is the sanctified body and temple of God polluted by adultery, nor is the innocence dedicated to righteousness stained with the contagion of fraud; *nor, after the Eucharist carried in it, is the hand spotted with the sword and blood.*’²⁰

Lactantius – Early Fourth Century AD

‘Or why should [the just man] carry on war, and mix himself with the passions of others, when his mind is engaged in perpetual peace with men?’²¹

Arnobius – Early Fourth Century AD

‘Although you allege that those wars of which you speak were excited through hatred of our religion, it would not be difficult to prove that after the name of Christ was heard in the world,

¹⁸ Ibid., 4.558 (*Against Celsus*, Chapter XXXIII).

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.351 (*The Epistles of Cyprian*, Epistle LVI).

²⁰ Ibid., 5.488 (*The Treatises of Cyprian*, Treatise IX, Section 14).

²¹ Ibid., 7.153 (*The Divine Institutes*, Chapter XVIII).

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not only were they not increased, but they were in great measure diminished by the restraint of furious passions. For since we, a numerous band of men as we are, have learned from His teaching and His laws that evil ought not to be requited with evil, that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it, that we should rather shed our own blood than stain our hands and our conscience with that of another, an ungrateful world is now for a long period enjoying a benefit from Christ, inasmuch as by his means the rage of savage ferocity has been softened, and has begun to withhold hostile hands from the blood of a fellow creature. But if all without exception...would lend an ear for a little to His salutary and peaceful rules, and would not, in the pride and arrogance of enlightenment, trust to their own senses rather than to His admonitions, the whole world, having turned the use of steel into more peaceful occupations, would now be living in the most placid tranquility, and would unite in blessed harmony, maintaining inviolate the sanctity of treaties.²²

Such is the way the early Church Fathers addressed the matter of Christian participation in violence or war. Such is the way they understood the way and teaching of Jesus. It seems beyond question that if they could see those parts of the American Church today that have accepted war as part and parcel of living out the Christian faith, they would accuse it of deleting Jesus.

Christian Soldiers

One of the arguments made in support of Christian participation in war is that, in the New Testament, various soldiers encountered Christ and the early Church, and none were explicitly asked to leave the military. There are, first and foremost, the Roman soldiers who

²² Ibid., 6.415 (*Against the Heathen*, Book I, Chapter 6).

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conversed with John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordon (Luke 3:14). There is the Centurion of great faith who sent messengers to Jesus asking that his servant be healed (Luke 7:1-10). There is the Centurion at the Cross who called Jesus God's Son (Matthew 27:54). And then there is Cornelius, the God-fearing member of the Italian Regiment who believed and was baptized by Peter (Acts 10). Indeed, the writings of the Church Fathers suggests that there were soldiers in the Roman army who professed to be Christians.²³ Christians who believe war is acceptable often cite such references as mitigation, if not outright refutation, against the claim that the New Testament and early Church Fathers proscribe Christian participation in war.

In our quotes from the Church Fathers, we saw how Tertullian dealt with the soldiers on the banks of the Jordan, wherein he noted that whatever John may have told soldiers early on in the story of the Gospels, Jesus' command to drop the sword changed everything. This same logic may well be applied to the other Roman soldiers mentioned above. But there is even more to consider. First, apart from Cornelius, we do not know whether any of the Roman soldiers mentioned in the Bible came to faith in Christ, or, if they did, what they subsequently did with respect to their military commissions. It seems as likely as anything that, assuming they did become Christ followers (and I believe they did), that to whatever extent they could, they would have stopped working for Rome and moved in a new direction with their lives; that they would have, in the words from the *Disputation of Archelaus and Manes*, 'thrown off the belt of military service' once and for all.²⁴

²³ Ibid. 3.49 (Tertullian, *Apologetica*, Chapter XVII); 6.96 (Dionysius of Alexandria, *To Domitius and Didymus*). The reference in Dionysius is to soldiers who were martyred for their faith – was this because they refused to fight? Dionysius doesn't say, but as we will discuss a bit further along, this is a distinct probability.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.179 (Disputation, Chapter I).

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Of course, we can imagine that the Roman military may not have been so accommodating. But that only begs the question: if they were not able to leave the service voluntarily, what would they have done?

This is no doubt a question that arose in the life of the early Church. The soldiers mentioned by the Church Fathers may well have been in the same boat as the Biblical soldiers: perhaps they came to faith after they joined the military. What then, should they do, given the fact that to serve Rome was to serve Caesar, and they were now to proclaim only Jesus as Lord? Or that they now followed a King who told them to drop the very swords they were required to carry around their waists?

It surely was a conundrum. But there were some in the early Church willing to offer advice.

Hippolytus – Third Century AD

‘A soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if he is commanded, and to refuse to take an oath; if he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected [for membership in the church]. A military commander or civic magistrate who wears the purple must resign or be rejected. If a catechumen or believer seeks to become a soldier, they must be rejected, for they have despised God.’²⁵

These words are part of a set of guidelines concerning who can and cannot be accepted into church membership. They make

²⁵ *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*: Translated into English with Introduction and Notes by Burton Scott Eastman (Cambridge University Press, 1934). Digitized by Tom Schmidt, 2009, Public Domain. Available on the web at [www.earlychurchrevival.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/apostolictraditionofhippolytus1-full version.pdf](http://www.earlychurchrevival.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/apostolictraditionofhippolytus1-full%20version.pdf). Accessed July 31, 2018.

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allowance for someone who came to faith while a soldier, *but only if he vowed not to kill*. In the case of someone seeking baptism or membership who sought to become a soldier, Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* echoes the teaching of other Church Fathers to the tune that you could not serve in the army while following the Prince of Peace.

Tertullian – Third Century AD

Tertullian, who wrote passionately about the incompatibility of following Jesus and participating in war, also recognized the problem of a soldier who came to faith after his induction into the army:

‘Of course, if faith comes later, and finds any already preoccupied with military service, their case is different. For example, as in the instance of those whom John used to receive for baptism, and of those most faithful centurions, I mean the centurion whom Christ approves, and the centurion whom Peter instructs; yet, at the same time, when a man has become a believer, and faith has been sealed, there must be either an immediate abandonment of [military service], *which has been the course of many*; or else all sorts of quibbling will have to be resorted to in order to avoid offending God’ (emphasis added).²⁶

Tertullian too then, was sympathetic to those who came to faith while in the army. Yet his counsel, which corresponded with the ‘*choice of many*,’ remained that they should abandon their military occupation in order to follow Christ. To do anything else would leave the soldier turned Christian in the untenable position of having to refuse orders on an almost daily basis (what Tertullian refers to as ‘quibbling’). No doubt, attempting to resign one’s position in the Roman army would bring repercussions, perhaps even death, but in

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.100 (*De Corona*, Chapter XI).

the early Church, such choices between death and compromise were routine.

Soldier Stories from the Early Church

Maximillian of Thavaste lived in Northern Africa (present day Tebessa, Algeria) in the latter part of the third century. As the son of a Roman soldier, he was required to enlist in the army. He refused and was brought to trial.

Standing before the court, Maximillian explained, ‘I cannot serve. I cannot do evil. I am a soldier for my Lord. I cannot be a soldier of the world.’

The court sentenced Maximillian to death. In 295 AD, at the age of 21, he was beheaded. Forced to choose between compromising his faith in the nonviolent Prince of Peace and death, he chose the latter.²⁷

Marcellus was a Roman Centurion who suffered a similar fate just a few years later. Marcellus apparently tried to walk the difficult line of following Jesus while being a soldier, but eventually decided the callings were incompatible. One day, as his unit raucously celebrated the Emperor Diocletian’s birthday, Marcellus stood up, took off his cloak and announced that he could no longer serve both Christ and the emperor. He was immediately arrested. At his trial he testified that, it is ‘not right for a Christian, who serves the Lord Christ, to serve in the armies of the world.’ He was immediately beheaded.²⁸

²⁷ *The Passion of Maximillian of Thavaste.*

²⁸ Saint Marcellus: Military Martyr, Orthodox Peace Fellowship. www.incommunion.org/tag/st-marcellus. October 27, 2007. Accessed March 18, 2018.

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Church history tells of another such story, with a much happier ending, that occurred around the middle of the fourth century. Martin, like Maximillian, was the son of a Roman officer and had been required to join the army. As a teenager, he expressed his desire to become a Christian hermit but on the basis of information provided to the state by his father, was seized, placed in chains, and forced to take the military oath. Martin reluctantly fulfilled his soldierly duties for a time, but eventually sought to withdraw from the service. On the eve of a battle in Gaul, Martin told his commanding officer, ‘Hitherto I have served you as a soldier: allow me now to become a soldier to God...I am the soldier of Christ; it is not lawful for me to fight.’ The commanding officer was outraged and accused Martin of cowardice, to which Martin replied:

‘If this conduct of mine is ascribed to cowardice, and not to faith, I will take my stand unarmed before the line of battle tomorrow, and in the name of the Lord Jesus, protected by the sign of the cross, and not by shield and helmet, I will safely penetrate the ranks of the enemy.’

This request was denied, and Martin was put into prison. However, before the battle, the enemy surprisingly sent ambassadors and surrendered. Martin was eventually released from prison and went on to a long life of Christian service, eventually becoming the Bishop of Tours.²⁹

These stories, taken together with the writings of the early Church fathers, reveal the prevailing attitude toward Christian participation in war during the early Christian centuries. When confronted with the choice between military service and following the nonviolent

²⁹ ‘Life of Saint Martin, Sulpitius Severus,’ translated by Alexander Roberts. From *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series Volume 11, New York, 1894.

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way of Calvary Love, Christians chose the latter. For the early Church, you simply could not simultaneously be a soldier of Christ and a soldier of the world.

At the end of the day, no matter how you slice it, participation in war was simply not an option for the early Christians. For the first three centuries of Christian history, 'war' was a dirty word.

So what changed between then and now? The answer, or at least the beginning of it, is Constantine.

Conquer by This

Constantine was the first 'Christian Emperor' of the Roman Empire. In the early fourth century, Constantine was one of several Romans seeking control of the empire. The story is told that in 313 AD, on the eve of a great battle, Constantine was encamped near what was known as the Milvian Bridge. That evening, he had a vision of Christ's Cross emblazoned with the words, 'conquer by this.' Constantine recognized this as a sign from God, and immediately painted crosses on his army's shields. The following morning, he marched into battle under the banner of the cross. He won the battle at the Milvian Bridge and went on to gain control of the entire empire.

Constantine's rise to power was a blessing to Christians in many ways. As a 'Christian Emperor,' he issued the famous Edict of Milan which created legal protection for the Christian Church. To Christians who had previously known Rome as its enemy, this was to say the least an astonishing turn of events. After so many years of persecution, Constantine's rise to power seemed to be nothing less than a blessing from above.

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Scholars debate Constantine's motives. Some claim he was nothing more than a shrewd politician who took advantage of Christianity's rising position in Roman society and used it as a force to hold his new empire together; that he didn't really care a lick for Jesus. Others that he was a genuine convert who did his best to help the Church for Christ's sake. The truth is likely somewhere in between. My personal take on Constantine is that he desired to be a Christian, but either failed to understand what it meant to truly follow Jesus or otherwise could not bring himself to do so. Constantine claimed to be a Christian, but he was also a power politician who wielded the sword and waged war against his enemies whenever he deemed necessary. He claimed to follow the Prince of Peace but lived as one who worshipped Mars. He was a man caught between two worlds.

This was tragic on two levels. First, for Constantine himself, who never knew the joy of following Jesus all the way. Second for the Christian Church. One can hardly blame the once persecuted believers for adoring their new Emperor. But one cannot avoid the conclusion that, in doing so, they allowed themselves to be seduced by power. Overnight, the attitude of the Church toward power and war changed dramatically. While for three centuries Christians had shunned alliances with political power and refused to participate in war, suddenly, such alliances were deemed expedient, and the sword a reasonable means to retain their now privileged position in society.

This can be seen in the altered views of great Christian leaders. Even Athanasius of Alexandria, the Father of Orthodoxy who stood against the whole world in defense of the Divinity of Christ throughout the fourth century, wrote this about war:

‘It is not right to kill, but in war it is lawful and praiseworthy to destroy the enemy; accordingly not only are they who have

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distinguished themselves in the field worthy of great honors, but monuments are put up proclaiming their achievements. So that the same act is at one time and under some circumstances unlawful, while at others, and at the right time, it is lawful and permissible.³⁰

In other words, the Church went from saying ‘drop your sword means drop your sword in all circumstances,’ to, ‘well, it’s wrong for a Christian to kill, but if they do so in the service of the state, it’s praiseworthy.’

Thus began the long train of history in which the Church has aligned itself with the powers of the world and done things in the name of Jesus that would have made Constantine blush. The followers of the Prince of Peace went from being those who refused to take up the sword to the Crusaders who killed Muslims in the name of God. The imperialists who conquered technologically inferior cultures. The perpetrators of all sorts of savage violence under the banner of the cross.

Whenever I think of the vision Constantine experienced at the Milvian Bridge, I feel a wrenching in my heart for what might have been. Some believe that Constantine made up the story of his vision, but I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Something happened that day, and I tend to believe he did have a vision. But perhaps it was a vision meant to convey to him, on the eve of a battle that promised power like no worldly king ever had, that there was another way. A vision designed to teach him that the way to conquer the world was not by the sword, but by the Cross. Jesus was calling Constantine to drop his sword, renounce his dreams of becoming

³⁰ Athanasius, Letter 48 (354 AD).

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Emperor, and take up his cross as he joined the ranks of those who overcame the world by following the way of Calvary Love.

Can you imagine what might have happened had he led his forces to do that, instead of fighting the next morning? Sure, his rival may well have wiped out his army. But what a testimony that would have been! We would to this day be talking about the Christian warrior who dropped his sword on the eve of a battle to follow the Prince of Peace.

Instead, Constantine conquered by the might of the world, and in doing so, blurred the lines between the way of the Cross and the way of the sword. The Christian world has been confused about those lines ever since.

Grace Notes

I am quite certain that this chapter has caused no small degree of consternation in the hearts and minds of many. It is quite shocking to contemporary American Christian ears to hear that the early Christians rejected participation in war. Some of you may be feeling as if I am insulting Christians who have served (or serve) in the military. Others that I am being naïve about the reality of evil in the world. A graceful word or two is therefore in order.

First, I would point out that while the stories and writings of the early Church reveal the attitude that Christians should not participate in war, you will note that no one spoke harshly about the Christians who found themselves in the prickly spot of believing in Jesus while serving in the military. The Church Fathers didn't like it, they advised against it, and they rightly insisted that Christian soldiers act in accordance with their allegiance to Christ (even if that meant withdrawing from the army), but they surely understood the difficulty such people were in. They knew that for Christians in the

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military at the time of their conversion, refusing to carry the sword would bring about their own deaths, and they surely understood that the whole issue was a genuine struggle for many. Thus, while they remained faithful to their understanding of Jesus and the New Testament, they offered their advice graciously. I believe that if they were writing today, they would be no less gracious. They would understand that people who had come of age in a church influenced by 1700 years of Constantinian thinking would need time to process and reflect upon what, to them, would be an entirely new Christian ethic in terms of war.

Moreover, I believe they would also acknowledge, as I do, that many who serve in the military do so out of both a deep sense of honor and the desire to do the right thing. They believe they are doing something noble, and, in fact, who can deny that risking your life for the sake of others is both noble and profoundly courageous? People watch war movies and read war stories because such virtues are often found on the battlefield. There we see brotherhood, courage, sacrifice and nobility in ways we seldom find anywhere else.

But we also must remember that Jesus knew all that, and still called his followers to follow another way. He called them to join a brotherhood of believers who would demonstrate the virtues of courage, sacrifice, and nobility differently. So, for those who have served, serve, or are contemplating serving in the military, I pray that you will consider that. I pray that you will understand that in writing this chapter, I am in no way mocking your sense of honor. I am simply suggesting the possibility of another way to be brave. A way taught and modeled by Jesus. A way he called us all to follow.

Secondly, I offer a word of grace to those who, whether they have served in the military or not, struggle with the issue of the use of

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violence in the face of great evil. As I said earlier in this chapter, I am aware of that evil. When I think of the Rwandan Genocide, or the kidnapping of girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, or other brutal expressions of evil, I am put to the task to defend the position articulated by Jesus, the New Testament and the early Church Fathers. It is difficult to hear of such situations and not feel in your bones that something should be done to stop such evil, and that if force is the only thing that could do it, then such force must be resorted to in order to prevent the perpetration of a greater evil. If that is your position, I get it. Oh boy do I get it. There are certain circumstances that try the patience of even the most ardent of saints.

And so, while I remain bound by the teaching and example of Jesus (as a soldier in *his* army, I dare not question his orders), I do sometimes wonder if, when Jesus told us to drop our swords and love our enemies, he was really prohibiting the use of any level of force in every circumstance. For example, I am not entirely sure what Jesus would have said to a Galilean man whose daughter was about to be taken from him to work as a prostitute in an army camp to satisfy his back taxes. In such circumstances, it might be entirely acceptable to hit the soldier over the head to save one's daughter. Likewise, it may in certain circumstances become necessary for people to band together to engage in similar action for the sake of saving many sons and daughters. Indeed, there may be all sorts of targeted actions short of war that are permissible in order to protect the innocent. But even accepting this to be true, war is of an entirely different order. What Jesus might say to a man protecting his daughter, or to police officers trying to save a child from his or her abductor, is something to consider. But war is another matter altogether. Wars inevitably involve the wholesale killing of people (both soldiers and civilians) who have nothing to do with the initial grievance, and are almost always motivated, at least in part, by dark

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political and economic purposes. A direct and targeted use of force arising from pure motives to protect the innocent might be one thing. The formation and mobilization of armies, tanks, warplanes and missiles to destroy an enemy wholesale is quite another.

All of this is to say that I understand these questions to be hard. I am therefore not so naïve as to believe that every reader will immediately and completely renounce the use of all violence forever. But I do hope that what you have read here about Jesus, the New Testament and the early Church Fathers will, if not make you a pacifist, at least give you pause to reflect the next time our nation's leaders start waving flags, rattling sabers, and praying for the annihilation of our enemies. I hope you will at least agree that, at a minimum, the normative Christian ethic is against violence, and that the use of force should be considered, if at all, only in the most egregious of circumstances. It is one thing to struggle with the issue of war. It is quite another to champion it every time the drums begin to beat.

The Lord's Army

When I was a kid in Sunday School, one of the cool songs I learned was the classic, 'I'm in the Lord's Army.' Perhaps you know it. It goes like this:

'I may never march in the infantry
Ride in the Calvary
Shoot the artillery
I may never zoom o'er the enemy
But I'm in the Lord's army.'

I can remember learning the movements to that song. We would march, pretend to ride a horse, turn our index fingers and thumbs into guns and spread our arms wide like a plane coming in low to fire

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upon the troops on the ground. As a kid, I loved that kind of stuff. Weapons are powerful things, and the juxtaposition of powerful weapons with the power of God in the mind of a young boy is a great recruitment tool.

But now I see, like Paul, that when I was a child, I spoke and thought like one. Now that I am grown, it is time to put away childish things. It is time to understand the lyrics of that song for what they should mean, not what the post-Constantinian Church says they mean.

I am a soldier of Jesus Christ, and as such, it is not my aim to march in the infantry. Or to ride in the Calvary. And it most certainly is not my desire to shoot the artillery or zoom o'er the enemy. Why? Because I'm in the Lord's Army.

Back in chapter one we learned about the Feeding of the Five Thousand and how, on that day, when the people in their excitement tried to make Jesus their King by force, he quietly crept away and rejected the way of worldly power to get things done. There is another detail in the story that specifically speaks to the fact that the way of Christ is not the way of war.

Mark records that as Jesus broke the people up into groups to receive their loaves and fish, he did so in groups of fifty or one hundred (Mark 6:39). The significance of this was not lost on the crowd. To a crowd looking for a mighty warrior king, Jesus' action was clear: *he was forming divisions for his army*. No wonder they got excited: Jesus was raising an army! He was preparing to march on Jerusalem and establish the Kingly Reign of God on earth by force! Woo hoo!

The people, of course, were half right and half wrong. Yes, Jesus was raising an army. But its purpose was not military conquest. Its

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purpose – and in the context of the story it is so bloody obvious – was to *feed the hungry*. I don't see how people can possibly miss that. Right there, smack dab in the middle of the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, we have a picture of what life is supposed to be like in the army of Jesus Christ.

Those in Jesus' army have a mission. It is not to wield the sword, or fire guns, or drop bombs. It is to meet the needs of a hungry world. The needs are many. People need food, clothes, shelter, rescue, families, and of course salvation. The mission of Jesus' army is to meet those needs, to feed the hungers of the world, be they physical or spiritual.

And as Jesus' withdrawal from those who tried to make him lead a traditional army reveals, that mission is not to be carried out with the weapons of the world. Our battle is not a military one, it is a battle against powers, against demons, against spiritual and temporal forces that hold people in bondage. It is a battle fought, not with the weapons of the world, but with the weapons of love, prayer, compassion, caring, faith, and hope. It is a battle we fight whenever we take up our crosses and follow Jesus, transforming lives through the power of Calvary Love.

I am certain that some who read this chapter will think me naïve and unrealistic. They will repeat Benjamin Franklin's maxim that those who beat their swords into plowshares usually wind up plowing for those who didn't. They will continue to insist that the power of the sword is necessary to vanquish evil in the world.

But I remember that Jesus showed us another way and called us to walk with him in it. I remember his promise that those who do help make a better world.

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In the end, we all must choose which way to follow: the way of the sword or the way of Jesus. Make the choice you think is best. But as for me and my house, we choose Jesus.

Chapter Four

Allegiance

‘At the bedrock of our politics will be total allegiance to the United States of America.’

Donald Trump, Inaugural Address 2017

The year was 2002, and my wife and I were worshipping at the church we attended at the time. It was one of those Sunday mornings that made you feel a little sorry for the pastor. People listlessly entered the building, evidencing zero enthusiasm over the fact that they were about to worship God in the great company of angels, archangels, and the host of heaven. The service began, and the worship leader called on everyone to stand for the opening hymn. You could hear audible groans as people pushed themselves up from their seats. The singing itself sounded as if most folks were between one-quarter to half asleep. We had the feeling that the people must have stayed up a little too late the night before.

The service continued in this vein for some time. Each time the people were called to rise or sing, it was as if they had become possessed by demon sloths. When they weren't 'singing,' they either nodded off or whispered among themselves. And so it went, until the grand moment when the Choir rose to sing the anthem of the day.

Now mind you, this church's choir wasn't anything out of the ordinary, and people didn't get too worked up about their performance most Sundays. But on this day, the choir had elected to sing a medley of patriotic songs. This was not lost on the congregation, who, from the first note, underwent a remarkable transformation.

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Everyone sat up straight. Their eyes went wide. The energy level in the room soared. All conversation ceased. The congregation listened in rapt attention as the choir regaled them with such classics as *America the Beautiful*, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and *My Country 'Tis of Thee*. You could feel the energy pulsate in the room.

Then came the climactic moment. The choir broke into its rendition of *God Bless America*. The once lifeless congregation that had struggled to sing such classics as *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and *Fairest Lord Jesus* jumped from their seats like kangaroos. Without any prompting, they joined in the singing. The voices were terrific. The rafters rattled. People openly wept. My goodness, people even raised their arms over their heads (an almost Charismatic act that NEVER happened in this particular church). It was as if Jesus himself had walked into the room to usher in the renewal of all things.

Only it wasn't Jesus who inspired such devotion. It was America.

Now please don't get me wrong. I'm grateful to live in America. I'm grateful for the freedoms we enjoy, and I believe it is proper to show an appropriate measure of respect for one's country and leaders (See Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). But what my wife and I saw that morning in 2002 went beyond gratitude and respect. We saw a people who could not muster the slightest enthusiasm for the God who had sent His Son into the world to save them suddenly transported to flights of ecstasy as they worshipped at the altar of nationalism. We saw the country in which we lived claiming, and receiving, an allegiance that belonged to God alone. We saw people pledging allegiance, not to Jesus, but to the United States of America.

If you have attended churches in America for an extended period of time, chances are you have seen these things too. You have seen,

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and perhaps taken part, in the syncretistic worship of God and America. You have been witness to a church that is confused as to where her true allegiance lies.

In this, as with so much else, you have seen Christians deleting Jesus.

The Allegiance of Jesus

Jesus loved Israel as much as anyone of his time. Born in Galilee, he felt the yoke of Roman oppression equally with his fellow Jews and longed for his nation to be free. In this sense we might call him a patriot. Yet no earthly nation or kingdom won his allegiance. His allegiance belonged to God alone. The only kingdom that won his allegiance was the Kingdom of God.

Jesus and the Transnational Kingdom of God

This is seen clearly in his rejection of the Messianic expectations of his day. As we have seen, people expected the Messiah to free Israel Judas Maccabeus style: raise up an army, throw out the oppressors, and establish a national kingdom. Jesus, in rejecting that path, rejected nationalism, by which I refer to the granting of one's allegiance to a particular nation over others. This rejection of nationalism is clear, not only in the path he chose, but also in the words he spoke.

In Jesus' day, the people of Israel, in some ways rightfully, were proud of their heritage and identity as a people. But some had taken it to the extreme. They believed that because they were the descendants of Abraham, because they were Jewish, they stood above those who were not. Theirs was the kingdom that mattered. Other kingdoms mattered less. Their motto might have been, 'Israel First!'

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The Jesus movement challenged that motto. Before Jesus publicly stepped onto the scene, his cousin John was already telling people they needed to change their attitude. Standing on the shores of the Jordan, he saw Pharisees and Sadducees who had come to observe him perform baptisms. John knew they had not come as friends. He knew they had come to spy on him, to see if there was anything brewing along the Jordan that might challenge their power. He also knew that they carried within their hearts a nationalistic pride.

‘...You brood of snakes...Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham. That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones’ (Matthew 3:7(b)-9).

It was a signal that something new was coming. That soon, the children of Abraham would include more than just the people of Israel.

At the other end of Jesus’ life and ministry, after the Cross and Resurrection, we find Jesus himself telling his disciples that the time had come to go beyond the borders of Israel as they built up the Kingdom of God. He said:

‘Therefore, go and make disciples of *all the nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28:19, emphasis added).

Similarly, Luke records Jesus’ words in Acts:

‘...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me

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everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and *to the ends of the earth*' (Acts 1:8, emphasis added).

Jesus was calling for the creation of a people who would transcend borders. He was calling for a Transnational Kingdom – the Kingdom of God. It would be to this Kingdom, and its King, that his subjects would owe their sole allegiance.

God's Supreme Authority

The religious leaders of Israel (Pharisees and Sadducees) had been trying to trip Jesus up for a while, when one day, they came up with what they believed to be a fool proof plan. Several of them approached Jesus to ask him about the contentious issue of paying taxes to Rome. 'Hey Jesus, what do you think? Is it right for Jews to pay taxes to Caesar? (See, Matthew 22:15-17). They figured this was one of those darned if you do, darned if you don't questions. If Jesus said, 'yes,' the crowds would be mad at him. If he said no, the Romans would be. I'm sure they were quite proud of their plan.

Jesus saw straight through their ruse and asked them to show him a coin used to pay the tax. They forked one over, and he held it up, asking, 'whose image is on this coin?' They didn't even need to look. Roman coins were stamped with the image of the emperor. Indeed, they usually contained an inscription to the effect that Caesar was the 'Son of God.'¹

Stop there a moment. They contained an inscription to the effect that Caesar was the Son of God. In other words, Caesar was claiming an authority that was not his to claim. He was claiming divine

¹ J.W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton. 'Commentary on Mark 12:16.' *The Fourfold Gospel*. Standard Publishing Company, Cincinnati Ohio, 1914.

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prerogatives, commanding worship and allegiance from the people he ruled.

Back to the story. Jesus adeptly used this fact to foil the trap of the religious leaders. ‘OK then,’ Jesus said. ‘This coin belongs to Caesar. Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s’ (See, Matthew 22:18-21).

People typically interpret this story to say that Christians should pay taxes. I’m not saying that’s wrong, but it means a lot more than that. Jesus, in responding as he did, changed the entire direction of the conversation. His antagonists had sought to put him in a Catch-22, but Jesus foiled their scheme. Instead of answering a question about taxes, he changed the topic and answered a question about authority. He challenged the inscription on the coin. He told both his interlocutors and the crowd that was listening that Caesar may oversee the treasury, but he was most definitely not divine. His was not the supreme authority. Supreme authority belonged to God.

Jesus was effectively saying, ‘Let Caesar have his money. But don’t give him more than that. Don’t allow him to claim divine prerogatives. Don’t allow him to claim your worship and allegiance. Those belong to God alone.’

Jesus further demonstrated the supremacy of God’s authority and the allegiance owed to him on the day he stood before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The religious authorities had brought Jesus to Pilate in the hope that the governor would quickly execute Jesus. But Pilate didn’t want to make a decision that might inflame the crowds one way or the other, and so he equivocated. The long and the short of the matter is that as Jesus stood trial (if you can call it that) before Pilate, Pilate was having trouble deciding what to do with Jesus, and as far as he was concerned Jesus wasn’t helping.

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After going back and forth a bit about the nature of Jesus' Kingdom and truth, Pilate pulled Jesus aside and began to demand answers. As he did so, he asserted his authority:

“Why don't you talk to me?” Pilate demanded. Don't you realize that I have the power to release you or crucify you?”

Then Jesus said, ‘You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above.’ (John 18:8-11(a)).

Jesus stated clearly that Pilate was not the one in charge of the situation. God was. Jesus did not owe Pilate answers. He did not owe Pilate an easy way out. His allegiance was to the one with supreme authority. His allegiance was to God alone.

Of course, Pilate did have some authority. He had been allowed to execute that authority on the day of Jesus' death. God moves in mysterious ways, even through the acts of government officials. This is part of the reason why the Bible tells us to be respectful toward those in authority. But while we are to be respectful, Jesus did not teach, here or anywhere else, that his followers owe the government their allegiance.

One final story from the Gospels will hopefully punctuate this point. In the Sermon on the Mount, in the middle of tossing about so many challenging ideas, Jesus got to talking about money and possessions and spoke these famous words:

‘No man can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.’ (Matthew 7:24).

Jesus was talking about money (more on that in the next chapter) but the principle he articulated can be applied to any number of things. His point was simple: you cannot serve two masters. You

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cannot serve God and money. You cannot serve God and your job. You cannot serve God and the state. You cannot serve multiple gods. Anytime you try to pledge your allegiance to more than one master, you put yourself in an impossible situation. Eventually, the demands of your ‘masters’ will collide, and you will be forced to choose whom to serve. You will be forced to choose whom to obey, and whom to disregard.

It is imperative for followers of Jesus to get this: Jesus taught that our allegiance belongs to God alone. It does not belong to anyone or anything else – not even the United States of America.

The New Testament Witness

The balance of the New Testament reinforces Jesus’ position. It emphasizes the transnational nature of the Church, the nature of Christian citizenship, and the supreme authority of God.

A Transnational Church

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, the day when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus in power, enabling them to proclaim the Gospel in words understood by everyone in Jerusalem who had come to celebrate the Jewish festival. In attendance that day were:

‘...Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya and Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs’ (Acts 2:9-11(a)).

Peter addressed this multi-national crowd, and in the course of doing so made two statements relevant to the topic of allegiance. First, he quoted the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days...I will pour out

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my Spirit upon *all people*;' then, a bit later, he noted that '*everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved' (See, Acts 2:17 and 21, emphasis added). In other words, the gift of God's Spirit, and the invitation to join Christ's Church, were not reserved for Israel. They were for all nations.

We see this throughout the Book of Acts. The Gospel makes waves in Samaria (Acts 8). It is taken to Ethiopia (Acts 8). It is believed by Gentiles (Acts 10). It moves north to Antioch (Acts 11). Then Paul takes it all over the Greco-Roman world, eventually landing in Rome. He even had plans to go as far as Spain (See, Romans 15:24).

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he wrote: 'There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). In Colossians, he wrote:

'In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free.' Christ is all that matters, and he lives *in all of us*' (Colossians 3:11, emphasis added).

At the close of his letter to the Galatians, Paul makes a reference to the Church as the 'Israel of God' (See, Galatians 6:16). The Church, you see, is the *New Israel*.² The New Israel is not a nation. It is the Church. It is God's transnational, global community of Jesus followers. It doesn't matter where they come from. National origin or previous affiliation mean nothing in Christ's Church. In the Church, we are all one in Christ Jesus.

² This obviously has all sorts of implications for the way in which the Church is to view the modern state of Israel. For a thorough study of that topic, I recommend Gary Burge's terrific book, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to 'Holy Land' Theology* (Baker Academic, 2010).

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The point of all this is one that many American Christians need to learn. Jesus died for everyone. He died for his Church, which is made up of people from all over the world, from every nation, tribe and tongue (See, Revelation 7:9). He has no favorites in the family of nations. He doesn't love and bless the Christians of one nation any more or less than any other. God loves and desires to bless his people in all nations.

A church that sings, *God Bless America*, should probably consider changing its tune to *God Bless the World*.

Citizenship in Heaven

In the New Testament era, followers of Jesus saw themselves, not as citizens of nations, but citizens in the Kingdom of God. A Christian's citizenship and hope were not in the nation of her birth or residence, but in heaven:

'But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives' (Philippians 3:20(a)).

'Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, *who is your life*, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in his glory' (Colossians 3:1-4, emphasis added).

'All these people died still believing what God has promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth. Obviously, people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can

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call their own. If they had longed for the country they came from, they could have gone back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them' (Hebrew 11:13-16).

'Dear friends, I warn you as 'temporary residents and foreigners' to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls' (1 Peter 2:11).

'So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners, you are citizens with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family' (Ephesians 2:19).

The lesson is not that Christians be so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. The lesson is that as they live in the world, they must remember that they belong to something greater than what the world (at least in its present, pre-return of Jesus state) has to offer. They belong to something that transcends all earthly loyalties, national loyalties included. They belong to the transnational Kingdom of God, and they are to look forward to the day when God himself melds together earth and heaven as one, when all God's people, from every nation, tribe and tongue rejoice in the presence of their Creator:

'And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne saying, 'Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them' (Revelation 21:2-3).

That is our Kingdom. That is our 'nation.' That is the place we long for, the place we should sing about when we gather, the place

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where we will one day, and forever, show our true allegiance to the only one who deserves it.

God's Authority

The New Testament also bears witness to the Gospel truth that God is the supreme authority. When the kingdoms of the world come into conflict with the Kingdom of God, there can be no question as to which authority is supreme.

In Acts, the apostles were called before the Sanhedrin for their audacity in preaching the Gospel in Jerusalem. When commanded to stop, Peter, speaking for the whole Church, replied, 'we must obey God rather than human authority' (Acts 5:29).

Throughout Acts, we find Paul in chains before the secular authorities. Every time, he respects their sphere of authority, yet proclaims Christ to be his ultimate authority. Even as he invokes the protection of his Roman citizenship in support of his mission (See, Acts 25:11) he remains clear about the fact that his true citizenship is in the Kingdom of God. Indeed, if Paul valued his citizenship in any nation, that nation would have been Israel. Yet even his status as an Israeli he considered garbage compared with his identity in Christ (See, Philippians 3:5-8).³ Paul's sole allegiance was to Jesus Christ, whom he proclaimed as 'supreme over all creation' (See, Colossians 1:15). It would be Jesus, not the kings or nations of the world, before whom every knee would one day bow (See, Philippians 2:9-11).

³ The Greek word used for garbage is *skybola*. In Paul's time, there were no sanitary sewer systems such as we have today. People would collect their waste in buckets for disposal. The contents of the buckets were referred to as *skybola*. You might say that, for Paul, his national allegiance was like a warm bucket of human waste compared to his allegiance to Jesus Christ.

The Allure of the Beast

We noted in chapter one that the book of Revelation casts the empires of the world in a negative light. In chapter 13, John writes about a vision of two beasts, one from the sea and one from the earth. The first is a monstrous looking thing with multiple heads, horns, and crowns. The second is a lamb beast that speaks with a dragon's voice and forces people to worship the first beast. Many scholars believe these monsters refer to the political and religious arms of the Roman Empire.⁴ The political power of Rome was vested in the Emperor, the officials under him, and his armies. These wielded considerable power. But no less a part of the Roman powerhouse was the religious cult, which enforced worship of Caesar and the Roman pantheon of gods. Together, they demanded absolute allegiance from Rome's subjects.

I believe one of the points of John's vision to be that the fusion of empire and religion is an alluring thing. It can inspire feelings of awe and adoration. When Church and State band together, they form a seemingly unstoppable force able to protect and preserve. Together, they present a synergistic dynamism that commands our allegiance. When the government has religion *by* its side, it projects the illusion that God is *on* its side. Just think for a moment: how often do we see politicians in America invite great and well-known Christian leaders to stand beside them as they announce their plans and policies? There is a reason why they do that. It is a not so subtle way of suggesting that people should side with them, stand with them, and pledge their allegiance to them. For, after all, God is on their side.

⁴ See, e.g., William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: The Revelation of John*, Vol. II (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960), 86-98.

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But when Christians see such things, we must remember that the powers of this world are under the influence of the evil one. Even the best of them. A nation and its government may seem to be good. It may indeed sometimes do good things (I would not for a moment deny that America has done many good things). It may, with all the power it commands, seem to be the one thing capable of saving us from evil. And with all that going for it, it may entice us to give it our allegiance. But no matter how wonderful and salvific a nation and its government may seem, we need to remember: God alone is good. God alone can save. God alone deserves our allegiance.

When we forget this, we run the risk of worshipping the beast.

The Early Church

Once again, the early Christians understood all of this. They understood they were part of a Transnational Kingdom that transcended all other allegiances, and that supreme authority rested with God alone. Indeed, as some of the entries below show, they not only scorned the idea of giving allegiance to government - they avoided association with it.

Clement of Alexandria - Second Century

‘We have no country on earth.’⁵

Tertullian (Second Century)

‘Nor is there aught more entirely foreign to us than affairs of state. We acknowledge one all-embracing Commonwealth – the world.’⁶

⁵ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2.281. (Clement, *The Instructor*, Book III, Chapter VIII).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.45-3.46. (Tertullian, *Apology*, Chapter XXXVIII).

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‘You belong to Him, for you have been enrolled in the books of life...Never mind the state horses with their crown... you are a foreigner in this world, a citizen of Jerusalem, the city above. Our citizenship, the apostle says, is in heaven.’⁷

‘No doubt the apostle admonishes the Romans to be subject to all power, because there is no power but of God [Romans 13:1]...Thus he bids you be subject to the powers, not on an opportunity of avoiding martyrdom, but when he is making appeal in behalf of a good life...Then he goes on to show how he wishes you to be subject to the powers, bidding you pay ‘tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom,’ that is, the things which are Caesar’s to Caesar, and the things which are God’s back to God; but man is the property of God alone. Peter, no doubt, had likewise said that the king indeed must be honored [1 Peter 2:17], yet so that the king be honored only when he keeps to his own sphere, when he is far from assuming divine honors.’⁸

Origen - Third Century

‘It is a proper thing, when the written law is not opposed to the law of God, for the citizens not to abandon it under the pretext of foreign customs; but when the law of nature, that is, the law of God, commands what is opposed to the written law, observe whether reason will not tell us to bid a long farewell to the written code and to the desire of legislators, and to give ourselves up to the legislator God, and to choose a life agreeable to His word, although in doing so it may be

⁷ Ibid., 3.101 (Tertullian, *De Corona*, Chapter XII).

⁸ Ibid., 3.647-3.648. (Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, Chapter XIV).

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necessary to encounter dangers, and countless labors, and even death and dishonor.’⁹

‘Celsus also urges us to ‘take office in the government of the country, if that is required for the maintenance of the laws and the support of religion.’ But we recognize in each state the existence of another national organization, founded by the Word of God, and we exhort those who are mighty in word and of blameless life to rule over Churches...And it is not for the purpose of escaping public duties that Christians decline public offices, but that they may reserve themselves for a diviner and more necessary service in the church of God – for the salvation of men.’¹⁰

Lactantius - Early Fourth Century

‘For how can a man be just who injures, who hates, who despoils, who puts to death? And they who strive to be serviceable to their country do all these things.’¹¹

‘For if we all derive our origin from one man, whom God created, we are plainly of one blood...Likewise, if we are all inspired and animated by one God, what else are we but brothers.’¹²

‘When men command us to act in opposition to the law of God, and in opposition to justice, we should be deterred by no threats or punishments from preferring the command of God to the command of men.’¹³

⁹ Ibid., 4.560 (Origen, *Against Celsus*, Chapter XXXVIII).

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.668 (Chapter LXXV).

¹¹ Ibid., 7.169 (Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, Book VI, Chapter VI).

¹² Ibid., 7.172-173 (Chapter X).

¹³ Ibid., 7.182 (Chapter XII).

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While these quotes obviously address a myriad of situations and issues, the underlying theme is clear: Kingdom People are part of a global family of persons whose citizenship is in heaven. Our allegiance is to God and Christ, the supreme authority over all creation. We owe it to no other.

A Pinch of Incense

One of the dilemmas faced by many in the early Church was what to do over the issue of Caesar worship. In the days before Christianity, Julius Caesar had declared himself divine. When his successor and adopted son Augustus ascended to the throne, he appropriated to himself the title, 'The Son of God.' Caesar worship soon grew to be a part of the Roman religious system. By the late 90's AD, it had become mandatory.¹⁴

Beginning at that time, and throughout the ensuing centuries, Christians were under pressure to participate in such worship. In many cities, what was required was that everyone burn a pinch of incense at an altar as an acknowledgement that Caesar was Lord. It wasn't something people had to do every day. In fact, it seems to have been required in some places as little as once per year. All you had to do was come forward, burn the incense, and you were done. You could then go back to practicing whatever faith your little heart desired, as long as it wasn't too public.¹⁵ In such an environment, it would have been easy to rationalize: 'well, it's only once a year. What good would I be to Jesus if I were dead? I may as well burn the incense and pledge my allegiance to Caesar. What's the harm?'

¹⁴ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2001), 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

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But to the early Christians, at least those who were faithful, there was great harm. To give allegiance to anyone other than Jesus, even for a moment, was simply beyond the pale. To the early Christians, Jesus was Lord, and Caesar was not. End of story.

This attitude is perhaps best captured in the story of a man named Polycarp. Polycarp had been a student of John, the beloved disciple. Around 100 AD, he became Bishop of Smyrna. Under his leadership, the church there grew, despite the pressure to conform to the will of the dominant culture. In 155 AD, Polycarp was arrested and taken to the arena to stand trial for the crime of atheism, that is, failure to honor the Roman gods, and in particular Caesar. Standing before a hostile crowd, Polycarp prepared to meet his fate.

The Roman Proconsul offered Polycarp a way out: if he simply pledged allegiance to Caesar he would be allowed to live. Polycarp stood in that arena as tall as his 86 years allowed and informed the proconsul that his allegiance belonged to Christ alone. ‘For 86 years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong. How then can I deny the King who saved me?’¹⁶

He was threatened with wild beasts and fire, but he would not back down. Finally, he was tied to a stake. Firewood was gathered. Polycarp uttered his final prayer:

‘I thank thee [Lord] that thou has deemed me worthy of this day and hour, that I should have my portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Christ unto the Resurrection of eternal life both of the soul and the body...Among these may I be received this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice...I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, together with the eternal and

¹⁶ ‘The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna.’ Charles Hoole’s Translation, 1885, 9.3.

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heavenly Jesus Christ thy beloved Son, with whom to thee and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and forever. Amen.¹⁷

The fire was ignited, and Polycarp went to meet his Lord.

The story of Polycarp was cherished by early believers. In a time when Christians were asked to bow and kiss the emperor's ring, it served as a powerful reminder that Christians were never to pledge their allegiance to anyone or anything other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Duties of the Christian Citizen

None of this means that Christians should be completely dismissive of the leaders and governments under which they live. The Old Testament principle of, 'seeking the peace of the city' where one lives is still alive and well in the Christian era (See, Jeremiah 29:7). While the words of Jesus, the writings of the New Testament and the wisdom of the Church Fathers compels us to give our allegiance to God alone, this does not mean that we owe no obligation whatsoever to our leaders, governments and lands. There are, in fact, several duties every Christian owes to those under whose authority we live.

For one thing, it is incumbent upon us to show respect for our leaders and government. Peter wrote: 'Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Fear God, and respect the king' (1 Peter 2:17). The shocking thing is that the 'king' at the time was the Emperor Nero, a man who infamously used Christians as human torches to light his parties. Nonetheless, Christians were to show even such as Nero a measure of respect. Living in a land of freedom, we think we can be disrespectful to our leaders when we don't agree

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.2 and 14.3.

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with them. That is unbiblical. We are always free to disagree with our leaders, especially when they do evil, and it is right that we challenge them when they do wrong (I've done a lot of that in this book!), but we must always do so with civility and respect. It is never appropriate for a Christian to act disrespectfully or hatefully toward anyone. During the Obama Administration, I was often ashamed at the way some conservative Christians spoke about the President. Their words, emails, and social media posts were as hateful as anything I've ever seen or heard and have no place in legitimate Christian discourse. As much as I disagree with the actions and policies of President Trump, it would be equally egregious were I to speak of him the way many conservatives spoke of President Obama during his governance.

Secondly, we must pray for those in authority. Paul wrote to Timothy:

'I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.' (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

This only makes sense. It behooves us to remember that God loves everyone, including our leaders, and he desires for them to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus and his way. We should pray that our leaders not only embrace Jesus but govern in a manner consistent with his peace and justice. This will make things better for us, for them, and for the whole world. Some people like to berate our leaders, others to collude with them; but there is a third option: to pray for our leaders, that they may govern in such a manner that leaves us free to live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness

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and dignity. My son and daughter are quite good at reminding me to pray this way. Yes, even for Donald Trump.

Third, we are to obey the law of our government insofar as it does not conflict with the law of God. When Jesus said, ‘give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s,’ he did in part mean that we should obey the law and pay our taxes. Paul, in Romans, told believers in Rome to do the same (See Romans 13:1-7). He understood that civil authority has been granted to us by God because, in a fallen world, we are better off with it than without it. And so it is our general duty to obey the law and work with the authorities, not against them. Of course, there will be times when the law asks us to do things that conflict with the way of Jesus, and when that happens, it is always our duty to obey God and not man (See Acts 5:29). But generally speaking, we owe our leaders and our government the duty of obedience.

It is possible to be respectful and even thankful for the blessings of government without giving it our allegiance. We just have to follow the way marked for us by Jesus, the New Testament writers and the early Church Fathers. In the scriptures and in their writings, they have shown us the way.

Taking Things Too Far

During my final year of seminary, I was asked by one of my professors to lead a group of students on a learning excursion to Washington D.C. We were to visit numerous Christian agencies that were headquartered there to learn about their ministries.

It was an interesting trip. The organizations we visited held to various approaches regarding how Christians should interact with government. Some simply stood at the crossroads and offered a

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public witness to a different way of doing things, others got down and dirty in the world of lobbying and politicking. But I will never forget the visit we made to one of the organizations that tended toward the latter. They were one of the largest Christian lobbying groups in America. Their influence stretched far and wide throughout the country (still does), and its leaders were often seen (and still are) in the company of Presidents, Senators, Governors, and Representatives, as well as on cable news programs offering their take on the issues of the day. Most everyone who goes to Church in America would know them if I were to mention their names.

Their office was majestic. As we entered the lobby, we saw American flags, eagles, military symbols, and patriotic emblems galore. As we waited for someone to take us back into the inner chambers of this hallowed society, I became increasingly uneasy. Finally someone came and gave us a tour of the entire building. As we traversed the hallways and looked in all the rooms, I searched everywhere for the one symbol I had seen in the offices of every other Christian organization we visited. I saw plenty of flags, eagles, and military emblems. But I never saw the one item for which I was searching.

I never saw a cross.

It is one thing to show respect for one's nation. It is quite another to idolize it. It is one thing for a Christian to seek the peace of the city in which he finds himself, but it is quite another to identify with that city so fervently that you give to it a loyalty, fealty and obeisance that is due to God alone. It is one thing to be thankful for one's country and its freedoms. It is quite another to adore it so passionately that you display its symbols while forgetting all about the cross.

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I have been in many churches in the course of my life, and I have witnessed what happens when Christians allow their allegiance to be split. I've seen where a dual loyalty leads.

It leads to church services like the one described at the beginning of this chapter.

It leads to a Christian organization that forgets to put up a cross.

It leads to people cheering for a nation's military success while ignoring the commands of the Prince of Peace.

It leads to a state of affairs in which allegiance to flag and nation eventually supplants allegiance to Christ; to a situation where Jesus is, for all practical purposes, deleted.

It is time again to remember the attitude of the early Christians. It is time again to remember Jesus' words to the effect that a person cannot serve two masters. For when you do, you will love one and hate the other, or, at the very least, obey one and ignore the other.

Not too far from my home in Collingswood, NJ, in the northern part of Philadelphia, there is a community of Christians known as *The Simple Way*. There, they recite something called *A Litany of Resistance*, the latter part of which goes like this:

One: Today we pledge our ultimate allegiance to the kingdom of God.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To a peace that is not like Rome's.

All: We pledge allegiance.

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One: To the gospel of enemy-love.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the kingdom of the poor and broken.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To a king who loves his enemies so much he died for them.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the least of these, with whom Christ dwells.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the transnational church that transcends the artificial borders of nations.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the refugee of Nazareth.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the homeless rabbi who had no place to lay his head.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the cross rather than the sword.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the banner of love above any flag.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the one who rules with a towel rather than an iron fist.

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All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the one who rides a donkey rather than a war horse.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the revolution that sets both oppressed and oppressors free.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the way that leads to life.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: To the slaughtered Lamb.

All: We pledge allegiance.

One: And together we proclaim his praises, from the margins of empire to the centers of wealth and power.

All: Long live the slaughtered Lamb.

One: Long live the slaughtered Lamb.

All: Long live the slaughtered Lamb.¹⁸

Amen. That is my pledge of allegiance.

¹⁸ Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI: 2009), 353-355 (Complied with the help of James Loney and Brian Walsh).

Chapter Five

Wealth

‘Then he said to them, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions’ – Luke 12:15 (NIV)

In the short story *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* Leo Tolstoy told the tale of Pahom the Peasant, who boasted that if he only had enough land, he would not fear the devil himself. Little did Pahom know that Satan was listening. Always up for a challenge, Old Scratch quickly arranged for Pahom to acquire all the land he would ever need.

Pahom soon came into possession of forty acres of land. He worked it and began to make a good living, but considered it insufficient to provide for his future security. He therefore used his profits to buy one-hundred and twenty-five acres, which increased his riches considerably, but not to his satisfaction. It was about that time that he learned of a golden opportunity in a faraway land where he could purchase all the land he would ever need from a local tribe for the sum of 1000 rubles (about \$32). The deal was that you could have as much land as you could circumnavigate in a single day. As long as you made it back to your starting point by sundown, the land would be yours.

Pahom thought this a great deal, and quickly took the tribe up on its offer. He paid the 1000 rubles (which were, of course, nonrefundable) and headed out to walk around as much land as he could in a single day. You can probably guess what happened.

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Pahom overreached. He walked so far out that by the time he began his journey back, the day was well past half done. Realizing his mistake, Pahom raced back to beat the setting sun. His heart beat like a hammer, his lungs pumped like a bellows, and he soon grew concerned that if he didn't stop, his race could probably kill him. Even so, his lust for the land caused him to press on, until finally, with a final gasp, just before the sun slipped below the horizon, he made it back to his starting point, where he collapsed, as dead as a doornail.

The tribe then dutifully placed Pahom's body in a grave just long enough for his body. Six feet, from head to heels, was all the land that Pahom needed.¹

John D. Rockefeller, the oil tycoon, was once asked how much money he needed. His answer was, 'just a little bit more.' The pity is that this answer, this relentless pursuit of more, this scarcity mentality that insists that you never have quite enough, seems to drive not only oil tycoons and fictional Russian peasants, but the whole world.

It even drives those who profess to follow Jesus.

It has been my experience that there is little difference between Christians and non-Christians when it comes to the relentless pursuit of more; the idea that all we need is a little more money, a little more stuff, to be happy and secure. Christians may be more willing than non-Christians to give lip service to the idea that this isn't true, but in practice, we are just as materialistic, just as self-indulgent, just as fearful for our financial security as our non-Christian neighbors. We worry about money as much as anyone, we store up treasures in

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* (1886).

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excess of what is reasonably necessary for future contingencies, we neglect the needs of those around us for fear that if we met them, we wouldn't have enough for ourselves, and we tend to believe that we simply must hold on to what we have, because no one else (not even God) can be trusted to provide for us.

Many Christians today seem to believe a gospel that is no gospel at all: the gospel of the American Dream, which proclaims in a thousand ways, 'whoever dies with the most stuff wins!' You can understand why people believe this. Our consumer culture is filled with a thousand voices calling us to embrace such a view of life. Just go on the internet for a moment, click on an item or two in an online store (without buying them), and watch how ads for those very items (and similar ones) start popping up on your social media pages, in emails, and in every search you run. There is a vast conspiracy going on to compel us to relentlessly pursue more, to spend our money on making life a little better for ourselves, to satisfy our longings and desires with materialistic comforts. The attitude that we will be happy with just a little bit more is all pervasive in our culture. And as ridiculous as Christians ought to know this to be, we keep falling for it.

The result is a world where financially successful Christians build big houses, drive fancy cars, and fill their homes with the latest gadgets, gizmos and home decorations, while billions live in bone crunching poverty and billions more die without ever hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yet we seldom stop to think: is this the way Jesus would have us live?

The pervasive scarcity mentality in the American Church combined with the bought into lie that things buy happiness is killing

the witness of the Church. When it comes to using wealth in accordance with Kingdom principles, many American Christians are guilty of deleting Jesus.

The Example of Jesus

No one could ever accuse Jesus of being materialistic or self-indulgent. For starters, he was the guy who gave up heaven to become the son of poor parents. During his ministry years, he did not even have a place to call home. In one famous exchange, when one of the religious teachers of Israel offered to follow Jesus anywhere, Jesus warned him off by saying, ‘Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head’ (Matthew 8:20). Not only did Jesus not have a place to lay his head, but he seemed to imply that those who followed him should expect pretty much the same.

Jesus did have money in the course of his ministry. He worked with his hands and enjoyed the financial support of generous patrons (See, Mark 6:3; Luke 8:1-3). But rather than accumulate these riches for himself, Jesus shared them with others. He practiced communal living and shared a common purse with his disciples (See, John 12:6). When Judas, who kept the common purse for the disciples (and stole from it!) left the upper room on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus’ other disciples assumed he had left to either buy something for the feast or give something to the poor (See, John 13:29). That the disciples considered the latter possibility suggests that the practice of giving to the poor out of their communal funds was something of a common practice. Jesus did not use his money to provide himself with a home, or a nice camel, or the latest tunics from Thyatira.² He

² Thyatira was the home of Lydia, an early believer who was at the time of her conversion a maker of expensive purple cloth (See, Acts 16:14-15).

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used it to support and train his disciples for ministry and to help the poor.

Many Christians today are terrified at the thought of living this way. How would they pay their bills? How would they save for retirement? How would they become financially secure? Where would their next meal come from? People asked those questions in Jesus' day too. But Jesus wasn't concerned about them. He knew his Father would take care of him:

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:25-34 NIV).

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Jesus was free to use his money for Kingdom purposes because he knew his Father had his back, and he encouraged his followers to live with the same attitude. He encouraged them to live as little children trusting in their heavenly Father's provision.

Jesus and the Dangers of Wealth

Through teaching, the telling of parables and encounters with the rich, Jesus warned people of the dangers of wealth. Jesus knew quite well that the relentless pursuit of more was a dead-end run, made the heart grow cold, turned people into slaves, and prevented them from experiencing eternal life.

The Rich Fool

Before becoming a pastor, I spent several years as an attorney, as both a prosecutor and in private practice. It was in the latter role that I learned that nothing brings out greed as well as a good old-fashioned estate contest. Such legal disputes turn brother against brother, often tearing entire families apart permanently.

Jesus was once approached by a man engaged in such a contest. The man demanded that Jesus order his brother to split their father's estate. Seeing the greed behind the request, Jesus cautioned the man to be on guard against every type of greed, admonishing him that life wasn't about owning stuff. Seeing that the man still wasn't getting it, he told a story about a farmer whose land produced a bumper crop, one that would bring in a great price at market. Looking around his property, he realized his barns weren't big enough to hold all the blessings he had been given, and wondered what he should do with them (some of the poorer people in Jesus' audience would have had no trouble making some suggestions). After thinking about it for a while, he said to himself, 'Self, I know what to do! I will build even bigger barns and save everything for the future! That way, I'll have

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enough for the rest of my life. I'll never have to worry about scarcity again! I'll be able to sit back and take it easy, I can look forward to a life of eating, drinking and merriment! Woo Hoo - I've finally arrived!' But that very night, as the farmer basked in his glorious plan, God showed up. God told him that he was a fool; that he would die that very night, and then where would his blessings go? (See, Luke 12:15-20).

Jesus ended his parable with these words: 'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God (Luke 12:21 NIV).

Just in case you don't get the point (and my experience is that many American Christians with money don't), let me try my own modern version of the parable on you:

There was once a man who had a successful career in the (you fill in the blank) industry. He had a six-figure salary and managed, over the years, to store up quite a bundle. Realizing he had more money than he needed, he began to wonder what he should do with it all. Perhaps he could increase his tithe to the church? After all, he barely felt the loss of 10% of his six-figure salary each year. Or maybe he could open a shelter for the poor in town, or send money to a Christian agency providing fresh water to people in Africa, or one that rescued children from human trafficking, or purchased Bibles for the underground church in China. All these suggestions, and a hundred more, had been made in the church he had attended each Sunday for the past 20 years. Perhaps he could do something along those lines.

But then another thought came. Sure, he had been blessed with riches, but what if something happened that took a significant

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portion away? What if the stock market crashed like it did in 2008? What if he lost his job? What if he were robbed? Who would care for him then? A parade of a thousand horrors danced before his mind. And so, he had an idea. Instead of giving his money away for Kingdom purposes, something to which he was already giving considerably (10% of six figures was no small number you know!) he would save it all for a rainy day to ensure his personal financial security. He would invest it in low risk securities and thus ensure financial stability for the rest of his life, a comfortable retirement, the ability to travel, and the building of a vacation home near the beach for the weekends.

So that is what he did. He saw a financial advisor and had it all set up. As he left his advisor's office, he said to himself, 'Self, you did it. You'll never have to worry again. Now you can eat, drink and be merry. You can enjoy a comfortable, carefree retirement, travel whenever and wherever you want, and spend weekends at the beach house.'

Stepping into his Lexus, he noticed that the floor mats looked a little dingy. Maybe it was time to get a new car. He could afford it. Maybe a BMW this time.

But as he pulled into the luxury auto dealer's lot, he heard God speak: 'You fool. You will die this very night, knowing that you blew the opportunity to do something worthwhile with the blessings I gave you.'

Thus it will be for anyone who stores up wealth for themselves but is not rich toward the things and people that matter to God.

Telling stories like that in church can get a pastor fired. Writing them can too. So I really hope you get the point. If God has blessed

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you with abundance, don't be greedy. Don't store up treasure for yourself. Use it the way God wants you to use it. Or else.

But wait, it gets worse.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Jesus told another story about a different rich man (See, Luke 16:19-31). This guy lived sumptuously every day, enjoying the finest foods and wearing the latest fashions. Outside his gate (he literally had a gate around his home to keep out the riff raff!) was a poor beggar named Lazarus. Lazarus was a sick man, covered with sores from head to foot. Just how he got them, Jesus didn't say, presumably because it didn't matter.

Poor Lazarus lay outside that gate begging for even the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. But the only ones who took any pity on him were some dogs who came by from time to time to lick his sores. The rich man, who undoubtedly knew he was there, never gave him a second thought.

Eventually, Lazarus died. Which would make this a real bummer of a story were it not for the fact that this is the point in the tale where his life turned around. For when he died, he was taken to be with Abraham, where he received the eternal comfort, blessings, and vindication of heaven.

The rich man died soon thereafter.

This is where things get worse. Remember the rich fool? Well, here we find out what happens to rich fools who live self-indulgently while people suffer outside their gates.

The rich man was buried, and his soul went to the place where such as he deserves to go. There, in torment and in flames, he could

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see from a distance Lazarus, the beggar he ignored all those years, being comforted by Abraham in heaven. He cried out to Abraham for help, asking him to send Lazarus over to cool him off with a little water, for he was in agony in the flames. But Abraham only answered:

‘...Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here, being comforted, and you are in anguish. And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over to us from there’ (Luke 16:25-26).

It amazes me that so many rich Christians have heard this parable yet continue to live according to the gospel of the American Dream. They can’t possibly believe that the Bible is really God’s word and truth. For if they did, they would understand what Jesus was saying.

He was saying that when the rich relentlessly pursue more, when they fail to be rich toward God and the things and people that matter to God, they deserve hell.³

Two Masters

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, ‘no one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money’ (Matthew 6:24).

³ This is not to say all rich people go to hell. Just that they, like everyone else, deserve it. Grace is a wonderful thing. For more about God’s grace, see generally, *Grace at the Threshold: Reflections on Salvation, Hope and the Love of God*, my first book, if you want to know more.

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There is perhaps no better illustration of this principle than the story of the rich young ruler (See, Luke 18:18-23; Mark 10:17-22; Matthew 19:16-22)).

His story begins with a group of kids (See Luke 18:15-17; Mark 19:13-16; Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus was teaching before a substantial crowd, when suddenly parents began bringing their children to him so that he could bless them (Gee whiz, can you imagine? What parent *wouldn't* come forward to have Jesus bless their kid?). The next thing everyone knew, Jesus and the kids were having a rollicking good time, which caused the disciples, grownups that they were, no small amount of consternation. They didn't think that they or any of the other grownups present should have had to share Jesus with all those little germ factories. For their part, the germ factories themselves had no trouble sharing Jesus with the grownups; it was the grownups who had a problem sharing. They wanted Jesus all to themselves.

And so, the disciples spoke sternly to the little whippersnappers. 'Can't you see you're interfering with the important things he has to tell the adults? Don't you know that children are supposed to be seen and not heard?' (For you church-going Christians, any resemblance between the disciples and certain curmudgeons in your church is surely not coincidental). They were simply aghast at the thought of having to share the attentions of Jesus with a noisy group of children.

Jesus became indignant at such words. He rebuked his disciples, explaining that the Kingdom of God belonged to these kids. In fact, he went on to tell, unless an adult became like one of the little tykes, he or she would never enter the Kingdom of God.

There are no doubt layers of meaning there, but none more important than the idea that his disciples, and the other offended

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adults who didn't want to share Jesus, needed to stop being selfish and start acting more like the kids who were willing to share him.

Jesus then went back to playing with the kids, taking them in his arms, bouncing them on his knee, and maybe even tossing one or two of them in the air (and catching them of course).

That's when the real interruption happened.

A rich man came along, pushing his way through the crowd, and just as Jesus was about to put one of the kids on his shoulders and run around the water fountain (yes, I know I'm taking some imaginative liberties here), this man interrupted Jesus with his all-important question.

'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?' (Matthew 19:16 NIV).

Right away, Jesus could see that this dude had an 'I' problem. He didn't care about the kids. He didn't care about the other adults. His one concern was himself. I mean, seriously, not only had he pushed his way through the crowd and the kids, but he asked his question as if he were the only one present. He could have at least said, 'Jesus, I see you're having fun and all, but what we really want to know, all of us, is how *we* can inherit eternal life?' But no, this is all about him. He might as well have said, 'Never mind the kids Jesus, what about me?'

This was definitely a guy who didn't know how to share.

In fact, as the story continues, it becomes clear that he really loved his money. He saw it as a sign of God's favor, and had no intentions of giving it up.

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The rich man may have enjoyed living this way, but Jesus saw him for what he was - a slave. He was a slave to wealth and possessions, the acquisition of which was a master whose influence kept him from truly experiencing God. So, with a heart full of love, Jesus offered him a new master.

‘Let it all go,’ he said. ‘Give your wealth and possessions away. Share what you have with the poor, then come and follow me.’ Jesus wasn’t asking for much of anything really. Sure, the rich man would lose his money and possessions, but he would gain so much more. Jesus was offering him a chance to be free. He was offering him the opportunity to come rest in the Father’s love. He was offering him a chance to serve God rather than money.

But alas, the rich man couldn’t do it. You have to feel at least a little sorry for him. It’s hard for a person to turn on a dime and reverse the course of their entire life. The rich man really enjoyed being rich. Now Jesus wanted him to share it? And with the poor no less? Come on, maybe as a kid he could have done something like that, but after so many years of enjoying wealth, well, the idea of sharing, let alone sharing everything, seemed more than a little crazy. And so, although I have always harbored a hope that this rich man one day changed his mind, the story ends with him rejecting Jesus’ offer, and walking away sad, because he just couldn’t bring himself to give up his money and possessions. He just couldn’t bring himself to serve a new master.

The story of the rich young ruler is a sad one that illustrates well the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Here was a man who loved money - whose master was money - but who also wanted to serve God. But when called upon to choose between them, God lost.

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Jesus was right, you cannot serve two masters. For you will ultimately have to choose one over the other. The danger, of course, is that once you become devoted to the wrong one, it becomes extremely difficult to switch your allegiance. Jesus said as much as the rich young man skulked away that day:

‘...How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!’ (Luke 18:24).

There you have it: when a person makes his or her life about money and possessions, it is very difficult for them to experience God. It is simply impossible to simultaneously serve both God and money.

Jesus and the Proper Use of Money

Okay, so it’s foolish and dangerous to store up wealth for yourself and fail to be rich toward God. What then did Jesus say we should do with our money?

Treasure in Heaven

In the same section of the Sermon on the Mount wherein Jesus told us not worry about money and warned against trying to serve two masters, he also said:

‘Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will be also’ (Matthew 6:19-21).

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With such words, Jesus lays out his blueprint for the proper use of property and possessions.

Investors always try to predict the future. Sometimes they get it right, sometimes they don't. But imagine if they could see the future. Imagine if an investor saw the future of two companies, one that was destined for bankruptcy, the other to grow exponentially, providing ever-increasing returns on investments. It would be a no brainer as to which of the two companies she should choose for her investments.

In Matthew 6, Jesus presents this otherwise ridiculous scenario to his disciples. Jesus knows the future because he's been there. He came from eternity. He knows the past, present and future all belong to God. He knows that those who follow him receive the blessings of eternity. He knows that one day, when all is said and done, he is going to make all things new and fill the earth with the glory of eternity. He also knows that when human beings enter the life of eternity, the material things we accumulate in life don't tag along with us.

And so he counsels: 'don't invest money in things that aren't going to last! Invest in the things that will last forever!

It is amazing how this advice is so routinely ignored. Every day, rich Christians turn down opportunities to make eternal investments in order to invest in the stuff of this world. They amass huge stock portfolios, buy fancy clothes, and otherwise live out the foolish philosophy outlined in the parable of the rich fool.

But you know what? No one has ever seen a hearse pulling a moving truck. As the old cliché goes, you can't take it with you. By the way some Christians live, you would swear they think otherwise. And so, many who claim to follow Jesus keep investing in temporal

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things instead of eternal things. Things that, when all is said and done, won't mean a lick of spit.

Jesus suggests we do otherwise, that we 'store up treasure in heaven.' What does he mean by that? Well, he doesn't mean that if you use your money for good things, you will wind up with the greatest mansion on a prime piece of heavenly real estate. He means that we should use our money for Kingdom purposes and causes. We should invest in eternal, rather than temporal things. We should use what we have to share the love of God in Christ. We should use what we have to tell others about Jesus, bring hope to the hopeless, comfort to the lonely, food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, and to take a hundred other good, Kingdom-oriented actions so that others might come to know Jesus and share in the wonders of eternal life.

When we do this we can look forward to the day when Jesus shows us our great reward: a throng of friends and family who will participate in the wonders of the age to come because we invested in the Kingdom - because we invested in sharing the Good News and Love of Jesus Christ.

That, Jesus says, is the way to use your money.

The Parable of the Talents

Jesus once told a story about a man who went on a long trip, entrusting his wealth to three of his servants. He gave one five bags of silver, a second two bags, and a third one bag.⁴ He then left on his trip.

⁴ In the Greek text, the man gives five talents, two talents and one talent, a talent being about 80 pounds. Hence the parable is commonly known as the 'parable of the talents.'

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While the man was away, the first servant took the money and invested it wisely, earning an additional five bags of silver. The second also invested wisely, earning an additional two. But the third servant, concerned that he might lose what he had been given, hoarded his one bag in a hole to keep it safe.

After a while, the man returned and asked his servants to provide an accounting. The first two, who had done the best with what they had been given, each received a hearty ‘Well done!’ They were lauded for their faithfulness and given greater responsibilities commensurate with their service.

But when the man heard what the third servant had done, he was furious. He could not understand why his servant had hoarded what had been entrusted to him. Why hadn’t he at least put it in the bank to receive interest? The man took the bag from the third servant, gave it to the first one, and then ordered the third to be cast into the darkness.

You can read the full account of this parable in Matthew 25:14-30. It is a great story with many lessons and many applications, one of which pertains to the way we use our money for God. The master of the servants represents God, the one who entrusts each of us with money. He entrusts us with other things too, like resources and abilities. Then he watches to see what we will do with them. God’s desire is not that we keep our talents hidden, or that we hoard our money to keep it safe. His desire is that we use them, that we even risk them, for the sake of His Kingdom. When we do so, he rewards us by giving us additional responsibilities and opportunities to advance his Kingdom. When we fail to do so, well, just look at what happened to the third servant.

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The parable teaches that if you want to hear at the end of your days the glorious words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!’ it will not do to play it safe with the wealth and possessions entrusted to you. It will not do to hoard things and keep them to yourself. You need to take risks with them. You need to use them for causes close to God’s heart. You need to invest them in ways that advance the Kingdom.

The Widow’s Mite

‘Alright,’ you may ask, ‘but how much does Jesus expect us to give anyway? I mean, sure, he asked the rich young ruler to give away everything, but he doesn’t ask everyone to do that, does he? How much are we supposed to give?’

In Luke 21:1-4, we read of a seemingly small event that happened one day as Jesus was people watching at the Temple. Wealthy people were coming in to the Temple and putting their money in the offering box. He noticed two things about them: first that they were rich; and second, that while they were quite adept at making a show of giving a lot, they were really only giving a small percentage of what they had.

Then he saw a poor widow come in. She went up to the box, rather sheepishly, I’d imagine, and dropped in two small coins - the smallest denominations of currency in circulation (think a couple of pennies). It was all the money she had in the world.

Jesus, amazed at the widow’s generosity, turned to his disciples and told them that this woman had given more than any of the others, for they had given only a small part of their abundance, but she had given all she had.

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As I have argued throughout this book, Christians can be pretty good at explaining Jesus' teachings away, and we have certainly done a good job with this one. We usually pass it off as a one-time event, in which Jesus was simply impressed with a woman's generosity as compared to others who had given that day. We praise the woman for her generous sacrifice, while convincing ourselves that what she did is not at all applicable to our lives.

But that's wrong. What the story teaches is that Jesus isn't impressed when we give small amounts out of our abundance. He isn't impressed when we tithe ten percent while earning six figures and using the surplus to enjoy the good life. Jesus is impressed when someone comes to him, in complete trust in his ability to provide, and gives all that they possibly can.

Chances are that you won't hear that preached in many American churches. But that's what Jesus wants from us, in terms of our lives and in terms of our money. *He wants us to give all that we possibly can.*

Jesus and the Blessings of Sharing

At the tail end of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler, after he pronounced the warning that it is more difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, Peter spoke up to note that, unlike the man who chose money over Jesus, he and the other disciples had left everything to follow him. Jesus replied:

‘Yes...and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property – along with persecution. And

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in the world to come that person will have eternal life' (Mark 10:29-30).

I am sure Peter was relieved to know, after having seen the rich young man walk away from Jesus' offer of eternal life, that he and his friends would receive it in the world to come. But what must have blown Peter's mind (and everyone else's) was the promise that they would receive *now* – in *this* life - property, family and friends one hundred times greater than what they had given up.

There are generally three ways in which this hundred-fold promise is taken.

First, prosperity gospel preachers abuse it by suggesting that if you are faithful to God, he will make you rich. That's heretical nonsense.

Second, people ignore it all together. They don't see themselves getting rich as a result of following Jesus, so they just don't think about it.

But then there are those who believe that Jesus' promise is true; that when we give up the good things we have in order to follow Jesus, we get better things, both in this life and in the age to come.

To understand how that works, we need to transition from the Gospels to the story of what life was like in Jesus' New Community.

The New Community of Jesus

Early in the book of Acts, we read about the amazing events that took place at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the believers in power and set them free to experience life in new and wonderful ways. The story Luke tells in Acts describes many of the amazing things that can happen when people live as a part of Jesus'

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New Community (aka the Community of the Spirit). But perhaps nothing amazes me more than the descriptions Luke provides of early church life in the following two passages.

‘All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to the fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer.

A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place *and shared everything they had. They sold property and possessions and shared money with those in need.* They worshipped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity – all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved’ (Acts 2:42-47, emphasis added).

‘All the believers were united in heart and mind. *And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had.* The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and *God’s great blessing was upon them all. There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.*

For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means ‘Son of Encouragement’). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. He sold a field and brought the money to the apostles’ (Acts 4:32-37, emphasis added).

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There are many amazing things in these passages. But at the center of both is the fulfillment of the hundred-fold promise. Here was a community of believers who did not consider their property to be their own but shared it with anyone and everyone in need. That Luke describes this aspect of Jesus' New Community twice tells us just how central this way of life was to the early Church. The early believers were so moved by the Spirit and the example of Jesus that they adopted an entirely new attitude toward property and possessions.

The members of Jesus' New Community did not see wealth as something to cling to. They saw it as something to be placed at the disposal of those in need within the community of faith. They experienced what we might call a practical collectivism. 'What's that Mark, you want to borrow my donkey for your journey? Sure thing!' 'Susanna, you need a place to stay? I have an extra room.' 'Miriam, I heard you were having trouble raising the money to visit your sick mother – I have some odds and ends I can sell to help pay your way.'

Luke even provides us with a true life example of this radical sharing and availability in his account of Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, who sold a piece of property (possibly prime real estate on the island of Cyprus) and offered the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to those who were in need. Lest anyone think this act of generosity was an anomaly, Luke makes it clear in verse 34 that many others did the same sort of thing.

The experience of the Spirit and the love of Jesus drove the early believers to do crazy things with their property and possessions. They did not go so far as to abolish the concept of private property in the legal sense, but they did abolish the all too human tendency to cling tightly to things and call them our own. They lived instead with

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a ‘what’s mine is yours mentality.’ Generosity was their common creed.

In this way, the believers multiplied their possessions. If they needed food, it was always available, from a hundred or more brothers and sisters. Likewise if they needed shelter, medical attention, or anything else. Members of Jesus’ community had found a way of life that gave each member hundreds more houses, mothers, brothers, sisters, children and property. They knew that if they ever fell into need, the community as a whole would provide for them in every way.

I guess you could say, as Luke does, that ‘God’s great blessing was upon them all.’ The hundred-fold promise was the blessing, and it had come true. The early Church was a place where everyone experienced economic security, as the resources of the entire community were suddenly available to every member in it. No one ever had to worry about falling into bone crunching poverty. Their new family would always be there to catch them before that happened.

The pity is that most of us today have so deleted Jesus that we aren’t even aware that this way of life is available. We aren’t aware that the whole church could be our family and support system. That we could, if we only had the faith to try, live in a community that provided economic security for all.

Instead, we pile up riches for ourselves, foolishly thinking that such a way of life leads to economic security. We embrace a scarcity mentality and relentlessly pursue more in a vain attempt to find life. We build barns and gated walls for ourselves while our brothers and sisters in Christ suffer in poverty and distress. We chase the elusive American Dream and ignore the dream that once came true, the

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dream that remains available to anyone brave enough to take Jesus at his word.

If only we could rediscover, and have the courage to live, this glorious truth: that when we give up everything for the sake of Jesus and His Church, we find blessings beyond our wildest dreams.

Jesus was right. When we leave everything behind to follow him, truly, we find a network of brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers one-hundred times greater than the one we left. We wind up with more than the best invested stock portfolios could ever offer: *we wind up with each other.*

Acts and the Dangers of Wealth

In his account of life in the Community of the Spirit, Luke doesn't just tell about the believers who experienced the one-hundred fold promise. He also, rather ominously, tells of those who refused it.

The opening verses of Acts 5 tell the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). This couple, perhaps jealous of the attention Barnabas and others were receiving as a result of their generosity, sold a piece of property and pretended to give all the proceeds to the Church, while, in fact, they kept a significant portion for themselves. Apparently, these two wanted to play the part of loving, caring disciples without actually being loving, caring disciples.

Ananias stood before the apostles and in false humility, waited for the praise to flow for his generosity. It did not. Instead, Peter called his bluff: 'Ananias, no one forced you to sell your property. But in doing what you have done, you have not only demonstrated that you are unwilling to give and share like the rest of us, you have also proven yourself a liar. You have represented yourself as something

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you are not! You aren't fooling any of us, and you most certainly aren't fooling God!' (See, 5:3-4).

The story would have ended differently had Ananias come clean and apologized, but unfortunately, he did not. And so, just like that, the judgment of God fell upon him. He keeled over as dead as a doornail.

A few hours later his wife Sapphira came flouncing into the room, blissfully ignorant of what had transpired. Peter gave her a chance to come clean, but she too stuck to the lie. Peter then exposed her as a fraud, and she too fell to the floor dead.

Many Christians don't know what to do with this story. They like to think of it as almost a mistake that was included in the Bible. They say things like, 'God doesn't do things like that, does he? Oh sure, I love to read about the miracles of healing in Acts, about the sharing and loving (done by others) and about the grand adventures of the early Church, but really! This story shouldn't be in the Bible. Or, at least, pastors shouldn't preach about it! I don't like that part. Aghhhh! Keep it away!'

Sorry, but the story is in the Bible. We have no choice but to come to terms with it.

'But wait!' I hear the apologists of the American Dream and the relentless pursuit of more cry, 'Luke wasn't saying that we all have to sell our property like Barnabas did. Peter even said that they were not under any compulsion to sell their property. Doesn't that get us off the hook?'

I'm afraid not. Yes, it is true that the real sin of Ananias and Sapphira was that they lied; that they presented themselves as something they were not, but isn't that what Christians do when they

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claim to follow Jesus, to be the emissaries of his love, while relentlessly piling up riches for themselves? Might we not be more than a little less than truthful, when we hold ourselves out to the world as loving, caring disciples of Jesus Christ, while at the same time holding back on the Biblical command to give all we can toward the advancement of Jesus' Kingdom?

Please don't get me wrong. I am not saying that if you don't step up your generosity game, God will strike you dead. If that is how things worked all the time, it is likely you and I would have keeled over long ago. But what I am saying, and more importantly what God through Luke is saying, is that whenever we fail to give our best, whenever we fail to open up our financial lives to the power of the Holy Spirit, we do two things: first, we give the lie to the claim that we are the loving disciples of Jesus we pretend to be; and second, we reject Jesus' invitation to life. Who knows? Maybe that's precisely why God struck down Ananias and Sapphira, to provide us a concrete illustration of the fact that whenever we turn down Jesus' invitation to life, we cut ourselves off from life as it can and should be lived in Jesus' New Community. That when we turn down the invitation, we experience, if not a physical death, at least a bit of a spiritual one.

I believe that the illustration of Ananias and Sapphira, juxtaposed as it is against the backdrop of a sharing and caring Church, tells the story of the rich young ruler all over again. It presents to us, as Jesus presented to him, an invitation to life. We can embrace radical sharing and experience life as Jesus means it to be lived, complete with the economic security that comes with being part of Jesus' New Community, or we can cling to what we have, and wander off like the rich young ruler did, sad and alone, cut off from the life of Jesus New Community, with no one but ourselves to rely upon. We can either embrace a new kind of life or experience an old kind of death.

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Acts reveals that one of the dangers of wealth and possessions is that we can come to love them so much that we think we are living when we are actually dying. Wealth can make us forget who we really are in Christ. It can make us forget who Jesus calls us to be.

The New Testament and the Dangers of Wealth

Beyond the Book of Acts, there are numerous passages in the balance of the New Testament that speak to the dangers of wealth. Here we will consider a few of the warnings of Paul, John, and James.

Paul and the Dangers of Wealth

The Apostle Paul spoke often about the dangers of wealth. Here are a few of his more general statements:

‘Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God’s people. Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes – these are not for you. Instead, let there be thankfulness to God. You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the Kingdom of Christ and of God. For a greedy person is an idolater, worshipping the things of this world’ (Ephesians 5:3-5).

Many American Christians would be quick to nod in agreement as Paul denounces the sexually immoral and impure. They would also be quick to check their movie guides to ensure they and their families avoid bad movies and shows. But how many of those same Christians simultaneously ignore what Paul says in the same passage about greed, even though, of all the sins he lists, he singles out greed for special censure, noting that a greedy person is nothing but an idolater who worships the things of the world? Greed, Paul insists, is a very bad thing.

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Similarly, Paul warns his son in the faith Timothy of the dangers of money and greed:

‘You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money.’ (2 Timothy 3:1-2(a).

Stop there a second. Paul says that in the last days, people will love only themselves and their money. Now consider what such people look like:

‘They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that’ (2 Timothy 3:2(b)-5).

Pretty disturbing. Those who love only themselves and money become pretty dangerous people. The kind who act religious but actually cause more harm than good in the world. The real tragedy is that if Paul wrote those words today, he would have to tell his sons and daughters in the faith to stay away from many who call themselves Christians.

Finally, there is that portion of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians wherein he chastises them for the manner in which they partook of the Lord’s Supper:

‘In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that

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when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you...So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!' (1 Corinthians 11:17-22 NIV).

At issue in the Corinthian church was the matter of divisions, most specifically between the rich and poor, during their meetings and participation in the Lord's Supper. Apparently, some of the richer members were taking Communion separately from the poorer members of the community, breaking out the fine china and celebrating it apart from the rest of the Church. The New Testament record suggests this was a problem in more places than Corinth (See, James 2:1-4).

Paul was aghast. The idea that rich Christians would participate in the Lord's Supper without the poor was at odds with the intent of Communion, which was to unite believers in the presence of Christ. He went as far as to say that those who partook in the Lord's Supper in this manner did so 'unworthily,' and sinned against the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:27). This was true not only in the sense of sinning against Jesus, but sinning against his body, the Church.

In other words, when rich Christians celebrate communion without proper concern for their poor brothers and sisters, their celebration is, to put it mildly, less than what it should be. It isn't communion. It is a charade.

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In most American churches, it is unlikely that richer members would deliberately exclude poorer members from the celebration of the Lord's Supper. But it is nonetheless true that there are great disparities of wealth in the Body of Christ. Many American Churches have memberships that include some of the richest believers in the world. But down the street, and across the oceans, there are believers who struggle in poverty. That rich Christians celebrate communion without practicing the principles taught by Jesus concerning the care of the poor is certainly a blight on their Eucharistic celebrations. If we would celebrate the Lord's Supper properly, we need to address the great disparities between rich and poor in the Body of Christ. We need to get back to the Book of Acts and become a Church where the rich members would never dream of having too much while others have too little.

When we fail to do this, our Communion celebrations are hollow. We sin against the body and blood of Christ. We partake of the Lord's Supper unworthily.

This is a sad reality. But I suppose it is one included in Paul's admonition in 1 Timothy 6:9-10, where he stated bluntly:

'...people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.'

John and the Dangers of Wealth

John too warns against those who store up treasures for themselves and relentlessly pursue more in the face of poverty when he writes:

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‘We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion, how can God’s love be in that person?’ (1 John 3:16-17).

In Acts, we saw that when people in the early Church saw a brother or sister in need, they sold property to provide for those needs. They did so because they were following Jesus, motivated by the Spirit, and filled with the love of God. Here, John states that when we fail to provide for our brothers and sisters in need, we are *not* filled with the love of God – that we are not following Jesus, not motivated by the Spirit, and not living in the light of God’s love.

John also records the words of Jesus in the Book of Revelation.⁵ In Jesus’ letter to the Church of Laodicea, he challenges the Christians there with these words: ‘You say, ‘I am rich, I have everything I want. I don’t need a thing!’ And you don’t realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked’ (Revelation 3:17). With such words, John and Jesus summarize what is so dangerous about wealth. Those who are rich often feel as if they have all they need. They don’t realize that what they really need is a deeper relationship with God. They don’t realize that what they really need is an authentic community of mutuality and availability that would provide genuine economic security. They don’t realize their need to love both God and one another with all their hearts. When people don’t realize any of that, they cut themselves off from the life Jesus offers. They end up like the rich young man, the rich fool, the rich man who ignored Lazarus, and Ananias and Sapphira.

⁵ Not everyone agrees that the John who wrote the Gospels and Epistles is the same John who wrote Revelation. I believe that all of those books were written by the same author: John, the son of Zebedee.

They wind up wretched, miserable, poor and blind. They wind up cut off from real life.

James and the Dangers of Wealth

James really lays it on the line:

‘Look here, you rich people: Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you. Your wealth is wasting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags. Your gold and silver are corroded. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This corroded treasure you have hoarded will testify against you on the day of judgment. For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire. You have fattened yourselves for the day of slaughter. You have condemned and killed innocent people, who do not resist you’ (James 5:1-6).

With great power, James punctuates so much of what the New Testament says about the folly and danger of wealth. Those who pursue it and accumulate to the neglect of others will one day reap the whirlwind. It will not save them in the end. It will only provide evidence against them on Judgment Day. It will leave them in the same position it left the rich man who day by day stepped over Lazarus to enter his luxurious home.

The New Testament and the Proper Uses of Wealth

We have already discussed the Community of Jesus described in the Book of Acts, which is the illustration *par excellence* of the

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proper use of wealth by those who follow Jesus. There are, of course, other verses and passages that reinforce this. Here I will simply highlight the story of Paul's effort to collect money from the churches of Asia Minor and Greece to assist Judean Christians in need.

The story begins in Antioch, where a prophet named Agabus predicted that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. The response of the Church in Antioch was not, as some might have done, to hoard things for themselves, but to think of those who might be worse off than they would be when the famine hit. Living in a wealthy city, they thought of their brothers and sisters in Judea, and immediately took an offering to help them. The offering was entrusted to Saul and Barnabas to deliver to the believers there (See, Acts 11:27-30).

After delivering the offering, the idea of having the churches help one another across the seas and miles continued to burn in Paul's heart. And so, years later, Paul was still collecting money for the assistance of Christians in need in Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians, he gives a lengthy appeal to believers in Corinth to give for this purpose (See, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9). In the course of that appeal, he bragged of the generosity of some Macedonian Christians who had already contributed to help the Jerusalem Church. He wrote:

‘Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches of Macedonia. They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the

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privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem' (2 Corinthians 8:1-4).

Whenever I read about these Macedonian Christians, whom Paul also wrote about in Romans 15:25-27, I am deeply convicted. They were poor and could easily have made excuses as to why they could not help their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, but they nonetheless found a way to give more than they could afford. How do you suppose they did that? There is only way they could have done that. They sacrificed. Perhaps they went without some of the things they needed in order to raise the funds needed to help others. Or maybe they sold off some of their property. One way or the other, they gave until they felt it, until they had to give up something to do so, and they considered it a privilege. One might argue that these believers had gone even farther than the believers in the Acts Community. They gave, not just out of their abundance, but out of their want. They were willing to go without so that they might be able to help others.

This is the example Paul holds up for the Corinthians to emulate. He goes on to write:

'So we have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return to you and encourage you to finish this ministry of giving. Since you excel in so many ways...I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving.

I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches.

You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

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Here is my advice: It would be good for you to finish what you started a year ago. Last year you were the first who wanted to give, and you were the first to begin doing it. Now you should finish what you started. Let the eagerness you showed in the beginning be matched now by your giving. Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly. Give in proportion to what you have, not what you don't have. Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality. Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it...

You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. 'For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.' (2 Corinthians 8:6-14; 9:7).

In all this Paul provides the Corinthians an example and an outline of how they should use their wealth. In so doing, he provides the same to us.

First, give to help others.

Second, give sacrificially, like the Macedonians. Like Christ.

Third, give graciously.

Fourth, give proportionally – according to what you have. In other words, if you have a lot, give a lot.

Fifth, give to foster equality. No Christian or group of Christians should have a lot while others have little. (Think of the disparities between American Christians and Christians from the developing world).

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Sixth, give reciprocally. Help others in their time of need, and they will help you in yours.

Seventh, give with a cheerful heart. You should rejoice at the very prospect of sharing the blessings God has entrusted to you!

Between the Community of Jesus in Acts and Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we can see the proper way Christians should use their wealth. Not to build bigger barns or save for an unknown future. Rather, to serve the Body of Christ and provide for those in need.

Any other use of wealth is simply unbiblical.

The New Testament and the Blessings of Jesus' Way

By now the blessings of Jesus way should be clear. When we join Jesus' community and use wealth as he bids us to, that is, when we share it with others, we find more than we could have ever hoped for. We find family, provision, and economic security. We find, in a word, life.

Paul sums it all up very nicely for us in his first letter to Timothy:

'Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So, if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content...

Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money for good. They should be rich in good works, and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the

future so that they may experience true life' (1 Timothy 6:6-8; 17-19).

Enough said.

The Teachings of the Early Church Fathers

The writings of the early Church Fathers echo the Gospels and balance of the New Testament in these matters. They bear witness to the understanding and attitude of the early Christians and speak powerfully to the dangers, proper use, and blessings of wealth and possessions.

Aristides – Mid-Second Century

'Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from the widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. *And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.* And when they see the stranger they take him in to their homes, and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. *And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free...And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.*⁶

⁶ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 9.276-277 (*The Apology of Aristides*, Chapter XV). Emphasis added.

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Hermas - Mid-Second Century

‘For all luxury is foolish and empty in the servants of God.’⁷

‘For as a round stone cannot become square unless portions be cut away, so also those who are rich in this world cannot be useful to the Lord unless their riches be cut down.’⁸

Justin Martyr – Mid-Second Century

‘We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need.’⁹

Irenaeus – Second Century

‘Now, [Jesus] has not merely related to us a story respecting a poor man and a rich one; but He has taught us, in the first place, that no one should lead a luxurious life, nor, living in worldly pleasures and perpetual feasting, should be the slave of lusts, and forget God.’¹⁰

Clement of Alexandria – Late Second Century

‘In fine, wealth, when not properly governed, is a stronghold of evil, about which many casting their eyes, they will never reach the kingdom of heaven, sick for the things of the world, and living proudly in luxury.’¹¹

⁷ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2.28 (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Commandment 12, Chapter II).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.167 (*The First Apology of Justin Martyr*, Chapter XIV).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.464 (*Irenaeus Against Heresies*, Chapter II, reference is to the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.248 (*The Instructor*, Book II, Chapter III).

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This next one is incredible – and quite an indictment of the consumer mindset of many American Christians:

‘And so the use of cups made of silver and gold, and others inlaid with precious stones, is out of place, being only a deception of vision. Away then, with [fanciful cups and goblets]. For, on the whole, gold, and silver, both publicly and privately, are an invidious possession when they exceed what is necessary...The elaborate vanity, too, of vessels in glass chased, more apt to break on account of the art...is to be banished from our well-ordered constitution...and beds of purple and other colors difficult to produce, proofs of tasteless luxury, cunning devices of envy and effeminacy - are to be relinquished...For tell me, does the table knife not cut lest it be studded with silver, and have its handle made of ivory?...Will the lamp not dispense light because it is the work of the potter, not of the goldsmith? I affirm that trundle-beds afford no less repose than the ivory couch; and the goatskin coverlet being amply sufficient to spread on the bed, there is no need of scarlet or purple coverings...The Lord ate from a common bowl, and made the disciples recline on the grass on the ground, and washed their feet girded with a linen towel – He the lowly-minded God and Lord of the universe. He did not bring down a silver footbath from heaven...For he made use, not extravagance his aim.’¹²

‘Riches are to be partaken of rationally, bestowed lovingly.’¹³

‘Wealth seems to me to be like a serpent, which will twist round the hand to bite; unless one knows how to lay hold of it

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.246, 247.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.279.

without danger by the point of the tail. And riches, wriggling either in an experienced or inexperienced grasp, are dexterous at adhering and biting...So that it is not he who has and keeps, but he who gives away, that is rich, and it is giving away, not possession, which renders a man happy.’¹⁴

‘The Scripture avouches ‘that the true riches of the soul are a man’s ransom [Proverbs 3:8],’ that is, if he is rich, he will be saved by distributing it.’¹⁵

‘It is a sin, for example, to live luxuriously and licentiously.’¹⁶

‘Wealth is of itself sufficient to puff up and corrupt the souls of its possessors, and to turn them from the path by which salvation is to be attained.’¹⁷

Mark Minucius Felix – Early Third Century

‘But that many of us are called poor, this is not our disgrace, but our glory; for as our mind is relaxed by luxury, so is it strengthened by frugality. And yet, who can be poor if he does not want, if he does not crave for the possessions of others, if he is rich towards God? He, rather is poor, who, although he has much, desires more.’¹⁸

‘Thus it is, that, rich men, attached to their means, have been accustomed to gaze more and more upon their gold than upon heaven, while our sort of people, though poor, have both

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.280.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.281.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.361 (*The Stromata*, Chapter XV).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.591

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.195(*The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, Chapter XXXVI).

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discovered wisdom, and have delivered their teaching to others.’¹⁹

Commodianus – Third Century

‘Luxury and the short-lived joys of the world are ruining thee, whence thou shalt be tormented in hell for all time.’²⁰

Cyprian – Mid-Third Century

‘But those, moreover, whom you consider rich, who add forests to forests, and who, excluding the poor from neighborhood, stretch out their fields far and wide into space without any limits, who possess immense heaps of silver and gold, as well as mighty sums of money, either in built up heaps or in buried stores, - even in the midst of their riches those are torn to pieces by the anxiety of vague thought, lest the robber should spoil, lest the murderer attack, lest the envy of some wealthier neighbor should become hostile, and harass them with malicious lawsuits. Such a one enjoys no security either in food or in his sleep. In the midst of his banquet he sighs, although he drinks from a jeweled goblet...Nor does he perceive, poor wretch, that these things are merely gilded torments, that he is held in bondage by his gold, and that he is the slave of his luxury and wealth rather than their master...From him, there is no liberality to dependents, no communication to the poor...Their possession amounts to this only: that they can keep others from possessing it.’²¹

‘‘Having therefore, food and raiment, let us herewith be content...He teaches us that riches are not only to be

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.18.

²⁰ Ibid., 4.207 (The Instructions of Commodianus, Chapter XXVI).

²¹ Ibid., 5.279 (*The Epistles of Cyprian*, Epistle I, Chapter 12).

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contemned, but that they are also full of peril; that in them is the root of seducing evils...the Lord tells us that a person becomes perfect and complete who sells his goods, and distributes them for the use of the poor, and so lays up for himself treasure in heaven.²²

Here is another one that particularly amazes me:

‘You say that you are wealthy and rich, and you think that you should use those things which God has willed you to possess. Use them, certainly, but for the things of salvation; use them, but for good purposes; use them, but for those things which God has commanded, and which the Lord has set forth. Let the poor feel that you are wealthy; let the needy feel that you are rich. Lend your estate to God; give food to Christ...For in this very matter you are sinning against God, if you think that riches were given you by Him for the purpose, to enjoy them thoroughly, without a view to salvation.’²³

‘But how can they follow Christ, who are held back by the chain of wealth? Or how can they seek heaven, and climb to sublime and lofty heights, who are weighed down by earthly desires? They think that they possess, when they are rather possessed.’²⁴

Lactantius – Early Fourth Century

‘It is not virtue to seek riches.’²⁵

²² Ibid., 5.453 (*The Treatises of Cyprian*, Treatise IV, Chapters 19-20).

²³ Ibid., 5.433 (Treatise II, Chapter 11).

²⁴ Ibid., 5.440 (Treatise III, Chapter 12).

²⁵ Ibid., 7.168 (*The Divine Institutes*, Book VI, Chapter VI).

‘Frugality...in this respect...is a vice, because it arises from the love of possessing, whereas we ought both to abstain from pleasures, and by no means withhold money. For to use money sparingly, that is moderately, is a type of weakness of mind, either of one fearing lest he should be in want, or of one despairing being able to recover it, or of one incapable of the contempt of earthly things.’²⁶ (Here, Lactantius encourages, not of spending wildly, but of giving freely in a spirit of trust. The frugality he speaks of is a kind of scarcity mentality in which one fears that if he gives, he will not be able to provide for himself).

‘Riches also do not render men illustrious, except that they are able to make them more conspicuous by good works. For men are rich, not because they possess riches, but because they employ them on works of justice; and they who seem to be poor, on this account are rich, because they are not in want, and desire nothing.’²⁷

In these writings, we hear the echoes of Jesus and the New Testament. We see that, as the early Christians ‘struggled’ with how to interpret those difficult teachings about property and possessions, they didn’t really struggle at all. They took them at face value and obeyed. How different their interpretations are from the ones we have today! Today we have found all sorts of ways to explain away what was clear as day to the early Christians. We have found all sorts of ways to delete Jesus.

How Then Shall We Live?

²⁶ Ibid., 7.182 (Chapter XVII).

²⁷ Ibid., 7.151 (Book V, Chapter XVI)).

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Jesus, the New Testament authors and the early Church Fathers all agree. Our wealth is not our own. It has been entrusted to us. We are not owners. We are mere stewards, called upon to use what has been entrusted to us in accordance with the design of the owner. We are not to use what has been entrusted self-indulgently, or to build up castles for ourselves that will not last. We are to give all that we possibly can for the sake of the Kingdom, for the sake of the poor, for the sake of our brothers and sisters in the Community of Jesus, and for the sake of spreading the Good News of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Most of us - us being American Christians - can probably share considerably more than we are. Heck, if the early Christians could fast in order to obtain the means to feed the hungry, how much easier would it be for us to empty out our garages, storage units, and closets to do the same?

Several years ago, while serving in a church in Pennsylvania, a group of us were studying Acts. When we came to the part about the believers sharing with one another, and holding things in common, one staunchly conservative fellow bellowed, 'Sounds like communism to me.' He had a look on his face that resembled someone who had just swallowed a quart of lemon juice. For several moments, there was pure silence around the table.

But then an elderly woman spoke up. She was a very special lady. In fact, she had special needs. Most people would have considered her 'slow.' But she was anything but, and on this occasion, showed her ability to grasp what the wise conservative man had failed to understand.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I don’t know if its communism, but I do know it’s in the Bible. And if it’s in the Bible, I guess we’re supposed to do it.’

Amen sister. Amen.

Two Excuses

Over the years, I have confronted a lot of people with God’s view of property and possessions. I have laid things out as clearly as I know how, and still, many have found ways to get around it. Many folks, when cornered by the truth of scripture, find solace in two last gasp excuses to get around the need to live as Jesus and his early followers bid them to live.

The first is that the poor are poor because ‘it’s their own fault.’ They simply haven’t tried hard enough. They are lazy. They have made bad choices. That sort of thing. The worst thing about this is that there is some truth to it. There are people in the world who are poor because of either a lack of industriousness or the bad choices they have made. (I might also point out that there are rich people who are lazy too – just lucky to have inherited money – and that it has been my observation that the rich make just as many bad choices as the poor). But even so, we cannot brush people off that way. For one thing there are all sorts of reasons why people become poor. They can be born into poverty. They may suffer loss because of calamity or natural disaster. The loss of a breadwinner. A tragic event that scars them physically or mentally. Any number of things. Not all poor people are lazy or make bad choices. Some have just had bad things happen to them. So, again, you cannot just brush the poor off as lazy and incompetent when it comes to their life choices. The causes of poverty are far more complex than that.

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But beyond this, even if someone seems lazy or incapable of making good choices, it is a good maxim that you should not judge another person until you have walked a mile in their shoes. Biblically speaking, it is intolerable for those who ‘have’ to dismiss those who ‘have not.’ As the Ghost of Christmas Present said to Ebenezer Scrooge, ‘Oh to hear the insect on the leaf pronounce against the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust!’²⁸ Those of us who have been blessedly born into circumstances where we have been well provided for, in circumstances in which it has been fairly easy to learn the value of hard work and how to make good choices, have no place to judge those who have not been as fortunate as we.

In any event, in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, you will note that the cause of Lazarus’ poverty is never told. One can only presume this is because, as previously noted, the cause simply did not matter. The rich man had enough to help. It did not matter why the man outside his gate was poor. It was his duty to help. Period.

The second excuse is even lamer than the first. It goes like this: ‘well, you know, Jesus said that the poor would always be with us, so really, you can’t do anything about that. You could give away everything and it wouldn’t change a thing. So you might as well enjoy what you have.’

Talk about Bible abuse!

It is of course true that Jesus said that the poor would always be with us (See, Matthew 26:11). He said so on the occasion of his anointing at Bethany. While Jesus was eating at the home of Simon the Leper, a woman (identified by John as Mary of Bethany – see John 12:2-3) came in with an alabaster flask filled with costly

²⁸ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave Three, ‘The Second of the Three Spirits.’ 1843.

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perfume. She broke open the flask and poured its contents over Jesus' head and feet.

The disciples were aghast and complained that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor (John identifies Judas as the main complainer – see, John 12:4-6). Jesus promptly told his disciples to leave her alone. She had done something beautiful for him in anticipation of his burial, he said, and noted that if they wanted to do something for the poor, they always could, since they would always be around. Far from telling them not to care for the poor, he was simply defending a woman who understood that he would soon die.

To take Jesus' words on this occasion as an excuse to neglect the poor is a case of deleting Jesus *par excellence*. This becomes even more obvious when you realize that when Jesus made his comment about the poor always being around, he was quoting the Book of Deuteronomy, where it says:

'There should be no poor among you, for the Lord your God will greatly bless you in the land he is giving you as a special possession. You will receive this blessing if you are careful to obey all the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today...But if there are any poor Israelites in your towns when you arrive in the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Instead, be generous and lend them whatever they need...Give generously to the poor, not grudgingly, for the Lord your God will bless you in everything you do. There will always be some in the land who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need (Deuteronomy 15:4-5; 7-8; 10-11, emphasis added).

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In these verses, we find a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, God (through Moses) tells the people that there will be no poor in the land he is giving them. But on the other, he acknowledges that the poor will always be among them. The solution to the paradox is found in the words in between these two statements. If the people obey God and keep his commandments, there will be no poor. It is significant that in the chapter before, God commanded his people to reserve a tithe of their harvest every third year so as to provide for the Levites, the foreigners in their midst, orphans, and widows (See, Deuteronomy 14:28-29). This was but one of many Old Testament commands to care for the poor, commandments that, if obeyed would have assured that everyone was provided for, and that there would be no poor among the people of Israel. But of course those commandments would not be kept, and so there would always be poor people among them.

In other words, when God said to his people that there would always be poor among them, he was not providing Israel with an excuse not to share. He was leveling an indictment. There would be poor - why? Because the people would not share as God commanded. The poor would always be around because the people of Israel would fail to carry out God's laws.

But even that was not the end of the matter. For since the poor would always be around, what were the Israelites to do? They were to share with them, generously and not grudgingly. They were to do all they could to help the poor in their midst.

Sounds a lot like the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament, doesn't it?

Yes, we will always have the poor with us. But that is no excuse not to help. It is an opportunity to do something to make up for the

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sinful way in which we have ordered society. For if we had only done things God's way from the beginning, there would have been enough for everyone.

And if we would only do things God's way now, there still could be.

The bottom line my brothers and sisters, is that we who call ourselves Christian, need to adjust the way we look at property and possessions. We need to learn to use them Jesus' way. We need to use them in the light of eternity. We need to use them for Kingdom purposes. We need to use them to help those in need.

Any other approach to wealth is an approach that deletes Jesus.

Chapter Six

Risk

*'Our Christianity loves its ease and comfort too well
to take up anything so rough and heavy as a cross'*

Charles Sheldon

During the early centuries of Christianity, cities were overcrowded and dirty, and often the site of plagues. One such plague took place in Alexandria in the third century. In his Festal Letter to the Church there, Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria, recorded the reaction of the populace to the plague.¹ He noted that most people fled the city, thrust aside the sick, remained aloof even from their dearest friends, and otherwise avoided 'any kind of communication and intercourse with death.' One can hardly blame them. In the days before antibiotics, such plagues were death sentences for large portions of a city's population. It only made sense to flee the city or otherwise protect oneself from contamination.

But there was one group of people who behaved differently. They stayed in the city and risked their lives in order to care for the sick. These brave souls were the Christians. Their actions contrasted deeply from those of their pagan neighbors. According to Dionysius:

'Certainly many of our brethren, while, in their exceeding love and brotherly-kindness, they did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril, and ministered to them assiduously, and treated them for healing in Christ, died from time to time most joyfully among them, lading themselves with pains derived from others, and drawing

¹ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 6.108-109 (*Epistle XII, Festal Letter to the Brethren in Alexandria*, Sections 4-5).

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upon themselves their neighbors diseases, and willingly taking over to their own persons the burden of the sufferings of those around them. And many who had thus cured others of their sicknesses, and restored them to strength, died themselves, having transferred to their own bodies the death that lay upon these...Yea, the very best of our brethren have departed this life in this manner, including some presbyters and some deacons, and among the people those who were in highest reputation: so that this very form of death, in virtue of the distinguished piety and the steadfast faith which were exhibited in it, appeared to come in nothing beneath martyrdom itself.’²

In other words, the saints of Alexandria, in contrast to their non-Christian neighbors, risked, and in some cases laid down their lives in order to save others. When others fled the darkness, the Christians ran toward it. In doing this, they believed that they were following in the footsteps of Jesus: ‘We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters’ (1 John 3:16).

It isn’t difficult to imagine that the recipients of such compassionate action, as well as those who simply watched it occur, became interested in the faith that drove those courageous Christians. It is no coincidence that the community of faith in Alexandria flourished in those days, as people were drawn to the Church like a moth to the flame. People had never seen love like this before, and wanted to experience it for themselves.

The early Christians in Alexandria, and elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world of the ante-Nicene Church, were people of great faith

² Ibid.

who took risks. They charged the darkness, won converts, and changed their world.

That Was Then, This Is Now

In the days of the early Church, Christians so impressed the world that the world could not help but take notice. But today in America, many no longer give the Church a second look. There are no doubt many reasons for this, but among them is a risk avoidance mentality. We may do a lot of good things, but for the most part, we are hardly the Alexandrian Christians.

There was a time when Christians were heroes, risking all for the sake of the Gospel and the people around them. But today, we've grown quite adept at avoiding risk. It seems the goal for many Christians nowadays is to own a nice home with a bay window and a white picket fence, have a family consisting of a husband, wife, 2.4 kids and a dog, and stay safe long enough to enjoy the bliss of early retirement. The American Church has mastered the art of playing it safe.

Problem is, Jesus called us to be courageous.

Jesus the Risk-Taker

Jesus was the ultimate risk-taker. As the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2 teaches, he was God, and yet, he cast away his divine privileges, including the safety of heaven, to be born as a human infant. As such, he was susceptible to cold, sickness, injury, and the caprices of a lunatic king. While he was still under the age of two, King Herod sent his goon squads into Bethlehem to kill him (See, Matthew 2:13-18). In the twelfth chapter of Revelation, John describes this attempt on Jesus' life in terms of a woman and child

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fleeing from the jaws of a red dragon (guess who that ultimately represents?).

Think about that: Jesus left heaven, where he was perfectly safe, to do battle against the enemy of humankind. Why? Because if he had not, that dragon would have destroyed us all. To paraphrase Charles Wesley's great hymn, he left his Father's throne above, so free so infinite his grace, emptied himself of all but love, all to defeat a dragon hell bent on destroying the world.³ Jesus took the ultimate risk in becoming one of us: leaving a place of perfect happiness to endure privation, sadness, loneliness, and ultimately, the excruciating pain of the cross.

And that's not all. Risk was a way of life for Jesus. Consider the following instances of Jesus taking risks in the course of fulfilling his mission:

- He healed on the Sabbath, knowing that doing so would incur the wrath of the religious leaders (See, e.g., Mark 3:1-6).
- He confronted the hypocrisy and evil of those same religious leaders again and again, knowing their fury would become murderous (See, e.g., Matthew 21:33-46; 23:1-39; 26:3-4).
- He returned to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead even though he knew the opposition in nearby Jerusalem

³ Wesley's hymn *And Can it be that I Should Gain* contains the line: 'he left his Father's throne above, so free so infinite his grace; emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race.'

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was white hot and that people there wanted to stone him (See, John 10:31-33; 39-40 and 11:1-16).

- He provoked the religious leaders by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, thus fulfilling Messianic prophecy (See, Luke 19:28-40 and Zechariah 9:9).
- He twice risked arrest at the Temple by clearing out the moneychangers and salesman who were fleecing people there (See, John 2:13-18; Matthew 21:12-13).
- Knowing that death awaited him, he ‘set his face’ toward Jerusalem (See, Luke 9:51, KJV).
- On the night before his death, instead of running away down the backside of the Mount of Olives to escape, he waited for the arrival of his betrayer (See, Luke 23:39-47).

In all these circumstances we see Jesus taking risks. Indeed, they were more than risks: Jesus *knew* that his actions would lead to opposition and death. Nonetheless, like the Alexandrian Christians who modeled their lives upon him, he charged into danger in order to save others. Jesus never for a moment played it safe.

Jesus and his Band of Brothers

When Jesus called his disciples, he was certainly calling them to a risky way of life. Peter, Andrew, James and John risked much the day they left their nets and tackle on the shoreline to follow their Rabbi friend to only God knew where. Matthew left behind a lucrative position as a tax collector when he tossed his lot in with

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Jesus. The first disciples of Jesus left their homes and families to follow a man who had no place to lay his head (See, Matthew 8:20).

As they followed him, he called them to embrace lives of radical trust and risk. When he sent the twelve on their first solo journey (i.e., without Jesus) he told them to go with little more than the shirts on their backs. They were to leave behind their walking sticks, travelers' bags, food, money, and extra clothes, trusting in their heavenly Father to provide what they needed (See Luke 9:1-3). Later, he sent seventy of his followers on a similar trip (See, Luke 10).

It's hard to imagine most modern Christians being willing to take trips with such faith. I can just imagine the responses Jesus would get as he gave his instructions, 'But what if [fill in whatever calamity you fear most] happens? What will we do? Shouldn't we be prepared for every possible contingency? Isn't going on blind trust too risky?'

Jesus would say, 'take the risk, my Father is more than able to cover any contingency.'

As Jesus prepared to leave the world, he readied his disciples to carry on his mission. Interestingly, he did not pacify them with peachy keen visions of pie in the sky. He minced no words as he told them what to expect. They could anticipate trouble at every turn (See, generally, John 16). He even went so far as to say that people would desire to kill them (John 16:2). Even so, they were not to shy away from their mission. They were to boldly go forward, despite the risks involved, and lead people everywhere into the life of discipleship. He called them, not to play it safe, but to courageously carry his message and way forward in the world.

And they did.

Risk and the New Testament Church

Not that the disciples were always so keen on the idea. When the disciples saw Jesus arrested in the garden, they all turned tail and ran like frightened school children (See, Matthew 26:56). It had been one thing to risk their livelihood to follow a man who was going to be a triumphant Messiah; it was quite another to follow a man on the way to his cross.

But then came Easter, and, well, everything changed. Jesus had triumphed over the grave, and suddenly, even death didn't seem too big a risk for the sake of carrying on Jesus' mission. The disciples learned that the worst the world could threaten them with was the threat of their own resurrections, and while they surely did not relish the thought of being arrested, beaten, and killed, in the light of their new hope, even such things were worth the risk in order to carry out the Great Commission. There was a world out there that needed to know Jesus, and in the quest to get the message out, no risk was too great for the members of the New Testament Church.

Peter and the Early Church

When was the last time you were so on fire for God that the public profession of your faith resulted in people accusing you of being drunk?

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, the day the Holy Spirit fell upon a group of Jesus followers and propelled them to make just such a public profession of their faith. Many people who had gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost were amazed at the testimony of the disciples in the wake of that great event, but others merely scoffed, contending that the Galileans whose hearts had been set on fire by the Holy Spirit had obviously been hitting the bottle a little early that day (See, Acts 2:1-13).

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But the disciples did more than risk the ridicule of their audience. In testifying to the wonderful things God had done in Jesus, they risked their very lives. Only weeks before, the Jewish and Roman authorities had successfully carried out their conspiracy to kill Jesus. The disciples, quite sensibly from their perspective, had gone into hiding. But when the Spirit came upon them, they were so full of passion that they threw all caution to the wind and testified publicly to the Lordship of Jesus.

Peter's testimony, which you can read in Acts 2, was particularly risky. In it, he publicly accused some present of nailing God's Messiah to a cross (2:22-24). He then went on to claim that their efforts were futile, as Jesus had been raised from the dead and exalted to the highest position in heaven (2:32-33). Finally, he called upon everyone present, even Jesus' murderers, to repent and be baptized in order to be saved (2:38-40).

It's a wonder someone didn't run him through with a spear.

Peter surely knew there was a chance someone would, but he didn't care. He didn't care because he knew his mission. He didn't care because he knew the worst thing that could happen to him was that his enemies would bring about his own personal resurrection. He didn't care because he knew that the people around him were lost, separated from God, and that they would remain so for all eternity unless someone explained to them the way of salvation.

In other words, Peter cared so much for others that he was willing to risk his life to save them. Just like his Master, his concern for the lost drove him, not to play it safe, but to courageously speak the truth.

He was just getting started.

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Shortly after Pentecost, after healing a lame beggar at the Temple, Peter and his compadre John were arrested by the Temple guards (See, Acts 3:1-11; 4:1). After spending the night in prison, the duo was brought before the authorities, who demanded to know how they had done such a thing. Peter, knowing full well he was in trouble, responded as follows:

‘...Do you want to know how he was healed? Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead...there is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:9(b)-12).

The Sanhedrin, amazed at the boldness of Peter and John, nonetheless ordered them to refrain from ever teaching or speaking about Jesus again. Their response was that their allegiance was to God, not human authority, and that wild horses could not stop them from speaking about Jesus (See, Acts 4:17-20).

Talk about Chutzpah.

Peter and John made a brave stand that day, and it inspired others to do the same. In the wake of their stand, the Church in Jerusalem, feeling the threats of the authorities, gathered to pray. Interestingly, they did not pray for the threats to be removed. They understood that being threatened by the powers of the world was part and parcel of following Jesus. They understood that following Jesus carried the risk of enmity with those powers. So rather than pray that the risks be diminished, they prayed for the courage to face them:

‘And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out

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your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.’ (Acts 4:30-31).

And then there is Stephen.

We don’t know if this great saint was present for that prayer meeting, but certainly we know that he exemplified the boldness the church prayed for that day. Luke describes Stephen as ‘a man full of God’s grace and power,’ who preached the Gospel courageously (See, Acts 6:8-10). Predictably, his bold preaching got him into hot water with the religious authorities, who had him arrested and brought before them. They accused him falsely of blasphemy against the Temple and the Law of Moses (6:13-14). If those charges sound familiar, that is because they are the same as those leveled against Jesus (See, Mark 14:56-58).

Stephen responded to these charges, not by playing it safe, but by charging the darkness. His speech before the Sanhedrin, recorded in Acts 7, is one of the longest in the Bible. In it, he traced the history of Israel to show how Jesus is the answer to all of Israel’s hopes and longings. Then he bravely confronted his accusers for their steadfast refusal to heed the call of God, compared them to those who had killed the prophets of old, and flat out convicted them of their role in Jesus’ death. Surely he knew the risk he was taking in doing so, but filled with the Holy Spirit as he was, he knew it was the right thing to do.

When the authorities responded as he surely knew they would, calling for his death and then driving him beyond the gates of the city

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to be stoned to death, Stephen simply fell to his knees and prayed for them.

Just like Jesus, Stephen had the courage to risk both confronting and loving his enemies. He was a man of boldness, and not one to play it safe.

And so it goes. Persecution broke out against the Church, and the Church kept going. Herod Agrippa had James, the brother of John, run through with a sword, and the church kept going (Acts 12:1-2). He imprisoned Peter, and still the Church kept going (12:3). No threat, no risk, was too great for the early Church. Risk was just part of the equation. It was something to be accepted and faced with boldness.

Paul the Risk Taker

There are few stories in the Bible as fascinating as Paul's. Once a persecutor of the church, he had been one of the 'risks' the early Christians faced. But after his dramatic encounter with Christ along the Damascus road and subsequent awakening to the story God was telling and Jesus' place in it, he became the church's ultimate risk taker.

Paul traveled the width and breadth of his world for Jesus, boldly facing down trouble with every step. The stories of his missionary travels make up the lion's share of material in the book of Acts. If you read through them, you will be confounded by the risks this man took for the sake of the Gospel. In 2 Corinthians, in the course of defending his apostolic credentials, Paul tried to sum up the risks he had taken as succinctly as he could:

'Are they servants of Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served far more! I have worked harder, been put in

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prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled many long journeys. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked long and hard, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm' (2 Corinthians 11:23-27).

This list doesn't count all the times Paul was threatened with beatings and floggings, nor does it count the shipwreck recorded in Acts 27 (that one happened after Paul wrote 2 Corinthians). Indeed, Paul would face danger for another ten to twelve years after the writing of 2 Corinthians. Paul moved from dangerous situation to dangerous situation. His was hardly the life of a man who played it safe.

There is one story in Acts that perfectly captures Paul's willingness to face down danger. Acts 19 tells of Paul's highly successful ministry in Ephesus. Ephesus was the home to the Temple of Artemis, a distinction that provided the city with much fame and wealth. Paul and his fellow workers had made such inroads for the Gospel in that city that people were beginning to turn from their pagan ways. Those who had an economic interest in the worship of Artemis and various occult practices understood the threat to their lucrative livelihoods and started a riot.

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As the rage of the city's populace reached its zenith, people rushed into the amphitheater, dragging a couple of Christians, Gaius and Aristarchus, with them. Things did not look good for these two men. As just about all Christians knew in those days, and would know for sure in coming decades, amphitheaters were dangerous places for Christians.

We don't know where Paul was or what he was doing when all of this started, but we do know what his reaction was when he heard about it. Acts 19:30 tells us that when Paul found out what was going on, he tried to enter the amphitheater to join his brothers. Other believers had to restrain him from doing so.

Think about that. Paul, upon learning that the crowds were taking Christians into the amphitheater to (likely) die, didn't run for the township line. *He ran toward the danger zone.*

I can just picture Paul, fighting those who held him, shouting that his place was with his brothers and not in the safety of the street, demanding that he be allowed to face down the anger of the mob so that he might, in one last glorious stand, speak to thousands about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Fortunately, it didn't come to that, but Paul's eagerness to be in the thick of the fray proves that he was a man who did not shy away from risk.

Shortly after this event, Paul made the decision to travel to Jerusalem. His decision was perhaps even braver than the one to enter the amphitheater that day. He knew full well that he was marching toward trouble. As he explained to the Ephesian elders:

'And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in

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city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God’ (Acts 20:22-24).

A bit later, as Paul inched his way closer to Jerusalem, a prophet named Agabus informed him that he would be bound by the Jewish authorities and handed over to the Gentiles. At this, both Paul’s traveling companions and the local believers present begged Paul not to go any further on his journey. Paul’s response was typical:

‘...Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 21:13).

The rest of Acts tells the story of how Paul went to Jerusalem, where Agabus’ prophecy came true. He was bound by the Jews and handed over to the Roman authorities. As a prisoner of Rome, Paul stood bravely again and again before both Jewish and Roman authority, sharing his testimony and preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. Each time he did so was a risk, but it was a risk Paul was willing to take.

Acts ends on a high note, with Paul heading toward Rome, sprinting for the finish line in his race. But Church history tells us that Paul met his end in Rome. One day, after a period of house arrest, possible release and recapture, he was taken out to a place along the street and beheaded.

A moment later, as a reward for his faithful service in the face of so many risks, he was given a crown of triumph from Jesus (See, 1 Timothy 4:8). Paul’s entire life, from start to finish, had been lived in defiance of risk, all for the sake of winning that crown.

Risk and the Early Church

Paul was not the only apostle who risked death in the service of Jesus. Of the twelve apostles present at the birth of the Church in Acts 2, eleven suffered martyr's deaths. The twelfth, John, was exiled to the Island of Patmos, where, as a prisoner, he wrote the book of Revelation. Clearly, each of the apostles were risk takers for Jesus.

Their example was emulated by generations in the early Church. Polycarp, whose story was recounted in chapter four, was one of countless early Christians who took bold risks for Jesus. Moreover, if you think about the stories told throughout this book, it becomes obvious that the believers of the early Church were risk-takers. I will therefore not take up any space in this chapter quoting the ante-Nicene Fathers, for the simple reason that the quotes previously noted speak to the risks taken by the early followers of Jesus. It was risky to walk the way of weakness rather than power. It was risky to love one's enemies. It was risky for Christians to refuse to serve in the Roman army. It was risky to refuse to pledge one's allegiance to Rome. It was risky to trust in God's provision rather than to pursue the accumulation of wealth. And, as noted at the outset of this chapter, it was risky to do things such as care for plague victims. The early Christians were people who took risks. They implicitly understood that the Christian life involved them. They were ambassadors for Christ. They had a mission to bring Christ to the world. And in a world where people were entering eternity without having had the opportunity to know Christ, they dared not play it safe. They knew they had to risk everything for the sake of loving others to faith in Jesus. There was too much at stake to do otherwise.

Eusebius of Caesarea, writing after the time of the Nicene Creed (around 325 AD), records that in the days of the early Church, many

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Christians (not just the super few) were inspired to give their all and risk all for the sake of spreading the message of salvation. They sold their goods, left their homes, and went off into the world to preach the Gospel to those who had not heard it. They would establish churches in the areas they visited, and then start all over again, traveling on to other countries and nations.⁴ Yeah, they were willing to let go of everything for the sake of seeing others come to faith in Jesus.

Essentially, the early Christians were a people who did not value their own security so highly that they neglected the physical and spiritual needs of others. They were willing to lay their lives on the line for the sake of others. Or, as John put it, ‘...they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die’ (Revelation 12:11).

The early Christians were not safe. They were brave. They did not cherish their security. They took risks for the Kingdom of Jesus.

Where are the Heroes?

To be sure, there are many Christian heroes in the American Church today, people who take incredible risks, whether at home or abroad, in the service of Jesus and those around them. Whenever one of their stories hits the news, people stand in awe before such exhibitions of Christian love in action. Thank God the Church still has heroes like that.

And yet, as I think of these heroes, the words of Charles Sheldon spring to mind:

‘Christian America! It is a reproach on the form of our discipleship that the exhibition of actual suffering for Jesus on

⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 37, 2-3.

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the part of those who walk in His steps always provokes astonishment as at the sight of something unusual.’⁵

The sad truth is that while there are Christian heroes in the world, most of the time the world thinks of the Christian church as something other than heroic. They see us as people obsessed with our own safety and security (we will come to a particularly sad illustration of this in the next chapter), a people who are so busy playing it safe and living out the American Dream that we rarely take risks for the sake of others.

And who can blame them?

When Christians play it safe, there are basically three consequences in terms of our walk and witness. First, Christians who play it safe become *bell ringers*. By this I do not refer to members of a hand bell choir (those are kind of nice), but rather the medieval practice of forcing lepers to carry bells to ring as a warning to keep others away. It was a way to ensure that the outcasts, the ‘unclean’ and diseased, stayed ‘over there,’ so that the lives of healthy folks could be enjoyed ‘over here.’

Of course, most Christians today would never be so callous as to make the sick ring bells, but in many quarters of the Church, we have done something just as bad. We have become the people who ring the bells that keep the outcasts away. By our words and actions, we make it clear that we don’t want them around. We make it clear that we don’t want their disease, their mental distress, or whatever other problems they have to interrupt our pleasant lives. We may not tell them as much, but our standoffishness, our cold attitudes, our lukewarm greetings, and the way we generally ignore hurting people

⁵ Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps*, Chapter 26 (1896).

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gets the message across loud and clear: don't bother me. I'm too busy pursuing my dream to be bothered with your troubles.

Let me tell you, a church greeting time can be one of the cruelest times of all for a hurting, broken, messy person. I have seen it too many times in too many churches: such a person gathers the strength to come to church, and everyone avoids them. It is a tragedy that breaks the heart of God.

Sometimes, we ring bells with words. It has often been observed, by both Christians and non-Christians, that a huge problem with the Christian Church today is its tendency to be all talk and no action. It is as if the Body of Christ has become little more than a chastising tongue. Chances are you know Christians who fit this description. They spew forth opinions about the sinful behavior of others, judgmentally fire off scripture verses at the speed of a Gatling gun, and endlessly talk about morality, but never lift a finger to help a hurting person. Why? Maybe because they enjoy the sense of moral superiority. Or maybe it's just easier that way. It's safer to ring bells that keep people away than it is to walk into dark places and associate with 'sinners.' It's safer to hide behind stained glass than it is to go into a broken world to engage broken people.

Talk is cheap. It doesn't matter if you can talk about the deep truths of the Christian faith and point out the sin of the world while wrapped in the warm embrace of your Bible study group if you aren't willing to get your hands dirty and express your faith through love in action. If you do the former without the latter, you are, in Paul's immortal words, nothing more than a 'noisy gong or clanging cymbal' (See, 1 Corinthians 13:1). You are nothing more than a bell ringer.

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The second consequence of Christians playing it safe is that we can become *buck passers*. Instead of understanding that it is the mission of the church to make the world a better place, we relinquish that responsibility to others, such as the government. This is what accounts for the obsession many American Christians have with partisan politics. Christians on both the left and right have adopted an approach that allows them to play it safe and avoid taking risks for the sake of the Kingdom because, after all, it is the government's job to take care of social problems.

The trouble with this approach, aside from the fact that it doesn't really work, is that Jesus never sought to advance his Kingdom through the government. In fact, he rejected the very idea of doing so (See, Chapter One).

It is the height of laziness and folly for Christians to believe that participation in the political process, say, by walking into a polling place every four years and pulling a lever, somehow satisfies the call of Christ to make a better world. Yet many American Christians, and certainly many American Evangelicals, act as if that's all they need to do.

Why would anyone think that such an approach is sufficient? Well, again, I fear it is because it is easier, safer and less messy to relinquish responsibilities to the government than it is to roll up your sleeves, take up your cross, and follow Jesus to the people and places where differences are actually made. It is easier to vote for a pro-life candidate than it is to volunteer at a crisis pregnancy center, financially support a young mother facing an unexpected pregnancy, or adopt a child. It is easier to, like Ebenezer Scrooge, call for the establishment and maintenance of government prisons and workhouses (or their modern equivalents) than it is to join a ministry in the inner city and serve meals on the street, or tutor children who

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live in those neighborhoods. It is easier to argue about whether we as a nation should take refugees in than it is to offer assistance to a real refugee family, whether here in the United States or overseas. It is easier to play it safe than to courageously do something that makes a difference in the world.

Folks, Jesus' answer to every problem this world has ever faced or will face is the Church. We are his plan and there is no back up plan. We cannot pass the buck, either to the government or anyone else. The early Church accepted that as Gospel. We should too.

Finally, when the Church chooses to play it safe, it becomes both *unremarkable and irrelevant*. In the early days of the Church, when people saw Christians doing things like risking their lives to care for plague victims, they stood up and took notice. They were amazed by Christian love in action. But today, I fear the Church has, apart from the exceptions that prove the rule, become so unremarkable that in many people's eyes, it is simply irrelevant. I fear that, in most people's eyes, the only thing the Church is known for today, apart from being all bells and buck passing, is a complete lack of action when it comes to things that matter. In the eyes of an unbelieving world, the Church is AWOL. We have for the most part failed, and are failing, to courageously challenge the evils of our time.

It is time to wake up, time to return to our roots. It is time for the Church to take up the mantra of the great risk-taking missionary of the 19th Century, C.T. Studd, who said, 'some want to work within the sound of church and chapel bell. I want to run a rescue shop, within a yard of hell.'

Brave like a Mouse

In C.S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, a group of heroes led by Narnia's King Caspian sail across the sea, on their way

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to Aslan's country, the realm of the Great Lion and Savior of the world. In the course of their journey, they spot what appears to be a vast mountain rising out of the sea. As they draw closer to it, they realize that it is not a mountain, but rather a vast darkness, a cloud resting upon the waters.

Terrified, Caspian and his crew steer away from the darkness, when suddenly, Reepicheep the Mouse, the bravest of all Narnians, speaks up. Shocked by his comrades' reluctance to face the darkness, he says:

'I hope it will never be told in Narnia that a company of noble and royal persons in the flower of their age turned tail and ran because they were afraid of the dark.'⁶

The ship's Captain counters that there is no use in going into the darkness, to which Reepicheep replies:

'Use, Captain? If by use you mean filling our bellies or purses, I confess it will be no use at all. So far as I know we did not set sail to look for things useful but to seek honour and adventure. And here is as great an adventure as ever I heard of, and here, if we turn back, no little impeachment of all our honours.'⁷

The crew, exasperated by such a challenge, nonetheless knew he was right, and agreed to sail into the darkness. And a good thing too, for inside they discovered and saved a man who had been trapped there for many years.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 'The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.' (HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 507.

⁷ Ibid.

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Do you get the point? Instead of playing it safe, the crew, inspired by a mouse, entered the darkness, and saved a life. Christian, this is our call. We are not called to sail safely to the Promised Land of the Savior's country. We are called to enter the darkness that we might bring others with us on the journey. We are called to be courageous, not to play it safe. We are called to take risks. We are called to live like the early Christians.

When we reject that call, we not only prove to the world that we are less brave than a Narnian mouse, we prove that we have deleted Jesus.

Chapter Seven

Refugees

‘So you too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.’

Deuteronomy 10:19

Headline: Pastor Moves to Protect Church, Self from Toddlers

Orange City, Iowa – In a striking development, Pastor Steve Johnson of the Good Samaritan Community Church has banned children under age four from church grounds for a period of four months.

The move came after Johnson, reading up on the refugee crisis, discovered that the odds of being killed by a terrorist entering the country as a refugee were actually longer than those of being shot by a toddler.

‘I was shocked,’ Johnson told reporters. ‘I mean, there I was, Sunday after Sunday, calling children up for a Kids’ sermon and standing before them unarmed! I couldn’t get the thought out of my head that one of those little devils might be packing heat! My initial thought was to just cancel the Kids’ Sermon indefinitely, but then I thought of the Children’s Church teachers. I had to do something. So I ordered the ban. Until we can be sure we’re safe, we just can’t take any chances.’

The congregation has been largely supportive of Johnson’s move. Gladys Stevens, head of the ‘Share the Love’ Hospitality ministry, expressed her support: ‘It’s not that we’re anti-children. We just need to protect ourselves. Isn’t that the first responsibility of the Church?’

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Members of the Elder Board have emphasized the temporary nature of the ban, noting that as soon as extreme vetting procedures are in place, the Pastor will revisit his decision.

At press time, Johnson expressed confidence that most parents would accept the ban but was considering installing a security fence around the property, just in case.

But Seriously...

Okay, that is a made-up story. However, as you likely already know, it is not entirely removed from reality. At the time I wrote it, the Syrian refugee crisis was a full throttle human catastrophe, and President Trump had just announced the first of his several oh so compassionate bans on refugees entering the United States. The claim was that such refugees had not been properly vetted (even though they had been), and that they posed a significant risk of danger to the citizens of America. Never mind that the actual risk of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack caused by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year.¹ That's hardly a risk at all. You should be far more concerned about being shot by a toddler.²

¹ Alex Nowrasteh, *Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis*. Policy Analysis No. 798 (September 16, 2016). www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/terrorism-immigration-risk-analysis. Accessed April 28, 2018. This report further notes that the risk of being killed by an illegal immigrant in such an attack is 1 in 10.9 billion.

² In an analysis performed by The Trace, an independent, nonprofit news organization dedicated to informing the public about guns and gun violence, it was noted that during a two-year period, 295 children under 13 wounded or killed someone with a gun. In 113 of those cases, the shooter was three years old or younger. See, Jennifer Mascia, 'Loaded Guns, Little Hands,' in *The Trace* (October 10 2016), www.thetrace.org/2016/10/when-kids-pull-the-trigger-interactive/. Accessed July 19, 2018. See Also, Snopes, 'Toddlers Killed More Americans than Terrorists in 2015.' <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/toddlers-killed-americans-terrorists/>. Accessed July 12, 2018.

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Reaction was immediate, with thousands taking to the streets to protest the ban. To their credit, many Christian leaders simultaneously expressed their disapproval. But even so, guess which demographic group was most supportive of the ban?

White evangelical Christians.

According to a Pew Research Center Poll released shortly after the first ban was announced, 76% of white evangelical Christians supported the ban, while only 22% opposed it.³ Interestingly, the religiously unaffiliated were most likely to oppose the ban: only 24% supported it, while 74% opposed it.⁴

Worse still, many famous white evangelical Christian leaders publicly supported the ban. I won't quote or name them for the simple fact that if I did, I'd probably get sued for telling the truth. But unless you weren't yet born or were living under a rock at the time, you probably know who they are. And I can attest to the fact that there were (and still are) many white evangelical Christians I know who supported the ban. When I told them they were more likely to be shot by a toddler than killed by a terrorist, they called me a liberal. To them, the refugees were simply dangerous enemies of the state. They had to be stopped! We had to find a way to keep America safe! At least until the President could enact what he called 'extreme vetting procedures.' These, by the way, at the time of this writing, have never been defined, let alone enacted. It is obvious to most rational observers that the President's 'travel bans' were

³ Gregory A. Smith, 'Most White Evangelicals Approve of Trump Travel Prohibition and Express Concerns about Extremism.' Pew Research Center, Washington DC. (February 27, 2017) www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/27/most-white-evangelicals-approve-of-trump-travel-prohibition-and-express-concerns-about-extremism/. Accessed June 21, 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

motivated by the desire to stir up the xenophobic and racist fears of his political base and had nothing to do with the protection of American citizens.⁵

Thus was born the satirical piece that opens this chapter. I figured if Christians were afraid of refugees, they should similarly be afraid of toddlers.

In keeping with the theme of the previous chapter, it strikes me that when it comes to the refugee crisis, white evangelical Christians are exhibiting the very kind of ‘play it safe’ behavior that causes the world to dismiss the Church as unremarkable and irrelevant (as well as heartless). It also strikes me that such Christians are deleting Jesus.

The Refugee Crisis

When the first travel ban was issued the refugee crisis was perhaps the worst humanitarian disaster in the world. The Syrian crisis alone was staggering (Syria was one of the countries listed in the travel ban). There were nearly thirteen million Syrians who had been forced from their homes because of war. Worldwide, 68.5 million people had been displaced from their homes due to war, violence,

⁵ Unfortunately, the Supreme Court of the United States did not see things this way. In a 5-4 party line decision, the Court upheld a modified version of the travel ban that prevented travel from several predominantly Muslim nations, including Syria. Trump’s well documented rhetoric against Muslims, both before and after his assumption of office, was deemed insufficient to undermine what the court deemed to be broad statutory and constitutional authority to determine who could and could not enter the United States. See, *Trump v. Hawaii*, Slip Opinion, Decided June 26, 2018, 585 U.S. ____ (2018).

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persecution, drought and famine. As if those numbers weren't staggering enough, over half of all refugees were children.⁶

I write in the past tense to provide a snapshot of the crisis at the moment Christians were cheering a refugee ban. Of course, the crisis is ongoing. And, of course, the numbers hardly capture the story. Each of those numbers is a person, and each has a tragic story. It is important that when we read those statistics, we picture more than numbers. We need to picture people.

Which is what I tried to do with a blogpost I posted to our church's website on the day the ban was issued (I didn't just write satire). It went like this:

Somewhere in the world today there is a family. A mother, a father, and a little girl.

They have not had an easy time of things.

Several years ago, war came to their country. It came to their village. Bombs fell on their neighbors' homes. Bullets ripped through the walls of their own. Taking little more than the clothes on their backs, they fled for their lives.

They wandered around the countryside, traveling from village to village, but the war followed them everywhere. Again, and again, they had to flee for their lives.

They saw people die. The little girl saw people die. She saw bloody bodies in the street. She saw people kneeling in the village squares. She saw soldiers shoot them in the back of the head. She saw children with missing limbs. She saw decapitated corpses.

⁶ United Nations High Commission on Refugees. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement 2017*. UNHCR: June 25, 2018. www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017. Accessed July 12, 2018.

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Her parents tried to shield her from these things. But they could only do so much. The carnage was everywhere.

After months of wandering, against all odds they made it out of their country. They considered themselves lucky. Many of those they knew or met in the course of their wanderings were not as fortunate. They located a settlement for refugees. They moved in. The tent leaked when it rained, but it was better than nothing. At least now they had food. Not much. But some. At least now they had clothing. It didn't fit well, but it was something. At least now, from time to time at least, a doctor would come to care for the sick. He didn't come often, but at least he came.

But as time went on, hope began to die. The parents could not work. Food became scarce. Clothing wore out. The doctors could not keep up with the sickness raging through the camp.

The family watched new friends get sick and die. They watched as their bodies were carried out on stretchers to be buried in a common grave.

Nightmares raged inside of them. All they had seen. All they had experienced. They lived inside of Mom. They lived inside of Dad. They lived inside of the little girl.

But then one day, hope was born. They had put their names on a list. It was a list of those seeking asylum in America, which was, they were told, a 'Christian Nation.' It was 'the land of the free and the home of the brave.' If only they could get there, perhaps they could start again. Perhaps they could find healing for the wounds they carried inside. Perhaps the nightmares would end. Perhaps their child could know something more than life in a tent with disease and death all around. Perhaps she could find a place to heal from the trauma of her young life.

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And then, on another day, they heard the news: they were accepted! There was paperwork to fill out. Background checks to run. Extensive ones. But the family had no fear. They were decent people. They had never committed any crimes. They had only sought to live in peace. All would be well. The checks would turn out alright. They would get a new chance in Christian America. They would find a place of peace.

And it seemed they were right. After being extensively vetted, after waiting two more years, they were approved. It was now just a matter of time before they boarded a plane and traveled to Christian America. The land of the free and the home of the brave.

They could not help themselves. They packed what little they had into their bags even before they had a departure date. They wanted to be ready at a moment's notice...

Somewhere in the world today, two parents who have been to hell and back are going to learn that they can unpack their bags. That they will not be getting on a plane. That they will not be going to Christian America after all. That they will not be getting a new start in the land of the free and the home of the brave. That they may never find a place of peace.

Somewhere in the world today, two parents will struggle to find a way to tell their little girl that they will not be going anywhere. Because Christian America doesn't want them.

Somewhere in the world today, a little girl will learn that Christian America is afraid of her.

I hope that gets you beyond the statistics. I hope it helps you see both the reality of the refugee crisis, and the cruelty of those who supported (and still support) Trump's ban.⁷

A Surprising Refugee

Let's begin our exploration of what the Gospels have to say about refugees with another story:

'Get up!'

The young father awoke from a deep sleep, covered in a cold sweat from head to toe. There was a familiar light in the room. He had seen it once before. From out of the light he heard a voice: 'Get up! Flee! They are coming for the child! Go now!'

He did not need to be told twice. He woke his young wife and told her to get their son. The terrified look in her husband's eyes told her there was no time for questions, and no need to ask them. As he grabbed what he could, she awoke their young child. They raced to the lower portion of the home, the place where the child had been born only two years ago and saddled their donkey. The young father

⁷ I should note that such cruelty in our day extends beyond the issue of the travel ban. During the late spring and early summer of 2018, as this book was in the process of publication, a battle was waged over the Trump Administration's 'zero tolerance policy' directed at migrant families crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as other undocumented persons throughout the country. This policy resulted in the separation of thousands of children from their parents. To their credit, even most white evangelical Christians denounced the cruelty of this policy. That they did so offers some hope that the American Church may, at least in some quarters, be waking up to the folly of cozying up to the current administration. As this book went to publication, the battle was not over, as the administration was talking about establishing what, in this author's opinion, amount to internment camps for migrant families along the border. If ever there was a time for Christians in America to wake up and stand up for the values of Jesus' Kingdom, that time is right now.

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flung the saddle bags across the thin blanket that would serve as a saddle. After getting the donkey outside, he helped his wife up, and placed the child on her lap.

Scanning the street in front of the home, and not seeing anyone, he began to lead the donkey and its passengers away from the place of their son's birth.

They quickly left the town behind and began to head along a road that led west. The young father pondered the journey that lay ahead. Past Jerusalem. Then south. Then west again. Into a foreign land. A land they had never seen. What would it be like there? How would they get by? He glanced back at the saddle bags, suddenly deeply appreciative of the gifts their most recent visitors had bestowed. They would help fund a new life in the strange land in which they would soon reside.

A shriek interrupted his contemplations. A piercing shriek. From behind, in the town that once was their home. Then, just as suddenly, another. And another. Sounds of wailing such as the young father had never heard before. A cold shiver ran the length of his spine as he thought of what might have happened had he not been awakened from his deep sleep. It would have been his wife shrieking. It would have been his child...

No time to think of that now. He had to get them out of there. Far away. To the foreign land. There they would start a new life. Perhaps one day they would return. But for now, it was time to leave everything behind.

It was the only way for their son, their very special son, to live.

You probably know who that story is about. The young father is of course Joseph, the young mother Mary, and the child Jesus. You

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can find the original version of the story in Matthew 2:13-18. There you will read of how, after the visit of the Magi, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee to Egypt, because Herod, the evil king who ruled Israel, had sent goon squads to Bethlehem to kill every child under the age of two. It was his way of ensuring the death of Jesus.

Thankfully, for both Jesus and humankind, God had other plans. But the story reveals something that a lot of Christians seem not to realize: Jesus began his young life as a refugee, fleeing the mania of a lunatic king. In fact, he lived as a refugee, along with his parents, as a stranger in a strange land.

And thankfully, Egypt was compassionate enough to receive them.

We don't know how long Jesus and his family remained in Egypt, only that, after Herod died, Joseph had another dream in which an angel told him it was safe to return. It may be they only stayed in Egypt a few months. It may have been a few years. But whatever the case, either in Egypt or as a young boy growing up in Nazareth, Jesus would have heard the stories of other Jewish refugees. No doubt he developed a special affinity for them.

He would have learned that Abraham, the father of his people, had once been forced to flee the Promised Land for Egypt because of a severe famine (Genesis 12:10).

He would have learned about Jacob and his family, who similarly left the Promised Land and took up residence in Egypt in order to survive a famine (Genesis 45-46).

He would have learned that Moses began his life as a refugee, placed in a basket and pushed out into the Nile to escape the wrath

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of a deadly king (Exodus 2:1-4). After being raised as an Egyptian Prince, he became a refugee again when he was forced to flee to Midian to preserve his life (2:11-15).

He would have learned about David's flight into the wilderness to escape the rage of Saul (1 Samuel 19-21).

He would have learned about Jeremiah, and how he was forcibly taken from his homeland into Egypt during a time of war, famine and death (Jeremiah 43).

And he would have learned of the numerous Old Testament passages (he would have called them his Bible) which commanded the people of Israel to love and be kind to the foreigners and aliens living in their midst (See, e.g., Leviticus 19:34; 23:22; Deuteronomy 10:19 14:29; 24:19-21; 26:12-13).

Such stories and passages would have resonated with Jesus the Refugee. He understood what the people referenced in those stories had been through. As he 'grew in wisdom and in stature' (See, Luke 2:52), he would have had no trouble understanding the importance of providing for foreigners and strangers, because once, as a young boy, he had been both.

The Parables of Jesus

Jesus' compassion for foreigners and strangers is revealed throughout the Gospels. But most telling are two parables, wherein he made it clear that caring for the stranger is a requirement for those who claim to be his followers.

The Good Samaritan

One day, an expert in the religious law attempted to test Jesus by asking him how a person obtains eternal life. Jesus turned the tables

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by asking the expert for his opinion on the matter. The expert dutifully quoted from both Deuteronomy and Leviticus, explaining that it was necessary to love God with all you've got and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus applauded the man for his answer, but the expert simply asked Jesus to clarify what was meant by 'a neighbor.' It is presumed that he wanted some sort of limiting answer, something that would have allowed him to feel justified in helping the people he liked (i.e., those who were like him), while avoiding those he did not like (i.e., those who were different than him).

Instead, Jesus bowled the expert over by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). This is one of Jesus' most famous parables. Christians love it; they even name churches and ministries after it (some of which are quite famous). But as the saying goes, 'familiarity breeds contempt,' and the meaning of the parable is often lost in a cacophony of clichés.

The setting for the story is the road to Jericho, an 18-mile thoroughfare that led down from Jerusalem to Jericho through many twists and turns. Its rocky landscape provided perfect places of concealment for robbers and vagabonds seeking to waylay travelers.

There are five characters in the story, the first of which is the traveler, a Jewish man making his way down the road to Jericho. He travels alone (a remarkably foolish thing to do) and not surprisingly, falls prey to a party of robbers, which in the original Greek is best translated, 'men of violence' (we'll consider them collectively as one character). They beat the traveler, take his clothes, and leave him for dead. They are clearly not the neighborly sort.

If you were hearing this story for the first time (and perhaps you are) you might breathe a sigh of relief as the next character enters the

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scene. It is a priest. Whether he is on his way to Jerusalem to perform his duties at the Temple or has finished those duties and is on his way home, Jesus doesn't say. But of course this priest, this 'man of God,' will stop to help this poor man left for dead along the road to Jericho, right? Wrong. He takes one look at the bloody mess along the highway and crosses to the other side of the road, passing the man by. It is often thought that the priest was concerned that if he touched what for all he knew was a dead body, he would have been rendered ceremonially unclean, and thus have been unable to serve at the Temple.⁸ If so, his is a case of a religious man valuing religion and ritual so greatly that he can't see the importance of helping a fellow human being fashioned in the image of God.

But then someone else comes along: a Levite. This man is not a priest but has duties at the Temple all the same. His actions are no different. Seeing the man, he crosses over to the other side and passes the man by. He likely didn't have the same level of concern over ceremonial cleanliness as the priest, so it is often thought that his problem may have been fear – fear that the men of violence who had done this to the man might still be around. If so, his is the case of a man so concerned for his own safety that he could not bring himself to take a risk for someone in greater distress than himself.

Jesus' audience would have been stunned by the story up to this point. The two men they would have considered most likely to help did not. Instead of being concerned for others as the Law commanded, their only thought was: 'what will happen to me if I stop to help?'

But then came a Samaritan. Now, this was certainly NOT someone Jesus' audience would have considered likely to stop to

⁸ See, Numbers 19:2-13; Ezekiel 44:25-27.

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help. The tension between Jews and Samaritans was legendary; they didn't like each other. Among other things, the Samaritan take on religion was different, and the Jews of the time considered them mongrel half-breeds. But surprisingly, the Samaritan does what the others did not: he helps. Jesus says that at the sight of the man, he was moved with compassion. The Greek text suggests he felt the kind of compassion that arises out of the deepest part of a person and drives them to action.⁹ There is a vast difference between the kind of compassion that moves a person to action and the kind that does not. The Priest and the Levite no doubt felt sorry for the man, but in the final analysis, their compassion was not any more alive than their faith, which was, in the absence of works, dead (See, James 2:26). It is important in this connection that the original question that provoked the telling of this story concerned the issue of how to obtain eternal life. The answer, apparently, is that you need to be a person who exhibits faith in action. Any other kind of faith is dead, and indicates you probably never really had faith in the first place. True faith, saving faith, isn't what you say you believe – it is what you actually believe, which is reflected in the way you live your life. Thankfully, for the Jewish man left for dead along the Jericho Road, the Samaritan was a man of true faith.

The depiction of how the Samaritan helped is both multilayered and rich. *First, he went over to the man.* He did not cross to the other side. Given that he was an experienced traveler along this road (as is later implied in the story, see Luke 10:35), we can surmise that he knew just as well as the Priest and Levite that robbers might still be hiding nearby, but was willing to take the risk that the others had

⁹ The Greek verb used by Luke to describe the manner in which the Samaritan was filled with compassion is *splangxizomai*. The root of that word is *splangxnon* and refers to one's bowels or intestines. The idea is that compassion rose out of the innermost part of his being and revealed itself in action.

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not. Why? Because he knew that if he did not, the man would likely die. Sure, he was taking a risk by stopping. But the risk to himself in doing so was far less than the risk to the man if he did not.

Second, he cared for the man. He soothed his wounds with oil and disinfected them with wine. He dressed them. He put the man on his own donkey. And then he took him to an inn, where he stayed by his side throughout the night (how many of us would go that far?). The Samaritan went the extra mile in providing care to the beaten man.

Third, he allowed his compassion to cost him. He paid the innkeeper two silver coins (likely two days wages) to provide for the man's care.

And finally, he made a long-term commitment. Before leaving the inn, he wrote a blank check for the man's care, telling the innkeeper to care for the man as long as was necessary, no matter the cost, and promising that he would pay his bill in full when he returned. In other words, he planned to come back. His was not one and done charity. He committed himself to the long haul, promising to come back to check on the man's progress. His was the kind of charity that helps a fellow traveler, no matter the cost, no matter how long it takes.

In telling this story, Jesus provides an emphatic answer to the religious expert's question, 'who is my neighbor?' A neighbor is anyone who needs you, and, which is more, might just turn out to be someone who isn't like you. In other words, when the Old Testament Law commands people to love their neighbors, it means that you are supposed to love everybody. Whoever they are, whatever they look like, whatever their religion, the command is the same: love them. Meet their needs. This is what it means to have true faith. This is

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what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is the kind of faith you must have if you wish to experience eternal life. The expert in the religious law wanted to get by with the kind of faith that would have allowed him to focus exclusively upon his own eternal security. Jesus tells him that kind of faith doesn't cut it. To be a person of genuine faith, you need to be like the Samaritan. You must be a person whose faith expresses itself in love (See, Galatians 5:6).

When I think of the way portions of the American Church have responded to the global refugee crisis in the light of this parable, I almost want to cry. Even as I write, I recall that within the past year, a wonderful ministry I am part of suffered tremendously, in terms of both financial and volunteer support, because it made the decision to help relocated Muslim refugee children within the United States. Many donors and volunteers feared that allowing them into the country posed too great a risk, and therefore decided to no longer support the ministry (which, by the way, did a lot more than just help refugees) any longer.

Jesus' parable shouts at people with such attitudes. 'There they are. The refugees. They are the travelers along the side of the road! Left for dead by men of violence.' That's who the refugees are. And we who are Christians? We are fellow travelers on the journey. We see them, just like the Priest and the Levite did. What will we do? Will we cross over to the other side? Will we be too fearful to take a one in 3.64 billion risk to allow them into the country? Apparently, for many, the answer to those questions is a painful yes. Many American Christians are, even now, sad to say, acting just like the Priest and the Levite.

But folks, there is another possibility: the possibility of being like the Samaritan.

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The Refugee crisis is real my friends. It calls us to help people. It calls us to allow our compassion to overflow into action, to take risks, to care for people in need, to allow our compassion to cost us, and to commit ourselves to help over the long haul. Yes, the people we are called to help are different than us. They look and dress differently than we do. They worship differently than we do. But guess what? They are no less for that our neighbors. They are no less for that people we need to love if we want to experience eternal life.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan shouts across the ages to American Christians concerned with their own security and filled with prejudice: which character do you want to be? Do you want to be like the Priest and Levite, or do you want to be like the Samaritan?

In Jesus' story, the Samaritan took the risk and helped. Today, two-thousand years after it was first told, Jesus shouts across the ages, 'Go and do likewise' (See, Luke 10:37).

The Sheep and the Goats

Perhaps the most challenging parable Jesus ever told was the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Some Christians would prefer to pretend Jesus never told it, as it seems to undermine their neatly packaged theology of salvation by grace as opposed to works. In truth, it does no such thing. It simply conveys the same point raised by the Parable of the Good Samaritan: that saving faith, the kind that brings eternal life, is not merely a private belief you keep to yourself, it is an all-consuming belief that exhibits itself in both life and action.¹⁰

¹⁰ Many scholars believe, and I actually tend to agree with them, that the 'least of these' in the parable primarily refers to the disciples of Jesus, and that the main point of the story is that people will be judged by the way they received and

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The context of the parable finds Jesus speaking about his second coming. One day, he explains, he will come in his glory, with heaven's angels all around him. Then he will sit upon his throne, and all the nations of the world (i.e., everyone) will gather around for the great and terrible Day of Judgment.¹¹ He will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates sheep and goats, and will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Jesus goes on to explain that after he has done this, he will turn to the sheep (on his right, the place of honor) and invite them into their eternal inheritance. He will also explain why they have been invited:

‘For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, *I was a stranger and you invited me in*, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’ (Matthew 25:35-36, NIV, emphasis added).

According to Jesus, the sheep will be surprised at this, and will inquire as to when they ever did such things for him. Jesus will reply:

treated messengers of the Gospel. While this may indeed be the main point, I still believe that the broader application of the parable outlined in the following paragraphs remains true. That the people of God have a responsibility to live out their faith in a way that benefits the poor, the broken, the stranger and the prisoner is a message that resounds throughout both the Old and New Testament scriptures. In Christ, we are not saved by the good works we do for others, but undoubtedly, if we have truly been saved by grace, if we have been transformed by the power of Jesus' great affection, we will prove our salvation by the way we help others. The Bible is clear that we have an obligation to do good works, not only to the messengers of the Gospel, but to everyone (See, e.g., 1 Thessalonians 5:15).

¹¹ See Also, Revelation 20:11-15.

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‘...Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’ (Matthew, 25:40 NIV).

Then, Jesus will turn to the goats (on his left, apart from the place of honor). This is what he will tell them:

‘...Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, *I was a stranger and you did not invite me in*, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me’ (Matthew 25:41-43, NIV, emphasis added).

Again, the hearers of Jesus’ words will be surprised, wondering when they ever failed to do such things for Jesus. After all, if they had only known that he had come to them in distress, they would have done something! But Jesus will not accept such an excuse:

‘...Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life’ (Matthew 25:45-46 NIV).

Wow. Every time I read that parable, I get shivers. For two reasons.

First, because the parable reveals the glorious truth that the greatest thing about caring for the poor and downtrodden is that when we do, we care for Jesus.

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Second, because it also reveals the heartbreaking truth that when we do not care for the poor and downtrodden, we are turning Jesus away.

Jesus appears to us in the faces of the people mentioned in the parable: the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the prisoner, *the stranger*. And just so you know, the Greek word that is translated as ‘stranger’ is *xenon*. It means ‘stranger’ as in ‘foreigner;’ in other words, a person from another country. If the word sounds familiar, that’s probably because you hear a form of it in the English language all the time. Especially in the wake of President’s Trump’s travel ban.

Xenon, you see, is used to form the English word *xenophobe*. As in a person with *xenophobia*. A person who has a fear or sense of loathing toward people from other countries.

A xenophobe is a person who doesn’t want to allow foreigners into the United States, because, well, they’re foreigners. They’re different from us. They might carry diseases. Or they might be terrorists and kill us (ahem, 1 in 3.64 billion chance there). A xenophobe is the kind of person who turns away strangers, even refugees, not just out of fear, but because he or she doesn’t feel they have any sort of obligation to care for them.

Jesus’ parable says otherwise.

Refugees are people fleeing for their lives. Like Jesus and his parents fleeing Herod’s soldiers. They flee today for all sorts of reasons. War. Famine. Disease. Persecution. They flee looking for countries, looking for people, who are compassionate enough to take them in. Right now there are nearly 13 million such refugees from Syria, and tens of millions more from around the world.

And every last one of them is Jesus.

The New Testament Church

It wasn't hard for the early Church to understand what it meant to be a refugee. In fact, as we noted in chapter four, they saw themselves as strangers and aliens in the world (See, 1 Peter 2:11; Ephesians 2:19; Hebrews 11:13). Beyond that, it was easy for them to identify with Jesus and his family during their time as refugees, because they too spent time on the run.

The Book of Acts reveals how the authorities harassed and persecuted the first believers. In Acts 8, Luke records that, after the martyrdom of Stephen, persecution broke out against the Christians in Jerusalem. As a result, all the believers (apart from the apostles) were driven into Judea and Samaria (8:1-2). Saul, anxious to prove his allegiance to the authorities, Israel and the Pharisee movement, launched a full-scale attack upon the Christian Church. Luke writes: 'Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison (8:3).

In other words, in the wake of persecution, the believers in Jerusalem became refugees. Our forefathers and foremothers in the faith were refugees, just as Jesus was.

A bit later, Luke tells us of a Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila, who had been driven from Rome after Claudius Caesar ordered all Jews to leave Rome (Acts 18:1-2). They were hardly the last of the early Christians to become refugees. Fortunately, they found a home in Corinth, and became instrumental figures in Paul's ministry in both Corinth and Rome (See, Acts 18, Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19).

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The identification of the early Church with the plight of refugees informed their attitude regarding the care of aliens and strangers. Consider the following verses:

‘Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!’ (Hebrews 13:2).

‘A widow who is put on the list for support must be...well respected by everyone because of the good she has done. Has she brought up her children well? *Has she been kind to strangers* and served other believers humbly? *Has she helped those who are in trouble?* Has she always been ready to do good?’ (1 Timothy 5:9-10, emphasis added).

‘We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion – how can God’s love be in that person?’ (1 John 3:16-17).

I know that last one isn’t specifically about strangers. Indeed, someone might object that it specifically refers to ‘brothers and sisters,’ i.e., those within the family of Christ (they may raise the same objection with respect to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats). But the Parable of the Good Samaritan takes care of that. We are to love, not just those within the community of faith, but those outside of it as well.

The New Testament record reveals a Church that understood what it was like to be ‘the stranger,’ identified with their Refugee Savior, and, like the Good Samaritan, opened their hearts, homes, and purses to those who needed love.

The Early Church

The early Church Fathers shared the New Testament Church's love for those who fled persecution. They knew full well what it meant to live as aliens and strangers in a world that did not want them.

Tertullian – Late Second Century AD

‘We are daily beset by foes, we are daily betrayed; we are oftentimes surprised in our meetings and congregations.’¹²

Lactantius – Early Fourth Century AD

‘...they torture, put to death, and banish the worshippers of the Most High God.’¹³

The early Christians knew what it meant to flee persecution. Indeed, all the evidence you need of this is found in the catacombs, which bear witness to the fact that for centuries, Christians were driven from their homes and forced to live underground. They were refugees in their own cities.

And yet they still found space in their hearts and homes to care for those who, like them, had become strangers in the world. Consider the following:

Aristides – Second Century AD

‘And when they see the stranger, they take him in to their homes and they rejoice over him as a very brother.’¹⁴

¹² *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3.23 (*Apology*, Chapter VII).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.135 (*The Divine Institutes*, Book V, Chapter I).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.276 (*Apology of Aristides*, Chapter XV).

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Clement of Alexandria – Late Second Century AD

‘She who emulates Sarah is not ashamed of that highest of ministries, helping wayfarers.’¹⁵

Lactantius – Early Fourth Century AD

‘The just man will omit no opportunity of doing anything mercifully.’¹⁶

If you add to all this the quotes of the Church Fathers on wealth and possessions, noted in Chapter five, it becomes clear that the Ante-Nicene Church, like the Apostolic one that preceded it, was a church that cared for everyone – including refugees.

Who Are We?

At the base of the Statue of Liberty, you will find a plaque inscribed with the words of Emma Lazarus’ poem, *The New Colossus*. Parts of it are well-known among American Christians. The whole thing goes like this:

‘Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of exiles. From her beaconed hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.283 (*The Instructor*, Book III, Chapter X).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.183 (*The Divine Institutes*, Book VI, Chapter XVIII).

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The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
'Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'

Sigh.

I read those words and fall into a state of lamentation. They reflect what were in times past the noblest aspirations of America. They also mirror sound Christian teaching. Once upon a time, our society honored such words and aspirations. Americans of all creeds cherished them. But that is apparently no longer the case. We live in a time of xenophobia, where tens of millions of Americans, many of them professing Christians, hail a Commander in Chief who makes it his daily business to keep 'those people' out. The very idea that Christians stand among the ranks of those who effectively erase the words of *The New Colossus* is something that breaks my heart.

And yet, I have hope. I have hope that perhaps Christians will remember who we are, who we once were, and who we can be again. I have hope that we will remember our Refugee Savior and the example of the early Church, and once again open our hearts and homes to the stranger and alien – to all the tempest-tossed who yearn to breathe free.

Can you imagine if we did? If, instead of being the people known as those who want to keep the doors shut, we became known as the

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people who desired to open them wide? If Christians of all races and denominations became known as the people who took in the strangers?

I believe that would make Jesus happy.

I believe that would change the world's opinion of us quite a bit.

I believe we would go from being unremarkable and irrelevant to be the very people others want to be like.

I believe it would even change the hearts of our enemies.

Brothers and sisters, the refugee crisis is real. People are hurting. It doesn't matter who they are. It doesn't matter if they are Christians or Muslims or light-skinned or dark-skinned, whether they are Syrian or African or Asian or Latino. What we do for them, or don't do for them, we do or don't do to Jesus.

It's time to stop keeping Jesus out. It's time to stop turning him away. It's time to stop deleting his parables and life from our approach to this crisis.

It's time to open the doors and let Jesus in.

Chapter Eight

Racism

'The white man's happiness cannot be purchased by the black man's misery.'

Frederick Douglass

I once lived in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, where, on the west side of town, there is a funky intersection with an island. On the island stands a monument harkening back to the days of the Revolutionary War. Its purpose, as noted by its inscription, is to mark 'the furthest inland point reached in the British invasion of the northern colonies during the Revolutionary War.' I always got a kick out of that whenever I drove past that monument. It reminded me that history is written by the winners. Had the British won the Revolutionary War, there would be no monument calling the British forces 'invaders.' Instead, if there would be one at all, it would say something like: 'On this spot the brave forces of the British army successfully put down the shameful insurrectionists against the crown.' As it is, you would think the British had launched an invasion of Pennsylvania for no reason whatsoever. Never mind that the colonists were rebelling against the governing authorities (in defiance of Romans 13). Never mind that it was they, and not the British, who knowingly embarked upon a course they knew would lead to war.

You might wonder what that has to do with the topic of this chapter. I'll tell you. We Americans tend to view our history through a particular set of lenses. Call them our 'the way we like to remember things glasses.' We recall the Revolutionary War as a struggle for freedom but disregard the fact that the freedom won by the revolutionaries benefitted some more than others. The outcome of

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the Revolutionary War was by and large great if you were a white landowner of European (preferably British) descent. It was not so great if you or your ancestors hailed from Africa. In the struggle for freedom for Africans in Britain and the New World, those evil British ‘invaders’ wound up outlawing slavery throughout their empire about thirty years before the United States passed the 13th Amendment abolishing it in ours. And never mind that in the fledging United States, a constitution was passed that declared that a slave of African descent be counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of determining legislative representation in Congress.¹ We prefer not to think of such things. We tune all that out as we ‘ooh and ah’ at pictures of Washington crossing the Delaware. We ignore the painful side of our history.

What’s worse is that we do this, not merely with the history of America, but with the history of the Church in America. Again, if I may return to Phoenixville, the church I once pastored there had been shaped by a dispute over slavery. In the years running up to the Civil War, William Bradley, then pastor of the First Baptist Church of Phoenixville, bravely challenged his denomination’s local Association over its stance on slavery. He and others wanted the Association to take a stand against it. The Association did not. Apparently, most of its churches either supported slavery or, at a minimum, refused to take a stand against it. Pastor Bradley and his friends did not back down. They formed a new association of Baptist Churches, the Central Union Association, whose churches stood against slavery in all its forms. It always made me proud to think that I was pastoring the church that was once led by William Bradley.

It is wonderful to think about Bradley and his associates standing against racial injustice. But the dark side to that story is that there

¹ See, Article I, Section 2, and Clause 3 of the United States Constitution.

were Christians who fought tooth and nail to stop them. In fact, Pastor Bradley's stand was only made possible because, in the years prior to his tenure, a previous pastor at his church found himself in opposition to the abolitionist tendencies of his flock. He resigned and took the pro-slavery Christians from the congregation with him to start a pro-slavery church down the road.

Wow. Pro-slavery Christians. A pro-slavery Church. A pro-slavery (or at least slavery-ambivalent, which is just as bad) Baptist Association.

We may prefer to think otherwise, but the sad truth is that, historically, American Christians have not always been on the right side of racial justice. 'Christians' owned slaves in America. 'Christian' theologians wrote commentaries justifying slavery. 'Christians' employed sharecroppers and established Jim Crow laws. 'Christians' first created segregation and then fought against desegregation. Throughout America's history, before, during and after the Civil War, white American Christians have often been on the wrong side of racial justice.

And guess what? Many of us still are.

The Present Reality of Racism

I would hazard a guess that every white American knows someone who, in the course of discussing race in present day America, has said something along these lines: 'that all happened a long time ago. Blacks need to get over it and stop using it as an excuse for everything.' They seem to think that just because they personally don't use the 'N-word' (or perhaps despite the fact they use it), racism is a thing of the past. The thinking seems to be: 'I don't discriminate against anyone, and most people I know wouldn't, so shouldn't we all be over all this by now?' The preferred white

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response to racism seems to be to pretend that everything is peachy keen, and that apart from the ‘occasional’ unseemly incident, we are living in an age of racial harmony and peace. You can tell they believe that because, whenever those occasional unseemly incidents occur (which truthfully are more regular than occasional) the typical reaction is, ‘Oh my, to think that something like that could happen in our day and age!’

Racism is hardly a thing of the past. It pervades our society. There is scarcely a thread in the fabric of our culture that is not affected by it. Racism is everywhere, in both overt and subtle ways.

Overt racism is on the rise. I suppose there was a time when it was at least uncool to be a racist. In many circles it still is. But unless you have been living under a rock these past couple of years, you are certainly aware of the ‘coming out’ of white supremacy in America. Riding the wave of political demagoguery (more on that in moment), the KKK and other white supremacist groups have found their voice on social media, held provocative rallies, and otherwise connected in ways that have fueled their movement. Hate groups are feeling their oats these days.

Racially motivated violence against people of color is on the rise as well. There’s the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida, in which a self-appointed vigilante saw an African-American kid in a hoodie, called 911 and said, ‘I see a black male. Those [expletive deleted] get away with everything. I’m going after him,’ and then did. There’s also the 2015 murder of nine African Americans at the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina by a white supremacist. And then there are all those videos – almost too numerous to count – capturing white police officers in the act of shooting young, unarmed black men. And those are just the stories that make the news. Racially motivated violence against people of

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color in this country is hardly a thing of the past; it is an everyday occurrence.

As are the hundreds of indignities suffered by people of color every day, which, while perhaps not resulting in physical violence, nonetheless does violence to the soul. Recently a friend told me a story of a police officer who, in the wake of an accident along a highway, drove two witnesses, an African-American man and a white woman, across the highway (the white woman is a friend of my friend, and had relayed the story to her). As the two got into the back of the officer's cruiser, he politely held the door open for the white person and let her in. But he patted down the African American before letting him get in. The white person stated out loud that this was wrong. The African American young man thanked her. The officer said nothing.

The political world bears witness to racism's present reality as well. Who in their right mind cannot see the role that racial hatred played in the election of Donald Trump? During the campaign, he repeatedly played on racial fears in order to whip up the enthusiasm of prejudiced supporters. At one of his rallies, he actually encouraged his supporters to beat up a black protestor, crying out that 'in the good old days,' that protestor would have been ripped from his seat, punched in the mouth and carried out on a stretcher – a vivid picture of how black protestors were treated during the struggle for Civil Rights in the 50's and 60's. Tens of millions of white American voters (including approximately 80% of white evangelical voters) shrugged their shoulders at such antics. For them, such behavior was not a deal breaker. Even now, all this time after his election, if the polls are to be believed, those same evangelical voters continue to support him. At no point has he suffered a significant loss of support among white evangelicals. He appointed a white nationalist to his

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inner circle of advisors, and they continued to support him. When white supremacists protested the removal of a statue of confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, and Trump noted that their group included some ‘very fine people,’ they continued to support him. When you hear about things like that, you know racism is not just a thing of the past. It is clearly a present reality.

Many people, especially American Christians, take comfort in the fact that they don’t support such antics and, even if they did vote for Donald Trump, at least dislike the racially charged rhetoric spewing from his mouth and from the White House. But even so, beyond the overt stuff, we must also contend with the fact that America’s past has left us with *a legacy of racism*, in which the maxim, ‘the sins of the fathers have been visited upon the children,’ has become all too true. America’s racist past has left an ugly scar across our national landscape. Our racist history has made a deep impact upon the configuration, demographics and institutions of our society. Our justice system, our schools, our hiring practices - every aspect of our society has been affected. America’s past has left us with a Gordian knot of systemic injustice that is not easily untied.

Which takes me to perhaps the most difficult pill for the white folks of today to swallow: even though we did not perpetrate the racism of the past, we continue to benefit from it. Our forebears created a nation with two groups of people: those who are white, and those who aren’t.² One group got all the perks; the other the short

² Interestingly, many writers on race more qualified than I have pointed out that ‘whiteness’ itself is a social construct designed to subjugate people with black or brown skin. There was a time when ‘white’ people weren’t called ‘white’ people.’ They were English, or Irish, or German, or French, or Italian or what have you. But somewhere along the line it became beneficial to group all peoples of European ancestry as ‘white,’ in order to elevate such people above those who were black or brown. This classification enabled and empowered slavery, segregation, Jim

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end of the stick. To use myself as an example, I wasn't born in a neighborhood that got the short end of the stick with segregation. The kids in the next town over were. I have never known what it is like to be classified as 'the other' in my country. No doors have ever been closed in my face because of the color of my skin. I have reaped all the benefits of being 'white' in America. But for every benefit I won, someone else lost.

Yes, racism is alive and well in 21st century America. And yet, the one group of white people who should be leading the charge against racial hatred, white Christians, have been complicit in it, by both their actions and their silence. Many prefer to ignore the present reality of racism and pretend that it is simply a thing of the past, or a problem for others to deal with, certainly not something for the Body of Christ to get all worked up about.

With such an attitude, white American Christians are deleting Jesus.

Jesus the Dark-Skinned Messiah

Recently I was walking through a hallway of a predominantly white church that has a school in its facility. As I passed along the corridor where the youngest children's classroom was located, I stopped to admire their artwork, which was on display along the wall outside their classroom door. The little tykes had made little construction paper mangers, complete with baby Jesus. There they were, all lined up in a row, dozens of them. Some of the mangers were brown, some blue, some purple. The swaddling clothes exhibited the children's fanciful dreams of first century fashion, bedecking the baby Jesus with everything from banana yellow to

Crow and a host of other evils committed by the 'white' majority against the 'colored' minority.

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candy apple red. But there was one unchanging aspect in every child's artwork: baby Jesus' face. In every manger, poking out of the swaddling clothes, there was a cute round, peach colored circle. In every manger, baby Jesus was white.

I have no idea whether the children were given any options when it came to the color of Jesus' face, or if the teacher had simply given them pre-cut peach colored circles. But whatever the back story, those pictures of baby Jesus along that hallway stood as a symbol of how most American Christians picture Jesus. Along with Hollywood movies and all those pictures of a long-haired Swede that hang in the corridors of so many American Churches, those little cut-out crèches bore testimony to the fact that in America, white Christians prefer to gaze upon a white, northern-European Jesus.

Newsflash: Jesus wasn't a white northern-European. He was a first century Palestinian Jew. This is not to say that Jesus was black. He wasn't African either. But he most certainly didn't look like a northern European. No one knows exactly what he looked like, but the one thing you can bank on is that his skin was darker than is usually depicted. He didn't look English or German. He looked like a guy from the Middle-East.

This may not say a whole lot about Jesus' views on race (apart from the fact that he chose to become incarnate in dark skin). But the fact that so many white Christians keep imagining a white Jesus probably says a lot about white Christians. Many seem to have a problem imagining a Savior with dark skin.

If you are one of those who do, it's time you got something straight: *Jesus wasn't 'white.'* He was the dark-skinned Messiah; the brown guy from the Middle-East who saved the world. The brown-skinned man who is King of kings and Lord of lords. The brown-

skinned man who, on the last day of his life, carried a cross with the help of an African (Mark 15:21).

Jesus versus the Bigots

I'm sure that everyone would agree that Jesus bore no racial or ethnic animus toward anyone. For one thing, to bear such malice is sin, and Jesus never sinned. Beyond that, we know he came to save *everyone*. Beyond that, his interactions with people of other nationalities - Romans, Samaritans, and Africans - provide further evidence that Jesus rejected the prejudices of his day. His was to be an all-inclusive Kingdom, open to all those willing to become his disciples.

What many have never considered though, is that Jesus himself was the target of bigotry. Jesus hailed from Nazareth, a despised town in the despised region of Galilee. Located in the north of Israel, Galilee had been infiltrated by all sorts of foreign influences. Pious Jews from the south, in Judea, looked down their noses on such as Jesus.

In fact, even people in Galilee had a low opinion of themselves.

We see this fact early in John's Gospel, as the beloved disciple recounts the calling of Jesus' first disciples. After Jesus called Philip in the town of Bethsaida in Galilee, Philip ran off to tell his friend, Nathaniel (also known as Bartholomew) about Jesus. He excitedly exclaimed, 'We've found him! The one the prophets foretold! The Messiah! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter in Nazareth!' (See John 1:45). You can almost imagine Philip pointing up the road to Nazareth, as if to say, 'can you believe it? He's been right here all along!'

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Nathaniel, a Galilean himself, was not impressed. ‘Nazareth!’ he cried. ‘Can anything good come from there?’ (See, John 1:46). His attitude is at once dismissive of Jesus and self-despising. Jesus and Nathaniel were both from Galilee, and Galileans were pretty much nothing more than mangy dogs in the eyes of the hoi polloi of Israel. And Nazareth, well, as Nathaniel’s words indicate, it was hardly a respectable town.³ No way could the Messiah come from there.

Nathaniel was turned around quickly (See John 1:47-51), but Jesus would face this type of bigotry throughout his ministry. If you peruse the Gospels, you will often find the religious authorities, the Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees, referring to Jesus’ place of origin. *Jesus of Nazareth*. The carpenter’s son *from Nazareth*. The *Nazarene*. The *Galilean*. None of these were flattering in Jesus’ day. There are modern counterparts to such monikers, such as would capture the spirit in which they were uttered. But decorum prevents me from writing them here.

Jesus also knew what it was like to hear slurs directed toward others. On at least one occasion, such a slur was applied to himself. In John 8, as Jesus was debating those who opposed his teaching, his enemies referred to him as ‘a Samaritan devil’ (See, John 8:48). As we noted in chapter seven, Jews despised Samaritans at the time, and considered them to be half-breed mongrels whose understanding of both God and religion was incorrect. In Judea, it was hardly a complement to be referred to as a devil, let alone a Samaritan one. One wonders how many times Jesus heard such a slur made in

³ President Trump, had he been around in those days, might have referred to Nazareth as a ‘s***hole.’ It was reported in January 2018 that at a closed-door meeting, the President had used that term in the course of objecting to America receiving immigrants from certain countries. He denies the accusation, although frankly, his use of such a term would fit well within the overall framework of his immigration rhetoric.

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reference to honest to goodness Samaritans. I'm sure his blood boiled every time he did – every time he heard one people group degrading another people group that he himself had created, loved, and come to save.

For Jesus' part, he went out of his way to oppose the racial and ethnic animosities of his day. We can see this in his treatment of Samaritans. In John 4, we read the wonderful story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. The story begins with Jesus traveling from Judea to Galilee. John notes that as Jesus did so, 'he had to go through Samaria' (John 4:4). Now, the odd thing is, he didn't. It was customary for Jews traveling from Judea to Galilee to avoid traveling through Samaria. There was a well-traveled path around Samaria, and most Jews took it. True, it was longer, but at least you didn't run the chance of meeting up with any Samaritans!

But Jesus had to go through Samaria. Why? Was it because he was in a hurry? Because he knew he had a divine appointment to keep? Yes and yes. But it was also because part of Jesus' mission was to break down racial and ethnic barriers and prejudices. His church would be a church for all people, and he needed to show his disciples, who were traveling with him at the time, that this was his way.

This was a lesson he continued to show as he encountered the woman at the well. For a Jewish man to speak with a Samaritan woman was in and of itself scandalous. But for Jesus to go even further, and drink from the very vessel she used to draw water – a vessel touched by Samaritan hands – was revolutionary. Jesus was making a statement against the prejudices of his time. He had come to seek and save the lost, and he didn't give a fig about anyone's racial, ethnic, or religious identity. Jesus had come to save everyone.

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Not that everyone understood that. Not even his disciples got it at first. Once, when Jesus was making the reverse trip from Galilee to Jerusalem (again via Samaria) he sent some of his disciples ahead of him to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. The people of the village would not receive him, however, because he was on his way to Jerusalem (Samaritans believed you should worship God on Mount Gerizim, in their territory, rather than Jerusalem – See, John 4:20). Two of Jesus’ best friends, James and John, immediately asked if they could call down fire from heaven to destroy the village. Presumably, this was due in part to the Samaritans’ lack of hospitality, but you can also hear the echoes of prejudice in the request. Jesus rebuked them (See, Luke 9:51-55). Not only did Jesus reject the notion of retributive violence, he rejected the ethnic antagonism beneath the surface of their request.

One of the more interesting instances of Jesus attacking bigotry occurred during his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (See, Matthew 15:1-28; Mark 7:24-30). In this disturbing episode, Jesus traveled north to the region of Tyre where a woman of Syrian Phoenician descent (i.e., a Gentile) begged him to free her daughter from the bondage of demonic possession. The disciples, seeking to keep their master’s peace from being disturbed, urged Jesus to send her away. ‘Matthew records their words: ‘Tell her to go away,’ they said, ‘She is bothering us with all her begging’ (Matthew 15:23).

Think about that. Jesus had traveled with his disciples to many places by the time of this encounter. He had shown them time and again that they were to love everyone. He had healed and delivered all kinds of people. The disciples knew he liked to do such things. But for *some reason*, they didn’t like that *this* woman was begging Jesus for help. I wonder why? Could it have been that she was a foreigner, a gentile, an ‘other?’ There really isn’t any doubt about it.

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Once again, his disciples' prejudices were rising, and Jesus didn't like it.

Jesus responded to their dismissive words by saying something that, at first blush, seems equally dismissive, if not more so. Matthew records:

'Then Jesus said to the woman, 'I was sent only to help God's lost sheep – the people of Israel'' (Matthew 15:24).

Whoa. Did Jesus say that? I only help people like me? Yes, and it gets worse:

'But she came and worshipped him, pleading again, 'Lord, help me!'

Jesus responded, 'It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.'

She replied, 'That's true Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table.' (Matthew 15:25-27).

Jesus not only said he had only come to help Israel, he made things worse by calling this Gentile woman a dog. A Gentile dog. What on earth is that about? Some have pointed out that there may have been certain justice concerns between the Jews and people from this region. Be that as it may, it hardly excuses Jesus for making a racial slur. How in the world are we to make sense of his words?

Well, when you think about it, the answer is obvious. Jesus didn't think of this woman as a Gentile dog. But his disciples, who were standing nearby, did. He knew why they were trying to get him to send her away. She was a foreigner. Their motto was 'Israel first!' They did not understand, even then, that Jesus had come for everyone

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(my goodness, had it not crossed their minds that this was why he had come to a place like Tyre in the first place?). And so, he played the part of his disciples. He told her he only came for Israel, and that she was a dog.

Sometimes we don't understand how ugly our words and thoughts are until we hear them on another person's lips. I am quite certain that as the disciples saw Jesus channel their hateful thoughts and words toward this woman, they were chastened.

And so they listened as the woman stood her ground, as she persisted in her request to save her daughter. And they recognized their sin. Here was a woman whose daughter was suffering. A woman who loved her daughter and was willing to fight for her as much as they loved and were willing to fight for their own children. How could they have dared to have seen her as anything else? Hearing their ugly thoughts on Jesus' lips must have convicted them to the core. I am sure they hung their heads in shame.

Jesus, seeing their regret, immediately changed his tune. Matthew writes:

'Dear woman,' Jesus said to her, 'your faith is great. Your request is granted.' And her daughter was instantly healed' (Matthew 15:28).

I wonder how Christians would react today if they were to hear Jesus use some of the words and express some of the thoughts they use and think toward people who are different than them.

My guess is it would shock a lot of people.

My hope is that it would make them realize how awful it sounds.

My prayer is that they would recognize that Jesus loves everyone, and that there is no place for such words and thoughts in the life of a Christian.

Jesus and Systemic Injustice

Jesus surely wants his disciples to confront overt prejudice. But his desires do not stop there. He also asks us to confront the systems and institutions that fuel it. As the Old Testament prophets called Israel to confront unjust systems and institutions, Jesus calls his followers to do likewise.

The Gospels tell of two occasions on which Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem of corrupt practices and influences. The first of these is recorded by John (2:13-19) and occurred in the early part of Jesus' ministry. The second is recorded by the Synoptic Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and occurred during the last week of his life (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). These bookends to Jesus' ministry highlight his consistent opposition to corruption and injustice.

In both instances, Jesus was in Jerusalem during Passover week. The city was bursting with pilgrims from all over the world, both Jews and Gentile God-seekers who had come to the Holy City to celebrate and learn about Israel's God. The Temple, however, had become little more than a circus. The Sanhedrin had allowed the presence of both moneychangers and hucksters selling animals for the required sacrifices. Essentially, the moneychangers enabled pilgrims to exchange their foreign currency so that they could pay the Temple tax in the required Jewish coinage.⁴ You would simply exchange your unacceptable currency for acceptable currency. Of course, you had to pay a transaction fee to do so, which turned what

⁴ See, William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. 'Moneychangers,' (1901).

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might have been a legitimate service into a fleecing operation. The same held true for the provision of animals. Inspectors at the Temple gates would be sure to find spots and blemishes on the animals brought by worshippers, requiring them to purchase a new animal within the Temple Courts, which would be sold for far more than they were worth.⁵

This was certainly enough to make Jesus angry. But it is the third aspect of the Temple's corruption that ties into the subject of our chapter. The moneychangers and hucksters were set up in the Court of the Gentiles.

You see, the inner courts of the Temple were reserved for Jews only. It was only in the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, that non-Jews could pray and worship. Now, that in and of itself seems discriminatory to us, but you must remember that through Israel and the Temple, God was telling a story. He had called Israel into existence to be his peculiar people and shine their light to the ends of the earth, so that all nations could come and know the One True God. The Court of the Gentiles was the place reserved for non-Jews to come and do that – discover the One True God. But that was where the ruckus was. The one place available to non-Jews to meet Yahweh, the One True God, had been turned into a circus.

Israel had been meant to be a light to the Gentiles (See, Isaiah 49:6). Instead, she had prevented them from experiencing God's light. Israel had established a system that had a discriminatory effect upon Gentiles. Her lack of concern for their well-being had led to a system in which the Gentiles were being excluded from the worship of Yahweh. It had led to a situation at the Temple in which the

⁵ See, William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: John Vol. 1* (Westminster Press, 1975), 110.

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dominant Jewish culture had marginalized the minority Gentile culture.

It had led to systemic injustice.

Jesus took in the situation (on both occasions) and did a slow burn. The veins in his temples throbbed. His nostrils flared. His heart raced. He gathered up some cords laying on a nearby table and fashioned a whip. And then he went Old Testament on the place. He drove out the hucksters and their animals and flipped over the moneychangers' tables.

The lesson here is that Jesus did not remain passive in the face of systemic injustice. He acted. He confronted those who were marginalizing a people group. He flipped over tables and changed things.

If we wish to follow Jesus, we will not, when we discover systems and structures that oppress people on account of their race or ethnicity (or any reason for that matter) sit idly by. We will not limit our understanding of prejudice to the performance of overt acts but will understand the systemic and structural components that keep people down. And we will act swiftly and publicly to make things right.

Even if it means flipping over a few tables.

Racism and the New Testament Church

Examination of the New Testament reveals that the Church of that era had no room for hate. John wrote, 'Anyone who hates a brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don't have eternal life within them' (1 John 3:15). Paul penned what may be the keynote for inclusion within the Body of Christ when he wrote, 'There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or

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female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). There was no room whatsoever for prejudice in the New Testament Church.

Beyond these key verses, there are three stories from the book of Acts that provide further evidence of the New Testament Church's stand against bigotry. The first of these can be found in Acts 6:1-7, where we read of an ethnic dispute that arose in the early days of the Church. The dispute was between Jewish and Greek speaking believers, likely native-born Jews who had lived all their lives in and around Jerusalem and Diaspora Jews who had lived in the Greek speaking world but had returned to live in Jerusalem. These folks quarreled over the daily distribution of food to the widows of the Church. The Greek speaking believers perceived that their widows were being treated less fairly than their Jewish speaking counterparts. It appeared to them that the native Jerusalem widows received preferential treatment over their sisters who hailed from Greece and beyond.

It is possible that this was only a perception, or that, at worst, the discrimination was inadvertent; that no one meant to discriminate, but it just worked out that the food distributors tended to visit and help people who were more like them. But whatever the case, when the matter came before the Apostles, they neither ignored the matter nor made excuses. The complaint before them raised the specter of systemic injustice. That is, there was a system in place that allegedly benefitted one group at the expense of another. Jesus had taught them not to tolerate such things. They knew that something had to be done.

The Apostles therefore acted swiftly and deliberately to end even the perception of discrimination in the distribution of food. They selected seven righteous men (deacons) to oversee the 'Welfare for Widows' food program and made sure it was run fairly. These men

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are identified as Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas of Antioch (Acts 6:5). The amazing thing about that list of names is that they are all Gentile names. The Apostles did not just appoint a mixed group to oversee the program, they appointed a committee comprised solely of members of the group that had been on the receiving end of the discrimination. In other words, the Apostles created the world's first Affirmative Action program!

The bottom line is that when the Jerusalem Church was confronted with systemic injustice, they did not ignore it. They acted.

Flash ahead to the tenth chapter of Acts, and we find another story that highlights the inclusive nature of the New Testament Church. The story revolves around Peter, who one day had a vision while sunning himself atop the home of Simon the Tanner in the seaside town of Joppa. In a dream, Peter saw a sheet come down out of the sky. On the sheet were all kinds of animals that the Jewish Law forbade him to eat. Suddenly Peter heard a voice telling him to go ahead and eat them. Peter, good Jew that he was, objected, but then heard the voice say, 'Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.' (Acts 9:15).

After the vision was repeated three times, Peter woke up, very confused. Word came to him that three men had just arrived, messengers from the home of the Roman army Captain Cornelius, who lived in nearby Caesarea. Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile who studied the Jewish faith, had also experienced a vision from God, in which he had been told to summon Peter to his home. Peter received their message and invitation and asked the men to stay the night. The following morning, he traveled with them to Caesarea to see Cornelius.

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When Peter arrived, he explained to Cornelius that ordinarily, he would never have entered his home or have even associated with a Gentile such as himself. But God had shown him that he had no right to call anything unclean that God had made clean. Cornelius then told him about his vision, and Peter understood. Cornelius was welcome in God's family just like anyone else. It did not matter that he was a non-Jew. Jews, Greeks, everyone was welcome in the Kingdom of God. Peter put it this way:

‘...I now realize how true it is that God shows no favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all (Acts 10:34-36, NIV).

The Gospel had once again broken a barrier, as Peter welcomed a Gentile, and a Roman at that, into the Christian Church, the Israel of God.

Finally, we flash ahead once again to Acts 13, where we find a beautiful description of the cosmopolitan Church at Antioch:

‘Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called the ‘black man’), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul (Acts 13:1).

Here we find, not just a multi-cultural, multi-racial church, but a church with multi-cultural, multi-racial leadership. Here we find, not just a church, but a picture of what heaven will be like: people from all tongues and tribes gathered to worship the One True King. There was no First and Second Church of Antioch divided by race or culture. There was one church, experiencing one baptism, worshipping one Lord (See, Ephesians 4:5).

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There are too few churches like the one in Antioch today. But in a country where many Christian houses of worship can be accurately described as being ‘white churches’ or ‘black churches,’ it is refreshing to imagine the way things once were, sometimes still are, and still can be.

The Early Church Fathers

It is not surprising that the early Church Fathers adhered to the non-prejudiced beliefs and practices of the Apostles and New Testament believers. Their writings bear witness to their insistence on the equality of all races and nations before God.

Clement of Alexandria – Second Century AD

‘At the same time [the Mosaic Law teaches] not to wrong anyone belonging to another race, and to bring him under the yoke, when there is no other cause to allege than difference of race, which is no cause at all.’⁶

‘And we admit that the same nature exists in every race, and the same virtue.’⁷

Mark Minucius Felix – Early Third Century AD

‘Let him know that all men are begotten alike, with a capacity and ability of reasoning and feeling, without preference of age, sex, or dignity.’⁸

Hippolytus – Third Century AD

‘For he casts away none of His servants as unworthy of the divine mysteries. He does not esteem the rich man more highly

⁶ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2.368 (*The Stromata*, Book II, Chapter XVIII).

⁷ *Ibid.* 2.419 (*The Stromata*, Book IV: Chapter VIII).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.181 (*The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, Chapter XVI).

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than the poor, nor does he despise the poor man for his poverty. He does not disdain the barbarian, nor does He set aside the eunuch as no man. He does not hate the female on account of the woman's act of disobedience in the beginning, nor does He reject the male on account of the man's transgression. But he seeks and desires to save all, wishing to make all the children of God, and calling all the saints unto one perfect man.'⁹

Lactantius – Early Fourth Century

'For God, who produces and gives breath to men, willed that all should be equal...He has imposed on all the same condition of living; He has produced all wisdom; He has promised immortality to all; no one is cut off from his heavenly benefits. For he distributes to all alike His one light, sends forth His fountains to all, supplies food, and gives the most pleasant of sleep; so He bestows on all equity and virtue. In His sight, no one is a slave, no one is a master; for if all have the same Father, by an equal right we are all children.'¹⁰

'For if we all derive our origin from one man, whom God created, we are clearly of one blood; and therefore, it must be considered the greatest wickedness to hate a man...if we are all animated and enlivened by one God, what else are we than brothers?'¹¹

Amen. It is the greatest wickedness to hate a person because of the color of their skin, or to withhold from them the rights and privileges belonging to every human being. Those who follow Jesus

⁹ Ibid., 5.205 (*Treatise on Christ and Anti-Christ*, Part II, Chapter 3).

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.150, 7.151 (*The Divine Institutes*, Book V, Chapter XV).

¹¹ Ibid., 7.172, 173 (*The Divine Institutes*, Book VI, Chapter X).

will live by this creed. And when they see any man or woman being treated contrary to it, they will stand beside them and cry for justice.

A Sermonic Conclusion

The sad reality is that white Christian America is failing to live up to this high calling. Instead of confronting racism, instead of standing with its victims, it is, at least in many quarters, standing with an openly racist President and pretending that racism is a thing of the past. Too often, the response of the white American Church when the topic of racism is raised is akin to that of a prominent (and supposedly Christian) member of Congress, who recently responded to a question about race with the line, ‘it’s racist to talk about racism.’

That may be the biggest problem of all. White America, including white Christian America, just doesn’t want to talk about racism. In fact, when confronted with its reality, the reaction of many is to simply get angry.

Case in point: as I write this chapter, America is embroiled in a debate over the appropriateness of anthem protests at professional football games. Over the past couple of years, numerous players have knelt during the playing of the National Anthem in protest of police shootings of unarmed black young men across the nation. To these players, the slaughter of young black life, the lack of justice in the aftermath of such loss, and the indifferent response of white America cannot be ignored. And so, peacefully and quietly, when the National Anthem is played, these players reverently take a knee and bear silent witness to the relentless and ongoing reality of racism in America.

Polls show that African Americans overwhelmingly approve of these protests. Those same polls show that White Americans overwhelmingly disapprove of them. The response from white

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Americans, including the President of the United States, has been either dismissal or anger. The call of white America to the pain of these players has been to say, with either cold indifference or animosity, ‘shut up and play football.’

In the fall of 2017, I attended a Pro Football game. As my friends and I made our way to the stadium, we walked by a tailgating party where a man was using a loudspeaker to broadcast what he thought about the players kneeling. He was chanting repeatedly a word that begins with the letter ‘A’ and ends in ‘holes.’ People around him, all white, were cheering.

Such reactions hardly help matters. They do nothing to bridge the racial divide. They exacerbate it. But in 21st Century America, including Christian America, few seem to be willing to do anything else.

Followers of Jesus should be interested in doing something else. When I was in seminary, I learned the Latin phrase, ‘*Fides Quaerens Intellectum.*’ It means ‘Faith Seeking Understanding,’ and conveys, obviously enough, the ideal that Christians are people of faith who seek to understand things. We seek to get beyond differences, emotions, and tensions to find real solutions to real problems. We build, not walls that prevent understanding, but bridges that foster it. And we should be bothered when people refuse to build those bridges.

If we are ever to fix the racial divide in this country, it strikes me that the Church needs to lead the way as a people of faith seeking understanding. And for that to happen, white American Christians are going to have to stop sticking their heads in the sand whenever the topic of race comes up. White Christian America is going to have

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to learn how to *listen* to the voices of those on the receiving end of racism.

In the story of the Transfiguration (which we will address in more detail in the next chapter) the disciples were commanded by God the Father to listen to Jesus (See, Mark 9:2-8). Interestingly, the next event recorded in all three synoptic Gospels is the story of Jesus healing a demon possessed young man (See, Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 17:14-21; Luke 9:37-43). The juxtaposition is striking in that immediately after the Father commands the disciples to listen to Jesus, Jesus listens to the voice of a man in tears over the pain of his son. The man approaches Jesus and explains that his son is possessed by an evil spirit, one that seizes him and makes him scream, throws him to the ground, fills him with rage, batters him, and never leaves him alone. In anguish, the father begs Jesus to deliver his son from this terrible evil. Jesus asks that the young man be brought to him, and then sees firsthand what the father described, as the young man is seized and thrown to the ground, battered and not left alone. Jesus rebukes the evil spirit and sets the young man free, and then, in a touching moment, ‘gives the son back to his father.’ (See, Luke 9:42).

The juxtaposition of those stories, the Transfiguration and the healing of the young man, teaches that followers of Jesus must heed two voices. The first is the voice of Jesus. The second is the voice of those who are in pain.

If this is so, and it certainly is, then White Christian America needs to listen to this: when people of color rise up in protest over the way they are treated in America, whether on the sidelines of a football game or in some other manner, the reaction of the Christ follower can never be to get angry. It can never be indifference. It can never be to look away in resigned disgust. It can never be to say,

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‘I wish people would just get over it.’ It must be to listen, to the voice of Jesus, and to voices of those who are in pain.

And folks, Black America is in pain.

It is in pain over a history, legacy and current reality of racism that, as they see it – and as I see it – has been and is being ignored by a White America that prefers not to think about it. It is in pain over a White America that chooses to forget that when The United States of America was founded, its Constitution counted each black life as merely 3/5 of a person.

That chooses to forget the viciousness of slavery and the devastating impact it had on both people and families.

That chooses to forget about segregation, sharecropping, Jim Crow, and the demonization of black life that has been ongoing throughout our history.

That chooses to forget that even fifty years ago, black people were routinely denied the right to vote.

That chooses to forget the legacy of systemic injustice that racism has bequeathed to our schools, our justice system, and other institutions.

That chooses to forget racism’s legacy of impoverished and underserved neighborhoods.

That chooses to forget that in a nation with a history of lynchings and black church bombings, when a young black life is gunned down in the street, it remains difficult for the victim’s family to find justice.

That chooses to forget that as an Opioid crisis hits the suburbs, and white Americans call for the humane and compassionate treatment of drug addicts as victims of a public health crisis, people

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in those same white suburbs were, only a few years ago, demanding the mass incarceration of drug addicts from minority neighborhoods.

White Christian America – all of this and more is the context for and reason why people kneel at football games. It is the context for and reason why black Americans are crying out in the streets about the value of black life: because for the longest time in this country, black life has not been valued. Racism is a demon that has held America in its grip for too long. It has people of color by the throat. It seizes them and throws them to the ground. It prevents them from speaking. It batters them and never leaves them alone. It makes them scream. And you know what, sometimes they have no choice but to scream. Because unless they do, white America just doesn't listen.

Brothers and sisters, it is time to listen. It is time for those of us, black or white, who are in a position to do something about the racial divide that plagues our nation to recognize that we will not fix it by calling those who protest something that begins with 'A' and ends in 'holes.' We will not fix it by belittling those who cry out for the dignity and worth of black life. We will not fix it by saying 'shut up and play football.' We will not fix it with demonization, blithe soundbite answers, or sticking our heads in the sand. And we will certainly not fix it by aligning ourselves with a narcissistic demagogue who uses the racial divide to feed his ego. We will only fix it when we listen to Jesus' teachings against bigotry, listen to those who are in pain, and get down on our knees together to pray for solutions.

In Mark's account of the healing of the demon possessed boy, there is an interesting postscript to the story in which the disciples of Jesus, who had tried to drive out the demon and could not, ask their Master why they could not do what he did. 'This kind,' Jesus replied, 'can be cast out only by prayer' (See, Mark 9:29). Racism is that

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kind of demon. We all, no matter our race or ethnicity, need to get down on our knees together, even in the face of different opinions, backgrounds and ways of doing things, and stay there until God shows us the way to cast off the demon of racism forever.

If we could learn to do that, we might just live to see the day when, just as Jesus handed that young man back to his Father, we can hand our nation to God.

Chapter Nine

Imitation

‘You know Dad, I think the world would be a better place if everyone just acted like Jesus.’

Caleb Miller – Age 6

The Phantom of the Opera is one of the most beloved stories of our time. Many have seen the Broadway Musical, based on the novel of the same name by Gaston Leroux. In the novel’s climactic ending, the Phantom relishes his triumph over Raoul, his rival for the love of Christine Daae. He has captured Raoul and threatens to kill him, as well as everyone else in the Paris Opera House, unless Christine agrees to become his bride. To save others, she reluctantly agrees. The Phantom then releases Raoul, triumphant in his dark victory.

Alone with Christine, the Phantom lifts his mask, revealing his hideous disfigurement, intending to kiss Christine. That’s when something happens that the Phantom had not counted on. Christine kisses him back. It was the first time in the Phantom’s sad and lonely life that anyone had ever kissed him, and the last thing he had ever expected Christine to do.

The Phantom had not believed anyone would ever do such a thing as willingly kiss him. Christine’s kiss was a demonstration of love and compassion he had never dreamed possible, and it completely broke him. It accomplished something that nothing else in his life ever had: it ransomed him from the darkness. It caused him to turn from his wickedness, and release Christine to be with her one true love.

What is most remarkable in Leroux’s story is that moments before that kiss, Christine (whose name, if you haven’t picked up on it yet,

literally means, ‘Christ-like’) sits reading a book. Leroux writes: ‘she was reading a tiny book, with gilt edges, like a religious book. There are editions of *The Imitation* that look like that.’¹

Fascinating. In one of the most moving stories ever told, a story about the power of love to set the darkest soul free, the heroine had been inspired by Thomas a Kempis’ devotional classic, *The Imitation of Christ*.

Excuses, Excuses

I think I have to thank anyone who has made it this far in reading this book. I’ve probably given you some tough pills to swallow. I mean, just think for a moment about the lessons of its first eight chapters:

Chapter One – Jesus rejected the use of worldly power, and so should we.

Chapter Two – Jesus loved his enemies, and so should we.

Chapter Three – Jesus refused to take up the sword, and so should we.

Chapter Four – Jesus pledged his allegiance to God alone, and so should we.

Chapter Five – Jesus’ life did not consist in an abundance of possessions, and neither should ours.

Chapter Six – Jesus was willing to risk all and charged into danger to save others, and so should we.

¹ Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera*, Chapter 24 (1910).

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Chapter Seven – Jesus welcomed the stranger, and so should we.

Chapter Eight – Jesus stood against hate and fought against systemic injustice, and so should we.

In each of these chapters, we see that the heart cry of every disciple of Jesus should be the words of the old hymn: ‘I would be like Jesus.’

And let’s face it, not every Christian wants to hear that.

In fact, over the years, I have heard Christians assert, over and over again, that there must be a loophole in all of this. ‘Yes,’ they freely admit, ‘your description of Jesus and the way he followed is accurate: he rejected violence, loved his enemies, yaddah, yaddah, yaddah. *But that was Jesus.* He was different. He was God. He had a special mission to die on the cross to save the world. That’s why he lived that way. Jesus was special. He certainly never intended for us to think that we were supposed to live the same way.’

I’ve heard a similar version of this when it comes to the Sermon on the Mount. The same people who make the ‘but that was Jesus’ argument love to point out that when Jesus laid down his great ethical teaching that day on the hillside, he was only doing so to demonstrate that we could never possibly hope to follow it. He was showing a way that only he could follow, thereby showing us the need for grace and the cross. He certainly didn’t expect anyone to live up to his standards.

With such excuses, Christians kill the life of discipleship. We destroy what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Whenever I hear such arguments, I scarcely know where to begin to refute them. There’s just so much wrong with them. I mean, sure, we will never be perfect like Jesus – he is God after all - but that can’t

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mean that we aren't even supposed to try to walk in his footsteps. The very fact that he was perfect (and is perfect) only highlights that he is our example; he is a divine gift sent to show us what we should long to be. Besides, how dare we use the 'Jesus is God' thing to avoid walking in his steps? I mean, if God himself rejected violence, loved his enemies and refused to take up the sword (along with the rest), preferring to allow his enemies to kill him rather than strike back, then who on earth do we think we are to argue that we shouldn't do the same? Do we consider our lives more valuable than the Incarnate life of our God? Do we not understand that we too must, as it says in Matthew 5:48, strive for the perfection of God?

And as for the idea that he had a special mission and never intended his followers to live as he did, all I can ask is: then why on earth did he ask us to? As we are about to see, Jesus, in everything he said and did, intentionally modeled the way of life he expected his disciples to pursue.

The truth is that everything in the New Testament, from the Gospels to the Book of Acts to the letters of Paul and Company, as well as everything in the life and history of the early Church, teaches an ethic of imitation. Followers of Jesus are meant to do precisely what their label implies: follow Jesus. We are called to walk in Jesus' steps, that we might be conformed to the image of Christ (See, Romans 8:29).

Follow Me

A long time ago, on a warm sunny day, along the banks of the Jordan River, two young men from Galilee were waiting. Both were students of John the Baptizer, enamored by his message of repentance and eager for the arrival of the Messiah – the one who would liberate Israel. They had heard that the day before, John had

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publicly identified the Messiah, and so there they were, hanging out with their mentor, waiting to see if the Messiah would grace the shores of the Jordan once again. Their names, by the way, were *Andrew* and *John*.² The afternoon wore on, and they were about to give up and call it a day, when suddenly, the Baptizer jumped to his feet. ‘There he is!’ he cried, ‘The Lamb of God!’ Neither Andrew nor John understood why their master called him that, but they figured it to be some sort of messianic title, and so, with the adrenaline pumping through their veins and their hearts beating a mile a minute, they left their teacher on the shoreline and *followed Jesus* (which, by the way, couldn’t have made John the Baptizer happier).

Andrew and John wound up spending the day with Jesus (I’ve always loved that part of the story – just imagine spending the day with Jesus!), and after adding Andrew’s brother Simon to their entourage, traveled with Jesus to Galilee, where they came upon another would-be disciple, Philip. Jesus walked up to Philip and said, ‘Follow me’ (See, John 1:43). Philip did just that.

Mark writes a bit more specifically about the day Jesus officially made Andrew, Simon, and John (and John’s brother James) disciples. He was walking along the shore of the Galilee as the four worked their trade as fishermen, when he called out, first to Andrew and Simon, ‘Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people’ (See, Mark 1:17). Then he issued the same call to John and James. They immediately left their nets and began to follow Jesus (See Mark, 1:16-20).

² This story can be found in John 1:35-43. John doesn’t actually identify himself, but then again, he rarely does in his Gospel, preferring to refer to himself, if at all, as ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved.’

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On another day, Jesus was walking the streets of Capernaum when he walked up to a tax collector's booth manned by a dude named Matthew and said, 'Follow me and be my disciple' (See, Matthew 9:9). Matthew, tired of selling his soul to the Romans and fleecing his own people, stood up and followed. He even threw a killer party to celebrate his decision!

Elsewhere in the Gospels we find Jesus issuing a similar call to a man who chose not to follow him (at least initially, I've always hoped he later changed his mind). When the rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked what he had to do to obtain eternal life, Jesus told him to sell his possessions, give his money to the poor, and do what? Follow him (See, Luke 18:22).

The call to follow is all over the Gospels. In John 8:12, Jesus stands before the people at the Festival of Booths in Jerusalem and cries, 'I am the light of the world. If you *follow me* you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life' (John 8:12; emphasis added). John 10:27 finds Jesus explaining that his sheep not only know him but follow him. In John 12:26 he says, 'anyone who wants to serve me must follow me, because my servants must be where I am.' And in John 21:19, three and a half years or so after first calling Simon Peter that day on the beach, we find Jesus once again calling out to the freshly forgiven and restored Peter: 'follow me.'

The call to discipleship begins with the call to *follow* Jesus. That much should be obvious. What seems a little less obvious to many Christians is that when Jesus issued that initial call, he was not just giving directions. He was calling people into a specific way of life.

Both Luke and Mark tell the story of how Jesus came to choose the twelve men who would be his constant companions over the

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course of his ministry (See, Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). After staying up all night to pray about it, he called these twelve men ‘*to be with him*’ (Mark 3:14, NRSV, emphases added). They would sit at his feet and learn from him. They would travel the length and breadth of Israel with him as he taught them on the road, on hillsides, shorelines, and mountaintops. They would watch his every move and strive to be more like him every day. This was their primary vocation as disciples: to be with Jesus and to become like him. Jesus himself made this clear when he said: ‘Students are not greater than their teacher. But the student who is fully trained will become like the teacher’ (Luke 6:40; See Also Matthew 10:25).

Yeah, the call to follow Jesus was not just a set of directions. It was a call to a way of life. Those who followed Jesus sought to be like him. They had been called to love the way Jesus loved (See, John 13:34 and 15:12). They were even told by Jesus that he was the way to the Father. It boggles my mind how every evangelical Christian can quote Jesus’ famous words from John 14:6, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me,’ yet so many fail to understand that when Jesus said he was the way, he was referring to more than just believing in him and his sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus called his disciples to follow him and described himself as the way. It is when we walk in Jesus’ way that we find our way to God.

The Basin and the Towel

On the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, before any of that went down, Jesus had been enjoying a final meal with his disciples. We can imagine him savoring both the company and the last pleasant moments of his life. Still, the coming events weighed heavily on his mind, and so, after giving his disciples the Lord’s Supper to remember him, he made the startling announcement that one of them

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would betray him (See, Luke 22:21). Luke tells us that the disciples began to wonder who would do such a thing. It didn't take long for their wondering to turn into an argument about who among them was the greatest. You can see how that would happen. Questions flew around the room. Fingers were pointed. And then, the inevitable comparisons. 'It wouldn't be me. I'm a better disciple than you.' 'What do you mean? I was with him at the Transfiguration, if anyone is above reproach it's me!' 'Hey, I've known him the longest!' 'But I've spent the most time with him.' 'Hey, when he becomes King, I'm going to be right beside him!'

It wasn't the first time the disciples had jockeyed for position like this. It had happened multiple times before (See, Matthew 18:1; Mark 10:35ff). That it should happen again now, at the threshold of Jesus' passion, in the very moment he had eagerly longed for and hoped to cherish, could only have broken his heart. And yet, he offered no recriminations. Instead, he silently rose from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet. You could have heard a pin drop. In Biblical times, people walked a lot, and their feet got pretty dirty, even gross. It was common practice to keep water jugs near the doors of homes, and when someone came in, a servant or slave would perform the duty of washing the guests' feet.³ That Jesus would perform this service transgressed the bounds of propriety. He was the Master, not the slave. He was the King, not the servant. And yet, he stooped to wash his disciples' feet. It was his way of driving home the lesson that had somehow been missed on those earlier occasions.

³ For Biblical references related to this custom, see, Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; 1 Samuel 25:41; Luke 7:44; and 1 Timothy 5:10.

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Luke and John record what Jesus said upon the completion of this task. Luke writes:

‘...In this world the kings and great men lord it over their people...But among you it will be different. Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant. Who is more important, the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? The one who sits at the table of course. But not here! For I am among you as one who serves (Luke 22:25-27).⁴

John further records that:

‘After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, ‘Do you understand what I am doing? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’ and you are right, because that is what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. *I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done for you.* I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message. Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them’ (John 13:12-17, emphases added).

In this wonderful demonstration of servant love, Jesus taught his disciples what they were to be. God had become their servant; they were to serve one another. The fact that Jesus was God did not excuse the disciples from imitating him; it *required* them to imitate him. Jesus, on that night and in every moment he spent on earth, gave to disciples of all eras an example to follow. Not just with

⁴ This was an echo of Jesus’ words spoken to the disciples on yet another, even earlier occasion when they jockeyed for position and power (See, Matthew 10:42-45).

respect to foot washing, but in all things. The command is clear: we must do for one another, and for others, just as Jesus has done for us.

Take Up the Cross

The disciples had ‘been with Jesus’ for quite some time, and had seen some pretty amazing things, when one day, as they were walking along the road to Caesarea Philippi, he turned to his disciples and out of the blue hit them with a big question: ‘So who do people think that I am?’ ‘Well,’ they began, ‘some are saying you must be John the Baptist alive again. Others that you are Elijah returned to earth, and still others claim that you are one of the prophets.’ Jesus nodded, said, ‘Mmm, mmm,’ and then hit them between the eyes with a follow up question: ‘That’s nice. But who do *you* say that I am?’ Truth be told, the disciples had been wondering about that for quite some time. Just who was this guy who could calm storms, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead? Who was this Galilean Jew who claimed the power to forgive sins and dared to challenge the religious leaders of Israel? And perhaps more importantly, what were they supposed to do with him? Yeah, they had already decided to follow him, but just where was all of this going anyway? Just how far were they supposed to follow?

Jesus’ question left the disciples nonplussed. They looked at their sandals, scratched their heads, and otherwise tried not to be the first to hazard an answer. They all were hoping that he was the Messiah. They even believed it, at least with a minor key sort of belief. But none had yet given voice to that hope. You can understand why. Sometimes you want something so bad that you are afraid to express it out loud, for fear that it might not happen. But then, into the awkward silence stepped Simon. The rough fisherman had been bursting with hope ever since the day Jesus called him on the beach,

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and he just couldn't suppress it any longer. 'You are the Messiah! You are the Son of God!'

Jesus rewarded Simon's confession with some of the most soul stirring words found in the Gospels, which we looked at in detail back in chapter three. He said: 'Simon, from now on you are the Rock, and on this rock I will build my gathering. And the gates of Hades will not stand against it.'

Readers will no doubt remember that we have already examined parts of this story in the course of this book. We revisit it here as we draw near the end because it is critically important to our understanding of discipleship. As we have previously noted, the disciples, like everyone else in Jesus' day, had a certain conception of what the Messiah ought to be. The Messiah was supposed to be a military hero who would rise up, toss out the Romans, and inaugurate the Kingly reign of God on earth in the form of a national, political Kingdom. And now, well, Jesus had just admitted he was the Messiah, the Son of God! He had just spoken about conquering the gates of hell! To say the disciples were stoked would be an understatement. Even Jesus' words to the effect that they needed to keep quiet about all this (see, Mark 8:30) only fueled the fire. As far as they were concerned, they were, for the time being, a clandestine organization working surreptitiously until the day of revolution arrived! But boy oh boy, that day was coming. Jesus was the Messiah, and Rome's days were numbered. Woo freaking hoo!

You can see what was happening right? The disciples had chosen to follow Jesus in the hope that he was the Messiah. But all along, they had been hoping he would turn out to be a Messiah on their terms.

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And here's the thing: Jesus knew it. Maybe that's why he had put the question to them in the first place, to draw them and their false expectations out into the open. Now that he had, it was time to set them straight:

‘The Son of Man must suffer many terrible things...He will be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of the religious law. He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead’ (Luke 9:22).

The disciples' heads began to spin. Suffering? Rejection? Death? Say what? It was so confusing they couldn't even begin to think about the rising again part. Peter, especially horrified, grabbed Jesus by the arm and, in a remarkable display of Chutzpah, rebuked him. ‘Jesus,’ he said. ‘Don't say things like that. You're not going to die. Your destiny is to reign! You are the Messiah for crying out loud! Don't you think it's time you started acting like one?’

Jesus' response must have chilled Peter's blood. ‘Get away from me Satan!’ Whew! To understand where that came from, we must return to chapter one of this book, wherein we discussed Jesus' wilderness temptations. One of the temptations, you may recall, was Satan's offer to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world if he would bow down and worship him. It was a temptation to free Israel while avoiding the cross, and it was, for Jesus, who felt the sting of Roman occupation and feared the agony of crucifixion as much as anyone, a real temptation. Jesus rejected the offer. Why? Because Jesus' mission wasn't to throw out Rome and establish an earthly kingdom. His mission was to save the world. It wasn't to defeat evil with the power of the sword. It was to defeat evil with the power of Calvary love. And so he had rejected Satan's offer. But now, Peter had renewed it. ‘Don't go the way of Calvary Jesus. Take the way of power. Establish a kingdom. Rule by the sword! Don't do things

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your Father's way. Do them our way! Be the Messiah on our terms!' And so Jesus said, 'get away from me Satan. I will not do things your way; I will do them the right way.'

Surely this shocked Peter. But what Jesus said next positively flummoxed him (and the others): '*whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me*' (Luke 9:23).

With such words, Jesus laid out the three requirements of discipleship.

First, if you want to be a disciple of Jesus, you must *deny yourself*. Renounce your agenda. Give up your hopes and plans. Embrace Jesus on his terms, not yours.

Second, *take up your cross daily*. Let's be clear about this. So many Christians today have effectively pared the claws of this requirement. They've made it to mean almost anything but what Jesus meant. 'Oh sure,' they say, 'Jesus said to take up a cross, but he meant *your* cross, not his.' And so they go to church believing that Jesus was simply referring to the way they have to deal with their arthritis, their financial woes, a tough boss, or a difficult relationship. But when the disciples heard Jesus say to take up their cross, there was only one image on their minds: a beaten man shouldering a cross beam on the way to his crucifixion. Crucifixion was well known to the disciples in Jesus' day, and Jesus had just spoken about his death. There was only one way in which the disciples would have taken Jesus' words: literally. And make no mistake, Jesus meant for them to take it that way. They were to be ready to die in the service of Jesus, and not just at some point in their life, but every single day.

And finally, *follow me*. In other words, embrace my life, walk in my way, even if it means your death.

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In context, the meaning of Jesus' words could not have been clearer. He was telling his disciples: 'if you want to be my disciple, you must follow me on my terms. For one thing, you'll need to give up on this ridiculous idea of a martial Messiah and victory over Rome with the sword. That's not my mission, and it's not yours either. My mission, my way, is the way of Calvary Love. You are going to have to surrender yourselves to my way. Even if it costs you everything, including your lives. In fact, that's the only way to preserve your life. That's the only way to eternal life. It won't profit you anything to win the whole world by the sword, or to experience success in any other way on your terms, if, in the process, you sell your soul to Satan. There it is. That's my way. Don't be ashamed of it; or else I will be ashamed of you.'

In fact, that is basically what he told them next. You can check that out in Luke 9:24-27.

It's hard to know precisely how the disciples took all that. My guess is they may have done what a lot of us still do today: looked for a way to ignore the plain meaning of Jesus' words. Quite frankly, it seems that's precisely what they did up until the first Easter. But if you look at the very next passage in Luke's Gospel, Luke 9:28-36, you will notice that the lesson begun on the road to Caesarea Philippi wasn't quite over. Eight days after Jesus confronted his disciples with the fact that they needed to embrace him on his terms, not theirs, something very significant happened: *The Transfiguration*. Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John up the slopes of Mount Hermon to witness something incredible. There, before their eyes, Jesus was no longer Jesus the son of Joseph, the tradesman turned itinerant preacher. He was Jesus Messiah, Son of God, resplendent in all his pre-incarnate glory. A lot of wonderful things happened that day, but the one that concerns us is this: a cloud came

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over the disciples, and a voice from the cloud, the voice of God the Father, spoke to them: *'This is my Beloved Son, the Messiah. Listen to him!'*

And just like that, all questions about Jesus were answered. Who is this man? He is the Messiah. But not just the Messiah. He is God's Son. He is God with us. And what are we supposed to do with him? Listen to him. Friends, it is no coincidence that the Father's words were spoken on the heels of Jesus words, 'If anyone wants to be my follower, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.' We need to listen to everything Jesus said of course. But those words especially we cannot ignore. The call of Christ is to do what Jesus did. It is a call to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus. True, most of us probably won't die a martyr's death, but every day, we must be willing to walk in Jesus' footsteps, to *imitate* him in all things, come what may.

And if we don't? Well, listen to something else Jesus said: 'if you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, *you are not worthy of being mine*' (Matthew 10:38; See Also Luke 14:27, emphasis added).

Ouch.

The Great Commission

Jesus' teaching that day on the road to Caesarea Philippi was tough, and as I said, the disciples didn't get it until Easter. But when it came, everything changed. Jesus had said he would go to Jerusalem, die, and then rise again. On Easter morning, Jesus fulfilled the last part of that prediction, and in so doing, demonstrated to the world that the way of the Cross is not the way of folly; it is the way to eternal life. Once the disciples understood that, they were ready to do what Jesus asked: deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus wherever he led.

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As Jesus prepared to ascend back to his Father, to the pre-incarnate glory that the disciples had glimpsed on the Mount of the Transfiguration, he gave to his disciples a final commission. We call it the Great Commission, for it sums up the very mission of the church. Here it is:

‘...I have been given all authority on heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:18-20).

I don’t have a lot to say about this one. Simply that when Jesus gave his disciples their mission, he told them to go into the world and make disciples. He told them, the ones he had called to follow and imitate him in every way, to go into the world and help others become people who would follow and imitate him in every way.

Christian, this is your call. You are meant to be a disciple of Jesus. You are meant to follow him and imitate him in every way. You are meant to go into the world and help others follow and imitate him in every way.

If instead you are doing what so many have, forsaking true discipleship, seeking power, hating your enemies, carrying a sword, doing the other things written of in the chapters of this book, and carrying on as if it were perfectly acceptable, you need to know something. The Father’s voice can still be heard. And do you know what it is saying?

‘Jesus is my beloved Son. Listen to him!’

The Ethic of Imitation in Acts and the Epistles

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The imitation of Christ was part and parcel of what it meant to be a Christian in the New Testament Church. In their lives and in their writings, the believers of that era demonstrated their willingness to listen to Jesus and walk in his ways.

Stephen

We discussed the martyrdom of Stephen back in chapter six. Here it is important to note the way Stephen died. The mob had grabbed hold of him and taken him outside the city, where they stoned him to death. Stoning by the way, is not as quick a way to go as you might think. It takes a lot of effort and can take a while, which explains why Luke notes that Saul watched the coats of the men who did the work (See, Acts 7:58). You work up a sweat while stoning someone. So naturally, you remove your coat.

So there Stephen was, dying a slow, agonizing death outside the city gate, as his Savior had done before him. Luke records: ‘As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ He fell to his knees, shouting, ‘Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!’ And with that, he died’ (Acts 7:59).

The echoes of Jesus’ death cannot be missed. Jesus too asked the Father to receive his spirit (see Luke 23:46) and prayed for his enemies as he died (23:34). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died as his Savior had died. As the stones reigned down upon him, he continued to imitate Christ.

And then there was the guy who watched the coats.

Paul

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Saul the coat watcher eventually met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, and tirelessly served Jesus to the end of his days. I'll have a little more to say about how that happened at the conclusion to this chapter. But for now, I want to take you to the time in his life when he was a prisoner in Rome waiting to die for his faith. He had been imprisoned for his faithfulness, wronged by enemies, and deserted by almost all his friends. He was inching closer to the day when the Romans would take him out to the roadside and lop off his head. And yet, in his letters from prison, he exudes joy. For example, in his letter to the Philippians, after writing of his former life as a Pharisee pursuing righteousness, together with all the perks that went with it, he writes:

'I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything is worthless when compared with *the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him...I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead.

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. *But I press on to possess that perfection* for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us...

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Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example' (Philippians 3:7-9(a); 10-14; 17).

I always stand in awe of those words. There is Paul, a man whose faithfulness to Christ had cost him so much, practically singing about the joy, the 'infinite value,' of knowing Jesus. Talking about how it is worth giving up everything to know Jesus. Thankful to share in Christ's sufferings. Looking forward to sharing in his resurrection. Pressing on to perfectly imitate Christ. And urging those to whom he writes to follow his example, not because he himself was all that and a bag of chips, but simply because he had done his best to imitate Jesus.

Other Key Verses

I trust you are getting the point by now. The New Testament teaches us to imitate Christ. But just in case anyone still wants to argue with you about it, here are some additional verses, from Paul and John, to toss their way when they do:

'And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ' (1 Corinthians 11:1).

'So you received the message of joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. *In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord.* As a result, you have become an example to all believers in Greece – throughout Macedonia and Achaia' (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7, emphases added).

'Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, *so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies*' (Ephesians 4:11, emphases added).

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‘You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had’ (Philippians 2:5).

‘But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can *see and reflect the glory of the Lord*. And the Lord – who is the Spirit – *makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image*’ (2 Corinthians 3:16-18, emphasis added).

‘I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20 NIV).

‘For those God also foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters’ (Romans 8:29 NIV).

‘For Christ called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. *He is your example, and you must follow in his steps*’ (1 Peter 2:21, emphases added).

‘Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did’ (1 John 2:6).

‘Dear friends, we are already God’s children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is’ (1 John 3:2).

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‘We know what real love is, because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters’ (1 John 3:16).

That should do it. If those verses don’t make it clear to you and your friends, nothing will. Christians are supposed to imitate Christ. Our goal is to be conformed to his image. My goodness, what do you think the word ‘Christian’ means?

Imitation and the Early Church

That this ethic of imitation remained the normative expression of Christian faith throughout the first three centuries of Church history should be evident in all we have discussed in this book to this point. We have already noted the stories of several martyrs who went to their deaths imitating Christ, men such as Stephen, Polycarp, Maximillian, and Marcellus. To this list we could add the names of Justin Martyr, Perpetua, Ignatius of Antioch, and countless more. And certainly we would add the lives of the apostles themselves, who, excepting John, were all put to death for their fidelity to Christ in the years following the writing of the books of the New Testament. In each of their stories, from the apostles through the early fourth century, we find account after account of men and women living and dying like Jesus. Their conduct throughout their trials and deaths are summed up well by Tertullian, who wrote in the late second century:

‘If [a follower of Jesus] is pointed at (for his religion), he glories in it; if dragged to trial, he does not resist; if accused, he makes no defense. When questioned, he confesses; when condemned, he rejoices.’⁵

⁵ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3.109, 110 (Ad Nationes, Chapter I).

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There is a letter, purportedly written by Ignatius of Antioch to the Christians in Rome while he was on his way to face trial and death there for his faith. Scholars dispute its authenticity. Some say it was written by Ignatius around 110 AD, the time of his death, others that it was written in the third century by someone else. I leave the scholarly debates to others on this one, but quote from the letter here simply to illustrate that, whoever wrote the letter, its existence bears further witness to the truth that the imitation of Christ, even to the point of death, was held in high regard during the period of the Ante-Nicene Church. Consider these lines:

‘Only pray that I may have power within and without, so that I may not only say it but desire [martyrdom]; that I may not only be called a Christian, but also be found one.’⁶

‘Now I am beginning to be a disciple. May nought of things visible and things invisible envy me; that I may attain unto Jesus Christ. Come fire and cross and grapplings with wild beasts...wrenching of bones, hacking of limbs, crushings of my whole body, come cruel tortures of the devil to assail me. Only be it mine to attain unto Jesus Christ.’⁷

‘Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God.’⁸

In this we see the desire of the early Church, a desire reflected in the lives of so many, to so imitate Christ that his sufferings might be shared in their bodies. Some of this is hard to read, but it demonstrates how seriously the early Christians took the imitation of Christ.

⁶ Ignatius to the Romans, from *Apostolic Fathers* (Lightfoot and Harmer, 1891), 3:2.

⁷ *Ibid.* 5.3

⁸ *Ibid.* 6.3

The Miracle of Imitation

Perhaps you know the line from *Hamlet*, ‘Methinks the lady doth protest too much.’ It has become something of a catch phrase to describe what is going on when someone behaves defensively in response to an accusation or comment. I think of that line whenever I think about the martyrdom of Stephen and the subsequent conduct of the man who would eventually become Paul.

Earlier in the chapter, I recounted the way Stephen died, praying for his enemies. I also noted that while he died, a young man named Saul had been watching the coats. Saul was an ambitious young man. He hailed from the tribe of Benjamin, studied under the renowned Rabbi Gamaliel, and was otherwise a rising star in the religious universe of Israel (See, Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:5). It is interesting that, immediately after Stephen’s death, this young man who had watched the coats while Stephen was murdered became the lead persecutor against the Christian Church. Luke records:

‘Saul was one of the witnesses [to Stephen’s death], and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria...But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went house to house, dragging out both the men and women to throw them into prison’ (Acts 8:1-3).

In other words, the coat check guy went on a mission to destroy the Church in the wake of Stephen’s murder.

A lot of people assume that this was because he was in such agreement with the murder of Stephen that he became pumped up and desired to join in with the persecution of the Christians. I’m sure

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that was a big part of it, and certainly so at the level of Saul's consciousness. But I've always wondered whether something else happened to Saul that day. Saul, you see, had heard Stephen's prayer. He had heard Stephen ask God to forgive his enemies. He had heard Stephen ask God to forgive *him*!

On the day Jesus' died, the Roman Centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail had been so moved by a similar prayer that he took off his helmet and famously said, 'Truly, this was God's Son' (See, Mark 15:39). There is something powerful about having someone forgive you like that. My belief is that Stephen's prayer had a similar effect on Saul. It got under Saul's skin. It rocked him to his very foundations. He had been the Pharisee's Pharisee, a man on his way to the top of the religious world! But suddenly, having watched a man die the way Stephen had, imitating Christ and loving his enemies, he wasn't sure what he believed anymore.

Desperate to prove himself a good and loyal member of the religious crowd, he plunged himself into violence against the Church. It was his way to check the rising doubts in his heart and prove himself true to his ideals. And so he struck out against Christian men and women, going house to house, chasing them even as they left Jerusalem, desperate to bring them to 'justice' and to convince himself that he was still the man he had always believed himself to be.

The only problem was that it wasn't working. For everywhere he went, he found more 'Stephens.' More men and women who refused to break faith with Jesus. Men and women who continued to love as he loved. Men and women who, like Stephen, pursued the imitation of Christ even in the face of persecution.

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So Saul went further. He obtained letters to arrest Christians as far away as Damascus and set out to arrest them there. The rest of the story is well known. On the way, he met Jesus, and was never the same again.

I believe that Saul's transformation wasn't just something that happened on the road to Damascus in a flash of blinding light. I think his story began the moment he heard Stephen pray and watched him die. The moment he saw a man imitating the love and compassion of Christ. The encounter on the road certainly brought Saul over the line, but Saul, I believe, was already wrestling with who he was and what to make of Jesus. It may not have looked that way from the outside, but Stephen's imitation of Christ was already working on Saul from the inside.

Friend, the imitation of Christ is a powerful thing. A person who walks in the footsteps of the Master will see, either in this life or from eternity, amazing things. Stephen's faithful imitation of Jesus propelled Saul on a course that eventually made him the greatest Christian missionary of all time. Christ-likeness changes people. It rocks them to their core. It turns them around. It sets them free. Just ask Stephen and Christine Daae. The imitation of Christ has the power to set the darkest heart free.

My wife and I are homeschool parents. My wife Megen is the real hero in this venture. She teaches both of our children day in and day out. It's hard work, but it has its rewards. Not long ago, Megen was discussing the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego with our nine-year-old daughter Kaeleigh. If you don't know the story, it's in Daniel 3 and goes something like this: King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon built a huge statue (probably of himself) and ordered everyone to bow down and worship it. Shadrach and Company, devout Jews that they were, refused. The King ordered that they be

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thrown into a fiery furnace and burned alive. God kept the men safe and delivered them from the fiery furnace. Nebuchadnezzar then apologized, praised God, and gave Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego raises and promotions.

After discussing the story, Kaeleigh and Megen talked about it.

Kaeleigh (*dubiously*): ‘So does this mean that when we stand up for God, God always saves our lives?’

Megen: ‘Well, not always. God saved Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but often, people who stand up and do the right thing aren’t rescued. Many Christians have had to give up their lives in order to bear witness to Jesus and do what is right. It’s happened many times and it’s happening all around the world even now.’

Kaeleigh (*thinking*): ‘I guess sometimes, the miracle happens later.’

Megen: ‘What do you mean?’

Kaeleigh: ‘Sometimes, when people give up their lives for Jesus, they don’t see the miracle before they die. But *then* the miracle happens.’

Megen: ‘What miracle? Do you mean they get to go to heaven?’

Kaeleigh: ‘Well, yeah, there’s that. But the real miracle is that when we live and die for Jesus, other people come to believe in him too.’

Christian America, please listen to my daughter. Imitate Christ. For if we do not, if we continue to delete Jesus, people will never believe a word we say. But if we follow Jesus, if we walk in his ways no matter what, then even when it costs us everything, we will see miracles.

Epilogue

*'Am I a soldier of the cross? A follower of the Lamb? And shall I
fear to own his cause? Or blush to speak his name?'*

Isaac Watts

One of the most read books in history is Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*. First published in 1896, it has sold more than 30 million copies. It tells the story of a pastor and church who decide to take the words of Jesus seriously. In every situation, they resolve to ask the question, 'what would Jesus do?' before deciding upon a course of action. They promise to do their best to answer that question, and to act accordingly. Almost 125 years later, that question has been so used and abused that it has sometimes become something of a joke, even in Christian circles. Christians nowadays actually laugh at other Christians who wear 'WWJD' bracelets and T-shirts. But that's a crying shame, because, of course, no Christian should ever do anything without first asking the question, 'what would Jesus do?' He is, after all, the one we are supposed to follow.

In the novel, the church's experiment begins when one day, amid the pomp and circumstance of a Sunday morning service, a homeless man pops in and disrupts things. He has had a hard life. He has wandered all over the country looking for work. He has lost his wife and daughter to disease. He has had doors slammed in his face by so called 'Christian' men and women who have ignored his cries for help. After listening to the congregation sing and the pastor preach, he stands up before them, and speaks. Here is just a portion of his convicting words:

'I was wondering as I sat there in the gallery, if what you call following Jesus is the same thing as what He taught. What did he mean when he said, 'Follow me?' The minister said...that

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it is necessary for the disciple of Jesus to follow His steps, and he said the steps are ‘obedience, faith, love and imitation.’ But I did not hear him tell you just what he meant that to mean, especially the last step. What do you Christians mean by following in the footsteps of Jesus?...

What do you mean when you sing, ‘I’ll go with Him, all the way?’ Do you mean that you are suffering and denying yourselves and trying to save the lost, suffering humanity just as I understand Jesus did?...Somehow I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing, ‘Jesus I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee,’ and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl too...I heard some people singing at a church prayer meeting the other night,

‘All for Jesus, all for Jesus,

All my being’s ransomed power,

All my thoughts, and all my doings,

All my days, and all my hours.’

and I kept wondering as I sat on the steps outside just what they meant by it. It seems to me there’s an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn’t exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don’t understand, but what would Jesus do?’¹

Right now my friends, there is a world out there yearning for the followers of Jesus to stand up and do what Jesus would do, no less than the homeless man yearned to see such action in Sheldon’s novel.

¹ In His Steps, Charles Sheldon, chapter one.

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But what do they see? They see a church that pursues worldly power. A church that builds walls to keep out its enemies. A church that carries a sword that was never ours to wield. A church that pledges its allegiance to national pride above Jesus. A church that pursues wealth, comfort, and security while neglecting the poor, the broken, and the lost. A church that plays it safe in the face of the world's sorrow. A church that turns its back on the refugee and stranger. A church that ignores, and even participates in, racial injustice. A church that refuses to ask, in these and so many other situations, 'what would Jesus do?'

Certainly not all Christians deserve such criticism. There are many who faithfully strive to follow Jesus. But, as I said in the prologue, those who have deleted Jesus have obfuscated the public's view of such noble souls. In the public eye, when people think 'Evangelical Christian' (and in the minds of many, there is no other kind, so we might as well leave off the 'Evangelical') they picture not servants, but power seekers. Not lovers, but haters. Not peacemakers, but division-bringers. They see, not a reflection of Jesus and his love, but a motley collection of fearful, angry, and compassionless people supporting fearful, angry, and compassionless policies.

If we don't do something to change things, and that right soon, we will watch our neighbors delete Jesus from their lives forever.

The Grand Inquisitor

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky penned what is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest chapters in all literature. It bears the title, 'The Grand Inquisitor,' and within its pages the great Russian writer tells a fanciful tale, born in the mind of Ivan

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Karamazov, of what might happen if Jesus were to visit the world again before his final coming in glory at the renewal of all things.

In Ivan's story, Jesus visits sixteenth century Spain, during the time of the Inquisition. When he appears, the masses immediately recognize and are drawn to him. They rejoice over him, especially as he raises a young girl from the dead. However, not everyone is happy to see him come. A Cardinal in the church, the Grand Inquisitor, is deeply disturbed. He has Jesus arrested and put in prison.

The Inquisitor goes to the prison to confront Jesus, demanding to know 'why shouldst Thou now return to impede us in our work?'² He then embarks upon a tirade against Jesus for the 'mistakes' he made in the course of his ministry. Among them, the Inquisitor insists, is Jesus' rejection of Satan's offers in the wilderness. In reference to Jesus' refusal to worship Satan in exchange for the kingdoms of the world, the Inquisitor says:

'Why didst Thou reject the offer? By accepting from the powerful spirit his third offer Thou would have realized every aspiration man seeketh for himself on earth...in accepting the Kingdom of the world and Caesar's purple, one would found a universal kingdom and secure to mankind eternal peace.'³

He continues to explain to Jesus that the church had since corrected his mistakes. It had accepted the offers Jesus had declined, and was in the process of building a better, more secure, material world. In other words, the church had found that it was better to do

² Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (H.P. Blavatsky Translation, 1880), Book 5, Chapter 5, 'The Grand Inquisitor.'

³ Ibid.

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things its own way rather than Jesus' way. It had rejected the way of the cross and traveled the way of power.

Sound familiar?

The Inquisitor eventually tells Jesus, 'if there ever was one who deserved more than any of the others our inquisitorial fires, it is thee.'⁴ He then sentences Jesus to death.

It is a disturbing story, but one that sadly rings true. For the Church has indeed, in many quarters, rejected the way of Christ. It has accepted the devil's bargain and gone its own way. As I look at what so many of us have done to Jesus and his teachings over the years – what so many of us are still doing – I cannot escape the tragic conclusion that were Jesus to come again to visit us short of his final coming in glory, we would probably try to crucify him all over again.

In a sense, we already have.

That may sound shocking, but the truth is that in ignoring the plain teachings of Jesus, we have done more than delete him. We have hung him on the cross afresh and left him there. We sing songs about how he died to save us, about his wondrous love, his sacrificial death, and how he brings us eternal life. But when it comes to following him, when it comes to having him direct our courses, we would prefer he just stay on his cross so that we can celebrate the gift of salvation while remaining free to live on our own terms.

Sigh.

But there is hope. Dostoyevsky does not end his story of the Inquisitor with the execution of Jesus (that never happens). Instead, he offers a powerful illustration of the eternal constancy and love of

⁴ Ibid.

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Christ. Jesus listens to all the Inquisitor has to say, his rantings and his sentence, and then, much as he did on the night he took up the basin and the towel, sadly and silently rises, walks over to the Inquisitor, and kisses him.

Brothers and sisters know this: yes, we have deleted Jesus, in so many ways. But even now, Jesus greets us with his holy kiss. His love and grace are still seeking our better natures, calling us back to what we are meant to be.

Dear Jesus,

Forgive us. For the times we have deleted you. For the times we have crucified you afresh, celebrating your victory while refusing to walk in your steps. Help us Lord, to imitate you, in all that we do. May we stand at the crossroads of our culture and show people who you are. Give us the courage to stand before those who model a distorted version of you and cry out to them and all around them, 'That's not Jesus!' Conform us to your image. Teach us to love while others rage. For your sake and for your glory. Amen.

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About the Author

Brent David Miller is Senior Pastor at the First Baptist Church of Collingswood. Before going to seminary, Brent was an attorney and spent several years as a prosecutor. His goal in life is to share with as many people as possible the Good News that there is a God who loves them unconditionally and limitlessly, and that He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. Brent currently lives in Collingswood, New Jersey with his wife Megen, daughter Kaeleigh, and son Caleb. You can follow Brent's blog, *Stars Above Me* at www.thestarsaboveme.com.

If you ever find yourself in the Collingswood area, Brent is always ready to hang out in a local coffee shop and talk about Jesus.

Also by Brent David Miller

The Dawn from on High: Advent through the Eyes of Those Who Were There

Advent is the story of God becoming human, the most mind-blowing event in the history of the universe. In *The Dawn from On High* you will hear the story from the perspective of eyewitnesses, specifically Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, a Shepherd, Simeon, Anna, Herod, and Gabriel. These dramatic pieces are ideal for personal reflection, meditation, or preaching. You will experience the Christmas story in a whole new way: through the eyes of those who were there.

Grace at the Threshold: Reflections on Salvation, Hope and the Love of God

The Bible teaches that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Many believe this means that if a person does not accept Christ before death, they will be lost forever. Others believe there may be opportunities for repentance after death. Still others contend that, in the end, everyone will be saved. In *Grace at the Threshold*, Brent David Miller explores these possibilities in a series of reflections on the means of salvation, the nature of the Christian hope and the relentless pursuit of a God who never gives up. The result is an ‘outside the box’ take on the possibilities of grace that will lead you into a deeper understanding of both the love of God and the necessity for a relationship with Jesus. If you have ever wondered how far God is willing to go to save the lost, *Grace at the Threshold* is for you.

***Royal Mistakes: Life Lessons from Some
Seriously Messed up Judean Kings***

Explore the blunders of Biblical kings with stories that will leave you shaking your head at just how foolish people can be. This collection of Biblical tales offers both an illuminating Bible study and a profound warning. *Royal Mistakes* provides a treasure trove of learning to help you avoid behaviors and decisions that will only bring heartache to you and the ones you love. Sit back, settle in, and take a journey through an ancient time when kings ruled, and folly was the order of the day.

***The Challenger: Faith, Love, and
Resistance in the Gospel of Mark***

The story of Jesus is the revolutionary tale of a hero rising from the margins to challenge the imperial, religious, and demonic oppressors of humankind. This commentary on the Gospel of Mark is an exploration of that story, one that will take you beyond both the mild savior of domesticated religion and the aggressive champion of warrior evangelicalism to reveal the truly subversive Christ. In these pages, you will discover Mark's message for what it is: a revolutionary summons to join Jesus in his ongoing work of challenging the powers and revealing the just and peaceable way of God.

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