

The background of the entire cover is a religious painting. It depicts Jesus, with long brown hair and a beard, wearing a blue robe over a white tunic. He is leaning over a large, multi-layered stone block that resembles a giant's foot or a large step. Two young children, a girl and a boy, are also leaning over the stone block, looking at it with interest. The scene is set against a warm, golden-brown background with a subtle grid pattern. The overall style is that of a classic religious painting, possibly from the 19th century.

CORNERSTONE

A STORY OF JESUS FROM
MATTHEW CHAPTER 19

Light
in the Closet
by Klein

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MATTHEW CHAPTER 19



Preprint proof for review.

Publication is a work in progress - VERSION 1 - 7/27/2025

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Forward – by Jesus

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

These were my thoughts as I looked down on Jerusalem from atop Mount Zion. It was just before I was taken before Pilate and condemned to death. You might think my ministry was a failure given the fact that it ended with my disciples fleeing and my brutal execution. But, if you have read my story before, you know that was not the end.

Looking back, the biggest challenge I faced in ministry was my attempt to move the disciples away from their man-made dogma toward what God originally intended. Living under harsh Roman rule, and stifling religious laws, the idea of a loving God was difficult for them to relate to. The religious leaders had hijacked the Jewish faith, redefining for themselves what it meant to be made in the image of God. The doctrines being promoted by the Pharisees, to manipulate and control the Jewish people, needed to be disrupted. My attempt to unearth the truths buried in Torah, Prophets and Psalms were not always well received. This was especially true when I challenged the narrative around gender roles.

The presuppositions of the Jewish worldview influenced and governed every aspect of Jewish daily life. There were rigid, socially-ingrained ideas on what it meant to be a man or a woman. The roles for each gender (male, female and saris) were well-defined and unquestioned. The penalties for attempting to express oneself outside of established gender norms included isolation, rejection, loss of family, and even death.¹

Modern preachers of today, much like their Pharisaical forefathers, use the threat of social isolation or expulsion now, and eternal damnation in the future, to keep parishioners dutiful and constrained. ^{2, 3}

Even though it was difficult, I attempted to shake up my culture to teach better, more valuable truths. For this endeavor to be successful I had to communicate through the Jewish dogma at the time. I achieved this by first citing the familiar and recognizing where my audience was at that moment. It was important to acknowledge their concerns and fears even if those concerns and fears were not directly relevant to my lesson. Creating a common understanding was critical to communicating ideas that were, for most of those listening, foreign. From there, I could challenge them with a reality consistent with my ministry's message of love, acceptance, faith and hope. ⁴

Those who followed me were amazed by the physical miracles performed, but I always felt a changed mind and heart were the greatest miracles of all. It was a lot easier to repair a broken bone than heal a broken heart or apply salve to a chaffed mind.

My followers were from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences. I chose my disciples because of their differences in the hope that by working closely together they would connect and then learn to value each other. If they could do this, their single-point perspectives could expand to include a wider understanding, and this would open them up to better appropriate for themselves the radical truths I wanted to teach.⁵

The following story contains an example of one such encounter. As I was preparing to teach in Bethsaida, a group of Pharisees approached me hoping to drive a wedge between me and my followers by challenging my views on gender roles. These Pharisees were already aware that I did not support a

strict adherence to gender hierarchy and saw this subject as an opportunity to expose me. The question they asked about marriage was designed to lay bare my views on gender in front of a sizable audience in the hope my disciples would no longer listen to or follow me. They anticipated success in slowing the growth of the crowds following me. ⁶

Rather than avoiding their question they were surprised that I decided to embrace it. I recognized this as an opportunity to reach the women and the gender-variant with a valuable truth. It was my hope that the sabbath listening would be encouraged and felt seen by me.

My teaching on gender roles has been misinterpreted by most. Ingrained gender biases make it almost impossible for the majority to understand the intent of my teaching. In those rare times when someone understands what I am attempting to impart, my heart is encouraged knowing I have reached or emboldened them.

My hope is that those who claimed to follow my teachings will be willing to let go of their presuppositions and open their minds to unexpected truths. I tried to help them glimpse a perspective more in line with mine and my Father's. Our ministry was, and still is, all about love. I hoped that those who followed me were willing to let go of the person they believed they should be, and discover through me who they really are.

To pursue fruitful spiritual growth, one must embrace uncertainty and doubt. Opening yourself up to this process can be unnerving and even scary. I assure you that a better understanding awaits those who risk losing something they never truthfully owned.

-Y'shua

Early Morning

A soft mist fell. Sunlight's first rays streaked through the clouds in the early morning. A gentle easterly breeze brushed the tousled, dark auburn hair away from the face of Jesus as he strolled towards an olive orchard to have a quiet moment before the day's start. His rough sandals were well worn from miles of walking, but they still served his sturdy, tall frame well. Constant exposure to the elements had etched lines of concern and passion into his olive brown face, allowing his smile to manifest quickly when called on.

His well-worn tunic, made from a single piece of cloth, was a present from his mother Mary. She had gifted it to him two years ago on the anniversary of his father Joseph's death. His tunic was secured with a thin leather belt around his waist as was his custom when he traveled. A familiar pale blue shawl hung over his shoulders, covering his chest. Jesus walked along with sure feet as if each rock, pebble, and blade of grass welcomed him and knew his name. He and his twelve followers found it difficult to find a moment alone away from the crowds. This quiet moment would not last long.

His disciples had set up camp the day before just a few paces from the Sea of Galilee shoreline. They quickly constructed, workable tent village. They chose a spot away from the smell of the fishing boats and nets, but a short walk to the town center in Bethsaida where Jesus planned to minister.

The disciples took care of the mundane details, of which there were many. They each had a specific job to do; from basic clean up and laundry, to securing food and providing shelter. Being

well supported in the essential day-to-day details, Jesus was free to plan and pray.

With evenly paced strides Jesus passed by a row of hastily constructed tents, and smoldering fires that had burned bright with food, fellowship and conversation the night before. Looking ahead to the north, Jesus could still see snow on the mountain tops. His piercing brown eyes fixed on the mountains which were, for the moment, bathed in the golden light of dawn. The mountain tops gleamed like the temple spires of old that used to tower above the city of Jerusalem before the Babylonians defeated the Jews and exiled them six hundred years ago. The Jews were home now in Israel. They were spread out through Samaria and Judea in the south, Perea and Decapolis in the east, and Galilee in the north. Once again, the Jewish people were in a struggle to regain the homeland they believed to be ordained by God. The latest conflict was with the power and desires of Rome.

The valleys near the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan river were rich and verdant but seldom refreshed with rain during the dry months relying on the melting snow. For Jesus and many others, this was a favorite time of year when the orchards were ripe with the sweet smells of olives and peaches.

As Jesus approached the garden, he could hear gentle waves behind him and to his left on the Eastern shore of Galilee. The rhythm of waves was like the pulse of the earth, boasting a wonderfully diverse creation in its depths. Mixed with the cooing of doves and call of loons, the sounds of the morning welcomed the new day.

Jesus loved the mornings and needed this time of quiet. He often wondered why so many chose sleep over welcoming the beauty of a new day. Morning was his time to reflect and set his mind at peace. He entered the garden by pushing open a narrow gate.

The well-tended orchard was ripe with dewdrops that slid from the leaves and branches dancing to the ground. The sweet scent of olives mixed with the smell of wet bark on the branches, created a pleasant perfume. Jesus found a large hard gray rock formed from shale and seashells to sit on. He laid his shawl on the impromptu seat as the garden sang its song of welcome. With eyes wide open he began his daily prayer. “Good morning my Father,” he said aloud, he paused and then continued quietly to himself.

As Jesus prayed, he felt fully connected to this wonderful creation. His purpose and joy could be fixed on the beauty of this new day, and for a while, he could just be grateful for the blessing of it. However, most of the Jewish people did not share his sense of belonging. The social and political struggles they faced were all too real, but Jesus put those aside for a moment. Many Jews would wake this morning with a dark cloud hanging over them unable to see any rays of hope. This fertile land was now part of a new world order. The promised land of the Jewish people, along with much of the known world, was almost entirely bent to the will of Rome. Their land had been overrun once again, and they yearned for the freedom God had promised them.

Jesus was three years into his full-time ministry. Many hoped that Jesus’s ministry would be a catalyst for the Jews to reclaim control over the Jewish nation. Some who followed him were anticipating a call to rise-up and revolt any day now. However, Jesus had a different plan, and those closest to him were beginning to understand that the revolution to come was something personal and deeper.

The sounds of clinking pots, low distant voices, and scuffling feet signaled that the camps were beginning to awaken. Jesus finished his time of solitude and headed back to his camp. As he

drew closer, he could see Martha and Mary Magdalene beginning to prepare breakfast. Mary was younger and took her clues from the elder who was a more experienced cook. Martha was the sister of his good friend Lazarus from Bethany. Both women wore the tradition long tunic, carefully tied across their chest for support in the traditional Jewish fashion. Mary's was a bright earthy orange while Martha's once bright yellow tunic was now faded. Both women's dark hair was neatly covered with tan linen and tied back in a modest fashion. Their feet were bare. The smell of bread and fresh peeled figs greeted Jesus as he approached. Soon the twelve would be up as well and a new day would surge forward.

Jesus was blessed to have such a loyal and hardworking group in his inner circle. As he listened to the women arranging the place settings, he thought back on how all his companions had come together.

A Call to Follow

It had been almost three years since Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding in Canaan. It was his mother who had put him up to it, and although Jesus loved a good feast, he was not really keen on continuing the three-day party by drawing so much attention to himself. After she asked him to help, his response to his mother was, “Woman, what must I do with you? My time has not yet come.”

Yet, to appease his mother, he performed his first public miracle by turning six large stone jars of water into wine. This was more than 120 gallons of, according to the wine steward, really great wine. Jesus did not do anything halfway, and this miracle really hooked people’s imagination.⁷

His fame had grown over the next few months as he regularly accomplished healings and other miracles. The blind were given sight, the lame could walk again, and even those who were hungry were being fed. Word of his miracles traveled quickly throughout the region of Galilee and across all Israel.

When his ministry began, Jesus split his time between the family carpentry business and preaching in the town squares and open fields. Being the eldest it was his responsibility to provide for his mother, brothers and sisters after his father Joseph had passed.

As interest in his teaching grew, Jesus started traveling greater distances making it difficult to return home. Jesus had already secured some benefactors in various towns and cities. Most of them were relatives who saw his potential even as a small child.

For many years, these relatives had traveled with his family to Jerusalem to worship and celebrate the high holy days. It was a precarious journey of four days through the rocky plain of Jezreel and down the western side of the Jordan Valley.

His half-brothers, James and Jude, sons of Joseph and his mother Mary, helped Jesus early in his ministry when they could. After Jesus's ministry became all-consuming it was up to his brothers to run the family's carpentry business.

Those following him increased in number quickly and it became evident that Jesus needed to create a reliable inner circle of support. He knew it was time to choose a core group from his more trusted followers. So, in the short weeks that followed he entreated twelve men to follow him, along with two women.

The first disciple Jesus chose was Andrew, a fisherman from Bethsaida in Galilee. Andrew was thin with strong arms and leathery skin from working long hours in the outdoors. Although young, his thick hair and beard were already beginning to turn white. Like other fishermen he wore a simple brown linen tunic covered with a natural wool mantle. His leather belt and sandals were sturdy and stiff from exposure to Galilean Sea. Andrew fished because his father and grandfathers had fished. He was not passionate about it and when called by Jesus to join the ministry, he was all too ready and willing to leave the nets behind.

Jesus called three more fishermen from Bethsaida: Andrew's brother Simon, whom Jesus would rename Peter, and the brothers James and John. It was Andrew who introduced Peter to Jesus. Peter was passionate and well meaning, taking his family responsibility seriously. Peter immediately followed Jesus, leaving the nets and boat to his two young sons. His wife stayed behind with their daughter Petronilla. A fisherman's family's life was difficult and uncertain. Peter believed that following Jesus could potentially improve the lives of all those he knew and loved. He

was inspired by what Jesus said, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ Instead, listen to my teaching, follow me and seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and those things will be provided for you as you need them.”

Peter believed him and wanted to find out more.

The brothers James and John were an obvious choice to help guide the ministry. Some called them the “sons of thunder” because of their passion and drive. They loved to wrestle, and quite often both made it to the finals in local competitions. Their mother Salome, was a strong woman with an opinionated wit. She applauded their choice to follow Jesus and saw this as a grand opportunity for her sons. She encouraged them to abandon their nets, family and friends to pursue something greater. She also determined to go with them.

As he taught in the towns and cities, Jesus continued to gather others to himself. Jesus’s teaching and presence was magnetic. His demeanor was soft and kind but he carried himself with an unquestioned authority that was not timid. He often spoke about love. “If you remember only one thing that I am trying to teach you, hear this; Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and give to your neighbor the same love you desire for yourself. Nothing is more necessary.”⁸

Jesus’s words were not dependent on volume or endless repetition in order to be heard. Jesus communicated in parables and metaphors filled with an enduring, sincere love. His teachings rang with truth that echoed in the souls of those who leaned in. His words filled their minds and hearts. His lessons revolved around attitudes rather than legalities. Religious leaders who opposed him sought to burden people with heavy loads, while Jesus attempted to lighten their load. He taught, “The pharisees tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on the

people's shoulders, when they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to help. If you listen, really listen to my lessons and learn from me you will find rest for your souls. I have shown you my gentle and humble heart. Let me lift the load with you to lighten your burden.”⁹

In Bethesda he met Phillip, a rather stout man with a thick dark beard. Phillip was very pragmatic and pessimistic by nature and not someone who would leave behind his well-ordered life. However, Jesus saw something more in him. He knew Phillip had a warm heart and empathy for others. When Jesus called to him, “Come follow me,” to everyone’s surprise, Phillip did not hesitate.

Philip and Nathaniel grew up together and were close friends. They were fishermen from Bethsaida. They were known for their rigid interpretation of Jewish laws and practices, to the point of excluding and judging anyone outside of the “true” Jewish faith. Philip had told Nathaniel he believed Jesus was the promised Messiah and entreated him to come and meet Jesus. Nathaniel wanted to see for himself what made Philip give up so much to follow Jesus. After speaking with Nathaniel, Jesus declared, “Here is an Israelite of the Israelites, in whom I can find no guile.”

It surprised Nathaniel that Jesus could size him up so quickly. He recognized Jesus as a potential Jewish Messiah. Jesus saw past Nathaniel’s initial skepticism and prejudice and invited him to be part of his inner circle, saying to him, “Nathaniel, most see you as inflexible, but I see you as genuine and sincere. You are open to understanding truth, even when it contradicts your preconceived notions. You may think you know who I am supposed to be, but if you follow me, I will show you who I really am.”

So Nathaniel did.

Also, from Galilee came, Jude the son of Cleophas and James the son of Alphaeus, both cousins of Jesus. They were dark haired,

young men, short but strong from daily burdensome farm labor. It was difficult to scratch out a living attempting to grow and harvest profitable crops in the rocky soil. They were the same age and often mistaken for brothers, sometimes even twins. Both had known Jesus their entire lives and were anxious for his ministry to start. When the time was right, Jesus just smiled at them and said, “Cousins, the time has finally come for my ministry to begin in earnest. Follow me!”

So Jude left the family farm to his siblings, while James was only too eager to leave the plow behind as he was never able to afford a donkey. This new path felt like a much better option.

As his followers increased in number, some of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were upset with his teachings, began to look for ways to disrupt his growing support system. They heard a rumor about the birth of Jesus. It was unbelievable, but true or not it was something they could leverage. His mother Mary’s explanation for the early pregnancy was wholly discounted by most all their relatives, aside from a very few. Most assumed that she was protecting Joseph’s reputation. Shortly after Jesus was born, Joseph moved the baby and Mary to Egypt, and after a few years, the rumor mill ground to a halt. When they returned years later, the relatives were just happy Joseph, Mary, and their now three children, were safe. Only close family and relatives remembered that Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father, but the topic was never brought up.

When Jewish religious leaders found out, they contrived a plan to use this against him.

Jesus’s relatives attended his preachings and teachings whenever he was ministering near his hometown of Nazareth. Word spread that he planned to teach and perform healings in the town of Nain, just south of Mount Tabor. Nain was a short hike from Nazareth for his mother, brothers and sisters, so they

eagerly came to hear him. If they left early enough in the day, they might get in a good visit.

Early in the morning, disciples Andrew and Nathan found a spot in the town square ideal for Jesus to address the crowd. They claimed the area by setting up a chair for Jesus and two long wooden benches for his family. Pillows were placed around for some friends they were expecting. Jesus's mother Mary and her sons arrived in the late morning and took their seats.

By noon, a noisy crowd filled the main town square. Soon after, Jesus arrived and greeted them, "Shalom, shalom!"

The crowd responded, "Shalom, shalom Rabbi!"

The crowd quieted and Jesus began to teach. He continued his previous lesson about forgiveness, "A slave owed his master more than he could ever possibly pay, so the master, in his mercy forgave the slave's entire debt. This same slave's brother owed the slave a small sum. Yet, he did not show mercy but demanded full payment. His brother could not pay, so the slave, this wicked slave, had him thrown in prison." Jesus paused while the crowd shook their heads and murmured. He then continued, "Well, the master heard about this. He was shocked that the slave, having been shown such mercy, would treat another so horribly. He decided to hand this ungrateful slave over to the punishers demanding that this debt be paid in full."

Jesus paused again and then continued, "Do you see yourself in this story or do you think this applies to someone else? Perhaps you are already thinking of someone who should have heard this, and you can't wait to tell them. I implore you to learn this lesson for yourself! Show mercy and forgive all those who have wronged you because your Father in Heaven has already forgiven your debt."¹⁰

As he was teaching, the Pharisees came into the courtyard,

dragging a woman who was struggling and crying. The disciples rose to their feet, but Jesus signaled for them to be still. The Pharisees shoved their way through the crowd and presented her to Jesus. They said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery, in the very act! The Law of Moses commands us to stone her to death. What do you say?”¹¹

Jesus paused his lesson and looked down at the ground. Jesus was silent. Picking up a nearby twig he knelt and drew straight vertical lines in the dirt creating seven parallel columns. He then started writing lists in those columns. They could not see what he was writing.

“Jesus, we ask you again, do you uphold the law?” the lead Pharisee asked him. “A woman who is unfaithful must be put to death! Or do you make exceptions in the case of friends or relatives?”

Jesus remained silent and continued to make lists, purposefully scratching in word after word.

“What about the betrothed?” one of the Pharisee’s scribes called out. “What should the punishment be for unfaithfulness?”

The disciples held their collective breaths. His brothers James and Jude started to move forward to address this veiled threat to their mother’s integrity, but Jesus motioned to them to be still.

Jesus stood up straight to address the damning accusation. He picked up a rock and those near him held their collective breath. What he said surprised them all. Holding up the stone, he declared, “Those without sin should be the ones to cast the first stones.”

He bent down to continue scribing out his lists.

The only sounds heard were the stones dropping to the dirt. The courtyard began to clear as each of her accusers departed

with the eldest going away first. His followers, with hushed whispers to each other and gentle nudging agreed it was best to go. Finally, all his disciples, his mother and his brothers exited as well. The day's lesson apparently was finished.

The woman was left alone with Jesus.

With his head still bowed and the stone still in his hand, Jesus asked her, "Where are your accusers?"

Wiping the tears from her face she answered, "Rabbi, they have all gone."

Jesus raised his head and looked at her, "Are there none left to accuse you?"

Still on the ground, she looked up at him and their eyes met. "No, none," she said.

Jesus stood up straight letting the stone fall from his hand. Helping her to her feet he said to her, "Then neither do I."

The next day, the crowds returned as did the Sadducees and Pharisees. His family did not return. Jesus once again began a lesson. This time Jesus spoke on light and darkness. As he taught, he said, "I bring light into the world so you may follow in my footsteps towards the light of life. It is my Father who has sent me, and I speak for my Father." ^{12, 13}

Then one of the Sadducees from the back of the crowd shouted, "Your testimony is false for we know you lie about who your father is. Do you know who your father is?"

This was not a random question, and Jesus knew they had prepared themselves carefully for this moment. They were intent on raising the issue of his birth and obviously did not plan to let it go. Jesus was glad his mother was not there to suffer yet another humiliation.

Another Sadducee echoed the question, “Who is your father Jesus?”

They were determined to continue accusing him and planned on getting even more personal.

Jesus took a moment and answered, “My teachings are true, for I know where I come from and where I am going. I know who my father is.”

A Pharisee laughed and then shouted, “We know who your father wasn’t. We know Joseph was not your father. Do you even know who your father was?”

Jesus was composed. It was not the first time he had to defend his mother. “You do not know where I come from nor where I am going. You judge me in accordance with your desires, but I am not judging anyone.”

One of Sadducees stepped forward and declared, “Jesus ignores the scriptures and teaches against the law of Abraham our father, ignoring strict adherence to the sabbath, and consorting with sinners.”

Another Pharisee stepped up adding, “We at least know who our father is. He is Abraham.” They congratulated each other with exuberant nods of agreement.

His disciples were looked for an opportunity to intervene, but Jesus raised his hand and stopped them. Jesus knew their intentions and was prepared to respond.

He replied, “If your father truly was Abraham, then you would know me as your brother, for the one true Father sent him and now sends me. Let me tell you in a way that you may understand. I know my Father, and you do not.” He continued more loudly and sternly, “But I know who your father is, for you show yourselves to be from your father, for you do the works of your

father, that is the evil one, Satan!”

They began to shout at him all the more, “You are wrong! We know who our father is!”

Jesus said in a voice that demanded an ear, “Understand this! You speak from your nature as I speak from mine. All here can see that you disrupt my ministry because you do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him, and there is no truth in you. You speak of earthly things, and I speak of Heavenly. I teach the truth, yet you do not believe me. What am I being accused of? Which of you convicts me? The one who is from God hears the words of God. You do not hear the truth in my words because you are not from God!”¹³

The disciples intervened as a shouting match ensued.

Jesus left through the crowd. Once again the day’s lesson was interrupted by religious leaders determined to maintain their control over the Jewish people. Jesus and his disciples decided it was time to move on to the next town, perhaps to Bethsaida in the east near Galilee. So they prepared to leave and went on their way.

Jesus Makes Some Surprising Choices

Thomas was a quiet young man. He was thin and slight of frame so mostly overlooked by others. His hair was light brown, and his skin was pale for an Israelite. He seldom drew attention to himself. He had been following Jesus for some time now, but never spoke to him, staying usually in the back of the growing crowds. So, it was a surprise to all when Jesus, singled him out. Thomas was standing several feet away, so Jesus had to call loudly to him. “Thomas, I see you! I can tell by the look on your face that you are not sure about me. You keep showing up day after day and yet I can tell you have strong doubts and many questions about my teachings. Will you come up here?”

Thomas was surprised that Jesus even knew who he was. Sheepishly he made his way up closer to Jesus. Jesus placed his hand on Thomas’s shoulder and remarked, “You possess a thoughtful and inquisitive nature, Thomas.” Don’t you think it would make sense for you to join my ministry? Perhaps you will find the answers you seek. I would really like to know your thoughts.”

Thomas did not reply. Tears welled up in his eyes. He felt as if his tongue had become too large for his mouth.” Jesus smiled at him and said, “I will take that as a yes.” The other disciples laughed.

John asked Thomas, “Do you have a good pair of sandals and a warm cloak? You’ll need them!”

Matthew was rich by most standards. He was a tax collector

employed by the Roman occupational government and levied on the Galilean people egregiously high taxes. While enjoying his luxuries, Matthew had become stout and round. He was clean shaven with short cropped hair to emulate the look of a Roman. He was pleased with the opportunities that the Roman occupation afforded him. Matthew often collected more than required to increase his own wealth, and he was extremely talented in doing so. Rome did not mind this, for depriving the Jewish people of resources made them more manageable and kept dissenting behavior in check.

Matthew was an outcast in Jewish society.

It was the miracles that first caught Matthew's attention. He had heard some touting them as miracles from God more profound than the prophets of old. Others said it was nothing more than a side-show bolstered by the ignorant and the ill-intended.

He was skeptical, but open and so needed to see this miracle worker for himself. Many knew Matthew, and most hated him, so it would not be easy to attend a gathering unnoticed. Matthew decided to disguise himself in plain clothing and stay mostly in darken doorways or just at the edge of his ability to hear what Jesus was saying.

He was drawn to Jesus to witness for himself the miracles being performed. However, it was Jesus's words, not his miracles, that challenged and changed him.

Matthew had been listening to Jesus teach as often as he could, but did not have the nerve to approach him directly.

Then, one day, Jesus went to pay his taxes at the tax collector's booth in Capernaum. It was Matthew who was the tax collector. Matthew held his breath as Jesus approached. Walking directly up to the booth Jesus suddenly stopped. It was his disciple John

who asked, “Jesus, what are you doing? Should we be submitting to Rome like this?”

Jesus asked, “Look at a coin, whose image is on it?”

John replied, “Well, Caesar’s of course.”

“Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar,” Jesus quipped, “and give to God those things that belong to God.” John had no response to this. Jesus looked fully into Matthew’s round face and asked, “Matthew are you ready to follow me?” ^{14a}

The disciples were aghast! But without even pausing to think it over, Matthew said, “Yes, I am ready.” Matthew then paid the entire group’s accounts out of his own pocket and left his very posh life behind to follow Jesus.

The disciples were upset with Jesus for bringing such a person into their circle of trust. They were all embarrassed to be seen with Matthew. When questioned by others as to the presence of Matthew, a known traitor of the Jewish people, they would attempt to make excuses. Jesus was Matthews biggest defender reminding his followers, “Some of you feel that Matthew is unredeemable and some of you have personally been wronged by him.

I encourage you to remember that if you do not forgive others their sins, you will not be able to receive the forgiveness you seek from God.”

It took a long while for the others to accept him, especially Nathaniel and Phillip.

The Zealots were fanatical Jewish nationalists. Simon was a Zealot, and so an obvious choice to follow someone who was gaining notoriety as a possible Messiah. Jesus called Simon to follow him, and Simon did not hesitate to do so. In fact, Simon embraced the idea of possible suffering as a way to gain purity of

faith. He relished the idea of testing his faith, and to follow Jesus was a challenge he could not pass up.

The last disciple Jesus called was Judas. Judas hoped, as Simon did, for this ministry to be turned into a movement to eventually overthrow their Roman oppressors.

The invitation from Jesus was simple, just “Follow me.”

Judas was already packed and ready to go and was hoping for this chance. The other disciples felt his eager attention to all that Jesus was doing made him an obvious choice. He had skills handling finances and so was put in charge of the purse. To Judas, Jesus was seen as someone who could gather enough support from the people and eventually rally the religious and political leaders to the cause. This was a once in a century opportunity to free the Israelites from Roman occupation. He was familiar with the Governor of Judea's displeasure in the established government and secretly wished for Jesus to partner with him as well.

Judas was also a member of the Sicarii, a faction of extremists within the Zealot ranks. They were well-known for advocating violence against Rome. He joined the disciples after Matthew did so had no input into Matthew's appointment. To him, Matthew would never be more than a traitor. His determination to see Jesus take his rightful place on an earthly throne blinded him to all else. He saw the miracles as an example of an exercise in power, rather than an act of servitude and love. Judas leaned into Jesus's teachings on hypocrisy and applauded Jesus when he was angered.

Judas discounted much of this Messiah's teachings and focused single-mindedly on the possibility that Jesus could be the catalyst for political change. These opinions he did not share with the others but bided his time waiting for an opportunity. The crowds

that followed Jesus, he imagined, could be turned into an army. Jesus called him with the hope he could point his passion and obsession in a different direction.

For Judas a revolt was inevitable.

Judas looked at the assembled group of twelve men measuring them up. Some, if they are willing, could be molded into warriors. However, in his estimation most were a poor choice.

He felt he had some legitimate concerns and so asked Jesus to speak with him privately. The two of them left the group and entered a private garden. Judas said, "Jesus you are a natural leader, and you have demonstrated that you possess a great power and keen insight. I will follow you into battle, if needed. I thank you for trusting me, and I hope you know I will live up to that trust and more."

Jesus pursed his lips and nodded, "Yes Judas, what do you want to ask me?"

Judas leaned closer and asked, "I do not understand some of the choices you have made for leadership in what frankly is, if I may say, our army. I have many friends, most of whom you know, who are willing and waiting to follow you. Our network needs you, and as our leader we would be unstoppable."

Jesus shook his head and said, "I appreciate your passion Judas, that is why I want you with me. However, the ministry I am forming is of a different kind than what you imagine. If you continue to follow me, you will see what I am doing. The change I hope to bring is something deeper and more permanent. "

Judas's eyes lit up, "That is what I am hoping for too! I am dedicated to establishing the kingdom permanently, one that will last without end."

Jesus smiled and shook his head. He leaned in closer and took

both of Judas's hands in his, "Judas, what I hope to accomplish will become evident in due time."

Jesus paused for a moment, let go of Judas's hands and stood up straight. He continued, "You question my choices. You think there are too many differences in the twelve I have chosen. Remember, the lesson about the body. In the body I am building there are many members. One is a foot, one an arm, one a leg and so on. Let's say you are the eye. Would you tell the hand that you have no need of them? Of course not. All members are unique and have insights, skills and talents that are needed to make the body whole. It is our differences that make us whole and strong. Look at the diversity in the world that my Father has created. All of it has a purpose, and most of it you cannot see. Most of it is unexpected and resides in the deep places.

So, do not be quick to judge others, for you only see what is on the surface. There is a depth in each of my chosen followers, that I can perceive, that you do not. You have shown me your passion, but I must ask you to now show me patience. Trust what I am doing and open yourself up to the unexpected." ^{14b}

Judas said, "I understand you. Some of those you have called to leadership do not now appear to be ready and I cannot see how they will be. Some, like me are ready. I can help you get the others ready." Judas paused and he could see from the expression on the face of Jesus that they were not on the same page."

Judas finished with, "I will try to be patient."

Jesus had chosen twelve men who shared little in common other than their desire to follow him. Their motives were often at odds with each other, but if the saying, "iron sharpens iron" is true, then these followers would become sharp indeed.

Although not part of the twelve, Mary Magdalene, and Martha from Bethany were welcomed by Jesus into the inner circle of

trusted followers.

Martha was with Jesus as often as she could be. The disciples and Jesus stayed in her home whenever they were in Bethany near Jerusalem. She often saved up for these times and lavished Jesus and his disciples with wonderful suppers. She was well known in Bethany for the creative and imaginative ways she served, what was typically common fare. Her tilapia was laced with a fig reduction and sweetened with olive oil and garlic. Her lentil and chickpea soup was especially filling, spiced with fresh garden herbs that only she knew the amounts and types of. Martha's bread was always warm when served and she took special pride in timing all the dishes to be ready simultaneously. Being late for dinner was not an option and if you were, Martha might not let you recline.

Mary Magdalene was with Jesus all the time. He often confided in her and she was trusted, many felt, more so than most of the men. This often led to friction between her and the twelve. Her open heart and desire to sit at the feet of Jesus, despite it being socially unacceptable, was an example of true steadfastness, trust and love. Jesus often spoke of her strong faith, passion and commitment. Because she was a woman, she was only tolerated by the men. This did bother her, but it did not deter her.

A Conversation with Jesus and Mary

Jesus had decided to minister to the Jews in Salem just south of Nain before heading up to Bethsaida in the northeast. Martha and Lazarus came up by boat along the Jordan to join them there, and they spent three days in the city speaking in various homes and meeting halls. One of the followers Jesus had healed a year before from a lame leg lived there. He owned a large villa and garden, with room enough for them all to stay, and was very excited that his invitation was accepted. Martha was especially excited to work in such a well-appointed kitchen and spend most of her time there.

After the noon meal, Martha began to clear away the plates, cups and bowls. She had one more meal to fix before her duties were done. The next morning her brother Lazarus and her would head back to Bethany. The disciples left on separate errands to prep for the journey to Bethsaida, leaving Jesus and Mary alone at the table for the moment.

Mary saw an opportunity to continue their ongoing private conversation.¹⁵

“Master, you have spoken a lot about what Heaven is like in a metaphorical way. You’ve compared it to a wedding feast to those who were hungry,” Mary recalled, “To the homeless you have promised a mansion. For those who are hurting from loss, you have said there will be no more weeping. For those who are on the fringe of society, you offer inclusion, a gold ring and new robes. From this, I understand that Heaven offers us a completeness that we lack now.” Mary pursed her lips, clicked

her tongue and then asked, “But what can we really expect? What actually happens when you die?”

Jesus replied, “You have a very inquisitive mind, Mary. I like that you have asked such a direct question, so I will tell you plainly.” Jesus looked hard into her eyes as if he were trying to burn understanding into her. “All things that exist come from God, and they are eternal, just as God is eternal. Life exists in many forms, and nothing is ever wasted or lost. All creation proceeds out from God to form the rocks, the sky, the air, the birds, the trees, the stars, and even you Mary. All that is created comes from a single source of energy and light. When someone dies, they return to God, to that same energy and light. You will have a new form, but the same substance. Matter transforms into energy or what many know as spirit. Do you understand?”

Mary thought hard for a moment. This was yet another layer in what she was learning from him. Just then Martha came back into the room and gathered a few more plates. Her eyes were watering, and she smelled of sweet onions. Mary could tell she was already in the midst of starting the evening meal. Martha spun on her heel and left.

Mary thought that Jesus’s answers at first were like peeling off the layers of an onion to get to a deeper truth. However, as she peeled, this onion kept growing.

“Yes, I think I understand. Well, sort of anyway,” she replied.

Jesus continued, “Good, it is something that is difficult to teach outside of context and there is little in this earthly realm that reflects the reality that lies beyond this one. When I say, ‘new heaven’ and ‘new earth,’ I don’t speak of something literal. My metaphors and analogies are not meant to imply that heaven is just like earth, just cleaner and shinier.”

Mary smiled, “Like, if heaven was, the same as earth but with

less bugs and dirt? I hope so, I have never enjoyed sweeping!”

They both laughed.

Jesus continued, “Creation is perfect as it is and does not need improvements. My Father sees all and has declared it all good. That has not changed. I can see that this is a lot to grasp.”

He paused for Mary to catch up and then continued, “I teach in metaphor and parable in order to relay eternal concepts of a divine reality outside of human experience. I must rely on the known so those listening may have a starting point to understand the unknown.”

Mary paused and then asked, “So we proceed from God, and to God we will return. That seems plain enough, so why use metaphors? Does that not complicate things? I know I will be with you as I am now, but not as I am. So, in a sense I will be and always have been with you. I hear many others keep referencing what we can and can’t take with us. Your teaching about laying up treasures in Heaven, have them expecting to pack a bag and move into a mansion bringing all those things they do not want to leave behind with them.”

Jesus’s eyes glimmered, he was very excited to have one of his followers ask questions that most would not even have thought to ask. “Yes Mary, you have touched on something very important and that is the idea of leaving something behind. In life we always leave the day we just lived behind, and each new day brings with it the unknown. The reality that the life will be left behind is not very comforting and frankly, scary for most. Being afraid is not conducive to understanding what I want to teach about heaven. I believe in sharing, not scaring.”

Martha reentered the room, swishing her apron and tunic in such away so as to interrupt and announce her intent. She brought several empty cups with her determined to get ahead

of the evening meal prep. She placed one at each of the sixteen vacant places, slamming down one in front of Mary with an obvious bang of disapproval. As she left, she motioned with her hands for Mary to follow her, which Mary ignored, and then left in a flurry feeling the pressure to complete her preparations alone.

“Did you want to join her, Mary?” asked Jesus.

Mary did not move.

Jesus smiled and continued, “You understand me, because you know me and trust me. Most do not, for their minds are full of doubt and disbelief. Like Martha, they are troubled by many things that they deem important and it is difficult for them to go beyond their own perceptions and fears. They focus on their deficits and value actions over intent, so they need a concrete image to relate to. Sin and fear still have power over them, and so their agendas are set accordingly. Sin creates a prison of condemnation and accusation. One built on a foundation of fear and secured with bars of guilt. They are self-condemned.” Jesus paused again to wait to see if Mary was caught up.

He then continued, “My Father wishes to free them. All of God’s creation is good, but they do not see it, nor can they fully appreciate it.” Jesus paused again and then pushed the empty cup in front of him off to the side. Leaning in towards Mary he said, “I have come to release the captives from their meticulously constructed, self-inflicted prisons of self-condemnation.”

The two sat in silence for a moment. They could hear Peter and James in the kitchen with Martha. Martha was complaining to Peter.

“She has been with the Lord all afternoon just chatting away leaving me to do all the work, and Jesus seems to be encouraging her,” Martha complained.

“All afternoon? All by themselves? Peter was annoyed. “Martha, it’s not proper for her to be alone with him. What have they been talking about?”

“Okay, so not really alone, since I have been going in and out while preparing for the evening meal.” Martha confessed to her obvious over exaggeration, “I have not been following what they have been discussing, only enough to know it has little to do with me.”

Peter peeked through the doorway, and said to Martha, “Mary considers herself an equal and Jesus allows this to go on.” Peter huffed, “It is not really my business, but I would not trust any woman so involved. It is unseemly.”

Martha added, “I agree. She does not know her place, and God knows I have tried to help her, but it is useless.”

Peter nodded to her, “I will bring it up with Jesus, but I don’t think it will do any good.” He thought for a minute, and Martha could see he was pondering something.

“What is it, Peter?” asked Martha.

“You and your brother are leaving in the morning by boat. Jesus told me not to get boats for our trip up the Jordan to Bethsaida, and said we were going to walk.” He grinned at Martha. “I’m learning to trust what he wants us to do, even though I really do not understand it.”

In the other room, Mary and Jesus sat together quietly and then continued their conversation.

“Master, you imply that you will defeat not just the power of sin but sin itself as an idea.”¹⁶

Mary took a quick breath and added, “This is difficult, and it would seem to me to be blasphemous if not for the truth it

sings to my heart. You say that forgiveness from God is free and does not require any payment. So also, we should freely forgive, without any recompense, those who have wronged us, even when they continue to do so?” Mary looked at Jesus and then down at the table. She relished their open and honest communication. She knew who she was while with him and felt more connected to all that was around her. Since following Jesus, the joy and peace she felt was new and she was living fully present and in the moment.

Mary continued, “Why do you say self-inflicted? Pharisees teach us that the sin we do needs to be appeased with sacrifice. Doesn’t God demand a sacrifice?”

Jesus smiled and replied, “Yes, that is what has been preached, but this teaching was an accommodation. Remember in the garden when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil? They saw themselves as naked and thought for the very first time that it was shameful. Do you think it was shameful, Mary?”

Mary replied, “No, God created all things good. I always wondered why they would suddenly feel shame.”

“Consider for a moment the nature of fruit.” Jesus began, “Fruit does not start off ripe, but ripens over time. The trees in the garden were symbols of the vast array of knowledge available. Most could be eaten, but the tree that bore the knowledge of good and evil was not yet ripe. I do not know when Adam and Eve would be ready to eat of that fruit, or if they ever would be ready, but they were told not to. This was not a test of obedience, as some would come to believe, but a caution to avoid inevitable consequences. They were not yet ready to determine for themselves what was evil and what was good and so when they ingested unripe fruit, they got it wrong. Adam got the apple stuck in his throat!”

“But isn’t expulsion from the garden a punishment from God?” Mary asked.

“It may seem that way, but the reason is more complicated. Remember what the question they were asked was, ‘Who told you being naked was a sin?’ When asked that question, what was their answer?”

Mary answered, “They blamed each other. Eve blamed the serpent. Adam blamed Eve and also God for creating Eve.”

“Correct,” Jesus responded, “This is why they were barred from consuming any additional fruit in the garden, especially the fruit of eternal life. They strayed from the initial intent of God, which unfortunately was their right in terms of free will. They had become broken, and God did not want his creation living forever in a broken state.”

“So, evacuating the garden was a consequence, not a punishment?” Mary was beginning to understand. This explanation was consistent with the other teachings of Jesus.¹⁷

Jesus smiled again, pleased with Mary’s openness. He said, “Sacrifice and offerings God does not require. That was man’s idea. For man does not freely forgive others, or themselves. God looks at the attitude of the heart. God wants to be pursued with your whole heart. Mary, if you can focus on the righteousness of God, then sin becomes irrelevant.”¹⁸

Mary looked troubled. “That sounds right, but I still question my motives and often stumble in transgressing against the law regardless.” She was starting to understand, but so many questions came flooding into her mind.”

Jesus looked seriously at her and frowned for an instant. He then composed himself and said slowly, “Yes. I know how you think, and accepting unconditional love without reservations is

truly difficult.” He paused and then deliberately and even more slowly said, “Well, if the only way mankind will allow forgiveness to take up residence in his soul is to appropriate a sacrifice on his behalf, then let that sacrifice be me.”

Mary was shocked! “My Lord,” she cried, “Why must it be you? Are not the sheep and lambs enough?” Mary was almost there, but a lifetime of learning is a lot to overcome.

John returned from his errands along with Jesus’s brother James and entered the dining area. They needed to ask Jesus about the upcoming trip to Bethsaida. Jesus asked how the preparations were going, and John had assured him that the money James had supplied was going to be enough for the journey. Jesus thanked them both. James said he needed to head back to Nazareth today. They both nodded goodbye to Jesus and Mary and left.

Jesus and Mary’s conversation continued.

“Mary, my Father is tired of the blood of the innocent being shed without cause.” Jesus began to sound stern, “The Torah is a list of accommodations and interactions from the mind of man attempting to understand my Father. They also try to understand the Messiah. Mary, you know who I am.”

“Yes, you are the son of man and the son of God.” Mary answered, “This I am sure of.”

“Hear this, Mary. You will have to endure much soon, as will the other disciples. You will see me freely give myself up to the whims and judgment of those who would desire to silence me. This I do to end sacrifice once and for all and to help those who follow me to understand that all creation needs to act in love for each other and love for God.” Jesus waited for her to consider this.

“You have told us that the greatest commandment is to love.” Mary looked worried, “But how do we love others when there is so much hate and distrust? The men barely tolerate me now. How can I love them when I often receive disdain in return?”

“You know I love you Mary, and I know this is not easy to ask this of you.” Jesus paused and then continued, “Start by loving each other, and then that love will spread. Others will see your love and know you follow my teaching. I realize that this may cost you much Mary. It breaks my heart thinking about what you will need to endure. But I do not ask you to do anything I am not willing to do.”

Jesus set his eyes and mouth in such a manner that his whole countenance had but a single purpose, “I am willing to lay down my life if the only way for my followers to fully accept grace, is a sacrifice. If it must be a sacrifice, then let it be me.” Jesus took a moment and then smiled almost as if this was a joke. “I do not do this lightly, and if there were any other way to teach what I need to in order to complete the task before me, then I would take it.” ¹⁹

Just then Peter entered the room and the two of them fell silent.

Jesus and the Pharisees

As he traveled from city to town, Jesus gathered to himself an additional following of about 500 postulants. The Pharisees in Capernaum were the first to report his activities to the Sanhedrin, a religious sect with a keen interest in accumulating power. As Jesus's number of followers grew, interest in his activities by the Jewish religious community did as well. The miracles could be dismissed perhaps, but not his words. Especially those that were aimed specifically at the Pharisees. He was routinely mentioning them in teachings and not in a positive way. Once he had called them "whitewashed tombs full of dead man bones, and filth." ²⁰

The entrenched religious leadership were very worried that the people might turn away from them and they would lose their power base and influence.

Jesus was ready to leave Salem. His disciples, Thomas, Judas, and the brothers James and John, along with Peter were with him. Martha decided to stay with Mary and the two of them got ready to travel to Bethsaida with the others. Jesus chose Bethsaida because the religious leaders in Capernaum had been speaking ill about him. Some threats were made on his and his followers' lives. So, his disciples, Matthew, Phillip, and Andrew had already crossed the Jordan and were taking the one-day journey to their hometown of Bethsaida to find lodgings. Jesus would minister there.

The crowds following Jesus discovered this was his next destination, and word spread quickly to all the neighboring cities

and towns. Consequently, all the inns were filling up even before the disciples arrived. People poured out of the neighboring cities, setting up tents outside the city gates and out towards the sea. Judas also had traveled with them since he oversaw the purse to pay for temporary shelter, but none could be found. Andrew and Phillip went back to inform Jesus. Judas and Matthew stayed to purchase supplies of bread, wine and fruit at the stalls and tabernacles before the marketplace was wholly depleted.²¹

Everywhere Jesus went large crowds gathered hanging on Jesus's every word. As Jesus and some of the disciples were traveling on the road they came upon Andrew and Philip returning to report to them. After conferring with each other it was decided to set up camp close to the shoreline because of the large crowds. There was a large open rocky area nearby, that wasn't suitable for tent camps but would work well for the upcoming assembly.

Most followed Jesus and his disciples because of the healings and other miracles being performed. Although Jesus had made it clear that his lessons were the most important part of his ministry, comparing his words to mana from heaven, and the bread of life, his teachings were often confusing even to his closest friends and family. Even so, Jesus was determined to reach the hearts and minds of those who defined themselves as his followers.

Jesus's miracles were placed under scrutiny by those who saw him as a threat to their honored place in Jewish society and political aspirations. But it was his words that the religious leaders and politicians found most objectionable.

During a time when not complying with Jewish law was seen as subversive and punishments for disobedience were quick and severe, Jesus taught, "Do not judge lest you be judged," and "The sabbath was made for the benefit of man, and not man for the

sabbath.”²²

In a time when it was commonplace to accuse and condemn others to lift yourself up and to look for places or honor and esteem, Jesus said, “Do not practice righteousness to be noticed, but when you give don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”²³

Jesus pushed back against the current social and political discord by teaching, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”²⁴

Jesus saw the need to teach those following him to keep their focus on themselves and their own spirituality, so he taught, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the tree trunk growing out of your own eye? Don’t be a hypocrite! Focus on your own missteps before attempting to instruct others.”²⁵

These words challenged the core of what the religious and political leaders used to maintain their superiority. Jesus’s teaching brought hope and an expectation that the Jewish plight was changing for the better. The call to convene had gone out and thousands of people had arrived to get a glimpse of the spectacle. This was a large noisy crowd of not only men, but also women and children.

The logistics for this meeting had all been handled and Jesus who had been waiting in a small nearby tabernacle was about to appear. Crowd control fell on the shoulders of the twelve chosen disciples, and they were exhausted but ready to facilitate the upcoming meeting.

The religious establishment was not pleased with this. Attendance in their synagogues was down and so also their influence over the congregation since they were no longer the most compelling voice of authority. Of course, revenue was also a

concern with less tithes and wave offerings.

Thousands had made their way to the rocky hillside. There were whole families, rabbinical students, teachers, fishermen, farmers, scribes, and mothers with children. Some were elderly, some ill, some blind and others who were lame carried great distances by family members on wooden planks. The mood was very excited, and expectations were high. Those who had heard Jesus speak previously were sharing their encounters with those hearing him for the first time. A thin woman in a bright blue tunic was recapping to a small group near her how Jesus had healed her blindness a month ago. So many others had similar stories to relate as the excitement continued to build.

Jesus finally appeared and the gathering quieted as everyone began to secure their places. The disciples all took their positions as well.

Having the multitude's full attention, Jesus began to teach.

It was at this moment that a group of Pharisees, draped in long white, red and gold robes with long fringes and tassels, pushed their way through the crowd and approached him to ask a question. It was obvious by the question that they were trying to goad him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" ²⁶

For the Pharisees, debate was a well-rehearsed rabbinical sport. Topics were introduced with the skill of a chess-master moving pieces on a chessboard. The first question asked would have an array of answers that were considered. Each answer would have a specific response calculated to move the conversation towards a certain and clear objective. Of course, Jesus knew the probable end game that this question implied. It was not the first time that Jesus had touched on this issue. However, Jesus surprised them by earnestly and unhesitatingly stepping into their trap.

Jesus determined to use the question asked to teach unapologetically on a subject he knew his audience would universally find objectionable and distasteful.

They were citing some very well-known passages. The first being the passage where Moses discusses a man writing a letter of dismissal. It reads, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he may write her a certificate of divorce, give it to her and send her from his house."

This was just the Pharisees first move and depending on Jesus's answer, there would be a whole list of scripture verses to follow. They must have known about his feelings toward marriage, the role of women and gender roles and were using this opportunity in front of a large crowd to shame or trap him into stating some unpopular viewpoints.

Jesus took a sharp breath, let it out slowly, and with eyes firmly fixed on the religious leaders began to speak. He intended to give them all that they wanted. They saw a trap, but he saw an opportunity.

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.'"

The disciples gasped! Was Jesus putting men and women on equal footing? They had heard his views on respecting each other in a marriage before. But this was taking things too far!

Jesus had been attempting to inch his believers towards the idea of creating a loving relationship within a marriage that would reflect his love for them. Jesus had hoped that mutual

goals and cooperation would be the corner stone of all married couples. He was not going to miss this opportunity to put a fulcrum under the old idea of marriage and move it towards what he knew to be the truth.

Marriage was entered into primarily as an economic or social arrangement. The man had most all the power, and the woman very little. Jesus was describing a unity of a sort that was unheard of. Jesus was implying more than just a respect for the marriage relationship but was redefining marriage at its core.

The crowd was astonished. One flesh? Never to separate? You could hear them murmuring,

“This can’t be true! A union joined together by God for the purpose of creating a single persona? So, is our teacher saying that I can NEVER divorce my wife?”

The Pharisees were elated at Jesus’s response. They had an answer in the ready. One particularly round-faced fellow with a gleam in his eye responded. “Why then,” he asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

This sort of debate usually involved a host of scriptures being cited and these well-seasoned religious leaders in their flowing robes were prepared to do just that.

Jesus’s view and treatment of women was widely unpopular. Embracing women as followers and routinely inviting them into his inner circle was unheard of. Not only did Jesus invite them in, but he listened to, respected and valued their input.

His views on saris and those outside of the gender binary were even more radical than his views on women.

His interactions with those who identified as saris was frowned on by both the religious leaders and his own disciples. Jewish

tradition held men in highest esteem, women next and saris well below that. Saris were not allowed into the temple but were relegated to the outer court.

One of his close friends was a very well-off man in Jerusalem whose trusted companion was saris. This companion had taken on the responsibilities of a woman in the rich man's household. It was at his home that Jesus planned to celebrate the next Passover with his disciples. Jesus knew this was going to be a vitally important meal and wanted to share that night with those he valued and loved the most.

The Pharisees question hung in the air while Jesus, looking intently at them replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The crowd fell silent. The Pharisees stood straighter and brushed the dust from their robes. His disciples shifted uneasily and shot each other quick glances. The crowd was murmuring disapproval at Jesus's words. Wasn't this heresy? Was Jesus saying that the scripture was wrong? Jesus was declaring that Moses penned those words, because the truth was not something the people were ready to believe or follow.

The crowd became even more restless. Most had risen to their feet, and a few had pushed forward.

"He speaks blasphemous words!" the round-faced Pharisee retorted.

Another Pharisee with obvious indignity gathered himself up and stormed from the courtyard, shouting as he left, "We cannot stay and listen to this man!" He hoped some of Jesus's followers might do the same.

The murmuring increased until a few of those present began shouting. “Jesus, who do you think you are? By what authority do you redefine scripture?”

Attempting some damage control, the disciples tried to quiet the crowd. They waved their hands wildly gesturing to get those on their feet to be seated. Peter turned toward Jesus and said, “Jesus, if this is the situation between a husband and wife...” He needed his voice to be heard over the rising cacophony of voices, so he paused and began again louder.

“Jesus! If this is the situation between a husband and wife then perhaps NONE of us should ever marry!” Peter shouted with a choked chuckle.

Those within the sound of his voice quieted. Peter had gotten their attention. A few smiled and laughed. Peter hoped to reframe Jesus’s statement. Perhaps this was just a joke? Surely Jesus did not mean what he was saying!

As the crowd murmured and shouted, Jesus just stared at Peter disheartened.

Jesus had shared his thoughts on saris before but only privately with those close to him and only then with much debate. Jesus was about to publicly raise an issue that was, and would for thousands of years to follow, remain highly controversial.

What followed was not good. The Pharisees were about to get a gift they had not considered possible, one that would surely separate him from these followers.

Jesus’s countenance grew larger, and all present felt as though he was speaking directly to them. Then Jesus said in a voice reserved only for those who have authority, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given by God!”

The disciples held their breath; he had never begun a teaching with those words before. Yes, it was true they often had difficulty understanding his concepts on love and inclusion, but now he was declaring that most, if not all of them, would not be able to comprehend or accept what he was about to share. Jesus was saying that only those with the life experience or divine insight given by God would be able to agree or understand him.

Jesus continued, “For there are some saris who were born that way from the womb, and there are saris who have been made that way by others and the circumstances of their lives.” Jesus paused briefly. He then continued, “And there are those who choose to live like saris...,” he paused again and then exclaimed, “... they chose to live that way for the sake and purposes of the kingdom of heaven!”

Jesus had elevated this lowly class well above their station. Jesus was claiming that those who choose to be saris were doing so with the blessing and support of God.

The crowd roared in disapproval. The disciples were beside themselves and wondered what they should do. The Pharisees being very pleased in how their trap had snapped shut, departed in a cloud of conceit and swirling robes. Their work was done. This was a victory. Who would stay and listen to him now?

Jesus had not only validated a person's right to pursue a life outside of the gender norms but had elevated it above the circumstances of nature and nurture. He had already redefined the institution of male and female marriage to be one of mutual respect and equality. Now, in his desire to make this lesson more inclusive he had addressed the subject of non-binary people. He declared that those who chose to live a non-polarized male or female lifestyle were, in fact, fulfilling the purposes of God. This raised many questions and the debate amongst those gathered raged like a wildfire.

As the conversations amongst his disorderly and raucous followers became more heated, the crowd began to slowly push forward. The disciples attempted to protect Jesus from those being shoved closer to him so positioned themselves between him and the crowd. The crowd's displeasure was firmly felt with sharp elbows, and sharper words.

Mary Magdalene and Martha were standing behind Jesus, in the place of status he had elevated them to. For a woman to be acknowledged in this way, of course, was not normal in Jewish society, however the disciples decided to ignore the practice. "Perhaps Jesus required them for errands, meals and such and wanted them nearby at the ready?" mused Peter, the most ardent objector to the practice.

The disciples treated Mary and Martha like stucco drying on a wall. In this moment of near hysteria, they were still almost invisible, which was fine with them. They did not need to be added to the list of Jesus's faux pas that Judas and Simon were undoubtedly forming.

Mary recalled one of the scriptures that had been applied to the Messiah. Mary whispered to Martha, "Doesn't this remind you of something?"

Pausing just for an instant, Martha responded, "Yes, very much so. It is in the Psalms. The religious leaders who are the builders of the Jewish faith will reject the chief corner stone."

"Should we say something?" inquired Mary, "This should not be a surprise to any of the men, since Jesus is in fact the Messiah his rejection is inevitable." ²⁶

Mary could not help but give Martha a wry smile, "They act as though this was not going to happen," she said through clenched teeth, attempting to hold back a laugh.

“It’s so like a man,” Martha said, almost a bit too loudly, “to try and fix things, especially when they are not actually broken.” The two women continued to hold their ground as the crowd ebbed and flowed around them attempting to get an audience with the teacher.

Although the chaos of the situation was mounting, Jesus became aware of one person a few feet away softly crying. They were of slight build, pale in color but not unhealthy, with long brown hair, and cool green eyes that welled up with tears. A simple white robe hung on their five-foot frame, tied closely with a brown sash secured in an indistinguishable knot. They stood much like a boulder in the midst of a noisy stream, unaffected by the pressing crowd around them.

For a moment, the noise seemed to fade, and the distance between them appeared to shorten as they connected in common thought and purpose. Jesus had seen this person before, but the two of them had not yet spoken. They held each other’s gaze for a moment. Both smiled and Jesus’s tears welled up with love and this person knew that Jesus had spoken these words just for them. They were the lost sheep. They were the lost coin. They were important and God knew their name. ^{27, 28}

Jesus had confronted some long-assumed ideas and beliefs about gender head on, and the disciples were concerned his ministry would be fundamentally compromised. Why did he have to speak so plainly? Why not teach these concepts in the form of a parable, like he had so often done? Difficult points, especially contentious ones, were often taught in a parable or presented as a metaphor. He so often taught with allegory and example, but not now. Jesus was not about to be misunderstood, and this message was given without reservation or apology.

The crowd continued to press in and the disciples, with the help of a dozen trusted followers, pushed back the crowd attempting to clear a space around Jesus. Peter, as usual was barking out commands and slowly order was being restored.

But Jesus was not yet done.

No Holding Back

When Jesus usually spoke his voice was clear and plain. He seldom needed to raise it. Still, most could hear what he had to say, and for those further away, the disciples would position themselves in the crowd so they could pass on his words to those out of earshot.

Today was different.

Eventually the volume of those attempting to make themselves heard over the din of so many competing voices, dropped to a lull. So, in a loud voice that carried with it the authority of truth, Jesus proclaimed, "All that I have said to you is true!" The crowd noise lessened still more. He had most of his followers' attention once again.

"I know not many of you understand these words, and they are as foreign to you as this Roman occupation! As I have tried to explain to you, only to those whose life experience has taught them to recognize my words as true will be able to do so. I realize most of you, through no fault of your own, do not comprehend or agree with this teaching." Jesus stepped forward and with arms raised in a blessing declared, "So, I say to those who have received my words as comfort and hope, the one who is able to accept this truth should accept it!"

Those to whom this final statement was directed were encouraged, for his words resonated with truth in their souls. Many of the women there grasped onto this teaching about respect, equality, and love with a fast hope.

Those saris present hung onto his words as a person drowning clings to a life preserver in a heavy storm. He had taught, with clear words of comfort, that the purposeful intent to choose a gender non-conforming life-path, in other words “choice” was the best option. Those who are born as saris, and those who have been relegated into service as saris were a fact of life and their place in society, although strictly relegated, was secure. But the legitimacy of choice was fiercely debated. Jesus declared his position by elevating the idea of choice above nature and nurture as part of God’s plan and purpose.

For those who saw themselves as such, this was a great encouragement.

The words Jesus spoke echoed so all present could hear them, and for a moment that hushed the crowd.

Gatherings always followed the same pattern. The arrangement of men in the front, women in the back along with the children, the lame and those who are saris just beyond that was now in disarray. The crowd was mixed together, with everyone either trying to get close to Jesus or secure a space for themselves. In an attempt to protect Jesus from the shoving mob the disciples, along with a dozen others, formed an undulating circle around their rabbi by locking strong tan arms together.

This resulted in the space around Jesus being cleared and some of the women and children moved close in. Their action was considered inappropriate or worse a violation of social norms. To engage with children in this sort of public meeting was the purview and responsibility only of the women or when need required, the saris.

Now that social barriers were confused, the women saw a unique opportunity. Didn’t Jesus’s words encouraging them imply invitation? He had declared a man and woman in marriage to be

as one person. How far would this lesson take them? They had to know.

Jesus also decided to take advantage of this, and his next lesson, would be one the disciples would try to block.

The women did not understand his teaching completely, but his words were like the sound of shofars blasting on the walls of Jericho. They did not want to lose this moment and so continued to move in closer hoping that Jesus could touch and bless them. They had seen his ability to heal someone, even just by proximity.

The disciples stood braced with feet spread in front of Jesus and attempted to hold their ground with locked arms to keep them away. James could be heard saying to Peter and John with whom he had locked arms, "Where do you think he's going next with this teaching?"

An old man in a dusty robe and matted hair was pressing into Peter's chest being pushed by others. Peter exclaimed, "The crowd is barely under control now, and I am afraid Jesus may put us all at risk if he continues."

John had to relock his arms to James' arm as a child now attempted to skirt under his robe between them. Catching his breath, John replied, "I hope his lesson about equality and gender roles is complete and finished. The crowd would rather see a miracle, and I am praying for one!"

Just then a child broke through, and then another, and still more. Two dozen in all had made their way to Jesus.

Undeterred the disciples rebuked the children and attempted to turn them all away. But there were too many.

Jesus held his arms open welcoming them. His face broke into a deep and knowing smile, one that was not subject to audit. It was a smile of knowing love. It was a smile that could create

entire worlds. It existed outside time and lasted for years, or perhaps only for just a moment. Either way, it was eternal.

His followers had seen this expression of Jesus's face before. It was all consuming and shone through the torrent of disapproval like a morning wind parting a sea of doubt.

Since many of his followers were fishermen Jesus thought they might understand that he had cast a wide net. The haul he was pulling in was more weighted than the one Peter had pulled into his boat two years earlier. It was more meaningful and was not merely a metaphor, but something far more real.

The disciples relented their rebuke of the children. Jesus was swamped by a wave of exuberance and laughed and played with those closest to him. He easily lifted them up swinging some around in a circle. His presence and strength had never been more evident as it was now. He easily supported their weight as they clung to his legs, swung on his arms, and jumped on his back.

The disciples were still worried and upset, but this display of love and pure joy had made them pause.

The crowd saw Jesus attend to the children like a mother would. The children rushed around him in joy like planets circling the sun, absorbing his light.

Jesus laughed and stated in a loud voice, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them!" More came and soon it was the disciples being pushed back.

As the children crawled on his lap, giggled and pulled on his cloak. Jesus said to all those present, "Do you see this?" And then again louder still, "Do you see this? Do you?" The crowd quieted and some began to finally make room for each other as they sat down.

As order was being restored, Jesus continued, “You have asked me many times what the kingdom of Heaven is like. I have taught in many ways about the kingdom being like a wedding feast. I have told you about those who were invited but did not come. You have heard that the outcasts, the poor and the foreigner will be invited.”

Jesus paused while a small child was grabbing ahold of his lip. He kissed the child and then continued, “You want to know who will be in the kingdom? I tell you; the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. Not just the children here, but all of those I have been speaking about!”

Jesus had demonstrated what he was teaching by pushing the gender boundaries again and placing himself alongside a woman and child, sharing in the role. These children understood what was happening and their joy could not be stopped. The crowd had come to witness a physical miracle, and others for a free lunch. So many were now leaving disappointed.

The children began to quiet and settle down. Jesus spoke freely with their mothers recapping his teaching and answering their questions. All of them left with minds amazed and hearts full. Jesus took the time to look at, speak to, and bless each child. As the hours rolled by the crowd dispersed. Only a few stragglers remained, perhaps they had no place to go.

As the light was fading, a thin young man with curly brown hair, dressed in a bleached tunic covered by a long purple shawl approached. He was well-dressed and his gold rings and bracelets affirmed his wealth. He had been standing off to the side during the entire meeting and was intently watching all that was taking place but had not engaged. He had a gleam in his eye, and seeing that attitudes had calmed, approached confidently. Striding up to Jesus, he interrupted him speaking to a small child, “Rabbi, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” The disciples had not

noticed him approaching at first, and so he had an unobstructed audience with Jesus.

Peter stepped forward, but Jesus waved him off. Jesus paused his current conversation, bouncing a redheaded child on his knee, he asked the young man, “What do you mean by ‘good’?”

The young man was not expecting this, and the comment threw him. He was hoping that Jesus would simply make a short list, and he anticipated that the list would be the same as his.

Jesus knew this, and he felt compassion for this man, and wanted to encourage him, so continued, “Keep the commandments.”

Peter heard most of the exchange, as the two of them listed off several commandments. The young man claimed to have kept all of them, and Peter remembered his own attempts to do so when he was young. This man had a lot of confidence for someone so very young.

Finally, Jesus said to the young man, “You have done well in so much. You must be very proud of all you have accomplished. Still, there is one last thing you must do.”

The young man was excited. He felt close to securing his eternal future, and with a voice on the verge of cracking he asked, “What must I do? Tell me and I will do it!”

Jesus answered, “Sell all that you have, everything you own, and join me and my disciples.”

Peter saw the young man’s shoulders drop. He was about to reply, but the words caught in this throat. He hung his head. Choking back tears, he turned and walked away. This was something he obviously was not ready to do.

Peter was surprised at the rough handling of this very young

and well-meaning person. And stared at Jesus with mouth open in shock.

Aware of this, Jesus said to Peter, “Peter, he was trying to see if his wealth and good works would be enough to please God, but it is not about that. What he needs is to get rid of his wealth and rely not on himself and his actions, but instead on God. He wants to bring all that he has with him, because he counts his wealth as a blessing and reward for his piety. For him, to lose his wealth, would be to lose the evidence of his piety. Trust me when I say that he would have more luck pushing a loaded camel into Jerusalem through the Eye of the Needle gate than entering Heaven with all that he owns.”

It had gotten dark now. The mother of the child who was bouncing on Jesus’s knee lifted him off, and thanked Jesus for his attention and care. They were the last to leave. Jesus was glad the last words he would hear from the crowd today were kind ones.

Confused by Jesus’s last comment, Peter asked, “Who can be saved then. Is there anything we can do?”

Jesus stood up and indicated to his disciples it was time to head back to their camp. As they left, Jesus said, “Peter, this is not about your actions, who you are or who you think you should be, but about who God is. It is impossible for you to get right with God, but not impossible for God to make things right with and for you.”

It had been a very eventful day, and they were all anxious for it to be over.

That evening around the campfire, Jesus spoke to his very troubled disciples, “I know I have confused you and these lessons are difficult. I am teaching some hard truths about who you are, and who we all are in Jewish society; What it means to be a father, a mother, a savior and a child.” He paused and then

continued, “You want to know the heart of God? You read the sacred scriptures looking to find God my father. I know that this occupies much of your time, so let me tell you plainly.”

Jesus paused again and took the time to look each of them in the eye. Jesus then exclaimed in such a way that none of them would ever forget it, and the memory of these words would resonate in their minds for the rest of their lives. Jesus said, “You have asked me many times to show you, my Father. Have you not understood that those who have seen me have seen my Father?”²⁹

The disciples were slowly beginning to understand. These were not the words of a conqueror, but of one who serves. What it meant to follow Jesus was changing. So many of them hoped that Jesus would be a political Messiah. They had assumed that his kingdom would be here in Israel. Wasn't Jesus going to establish a New Jerusalem here and now? They believed that Rome would be rebuffed and that the Jews would finally get the home God had promised. But this messiah was not that messiah and the realization of that made them uneasy.

Jesus knew this and also that his time to teach would be coming to an end shortly. So, he spoke to them plainly and said, “You have been my followers. So, I ask you, if you are my followers, then heed my command.”

James and John shared a quick glance, hopeful that he would finally give marching orders. James asked, “Which command do you mean, Lord? There are so many.”

His answer surprised and confused them all, “My command is simple, to love each other.”³⁰

Would his disciples learn that to love someone is the most rewarding thing someone can do, but it was also the hardest? They would have to draw closer to God to do so and like the rich

young man, leave behind all that they knew and trusted in. Jesus knew they were hoping for so much more. They still had much to learn, and those lessons would cost some of them their lives.

They lived in a world that was full of restrictions, and man-made doubt and fear. They lived daily with the very real occupation of a brutal overlord. So how could love be the way forward? Love is risky and dangerous, but it is what Jesus wanted them to do. They thought they were going to war with Rome. But the war they were being asked to fight was one with themselves. They were to lay down traditional weapons and look only to God. The only way to achieve victory was to surrender.

Summary by the Author

Why would Jesus need to confront so many with a truth that he knew so few could even begin to understand? Jesus meets us where we are but refuses to stay there. Much of the Bible is a history book that chronicles our interactions with God, and the insights given are relegated to the understanding and worldview of the day. Much of what was written in the Torah about, working on the Sabbath, the treatment of slaves, the value of women, and those outside the mainstream, as well as what it means to be righteous was redefined, and even flipped upside down through the teachings of Jesus. Jesus emphasized the attitude of the heart over sacrifice. He valued truth and love above all else and declared that to love was to fulfill all the commandments. His teachings were radical in the extreme, and his crucifixion was a result of his being viewed as a heretic. He threatened the status quo and gave up his life to appease our insistence on needing redemption through sacrifice.

In life he pushed the boundaries of what we could begin to accept and accelerated our evolution toward an understanding of who we are and who God is. Jesus's words still echo two thousand years after they were first spoken. His lessons still inspire and challenge. His views on gender, especially declaring that the self-determination of "choice" was a better God inspired alternative, for those who are saris, are radical even today.

Speaking on behalf of, and for God, his words register in our hearts. Some words are a salve, while others a challenge. Those who find his words difficult to understand often reduce them to ideas they are able to live with. They hold tightly onto their

dogma afraid to be challenged as they need to, so their faith has no momentum.

Those who are willing to risk and trust will hold their faith loosely seeking to enlarge their perspective. They are willing to be wrong, and do not claim great faith, but understand they need to be open to surprises and all that this earth has to offer in finding the footprints left by God. These followers of Jesus understand that it is more important to be quiet and listen, than to shout out a personal opinion. These followers understand the importance of a contemplative way to approach spirituality.

Fostering this sort of spiritual growth is dependent on acknowledging our finite position in creation. Growth comes from understanding that a relationship with our creator is not something we force, but something we allow. This type of personal growth is subtle and takes a disciplined and purposeful mind and heart. This subtle way of seeing is referred by some teachers as the “alternative she.” If we open ourselves up to the larger tapestry which includes all genders, we open ourselves up to a more inclusive sense of self and a truer understanding of the world we occupy. By embracing all aspects of creation as good, we can appreciate more of what it means to be in the center of an honest reality.

This teaching of Jesus on gender is especially important to those who disproportionately value the masculine. The search for truth is curtailed when the feminine part of our lives is repressed and viewed as inferior.

Jesus knew that spirituality teaches us to embrace paradoxes. To live with the unknown and be okay with discovery is the only way to truly love or understand anything correctly.

Jesus had hoped that those who come after him would do greater things than he did. His teachings, as they have been

recorded, may have been modified in translation and some may hold onto their personal agendas so that Jesus' words are misunderstood. Some may only focus on those verses that support their static worldview.

Holding our faith loosely is to rely completely on God. The intent behind our journey should always be those things that last forever, those things that have the greatest value —faith, hope, and the greatest of these - love.

Biblical References

1. Acts 10:14: “No, Lord,” Peter declared. “I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean.”

Acts 10:28: Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean.

Acts 15:21: For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.”

2. John 5:9: Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath, so the Jewish leaders objected. They said to the man who was cured, “You can’t work on the Sabbath! The law doesn’t allow you to carry that sleeping mat!” 16 So the Jewish leaders began harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules. 17 But Jesus replied, “My Father is always working, and so am I.” 18 So the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill him. For he not only broke the Sabbath, but he also called God his Father, thereby making himself equal with God.

3. Matthew 23:15: “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are!

4. 1 Corinthians 13:13: Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

Matthew 22:37: Jesus replied, “You must love the LORD your

God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’

5. Mark 3:8: Jerusalem, Idumea, from east of the Jordan River, and even from as far north as Tyre and Sidon. The news about his miracles had spread far and wide, and vast numbers of people came to see him.

Romans 2:29: No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people.

6. Matthew 19 - Full Chapter (NIV): When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a

husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs (saris*) who were born that way, and there are eunuchs (saris*) who have been made eunuchs (saris*) by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs (saris*) for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

“Which ones?” he inquired.

Jesus replied, “‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he

had great wealth.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you; it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (most likely the smallest gate in the wall of Jerusalem) than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

***About Saris:**

Saris: In Judaism, a “saris” is a term used to describe an individual assigned male at birth who either develops female characteristics at puberty or has their sex characteristics altered, often through castration. This term can refer to both individuals who are naturally intersex (saris hamah) and those who become so through human intervention (saris adam). The concept of saris is relevant in Jewish legal discussions, particularly regarding marriage and procreation.

Interpreted as Transgender or Intersex: In modern terms, the

saris category can be interpreted as either transgender women or individuals with intersex variations.

Rabbinic Discourse: The Talmud discusses saris in the context of Jewish law and ritual, recognizing that biological sex is not always binary.

Not Always a Fixed Category: The status of saris could change over time, depending on the development of secondary sex characteristics.

7. John 2: On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

...Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so, they filled them to the brim. "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

Authors note: The wine created was an estimated 50-70 cases of 12 bottles each of wine.

8. Matthew 22:37: Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with

all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

9. Matthew 23:4: They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

10. Matthew 18:25: Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt...

11. John 8:3-11: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

12. John 8:12: When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

13. John 8:14-45: Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one... Then they asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also." -- You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

14a. Mark 12:17: Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

14b. 1 Corinthians 12:12-17 (teaching of Apostle Paul): For just

as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

15. Book of Mary: The Gospel of Mary is an early Christian (otherwise called the Early Church or Paleo-Christianity, describes the historical era of the Christian religion up to the First Council of Nicaea in 325) text resurfaced in 1896 in a fifth-century papyrus codex written in Sahidic Coptic. This Berlin Codex was purchased in Cairo by German diplomat Carl Reinhardt. Additional Greek fragments of the text were subsequently found amongst the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. The work is popularly known as the Gospel of Mary since it focuses on Mary Magdelene, it is not classified as a gospel by most scholars, who restrict the term “gospel” to texts written by men that primarily focused on recounting the teachings and activities of Jesus during his adult life. The book of Mary takes place, and recaps conversations between Jesus and Mary, after his resurrection. The first five pages are missing, and the sixth begins with, “Now since you have explained all things, let me ask you...” The chapter in this book call, “A Conversation Between Jesus and Mary,” contains content gleaned from the “Book of Mary” ,and historical and biblical information and writings.

16. Romans 8 (*with editor notes*): Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened ... God did (through) his Son in the “likeness” of sinful flesh (as) an offering. He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law

might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh (bound by the terms of sin) but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the (agenda of) the fleshly desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

17. Genesis 1: 31: God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. *Also see whole chapter of Genesis 3.

18. Mark 12:33: I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.”

19. Hebrews 7:27: Unlike those other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices every day. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he offered himself as the sacrifice...

20. Matthew 23:27: Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.

21. Stalls and Tabernacles: Marketplace stalls, usually a one room structure used by merchants.

22. Matthew 7:1 Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.

Mark 2:27 (NLT): Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.”

23. Matthew 6:1: Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

24. Matthew 5:44: But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

25. Matthew 7:3: Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?

26. Matthew 19: *NOTE:* These next sections are constructed from the Gospel of Matthew, Jewish commentary, and other historical resources.

26. Psalm 118:22: The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...

27. Luke 15: "The Parable of the Lost Sheep"

28. Luke 15:8: "The Parable of the Lost Coin"

29. John 14:9: Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

30. John 13:34-35: A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

The publication is a work of fiction, based on Biblical scripture and historical references. It is intended to inspire conversation and to open up dialogue. It is the hope of the author that it will inspire and help broaden the perspective of the reader. Please review the reference section.

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Preprint proof for review.

Publication is a work in progress

VERSION 1 - 7/27/2025

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