

CHAPTER 24, NO ORDINARY MAN

TIMELESS TRUTH: NEUTRALITY IS NOT AN OPTION – JESUS DEMANDS A RESPONSE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

One thing about this Jesus: He never invited neutrality. His followers called Him the Christ. His contenders called Him a blasphemer. Some were drawn to Him, while others could muster nothing in His presence but contempt. His teachings were revolutionary and His miracles undeniable. He claimed nothing less than equality with God and proclaimed Himself as the long expected Messiah. Jesus never left sitting on the proverbial fence as an option.

He attracted criticism in spades, but He also drew crowds. He often taught the people in parables, pithy stories that drew spiritual lessons from everyday life to reveal the “secrets” of God’s kingdom. With simple illustrations, Jesus taught that in Him, God’s kingdom had come, while exposing the religious leaders’ misguided view of religion. Jesus’ trilogy on lostness told of a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son and demonstrated the value God places on a repentant heart. In the story of the lost son, Jesus exposed the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees as the older brother’s indignity, angered by his father’s compassion. Like this father, Jesus’ concern for sinners created an ever-widening rift with the Pharisees. His popularity increased and so did His opposition. Yet Jesus’ teaching ministry to the masses continued, and in the Sermon on the Mount, He taught them how to live by faith in close relationship with God.

Jesus was a great teacher, but even His closest disciples struggled to grasp His true identity and purpose. He authenticated His words with miracles that made His authority irrefutable. The disciples were awestruck when Jesus calmed a raging storm at sea. The people were confounded when he expelled demons from a possessed man into a herd of pigs, who promptly drowned themselves. Who was this man? He certainly wasn’t looking or sounding like a Messiah should. The desperate came to Him for healing, and weren’t found wanting. Jesus healed a woman with a bleeding disorder, while pausing to restore her dignity and commend her faith. Meanwhile, the daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus died. Jesus established His authority over death by raising her back to life. He healed two blind men, and the Pharisees exposed their own desperate lack of vision by crediting such miracles to the prince of demons.

News about Jesus spread through villages and cities, homes and institutions. Even King Herod grew interested. He was haunted by the fear that John the Baptist might have returned from the dead, for he had ordered John’s execution. Wherever He went, people gathered around Jesus. After one especially long day, Jesus fed more than 5,000 with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. The miracle was meant for more than filling empty stomachs. He had come to fill empty lives; the real point was that He is the “bread” of eternal life. As a result of his teachings, the people were divided. Many turned away, but those who truly believed remained. In one of His finest moments, Peter announced, “*You have the words of eternal life...you are the Holy One of God.*”

Many came to Jesus with Lower Story needs, but Jesus’ mission was greater than any had imagined. He’d come to offer an Upper Story life, to fulfill the promises that began centuries ago with Abraham and David. He’d come to offer a life of faith – faith in unseen realities, faith in who He is, and what He could do for them eternally. The offer still stands.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the hardest class you had to take in school? What made it so hard for you?

1. You might think that Jesus spoke in parables so everyone could understand, but the disciples as well as the crowds had a hard time understanding his meaning. Why did Jesus say he spoke in parables (p. 335-336)? Why was this so?
2. Who was Jesus referring to when he said "*whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them*" (p.336). What will be given or taken?
3. How are genuine believers differentiated from unbelievers in the parable of the soils? What does each of the soil types represent? Can a "soil type" be changed?
4. Note the setting and the target audience of the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son (p. 337-338). From the parable of the prodigal son, what do we learn about what the Father values? Do you share his values?
5. Review pages 335-337. Based on the parables, what is the Kingdom of God? Look up Mark 1:15. What should be our response to the Kingdom of God?
6. The Sermon on the Mount opens with nine statements called "the Beatitudes," from the Latin word for "blessings." How does someone gain these blessed qualities? (Hint: See Rom. 3:21-23.)
7. Christians believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man. How do you see this in the episode of calming the storm (p. 343)? What encouragement can believers today draw from this story?
8. John the Baptist languished in prison until he was finally executed. Faithful believers are persecuted around the world in greater numbers today than ever before. Discuss practical ways that your group could support the persecuted church around the world. (*Check out www.persecution.org . This website provides accurate details about the persecution of Christians throughout the world.*)
9. What lessons of faith and courage can be gleaned from the account of Peter walking on water (p.348-349)?
10. Identify two or three ways the crowds misunderstood Jesus' description of their need for eternal life (p. 349-351). How is Jesus' message (Jn. 6:29, 35, 47) different from most people's idea of salvation?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 25, JESUS, THE SON OF GOD

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Jesus' audience thought he was going to establish His kingdom by force, but He strongly rebuked Peter for such thinking. Reflect on a time when you have struggled between doing things the easy way and doing things God's way.
2. Despite confessing Jesus to be the Christ and witnessing the transfiguration, Peter continued to struggle to be faithful. What miracles has God done in your life that you sometimes forget?

DAY 2

1. During the Festival of Tabernacles, a celebration of God's provision while Israel wandered in the desert, Jesus claimed to be the way of salvation. Why would He choose this festival to make this claim? Does John 1:14 bear on this?
2. Look up 1 John 1:5-7 and 2:8-11. Jesus said that His followers "*will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" How does Jesus illuminate our Lower Stories?
3. Why did Jesus delay in coming to Mary and Martha? What does this tell you about God's timing? Does this relieve or intensify your own anxieties and concerns?

DAY 3

1. Who do you think was most surprised at Lazarus' resurrection?
2. Those who opposed Jesus "*loved human glory more than the glory of God.*" Honestly evaluate yourself: whose glory do you pursue most often? Whose approval do you seek?