

Running Ahead of God

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus began the final stage of His ministry which would be in and around Jerusalem. He announced before going that, once they arrived, He would be betrayed, sentenced to die and, then, handed over to the Romans, who would mock Him, spit on Him, whip Him, and kill Him. Then, after three days, He would rise again. The predictions of the prophets would come true (*Mark 10:31-34*).

Even after spending three years with Him and hearing Him preach the Gospel message, the disciples and the rest of **His followers still misunderstood the purpose of His coming**. They believed that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to set up the earthly kingdom that had been foretold (*Luke 18:34; 19:11*). Two of them, James and John, even went so far as to ask Jesus if He would grant them places of honor, one at the Lord's right hand and one at His left.

Jesus immediately tried to refocus their attention on what it meant to be great in God's eyes. "Whoever wants to be a leader among you," He said, "must be your servant; and, whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others and to give My life as a ransom for many" (*Mark 10:43-45*).

When Jesus visited Zacchaeus, and the tax-collector repented of his sin, Jesus reminded everyone that He had come "to seek and save those like him who are lost" (*Luke 19:10*). When the crowd following Him "believed that the Kingdom of God would begin right away," Jesus told them the story of the ten servants (v.11-27). It was His way of telling His followers that He would not be staying on earth; rather He would be going away for a while and, when He returned, He would judge all men.

Daily Reflection

If you think about it, **we misunderstand God's will and purposes all of the time**. It is easy for us to run ahead of Him, thinking we know what He is doing or where He is going. Oftentimes, we believe that He is moving in one direction, when He is really headed in another.

Can you recall a time when you misunderstood what God was doing in your life, when you thought He was doing one thing when He was really doing another? Explain.

How can you keep from repeating this mistake in the future? What steps can you take to ensure that you are following Him and not "leading" Him?

Have your focus, your priorities, your agenda ever been misplaced? Have you ever tried to force your plans on God instead of being patient to see what His plans are for you?

Make sure not to run ahead of the Lord or tell Him what He needs to do in your life. Instead, pray and discern where He is leading. Rather than running ahead of Him, remain behind Him, following wherever He leads. Remember to pray, "Not my will but His be done."

Wasteful or Worshipful?

Today In Your Reading...

The people welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem as their king. Just as Zechariah the prophet had predicted, the Messiah entered Jerusalem on a donkey and the people rejoiced (9:9); but, while the masses celebrated His arrival, the Messiah wept. Why? He knew that within a week's time, the same people who received Him with joy would reject Him, betray Him to the authorities, and crucify Him. He knew that Jerusalem and the Temple, proud symbols of their Jewish heritage, would soon be destroyed by the Romans (70 AD); and, He knew that the people were only celebrating His arrival because they thought He was there to deliver them from their enemies, when He was really there to deliver them from their sins.

Another indication of this misunderstanding came when Jesus mentioned that He was there to die (*John 12:32-34*). "Die?" asked the crowd. "We understood from Scripture that the Messiah would live forever. Why are you saying the Son of Man will die? Who is this Son of Man that you are talking about?" Jesus told them, "The truth is, a kernel of wheat must be planted in the soil. Unless it dies it will be alone — a single seed. But its death will produce many new kernels, a plentiful harvest of new lives" (v.24).

Before Jesus entered Jerusalem, He visited His friends in Bethany. While Jesus was reclining, a woman came and washed his feet. Though people often washed their feet in those days, because of the dusty roads, this event was different. She didn't wash his feet with water but with costly perfume.

The disciples were angered by the **wastefulness** of this act, for something so valuable could have been sold and the money used for the poor. One of them estimated the cost of the jar to be 300 denarii (*Mark 14:5*), which was an en-

tire year's wages. But Jesus told them to leave the woman alone, for what she had done was a great honor to Him, not to mention a symbolic anointment for His burial.

A few days ago, the rich young ruler could not part from his "valuable" possessions to follow Jesus. In contrast, this woman freely sacrificed her most valuable possession and laid it at the feet of Jesus. She recognized that the value of His grace and forgiveness, as well as the new life she had in Him, was worth far more than any earthly possession. **Her act was one of genuine worship and gratefulness.**

Daily Reflection

Which one best describes you — the young man who chose His possessions over following Christ or the woman who saw her possessions as valuable only as she gave them to the Lord? Explain.

Paul wrote, "I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be **a living and holy sacrifice**, the kind He will accept. When you think of what He has done for you, is this too much to ask?" (*Romans 12:1*).

What does it mean to be "a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God?" Is this you?

Temple Temper

Today In Your Reading...

“Despite all of the miraculous signs He had done, most of the people did not believe in Jesus, which was exactly what the prophet Isaiah had predicted” (*John 12:37, 38*). Thus, the scene of Jesus and the fig tree was fitting. The tree, which was a symbol of Israel, had no fruit to give, so Jesus cursed it. It was withered from the roots (*Mark 11:12-14, 20, 21*). The Jews’ hard-heartedness will open the door for Gentiles to receive salvation during a period known as the Church Age (*Romans 11*).

Another snapshot of the state of God’s people came when Jesus entered the Temple. Twice in Scripture we read about Jesus cleansing the Temple of money-changers, once at the beginning of His ministry and here at the end. Since the Jews were required by law to make sacrifices and offerings for various reasons, the Temple was constantly full of people, all needing animals, doves, or half a shekel. For convenience sake, businessmen provided these things in the Temple at steep prices. They took advantage of a sacred system in order to make a profit.

Of course, Jesus took offense at what these men were doing and drove them out to make a point. Here we see a side of Him that seems incompatible to us — **Jesus exhibiting anger**. When His disciples saw and heard His righteous rage, they were reminded of a verse in *Psalms*, which prophesied that the Messiah would be filled with zeal for the things of God (*69:9*).

Getting angry, which is a natural emotion, is commonly believed to be sinful. However, **it is not getting angry that is the problem but what we do or say in our anger** (*Ephesians 4:26*). God gets angry, Jesus got angry, and we too can get angry. *It is mishandling our anger that gets us into trouble.*

More important than Jesus’ anger here was the reason for it — **zeal for the things of God**. We get angry for so many reasons, most of them trivial, but do we get angry for righteous reasons, when the things of God are corrupted or abused?

Daily Reflection

For what reasons do you typically get angry? Are these reasons legitimate or uncalled for?

What is your usual response when you get angry? Have you stayed above reproach or have you allowed your anger to cause you to sin?

If you were only to get angry for the things of God today, what would that look like?

Jesus was angry for the right reasons. He hated sin and He could not stand to watch the things of God be abused or corrupted by men. Can you say as much? For what does your anger burn — self-centered or God-centered reasons?

The Called Out Ones

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus is in Jerusalem; He has reached the final days of His ministry and life on earth. He knows that the time has come for Him to be arrested and killed. His enemies, who are the religious leaders of the day, attempted to trap Him in any way possible, so they bombarded Him with tricky questions. Here are a few of them:

“By whose authority do you drive out the merchants from the Temple?” Jesus asked them a question, “Did John [the Baptist’s] baptism come from heaven or was it merely human?” They did not know the answer, so Jesus responded that He would not answer their question either (*Mark 11:27-33*).

“Tell us, Jesus. Is it right to pay taxes to the Roman government or not?” After Jesus called for a coin, He said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Him, but everything that belongs to God must be given to God.” This reply completely amazed them. They were silenced and went away (*Mark 12:13-17*).

“Whose wife would a woman be in the resurrection, if she were married to seven men?” Jesus told them that “marriage was only for people on earth; marriage would not be the way in the age to come. In this respect, they will be like the angels.” When the people heard Him, they were impressed with His teaching (*Matthew 22:23-33*).

Jesus fired back at these tricksters with two powerful stories, that of the evil farmers and the great feast. In the story of the evil farmers, Jesus revealed His enemies’ plot to kill Him, as well as their coming judgment by God. In the story of the great feast, Jesus described them as ungrateful wedding guests who refused to attend the feast. As a result, God would “go out into the street and invite everyone else.”

At the end of the story of the wedding feast, Jesus made a very important statement. “For many are called, but few are chosen” (22:14). He said this in response to a man who had come to the wedding feast without the proper clothes. Here is a picture of someone attempting to get to heaven in his own way, without being dressed in the righteousness of Christ. We cannot earn our salvation or force our way into heaven, and, thus, the King said, “Bind this man and throw him out into the darkness” (22:13).

Daily Reflection

The truth here is clear and pointed — **few people will follow Jesus although many will be invited**. Those who refuse the invitation to follow Christ do so because of their rebellious heart; those who respond to the invitation to follow Christ do so, not because their heart was somehow inclined to do so, but because they were chosen by God and drawn to Him by His Spirit (*John 6:44; Romans 3:1-19; 8:30; Ephesians 1:9-11; 2:1-3*). Their rebellion was overcome by His grace. These “called out ones” comprise His Church.

How can you know if you are one of the “called out ones”? You will know by your response to His gospel invitation. **Have you responded to or rejected the call of Christ?**

Will you have the right clothes on at the wedding feast? Or are you trying to save yourself?

Whitewashed Tombs

Today In Your Reading...

The religious leaders continued their efforts to trap Jesus with difficult questions. For example, "Of all the commandments," they asked Him, "which one is most important?" In short, Jesus answered with love God and love others. "All of the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (*Matthew 22:34-40*). Jesus returned the favor and asked them a question. "If the Messiah is the Son of David, then why did David call Him Lord?" No one could answer Him, and after that no one dared to ask Him any more questions (*v.41-46*).

Following His interaction with these Pharisees, Jesus offered His harshest criticisms yet. "The teachers of religious law are the official interpreters of the Scriptures. Practice what they teach, but do not follow their example; for they don't practice what they teach... **Everything they do is for show!**" (*23:1-5*).

He continued, "You are so careful to clean the outside of the cup, but inside you are filthy, full of greed and self-indulgence... You are like **whitewashed tombs**, beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. You try to look like upright people outwardly, but inside your hearts are filled with hypocrisy..." (*v.25-28*). He even called them blind fools, hypocrites, snakes, and sons of vipers!

Then, Jesus contrasted their despicable display of "faith and uprightness" with the measly offering of a poor woman. Many rich people put large amounts of money in the Temple collection box, but a certain widow dropped in two pennies. "I assure you," Jesus said, "this woman has given more than all the others...; as poor as she is, she's given everything" (*Mark 12:41-44*). Here was **genuine faith and humility**.

Daily Reflection

It is easy for us to shake our heads at the Pharisees in Jesus' day and think to ourselves, "What terrible people they were," but, truthfully, we oftentimes do the same things. What would hypocritical Pharisaism look like today?

Have you ever been guilty of doing religious things for show, only to impress others or make yourself look good? Explain.

Describe the opposite of Pharisaism. What does genuine Christian living look like?

You may do all of the right things and say all of the right words, but are your motives pure? Is your heart right with God? Are you living only to impress others or are you seeking to please God, no matter what others think? How terrible it would be for someone to say of you, "Listen to what he says, but do not follow his example."

Don't be a whitewashed tomb, one who only looks good on the outside but whose true intentions are rotten.

Is This the End or Not?

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus described for His disciples what we now call “the end times” or “the last days.” The conversation was sparked by a remark Jesus made concerning the Temple. When the disciples were marveling at its elaborate décor and the enormity of its stones, Jesus commented, “These magnificent buildings will be so completely demolished that not one stone will be left on top of another” (*Mark 13:1, 2*).

Naturally, the disciples wanted to know more. Thus, when they were resting on the Mount of Olives, across the valley from the Temple (one could see it from there), Jesus took the time to explain His comments more fully. This conversation is sometimes referred to as the “Olivet Discourse” (*Matthew 24, 25*).

Just as the Old Testament prophecies oftentimes had double fulfillments (one sooner and one later), so too did Jesus’ prophecy of Jerusalem and the Temple. Because of political tension between the Jews and the Romans, Caesar sent his legions to destroy Jerusalem in 70 AD. Included in the judgment of the city, soldiers leveled the Temple. Therefore, part of Jesus’ predictions have already come true.

However, Jesus described so much more than the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans. Evidently, there will be another Temple built in the future, which, at some point, will be desecrated by a Gentile leader (*Matthew 24:15*). This event will take place during a great tribulation, which is marked by natural disasters (earthquakes, famines, signs in the skies, etc.), destruction caused by world-wide wars, and a host of false prophets and phony “messiahs.” These events are all indications that the end is near and Jesus’ return is imminent. Until that day, “Jerusalem will be trampled down by Gentiles, until the age of the Gentiles comes to an end” (*Luke 21:24*).

Since the days of the Roman Empire, Jerusalem has been conquered and controlled by one Gentile nation after another; but after Jesus returns, He will deliver them from their enemies and establish His kingdom on earth.

Daily Reflection

Though we have read hundreds of prophecies during our time in the Old Testament, many of which have already been fulfilled, these prophecies of Jesus give us some idea of what the people in the Old Testament must have experienced, hearing and waiting for prophecies to be fulfilled. Describe what you think or feel when you read these predictions. Do they make you feel confident, overwhelmed, or uneasy?

Personally, knowing that God sees all of time from beginning to end and that He knows the future like we know the present gives me great confidence. It is reassuring to be reminded that God governs in the affairs of men. While these events may appear to be haphazard or chaotic, they will all occur under the sovereign eye of God. **He is in control today, and He will still be in control then.**

However, as soon as I begin to dive into all that will take place in the last days and as I try to figure when and how they will occur, I can easily get overwhelmed and frustrated. The fear of the unknown is quite powerful; but that fear is quickly squelched by the faith I have in the sovereignty of God, my trust in Christ, and His promises regarding my eternal destiny. **Let us not be fearful of the end times; rather let us be found faithful to the end.**

Faithful and Fruitful

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus continued His discussion of the end times, particularly in regards to His second coming. "No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son Himself. Only the Father knows; and, since you don't know when they will happen, stay alert and keep watch" (*Mark 13:32, 33*).

Stay alert and keep watch! "Don't let Him find you sleeping when He arrives without warning" (v.36). "You must be ready all of the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected" (*Matthew 24:44*). "Don't let the day catch you unaware" (*Luke 21:34*). "Stay awake and be prepared, because you don't know the day or the hour of My return" (*Matthew 25:13*). Repeated several times here is the idea that we are to be ready for Jesus to return. The obvious question, then, is what exactly does it mean to be ready, stay awake, be alert, or be prepared?

Jesus gave the answer to this question in the story of the ten bridesmaids. Five of the bridesmaids had enough oil to sustain their lamps all through the night, while the other five bridesmaids did not have enough oil to wait. The oil here is faith. **Those who exhibit genuine saving faith** (which is a gift of God) **will remain faithful to the end**. While those who say that they have faith but who really do not will fall away and abandon their "wait" for the Lord.

Is there another way to tell the difference between those who have or don't have genuine saving faith? Again, Jesus gives us the answer with His second story of the three servants. Two of the servants took what was given to them and made good use of it; when the Master returned, they were rewarded. **They were rewarded for being faithful servants, but the evidence of their faith was fruitfulness.**

The third servant had the same "financial" opportunity as the other two but did nothing with it; rather he hid his talents in the ground. Thus, **he bore no fruit, which was evidence that he had no faith**. "From those who are unfaithful," Jesus said, "even what they have will be taken away" (*Matthew 25:29*).

Lastly, Jesus shared the reality of a final judgment, a time when He will separate "the sheep and the goats," meaning those who accepted Him and those who rejected Him (*25:31-46*). To those who rejected Him, He will say, "Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his demons." Here is the reality of not only the final judgment but of hell, a place of eternal punishment for sin. However, to those who were faithful and righteous (because of Christ), they will inherit eternal life.

Daily Reflection

Faithful followers of Christ are fruitful followers of Christ. *Salvation is not an effect of your good works but good works are effects of your salvation.* How would you evaluate your faithfulness and fruitfulness?

What exactly are "good works"? Who gets to decide what is good — you or the Lord? Obviously, He does. How can you discern what is a good work by God's standards?
