

I. Intro

A. Last Monday, the country celebrated the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King - the civil rights leader who mobilized non-violent resistance against unjust laws, delivered mesmerizing speeches, won a Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35 and was tragically assassinated at the age of 39.

B. You likely noticed lots of references to Dr. King this week. I was particularly struck by the number of politicians on both sides of the aisle that cited him. That claimed him. That claimed that if Dr. King were alive today, he would be on their side of whatever issue they were talking about. What they were saying is, Dr. King would think like me.

C. In that sense, Dr. King has a bit in common with Jesus. People try to co-opt him. They argue that he is a lot like them, though perhaps nicer.

D. When it comes to Jesus, some on the right act like he founded the NRA, while those on the left claim he crusaded for labor unions. I've seen Christ claimed by virtually every side of every issue: Jesus the capitalist and Jesus the Marxist; Jesus the pacifist and Jesus the warrior; Jesus the environmentalist and Jesus the corporate titan. This is only possible because lots of people do not know what he actually said. What he taught.

II. Today's message is part of a series in which we are doing a fly over of the basics of the Christian faith. Instead of taking one passage and going deep, we are water skiing over lots of material – Genesis to Revelation – distilling it into an introductory overview of the Christian faith.

A. So far, we have looked at: the Gospel, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Faith, Evil, Service and Communion. Future topics include: the Bible, death, judgement, heaven and hell, prayer, spiritual growth, the resurrection and more.

B. Two weeks ago, we looked at Jesus generally. Next week we look at why he died. Today our focus is on what he taught.

III. There are lots of places we might ground this idea. We are looking mostly in Luke.

A. The first chapter of Luke is all about the 400 years of silence being broken when the angel Gabriel makes announcements to Zechariah - about his wife's upcoming birth to John the Baptist – and then to Mary – about her pregnancy of Jesus.

B. Luke 2 is the Christmas narrative – Caesar issuing a decree for a census, Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem and all that.

C. Luke 3 focusses on John the Baptist, leading up to Christ's baptism. It then covers Christ's genealogy.

D. In Luke 4 we are told that after Jesus was baptized, he went into the desert for 40 days, fasting and preparing for his mission. When he emerged, he did so as a Rabbi – a Jewish scholar who teaches. Luke 4:13 reads: When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. And then 14 looks ahead. It reads: **Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.**

1. Matthew's account of this moment – found in Mt. 9:35 - says something similar: Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the Good News of the kingdom.

E. Other passages commenting on other moments in his life, also highlight his role as a teacher:

1. In Mark 4:38 - that famous scene where Jesus is asleep in the boat when a storm comes up, and the disciples all think they are going to die - they wake him up, saying, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?";
2. At the end of Matthew's Gospel – when he is being arrested at night – he chastises those arresting him in secret saying: Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the Temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me.<sup>1</sup>
3. And let's not overlook the fact that the Greek word for disciple (*mathetes*) means learners. Jesus was a teacher. It's hard to imagine a more obvious statement. Teaching was a big part of His identity.

F. Now, it is important to note, this is not his only identity. Indeed, I would argue, it is not the most important aspect of who He is. The study of Jesus is occasionally divided into: 1) a study of His nature – the fact that he is God and Man; 2) a study of His life – which generally refers to his example. (We look at what we can learn by studying what he did, how he treated others, how he spent his time, who He spent his time with, his devotional practices and things like that); 3) a third aspect of Christ is His work – which focuses mostly on His sacrificial death on the cross to atone for our sins;

G. So, there are other aspects of Jesus's life we need to focus on. But one of them we need to pay attention to is that Jesus was a teacher.<sup>2</sup>

H. Of course, even here we have to focus. There are several aspects of his teaching that warrant our study. Teachers are recognized as great teachers for a variety of reasons:

1. Some teachers are called good because they really know their subject.
2. Some are called good because they really care for their students. I have a friend who won teacher of the year for the State of Washington – and then a few years later was named Principal of the Year for the State, and then I caught a news clip in which he was at the White House with two others as they selected

National Principal of the Year. He didn't get it, but it didn't surprise me that he was nominated. One of the last times I was with him, we stood outside the high school as the 2,000 students rolled into the building, and he knew virtually every one of them by name. He was celebrated as a teacher for loving and caring for his students). There are different ways teachers might excel - hey, some are called great teachers because they give easy As.

I. There are several aspects of teaching that make a teacher noteworthy. Jesus excels at all of them.

1. His lectures were fascinating. In Mark 1:22, we are told that one of the common responses to Jesus's teaching was awe. If you read the black letters after the red letters you find that people are shocked by what He says. They are winded. They look around and say, "no one has ever said these things before." They marvel at his insights and at the authority with which he spoke.

2. He was a master of nonformal learning before it was recognized as the best approach. He not only mixed lectures with field trips, he was with his students 24/7. He was always teaching them. They got too listen to what he said; watch how he lived, see him up early to pray, and watch him care for those others were overlooking. They had a front row seat as he debated the Pharisees.

3. Other reasons to celebrate Jesus as a teacher would be: 1) the way he took parables to new heights;<sup>3</sup> 2) the way he answered questions with questions; 3) a third would be the success of his students. Jesus took an unimpressive group of people others had passed on and developed them into people who changed the world.

J. But our focus today is on something slightly different.<sup>4</sup> It is on the essence of his verbal message. The content. The big ideas. If you listened to Jesus speak, what was He teaching you? What did he say?

K. I want to give you a brief summary. Please know, it is only that. Hundreds of thousands of books – and tens of millions of sermons – have attempted to summarize what Jesus taught. All fail to capture the raw power of His words.

1. My efforts will also fall short. So let me say again, you should read Christ's words yourself. Everything he said fits on twenty typed pages, which is far less than you'll find in today's *USA Today* or *The Wall Street Journal*. You can read them in less than an hour. Take this challenge. Find a red-letter Bible – ideally in a modern translation of paraphrase - strap yourself into your chair and get started. But be warned: whitewater rafting trips are more relaxing. The words of the Word are among the most riveting, alarming, comforting and shocking known to mankind. Most people are unprepared. You might suffer whiplash.

IV. What did he teach? What was the essence of Christ's message? Trinity students and others may know that one way to summarize everything would be to talk about the kingdom of God. For our purposes, I will divide the topics Christ spoke about under three headings:

## V. Jesus on Ethics.

A. Jesus had a fair bit to say about How to Live. In fact, even those who do not believe he was God will generally agree that Jesus gave us the greatest ethical system we have. Some will argue that Aristotle did – but most agree it was Jesus. Between the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule and his selfless example, he laid out a path that would lead to world peace if it were ever universally embraced. When asked to summarize it, he said:

1. You shall love the Lord your God, with all of your heart, with all and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>1</sup> There is no commandment greater than these.”<sup>5</sup>

2. Most of us love ourselves first, family members second and God third. Jesus reversed the order. He instructed us to love our Heavenly Father with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. Indeed, he called on us to love God with such fierce passion that our love for our own family would look like hatred beside it.<sup>6</sup> In Christ’s ethic, God is preeminent. He does not exist for us; we exist for him. He is first. And indeed, many aspects of life fall into place for us only when we learn to rightly order our loves. Loving God first is a game-changer.

3. And then, as soon as we focus on a love for God, we are called to love others, especially the poor and hurting – the widow, orphan, leper, sojourner, the overlooked. People matter. Our vertical focus on God is expected to overflow into horizontal acts of mercy, justice, reconciliation and service. Jesus went so far as to demand that we care for those we hate<sup>7</sup> - which are exactly the kind of shocking words I was talking about. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said: You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

4. This does not mean we should turn our enemies into friends. That is ideal, but generally it suggests we set out to get them to look, think, act and vote like us. What we are called to do is to be the kind of people who treat our enemies as if they were friends.

B. Now, these two big ideas are the two big ideas, but they do not stand alone. And they do not make sense on their own. They are supported by other assumptions. Let me name three.

1. The first is: We Are Stewards. Christ taught that everything we “own” is on loan from God, and that we are expected to “invest” his resources in ways that reflect his priorities. He made much of the idea that we will be held accountable for what we do with what is entrusted to us. He also stressed that those to whom much has been given will be held to a higher standard.

a) One-half of the parables are about grace – the shocking, unthinkable, counter-intuitive, too-good-to-be-true nature of God’s favor. They are about getting what you do not deserve.

b) And one-half of the parables are about works. About getting what you do deserve. Think: the parable of the talents, the parable of

2. The second is: We Are Going to Live Forever. According to Jesus, we will either spend eternity with God in a place of love and joy, or we will be eternally cut off from all that is gracious and good. This truth affects everything.

a) In fact, if you go back and read the Sermon on the Mount, you realize how little of what Jesus says there makes sense unless we look past the grave and into the world to come. *Blessed are the poor, those who hunger and thirst now, those who weep.* If this is all there is, that is hard to understand. But if you keep reading things fall into place. Jesus said: *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.*

b) Jesus spoke about eternal life. And he told us to live this life in light of the next one. In fact, Jesus taught that those who focus only on this life are fools.

3. The third is, the Way Up Is Down. Jesus announced that “the first shall be last,” those who “seek to save their life will lose it” and that those who really want to get ahead will wash the dirty feet of those around them.

a) In last week’s sermon on service, Pastor Brad turned to John 13 and talked about washing someone’s feet. He noted that it was a bad job for the lowest class of people. (There was a TV show about dangerous and awful jobs. I am not sure washing someone’s feet has been featured on it. But, 2,000 years ago, when people wore sandals in a desert setting – and walked on roads behind lots of large animal, washing people’s feet was a bad job).

b) And then you put the story in context. Early in this section we see that the disciples are fighting over who is greatest. Meanwhile, in John 13:3 we are told that: Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waste. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. , and you realize that just before washing their feet, Jesus had been told that all power and authority was his.

c) And we are called to do likewise – which are not commands to act against our own best interests. What Jesus teaches is not just that we are to

serve, but that we are servants, and that in God's economy: the first will be last, and the way up is down.<sup>8</sup>

C. There is a beautiful simplicity to Christ's teaching. Anyone can make things complicated. Few can make the complicated simple. Jesus explained graduate-level moral concepts in ways preschoolers could grasp, and he did so without being simplistic.

D. I am labeling the first category of Christ's teaching, ethics.

## VI. The second big category I am going to call, the Plan

A. When you let the Bible unfold, you see that Christ's birth was part of a long-developing plan. And the headlines here unfold under a few terms:

B. The first would be The Kingdom of God.

1. There is a movement of God to restore and reclaim everything – to re-establish his rule and reign. This all falls under the banner of The Kingdom of God. I think many Christians have a very under-developed notion of eternal life. Heaven ends up very wispy, vaporous, gnostic and boring- sounding. And the understanding is that all that plays forward is people. Or, people and the Bible.

2. Heaven is not the topic for today's sermon, but know that God's plan seems to be to reclaim everything that is his. He is going to bring his Kingdom, and it's bigger and better than we can imagine.

C. The second would be the Church: At this moment, we are to be working to that end. God has a mission, and the church is part of the vehicle to see that accomplished. And so, Jesus launches it – and he taught about it. Most famously, in Matthew 16, where, after Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus talks about founding a church – an *ekklesia* – that will march forward, that will be a vehicle for advancing Christ's kingdom. One that will prevail. One that will push down the gates of hell.

D. There are a few others that need to be highlighted here:

1. Disciples and discipleship: Along side this we have Christ's plan to see it grow as Christ followers share the story of Christ, see others embrace Jesus, and then tell others. The idea is that disciples will make disciples who will make more disciples. This was the plan he modeled. And as this happens, the church will expand – just as he said: In Jerusalem, and then Judea, and then Samaria and then the outer most parts of the world.

2. Another term would be Great Commission. When we were looking at his ethics, I cited the Great Commandment. When you talk about the plan you focus on the Great Commission: Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

## VII. Jesus on Jesus

A. Given his reputation for humility, you may be surprised to learn that the central focus of Christ’s teaching was Christ himself. But it was. In ways big and small, Jesus kept claiming to be God. He used the titles of God to refer to himself. He accepted worship. He forgave sins. He said that he and the Father were One. He even claimed that he would return at the end of the age to judge every person who ever lived.<sup>9</sup>

1. Others have claimed to speak for God. But Jesus kept claiming to be God. Not godly. Not god-like. Not even “a god.” Jesus claimed to be the one true God.

B. It is important to note that while a few others have made related claims - David Koresh and Jim Jones to name two. (And I hear there is some Netflix show about another) - few believed them then and no one believes them now. Christ is the only great moral leader to make this claim.<sup>10</sup>

C. I stress this because some claim that Jesus doesn’t make this claim. In the recent past yet another book came out – this one by an Australian, called *Beyond Belief*, and it posits that Jesus didn’t ask people to believe in anything. He simply had some advice about how to treat others – how to be nice. Look, you do not usually put someone to death for suggesting that everyone should be a bit more kind. A simple reading of the Gospels makes it clear, claiming to be God is what Jesus teaches and it’s what gets him killed.

D. If you have read the Gospels you know, Jesus did not map out the path for people to follow. He said, I am the path.<sup>11</sup> Jesus didn’t come to offer good advice, he came as Savior of the World. He said, he came to lay down his life as a ransom for many.

## VIII. So, what do you do with this? What do you do with Jesus’s teaching?

A. Well, what do you do with the teaching of anyone – someone who cares for you and who knows more than you do? You learn what they are saying. You study. And then, you apply it. And then you tell others.

B. As always, I want to be quick to note, that with Jesus, an early point needs to be becoming a Christ-follower. Putting your faith down. He is not simply a moral sage. Following his teaching starts with accepting Him as more than just a teacher. Being born again. Asking Christ to be your Lord and being baptized.

1. In John 1:12 we are told that as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God.

2. If you have not taken that step, that comes next. you sign up.

C. And I would suggest that if you have signed up, you ask yourself: is Jesus shaping my life more than anyone else?

1. Am I most behold to the comments of Jesus or the comments of the Fed chairmen? Is my attitude shaped by Jesus, or by a particular news commentator or radio talk show host? Am I more influenced by the Gospels or by *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*?

D. Jesus is more than the greatest teacher ever, but he is not less.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26:55

<sup>2</sup> When theologians refer to “the work of Christ” they are referring to what he accomplished by dying on the cross.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus does not invent parables – we see them in use in the Old Testament (e.g., Judges 9:8-15), but he perfects the craft.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting, that those on the theological left often focus more on his example than on his claims. And those on the theological right focus more on his works (death) than on his teaching. Indeed, on the right, some who want to refute the claim that he is only a teacher end up acting as if he isn’t a teacher today.

<sup>5</sup> The Great Commandment is recorded in Luke 10, Matthew 22 and Mark 12.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:26

<sup>7</sup> Some have tried to reduce the Christian faith to “Love God and Love Others.” (William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, once sent out a telegram simply reading “Others.”) Far too much truth is left out for either of these tag lines to represent the Christian faith, but they do point us in the right direction.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 22:36-40.

<sup>9</sup> Christ claimed that at the end of “the age” he will return as King, and that in that role he will judge everyone who has ever lived. He further claims that his assessment will be both perfect and final, and that it will be based in large part on how people responded to him.

<sup>10</sup> As C.S. Lewis writes: There is no parallel in other religions. If you had gone to Buddha and asked him: “Are you the son of Brahma?” he would have said, “My Son, you are still in the veil of illusion.” If you had gone to Socrates and asked, “Are you Zeus?” he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, “Are you Allah?” he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, “Are you Heaven?” I think he would have probably replied, “Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.” The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man. C.S. Lewis, *What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?* (1950)

<sup>11</sup> As Karl Barth – one of the most influential theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – said, “Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way.”