

W@W001

Word@Work from BeaconLight

Read Mark 1:1-3 *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" (v2) (NIV)*

God does not arrive unannounced. As Isaiah announced John the Baptist, and John announced Jesus - the task of God's people today is to prepare a rebellious world for the arrival of its King. John's working life was spent announcing the Son of God; and in doing that, he knew that Jesus had to increase and that he had to decrease.

So why do some 21st century Christians think that God wants them to be the centre of attention? Too easily, we announce Christian celebrities as if people are converted to Jesus by being attracted to them. We do all in our power to reassure a godless world that Christians are as 'normal' as they are, and we are lured into the delusion that a 'successful' Christian ought to be honoured by everybody.

The truth is: John the Baptist's life was unpretentious and ended ignominiously, as did the lives of most of the apostles. Why should we fare any better? The importance of John's life was not his comfort or popularity - but simply that he lived clean and announced the need for others to be clean before God arrived.

If we are honoured in the workplace, we should thank God. But we should not expect to be honoured: however we should expect to be noticed. If we witness faithfully, our colleagues will learn how much we honour Christ and they will be challenged to do the same.

In part, it is the challenge of a godly life that excites some people into seeking Him and others into more obvious rebellion. If they seek - don't interpret it as any personal credit. If they reject, they are not rejecting you, but Christ if they slander you because of your holy life. If they ask how to be saved, they will certainly expect us to be prepared with an answer.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help me to live the truth today so that my colleagues will want to hear Your Word and start to get ready to meet You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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W@W002

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Read Mark 1:4-5 *"And so John came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River."* (NIV)

Repentance and confession are the keys to change, for people who do not get everything right. Yet our fear of being sued if we admit the truth removes most businesses and professions from these starting blocks of real progress. Even governments cannot bring themselves to accept responsibility for their own errors. Small wonder that they find real change for the better is next to impossible.

In fact, there is little forgiveness in worldly institutions because, apart from Christ, sin can only be swept under the carpet - providing good reasons for the next office incumbent to gloat as the carpets are pulled up. But, piling good ideas onto a corrupt past cannot work for long. The past has to be dealt with.

John the Baptist announced that God was coming, and it was time to get cleaned up. Of course, repentance of heart and confession is only the beginning - but it is the essential first step in coming to God ... or indeed getting right with anyone. We have a God whose graciousness is largely unknown to corporate business. The believer shows how much he believes in a God who forgives and restores when he genuinely admits his faults. Strangely, such humility is secretly respected. Millions of sin-laden hearts want to be unburdened but think it is impossible. Only the Christian can prove that it is possible.

Repentance is our part, and forgiveness is God's. Through Jesus, a forgiven man or woman is not only a released personality (and a witness of God's grace), but also an agent for real change. Admitting what is wrong is the essential prerequisite to progress. If Christian conviction led William Wilberforce to stop the slave trade and Elizabeth Fry to bring dignity to prisoners, what could you do to change your bit of the world in Jesus' Name?

Prayer: *Gracious Father, help me to admit the truth about myself and the society in which I live. Help me to move on by receiving Your forgiveness and changing what is wrong. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:6-7 *John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie..." (NIV)*

John was not a pretty sight and his eating habits left something to be desired. He did not trouble to be politically correct because his task was not to make himself acceptable to society, but to point people to Jesus.

Neither can we afford the luxury of surrounding ourselves with the admiration of others, if our job is to admire Jesus and point to Him. When we attract people to ourselves that is just where it stops! So much evangelical 'bridge building' fails to encourage anyone to cross over to Jesus, because we block the bridge! It may not be much comfort to be a human bridge, because you get trampled on and you feel used, but if people can cross over you to reach Jesus, the job is well done.

The modern obsession with 'feeling good about yourself' and 'developing self-esteem' reeks of moral bankruptcy. Why should we dignify such pagan ideas as being wise, when we know that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom?

Security can never be gained by self-assertion, because God has designed us to feel insecure - unless we put Him first. So, today, instead of 'being someone' or seeking popularity, try decreasing your ego. Choose to submit to those over you and serve those around you as a witness to the fact that you believe that you are merely the Master's servant.

Don't worry about missing out on the glory today. Glory can wait until eternity. However announcing the King, after He has come again, will be a waste of time. In any case, Jesus said that those who seek and receive glory today will forfeit it tomorrow.

Prayer: *Holy God, forgive my inner hunger to be noticed and glorified. Help me to see You more clearly today and to take the role of Your servant. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:8-10 *"I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. (NIV)*

It is worth remembering that we cannot do everything. The perfectionist or obsessive worker may be an asset to the business, but can be a menace in the Kingdom of God.

That is not to say that Christians are supposed to be inert in their witness (there is already a surfeit of such types) but that however much we run up and down the pitch passing the ball, we can never personally score the winning goal - that privilege is reserved for the Holy Spirit.

We may, and must, be clean in our living and vigorous in our witness; but we can never put the life of God into anyone. It is important that we serve God at work and develop conversations with those seeking release from their wasted years, but only Jesus can flood their lives with His life.

This is not to underestimate our role, but rather to define it. If even Jesus needed to be flooded with the Holy Spirit, then so do we and our friends too. Yes, we certainly need to explain and persuade that Jesus wants to be welcomed by repentant sinners as their Master (and if we are nervous here, may the Lord give us courage), but the end point of the gospel is between the sinner and the Saviour. The rest is up to God, as repentant people are born again by His Holy Spirit.

Prayer: *Dear Lord Jesus, please overwhelm me afresh with Your Holy Spirit so that I may be full of You. May I have the courage to do what only I can do, and have the wisdom to pass everything else to You. In Your Precious Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:11 *And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (NIV)*

Love is still the most prized commodity on earth. Some say that God loves everyone, so everything is all right - but is it? In these sentimental days, it is important to understand that the 'love of God' and the 'pleasure of God' are different. Let's take a moment to think it through ...

God does not do loving things just because He wants to be nice, or as a strategy to get people to like Him. He loves because that is His nature. It is therefore natural for God to tell people that He loves them, because He does! He cannot be false to His nature. So when Jesus heard that His Father loved Him, God was expressing His essential character, because God IS love!

Unlike us fickle humans, God's love cannot vary in quantity or quality. Nothing we can do will make God love us any more or any less. Put like that, do you think that God loves you any less than He loves Jesus? The answer to that question also applies to the best of your friends and the worst of your enemies.

What does vary is the pleasure that God derives from us. God is pleased with our obedience and grieved by our disobedience (note that the extent of God's pleasure with us, is the measure of our true fellowship with Him). Because nothing delights God more than our loving obedience, He will keep on acting in such a way as to grab our attention to bring us back to the place of obedience - where we can appreciate His pleasure. That is the most loving thing He can do, because His will is always for our highest good, as well as His glory.

Jesus was obedient in coming to earth to die for the sins of the world and God the Father was very pleased with Him. Jesus said that if we loved Him we would keep His commandments - and that applies as much to our workdays as our Sundays. If the working world understands that loyalty and obedience should be rewarded, why should Christians forget?

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank You for loving me without any limits. Help me to serve You in obedience today without putting any limits on my response to Your love. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:12-13 *At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (NIV)*

God does many things that are strange to our way of thinking.

After the extraordinary holy public conference of Father, Son and Holy Spirit by the waters of baptism, why should the Spirit 'cast out' Jesus into the desert to meet Satan? (This word is used 58 times for violently expelling demons.) Why should the Spirit need to 'drive out' Jesus to meet His adversary?

If we think that Jesus just came to save sinners, we do not see the big picture. In God's global plan, the devil must also be confronted and defeated: that was Jesus' job too. Yet everything in the character of our Lord was repelled by evil. Small wonder that it took all the energy of the Spirit to move Him from the peace of baptism to confront Satan.

Most Christians in the workplace are surrounded by words, values and actions that will never be found in heaven. The sensitive believer will properly loathe the corruption that is in the world. Escaping from it seems to be the holy option. It is, of course, necessary to treasure Christian fellowship at church or in the Christian Union - but that is not the whole story ...

God deliberately sends us out into a dark world, to be light in the darkness and salt in the dung-pile. Those tasks are morally repugnant to the believer. If God did not drive us to confront the corruption in the world with His Word, we would not even want to do it. If the Spirit's protection was not available, we could not survive: if His powerful Word could not be our sword, we would fail.

Today you are probably surrounded by corruption and temptation - but God has placed you there to be a sign that light does not have to be extinguished by the darkness. Keep shining!!

Prayer: *Holy Father, You have placed me here to be a light. I need Your Holy Spirit's powerful presence to keep me here and to help me to stay bright for You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:14-15 *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (NIV)*

It never feels good to be sidelined - I am sure that John was not wildly happy to be thrown into jail. But sometimes the next phase of God's work requires that you should be moved off stage, so that Jesus can move on.

This is not to denigrate your part; it merely clarifies that you are just a supporting actor and it is Jesus who has the lead role. If John had stayed around it might appear that Jesus was his disciple, instead of the other way around.

Today there are too many wannabe Christian 'stars', but that is not God's idea. We need to remember that Jesus and His people are not entertaining people with "The Prince of Peace" at some spiritual royal variety performance: the theatre is the theatre of war against spiritual darkness, and the weapon is love.

Jesus deliberately confronted the devil after His baptism and strategically marches into enemy (Satan's) territory. The gospel therefore puts the church onto a war footing more vital than any physical military campaign. As the territory is taken so the scouts, pathfinders and shock troops give way to the wider offensive. If foot soldiers fall they do so with honour knowing that others can continue the advance.

So do not be perplexed by the changes in your life - the Lord knows! He is, even now, allowing and arranging circumstances to maximise the effect of the gospel in and around your life. Do not be disturbed by disturbance - the Lord Jesus is on the move, and although your part may be less prominent than before, He knows that He will win the hearts and minds of many. The only blood to be shed - was His own!

Prayer: *Dear Lord God, thank You for using me in some small way - help me to rejoice in the wisdom of Your love battle-plan so that I do not suffer disappointment when my role fades. Help me, in my working world, to rejoice in You, even though others may sideline me. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:16-18 *As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. (NIV)*

Most non-Christians think (if they think about it at all) that if God were to call anyone, He would obviously call a holy person doing holy things. Not so!

It was just another ordinary day for the fishermen. There was nothing particularly holy about these men ... they were not in the temple and were certainly not dressed in their Sabbath best. The Master simply walked by their workplace and commanded that they must change their job and become His apprentices. And they did.

Although it seems strange, Christ did not take His chosen band from the religious set in the synagogue but from the ordinary in the workplace.

Have you ever thought that there are many more potential fishers of men at work rather than in church? In comparison, the church is small but the workplace is huge - and contains many who do not yet know that Jesus has His eye on them. But He has!

That alone is a good enough reason to look at colleagues with wiser eyes; knowing that the call of God might well come to them, and sooner than you may think. So we ought to expect God to speak in the office or school or canteen ... He might ask you to help Him. He even might command you to be a fisher of men. Perhaps that is why He has put you where you are.

Prayer: *Holy Father, thank You for choosing me and for Your plans to choose others who work alongside me. Today I pray for my colleague / friend In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:19-20 *When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. (NIV)*

The Christian life inevitably includes a call away from the past. Peter and Andrew were cleaning their nets; James and John were preparing their nets, but Jesus called all four to leave their nets and follow Him.

The call to follow was so authoritative that they obeyed. It made sense to them even though it separated them from the tools of their trade, their primary family loyalty and their financial security. What the Lord Jesus injected into the lakeside beach was the opportunity to fulfil their 'design specification' - to serve and glorify the Lord by doing whatever He wanted them to do. That is the highest purpose of mankind.

Is this an instruction to the modern Christian to leave home and the company car? Probably not, but it is a healthy reminder that whilst the purpose of work is to provide for the family needs - it is not the purpose of life! We 'work to live' but that is not the same as 'living to work'. You see, our life gains its significance - not by what we do, but by why we do it.

We can fill our life with activity but fail to achieve our divine purpose, unless we obey the Lord's instruction. If we refuse to walk into the future shaped by God's call, we will stay in a future shaped merely by our own background.

It may be that the Lord tells us to continue to do the same things as before, but His call will reveal a fresh purpose; we will know we are doing it for Him! For others, the voice of God will lead us into a new adventure with Him and it could be a totally different lifestyle altogether. For all who listen we know that we are working for the King and not for ourselves.

Prayer: *Father, if I am working in the knowledge of Your call then please affirm me in it. If I am not, then speak to me about it. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:21-22 *They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. (NIV)*

Jesus always went first to the places where people expected to hear God. In the synagogue the rabbis said that the law of God was right - but even the most religious found it impossible to keep. The rabbis themselves were no better: they not only suffered the internal schizophrenia of failing to do the truth that they taught, but their message carried the conviction of their own hopelessness.

Because Jesus was and is God, His teaching has the 'ring of truth'. His teaching was authentic and authoritative. Not only was it right, but as Jesus spoke, it was clear that He believed it and was able to do it.

Very few people today have heard the teaching of Jesus. Most sceptically assume that as every 'life changing' idea they heard in the past has huge cracks, the teaching of Jesus will be the same - inadequate and irrelevant.

Yet, all over the world, the gospel of Jesus has revolutionised millions of lives. In a day when few people expect to meet God anywhere, the gospel has an incredibly authentic impact on anyone who wants to listen. Instead of hoping that your friend might be interested in coming to church one day, why not encourage a simple reading of the gospel. Even the link below could introduce the Word of God; and they may be surprised, how soon they will want to meet the God of the Word.

Prayer: *Lord God, please forgive me for underestimating the powerful effect of your Word. Give me the courage to suggest to my colleagues that they might read it. For Jesus' sake, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:23-27 *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching - and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." (NIV)*

Although natural science insists that demons do not exist, Jesus had no such problem. When evil spirits spoke through the commandeered mouths of their victims, Jesus heard them, spoke back to them and they obeyed His orders.

Even though the people might have wondered who Jesus was, the angels of Satan were fully aware that His task was to destroy their kingdom.

Interestingly, their 'confession of faith' was insightful and fearful, but was certainly not mixed with repentance. It is therefore a sobering possibility that someone may know about Jesus and even shout out the facts of the gospel but not be 'on side' with the Lord (Matthew 7:21-23).

This exorcism was no illusion; the crowd recognised that if Jesus had power even over the demons then His words must carry awesome weight. Which they do!

Whatever the opposition, it is good to be reminded that even Satan cannot win against Jesus and His gospel. Evil may win a battle or two but Satan knows he cannot win the war. So why should we be afraid?

Prayer:: *Mighty God, thank You that you have all power and all authority. Help me to submit to Your authority today and to 'hide in You' as I say what is true in Jesus Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:29-31 *As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.*

It may not be true that charity begins at home, but if divine service has no domestic context, there is a problem. As the task of the Lord Jesus was to do the Father's will - we must conclude that this healing in the home was the Father's will.

Perhaps we see God's will as being reserved for the big things of life - for the rest we just use our common sense. We might think that it was merely natural for the disciples to tell Jesus about illness in the family; but sharing that information with Jesus triggered a whole episode that was in the Father's will. After a day of intensive ministry to the crowds, the love of God was focused on a sick old lady - but why?

It was not simply the compassion of Jesus, but His gospel strategy that involved the disciples in a very personal miracle. This was stark evidence to them that what Jesus could do for others in church, He would do for them at home. With all that lay ahead for them they needed the confirmation of His personal involvement with them.

It is all too easy to separate the sacred and secular parts of life (although there is no such valid distinction). We can fail to see that the same Lord Jesus that we worshipped on Sunday is with us at work on Tuesday. By the time we get home in the evening, we forget He is there too.

In each of the mundane and apparently non-spiritual segments of life the Lord may well surprise us by the effectiveness of His involvement. When He touches our lives, grateful service should follow and that will encourage others to do the same. So let us tell Him everything and see what He will do!

Prayer:: *Gracious Father, thank You for this reminder to look to You as much today as I did on Sunday. Help me to see that You are involving me in Your work - even during my working hours, and also at home. I want to see Your will being worked out in the ordinary parts of my life. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:32-34 *That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. (NIV)*

Diseases of the body and mind have long perplexed humanity. But Jesus knew their origin - a by-product of Satan's seduction and rebellion against God. Their healing was a sign that the authority of Satan was not only under threat but would eventually be overturned. So Jesus' early ministry demonstrated the supremacy of the Kingdom of God. At the same time, God showed His mercy and kindness to many whose lives had been torn by sickness.

Statements such as 'all the sick', 'whole town gathered', 'healed many' and 'many demons' emphasised that there was a massive problem of unresolved disease. The fact that they emerged only after the Sabbath sunset, showed that religion only prevented relief reaching the oppressed. It was Jesus, and Jesus only, who could destroy the works of the devil - and prevent the demons from having any say in the matter.

Most offices, schools, professional practices and industrial sites are full of hurting people who have been disillusioned by religion. Without Jesus, no creed can console a breaking heart, and no ritual can bring peace to the sinful conscience. However, knowing that Jesus is present in the workplace (in the heart of a believer), may spark that curious longing that only He can satisfy. There is every good reason to announce that the Lord is here and His Spirit is with you. For some of your dis-eased colleagues, it is just the news they have been waiting for!

Prayer: *Dear Lord God, thank You that Your compassion can reach every dis-eased person who I meet today. Give me the courage to announce Your presence. For Christ's sake, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:35-39 *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (NIV)*

The worlds of prayer and popularity are always in opposition to each other.

Prayer speaks of intimacy with a holy God: popularity speaks of superficiality with a selfish crowd. Prayer provides a conversation where you don't have to pretend; but popularity eventually produces the anxiety of keeping up appearances. Yet how often we prefer the crowd to the Lord, and in so doing we feed the flesh and starve the spirit.

Is it therefore surprising that today's Christians are fascinated to jump on the latest bandwagon of spiritual fix-its? They have forgotten Elijah's testimony that the Lord was not in the earthquake, wind or fire. The Lord was in the 'still small voice'. The experience of the Lord Jesus was the same. God speaks when we make the time to listen.

It is not easy to carve that undiluted time, that 'Nothing Else Time' out of a busy day. The lunch break, the train or bus journey, the privacy of your own office or a five-minute walk between buildings may allow you a brief chat with your Maker; but Jesus was praying alone before the early shift was awake.

The gospel priority of our Lord did not seek to trade on popularity and neither should you. At best, the esteem of others is transient, at worst it is deluding - it is always a diversion to dependence on the Lord. Even the apparent safety of work we know, may make us reluctant to follow God's call into uncharted service. The choice, to pray before the priorities of the world suffocate us, is therefore a Christ-like decision.

Prayer: *Holy God, thank You for this time before your Word. If I am to fulfil Your will in this place I need Your direction. I know that I need to change my priorities so that I can spend time with You before I am swept helplessly into another whirlpool of work. Please help me for Jesus' sake, Amen.*

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Read Mark 1:40-42 *A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. (NIV)*

Most people, having thought a little about God, might agree that He probably could do anything. However the majority never ask Him. Either they see their need as irrelevant to Him or that He is too inaccessible. More likely they do not see Him as someone who might be approached, still less begged, to meet their need. They simply do not believe that He would be willing to help them.

That is why it is the desperate who have more of God's blessings, simply because they know they have nowhere else to go! The polite circle of self-sufficiency, with which the western world has been plagued, says that our salvation is in our own hands. In most businesses, a divine solution to a problem is scorned as a lack of character or resolve or creative imagination. Begging Jesus for help would be thought of as being despicably weak.

The Bible record shows that the people asked God for help when they ran out of other options. But their stories show Jesus does not have to be the last resort. The sooner we ask, the sooner He acts. As we grow in trusting Jesus, we know that God is more than willing to make the outcast clean and the penitent will never be turned away. Although the world will laugh, in the Kingdom of God, crying out for help is the essential weakness that God requires in us, before He will act in strength.

The experience of believers in every age is the same. We need to practise our begging before God. The time will come when others will see how graciously Jesus responds to honest helplessness; and our testimony of God's mercy will encourage others to do the same.

Prayer: *Blessed Father God, help me to cast off my self-sufficiency and confess my weakness so that I may receive the help I need from You today. In Christ's Name, Amen.*

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W@W016

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Read Mark 1:43-45 *Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. (NIV)*

The belief that God's Kingdom will expand through advertising its immediate benefits has more to do with the spirit of this age than the Bible. Promotional policies learned from the world would demand maximum publicity for such an amazing miracle, but it is clear from this passage that Jesus did not need disobedient testimonials to achieve His purpose.

It is all very understandable. The leper received more than he dared to hope, and with his healing came a social rehabilitation. He was full of joy and gratitude and let everybody know. They in turn thought that they could get similar advantages from Jesus, and so they became more than enthusiastic fans. However, as the story tells later on, most of the crowd went away once the novelty faded.

Jesus does not look for crowds who follow because of what they can get for Him; Jesus looks for self-denying faith. The enthusiasm that comes from a miracle may evaporate when the next prayer is not answered as expected. Faith trusts in the Master rather than the miracle, and continues to trust even when human eyes can see no future. Faith sees simply that Jesus is the light at the end of the tunnel.

We rightly encourage believers to tell of their faith in Jesus Christ. Often an amazing answer to prayer is an encouragement to saints and sometimes the curious sinners will search for the Lord. But faith does not come by miracles or hearing about miracles - faith only comes from hearing and believing the Word of God.

Today your witness is to explain who Jesus is, and that you have submitted to the authority of His call. These facts are true irrespective of how God should choose to answer your prayers. Strangely, it is your 'ordinary' submission to Christ that is the stuff of which the Kingdom is made.

Prayer: *Almighty God, may I never be so high that my enthusiasm for getting blessed becomes an obstacle to the gospel. Likewise may I never dismiss the blessings and find that that my simple obedience to Jesus is without joy. For His sake, Amen.*

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Read Mark 2:1-5 *A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralysed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (NIV)*

It is a curious fact that God delights to reveal His character in response to faith. Although many people are confused in their understanding about faith, it is really quite simple.

Faith is not a feeling to be generated - it is the essence of relationship.

It works like this: you have some experience of a person or you have a recommendation; because of that, you make a decision to trust them. When that trust is rewarded you will be more confident to trust them again and with bigger matters. So faith is a practical decision to commit yourself to another person because you believe that they will not disappoint you.

This is how business works every day. Although the days of 'my word is my bond' have largely gone, most of us choose to trade with those we like; and we like them because we believe we can trust them. So it is also with Jesus.

When the four men carried the paralysed man to Jesus and half demolished the roof to reach Him, they were acting in faith. They believed in Jesus. They believed that if they could get the man to Jesus, He would do the rest: and Jesus did! He saw more than just the physical weakness; he saw and healed a spiritual cripple when He forgave his sins.

This story should make us wonder what might happen if we trusted Jesus with every situation. Could He meet the deepest needs of our friends and colleagues? Theoretically, we might believe, but if we have done nothing to bring our associates to Jesus - what kind of faith is that? Two questions may reveal our faith in the saving Christ. How do we pray for our friends? What do we say to them?

Prayer:: *Gracious Father God, I know that You are willing to save all who come to You. Please strengthen my faith in You that I may have confidence to do whatever is necessary to bring my friends to You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 2:6-12 *Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (NIV)*

It is astonishing that Jesus could be accused of blasphemy. Yet in our own age, there are similar protests. Once the Lord Jesus Christ has been reduced to the level of a prophetic teacher, He is just one of many with an equal right to His opinion, but definitely cannot be the supreme authority.

The thought that Jesus Christ was God in a human body was, and is, most offensive to religious people who are outside of Christ. When Jesus forgave the man's sins it was such an obvious statement of His divinity. Then He confronted religious critics on their own theological doorstep and so clearly linked healing, forgiveness of sins and His divine nature - that nobody could miss the point.

Any fair-minded enquirer today, who examines this text, must also come to the same conclusion. Is this process not the primary gospel priority? Some Christians today would rather pray for people than sit down with a colleague and examine how the Bible reports the life and words of Jesus.

Of course, prayer is essential but, without the facts about Jesus, it is an inadequate basis for a relationship with Him. The definitive springboard for faith is found in the Bible. Nowhere else is Jesus so clearly shown: His authoritative behaviour and response to intrigued, bewildered or hostile people still finds direct application. Such people are in every shop or boardroom today.

The opportunities for fellowship and prayer are of great benefit to Christian groups in all sorts of businesses, schools, colleges, and hospitals: but how will an unbeliever know who your Jesus is - let alone believe in Him? If He is best defined in the Bible, why not open it and help the seeker to read and understand what it says?

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us such a clear picture of Jesus in the Bible. Give me courage today to share the real Jesus as You have revealed Him in Your Word. For His sake, Amen.*

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Read Mark 2:13-17 *Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (NIV)*

It seems logical that a perfect God would choose the best people to serve Him. However, that logic is weak. As perfection is an absolute quality, logically a perfect God would demand only perfect servants. Put it another way, as nobody is perfect except God, why should He choose anyone at all, except the angels?

In this narrative, Jesus chose dishonest Levi (Matthew), and then hosted his leaving party surrounded by those whose morals and integrity were in tatters. The religious leaders asked the obvious question, "Why?" Why should one who claims to be the representative of heavenly perfection, soil himself with corrupted people? This must prove that He is not God.

How sad that well mannered, clean living people should be confused by the behaviour of the Saviour. They did not understand that the Lord Jesus had not come to applaud respectable Israel, any more than He now intends to give prizes to the moral majority in middle England. He told them plainly that He came to call sick people and make them well; immoral people and make them righteous; sinners and turn them into saints. That is the grace of the gospel in which Jesus personally took our dirt in order to make us clean.

Alas too many Christians are still impregnated by old-fashioned religion. We have high faith that the nice person will be converted yet low expectation for the office gossip, the violent customer or the embezzling clerk. That is not the way Jesus would think!

Why not treat each meeting, phone call or e-mail today as if the Lord Jesus is calling your client, employee or boss? Next month or next year that person could be your brother or sister in Christ. How you treat the sinner depends on whether you think they might be saved one day!

Prayer: *Gracious Father, in Your mercy You called me and saved me. Give me the eyes and ears of faith to see that You are calling the most unlikely into Your service and help me to cooperate with what You are doing. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 2:18-20 *Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. (NIV)*

Mark introduces us to more confrontation - this time about the practice of fasting. The problem could not have been about whether fasting was right or wrong, because Jesus assumed that fasting was as normal a spiritual discipline as prayer and giving to the poor (Matthew 6:16). It was all about how and why it is done.

In the Law of Moses, fasting was only demanded on the Day of Atonement. After the return of the exiles around 500BC, fasting was mandatory on four other feast days in the year. By the time of Jesus, most devout Jews would fast on Monday and Thursday every week as well! These were all man-made additions to the God's law to win God's favour.

Could it be a similar attitude for those who go to church every Sunday - 'religiously'? Does our religious practice assume that God will be impressed by what we do; and if we can do more than He has asked then He will be even more pleased. Jesus put a rude end to the discussion: He pointed out that who you are with, is even more important than what you do! In other words, behaviour has to be rooted in relationship.

It is not wrong to have personal spiritual disciplines, but it is untrue that because I have 'done a spiritual duty', God is satisfied with me. The automatic recitation of psalm, choreographed positions for prayer, fasting and even the mechanical 'quiet time' give my soul no advantage, without knowing Jesus. Such delusions seize even the pagan at times of crisis because nobody has ever explained that faith is can only be expressed in a relationship with the person of Jesus, and not in religious ritual.

Prayer: *Almighty God, help me to worship You in Spirit and in truth and to set no store by religious activities if they are not an expression of my living relationship with You. In Jesus Name, Amen.*

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