

**BEAT
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TO THE
PUNCH**

BECAUSE JESUS DEMANDS YOUR LIFE

ERIC MASON

FOREWORD BY PAUL DAVID TRIPP

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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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To my wife Yvette,

*God's grace has been a staple of our journey with Him
and with one another.*

*To experience all of the illnesses and losses you have,
and to be free of all bitterness and resentment is a joy to watch.*

*I dedicate this book to you, enjoying every season of your life with the
strength of the good Lord. Love you, babe, and I'm thankful to be
encountering the grace of God through life with you.*

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FOREWORD

The location: Camden, New Jersey
The scene: Epiphany Church Camden
The event: Good Friday service

The atmosphere: Celebration of the grace of the cross of Jesus

Luella and I went to the service not really knowing what to expect. We left blown away with what we had experienced and with hearts filled with gratitude for God's amazing grace. We listened that night to a company of young preachers winsomely expound and practically apply the words of Christ on the cross. We really were blown away by the street-level theology and the transformative practicality of what we heard that evening. I love hearing good preaching. I love having my heart rattled. I love looking at life through the lens of the cross of Jesus. At the end of the service I felt like a man who had just done a whole lot of grazing at a very good buffet. My heart and my brain were full, but I was sad when the service ended.

All the young, budding theologians who spoke that evening were mentored/discipled by Eric Mason or by someone who had been mentored/discipled by Eric Mason. As I read the manuscript of this book, it hit me that Eric had taught these young men to do exactly what this book is about. You could hear it in their words, and you could feel it in their passion. It was no accident that these men spoke with such confident clarity. They had been taught to "beat God to the punch."

Now, maybe you're thinking, *Paul, what in the world are you talking about? We can't ever beat God to the punch. He is in control. He is sovereign. He always is the one who initiates our relationship with Him. Isn't the Bible the origin-to-destiny story of how God in grace has beaten us to the punch? There is something about this phrase that just doesn't seem right.*

Well, it is true. Every moment of thought, desire, choice, and decision that moves us toward God is initiated by His rescuing, forgiving, transforming, and delivering grace. Without the move of His grace, we would remain in our sin—spiritually dead men walking. There is a way in which it is perverse for us to take any credit whatsoever for the spiritual awakening, submission, and growth in our lives. The apostle Paul says that if it is all God's gift then there is simply no room at all for personal boasting. We must all remember the desperate and hopeless condition we were all in before glorious, powerful grace entered our door.

But with the phrase “beat God to the punch” Mason is onto something—something important, something that could change your life. Now, it's not that the Christian life is up to you. There are some that teach this. God by grace brings you in and by grace takes you out, and in between it's up to you. If in between my spiritual life is left to my fickle and wandering heart, I'm cooked. What a hopeless view of what goes on between the “already” and the “not yet.” No, what Mason is proposing by his provocative phrase is that the grace-filled, grace-dependent, grace-hopeful life is not a passive life. It's not sitting around waiting for grace to do its work. It's not “letting go and letting God.” It's not taking a vacation on Jesus.

Yes, your hope is in God's grace and God's grace alone. You never, ever rely on your performance, but the grace-filled,

grace-dependent life is an active right. It takes grace to reach out for grace, but that's exactly what God calls you to do. The grace-dependent life is a life of *joyfully active rest*. God's grace doesn't relieve you of activity; it ignites God-honoring, joyful activity. It celebrates the eternal liberty of a brand new way of living.

In grace God calls you to activity. He says,

“Seek Me.”

“Love Me.”

“Trust Me.”

“Follow Me.”

“Serve Me.”

“Worship Me.”

“Beating God to the punch” is about reaching out for what you could have never earned, achieved, or deserved. It is affirming your desperate need for what only grace can provide. It is celebrating the shocking sacrifice of the Messiah for your sins. It is embracing the nowism of the grace of Jesus. It's celebrating your freedom from your slavery to sin and your welcome to slavery to Christ. Obedience is your moral obligation, but it is never, ever your means of achieving or maintaining relationship with God. You reach out knowing that in the moments when you don't reach out, God will still not turn His back on you. But you don't sit around waiting. You run after the grace that has eternally taken hold of and rescued you from you. Mason would say that you “beat God to the punch.” And I'm glad for the reminder. Read and you will be too.

Paul David Tripp

5/2/14

INTRODUCTION

Hearing this title will raise many eyebrows—especially if one knows anything about the character and nature of the living God. This title is meant to draw the reader into the complexities (and simplicity) of a grace-filled life. God is the all-knowing Sovereign Lord. He is God all by Himself and doesn't need anybody else. How can someone *beat God to the punch*?

One day, God's wrath and glory is going to be revealed to everyone, and all will have to acknowledge the Lordship of the Mighty One, Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:9–11 makes it clear:

For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is a reality, that all will bow to Jesus. By implication, we have the option to bow by choice, or to bow by force. This reality extends to our whole life. Willfully bowing to Jesus now—rather than later—is the option we have in our everyday life. The preaching of the gospel is the invitation—a free offer, an urgent call—to bow now, by choice.

In our willingness to bow, we find a grace-filled existence in our walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. Beating God to the punch involves willingly bending one's life to Jesus now, and forever. Practice begins by trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead as a substitutionary atonement for your sin. Upon the return of Jesus, all will acknowledge His Lordship. On that day, those who are forced to bow will experience the punch of God's wrath. Those who willingly bow at the appointed time of salvation will be missed by God's wrathful punch because God hit Jesus on their behalf.

How to Seize a Grace-Filled Life

For those who have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, this is a process by which we fight, through His power, to live a grace-filled life. This grace-filled life is the willingness to continue to progressively set Jesus aside as Lord every day. First Peter 3:15 states, "But honor the Messiah as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."

Our hearts are the epicenter of our values, affections, and will. Jesus is to be given the top position in our hearts. As a result, the Lordship of Jesus dominates every aspect of our heart. In fighting for this reality the believer *beats God to the punch*, because we willingly worship and adore Jesus before the universe is forced to bow before His glorious might.

On the other hand, those who are not in a relationship with Jesus will, in unison with those who value the Christ, bow by force. Those who refuse to respond to the glorious gospel will have to one day admit that the One they rejected is the One who deserved their

all. Although this bowing will occur among those who reject the gospel, this bow will not merit salvation because the time will be up. Therefore, we will implore you to place all your confidence in the one who is worthy of our life, because He gave His life as a ransom for us. This will cause us to beat God to the punch.

Jesus, in John 1:35–51, graciously invites some young men to experience this grace-filled life. Jesus' interaction with them leads up to a climax where He invites them to willingly participate in the revelation of His Lordship now (in smaller trailers), and later (in the ultimate eschatological movie of His return). Throughout this resource we will refer to this passage as a compass of what it looks like to come in contact with God's grace in the person of Jesus Christ. In addition, it will serve us in Jesus pointing us to joyously experiencing all things being brought to conclusion. We will find ourselves looking in other places in the Word of God for the echoes of God's grace in those places.

Let's be clear: beating God to the punch is never accomplished through our own effort, enlightenment, strength, or power. Only by God's grace is one able to bow. We will explore the recesses of how grace gives the strength to us to bow our lives to the living God. Without grace we are helpless and hopeless in living a life filled with joy and the true happiness that comes from God through Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, we will find that it isn't through contrived circumstances, but through the mundane to the magnificent seasons in life where grace works in us to a life lived on our knees walking with and serving the living God.

At times, it will seem as if this book is more about grace than anything else. If the reader walks away with that, the Lord has used

this resource to my heart's desire. I want the reader to view this as a tool that motivates them to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ by seeing it as a grace from heaven.

Jesus Demands Your Life

Jesus demands your whole life. Not part of it, but the whole. Much has been written on the subject of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I will not dive into these various arguments on whether to be a Jesus follower and submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ should be the content of the presentation that one would hear in order for it to be an authentic communication of the gospel and/or an authentic conversion. As one looks into the content of the Scripture, what is clear is that both the Lordship of Jesus was explained to some prior to salvation and all post conversion. We see Jesus telling unbelieving Pharisees of His Lordship. He states in Matthew 12:8, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." By saying that He is "Lord of the Sabbath," Jesus is communicating that He has equality with God. In doing so, He communicates the extent of His Lordship over them, in this case, specifically as it relates to the Sabbath. They couldn't properly respond to His Lordship because they rejected Him. Belief in Jesus acknowledges Him as an authority in our lives, such that whatever He communicates to us about Himself (whether difficult or palatable), we believe by faith. Though belief that "Jesus is Lord" does not affect His status as Lord, belief does connect us to Him as willing, submissive subjects.

For example, think about a king—essentially, another word for lord. For Americans who are inundated with democracy, it is more difficult to imagine, but there are places in the world where a king rules with absolute power. Regardless of what the subjects

of the kingdom think about his leadership, regardless of how they align themselves with his political views, and regardless of how he represents their nation, the king reigns over the entire kingdom. In order to thrive in that kingdom, the people have one of two choices. Either they can recognize the authority of the king, or they can live in rebellion toward the throne.

In the same way, Jesus has established a kingdom that knows no political boundaries. It extends over the entire universe. All, in heaven and on earth, are His subjects. He rules over them regardless of their acknowledgment of His reign. But Jesus doesn't rule like the kings we are accustomed to seeing. His reign is marked by benevolent, generous grace. Who wouldn't want to pledge allegiance to a king like that?

The apostles embraced the Lordship of Jesus over every area of their lives. When Peter and other disciples are faced with responding to Jesus' Lordship as believers, they are faced with a choice between bowing and rebellion. In John's gospel, Jesus makes a culturally and theologically confrontational statement to the crowds and those who are following Him:

So Jesus said to them, "I assure you: Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life in yourselves." . . . From that moment many of His disciples turned back and no longer accompanied Him. (John 6:53, 66)

Subsequently, Jesus' statement was truth that required trust in His character that would allow for Him to bring the clarity necessary for growth. When following, the believer will be faced with hard statements. These hard statements must be processed in

relationship with the Lord and giving Him the benefit of the doubt. Some who were “following Him,” didn’t trust His character enough to sustain their allegiance, and disassociated themselves from Him as the Lord. Those who hung in there with Jesus would later have what was difficult to understand—what the apostle Paul calls the mystery of the gospel in Ephesians—revealed as they continued to trust in Him. Jesus asks a probing question and Peter states by faith,

Therefore Jesus said to the Twelve, “You don’t want to go away too, do you?” Peter’s statement is what each stage of our journey with the Lord must be. Peter replied: “Lord, who will we go to? You have the words of eternal life.”
(John 6:67–68)

Real life, for a disciple, is a journey of wrestling with a pattern of faith and loyalty to who Jesus is. It is a journey often marked by misunderstanding and perplexity. Yet trust and loyalty to a God who doesn’t explain everything immediately, nor remove the complexity of following Him, is the means He has chosen to make us more like His Son. In the complexity of pursuing a grace-filled life, we are called to simple (not simplistic) devotion to His glorious Lordship (2 Cor. 11:2–3). Walking with Jesus is recognizing that sometimes He explains immediately (Matt. 12:18–23), sometimes He explains later (John 12:26), or not at all (Acts 1:6–7). Yet we are called to a ferocious commitment to His divine authority. We must refuse to view what He doesn’t explain or reveal to us in our time as a credibility issue. We must embrace the beauty of the mystery of the gospel.

The Big Picture

Ultimately this book is about the punch of His wrath, justice, and judgment. As much as we'd like to ignore it, God's wrath can only be quenched under the weight of the cross. Those outside of Jesus don't stand a chance. God's wrath was fully satisfied by Jesus' death (Rom. 5:9), but without the work of Jesus Christ absorbing His wrath, we will experience the consequences of our sin. We must see His Lordship in light of both the law and grace. The law helps us to see His Lordship as righteous and holy. Grace helps us to see His Lordship as inviting us through Jesus to be in relationship to Him. So the question is, will you experience the grace that comes through Jesus Christ to deter that wrath? Or will you be forced to bow? This book is for you.

But this book is also about the life available to those who embrace Jesus as Lord, those who willingly bow the knee. God not only saves us *from* something, He also saves us *for* something. This book is for those who long to thrive in the King's kingdom right now. This book is for you.

So, believer, will you seize the life made available to you in Christ (1 Tim. 6:12), and to the unbeliever, will you be beckoned to seize that life you don't have through what Jesus has done on your behalf (2 Cor. 5:20)?

Let's beat God to the punch.

CROSSING PATHS WITH GRACE

When I saw you the first time,
I know not what I saw in you. But from
that moment on, I felt as if everything was really new.

—ARIJIT MANDAL, *MY LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT*

I have heard many speak of having experienced love at first sight. But I don't know if I have ever experienced it. To be able to love someone without any knowledge of who they are, what they believe, and represent has always seemed a bit of a stretch. Love is not based on our infatuation with a person, but is a choice connected to the knowledge of the good, bad, and ugly of a person. God's love is deeply entrenched in His full knowledge of what we are like.

On the other hand—to return that love toward Him—God must grace us to recognize Him through transformation. We cannot see the glory of God's grace without God changing us to see it. God, the Holy Spirit, does this by aiding us in getting new sight (2 Cor. 3–4; 1 Cor. 12:3). In some sense we do have love at first

sight, because our new sight through the gospel helps us to love the One who first loved us. Being dead in our sin, we cannot see God's grace (Eph. 2:1–3). Yet when God opens our eyes with new sight, we can see and respond to the divine image (2 Cor. 3:18).

To be honest, this makes me want to have a praise break for the Ruler of all things. In His unrivaled goodness, He saw fit to give sight to the blind. The greatest sight of the life of the believer is being able to recognize the grace of God.

Grace Walked By

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a
wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, Was blind,
but now I see.* (John Newton, "Amazing Grace")

Grace is a concept that will take us an eternity to come to grips with. It is a massive concept in the Bible. Grace on many occasions has been called "God's unmerited favor." As God's unmerited favor, grace is God choosing to place His affections on us and thereby lavishing us with Himself through the person and work of Jesus. God grants good standing before Him, and He does so without our assistance.

Grace is also defined as all of the goodness of life that is accomplished by God's own doing. No other faith, religion, or belief system has at its foundation the concept of grace. For the Christian, it is both its foundation and all-encompassing tenant.

One of the distinctive features of the religion of the Bible. No other system of religious thought, past or present, contains an emphasis on divine grace comparable to that of the Bible.

As a general definition, the doctrine of grace pertains to God's activity rather than to his nature. Although God is gracious, this trait of his nature is revealed only in relation to his created works and to his redemptive enterprise. In other words, grace is to be understood in terms of a dynamic expression of the divine personality rather than as a static attribute of God's nature. Grace is the dimension of divine activity that enables God to confront human indifference and rebellion with an inexhaustible capacity to forgive and to bless. God is gracious in action.¹

Grace is not merely an esoteric theological concept, but it is seen and defined most vehemently in a person.

Jesus is the full embodiment of God's grace. John 1:14 states that Jesus is "full of grace and truth." Being full of grace means that Jesus, in His incarnation, perfectly reflected God's glory in that all of His life and ministry was saturated with grace. Until Jesus came on the scene, grace wasn't a concept that was clear to the world. Although God, in many ways in the Old Testament, displayed His grace to the children of Israel as individuals and as a whole, Jesus fully revealed the commitment of God to man in His incarnation.

For the entirety of this book, we will investigate how Jesus engages us to walk with Him as His disciples under His Lordship through the gospel of grace. The Gospels, whether the Synoptics or John's (as a stand-alone work), act to do one unifying thing and one thing only—to reveal Jesus. Matthew reveals Him mainly as King, Mark as the Suffering Servant, Luke presents the Lord as Son of Man, and crescendos with John revealing Him as God.

The most powerful thing about the Gospels is seeing Jesus reveal Himself to people and their response to His revelation. In

John 1:35–51 we find an encounter with Jesus by some of the future apostles prior to Luke 5 where Jesus reengages them and calls them to mission with Him. After they experience Jesus in John 1, they go back to their normal lives, but Jesus casts an abnormal vision. The vision was compelling enough for them to leave everything to follow Him. Later, Jesus fervently engages in prayer to the Father and calls this motley crew to be His key agents of mission, church planting, and theological pioneering. In our current passage in John, Jesus has His first encounter with the disciples. Jesus meets these guys where they are, but also gives them hope for beyond where they are.

John the Baptist twice expresses the fact that Jesus is the grace of God among men. Twice he states “Behold, the Lamb of God.” He is like, “Look, this is the guy that I’ve been telling ya’ll about, He’s about to change the game, fellas.” John is pointing his disciples to Jesus as the redeemer. He is not called *a lamb*, but *THE Lamb*. In addition, “the Lamb” is called “God’s Lamb.”

Usually, in the Bible, the possession of a lamb is from the perspective of a human being who offers an animal to God for the atonement of sin. But in this case, Jesus is depicted as the Lamb offered on our behalf. Jesus is the one—The Lamb—who will satisfy the pending wrath that hovers over us because of sin’s grip. Moreover, this Lamb is the definitive sacrifice that will end the need for other sacrifices to be made. Hebrews 10:4 says, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” This lets us know that all of the sacrifices that have been made never took away sins. Although God valued them—in that their sacrifice was a sign of obedience—they didn’t act as an eternal propitiation for our sins.

God brought Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice for us. Ultimately, all previous sacrifices pointed to Jesus who would remove sin.

For lower and middle class households, there is something called “layaway.” Layaway holds a valuable item for very little currency until the full payment for that item is made. Once the full balance is paid, the desired item is released from hold—in other words, the item is redeemed. Our lives were put on hold through the blood of bulls and goats, but the funding wasn’t enough to pay for our sins in full. Therefore, Jesus came to take our lives off layaway.

In light of this, when Jesus *walked by* in John 1, we see that He, as the Lamb of God, is the walking embodiment of grace. In essence, Jesus is our redemption, the purchase of something that had been lost, by the payment of a ransom.² Our ransom isn’t from Satan, but from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9).

One of my favorite hymns that exemplifies this says:

*O come, o come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here, Until the Son of God
appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O
Israel.*

The debt against us is not viewed as cancelled, but as fully paid—an important distinction. Christ’s blood and life, which He surrendered for them, is the “ransom” by which His people are delivered from the servitude of sin (and its penal consequences) and are secured. Hodges makes a strong statement on this point.

It is the plain doctrine of Scripture that “Christ saves us neither by the mere exercise of power, nor by his doctrine, nor by his example, nor by the moral influence which he exerted, nor by any subjective influence on his

people, whether natural or mystical, but as a satisfaction to divine justice, as an expiation for sin, and as a ransom from the curse and authority of the law, thus reconciling us to God by making it consistent with his perfection to exercise mercy toward sinners.”³

Jesus walking by was more significant than any other human walking by; it was God in the flesh uncloaking heaven’s grace. We must recognize that grace still walks by us. It is a beacon for us to see grace through Jesus Christ.

I remember grace beaoning me November 15, 1992, on the campus of the great Bowie State University (HBCU). I heard for the first time the call of grace through a small campus ministry service that cold Sunday morning. I was scheming on a young lady and we went together, holding hands, to this service. Like never before, as the evangelist proclaimed the grace of God in Jesus Christ, I found myself drawn to an aroma I hadn’t smelled before. It was confusing because it was both attractive and confrontational. In what was seemingly a conflict of interests, was the drawing power of God giving me eyes to recognize grace walking by.

Even creation points its ecological finger, through its role as a preacher, toward God’s existence (Rom. 1:20). It moves man toward the road of belief and surrender. Just as it points—as it preaches—we who are in Christ proclaim God’s favor in the person of Jesus Christ. All cross paths with grace, but not all respond to it. We will explore ways we cross paths with the grace of God.

Follow Jesus?

If anyone knows me, they know that I am a student and lover of soul, R&B, hip-hop, gospel, and jazz music. In a word: I love culture. I am an avid student of the lives that hip-hop artists lead. I study where they came from, their influences, what shapes their expression, the nature of those they attract as fans, and those who hang in their entourages. Hip-hop entourages seem to be different than other artists.

These crews are made up of friends and family who are a part of the trusted inner circle of the artist. They live off the artist's success and have an unbridled personal loyalty to the artist (sometimes) and the artist's interests. Crew loyalty runs so deep that what ever the artist is for, they are for. Whomever the artist is against, they are against. Wherever the artist goes, they go. Their lives are explicitly tied to the career of that artist. If the artist falls, they fall. If the artist has success, they ride the artist's wave up in life.

Following Jesus has some parallels to hip-hop crews. The disciples of Jesus were driven by a loyalty to the interests of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Following Jesus is a foundational concept in the Synoptics, especially in the Gospel of John. Following Jesus is synonymous with the concept of discipleship. The verb "followed" is in the tense that indicates a once-for-all action, which may mean that they cast in their lot with Jesus.⁴ We should also notice that the verb has both a general sense of "follow" and a more specific sense of "follow as a disciple." The disciples walked down the path after Jesus and thus became literal followers. But they also symbolically committed themselves to Him.⁵

The tense⁶ also points to a particular time in their lives where they decided to follow Jesus. In all of our lives we should be able to point to an encounter with grace in which we were signaled to follow the Son of God. There must be a point in our lives where we decide we are committing our lives fully to the master. At that point it marks the transformation that is unforgettable. Encounters like that mark our journey with clarity that we have met our master. The Christian life is filled with things that will seek to deter us from following Jesus.

This “following” concept will serve as a metaphor in the Gospels for discipleship. They turned their loyalty from John to Jesus. In rabbinic culture, disciples walked behind those whom they followed as teacher. They would literally follow their master around imitating him. By following Jesus, they were communicating their willingness to submit to Him as their leader. Following Jesus always means abandoning something else that preoccupied our lives prior to grace passing by and being preoccupied by Him. To follow Jesus is to follow the grace of God. This glorious abandonment changes everything. Köstenberger states,

What is more, these early followers of Jesus show paradigmatically that with the appearance of Jesus the Messiah, those identified with old-style Judaism—even if part of a renewal movement such as the Baptist’s—must leave their old religious system and associations behind for the sake of following the Messiah, Jesus. This is as relevant today as it was when the Gospel was first written and read (Burge 2000: 75).⁷

The term *follow* which occurs here for the first time in John, is used in all four Gospels with reference to Jesus' disciples.⁸ Disciples in that day literally "followed" or walked behind the one whom they chose as their teacher (e.g., Hag 1. 2.1).⁹ In John's gospel, however, the term gradually moves from literal to a more figurative sense, denoting a "following" of Jesus' teaching (8:12; 10:4–5, 27; 12:26; 21:19, 20, 22).¹⁰ It is possible that the Evangelist is playing with both meanings: at one level, these two men were "following" Jesus in the most literal of senses, but at another they were taking the first steps of genuine discipleship.¹¹

Disciple Defined

A disciple of Jesus Christ is one who has renounced himself or herself and pledged to being in a lifetime apprenticeship with the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 10:39). One who is unequivocally committed to Jesus and His goals for his or her life and His goals as seen in transforming the world (Eph. 2:10). One whose life goal is to be conformed to the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29).

There needs to be a community of mimickers of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' day, gifted students would listen to various rabbis and approach one, chosen rabbi and ask, "May I follow you?" In effect, the student was asking, "Do I have what it takes to be like you?" The rabbi would either accept the student as a *talmid*, or would encourage him to pursue a trade. Jesus broke this pattern when He chose His own *talmidim*. As He asked His disciples to follow Him, they knew without a doubt that their rabbi believed in them. And as they came to see Jesus as the Messiah, they realized that God believed in them too.

A *talmid* did not merely follow a rabbi as a student. They desired to gain the rabbi's knowledge, but for a greater goal they wanted to become like the rabbi himself.

- A *talmid* followed the rabbi everywhere.
- Every day, and every hour of the day—often without knowing or asking where the rabbi was going.
- The *talmid* rarely left his rabbi's side for fear that he would miss a teachable moment.
- He watched the rabbi's every move, noting how he acted and thought about a variety of situations.
- *Talmidim* trusted their rabbi completely.

What Do You Want for Real for Real?

Growing up in the Mason household—around so many older folks—helped me earn a certain reputation: I was “a young old man.” I loved the environment, being a fly on the wall for so many interesting discussions (many of which I'm not sure I should have heard). One of the things that was funny about being around older folks is when they talked to us, they spoke in what I would have expressed back then as a “code.”

This “code” was made up entirely of questions. They would answer my questions with questions all of the time.

“What did I say?”

“Didn't I tell you?”

“Don't let me again?”

“Oh, no you didn't?”

“What do you think I'd say to that, Eric?”

“Open your mouth one more time?”

“Didn't I tell you to stay out of grown folk's conversations?”

Those were routine questions where I grew up. Their questions, when stated in this context, implied an answer that I should have known from past experiences. Those past experiences trained me to understand the “code.”

Jesus’ questions in the Gospels are some of the most riveting ones that we could come across. Working through His questions alone could be its own work. They could make an incredible sermon series. As I have His questions, these are some of my favorites (and the most challenging to my walk):

Matthew 20:22: But Jesus answered, “You don’t know what you’re asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”

Mark 8:27: Jesus went out with His disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the road He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

Mark 9:12: “How then is it written about the Son of Man that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt?”

Mark 11:30: “Was John’s baptism from heaven or from men? Answer Me.”

Mark 12:37: “David himself calls Him ‘Lord’; How then can the Messiah be his Son?”

Luke 18:19: “Why do you call Me good?” Jesus asked him. “No one is good but One—God.”

John 3:10: “Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?”

John 5:6: When Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had already been there a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to get well?”

It is estimated that Jesus’ questions recorded in the Gospels amount to about 173 in number. All of them reflect a broad range of issues that get to the heart of those who are on the receiving side of His communication. The Master’s questions are just as riveting now as they were to His contemporaries. Jesus’ questions engage topics in contemporary life issues now just as He did in His day—issues such as prosperity and personal happiness, authentic belief, legalism, betrayal, sexuality, mercy, guilt, forgiveness, and most important of all, His identity. In light of the offer that Jesus makes to those who are drawn to Him, the most important question is who Jesus is (identity), why are we drawn to Him, and what it is that Jesus actually offers.

In rabbinic culture, disciples were seen following their rabbi everywhere. The disciples walking behind Jesus out in public was normal for followers of a master teacher. Students would mimic every aspect of their teacher while they were following them through life. One writer states,

Like other rabbis of his day, Jesus had disciples called talmidim, devout followers who were probably in their mid-teens.

Gifted students approached a rabbi and asked, “May I follow you?” in effect, saying, “Do I have what it takes to be like you?” The rabbi either accepted the student as a talmid or sent him away to pursue a trade. Jesus broke this pattern when he chose his own talmidim. As he asked his

disciples to follow him, they knew without a doubt that their rabbi believed in them.

A talmid followed the rabbi everywhere, often without knowing or asking where he was going. He rarely left his rabbi's side for fear that he would miss a teachable moment. And he watched the rabbi's every move, noting how he acted and thought about a variety of situations.

Talmidim trusted their rabbi completely. They worked passionately to incorporate the rabbi's actions and words into their lives. The disciples' deepest desire was to follow their rabbi so closely that they would start to think and act like him.

Jesus' twelve disciples ultimately succeeded in becoming like their rabbi: Their missionary efforts changed the world, and most of them gave their lives in the process.¹²

A. C. Myers affirms this, connecting the Jewish idea of the *talmid* or *talmidim* to *mathetes*, a.k.a. a disciple:

A student or follower. As used in the New Testament, the English term (from Lat2. *discipulus* "pupil") reflects the Greek sense of the disciple as an adherent to the teachings of a particular teacher or school of thought (John 9:28; cf. Matt. 22:16); the followers of John the Baptist are thus identified as disciples (e.g., Mark 2:18; John 1:35, 37). To an extent, the function of the disciple is similar to that of the rabbinical *talmîdîm* (cf. 1 Chr. 25:8; RSV "pupil"), who studied the Law under the guidance of a particular teacher; however, akin to the alternate Greek sense of the disciple as an apprentice, these students themselves sought to gain ordination as teachers.¹³

What a profound understanding of the first-century idea of a disciple! A disciple would have wanted to learn about Yahweh from the perspective of the rabbi to whom they submitted as a learner.

Just observing the posture of a first-century disciple toward their Rabbi reveals a stark difference between how we communicate discipleship in our day from a gospel perspective. Jesus states, ultimately, that He chose them; they didn't choose Him. Jesus changes the normal pattern between student and teacher by choosing the student and choosing those who wouldn't normally be on the radar of any rabbi in His day.

However, true to form, Jesus wasn't impressed with a cultural approach to discipleship. Jesus demanded their whole life.

"What are you looking for?"¹⁴ The question is both probing and challenging, revealing something about both the identity of the questioner and the questioned. Considering, the Fourth Evangelist's penchant for double entendre, it is hard to believe that the question is not, on a secondary level, meant to challenge also the readers of John's gospel to ask themselves what it is they are looking for.¹⁵

Jesus asks this question to those who would seek to follow Him: "What do you want, for real for real?" This urban idiom has embedded in it the notion that there is discontinuity between what is being sought and what will be received. Therefore, the question beckons them to consider, "So you wanna be My disciple?" with the tone of "You don't know what you want."

Following Jesus comes with glorious promises, some of which we can expect now and others which won't come to pass until the eschaton. Having an over-realized eschatology in the communication of the gospel of justification could shipwreck the faith of

people. An under-realized eschatology robs believers of hope. Jesus' question paints a comprehensive picture of what it means to follow Him.

In essence, that is why the prosperity gospel is such danger, because it creates dangerous expectations in the heart of the person who places their faith in what God can give monetarily instead of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. If God doesn't do it (which He won't, in many cases), it undermines the glory of God because it overemphasizes what God "can deliver on," versus the most valuable thing He has already offered—deliverance from His holy wrath.

Jesus in the course of His journey with these men throughout His incarnation and post incarnation by the Spirit and through others would deliver a finished canon filled with paradoxical promises that is sustaining for a grace-filled life. Being in a relationship with Jesus Christ by faith helps us to know what we should expect from Him. *A walk with Christ Jesus is a constant collision of human and divine expectations.* In this collision, the hope is that His will would prevail in us.

These New Testament paradoxical promises for the disciple paint a full-bodied picture of an authentic Christian life:

Mark 8:35–36: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me and the gospel will save it. For what does it benefit a man to gain the whole world yet lose his life?"

Mark 9:35: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Luke 9:23: Then He said to them all, “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”

Luke 18:29–30: So He said to them, “I assure you: There is no one who has left a house, wife or brothers, parents or children because of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more at this time, and eternal life in the age to come.”

And this is the promise that covers them all:

2 Corinthians 1:20: For every one of God’s promises is “Yes” in Him. Therefore, the “Amen” is also spoken through Him by us for God’s glory.

As seen throughout the life of the disciples, their motivation for following Jesus was tested in every sense of the word . . .

- Economic turmoil
- Popularity decline
- Persecution
- Loneliness
- Viewed as disregards of the customs of men
- Cult leaders
- Being on a fool’s errand

But the promises of God guide us down the pathways of grace in a broken and confusing world. As we experience God’s promises, the Spirit guides us into truth and shapes what we should expect from the Lord. Therefore, the heart of Jesus guides our expectations—not our personal preferences, unfiltered and unchallenged. Over and over again, in our lives, our humanity will collide with His divinity. At the end of the day, a disciple must be transformed

into wanting what the Lord wants for them. Will you live with the challenge of following Him, as His *talmid*, while you struggle to understand grace from a divine perspective? Will you beat God to the punch? Will you follow Him?