

Learning the Lord's "Higher Math"

John 2:13-22, Philippians 3:7-14

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Introduction: If we want to understand God and His ways, we have to learn that it means getting comfortable with paradox: Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and our ways are not His ways, meaning **we have a lot to learn in order to tune in to His view of life!** He's literally dealing in higher math than we could ever fathom. In fact, God's deepest truths often have to be expressed as paradox (apparent contradiction): for example, the first shall be last and the last first; to save your life you must lose it; blessed are the poor and hungry and persecuted; we fix our eyes on what we can't see, and we boast in our weaknesses! Who can understand this logic? Especially the paradox of "the Word made flesh!"

1) So where would you begin if you were Jesus just starting to introduce Himself in public Jewish society? Or rather, where would the Jews be expecting their Messiah to show up? They would likely have hoped to see Him attacking the Fortress of Antonia, the military control point of Roman power in Jerusalem. That would have made good sense to them! But where did Jesus actually "strike" first? According to John's Gospel, it was at the religious nerve center of Jewish identity – the religious power structure at the temple! **Cleansing the temple** was a bold move on His part. The Court of the Gentiles was where marketeers had set up their booths to sell the animals required for the sacrifices; the bankers were there to change people's secular money into the special temple coinage, and they were cheating the people, overcharging, giving a bad exchange rate, and turning the temple into a lucrative business for themselves and the religious leaders who gave them permission to be there. So Jesus charged into that scene as if He were the Owner (He was!), overturning tables, driving out both the animals and their vendors, cleansing the temple of all that corruption, telling them, **"Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"** What a beginning!

Of course, biblical critics have a heyday with this passage, saying "John has just relocated the story here for dramatic effect; we know from the Synoptics (Mt. 21, Mk. 11, Lk. 19) that it was really at the *end* of His ministry: His crowning act of judgment on the Jews (thereby provoking the crucifixion); what John writes about is really the same incident, which he's just rearranged for literary reasons." **That's not at all a fair assessment** of John's text, which

has multiple indicators that John is reporting faithfully Jesus' *introduction* to public Jewish life in Jerusalem, especially the ensuing conversation: the Jews ask, **"What miraculous sign will you do to prove your authority here?"** Jesus responds: **"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again."** This important saying doesn't appear in the Synoptics, nor do His sayings there appear in John (about the **"house of prayer"** and **"den of thieves"**). Then comes the part about how long the repair work had been going on (Jn. 2:20) —46 years— identifying this moment as 26 A.D., whereas the Synoptics' event was from 29-30 A.D. The Gospel writers had too much respect for what really happened to take events and switch them around randomly to suit some arbitrary criteria. **They were after the truth** ... and you should be too! That was the Pharisees' and Sadducees' problem – they were *no longer interested in truth*, but only in winning, beating the opponent, getting ahead! Just don't let that happen to you!

The temple of Jerusalem was supposed to be the most sacred place in Israel, even in the whole world: it represented God's presence in the midst of His people, God's message of light and hope to the nations. Yet God's people were treating the temple as if it belonged to them, as if they could cheat their fellow humans right under God's nose, acting as if they themselves were the final authority, the true gods of the temple! So they had corrupted the sacred place, desecrating God's temple. Of course, Jesus claimed here that **His body was the real temple** – the real place of worship and reconciliation with God – which they would indeed destroy (those were prophetic words!), and in the process of that **worst of all human crimes**, Jesus would declare and act out our total forgiveness, and finish establishing the kingdom where you and I can finally be victorious over sin! That's what He was doing on the cross: finishing the task of establishing our forgiveness and the divine kingdom on earth – He was living it out! Then He would be raised on the 3rd day (the temple restored!). So Paul takes that metaphor to its next logical conclusion: now it's *your* body that's a temple: **"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"** (1 Cor. 3:16). But the Lord of the temple will never force the entrance! The beginning of life is to let Him cleanse your temple. In order to reveal Himself to the world He had come to save, Jesus first cleansed the temple, a hugely prophetic act, and He would do it again the week of His crucifixion. In the same way, God cannot reveal Himself to you unless you first let Jesus cleanse the temple of your life. This is the first priority – it's where we start in discipleship!

2) So in this series on **growing toward mature discipleship**, we begin by trying to set true **priorities for the new year** (not like New Year's resolutions that are simply broken by the second week). I'm inviting you to make the conscious decision **to grow** in your relationship with Jesus, adjusting all your earthly pursuits to His eternal perspective, and that always means we start with confession and repentance: letting Jesus cleanse the temple, saying yes to His priorities as we see that ours fall so short! We let lots of junk accumulate in our temple, just like in our homes, computers, minds – from unkind thoughts, judgmental words, wasting our time on unworthy pursuits, to outright idolizing of image, clothes, other material things. Martin Luther put it well when he said we never break any of the ten commandments without first breaking the first one! We indeed have other gods...!

We need only go to the Word to find the **major priorities** that should fill our lives: in Dt. 6:4-9, Mt. 22:34-40, and 1 Jn. 3:23 – the commandments to love God and neighbor. These are fleshed out in the rest of the law, serving like training wheels, braces, guidelines, to help us set our sights on the right goals. This is what we were made for, our vocation, but therefore,

it also represents our greatest life failure. And theoretically, we know the only remedy comes from making the conscious decision **to follow Jesus and grow** in our relationship with Him, but practically we find Him too radical – especially His cross! Jesus enfleashes a **new vision of life** that challenges all our natural way of thinking, a new vision that only His Spirit can convince us to adopt: **to take up a cross as the way to true life**. It's so counter-intuitive for our flesh, but it's what He was telling us in multiple passages (Lk. 14:25-33, Jn. 6:53-58). Would you say this is your goal?

Consider these challenges from some Christians who lived out Jesus' commands: *"The question is not whether to undertake spiritual formation. The question is what kind of spiritual formation are we already engaged in?"* (R. Mulholland, NT professor). Is your kind of spiritual formation proving effective? *"There is no avoiding the fact that we live at the mercy of our ideas. This is never truer than with our ideas about God."* (D. Willard, professor of philosophy). Jordan Peterson (Christian psychologist) says we are often *"prisoners of our own tyrannical misconceptions and misperceptions."* Prov. 23:7 says, *"As a man thinks in his heart, so is he."* *"A disciple is a person who has decided that the most important thing in their life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do."* (D. Willard). Have you made this decision?

3) In Php. 3, Paul invites us to consider the Lord's "higher math" (His ways and thoughts are higher than ours): teaching us to count our losses and gains God's way, and to make the goal for our lives becoming like Jesus in His death. This will clearly require the Holy Spirit's intervention, but I can't conceive of a **serious Christian** who has not set for him or herself the **goal of growing to be more like Christ**.

Remember the Pharisees, how they focused their attention on only part of the biblical message? This was so that they could reduce its complexity to something simple and manageable. So they taught a kind of **"mathematical righteousness"**: you do this much good and you'll be repaid with this much blessing. It was the law of reaping and sowing reduced to a simplistic formula of "balanced scales." It's not that there's no truth in this kind of wisdom; doing what's right does bring certain rewards, at least, generally speaking, in terms of an orderly life, security, well-being. But it's not the whole story, as the book of Job makes clear – things certainly didn't work out "mathematically" for Job! Ecclesiastes reinforces the same point, and Jesus epitomizes this truth in the Gospels: goodness and righteousness are not simple mathematical equations, especially in this fallen world; they'd be more comparable to quantum physics! Spiritual truth simply doesn't follow Aristotelian logic, as the Bible clarifies over and over.

So after reviewing his "credentials" in Php. 3:4-6, according to his former life as a Pharisee, Paul explains: *"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith"* (Php. 3:7-9). Paul says he's throwing away all those credentials, a total loss, garbage, and dung. That would include his prestige (Gal. 1:14), position (Sanhedrin), power (his letters of authorization to the synagogues of Damascus). **"Surpassing worth"** was now found only in knowing Jesus and

His righteousness, meaning “right-relatedness” (both vertical and horizontal), the result of faith in Christ.

“I want to know Christ – yes, and the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead” (Php. 3:10-11). How long had Paul known Christ? Nearly 30 years? Yet hear this spiritual hunger in Paul’s heart! Are you this eager to know Christ? Are you more impressed by Him than by anything else? Yes, we’d all like to know the power of His resurrection! But are we unwilling to participate in His sufferings? Rom. 8:17 says we are ***“heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*** Remember how Peter didn’t want a “suffering Messiah”? It took him a while to tune in to this higher spiritual truth, but he finally got it. In his first letter he spoke of ***suffering for doing what’s right*** (1 Pe. 3:14), which doesn’t sound reasonable according to Pharisaic logic; if you do what’s right, you should NOT suffer. But by that logic, the Messiah would never have become the Suffering Servant (think of all the Christians who suffer for their faith)! When God says to Isaiah, ***“Come, let us reason together,”*** He’s not talking about standard human reasoning – this is divine reasoning we’re invited to tune in to. The cross is our paradigm, and there’s a higher logic at work in the cross which we often fail to perceive. So what do we do with *our* suffering? We commit it to Christ so that He may somehow use it redemptively as He did His own! Our suffering helps us to become more like Him in His death. What was He like in His death? Forgiving, merciful, not vengeful, quoting Scripture, His mind focused on God’s truth, representing His Father’s heart (patient, loving, caring). ***“God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself ...”*** (2 Cor. 5:19).

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal [to win] the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Php. 3:12-14). Jesus can cleanse away every stain and fix all the brokenness in our desecrated temples, cleansing away hurts, bitterness, anger; healing broken relationships and broken hearts; cleaning up even repeat offenders like you and me! He’s the true Lord of the temple! So the “junk” of failures and disappointments in your life no longer has the last word over you! Jesus claims that *right* at the cross – He alone will have the last word! Will you set your sights on *His* goal for your life this year? God in Christ implants a spiritual growth mentality in His children through discipleship to Jesus: it’s ***“the process of becoming who Jesus would be if He were you”*** (D. Willard).