

# A Biblical Case for Christian Schooling: A Contextual View

By Jeff Blamer (Parts 1, 2 and 3)

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# A Biblical Case for Christian Schooling: A Contextual View

By Jeff Blamer (Part 1 of 3)

## You Will Be Strugglers

*“Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome’” (Genesis 32:28).*

More than 400 years before God called His chosen people out of Egypt, the biblical narrative tells us the story of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God chose each one of them to accomplish His purpose. Their stories reveal their strengths as well as their weaknesses and human failings.

Jacob was a deceiver. He tricked his father and stole the birthright from his twin brother, Esau. Later the tables were turned, as his father-in-law Laban tricked him. As a result, he married two sisters and spent several extra years paying for his brides. The price he paid lingered in tense and fractured marital tension and sibling rivalries that would haunt him for a lifetime. Jacob would struggle.

**The collective nature of community is clear. Out of Egypt, God called the people, a nation, a community.**

There was good news during his time of servitude, too, as Jacob prospered. By the time he had completed 14 years with his father-in-law, he had amassed flocks, two wives, servants and concubines, and a growing family. Jacob began his journey back to the Promised Land with wealth and resources. As Jacob approached the land, he learned that Esau was coming to greet him. Jacob feared the worst.

During a night near the Jabbok and Peniel, an inexplicable event took place. As Jacob was falling toward sleep, a man came to him. Some writers say it was God in human form, while others suggest it was an angel from the Lord. Jacob and the stranger wrestled all night.

Whether the stranger was God or His angel doesn't really matter. Either could have defeated Jacob in seconds in a wrestling match. So, why did the stranger toy with Jacob all night? There was a lesson for Jacob, for all the generations of God's chosen people to come, and for us.

Jacob's struggle through the night would be a metaphor for all who would follow. As Jacob had struggled, God's people will

struggle. To make the point perfectly clear, Jacob was given a new name. And as a constant reminder, Jacob would live the rest of his life with a bad hip.

Jacob was now Israel. And Israel literally means “those who struggle with God and humans and overcome.”

There are two reasons to begin a paper on a biblical case for Christian schooling with the story of Israel, the struggler:

1. We will struggle too. We will struggle on the path of life. We will struggle with God as we seek to discover His will for our lives and how He has called us to live. We will struggle with each other, because God chose not to give us a robotic regimen for obedient living. If the struggle is not shaped by a desire to love God above all and our neighbor as well, our relationships will become as fractured as the family of Jacob.
2. We must struggle together. The biblical narrative continually calls us away from individualism toward being the people of God. It provides a model for us as we struggle. It is a model carried out in home, in church, and in Christian schooling.

## God Called a Community

*Life for God's people has never been, nor will it be, easy. After Egypt, God took His people into the desert to teach them that humans cannot live by bread alone, but must rely on every word from God's mouth.*

How long should it take for our God, who revealed himself to His people in the metaphor of a tender, loving shepherd, to shape His chosen people? God could have shaped them completely with nothing more than the touch of His little finger. But in His incomprehensible plan, God chose to do it differently.

God chose for His people to spend some time in servitude in Egypt. One would think 40 years would have been sufficient. Throughout the biblical story, 40 equals preparation. Moses





spent 40 years in the desert preparing to shepherd God's people. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Examples of 40 abound.

But to emphasize the crucial importance of preparation for God's people to follow Him obediently, God chose to leave them in Egypt for 400 years; that is ten 40s. Point made!

Then God acted. He chose to use a self-proclaimed weak man, Moses, to shepherd the human flock out of Egypt to take their rightful place in the land

He had promised to the patriarchs. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm, powerful Pharaoh fell, a sea was split in two parts, and the Israelite strugglers left Egypt.

We can imagine the adrenalin rush as the people crossed through the sea, watched the waters close over the pursuing army of Pharaoh, and realized that their escape was reality. The first step of their exodus was complete. One would have expected God to direct Moses to take them up the well-traveled Gaza highway. That route to the Promised Land was short and would have been relatively easy for the weak among them.

But nothing would be easy. They were, by definition, the strugglers. Four hundred years were not enough, and lessons were still to be learned. They were not yet ready to be the obedient, chosen people. Exodus 32 begins with the golden calf incident. The people had become impatient with the seemingly long time that Moses had spent on the mountain with God and hedged their spiritual bets by encouraging the construction of a golden calf, something familiar to them from their time in Egypt. In Exodus 32:9 (also throughout the Torah) God says to Moses, "I have seen these people and they are stubborn!" Three thousand Israelites were killed for the community's act of disobedience.

After the punishment was meted out, God's appointed shepherd, Moses, approached God on behalf of the people, "Lord, if you are pleased with me, then go with us. Even though these people are stubborn, forgive the evil things we have done. Forgive our sin. And accept us as your people" (Exodus 34:9, NIRV).

The collective nature of community is clear. Out of Egypt, God called the people, a nation, a community. He called them collectively: the old and young, the rich and poor, the

compliant and the stubborn, those who had gained a position in Egypt and the lowliest of slaves, leaders and followers, the weak and strong.

As Moses and God conversed about them, the language was always collective. God did not choose to act with each individual. God chose a community. *People* is plural.

Understanding this is crucial to comprehending stories in the biblical narrative. Why were 3,000 killed after the golden calf incident? Why did all the people have to wander for 40 years in the desert? Why, even after Jericho, was all of Achan's family punished for his individual sin?

None of those things can be understood unless one begins with the understanding that God chose for His people to be a community. The lesson for the strugglers is that God's way is not the way of individualism. God chose a people, He placed them in community, and He demonstrated that it was His desire for His community to be in relationship with Him.

Individualism was at the core of the original sin of Adam and Eve. Individualism led them to decide that their individual way was better than God's plan for them. Individualism is contrary to God's plan because His plan is for harmony and for His people to live obediently and with accountability.

**All of life is to be God-centered. All of learning is to be God-centered. There is no room in life or learning for secular timeouts.**

Jesus reminded us of God's desire for us in His last prayer with His Father when He said in John 17:20–23: "I do not pray only for them. I pray also for everyone who will believe in me because of their message. Father, I pray they will be one, just as you are in me and I am in you. I want them also to be in us. Then the world will believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me. I did this so they would be one, just as we are one. I will be in them, just as you are in me. This is so that they may be brought together perfectly as one. Then the world will know that you sent me. It will also show the world that you have loved those you gave me, just as you have loved me."

Why does God call us, as He called Israel, beyond individualism to community? The powers and principalities of the world are real. For a time, God has chosen to allow those powers to be strong, and they are at work to tear God's people down. Only within the support and the accountability of community can God's people confront those powers, advance His kingdom, and glorify God. Individualism is the world's way. Obedient, faithful, believing community is God's way.

### God Defined Obedience

*"Israel, listen to me. The Lord is our God. The Lord is the one and only God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart*

*and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength. The commandments I give you today must be in your hearts. Make sure your children learn them. Talk about them when you are at home. Talk about them when you walk along the road. Speak about them when you go to bed. And speak about them when you get up. Write them down and tie them on your hands as a reminder. Also tie them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses. Also write them on your gates.*

*"The Lord your God will bring you into the land of Canaan. He gave his word. He promised he would give the land to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The land has large, wealthy cities you didn't build. It has houses filled with all kinds of good things you didn't provide. The land has wells you didn't dig. And it has vineyards and groves of olive trees you didn't plant. You will have plenty to eat. But be careful that you don't forget the Lord. Remember that he brought you out of Egypt. That's the land where you were slaves. Worship the Lord your God. He is the only one you should serve" (Deuteronomy 6: 4-13).*

The strugglers arrived at Sinai. They were crossing a hot and dry desert, and resources were limited. They were learning a lesson that a second-century rabbi named Akiva would summarize in these words: "You can take me out of the desert, but if you take the desert out of me, I will no longer be faithful."

In the setting of a harsh desert, the strugglers were learning dependence on God. They could not make it on their own as individuals. Only by trusting God and relying on the community that He had called could they make it.

As in the desert of Sinai, the desert journey of the lives in the believing community provides the same lesson. Life is a desert journey, and it is only survivable when we live it in obedience to our God and in relationship with His believing community.

At Sinai, God made another crucial point with the community. God wanted His people to understand that obedient and faithful living was just a generation away from being lost. And so God gave instructions to the community to be sure the stories of God were passed to each succeeding generation. Psalm 78 reiterates the critical importance of telling the next generations and, to add emphasis, even to generations not yet born.

Deuteronomy 6 provides some pretty clear marching orders. Tell the children when you are at home and out of the home and when you are waking and getting ready to sleep: in other words, at all times. God also required concrete representations. Tie His words on your hands and foreheads. Israel took that literally, and to this day tefillin are tied and bound for prayer.

In Numbers 15, God tells Israel to tie tassels to the corners of clothes. Why? "The Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, "You must make tassels on the corners of your clothes. A blue cord must be on each tassel. You must do it for all

time to come. You will have the tassels to look at. They will remind you to obey all the Lord's commands. Then you will be faithful to him. You will not chase after what your own hearts and eyes wish for. You will remember to obey all my commands. And you will be set apart for your God. I am the Lord your God. I brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God'" (Numbers 15:37-41).

Those tassels have five knots in each corner strand. Those knots represent the five books of Torah. There are four spaces between those knots representing the unspoken name of God (YHWH: Yahweh, Jehovah).

In Deuteronomy 6, Psalm 78, Numbers 15, and in the culture of both the Old and New Testament times, the message is consistent. Seeking to live faithfully is a full-time endeavor. There is no room for a secular break. Our day begins with God, ends with God, and everything in between belongs to God.

It is a critical understanding in the biblical case for Christian schooling. All of life is to be God-centered. All of learning is to be God-centered. There is no room in life or learning for secular timeouts.

### Set Up Stones



*In the biblical narrative, setting up stones was a significant symbol.*

At Gezer, mammoth stones were placed in upright positions by humans. Archaeologists tell us that those Gezer stones date to the Canaanite period prior to Israel entering the Promised Land.

The Gezer stones are not fancy. They are not inscribed. But they were placed in a

significant location. They were at the highest topographical point of the city in the Canaanite period. They are positioned so that anyone passing by on the major road near Gezer could see them. High places were always the worship centers in ancient towns, as they were the closest to the heavens.

What was the purpose of standing stones? In ancient times, stones were placed to represent a story. Gezer is a strategic place. Later Solomon recognized its military significance and fortified it. Each large Canaanite stone most likely represented a significant Canaanite victory or event. The enormity of each stone represented the enormity of the act of the god that gave the Canaanites a victory in battle or success in an event. It was as if the stone begged for a story to be



told: “See and hear what our god did in this place.” See the stones; hear the story.

God warned Israel about the misuse of standing stones. Deuteronomy 16 says, “Don’t set up a sacred stone to honor another god. The Lord your God hates Asherah poles and sacred stones.” At first it might seem that God forbade Israel from using stones because pagan people also used them. But just a few chapters later and shortly after the strugglers entered the Promised Land, Joshua 4:20 tells us that Joshua instructed Israel to set up 12 stones at Gilgal. Those standing stones were the ones the people had taken out of the Jordan.

## What was the purpose of standing stones? In ancient times, stones were placed to represent a story.

God did not warn His children to fear inanimate stones. God warned of the danger that stones would not be used to tell the story of the one true God and what He has done among His people. He said, “You shall not make idols and put other gods before me.” With altars nearby, pagan people worshipped idols, false gods, and eventually the stones that represented them. God’s warning was about idolatry, not about using the tool of stones as a reminder to tell His story.

After the stones were placed at Gilgal, Joshua gave to Israel the reason why: “Then he spoke to the Israelites. He said, ‘In days to come, your children after you will ask their parents, “What do these stones mean?” Their parents must tell them, “Israel

went across the Jordan River on dry ground.” The Lord your God dried up the Jordan for you until you had gone across it. He did to the Jordan River the same thing He had done to the Red Sea. He dried up the Red Sea ahead of us until we had gone across it. He did it so that all the nations on earth would know that He is powerful. He did it so that you would always have respect for the Lord your God.”

Why did Israel set up stones, and why have we built churches and Christian schools? The reason is similar: So that our children will ask and so that they will learn what God has done, is doing, and will do.

### For thought and discussion:

1. Do you agree or disagree with the author’s perspective of community? How does the concept apply to Christian schooling?
2. What are the potential positives and negatives regarding community?
3. Discuss the relationship between being strugglers and trusting God. What are the implications for the way you do Christian schooling?
4. What standing stones pose the greatest threat to your school? Greatest opportunity?

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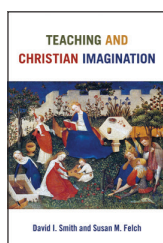


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# A Biblical Basis for Christian Schooling: A Contextual View

Jeff Blamer (Part 2 of 3)

## Bowing the Knee to Baal

The hero of Carmel was on the run. Elijah feared for his life. We can imagine his over-the-shoulder glances as he ran for 100 miles from the Jezreel Valley to the area near Beersheba, expecting to see Jezebel's soldiers pursuing him.

After God provided Elijah with much-needed refreshment, He gave him an instruction to travel 40 more days to Sinai where they would meet and talk. God meets His people in desert places. Elijah listened.

After Elijah recognized God's presence in the quiet of Sinai, God spoke. God told Elijah to go back. He was still called to God's purpose and mission. God encouraged him with these words: "But I will keep 7,000 people in Israel for myself. They have not bowed down to Baal. And they have not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:18).

Elijah ran because he forgot that God was His shepherd and was beside him. He also ran because he mistakenly thought he was the only faithful person left in Israel. Individualism was a temptation.

In 1 Kings 19:18 God points out that there is a quiet, faithful community remaining in Israel, and Elijah was called to be God's messenger to them. Elijah listened. He returned to the community.

Seven thousand people may seem insignificant, but the significance of the number cannot be overlooked. Seven is God's perfect number. He created the world in six days and then rested. Seven symbolized God-given completeness. Seven is perfect, 700 would be even more perfect, and 7,000 the most perfect.

Ancient cities were secured and fortified by walls and gates. Outside of the city gate was often an altar. There were no atheists in ancient times. The question to ancients was not, "Is there a god?" but instead, "Who is the god of this place?"

In the northern kingdom of Israel was the city of Dan. Its ruins remain to this day near the Lebanese border. In the large courtyard outside the city gate is a large altar. Before entering the city, residents and visitors alike first saw the altar and the daily sacrifices to the gods that protected the place and gave it prosperity. Right next to the gate is a small niche. At the niche, individuals would leave their gifts to the god.

As the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell away from God (in just one generation!) in the time of Jeroboam, they turned

to Baal and Asherah worship cults. Baal became the god of the place of Dan. Imagine that you were a simple farmer in the area and that you came to the market in Dan to sell or trade your produce. You would be expected, even required, to offer a portion of your harvest to the god of the place. At the niche next to the gate, you would be expected, even required, to bow your knee to Baal. You would bow the knee to acknowledge the god of Dan. You must bow your knee to do business inside the city gate.

So, what would a faithful believer do? God said believers would be strugglers. If trading your produce for goods that your family needed to survive required you to bow the knee to Baal, what would you do? Believers had options.

Believers could choose to compromise. If the family's needs were at stake, God would understand, right? God would forgive bowing the knee to Baal in order for our family to have what we need, right? After all, bowing the knee is only for appearances and we do not really mean it, right?

Believers could turn away and not bow the knee. Seven thousand faithful did in Elijah's time. How did they survive? They survived in community, just as God always intended. The people of God sustained and supported each other.

When the disciples went to Asia after Jesus had ascended and sent them out, they faced exactly the same dilemma. In the Roman Empire, to do business required bowing the knee to the self-proclaimed god-man Caesar. Many were martyred for their choice. But in some places, the community survived. In a place called Priene is a site where ancient markings pointed believers to the homes of fellow believers. Because of their



faithfulness and unwillingness to compromise, and at great risk and sacrifice, the believing church was born in Asia, thrived, and spread.

God's faithful followers cannot compromise. Jeroboam compromised in order to keep the Northern Kingdom from going to Jerusalem. He set up worship altars in places of his choosing at Dan and Bethel. Very soon worship of the one true God became intermingled with cultic practices of the pagans. Within a generation, faithfulness was lost and knees were bowing to Baal.

The biblical case for Christian schooling must include an understanding of the serious consequences of compromise. The sacrifice to provide Christian schooling is a very real challenge. It requires a commitment that must be based on more than just our individualistic desire to seek the best for our nuclear family. The sacrifice requires a believing community to understand that faithfulness to God in the generations to follow is at stake, as is His community.

The biblical case for Christian schooling includes an understanding that our impressionable children cannot be entrusted to places where the knee is bowed to the Baals of the twenty-first century. Instead, believers in community must fix their eyes on Jesus and lean on the Father until the day comes: "When the name of Jesus is spoken, everyone will kneel down to worship him. Everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth will kneel down to worship him" (Philippians 2:10). Imagine those words being received by a community in the Roman Empire, where bowing the knee to Caesar was required and where anyone not doing so risked it all.

### Sh'ma

"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

According to religious and historical records, the very first thing that parents taught their children was *Sh'ma*: "Israel, listen to me. The Lord is our God. The Lord is the one and only God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6: 4–5).

This was the community's commitment to obedience to God's command to start children on the right path.

*Sh'ma* literally means "hear" or better still "hear, listen, obey." God commanded Israel to hear, to listen, and to do something. He expected action to follow words instead of the words going in one ear and out the other. God expected obedience, but He left it to His children to figure out how to obey.

In Matthew 13, the disciples ask Jesus why He speaks to the people in stories and parables. He responds by saying, "They look, but they

don't really see. They listen, but they don't really hear or understand." Then Jesus gives the fuller context by quoting Isaiah 6.

Do you ever recall your parents telling you something like, "Go to your room and pick up everything on the floor so it is cleaned up and organized"? Did you ever then sit motionless, busy with whatever game or activity was distracting you? Do you remember your parent saying in a firm voice, "Didn't you hear me?"

Most likely the parent knew full well that the words were heard. What the parent meant with the question is, "You heard me, so why have you not acted and cleaned your room?"

Jesus used stories and parables because He knew that people too often hear, but do not respond. The words go in one ear and out the other without sinking into the grey matter in the middle. Jesus expected His disciples to hear and to do.

God commanded us to train up children in His ways, to talk about His ways in every moment from sunrise to sunset and in every situation when the stories of God's faithfulness could be told. God does not just expect us to hear nice words, but to do something with them.

Christian schooling is a "do something." It is doing something that is crucial for the teaching of His children and the assurance that the next generation will know the praiseworthy deeds of our God.

### The Rabbinic Model

"Jesus became wiser and stronger. He also became more and more pleasing to God and to people" (Luke 2:52). The version of this text that I memorized said it this way: "Jesus grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with both God and men."

If Jesus grew and was favored by God and by the people of His town, it is logical to assume that His parents followed the pattern of the culture.

As soon as children were able to learn and speak, parents taught them to memorize *Sh'ma*: "Israel, listen to me. The Lord is our God. The Lord is the one and only God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6: 4–5).

At age five or six, children entered school. Every first-century synagogue discovered in the Galilee had a school! It was a small, one-room structure attached to the synagogue. God's creation was the classroom. The school structure was an occasional gathering space for groups of students and the rabbi. From ages 6–12, the Torah was the textbook, and it was memorized.

At age 12, boys led the family at one of their Temple pilgrimages, as did Jesus (Luke 2:42). From age 12 to 15, boys and girls apprenticed at home. They learned the ways of their culture and their family business. Boys were expected

to memorize the rest of our Old Testament. Girls memorized Psalms and Isaiah.

At age 15 a boy could ask a rabbi for the opportunity to become a disciple and would have to pass an oral test to be considered. Young men who were chosen could follow a rabbi until age 30 and then might become rabbis themselves. Jesus' ministry began at age 30 (Luke 3:23).

There was another type of school in the Galilee. The Romans had adopted the Greek humanistic culture. Their schools were called gymnasiums. Nudity was an element of school practice, because the individual was center and the body was to be worshipped. Greek culture embraced the gymnasium, the theatre, and the arena. Individualism, humanism, entertainment, and athletics were worship icons. God was not center, because humans were godlike. Seeking pleasure and happiness was a creed.

Jesus spoke against the pagan humanism of the day. He told a parable of a loving father who had two sons. The youngest rejected everything the community stood for, its values and traditions, and even the beliefs of his own family and father. The son took his inheritance early (like wishing his father were dead) and went off to the pagan Decapolis, where he indulged in its humanism, sexual immorality, entertainment, and sports. One day the son realized that he had squandered away everything. When all material possessions were lost, the value of his rejected family and community struck him.

This parable was commonly told in Judaism. In its sad and traditional ending, the son returns and the father turns his back. The family traditions were sacred and the community at risk. The son had rejected both. The son could not be allowed to return and risk polluting the ointment.

Jesus turned the parable upside down. The loving father embraces and celebrates the son's return. He is welcomed home to a forgiving, loving community. That is God's mercy and grace on display.

A biblical case for Christian schooling must include the context of Jesus' world. He did not reject the pattern and traditions of His culture, but grew up as a model within them. That model included the first-century equivalent of the Christian school. It was the synagogue school, a place where the children of the believing community were educated in an uncompromising way. God was at the center, and His Word was the foundation for all of learning.

A biblical case for Christian schooling says that it is impossible to educate children of a believing community without God at the center and His Word as the foundation of the school. For those who have not yet recognized that, the Father's arms are open wide.

## All of Life Is Worship

The rabbis say, "All of life is worship." Reformed Christian schooling says, "Every square inch of creation belongs to God." It is nice to see the correlation between the words about education from ancient rabbis and the words that capture the essence of reformed education worldview.

There are many phrases to capture the basis and purpose of Christian schooling in the reformed educational tradition. In our tradition, we have used phrases like these:

- *The three-legged stool.* The nurturing of children is like a three-legged stool of home, church, and school, each doing an equal part in holding up the child as the child is educated. Each leg is only as strong as each of the three legs.
- *Every square inch.* One of the patriarchs of reformed education is Abraham Kuyper, who said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" While our world is polluted by sin and its effects, God is sovereign and at work. All of creation is His right now, even those parts that do not reflect His glory at times.
- *Faith and learning are inseparable.* Scripture speaks of cords of three strands that are not easily broken. So it is with faith and learning. When understood and applied well, faith and learning are inseparable. This principle stands in contrast to a pluralistic worldview, which suggests one of two things: either that Christian education means the inclusion of Bible classes, theology, or weekly worship but that faith integration is not necessary in some classes; or that a secular education is good enough if a child attends church or youth group and the family members are strong believers. A pluralistic approach is antithetical to the principle that faith and learning are inseparable. Reformed educational worldview does not allow for pluralism, because pluralism suggests there are portions of learning that could exclude God and faith.

Yes, one plus one is two for people of faith and those who have no faith. But one plus one is two because the Creator placed order in creation. And because He did, we can be confident that one plus one will not only be two today, but it will also be true tomorrow and forever. A biblical case for Christian schooling reminds us that even the simplest of math principles is an opportunity to glorify God.

*Read part 3 on page 34.*



# A Biblical Basis for Christian Schooling: A Contextual View

Jeff Blamer (Part 3 of 3)

## Salt and Light

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill can’t be hidden. Also, people do not light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand. Then it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine so others can see it. Then they will see the good things you do. And they will bring glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:13–16).

Salt was a precious commodity in the first century. Records show that Roman soldiers were actually paid with salt. The Dead Sea is the saltiest body of water on earth and salt deposits abound. Whereas salt was scarce and precious in Rome, it was abundant in Israel. Salt boosted the local economy.

Jesus says that we are precious like salt. Salt seasons, favors, and enhances the taste of food. Salt preserves food too. There was a Galilee industry of preserving fish by salting them.

A little salt will make fires burn hotter, but too much salt will act like an extinguisher. Regardless, after salt is thrown on a fire, it is useless. It cannot be made salty again. It becomes just like dirt that people trample under foot.

Jesus says that we are to be like precious salt that lasts—salt that flavors, enhances taste, seasons, and preserves. Jesus says that we must not be like salt that provides nothing more than a momentary flash and is then useless.

We are to be lights to the world. Jesus was called the Light of the World when He and His disciples were attending the Hanukkah festival. During the feast, the candles of the great temple menorahs were lit. The center candle was known as the servant candle. It was also called the light that lit all other lights. It was the light of the world. So is Jesus.

Israel is a land with high hills and deeply cut valleys. Cities are built on hills and farms dot the hillsides and valleys. In the dark of night, cities on hilltops are beacons. It is impossible to hide them.

We are to be beacons too. We are to light a dark world. It should be impossible not to see God’s community shining brightly as a beacon of hope to a dark world. Jesus is. We must be also.

Jesus did not say we are to be a single lighthouse on a hill or a single signal fire on a hill or a flashlight beam on a hill. He said we are to be collective light, like a town full of people. He said people (plural) light lamps. Matthew 5 is a message to His disciples as a group about people in the plural. There is no individualism in the Matthew 5 illustration of salt and light. It is what the people of God must be like.

How do we become salt and light? First, we must learn what salt and light are like as metaphors in the kingdom of God.

## Give to Caesar What Is Caesar’s and to God What Is God’s

Jesus and His disciples were in the Temple courts. A group of Pharisees came to him with a question: Was it right to pay taxes to Caesar?

The Pharisees were not all of one mind. They had factions that held to differing biblical interpretations. While factions differed on interpretation, the Pharisees as a whole opposed Rome and its occupation of the land that God had given to His people. While Pharisees did not turn to violence like their Zealot cousins, they did all they could to oppose Rome. They were opposed to paying taxes to Caesar.

So the dialogue in Matthew 22:15–22 is about Jesus’ political position in regard to Rome. “Where do you stand, Jesus?” Some would call it an opportunity to trap Him. Others understand that it was a legitimate question, because views differed.

Jesus asked them for a coin. One of them produced a denarius, a Roman coin. It was illegal, according to Jewish law, to possess a Roman coin in the Temple. It was illegal because the coin bore the image of Caesar, who was not only a foreign occupier, but who had been elevated to the status of god in the Roman Empire. To hold the coin in the Temple broke both the command to have no other gods before God and the command to have no graven images.

We could speculate that more among that group of Pharisees had similar coins in their pockets too. You hypocrites! You claim to oppose Rome but carry Roman coins to do your business in the Temple courts. You say one thing and do something else.



The rebuke was obvious. Jesus did not need to point it out. There were probably a few red-faced Pharisees as Jesus went on to ask a question.

“Whose image is on this coin?” He asked. “Caesar’s,” came the reply.

“Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

What belongs to God? They didn’t need to ask Him to explain. Everyone agreed that the greatest command was to love God above all other things. And everyone agreed that to love God meant to live obediently and faithfully.

In a Roman world, that meant they left it to Rome to rule. Rome kept peace and order. Rome maintained roads and taxed to fund projects. Rome did not dictate life and faith. Rome was secular. It had fully adopted Greek culture with its worship of the arts, within the arenas, in the markets, and in the pagan worship centers with their sexually immoral practices.

God’s people were not to allow those influences into their lives or the lives of their children. God commanded life for believers to be set apart from the world. God commanded believers to center their lives on His Word.

Jesus’ message is clear. Give to Caesar only what is his. But give to God the devotion of our lives and love. Little is as precious to the Father as are His children. They are created in His image. Deuteronomy 6 was focused on teaching the children in every part of the day. Jesus warned that anyone who caused a little one who belongs to Him to sin would be better off drowned in the abyss.

Where in the twenty-first century can we be best assured that children will be taught in the ways of our God? It is certainly not in the school of modern-day Caesars. It assuredly is in Christian schools.

### All Authority!

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with the observation that the people were amazed because Jesus taught as one with authority and not as a Torah teacher. What was authority, and where did Jesus get His?

One day in the Temple courts, some chief priests and Torah teachers came to Jesus to ask Him where He got His authority. The story is recorded in the first part of Luke 20. Their query supposes that He had authority. The question was not “Do you have authority?” but “Where did you get your authority?”

Torah teachers were only allowed to teach biblical interpretation that was already agreed upon and approved within their community. Rabbis with authority could add

new teachings or interpretations. Matthew 5–7 contains many examples. Whenever Jesus structured a teaching with “You heard it said ... but I say ...” He was adding a new interpretation. That is authority.

Where did His authority come from in the culture? Jesus responds to the query in typical rabbinic fashion. He responds to a question with a question: “Where did John get his authority?”

The chief priests and Torah teachers were now in a quandary. To question John the Baptist’s authority would likely result in a confrontation with the crowd. By answering that they did not know, they supported the assumption that John indeed had authority. By answering with a statement instead of another question, they ended the dialogue.

Authority was special. One could not claim it. It was given. And since the time of Moses, the people of God agreed that it had to be given by two witnesses. John was one. Who was the other?

Jewish scholars would say that we Christians have missed this point. Jesus was given authority at the Jordan when the heavens were ripped apart and the voice of the Father said, “This is my son, listen to him” and when John declared, “Behold the Lamb of God.”

With authority, Jesus sent His disciples into a world that was as secular and pagan as our twenty-first-century world. Some went to Asia and confronted a cultic, sexually-centered religion. Some went to Greece, where the theatre and arts were worshipped and humanism was center. Some went to Rome, where the arena was a worship center and Caesar was god.

Those who were sent were first trained and prepared. They would be sheep among wolves. They would only succeed if they were equipped. They would only survive in community.

Jesus had prepared them. They had followed Him closely and He had taught them for three years, and yet they were still confused. So, after His resurrection and with a more complete picture, He explained everything to them over a 40-day period.

By the time Jesus left them and entrusted the advancement of the Kingdom to them, the disciples were likely in their late teens or early 20s. They had memorized all of their Scripture in rabbinic school. They had spent three years at the feet of the greatest rabbi to have ever lived. They had the Scriptures opened to them by the risen Savior. They had been taught in the ways of the Lord. They had been equipped by the Son of God. They were prepared, ready, and committed. They went to the ends of the earth with the gospel story.

We, too, are entrusted with the authority of disciples. It is a treasure. It is a responsibility. It is a privilege. Christian schooling is the twenty-first-century opportunity for preparedness for disciples of Jesus who seek His kingdom.





## What Would Jesus Do?

Disciples are called to be like their rabbi Jesus. Examining His words and life as we seek to live like Him is good. It is a good thing to ask ourselves what Jesus would do if our intent is to learn in order to become more like Him.

Let's begin with what He did not do.

Jesus did not tell us in the Gospels that His parents erred. Jesus did not go into the synagogues and tell the rabbis and Torah teachers that they had gotten it wrong. He did not rip the doors off the synagogue school rooms and declare that the children should go to the government schools to influence the secularists and pagans. He was never shy in challenging religious leaders when He confronted their hypocrisy. Instead, Matthew 4 simply says that Jesus taught in all of the synagogues in Galilee.

Jesus did not move to the Hellenistic Decapolis and its nearby cities of Susita or Bet Shean so His disciples could be schooled in the Greek and Roman gymnasiums. The Gospels actually record very few occasions when He set foot in those pagan places. Instead, He told a parable of a son who chose to be disinherited and went there to live the high life. Later the son came to his senses and returned to his family and community. The broken son was forgiven by his loving father. If being salt and light to the world meant moving His disciples into the godless world and entrusting their education to the secular gymnasium, He would have made a radical move for a faithful rabbi and moved to the Decapolis. If Jesus' actions did not match His words, Jesus would have been a phony hypocrite.

Jesus did not move with His disciples to Tiberius. The city was built by Herod Antipas on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was only a mile off the road from Nazareth to Capernaum. It was primarily settled by Herodian Jews—Jews by name, ethnicity, and heritage, but Greek and Roman in their lifestyle. We might call them dabblers. We might compare them to Easter-and-Christmas-only Christians.

Some scholars suggest that they were the group that Jesus called the lost sheep of Israel. It would have been logical for Jesus to

settle among them. They knew Torah and had grown up with some experiences in Jewish religious practices. But the secular Greek and Roman lifestyle was a magnet that they didn't resist. There is no clear record of Jesus ever visiting Tiberius.

### What Did Jesus Do?

Jesus lived within the context of the first-century

culture of the faithful believers in Galilee. He was educated in the home and in the religious practices of the day. Those practices included synagogue school with a rabbi until age 12.

Neither Scripture nor history informs us as to the name of the rabbi who taught Jesus in His early years. But cultural context implies that He grew up within the patterns and practices of His people and culture. "He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him." He led bar mitzvah with His family at the temple at age 12. His ministry began at the Jordan at age 30. Jesus' preparation followed the pattern of the religious educational practices of His community.

Jesus moved to Capernaum, a Galilean town known for its educational excellence and religious orthodoxy. The best of the Galilean rabbis were centered there. Jesus called it His own hometown. Jesus taught as a rabbi, He had disciples as did other rabbis, and He was recognized with authority as only the most esteemed rabbis had.

Training the young in the way they should go was of paramount importance to Jesus. He said, "Suppose people lead one of these little ones to sin. It would be better for those people to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck" (Luke 17:2). He was in Capernaum. Little ones can also be translated "young adolescents." Jesus was the teacher, young people were following Him, and He was guarding their nurturing in God's ways ferociously.

The only evidence in Scripture, in culture, in tradition, and in practice for the faithful people of God in the biblical period is for education of children that is rooted in faith and built solely on the foundation of God's Word. There is no evidence in Scripture or the life of Jesus for a secular or government choice for education.

What did Jesus do? He taught and He modeled the same kind of training for the children of believers that is found in twenty-first-century Christian schooling (or in Christian homeschooling by well-equipped parents).

### Prepared

No disciple should be sent until the disciple is prepared and equipped.

The sheep in the flock of Jesus will be among wolves. Defenseless sheep will be consumed unless they are prepared. As the rabbinic tradition and practices prepared young people, so Jesus prepared His disciples. As Jesus taught and equipped His disciples, so Christian schooling must be a place to teach well and to prepare fully before students are sent out.

In the context of Jesus' command to go and tell, His disciples had been taught from an early age by their parents and the synagogue Torah teacher. They had apprenticed with their parents to learn skills to provide for their physical needs. They had followed the master rabbi Jesus for three years. After His resurrection, He pulled it all together for His disciples.



Luke 24:45 says, “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”

### **To the Ends of the Earth: Go and Tell**

Once prepared, Jesus’ last command to His disciples implored them to go to the world with the gospel story, tell the good news, and make disciples.

“Then the 11 disciples went to Galilee. They went to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him. But some still had their doubts. Then Jesus came to them. He said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So you must go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And you can be sure that I am always with you, to the very end’” (Matthew 28: 16–20).

Jesus returned to the Father. As the Father had given His Son authority, so Jesus equipped His disciples with authority. Church tradition and history inform us that they went into parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Among our clearest New Testament examples are the stories of John and Paul.

John went to western Asia (Turkey today). He became the circuit-riding apostle to the cities and regions listed in Revelation 2. Asia was a hedonistic place. John headquartered in Ephesus, a seaport town, where the sex industry appealing to lonely sailors mixed well with the Diana cult. The warnings to the churches of Revelation confronted the real-life challenges and temptations in their cities. John warned them. They would only survive in faithfulness if they remained communities that understood the powers and temptations of the world around them and were centered in God.

Paul was the late-coming disciple. After his conversion, he did not reject his upbringing or the practices of the Jewish religious tradition. Instead, he introduced his credentials in Acts 23 and 26 by saying “I am a Pharisee of Pharisees.” Paul’s rabbi was Gamaliel, one of the best (Acts 5).

After Paul’s first missionary journeys didn’t result in churches that stuck, he changed his tactic. He stayed in places a little longer, preparing and equipping disciples, and only when the church was in good hands did he move on. The story in Acts 19 illustrates this. Paul’s message threatened the silversmiths in Ephesus, who relied on the Diana/Artemis worship cult to thrive in business. There was about to be a riot, and the throng was assembling in the theatre on main street.

Paul wanted to address the crowd, but the story tells us the believers would not let him. Paul had raised up Ephesian disciples and leaders. It was as if they said, “It’s okay, Paul; we are equipped. Move on; we’ve got this.” Soon thereafter, Paul moved on.

Prepared disciples, equipped for the task, are to go and tell. John did so in western Asia, Paul across Asia and later in

Rome, Peter in Cappadocia (central Turkey), Thomas in India, and James the brother of Jesus in Jerusalem.

The people of God and disciples of Jesus are not called to hunker down in insular communities. Communities of believers must be the God-centered places where children first grow, becoming prepared and equipped, and then go and tell.

### **Strugglers in the Twenty-First Century**

About 4,000 years ago, God gave his chosen people a new name. They would not be known as Jacobites. They would be Israelites—those who struggle with people and with God.

Two thousand years later, God sent His Son. Our perfect example struggled with the powers of the seen and unseen world. He taught us how to live with God and with people. His words to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount described the struggle of Kingdom-building disciples. His perfect life of obedience ended with a tremendous struggle with His Father and with the powers of the world. “My God,” He said, “Why have you forsaken me?”

Two thousand years have passed since Jesus walked the earth. The picture that He painted of the life of discipleship remains clear. As it was for Israel and for Jesus, so it is for us. Life is a desert journey of struggling, as believers take up the cross each day and follow.

Communities of faith must support and celebrate the gifts of God’s disciples that are being used to serve and advance His kingdom in government positions, in secular schools, in places of business, in healthcare and social services, and in every workplace environment. We believe that every square inch of creation belongs to God, and we believe that all of life is worship. Therefore, there is not one place of work or service less important than any other place, because disciples of Jesus are called to be difference makers as we advance God’s kingdom everywhere.

In the twenty-first century, the home is as vitally important to the child as it ever has been. Parents are the God-given first line of instructors, teaching the message of *Shema* as soon as children are able to learn. The church is of vital importance as a community center of believers worshipping and fellowshiping together. Christian schooling is of vital importance because it is the only institutional means by which children are instructed in God’s Word and ways from the time they get up until the time they go to bed.

All of life is worship. No part of it can be set aside for a moment, much less for six hours of every school day. Christian schooling is a Kingdom calling. It is the best way in every age for believers to ensure that the story of God is passed to each succeeding generation. That is what God’s strugglers are called to do.

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