

Life Before God:

One Prayer that Changes Everything

Thursdays @ 11:00 a.m., February 11–May 6.

Led by Pastor Dan and Sam LaDue.

Click Zoom link below.

What doors might open as you tend to a life of mindfulness, prayer, or meditation? This workshop is based on the way Jesus approached his prayer-filled moments, the scholarly work around the familiar Lord's Prayer, and the Jesus we meet in Mark's gospel.



Schedule

Feb 11 Intro / Portraits of Jesus

Feb 18 Portraits of Jesus

Feb 25 The Q Prayer

Mar 04 The Prayer - Abba as Father

Mar 11 The Prayer - A name to be revered

Mar 18 The Prayer - Let your domain unfold

Mar 25 The Prayer - Give us the bread

Apr 01 The Prayer - Forgives our debts

Apr 15 The Prayer - Piercing it all together

Apr 22 Jesus before God

Apr 29 Our lives before God

May 06 Thoughts, Reflections, Next Steps

Zoom Link

Topic: Life Before God: Discussion Group

Time: This is a recurring meeting, Thursdays, 11:00 a.m.

Join Zoom Meeting <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8406525643?pwd=MzRjaUFxWVJ1SWWhNYzdIMXljL1ByZz09>

Meeting ID: 840 652 5643

Passcode: oslc2020

Readings This Week:

A Sage

All the major scholars of our day agree that Jesus was a sage. This scene is based upon the emerging consensus that Jesus' primary historical identity was that of a sage. In the first-century Mediterranean cultures a sage was someone devoted to wisdom. That is, a sage was interested both in understanding life and in communicating that understanding. These near eastern devotees of wisdom were eager to learn life's secrets and to help others do the same.

In the past fifteen years of scholarship Jesus as sage has become the key to understanding who he was. Everyone from the evangelical Ben Witherington (whose recent book is called *Jesus the Sage*) to the relentlessly critical Burton Mack make Jesus as sage the central concept. Perhaps the best cases for this way of looking at Jesus have been made by John Dominic Crossan (in his popular *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, and in his voluminous *The Historical Jesus*) and Marcus Borg (in the well written book for lay people, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, and in his more scholarly *Jesus: A New Vision*).

The Jesus Seminar, the much-publicized group of some one hundred New Testament scholars, emphasized Jesus as sage in *The Five Gospels*, its first major report on its findings about the historical Jesus: "The sage of the ancient Near East was laconic, slow to speech, a person of few words. The sage does not provoke encounters...As a rule, the sage is self-effacing, modest, and unostentatious" (32).

Newly available material (see Boxes 2 and 3, pp. 15-16) about Jesus as sage has made it clear that Jesus belonged to this large near eastern search for wisdom during the Greco-Roman period. These earliest layers of texts about Jesus contained little except teachings of Jesus. These layers—newly in focus thanks to both new documentary discoveries and breakthroughs in understanding how the gospels were written—contained little about what Jesus did. The Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Q, and the pre-gospel collections of parables were collections of sayings by Jesus with the barest of context. There was no story of Jesus' life in these collections. In fact there were not even stories about Jesus doing anything in these earliest sources. These earliest layers contained only various forms of wisdom sayings. They were basically collections of the sayings of the sage Jesus.

Since they were, as noted earlier, devoted to communicating their understanding of life, we can clearly consider these Mediterranean sages to have been teachers. That is why it is quite conceivable that Jesus was called "Rabbi" in the villages of Galilee, where he lived. During the early part of the first century when Jesus lived, "Rabbi" was not a technical term for a synagogue official. It simply meant "teacher."

But as a sage, Jesus was not simply a teacher. He spent at least as much time in figuring things out himself as in communicating the understanding he came to. Jesus as teacher devoted himself to the more basic task of seeking wisdom, a task in which he fervently believed. "There is nothing veiled that won't be unveiled or hidden that won't be made known," a saying attributed to Jesus in six different early Christian texts, shows this confidence Jesus had in the possibility of figuring things out and then saying what he understood.

The best place to gain wisdom, according to Jesus the sage, was right in the midst of ordinary life. In interacting with the Roman soldier who forced you to carry his pack for a mile, in the way field workers got hired and paid, in the way lilies grew in the field, and in the way a woman made bread, one

Box 3:

Pre-gospel Documents about Jesus Identified by Twentieth-Century Literary Investigations

The Q Gospel

A collection of some 240 versus of sayings of Jesus which eventually found their way into the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. See a longer explanation of this crucial document in the search for the prayer of the historical Jesus in chapter three.

A Pre-Gospel Collection of Parables

A series of parables and interpretations of parables linked together in writing, which the Gospel of Mark eventually placed in its fourth chapter and then added its own interpretations.

A Chain of Miracle Stories

A set of six or seven stories about Jesus' healing, feeding throngs of people, and walking on water, modeled after both the miracle stories of Elijah and Elisha and the story of the Exodus. This "chain" eventually found its way into the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

The Signs Gospel

Another collection of miracle stories about Jesus, bound fairly tightly together by the interpretation that Jesus performed miracles as signs that he was the Messiah. This small gospel was taken over by and integrated into the Gospel of John.

could discover wisdom. Jesus' sayings from the earliest layers of the gospels and in the newly discovered documents have a clear focus on everyday life as the place to be, if one really wants to be both wise and holy.

This concentration on everyday life meant that Jesus as a sage did not emphasize either holy scriptures or established religious systems as privileged sources of wisdom. The sayings of Jesus in the earliest layers of evidence do not show Jesus quoting the Hebrew Bible with any regularity. Instead he taught about the blessedness of the poor or the way the domain of God was perceivable in a mustard seed growing. Rather than pointing to traditional texts Jesus pointed to the birds of the air, the employment practices of farmers, the goings on in the marketplace, the work of women in the household, and the social life of the peasant as the real sources of wisdom and authority.

Nor do the earliest documents of Jesus' teachings portray him as having much cared about religious institutions, religious systems of thought or belief, or religious codes of behavior. There are no sayings from Jesus in these early layers about the Temple in Jerusalem, either for or against it. Most scholars think that when Jesus finally went to Jerusalem, he did perform some action meant to criticize the Temple; but scholars do not agree at all on what that action was. The saying imbedded in the texts about Jesus in the Temple looks too much like part of an ancient story-telling device to be a reliable record of what Jesus said.

Nor did Jesus' teachings go out of their way to promote basic aspects of Jewish faith. It is easy to see in these early teachings that Jesus assumed the main tenets of Jewish faith. The oneness of God, the high ethical standards associated with Judaism, the Jewish concern for fairness and justice, and God's active role in the governance of the world are all affirmed in Jesus' teachings. He seems to have assumed that Judaism as a faith was God's way, and then concentrated on expanding ways of understanding one's self and God within that frame. The real energy of his teachings is found in their expansiveness of vision and in their critique, not in their defense, of religion. Typical of

Jesus' stance toward the religious systems in place is the parable that saw God's domain in the actions of a social outsider like a Samaritan rather than in those of a priest.

Nor did Jesus' teachings encourage people to follow religious codes of behavior. It is important to acknowledge that in all the gospels—both in the passages where we find Jesus' original teachings and in the texts where the gospel writers have gone beyond his original actions and teachings—there is never a place where Jesus placed himself outside of Judaism. Also since Jesus clearly affirmed himself as belonging to Judaism, it is inaccurate to see Jesus as having campaigned systematically against religious or specifically Jewish religious behavior. But the cutting edge of his teachings often calls some of these religious behaviors into question. Perhaps the best example of the way this Jewish sage pushed people to seek a deeper understanding rather than blindly following religious rules is his teaching about the sabbath: "The sabbath day was created for Adam and Eve, not Adam and Eve for the sabbath day." Here Jesus did not denigrate the sabbath, he just tried to put it in the larger context of his search for wisdom, the context of the created world and of ordinary experience.

In both the Jewish and Greco-Roman settings of Jesus' time, there were plenty of examples of this kind of sage. The biblical books of Proverbs and Ben Sirach are collections of the sayings of various sages about everything from raising children to protocol in the king's court. For instance, the sage wrote in Ben Sirach 6:15, "A loyal friend is something beyond price, there is no measuring the price of such friendship." Some of these teachings, however, with their emphasis on lessons to be learned from life apparently began to wear thin. "Koheleth" produced a collection of sayings in the book of Ecclesiastes which questioned how much wisdom can really be found. So, for instance, in 9:18 and 10:1, this sage observed, "Wisdom is worth more than weapons of war, but a single sin undoes a good deal of good. One dead fly can spoil the scent-maker's oil; a grain of stupidity outweighs wisdom and glory." But even in his skepticism, Koheleth kept the sage's focus on everyday life and on the possibility of life revealing at least some wisdom ("Better to be a live dog than a dead lion," Eccl 9:4). Whether skeptical, conventional, or innovative, the sage looked for wisdom in life itself. It was not in sacred texts or institutions that wisdom was revealed. It was in the discipline of being present to what one lived.

Similarly, the sages of the Stoic and Cynic movements, popular at the time of Jesus, concentrated on life experiences as the place where real wisdom was discernible. Mack, Crossan, and Gerald Downing have all produced major works which make extensive and successful comparisons between Jesus and especially the popular Cynic sages of that day. The Roman writer Lucian, cited by Crossan, described the way the second century C.E. sage Demonax "led the same life and ate the same food as everyone else, was not in the least subject of pride, and played his part in society and politics." The Cynic philosophers, who intentionally dressed in demonstratively simple ways, were especially well-known for hanging around the market places and any banquet they could find their way into in order both to gain and disperse wisdom.

Jesus taught in these same places. His favorite place to teach was probably at dinner. Jesus seems to have been so closely associated with dinners that an early criticism of him was that he was "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt 11:19). As Kathleen Corley has shown in her book *Private Women, Public Meals*, these dinners were usually semi-private. Perhaps the word "banquet" better suggests who attended these meals. They were hosted by an individual, family, club, or organization and held either in a rented room or the home of an aristocrat. These meals were quite common, and provided important occasions for socializing in the Mediterranean

world.

There is very little evidence of Jesus himself hosting a meal. The gospels consistently portray him as a guest. When the gospels have him speak at a meal, he almost always does so as a guest among other guests. Such was the normal order of affairs at meals in the Mediterranean culture of that day, with various sages, entertainers, and musicians contributing. Jesus as guest sage also fits well with the relative shortness of all of Jesus' sayings found in the earliest layers of evidence. As a guest, Jesus was probably not sufficiently in control of the situation to have spoken at length. In passages like the "sermon on the mount" the gospel story line calls for Jesus to present a longer set of teachings, but the clumsy way the sayings in these longer "sermons" bump up against one another is evidence that it was the gospel writers who patched together a series of sayings, rather than Jesus who repeated them one after another. As we will see when we examine the specific kinds of punch-line related teachings of Jesus, his wisdom was particularly suited to short presentations.

Sages in this part of the Near East wandered from village to village, carrying practically nothing with them as a visible sign that all they needed in life was the wisdom they offered and sought. Such a strategy is found in the Gospel of Thomas' rendering of an early saying of Jesus: "When you go into any region and walk about in the countryside, when people take you in, eat what they serve you" (14:4). That this was a rather general behavior of all kinds of sages is shown in this quotation from Epictetus:

I wear a rough cloak even as it is, and I shall have one then; I have a hard bed even now, and so I shall then; I shall take to myself a wallet and a staff, and I shall begin to walk around and beg from those I meet. -Discourses 3.22:9, 10

Not Just Any Sage

As scholars of the last twenty years have zeroed in on the problem of which sayings attributed to Jesus in the ancient literature may have actually been said by him and which were added by his followers for various purposes, Jesus has emerged as a rather astonishing sage. Scholars have noticed, for instance, a number of sayings which occur in a variety of independent pieces of literature, and therefore may be quite close to what Jesus himself said. On the other hand, it has become relatively clear that some other sayings reveal views of the later gospel writers, and as such are probably not from Jesus. In these and other ways the research of this century has been able to identify a core group of teachings by the historical Jesus which are consistently fresh, funny, and insightful.

These sayings closest to Jesus of Galilee bubbled over with surprise. They stood conventional wisdom on its head. For instance, the standard wisdom that wealth is a sign of God's blessing became in the mouth of Jesus the ironic and liberating, "Blessed are the poor." Or, the way God acts got compared in a single pithy sentence to both a woman at work in her household and the yeast which most of the culture considered impure.

Jesus' teachings astonished his hearers. When he spoke, people were likely to be either inspired or outraged at the way he broke through conventional thinking and behavior. The pithy and provocative sayings found in the earliest collections of his teachings targeted accepted ways of doing things in a style that surely disturbed some and encouraged others. One of the primary methods in Jesus' search for wisdom was to learn by challenging and debunking convention. He seemed to assume that if one called into question old habits and norms, something far more fresh and powerful could be unveiled.

Three conventional institutions came in for the most critique by Jesus: family, wealth, and religion. Against none of these did he mount a thorough-going attack. Rather he targeted the pretensions of these institutions without directly calling for any systematic reform. His strategy, it seems, was to help people see how funny some of these assumptions made them and everyone else look. He called the privileges of blood ties and ability to produce children into question. In a context where family loyalty was the equivalent of social security, he said:

"My mother and my brothers—who ever are they? Here are my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, that's my brother and sister and mother." -Matt 12:48-50

In a social situation where having children was perhaps a man's greatest source of status, Jesus said:

"There are castrated men who castrated themselves because of Heaven's imperial rule." -Matt 19: 12

He mocked the ways the affluent received and bankrolled prestige:

"Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you." -Luke 6:20

In the face of the status value of accumulated wealth, surely with a smile he tweaked people's ambitions with:

"If you have money, don't lend it at interest. Rather, give it to someone from whom you won't get it back." -Thorn 95:1, 2

And he challenged those who were "holier than thou":

"Be on guard against the scholars who like to parade around in long robes, and who love to be addressed properly in the marketplaces, and who prefer important seats in the synagogues and the best couches at the banquets." -Luke 20:46

With reference to religious prescriptions about what to eat and what not to eat (and most likely with reference to people defecating), he said:

"It's not what goes into a person from the outside that can defile; rather it's what comes out of a person that defiles." -Mark 7: 15

One of the main ways Jesus identified what emerged when the pretenses of conventional family, wealth, and religion were dropped was what he called the "domain of God." Interestingly enough, the "domain of God"—like real wisdom—was present for Jesus in the daily pursuits of life like the household, the marketplace, and the countryside. In the very same places where family, wealth, and religion claimed privilege, underneath the pretense one could find "God's domain."

Between 20 and 25 percent of the sayings attributed to the historical Jesus by the Jesus Seminar make reference to this "domain of God." The way Jesus' core teachings presented this notion was fresh and evocative. God's domain became something that the poor inherited. It was like the way seeds grew into plants which then produced a harvest. God's way of acting ended up—through the lens of Jesus' teachings—looking like that of children (Matt 18:3 and parallels in Mark and Luke).

Jesus seemed to be suggesting that God's domain was present in unexpected ways. The Gospel of Thomas shows Jesus describing God's domain as "spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it" (113:4). Nor was God's domain just in heaven or in the future. It was—for those "with ears to

hear"—like an open dinner invitation, and as visible as a city set on a mountain or a light uncovered. Since wisdom from everyday life was easily uncovered and God's domain was available at every turn for the discerning ear or eye, Jesus taught that one need not worry about the basics of life. "God causes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good, and sends rain on both the just and the unjust" (Matt 5:45). That one could trust God's care was obvious in the birds of the air or the lilies of the field. And, one could therefore risk much more and be free of dependency on riches, family, and status. One could also put in perspective the claims of the Roman empire, which ruled all of the Mediterranean world and completely dominated what used to be the nation of Israel.

On this subject consider for a moment the phrase so frequently occurring in Jesus' teachings, "basileia tou theou," (which we have been translating, "God's domain," following the translation in the recent *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, ed. Robert Miller, and which has traditionally been translated "kingdom of God." Other recent helpful translations are "reign of God" and "God's imperial rule.") This phrase is really yet another clever taunt by Jesus. Whenever anyone in Jesus' time used the term "basileia" (or "kingdom"), the first thing people thought of was the Roman "kingdom" or "empire." That is, "basileia" really meant "Roman empire" to most people who heard it. So, when Jesus taught about the "basileia" of God, he was mocking the pretense of the Roman empire in a subtle, but unmistakable, way. He was calling into question the presumption of his hearers that Rome was in charge, and calling for them to entertain the idea of how life could be lived through the vision of God's domain, "spread out upon the earth" that people generally didn't see.

This is why the other translation of "basileia tou theou" in the *Scholars Version* "God's imperial rule" captures the flavor of Jesus' clever taunt. A rendering which might pick up the taunt even more explicitly would be to talk about "God's empire." The satire implicit in Jesus' first-century teachings about this "basileia/imperial rule" might be similar to someone in the late twentieth century talking about "God's multi-national corporation" as a way of tweaking the pretentiousness and domination of today's multi-national corporations.

Although "God's imperial rule" or "God's empire" do illustrate nicely the taunt against Rome in all Jesus' "kingdom" sayings, these two new translations are ultimately more confusing than helpful. In today's America they unintentionally evoke the notion of a Christian empire ruling the world. When the general populace today read of Jesus talking about an empire, a natural (but disastrously mistaken) interpretation is that Jesus predicted and endorsed the western Christian empire-like domination of the world today. The historical Jesus clearly was not interested in endorsing a class of pious wealthy westerners of our day in their quest for world domination. If anything, he would have been skewering the pretense of western Christian domination over everyone else as thoroughly as he debunked the pretensions of Rome and Jerusalem in his day.

Jesus' teachings about God's reign were fresh and surprising. But the idea of a sage talking about a new kind of "kingdom" resulting from the search for wisdom was not new. As both John Dominic Crossan and Burton Mack have shown, many sages couched their search for wisdom in terms suggesting that wise people are the true kings. Among many quotes cited by Crossan from other sages of Jesus' time, consider the following:

Look at me, who am without a city, without a house, without possessions, without a slave; I sleep on the ground; I have no wife, no children, no praetorium, but only the earth and heavens, and one poor cloak...Am I not free? When did any of you see me failing in the object of my desire? Or ever falling into that which I would avoid?...any of

you ever see me with sorrowful countenance? And how do I meet with those whom you are afraid of and admire? Do not I treat them like slaves? Who, when he sees me, does not think that he sees his king and master? -*Epicetus, Discourses 3.22:45--49, Oldfather 2.146-147*

So the use of kingdom/domain language by Jesus to describe what happens in search for wisdom was something he shared with many other sages.

In this regard Jesus' teachings maintained a creative tension between the socio-political and economic concerns of his day and the search for wisdom. Since Jesus used terms that evoked thoughts say that he disregarded politics and economics in his search for wisdom. But neither did he become a social or economic reformer. He seemed to encourage people to think actively about socio-political and economic matters, and then to concentrate on integrating those insights into a fresh and wisdom-filled way of living.

This wisdom-oriented approach to politics and economics by no means points to an other-worldly emphasis. Just because Jesus' teachings don't reflect an explicit effort to reform or revolutionize the political and economic systems doesn't indicate that he sought a wisdom removed from the world in which he lived. As we have seen, almost all of the early sayings of Jesus concentrate on this-worldly topics. Nor was his wisdom-oriented political stance similar to current American individualism, which makes light of social concerns. Many of Jesus' teaching in their own humorous and fresh way focus on social interactions. Because the teachings of Jesus critiqued a great deal of social convention and asked his hearers to develop a less superficial relationship with life itself, it is fair to characterize this wisdom-based approach as a spiritual one. But Jesus' wisdom spirituality had a clear social and this-worldly orientation.

So Jesus was no ordinary sage. His teachings were so striking that usually his hearers were inspired, shocked, or actively puzzled. When he spoke, the clever social involvement of his teachings called people to self-examination and new relationships. This kind of wisdom teaching, which draws the hearers into new ways of understanding beyond that of either common proverbs or conventional expectations, has been named "aphoristic." Robert Funk summarizes a decade of scholarship on aphoristic teaching by contrasting it to proverbial wisdom: "An aphorism, on the other hand, is a subversive adage or epigram: it contradicts or undermines folk wisdom.... Folklore, or proverbial wisdom, reflects the regnant sensibilities of a people. Aphorisms contravene that sensibility and endeavor to replace the old perception with new" (*Honest to Jesus*, 136).