**CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY**

Phil Van Auken

“**I go to church because…”**

* America is a Christian nation.
* God will answer my prayers.
* God will bless me.
* Going to church ensures my salvation.
* I always get something out of it.
* I am a member of the church and denomination.
* I became a Christian when I was baptized.
* I feel guilty if I don’t.
* I give a lot of money to the church.
* I grew up in a Christian home.
* I grew up in this church.
* I have responsibilities to fulfill.
* I have sins that need to be forgiven.
* I learn a lot about the Bible.
* I like my Sunday School class.
* I receive good counseling.
* I support our youth program.
* I want to please God.
* I’m a sinner.
* I’m looking for someone to date or marry.
* It keeps me busy.
* It’s good for my kids and family.
* It’s good for my marriage.
* It’s good for my standing in the community.
* It’s my duty as a Christian.
* It’s my support group.
* It’s socially expected.
* It’s Sunday.
* Members of the church make me feel guilty if I don’t go.
* People pray for me.
* The pastor is a great preacher.
* There are so many activities for my family to participate in.
* This is an important church in the community.
* We have a great music program.
* We have a great pastor and staff.
* We have great facilities.
* We live in the Bible Belt.

**WHEN JESUS RETURNS, HOW MUCH TIME WILL HE PROBABLY SPEND ON…**

church membership meetings, denominations, seminaries, electronic ministries, foreign missions trips, Sunday School, retreats, bestseller religious books, seminars, speakers, sermons, prayer groups, construction projects, scripture memorization, church camps, vacation Bible schools, youth programs, potluck meals, food drives, funding drives, lock-ins, food banks, walkathons, church advertising, Christian music, committee meetings, church clean-up days, worship services, music ministries, hospital visitation, newsletters, rallies, revivals, prayer chains, house-to-house canvassing, congregational meetings, missions training, building campaigns, pulpit committees, Christmas programs, Lent, mid-week services and programs, youth trips, campus ministry, church baseball leagues, Christian schools, decorating committees, funeral meals, weekly visitation, canned food drives, ushering, singing in choir, bell choir, budget budgeting, denominational meetings, church website construction, greeters scheduling, church libraries, Easter egg hunts, bingo, political parties, voting drives, lobbying for school prayer, praying over the loudspeaker before sporting events?

**ONCE JESUS RETURNS, HOW MUCH TIME AND ENERGY**

**WILL HE PROBABLY SPEND…**

Working for a promotion? Promoting his ministry? Networking with successful people? At the country club? In politics? Playing fantasy football? Upgrading to a large screen HD TV? Blogging? Texting? Adding to his Facebook page? Keeping up with Wall Street? Complaining about high taxes and gas prices? Going on a diet? Seeing the shows in Vegas? Watching the Cowboys on Thanksgiving? Listening only to Christian music? Endorsing Christian political candidates? Hiring an agent? Getting a Harvard MBA? Deregulating big business? Promoting rugged individualism? Trying to make straight A’s? Getting in shape? Attending church events? Listening to talk radio? Denying global warming? Sending his disciples to seminars? Attending PTA meetings? Buying Girl Scout cookies? Helping to build the 40-foot tall border wall between Texas and Mexico? Driving a V-8? Praising the USA for being a Christian nation? Getting cash back on his Discover card? Flying first class? Attending preaching classes in seminaries? Watching BCS bowl games? Moving into a nicer house and neighborhood? Making his front yard greener? Putting up Christmas lights? Saving money at Wal-Mart? Getting the Venti at Starbucks? Surfing online? Playing the lotto? Buying more to help the economy? Eating out after church? Greeting people with, “Have a happy holiday season”? Recycling? Attending $30,000 weddings and their rehearsals? Reading bestsellers on professional success? Relying on the advice of Oprah and Dr. Phil?

**THE CORE OF CHRIST’S TEACHINGS ABOUT LIVING IN THIS WORLD**

Christ came to take people out of the exploitative sinful secular world system via building an alternative world of Christian (unconditional) love (born of the Holy Spirit) that people must be born again (taken out of this world) to join.

Those of Christ’s community, the body-of-Christ’s invisible (non-denominational church) Church, are to represent Christ in creating and nurturing the born-again community of non-exploitative, unconditional love (heaven on earth).

Too many Christians and churches today have comfortably accommodated themselves to the exploitative world system (and thus perverted Christi’s community) in 3 main ways:

1. Cultural Christianity (the futile attempt to live comfortably in both worlds simultaneously)
2. Personal piety (self-righteousness + conditional love)
3. Mixing secular politics with denominational politics (attempting to use the tools of secular power and lifestyles in Christ’s community)

Those who wish to work in Christ’s harvest fields must avoid the above perverted triangle, or Christ will vomit them out of his mouth.

**HOW WELL DO WE TRULY UNDERSTAND GOD**

The Bible provides only sketchy information about God’s being, because our relationship with Him is based on faith, not intellectualism. But Christians manufacture extensive cultural traditions about God that imply we’re closer to Him than we really are, thus violating the third commandment:

* “God told me to…”
* “God wants us to…”
* “God’s will is…”
* “I serve God by…”
* “That was an answer to prayer.”
* “We’re in God’s will when we…”
* “I live my life for God.”
* “We are a godly church.”

Most of the people in the Bible did not understand God well; often acted contrary to what they knew God wanted; and tolerated ungodly cultural practices. Through the centuries, organized Christianity (churches, denominations, seminaries, pastors, missionaries) has anointed a great deal of cultural dogma and doctrine as scripture.

**WHO JESUS MINISTERED TO**

“Blessed are the **poor in spirit**,   
   for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.   
 Blessed are those who **mourn**,   
   for they will be comforted.   
Blessed are the **meek,**   for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and **thirst for righteousness**,   
   for they will be filled.   
 Blessed are the **merciful**,   
   for they will be shown mercy.   
Blessed are the **pure in heart**,   
   for they will see God.   
Blessed are the **peacemakers**,   
   for they will be called children of God.   
Blessed are those who are **persecuted because of righteousness**,   
   for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

* Socially disposed and marginalized
* Low class, uneducated
* Flagrant sinners
* Social elites
* Religious elites
* The ill and the infirm
* Ignorant “sheep”
* The innocent, unsophisticated

How much time, energy, and money do local churches spend ministering to themselves?

How much time, energy, and prayer do most local churches spend ministering to the same categories of people Jesus ministered to?

**WHO JESUS MINISTERED TO**

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| **PERSON** | **PROFILE** | **MINISTRY APPROACH OF CHRIST**  **TO THIS PERSON** |
| 1. John the Baptist | A non-institutionalized religious outsider in a colonized nation with a theocratic history | Submissiveness, respect, partnership |
| 1. Satan | Exploiter and destroyer of people and community | Expressed no interest in what this world offers (worships) |
| 1. Peter | An uneducated, unsophisticated blue collar worker | In sync with Peter’s temperament and personality (direct accountability + bold challenges) |
| 1. Mary (mother) | A nobody teen mother with a dubious past (but not the “perpetual virgin queen of heaven” who was born by the “immaculate conception” of her mother!) | Honor; service; new wine in new wineskins |
| 1. Nicodemus | A credentialed insider of a corrupt, exploitative religious aristocracy | Teaching authority; appeal to both the intellect and heart; non-Calvinistic appeal |
| 1. Samaritan woman | A socially-shunned sinner | Unconditional love and acceptance; respect; surprise; tough love; authority |
| 1. Healed young son of royal official (Capernaum) | An “upper-middle class” white collar worker | Jesus wasn’t class-conscious; response to true need (not merely wants) + simple, non-intellectual faith |
| 1. People of Nazareth | “Cultural Christians” | Expressing spiritual truth + disengagement |
| 1. Disciples fishing | Blue collar laborers with not much of a future | Appeal to their experience base in life (meeting them just the way they were) |
| 1. Disciples as a group | “Regular guys” | Mentoring through word and deed; unconditional acceptance + tough love; intimate companionship/community = the Trinity |
| 1. Man in Capernaum synagogue exorcized of a demon | An “untouchable”? | Treated humanely, not shunned as a sinner; restored to God’s intentions |
| 1. Peter’s mother in law | A hospitable “homemaker” | Respect, honor, community |
| 1. Large roving crowds | Sheep | “Son of man”; suffering servant; unconditional (tough) love |
| 1. Leper healed | Social outcast | Treated as “clean” and healthy; no consciousness of social worthiness or “deserving” help |
| 1. Paralyzed man healed | Handicapped unemployed | Clean, whole, functional (redeemed Christians) |
| **PERSON** | **PROFILE** | **MINISTRY APPROACH OF CHRIST**  **TO THIS PERSON** |
| 1. Religious professionals | Arrogant, comfortable elitists | Formality; transparency and no games; resolutely upholding Kingdom Truth |
| 1. Tax collectors | Detested entrepreneurial shysters | Diamonds in the rough; Existentially savvy and inquiring; worthy of respect and forgiveness; people with changeable hearts and lives |
| 1. Crippled man at pool of Bethesda | Life-long invalid | Restoration to God’s intended life on earth; absence of patronizing pity or cloying sentiment |
| 1. Jews religiously persecuting Jesus | Culturally religious conformists | Meeting them on their own perverted terms rather than on God’s perfect terms |
| 1. Man with withered hand | Man in the right place (synagogue) at the right time (where Jesus was) | Jesus comes to us with help and does not have to be prevailed upon or manipulated like a vending machine. |
| 1. People healed by touching Jesus | “Rabble” | The shepherd goes after the sheep and already knows them. He doesn’t shear them. |
| 1. Roman centurion (with healed slave) | Gentile of political power | Respect for non-Jews; people of supernatural faith; people of the lowest social-standing |
| 1. Widow’s dead son | Economically and socially dispossessed Jew | Provider for widows and orphans (those not cared for by the “system”) |
| 1. Sinful woman who wiped Jesus’ feet with her tears | Social outcast judged and rejected by the religious establishment | Sorrowful love for those suffering from internal sin nature and external abuse by other sinners; openness to the unconditional love of others |
| 1. Stooped woman on a Sabbath | Socially unproductive person (for 18 years) handicapped | Being born again physically and thus spiritually |
| 1. Demon-possessed man in the Gerasenes | “Psychotic monster” | “This isn’t my Father’s intentions; if you are freed by the Son, you are free indeed. Get behind me Satan.” |
| 1. Jairus and dying daughter | Official of a synagogue in a crowd by a lake | “I am eternal life” (for those who come to me.) |
| 1. Two blind men | Socially dispossessed, isolated men | “I am the truth, and the LIGHT” |
| 1. Canaanite woman with demon-possessed daughter | An “unclean” pagan woman | Jesus makes us clean in God’s eyes. |
| 1. Deaf mute man | Handicapped man cared for by relatives or friends | Jesus is the head of a new community of mankind. |
| **PERSON** | **PROFILE** | **MINISTRY APPROACH OF CHRIST**  **TO THIS PERSON** |
| 1. Crowds of 4000 and 5000 | Nameless, faceless vulnerable “sheep” | “I feed all my sheep with all the spiritual sustenance they need.” They don’t have to earn it, prepare it, or pay for it. |
| 1. Blind man near Bethsaida | Brought by friends; instructed by Jesus not to go into Bethsaida after miracle | “Don’t make me into Jesus Christ Superstar.” |
| 1. Peter acknowledges Jesus is the Messiah | The “rock” Christ’s church was symbolically built on | Man’s role in the “salvation play” (responding to ones experience with Christ) |
| 1. Man with epileptic son | Man in crowd prevails on Jesus to heal his son and asks Jesus to “help me with my unbelief.” | Jesus responds to those who know they are unable to help themselves. |
| 1. Jesus instructs Peter to pay the temple tax by going fishing | Peter is “button-holed” by temple officials | True Christians live in a God’s Kingdom on earth, and can help bring others into the kingdom by respecting man’s secular kingdom. |
| 1. Teaching of Jesus amazes hostile people in temple during Feast of Tabernacles | Crowd mentality: hostile to outsiders; conformists; tradition-bound; prone to violence | Cultural Christians (those or create God in their own flawed image) are amazed, and often upset, when they catch a whiff of the real Kingdom. |
| 1. Adulterous woman caught by Pharisees | Jesus judges the judgers and forgives/directs the sinner | Christ forgives unconditionally and has compassion on exploited people whose sins are not entirely their fault. |
| 1. Healing of man born blind; theological dispute and cynical neighbors | Obedient, honest man and his savvy, “authentic” parents | Christ’s righteousness imparted to Christians protects us from the self-righteous. |
| 1. Ten men healed of leprosy | Only the half-breed Samaritan thanked Jesus and became a Christian. | Only repentant sinners are grateful for and respond to grace. |
| 1. Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus | Domineering, overwrought salt-of-the-earth woman | The Kingdom of heaven on earth is a peaceful, quieting one. |
| 1. Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus | Spiritually-attuned and attentive; insightful about the true nature of Jesus as Messiah (anointing Jesus) | We don’t have to die to “get out of this world.” |
| 1. Lazarus | Apparently a very loveable man man in a very loveable family (Jesus wept over his death.) | Christ didn’t want to be separated from Lazarus and vice versa. |
| **PERSON** | **PROFILE** | **MINISTRY APPROACH OF CHRIST**  **TO THIS PERSON** |
| 1. Man healed of dropsy in Perea | God never stops working through His son | God isn’t a legalist. |
| 1. Children | Innocent, dependent people | We must become as children to genuinely accept Christ |
| 1. Rich young man | Honest; a high achiever; trapped by social class and lifestyle | People willfully trapped by the worldly system (wealth, power, materialism) lock themselves out of heaven. |
| 1. Mother of James and John | Ambitious: bold and transparent; spiritually dull | Cultural Christians don’t see who Jesus is even when he’s in their own house. |
| 1. Zacchaeus | Honest, ethical, inquiring, well-intentioned, humble, humane | All the hosts in heaven celebrate over the kind of people like Zacchaeus (even though they may not be the second coming of Billy Graham). |
| 1. Bartimaeus | Insistent, humble, faithful, full of praise | This is what it feels like when your eyes are opened to the kingdom of heaven. |
| 1. Disciples at last supper | Innocent; Still undiscerning about God’s will for Jesus; spiritual communion; vulnerable | Don’t ever imagine that you’re savvy and self-sufficient enough to make your way through life alone (the “rugged individualist”). Jesus’ disciples sure weren’t. |
| 1. Sacrificing widow | Invisible, sacrificing, humble | To be humble means that you don’t try to take credit for what Christ has done for you. |
| 1. Philip and Thomas want greater assurance | Intellect vs. obedient faith | God gave us a brain and a heart, but they aren’t enough to become a Christian. |
| 1. Praying for his disciples on Mount of Olives | The Trinity | Christianity is community. Christians shouldn’t try to isolated and or to do things their way. (Leave that for Frank Sinatra). |
| 1. Judas Iscariot | Do it. | Christ won’t try to force you to give up a life of willful sin. |
| 1. Annas (father-in-law to chief priest Caiaphas) | Unprincipled (pragmatic) political operator. “If Jesus is dumb enough to be our public scapegoat, take him up on it!” | Exploiters have to know how to use the world system to their selfish advantage. |
| 1. Caiaphas | Doing the will of man (Satan) | If you don’t use power, you lose power. |
| 1. Pontius Pilot | “Hear no evil; see no evil; speak no evil”(“CYA,” hardened, amoral politician playing the corrupt power game) | Imagine scoffing at God by saying “What is truth”? |
| 1. Herod | Weak, morally degenerate, sadistic man of evil who exploits the innocent “just for the thrill of it.” | Emulating Satan |
| **PERSON** | **PROFILE** | **MINISTRY APPROACH OF CHRIST**  **TO THIS PERSON** |
| 1. Women weeping for Jesus on his way to be crucified | Innocent, vulnerable Christians | When Christ is kicked out of society, everybody, including the Christian, pays. |
| 1. Soldiers who crucified Jesus | (Possibly innocent) victims of a corrupt, exploitative system | Soldiers aren’t allowed to ask questions. |
| 1. Thief on the cross | Open, honest, humble (and probably “sifted by Satan”) | Christ and this criminal were executed by the same sinful, unforgiving world system. |
| 1. Mary Magdalene and other women at the tomb | Loving, giving, humble, “Existential” Christians | These women loved Christ because He loved them first—not a complicated theology. |
| 1. Resurrected Jesus walks with Cleopas and companion to Emmaus | Grass roots, non-professional evangelists | We discover Christ without intending to. |
| 1. Peter, Thomas admonished by the resurrected Jesus | Derailed trains | Forgiving, saving love is tough love. |

Living the life God intends for us with us with our

**H**appiness

**E**xperiences

**A**ctions

**R**elationships

**T**ribulations

**S**uccess

in Christ

J: gospel of John

L: Luke

MK: Mark

MT: Matthew

The number after each abbreviated gospel refers to the chapter in which the verse is found.

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| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. Son, why have you treated us like this? (L2) | * Respect your parents. | Respect God. |
| 1. Do not put God to the test. (MT4) | * Charismatics * Church growth entrepreneurial churches | Let God take the lead; we follow |
| 1. One more powerful than I will come. (MT3) | * “Winning is the only thing” * Politicians and institutional leaders | Move out of the driver’s seat of your life |
| 1. Follow me. (J1) | Without asking Jesus where he is going or how long we will be gone. | “Give us our DAILY bread” |
| 1. How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market. (J2) | * Mega-churches * Christian book stores * Television evangelists * Christian radio talk shows * “Christian pop music” * Politicians seeking the backing of “rightwing Christians” | In most nations, culture shapes Christianity more than Christianity shapes culture. |
| 1. You must be born again. (J3) | Cultural Christians: “He’s a Christian, but you’d never know it.” | True Christianity kills you. |
| 1. What you have said (I have no husband) is very true. (J4) | Uncompromising honesty is a mighty rare commodity. | Admitting and confessing your sin nature. |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. They are ripe for harvest. (J4) | * The outcasts * Those most vulnerable to economic and ideological exploitation * The morally inconsistent | “The truth shall set you free.” |
| 1. Tell these stones to become bread and all else I will give you. (L5) | * Amazing people with your worldly success * Career-worshippers | Worldly success demands a life of its own. |
| 1. Put out into the deep water for a catch. (L5) | * The sacrificing life * The non-conforming life | We can’t serve two masters (yourself + others) |
| 1. How can a man be born again when he is old? (J3) | How can Christians be salt on the popcorn of life? | You’re born again when the Holy Spirit empowers you to love others unconditionally. |
| 1. His disciples were surprised to find him talking with a woman. (J4) | * How often do churches surprise people? * How much of the social status quo do we challenge? | It’s surprising what God can do with Christians who enter His harvest fields. |
| 1. (Could someone have brought him food?) “I have food you don’t know about.” (J4) | Few people today consider the “food” (sacrifices) made by mothers, teachers, and other invisible people | The more invisible our service, the greater God can bless it. |
| 1. All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this and tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. (L4) | What nations would be furious if charged with the sins of exploitative commercialism; colonial wars; lukewarm churches; oligarchy; materialism? | “My ways are not your ways.” |
| 1. We have never seen anything like this. (Crowd witnessing a miracle by Jesus) (MT9) | How many churches either have said this or demand it every Sunday? | Isn’t being born again by the blood of Christ a big enough miracle? |
| 1. I have not come to call the righteousness. (MT9) | How many Christians does this leave out? | “Our works are as filthy rags.” |
| 1. New wine must be poured into new wineskins. (MT9) | Why then are churches so traditional (declining)? | Christ’s disciples never got into a comfort zone. |
| 1. My father and I are always at work. (J5) | Setting the ministry table for us (but we’re not hungry). | We must stop trying to set the table for ourselves. |
| 1. Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders you will never believe. (J4) | * Rick Warren * Cafeteria churches * Charismatics * Dynamic preaching | “The pure of heart shall see God.” |
| 1. Which is lawful on the Sabbath? (MT12) | What church traditions are Christians afraid to break? | Is serving God possible in a comfortable life or church? |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. Jesus gave strict orders for the healed man not to tell how he was healed. (MT12) | * The PR church/denomination * America’s success culture | We won’t really know how we served God until we get to heaven. |
| 1. Woe to you who are rich. (MT5) | Who did we exploit or neglect in the process of becoming a success-aholic? | Why does Wal-Mart have the lowest prices? |
| 1. You are the salt of the earth. (MT5) | But what if we don’t have any popcorn? | We may pop the popcorn, but God grows the corn. |
| 1. Is someone strikes you on the left cheek, turn the other also. (MT5) | Wars; litigation; scorch-the-earth political campaigning | Is winning really the only thing? |
| 1. Love your enemies. (MT5) | * Muslims? * Mexicans? * “Liberals”? * Homosexuals? * Drug users? | Do we even love our our neighbors? |
| 1. Do not do your acts of righteousness before men. (MT6) | * PR self-righteousness * Self-serving “public servants” * VIPs accepting awards and public honors | Did Jesus rank his disciples from 1-12 (best to worst)? |
| 1. Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. (MT6) | * Invisible sacrifice * Good works for those who don’t deserve it * Family > career | * How many churches do this? * What treasures do most Christians or churches have? |
| 1. No one can serve two masters. (MT6) | * Career vs. God * Wealth vs. God * Politics vs. God * Do-goodism vs. God * Entertainment vs. God | Why are so many Americans over-stressed and overworked? |
| 1. Do not judge. (MT7) | How many people are exploited by economic, social, and ideological systems? | Should we be judged when we use exploitative systems (low cost products, under-priced scarce resources, colonialism) to our personal advantage? |
| 1. Everyone is looking for (but not finding) you. (MK1) | * Christians, churches, denominations * Rich people * Successful people | How zealously do we look for self-serving career and consumerist opportunities? |
| 1. Enter through the narrow gate. (MT7) | * Into the yard where few people go | We can’t carry many possessions through a narrow gate. |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. You load people down with burdens they can hardly carry. (L11) | * Busyness in the church * Perfectionism * Social Darwinist culture * Material wealth * TAKS tests * “Student-athletes” | What do people have to prove to us before we will accept them? |
| 1. Do not worry about the basic things of life. (L12) | * Our culture doesn’t know the difference between wants and needs. * We don’t know about community (but think we do). * We don’t know how globally exploitative the American lifestyle really is. | “They will call good bad and bad good.” |
| 1. Be dressed for service. (L12) | Otherwise God won’t set our ministry table for us. | Take off your exploitative duds. |
| 1. Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? (MT9) | Instead of successful citizens like Bernie Madoff, Alan Greenspan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Strauss-Kahn | * Because they don’t have much to hide. * Because they acknowledge that they are sinners. * Because they don’t judge you. * Because you have the Spirit-led capacity for unconditional love |
| 1. I do not accept praise from men. (J5) | * Awards, PR, mutual back-slapping * Good-ole-boy conformity * Celebrities | Praise what God does in your life and in the lives of others you know. |
| 1. Many from the east and west will take their place at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in heaven, but the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness. (MT8) | Cultural Christians? | Churches should be God’s light bulbs. |
| 1. Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else? (MT11) | * Religious fads * Church-hopping * Charismatic ministry | Is Jesus really an American? |
| 1. The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. (MT9) | “But we can’t get anybody to come to our church.” | Our society has broken down everywhere, so the harvest field is ripe. But most Americans still think we are a Christian nation. |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. They intended to make him king by force. (MT14) | Breaking the third commandment (thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain) | Would Christ consent to run for political office? |
| 1. A wicked and adulterous generation (MT12) | Nations/corporations/people who keep the exploitative systems in place for self-gain | Would you be willing to pay more for sweatshop goods? |
| 1. Woe to you Pharisees and Sadducees (religious leaders) (L11) | They designed and maintained a perverted religious system based on self-righteousness and social status | Woe to you Protestant denominations, seminaries, and church councils? |
| 1. Have mercy on me. (MT15) | Maybe they are victims of perverse social systems or their own waywardness. | We’re all part of exploitative social and economic systems and hence need forgiveness and mercy. |
| 1. Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (MT16) | Legalism, scholasticism, political cleverness, lack of concern for the victims of Social Darwinism | * “Islam is Satanic” * “In God we trust.” * “Homosexuals are going to hell.” * “America is a Christian nation.” |
| 1. Forgive your brother. (MT18) | Get even.  Litigate.  Retaliate.  Kill Bin Laden. | * Those who don’t deserve forgiveness * Those who have wronged you * Forgive unconditionally (which only the Holy Spirit can empower you to do.) |
| 1. I am the way, the truth, and the life. (J8) | Not a church/denomination, theology, legalism, religious tradition | Christ isn’t doctrine, theology, or good works. |
| 1. This generation will be held responsible for the blood of the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world. (L11) | * The generation of Christians * Christian institutions * For tolerating perverse systems that keep people from being spiritually free | Did the innocent Jews escape the Babylonians and Assyrians? |
| 1. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the weather, but not what’s going on in the world. (L12) | Namely, that churches are lukewarm, self-serving, elitist, materialistic, and non-sacrificing | Look for the exploitative systems of your culture, workplace, denomination, and lifestyle. |
| 1. You have hidden these things from the learned and revealed them to little children. (L12) | Denominational officials and empire-building pastors tend to be political Christians. | How do outsiders perceive your religion, church, lifestyle? |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. I will give you rest. (MT11) | But not necessarily material wealth, sense of community, social status, security, etc. | If Christ gives us rest, how come we’re stressed out and tired so often? |
| 1. Who is my neighbor? (L10) | * My friends * My fellow church members * My co-workers | * Those affected by your actions * Those in your community * Those whom you can help |
| 1. Unless you repent, you will all suffer. (L13) | Community sin born of perverse systems of justice, wealth, education | I’m responsible for the systems I benefit from. |
| 1. I will utter hidden things (in parables). (MT13) | “The Bible is good enough for me.” | * Hidden from those living in the (fallen) physical world * Hidden from cultural Christians * Hidden from the spiritually dull * Hidden from those lacking community-consciousness |
| 1. We had to celebrate because your brother was dead but has returned and is alive. (L16) | * But he was a dead beat! * But what about a celebration for me? | Let the spiritually alive celebrate those who also discover true life |
| 1. Let the dead bury their own dead. (MT8) | Maintaining dead religious traditions | Let the spiritually alive resurrect the (spiritually) dead: in prisons, unjust wars, etc. |
| 1. Jesus withdrew. (J11) | “God told me to…” | * From spiritually dead people and exploitative systems * From cultural Christians and churches * From rugged individualists and community-wreckers (including libertarians) * From the self-righteousness and self-anointers |
| 1. The stone the builders rejected. (MT21) | The builders = denominations; empire-building church leaders; secularists; rogue capitalists | Serve the people rejected by society and institutions |
| 1. Everything they do is for men to see. (MT23) | * Marketing * PR * Entertainers * Fake-face politicians * Crooked business tycoons * Bloggers | Invisible ministry is the most visible to God. |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. (MT23) | * Charismatics * Theologians * Empire-building religion * Self-righteousness * Legalistic * Cultural Christians * Secularists | Talk about Christ, not church. |
| 1. Jesus exorcised demons and put them into 200 pigs which drowned themselves. The town’s people asked Jesus to leave the region. (MT8) | * Whatever stimulates the economy is A-OK. * Whatever helps our nation is great. | Exorcise your participation in unfair, exploitative systems. |
| 1. Your grief will turn to joy. (J16) | Grief is bad. | Much grief is caused by man’s inhumanity to man. Helping those victimized by inhumanity (human sin) has always been God’s ripest harvest field. |
| 1. They took offense at him. (MT13) | * People dislike outsiders who disrupt the status quo = authoritarianism * Good ole boys hate non-conforming outsiders who won’t gradually compromise themselves. | Love people unconditionally, so sins against can’t be laid at your doorstep. |
| 1. The soldier beheaded John in prison and presented the head to the girl to give to her mother. (MT14) | * Elites get their way. * Telling the truth is never politically correct. | Help the followers of John the Baptist and forgive the executioner used by a perverse system. |
| 1. Many of Jesus’ disciples turned back and no longer followed him. (J6) | * We ditch our heroes whenever they stray from our own preconceived, unrealistic biases and agendas. * When society adulates someone, people demand the right to take them to the taxidermist. Ask “celebrities.” | Don’t make God in your own image. |
| 1. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table. (MT15) | * Being low class in status makes you humble enough to admit that you are a sinner and need forgiveness, which you are willing to ask for. * The meek inherit the earth. | God’s manna was boring to eat, but it was nourishing. |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. You are a stumbling block to me because you think about the things of men, not of God. (MT16) | * Church numerical growth and costly programs * Cultural Christianity * Being religious instead of spiritual | Serve Christ, not your church. |
| 1. If anyone wants to be the leader, he must be the servant of all. (MT18) | How many servant hearts do we see in the world of power and influence today? | Get a heart transplant. |
| 1. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin. (MT18) | The corrupt social systems that people maintain to their advantage (often in the name of “freedom” and “individualism”) | Drink at home, not in the bar. |
| 1. If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin, but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. (J9) | * PR holographs * “Religious” people * “Conservatives with a conscience” and liberals for human rights | Human institutions, including churches, are no substitute for Christ. |
| 1. I don’t know you or where you came from. Away from me. (L13) | * Wolves in sheep’s clothing * Cultural Christians | Abba father! |
| 1. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the blind. (L14) | * Instead of the well-to-do, popular, and networked | Give parties as a ministry to serve others rather than a self-serving networking opportunity |
| 1. There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don’t need to repent. (L15) | Churches rarely have much to rejoice about because our eyes on on each other rather than on people in spiritual crisis. | Keep your eyes on Jesus. |
| 1. There was a man who had two sons. (L15) | * Is it God’s fault when one child doesn’t turn out all right? * Are parents always at fault? * Should we have children only when they are convenient? | The “difficult” family member may be the one prodigal son God is trying to redeem. |
| 1. You can’t serve God and money. (L16) | * But it’s the wide gate that gets you access to the country club crowd * Who you serve also determines who you don’t serve | Strive to be rich in time so you can be of service to others. Availability, not money and possessions, is the key to serving god. |
| 1. The kingdom of God does not come with careful observation. (L17) | Church isn’t your main ministry field. | You can’t work your way into the Kingdom; you love your way in. |
| **The H.E.A.R.T. of Jesus** | **The H.E.A.R.T.S. of man** | **Challenged H.E.A.R.T.S.** |
| 1. The last will be first and the first last. (MT20) | * Not in Social Darwinist culture where “winning is the only thing.” | Focus on the types of people Jesus ministered to. They are right outside any door. |
| 1. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and then the Romans will come and take away both our peace and our nation. (J11) | * Don’t sacrifice a good thing for the truth. * Be “reasonable” and pragmatic! | Empires exploit and kill—including religious ones. |
| 1. We have left everything to follow you, When then will there be for us? (MT19) | * “Everything” doesn’t make you happy or useful to God. * The meek own the fruit, the rich the peeling. * The rich never have time to enjoy their riches because they’re too busy serving themselves. | Success is being in a position to serve God. |
| 1. Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. (MT20) | * Those who break the third commandment * Christians who view God as a vending machine | The best lessons come from people who have learned God’s ways. |
| 1. Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous things in their presence, they still would not believe in him. (L21) | * Because most people didn’t have a miracle performed on their behalf. * Because most people have an agenda God won’t honor (selfishness). * Because most people skirt controversy of any kind. * Because people are sheep. | To believe in God, we must first believe in our own sinful nature. |
| 1. Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. (MT26) | * Because they didn’t want to know him. * Because Jesus already answered them, but they refused to listen. * Because Jesus had no answer other than no. | Remain silent around exploitative systems, but help clean up the mess. |

**DEVELOPING A CLOSER RELATIONSHIP TO GOD**

**From the Sermon on the Mount**

1. Only the **poor in spirit** (meek) can develop a closer relationship to God. Spirit-led humility leads us to realize that most of what we ask God for is borne of immaturity and selfishness.
2. When we mourn for the innocent, helpless, and exploited (**seek after righteousness**), we grow closer to God because we know He is also mourning.
3. You will experience **(“see”) God** when your **heart is pure** (filled with the desire to serve rather than be served). Only when your heart is pure can you love unconditionally; forgive unconditionally; sacrifice for others; and engage in community-building behavior.
4. Being the **salt of the earth** means ministering to the people God brings to us (through seemingly “natural” circumstances) whose lives need “seasoning” with unconditional love, mercy/forgiveness, encouragement, etc. We draw closer to God as we **allow** His love and compassion to be channeled **through** us.
5. We should avoid immersing ourselves in material luxuries (materialism beyond personal needs) merely because we can afford it. We may otherwise end up struggling to serve two **incompatible** masters.
6. Let’s keep our natural tendency for security and comfort in life (depending on self rather than God) at bay by living one day at a time vs. naively trying to map out a “got-it-made” future. (**Give us our daily bread**.)
7. Remember, the Sermon on the Mount speaks of **seeking** after righteousness in this life, even though God may not always choose to make everything turn out “all-right” for us or those we care about. The Holy Spirit helps us accept life’s imperfections instead of expecting (demanding?) non-stop miracles from God. But the same Spirit gives us the quiet desire to strive for **justice** on behalf of innocents suffering in the community.
8. We should use the talents, experience, and personality God gave us on behalf of the **community** and its people. God is the miracle worker, not us. He invites us to work **with** Him using what He has endowed us with. This inevitably draws us closer to Him.
9. Unconditional love for others is a miracle that only God can work in our lives. Every time we are able to love people the way God does, we grow closer to Him.
10. Each and every day God invites us to work with Him in ways He has uniquely equipped us for. He shares His work with us so that we may experience the wondrous joy of His labor. This is the spiritual unity and experience of the Trinity, which we can experience ourselves.

**Simple Techniques for Relating to God:**

1. Read the Bible from the standpoint of community rather than individualism
2. Don’t try to figure out how to serve God; He sets the table for us when we’re hungry (to serve). Serve where and when He wants us to serve—not where and when we feel like it.
3. Quit striving to please God; He wants us to love Him.
4. Get around innocent people (children, the “meek in spirit,” non-willful people, etc.) as often as possible to get away from the perverted everyday world.
5. In humility, we should think of ourselves as God’s helpless, not-so-smart pet dogs or cats. It takes humility to accept God’s grace.

**NUT SHELLS**

You will truly know yourself only when God is in the equation.

The Bible doesn't attach much importance to one's professional success.

Do it for God, not man.

Churches find it easy to do most things because they stick to the easy things: building buildings, organizing programs, raising money, etc.  The hard things to do are spiritual, such as prayer, reaching out to the poor, and proclaiming the gospel.  These are secondary in most churches because people can't do them in their own power.

God works through human agency more than human effort.

You don’t have to be a good guy to be God’s guy.

Go easy on what you demand from God, because He probably has better things planned for you than you imagine.

The world becomes a much more interesting place when you try to see life through God’s eyes.

Most churches and pastors have to please people more than God.

Most people favor human justice over divine, because they’re afraid God might show mercy.

Pity the pastor: called to serve God; paid to serve church members.

He goes to church occasionally for some unknown reason.

For every door God opens he mercifully closes two or three. For every prayer request he answers yes to, he mercifully says no to two or three.

A good eschatology: Hope that God doesn't run out of grace anytime soon!

Christians and churches have to decide whether they’re going to follow Christ or make up their own gospel.

Too many Christians make up their own personal theology.

Before you can know Christ, you have to understand him.

When you pray, start looking for new people to enter your life.

Don’t presume to speak for God.

The more God has to do to you, the less He will do through you.

The true test of being a Christian is not what it does for you, but what it does for others.

Worship God, not your culture.

God does most of His work through invisible people.

Science can figure out everything except God, and religion isn’t so good at that either.

God's will is always better for me than my own will, because I don't know myself very well, I don't know the future at all, and I haven't learned enough from my past.

God's payback for our willful sins is often delayed years or even decades until a time in our life when we can best cope with the discipline.  God is gracious in both His blessings and His discipline.

Most of the time, culture shapes Christianity more than Christianity shapes culture.

Success in life is being in a position to serve God.

You can’t work your way into the Kingdom; you love your way in.

The meek eat the fruit; the rich eat the peelings.

To believe in God, we must believe in our own sin nature.