



## Jesus' first words

### Table of contents

john 1. <sup>38</sup> — meditation 1 (first in the series, "jesus' first words") .....	2
john 1. <sup>38</sup> — meditation 2 (second in the series, "jesus' first words").....	4
john 1. <sup>38</sup> — meditation 3 (third in the series, "jesus' first words") .....	5
matthew 3. <sup>15</sup> (fourth in the series, "jesus' first words").....	8
luke 2. <sup>49</sup> (fifth in the series, "jesus' first words") .....	10
mark 1. <sup>15</sup> — meditation 1 (sixth in "jesus' first words" series.....	12

## John 1.<sup>38</sup>— meditation 1 (first in the series, “jesus’ first words”)

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Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, “**What seek ye?**”

Books often begin with introductions and end with conclusions/summaries. With this in mind, I am interested in Jesus’ first recorded words as reported by the various Gospel writers. Obviously, Jesus’ first uttered words as recorded in each Gospel were not his first words. But, we suggest, the evangelists’ selections of Jesus first recorded utterances can be seen as a kind of introduction to Jesus. These utterances might introduce us to a fundamental aspect of Jesus’ character, to his thinking, to his sense of mission and purpose, and to the impact he can have in our lives.

Here, then, are Jesus’ first utterances as recorded by each of the Gospel writers.

“Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

“How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?”<sup>3</sup>

“What seek ye?”<sup>4</sup>

In this series of meditations, we will explore each of these first recorded utterances.

As the initial idea for this series of meditations came from my recent reading of John’s Gospel, we will begin this series of meditations with Jesus’ first utterance as recoded by John: “What seek ye?” “What are you looking for?” “What do you hope to learn?” “What do you want?”

He posed this question to two of John the Baptist’s disciples who, full of curiosity, followed Jesus around after their mentor’s witness of Jesus.

This question led me to several disparate thoughts. The reader is welcome to follow me in my wandering musings.

In its “historical,” “literal,” time-bound, plain sense meaning (*Peshat* in the Jewish tradition of scripture interpretation), Jesus is asking what these specific seekers were hoping to find in following Jesus around. But, as we consider Jesus’ question, we can appropriately think of Jesus’ question as if it were addressed to each of us. I ask myself, “What it is that I seek?” “What is the nature of my desires?” “What do I want?” “What do I want most, above all?”

We humans are such strivers. We have so many desires. They continuously, incessantly flood our being. Every second brings a new one. Some desire or other accompanies every thought. We are insatiable. We might cease to exist without them. This world seems ready made to provide no end to things to be desired and acquired.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mark. 1.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Luke. 2.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John 1.<sup>38</sup>

Our desires dictate and control the nature of our lives. They dictate how we spend our time, how we think, how we act, how we view and treat others. As I ponder these realities, I recall that in delivering his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directs our attention to a question about desire. In doing so, he suggests the overriding desire that should direct our lives, our thoughts, our behavior, and our view and treatment of others.

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness.”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, “the kingdom of God” is the subject of Jesus’ very first utterance as recorded in Mark. But more on that when we turn our attention to Mark 1.<sup>15</sup>

Here, we are led to ask ourselves where our desires run and how closely they comport with Jesus’ suggestion. We would all do well to regularly ask ourselves the question that Jesus posed to these two seekers two thousand years ago. What do we seek? What do we want above all? Such questions are as pertinent today as they were then. Indeed, Jesus’ life and mission serves to draw us into such thoughts and contemplate what is of deepest import and what it is that we seek.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 12, 2025)*

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6.<sup>33</sup>.

John 1.<sup>38</sup>— meditation 2 (second in the series, “jesus’ first words”)

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Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, “**What seek ye?**”

In our first meditation on this passage, we considered the question that Jesus posed to two of John the Baptist’s disciples as they followed him about, “What seek ye?” We considered the question as if addressed to us, and suggested that Jesus’ question can serve as invitation to inventory our desires and priorities.

As I consider Jesus’ question, I am also struck by his interest in human desire. It is true that he is magnificent beyond words.

“YHWH is exalted above the earth.  
Greater is His importance than the universe is expansive.  
Who is like YHWH, our God;  
the One who sits, exalted...?”<sup>1</sup>

But he is as intimate as he is ultimate.

“the One who condescends to look upon  
heaven and earth;  
the One who raises the powerless from their humiliation;  
the One who lifts the destitute out of their desperation...”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is personably. He is not aloof. He is not disinterested and uncaring. Jesus is interested in our desires. He is interested in knowing them. He desires to hear us express them. But, as this episode suggests, Jesus also desires to help us realize our appropriate desires.

After asking John’s two disciples what they wanted, they answered, “Rabbi, where dwellest thou?” Jesus replied, “Come and see.” Then, “they came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day...”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ first words as recorded by John, then, reveals Jesus’ interest in understanding and meeting appropriate human needs. He lives to do so. To be part of our lives is one of his most ardent desires. To know this; to live this is truly life changing and glorious.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 12, 2025)*

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 113.<sup>4, 5</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 113.6-7, author’s translation

<sup>3</sup> John 1.<sup>38, 39</sup>

John 1.<sup>38</sup>— meditation 3 (third in the series, “Jesus’ first words”)

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Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, “**What seek ye?**”

As we have meditated on Jesus’ question, “What seek ye?” we have considered the nature and multiplicity of human desire in general. But, as we have suggested, in the plain sense reading of the text Jesus was asking what the two specific seekers were hoping to find in following Jesus around, “What do you want of me?” The question about what we want from Jesus is more focused than the simple, “what do you want?”

There are any number of things we might want from our association with Jesus. Like desires in general some of our desires of Jesus are appropriate and some are not. We should avoid thinking of Jesus as some kind of slot machine in the sky: pull the handle and be rewarded a cup full of sparkling blessings. We are highly suspicious of prosperity Gospels that seem more idolatrous than devoted.

But, for now, as we consider what we might want from Jesus, we are intrigued by the two disciples reply to Jesus’ question.

“They said unto him, ‘Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou?’”<sup>1</sup>

As the next verse makes clear, their question about Jesus’ abode was literal.

“He saith unto them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day...”<sup>2</sup>

But, in John’s Gospel, the evangelist takes such literal questions about Jesus’ locus and turns them into a search for something deeper and more meaningful. Just who is Jesus? Where is his home, really? Where is he from and where is he going?

Just as the two disciples are ignorant about Jesus’ earthly abode, the world is ignorant of where he is really from, where he is going, and where he really lives.

“And they said, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? *How is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?*’”<sup>3</sup>

“Then said Jesus unto them, ‘Yet a little while am I with you, and then I go unto him that sent me. Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me: and where I am, thither ye cannot come.’

Then said the Jews among themselves, ‘*Whither will he go, that we shall not find him? Will he go unto the dispersed among the Gentiles, and teach the Gentiles? What manner of saying is this that he said, Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me: and where I am, thither ye cannot come?*’<sup>4</sup>

“Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true: for *I*

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<sup>1</sup> John 1.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John 1.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>3</sup> John 6.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John 7.<sup>33-36</sup>

*know whence I came, and whither I go; but ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go.*"<sup>5</sup>

"We know that God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is."<sup>6</sup>

"Simon Peter said unto him, 'Lord, whither goest thou?'"<sup>7</sup>

Jesus, however, is always aware of his locus, his origins and destiny.

"I came down from heaven..."<sup>8</sup>

"I am the bread which came down from heaven."<sup>9</sup>

"What and if ye shall see *the Son of man ascend up where he was before?*"<sup>10</sup>

"And he said unto them, 'Ye are from beneath; *I am from above*: ye are of this world; *I am not of this world.*"<sup>11</sup>

"Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that *he was come from God, and went to God...*"<sup>12</sup>

"*I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.*"<sup>13</sup>

"And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but *he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.*"<sup>14</sup>

Central and fundamental to John's witness is the truth that Jesus' locus is situated in heaven. He comes from there. He returns there. He abides there. He comes from and abides "in the bosom of the Father."<sup>15</sup> And so, of all the things we might wish of him, none are more important than knowing him. The benefits of knowing him are expansive and long-lasting.

"He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God..."<sup>16</sup>

"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John 8.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> John 9.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John 13.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>8</sup> John 6.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>9</sup> John 6.<sup>41</sup>, again in 6.<sup>33, 50, 51, 58</sup>

<sup>10</sup> John 6.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>11</sup> John 8.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>12</sup> John 13.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>13</sup> John 16.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>14</sup> John 3.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>15</sup> John 1.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> John 1.<sup>10-12</sup>

<sup>17</sup> John 17.<sup>3</sup>

This knowing him encompasses knowing his true locus. Knowing that he comes to us from God's bosom and that he abides eternally in God's bosom. This knowing of him ought to override any and all of the myriads of human desires that enter the heart of man. Knowing him is the greatest of all desires the human heart can conceive.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 12, 2025)*

## Matthew 3.<sup>15</sup> (fourth in the series, “Jesus’ first words”)

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Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.

Tolerate it for now, because this is how we appropriately accomplish all that is right (author’s translation).<sup>1</sup>

In our first three meditations in this series entitled, “Jesus’ First Words,” we explored John 1.<sup>38</sup>. We considered the nature and multiplicity of human desire, and Jesus’ interest in knowing and responding to appropriate human desire. We also considered the highest of human desire: to understand and know Jesus and his true nature.

In this meditation, we consider Jesus’ first utterance as recorded by Matthew, and what it tells us about him. Jesus spoke these words to John the Baptist when the Baptist expressed reluctance to baptize Jesus.

We first note the plural. Jesus does not say, “this is how *I* appropriately accomplish all that is right.” This is how we often think of Jesus’ statement. As if Jesus were using the royal “we,” we understand Jesus to be speaking of his own private need to be baptized in order to be right with God in all matters. But there is no reason to assume a royal “we” here. Rather, in Jesus’ “we,” Jesus intends to include the Baptist: “this is how you and I accomplish all that is right.” However John’s baptism of Jesus accomplishes “all that is right,” John’s baptism of Jesus allows both John and Jesus to be right with God.

This suggests at least two things about Jesus. First, Jesus intends to do everything right, to act in ways that are right with God and so please Him. During one particularly testy confrontation with religious leaders, they complained to Jesus, “Thou bearest record of thyself; thy record is not true.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus replied by assuring them that in addition to his own witness, “the Father that sent me beareth witness of me.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus then declared,

“I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for *I do always those things that please him.*”<sup>4</sup>

In so saying, Jesus is not being boastful. He is providing them a sign that God has sent him and that he does God’s will. Indeed, upon being baptized and demonstrating his intent to do all that is right, there was heard “a voice from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus’ baptism was a sign of God’s pleasure with Jesus. In being baptized a sign was given of this pleasure. Jesus’ priority was always to do God’s will and so please him.

But there is a second thing to be learned from Jesus’ statement to the Baptist. Jesus’ intentions to “do always those things that please” God was not only not boastful, it was not selfish. With Jesus’ “we,” he reveals his inclusiveness. When John baptized Jesus, it was not only Jesus with whom God would be pleased, but John as well. It was always Jesus’ intention to bring others along with him in doing all that is

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to this passage, this series explores Mark 1.<sup>15</sup>, and Luke 2.<sup>15</sup>, and John 1.<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> John 8.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> John 8.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John 8.<sup>28-29</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 3.<sup>17</sup>



right. He would set an example, show the way, and invite others to join him in his life work of doing what is right and pleasing God.

Jesus' first words as recorded by Matthew, then, not only remind us of Jesus' intention and commitment to always do the right thing, but of his intention to bring others along with him; to help others be right with God. It was not then or now enough for Jesus to personally please God. He wished and wishes all to find God's pleasure. Indeed, his right standing with God was constituted of his bringing others to a right standing with God. Jesus' work was and is always one focused on "we," rather than "I."

Jesus ever maintained that he and his Father were one. But to this, he added that we were to be one with him and with the Father. That we all be one. Maybe, finally, this is what it means to "fulfill all righteousness."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 12, 2025)*

Luke 2.<sup>49</sup> (fifth in the series, “jesus’ first words”)

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How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

“Why have you been searching for me? Didn’t you realize that it is necessary for me to be in my Father’s house?” (author’s translation)

These are the first words of Jesus that Luke records. Like those found in the other Gospels, they can be useful in helping us understand Jesus and his self-understanding.

We are all familiar with these words and the circumstances in which Jesus uttered them. Jesus is twelve years old. His family has come to Jerusalem to worship during one of the great feasts. Having begun their journey home at the end of the feast and discovering that Jesus is not in their retinue of returning pilgrims, his mother and father return to Jerusalem in search of their lost son. After searching for him for three days, they finally find him in the temple conversing intelligently and impressively with religious authorities. Reasonably enough, his mother asks Jesus how he could give them such a scare. Even before Jesus replies to his mother, it seems that it is obvious to his mother, as it is to the reader, that Jesus had been little concerned about his own safety or his parents’ worry. With his reply, this becomes crystal clear.

“Why have you been searching for me? Didn’t you realize that it is necessary for me to be in my Father’s house?”

The Greek leaves some ambiguity about the exact meaning of Jesus’ reply. Jesus could have simply wondered in his reply why his parents had been looking all over for him when it should have been obvious to them that he would be in the temple. While not quite as “theologically loaded” as the traditional KJV translation, this understanding of Jesus’ reply still signifies Jesus’ preferences and priorities. His first interest involves his Heavenly Father. There is nowhere else he would rather be than in His temple. He is more at home in the temple than anywhere else. He is most at home with God.

It is in the Gospel of John that this is most clearly stated. Jesus is from God. According to John, Jesus feels, nay, knows “that he was come from God, and went to God.”<sup>1</sup> It is Jesus’ own testimony that “I proceeded forth and came from God.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is from the very bosom, the most intimate and cherished place in relation to God. He knows God as no other. He can introduce God to others as no other

“No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, so intimately connected are God and Jesus that Jesus can testify,

“He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, ‘Shew us the Father?’ Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in

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<sup>1</sup> John 13.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John 8.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>3</sup> John 1.<sup>18</sup>

the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake."<sup>4</sup>

As pleased as the young Jesus is to be in his Father's house, the Father is just as pleased to be with and in Jesus.

"And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him."<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, these truths are made explicit in John, less so in Luke. Perhaps we would have appreciated them less with only Luke's witness. Still, Jesus' first words as recorded in Luke alerts us to Jesus' own understanding of his intimate relationship with God. It alerts us to his priorities and his sense of mission. It alerts us to Jesus' deep commitment to serve God and to be as close to God as possible.

Then too, in all of this, Jesus sets an example for all us. He invites us through his example to value God above all. He invites us to make God our priority. He invites us to think those things, say those things, do those things, and be in those places where God may be with us. He invites us to reveal the beauty of God to others, however far our revelatory example falls short of Jesus'.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 12, 2025)*

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<sup>4</sup> John 14.<sup>9-11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John 8.<sup>29</sup>

Mark 1.<sup>15</sup>— meditation 1 (sixth in “jesus’ first words” series)

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“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”

“The time has come, and God’s kingdom is imminent. Transform your views and actively believe this positive proclamation” (author’s translation).

In our previous meditations in this series, we have used the first words of Jesus as recorded by each Gospel writer to glean insight into Jesus, his character, his thinking, his sense of mission and purpose, and the impact he can have in our lives. In Jesus’ first words as recorded in John, we found Jesus’ interest in human desire and his own desire to meet appropriate human desire. In his first words as recorded in Matthew, we found Jesus’ desire to please God and to bring others with him to a right standing with God. In Jesus’ first words as recorded in Luke, we found that Jesus’ first priority was to do his Father’s will.

In this meditation, we turn our attention to Jesus’ first words as Mark record them and what they tell us about Jesus, his character, his thinking, his sense of mission, and the impact he can have in our lives.

Jesus speaks of kingdom of God some forty times in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>1</sup> Matthew not only introduces the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as one focused on “the kingdom of heaven,” but says that “*from that time* Jesus began to preach... the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the kingdom of God was a central feature of Jesus’ teachings and intentions throughout his ministry.

Jesus’ first words as Mark records them confirms this suggestion.

“The time has come, and God’s kingdom is imminent. Transform your views and actively believe this positive proclamation”

We wish to make several observations about Jesus’ initial and introductory proclamation about the kingdom of God.

First, Jesus saw the inauguration of the kingdom of God as being imminent. Its time had come, and he was tasked with inaugurating it. When we contemplate the kingdom of God, we often associate it with an after-life existence, making it, essentially, synonymous with “heaven.” But Jesus has something imminent in mind; something to be had and lived in this world, in the here and now. It will not do to suggest something like “Jesus’s talk of the kingdom being ‘imminent’ was a figure of speech in which he was viewing time and imminence as God views them— ‘one day is with the Lord as a thousand years.’”<sup>3</sup> I, at least, must believe that Jesus respected those who listened to him and spoke so as to be understood by them. If he told people that the kingdom was imminent, then they could believe that Jesus offered them something that they could experience in the present.

If we think of the kingdom of God as something for the here and now, we often think of it in

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<sup>1</sup> Where the other Gospel writers speak of the “kingdom of God,” Matthew speaks of the “kingdom of heaven.” It is generally thought that Matthew speaks of the “kingdom of *heaven*” rather than the “kingdom of *God*” out of a disinclination to refer to God directly out of respect for God, much as Jews avoid speaking the name of Yahweh, replacing it with LORD. Therefore Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven” should be understood as being precisely the same as the “the kingdom of God” spoken of elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 3.<sup>8</sup>

organizational or institutional terms. I am also suspicious of this understanding. Rather than thinking of the kingdom in either eternal or institutional terms, I suggest Jesus thought and spoke of it in terms of “dominance,” “rule;” “The Rule of God has arrived.” “God is taking control.”

Jesus served as the announcer and the agent of God’s control. In Jesus, God took control over things that had previously been out of control. Jesus reveals and exercises God’s control throughout his mission. As but one example, we can point to Jesus’ exorcisms—indeed, exorcism of “evil spirits” went hand in hand with the message and inauguration of the kingdom of God. In exorcising “evil spirits”—which, generally, I take to be the healing of emotional and psychological illnesses—Jesus transformed individuals from a life in which they had no control to a life of control; a life in which God was in control. Individuals so healed, experienced “the kingdom of God,” or the “rule of God.” As Jesus viewed it, such individuals entered the kingdom of God immediately upon their encounter with him.

Jesus also served as the announcer of the kingdom through the principles that he taught. Over and over again, Jesus taught that the principles, the values, and even the material resources that controlled and governed this world must be abandoned in favor of those principles and values that governed the kingdom of God. By doing so, we are transformed from this present evil world<sup>4</sup> into the kingdom of God.

It is clear that Jesus understood that the kingdom of God would grow into something immense and enduring—think, for example, of Jesus parable of the mustard seed.<sup>5</sup> Jesus was attempting to create a new kind of society that could endure. This required individuals who could live by principles that made an enduring society possible. This society must of necessity grow one person at a time as one individual after another experienced and accepted God’s rule in their life and so found themselves in control of forces previously uncontrollable. It grew one person at a time as one individual after another accepted and lived the principles of the kingdom as Jesus taught them.

Do we, each of us, inhabit the kingdom of God, here, today, now? Have we handed control of our lives over to God? Do He and the principles upon which the kingdom is based govern our attitudes, our thoughts, our desires, our motives, our actions? The choice is ours. We are stronger when united with others who, like us, have entered the kingdom of God. Our entrance into and our habitation of the kingdom can be enduring. But in Christ Jesus we can enter individually right now, right where we are.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: February 15, 2025)*

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<sup>4</sup> See, Galatians 1.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See, Matthew 13.<sup>31-32</sup>/ Mark 4.<sup>30-34</sup>/ Luke 13.<sup>18-19</sup>