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By Himself Alone

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Series: The Mind of Christ

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Let's pretend for a few minutes that *we are there*. We are that band of new disciples who long to see this one we call "Lord" change the world. Now everything we have been hoping for appears to be coming to pass. It is the moment we have been longing for. Or is it?

As we walk alongside the Master, Jesus' life is beginning to enter a whirlwind stage. His popularity is soaring. Word of His miracles have circulated far and wide, and even without the benefit of radio or television, there is hardly a person in Israel who isn't talking about this amazing carpenter's son.

Word has spread of the water being turned into wine at the wedding feast, of the king's courier having his son healed, of the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda taking up his bed and walking. The topic of conversation in the back rooms of all the Jewish gathering places is who this amazing young man really is. Could He be Elijah? Could He be of the devil? Could He be...? Oh, of course not, *not a carpenter's son*. No one knows for sure who He is. Those close to the religious establishment have branded Him a charlatan, a fake. He isn't *one of them*, so He can't be of God. That is their rationale.

But others are not so sure. How could He do these things He is doing if God has not sent Him? He is causing the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear. At His command, people's lives are being totally transformed. Nothing like this has ever happened before. On the other hand, *if He is of God, why does He heal on the Sabbath?* How could someone sent of God not conform to our traditions? So the arguments are endless.

A key transitional phrase that leads us into what is to follow is found in John, chapter five, verses 39-41. It is important. Jesus is speaking:

By Himself Alone

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,

yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

I do not accept praise from men, (John 5:39-41 NIV)

The Scriptures were to be the key to knowing Christ. But knowledge *about* the Scriptures would be no substitute for *knowing Him personally*. The Jews had two problems:

First of all, they were entangled in the web of their own intellects. They thought that the more they studied and the more knowledgeable they became, the more spiritual they would be. They were on a collision course with destruction. The more they knew, the more confident they became that God would be bound by what they learned, and that God would be impressed by what they learned, but in reality, what they had learned was becoming a boomerang, wrapping itself around their necks like a millstone, blinding them to the simple truths the Scripture came to proclaim.

They knew so much *about* the written Word (and were so impressed with what they knew), they didn't recognize the Living Word, even as He stood in their midst. Jesus said, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me." The Scripture isn't history; it's "His story". So their first great problem was that they were too impressed with their knowledge to humble themselves and see God.

The second problem was that they were looking for earthly solutions to eternal problems, and no such solutions exist. That's the same argument you hear from men and women today who are making their spiritual pilgrimage dependent on physical circumstances.

"If only God would give me a job."

"If only God would heal me".

"If only God would save my marriage".

"If only God would rearrange life so that the pressures are gone, we could serve Him the way he wants us to."

The Jews of Jesus' day were no different. They thought

that if God would just send Israel another king, their problems would be over. This time it would be different. This time they could profit from their mistakes and Israel would become the nation of nations it was meant to be.

While they did not see Jesus as God, they saw His miracles as a possible tool to catapult them into international prominence and give them the tangible, temporal benefits they felt they so deserved as God's anointed ones. That was the mindset of the people as Jesus' popularity began to ascend and His ministry began to take on an almost circus-like atmosphere. Wherever He went, multitudes followed, pulling at Him, shouting to Him, weeping before Him, wanting to be healed, wanting to have their problems solved and their earthly pressures go away. Sound familiar?

So they began to exalt Him and flatter Him and set Him up as the temporal solution to their problems. By man's standards, as a pastor, He was in his prime. His church was bursting at the seams, His congregation was glued to His every word, His reputation was spreading like wildfire throughout the countryside. From their perspective, this man Jesus was to become their meal ticket back to independence from Roman rule and back to prominence among the nations. They thought all they had to do to get Him to run for office was to let Him know He was their man.

But, much to their amazement, Jesus responded instead, "*I do not accept praise from men.*" An entire series of books could be written on that one phrase. Jesus could not for one minute let His guard down and listen to the flattery of men. It would tempt Him to pride, and one tiny centimeter of pride would constitute sin, and thus He could not be our Savior. *So He humbled Himself.* Again and again He humbled Himself. At every turn, He humbled Himself. Each time the world tried to squeeze Him into its self-exalting mode, He humbled Himself. He knew who He was. He was God living in a human body. He also knew why He had come. He had come to humble Himself and become obedient, even to the death of the Cross.

Satan's goal had been made clear in the wilderness. He was

going to try to sidetrack the Master through subtle compromise. He was going to attempt to sugarcoat the world's demands for self-expression with spiritual language and trick the Son of God into accepting the plaudits of men at the expense of the plan of God. Jesus would have none of it. The minute He began to listen to the praise of man, He would be tempted to yield to the demands of man, and that would be eternally fatal. *He knew what was in man* (John 2:23). He had come to rescue man out of his self-centered cesspool and lift him into the plane of servanthood. So He could not accept praise from man. If any praise was to be given, it had to be passed on to the only one worthy of praise, His Father.

Now Jesus lives in us. That means that *to whatever degree we listen to the plaudits of men and allow their praise to affect the course of our ministries or the direction of our lives, we are in danger*, and when we begin to seek the praise of men, we are in trouble. Most churches and most ministries and most Christians who fall, begin by listening to their cheering constituency, then looking in the mirror, they like what they see. Seen through God's eyes, we are nothing apart from His amazing grace. Seen through the eyes of our admirers, we are essential to God's success on planet earth. Mark it. Don't listen to the crowd. They will love you when you give them what they want; they will run like water when you tell them what they need to hear. If you gear your message or your ministry to what will build a crowd, you will ultimately lose both the crowd and the ministry. The story continues:

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias),

and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.

Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.

The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"

He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. (John 6:1-6 NIV)

By Himself Alone

And we know what He was going to do, don't we? He was going to take an insignificant gift and translate it into a miraculous provision. The feeding of the 5,000 was a key event in the ministry of Christ. These people were there to be fed spiritually. To do that, He had to meet their basic physical needs, so He did even that in a way that would glorify His Father. In the process, He demonstrated what happens when you give everything you have to the Father, even if everything you have seems to be nothing from man's perspective. Jesus took what man would throw away and multiplied it until it did what man could not do. He loves to do that. That's why we must be so careful not to call ourselves "unusable" or "incidental" in God's scheme of things. He delights in using the "throwaways" of society to confound the wise, that "no flesh should glory in His presence". The miracle concludes with Jesus seeing that *even the fragments that man would discard were gathered together*. Nothing was wasted. God was the original ecologist. Look what happened now:

After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6:14,15 NIV)

Verse 15 in the New King James Bible reads:

Therefore, when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to a mountain by Himself alone.

And verse 15 in the New American Standard Bible says:

Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

By Himself Alone

BY HIMSELF ALONE

By Himself alone,
What a precious thought!
The very God whose loving hand
All creation wrought,

As the maddening crowds
Sought Him to enthrone
He withdrew and chose
To be...*by Himself alone.*

By Himself alone,
Went God's only Son
So little time had He
And yet, refused to run.

He refused to panic
Or yield to their demands,
He refused to, in the flesh,
Take things into His hands.

And lest, amidst the pressures
He might fall to sin,
He answered in humility,
"I can't take praise from men."

So up into the mount He went,
By Himself alone,
To meet with His dear Father,
To worship at His throne.

The eternal God in human form
Responded to their call
With "Apart from My Dear Father,
I can do nought at all."

Each crisis in His life became
But a stepping stone
As humbly He withdrew
To be...*by Himself alone.*

It does sound a bit trite to point to a verse of Scripture or an incident in Scripture and say, “this is a turning point” or “this is the most important incident” in Jesus’ life. We often do it, but in reality, *all of Scripture is a turning point, and everything Jesus said and did was of incredible importance.* But if we want to dig beyond the surface and uncover some of the hidden treasure buried beneath the words in God’s Word, we may find in this particular story a gem of inestimable value. It is possible that a principle lies hidden beneath the incident that is crucial to our understanding the mind of Christ, and understanding the mind of Christ is what this particular series of studies is all about.

Jesus has been elevated to a position of near-kingship in the eyes of the people. While the religious authorities are secretly plotting ways to destroy Him, the electorate as a whole sees Him as the answer to their prayers. Wherever He goes, healing occurs, life issues forth, joy replaces sorrow. Wherever He goes, stale tradition is replaced by living reality; dead orthodoxy gives way to spiritual freedom. So the people are rushing to His meetings and crushing those who get in their way. And they aren’t waiting for Him to come to the synagogue. They gather outside the room where He stays; they follow Him through the villages as He walks; they stand by the seashore and wait for His little boat to come to shore. They hang on every word He speaks, they wait breathlessly for Him to walk their way, to look their way, to speak just a word of love to them.

Is it any wonder the religious authorities are threatened? They want to make Him *their king!* They want to crown Him King Jesus and commission Him to overthrow the Roman tyranny that holds them in its grasp and see Him restore precious Israel to its coveted place as the glistening jewel in God’s crown of nations. Jesus does the exact opposite of what you and I would have done. We would have hired a campaign manager, begun putting a cabinet of assistants together, and started writing our acceptance speech. Isn’t this what God was after? From His place of Lordship over Israel, King Jesus could pass legislation to do away with injustice and immorality. He could remove from office all

the incompetent and dishonest government officials. He could purge the Sanhedrin of its legalism, bring about a new government program to help the handicapped, put an end to racial injustice, and bring peace on earth and good will to men. What would be wrong with that?

What would be wrong is this: He would be removing the symptoms, but leaving the disease. The problem with man was not external, it was internal. And for Jesus to do anything at all about it, He had to first deal with the sin question. What would it profit man if he had perfect legislation, an ideal leader, a caring government, a holy justice system, and yet he was lost and on his way to an eternal hell? What would it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

The issue has always been the same. From the beginning, sin was the question. Sin had separated man from God, and neither legislation or economic recovery could do a thing about it. Man needed a Savior. Man needed someone to pay the price for his sins so he could approach God again and have the inner presence of God to give him victory over life's onslaughts. The key was not to remove the onslaughts through external means. The key was to possess the power of God internally. And any steps Jesus took that would even to a *tiny degree*, substitute physical solutions for spiritual problems would violate the very nature of God, which is spiritual, and the very plan of God, which is eternal.

Jesus was tempted. He was tempted in all points like as we are. And He was so tempted, that rather than stay and argue with either his disciples or His fans over their plan to make Him a temporal king in a temporal kingdom, He *withdrew*. Oh, the miracle of withdrawing. It means He quietly slipped away from the noise and the pressures and the tensions that accompany a successful ministry, and He went to be by Himself alone.

Not many of us know how to do that. It is a *learned art*. It will never come naturally. It has to come supernaturally. The world scoffs at solitude, laughs at those who call a halt to the intensity of life's hectic pressure-cooker and just "get away

By Himself Alone

from it all”. Not to ski. Not to play golf. Not to go on a cruise. There’s nothing wrong with those things. On occasion, they are “just what the doctor ordered”. But they are not the same as withdrawing to be with God. The parallel passage in Matthew 14:22,23 tells us *why Jesus wanted to be alone*. It says:

he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

(Matthew 14:23b NIV)

The eternal God in human form had to remove Himself from the harried, hurried pace of man that was about to envelop Him in a scheme to politicize the gospel, and talk it over with His Father. This was a time of great spiritual warfare. And it was the kind of warfare we often don’t recognize as warfare. When Satan is attacking us to destroy our ministries or our testimonies or taking from us the evidences of spiritual success we cling to, we call that warfare. Here Satan was offering Jesus everything the world thought He wanted. It was the same thing he offered Him in that third temptation, but it was much less recognizable.

Jesus knew that the times when we are most vulnerable are not always when we are in trouble. We are often the most vulnerable when we are seeing the seeds of success germinate, and the blossoms of spiritual potential are beginning to bud on the trees around us. People seek us for counsel. People ask us to speak. People want to confide in us. They *need* us. What an honor! Why pray then? Why not just rush into the battlefield and do God’s will?

Because, Beloved, we are more vulnerable to operating in the flesh when we are sowing the seeds of success than we are when the skies overhead are laden with thunder clouds. When the world likes what we are doing, and the church likes what we are doing, we must be doing it right. Right? No, dear friend, I am slowly (ever so slowly) coming to realize that when the pressures that build are *good pressures*, we need to withdraw *immediately* and be absolutely certain which of those “opportunities” are of God and which are not.

This was the high point of His ministry from man’s perspective. From here on, it would go downhill. And the

decisions Jesus would make that would precipitate that downward spiral that would end up with this prospective king on a Roman cross, had their roots on that mountainside, while the disciples went boating, and the crowds went looking for their king-in-the-making.

Here was the mind of Christ at its most vulnerable point. We will look another time at Jesus as He faced that agonizing crucifixion, and watch as He went apart once more to seek the face of His Father. We have already seen the Master in the wilderness for forty days and nights, praying and fasting because the enemy's onslaughts were imminent. There He was, *by Himself alone*. He confessed that *apart from the Father, He had no strength*. He refused to move into the arena of open warfare without knowing for sure that the flesh was totally dead and God's Spirit in Him was totally in control. You don't do that with a casual, "*Dear God, deliver me.*" You don't even do that with a once-a-day quiet time where you read a little, pray a little, and watch your watch a little.

No, to really restore the power that has been drained out of the battery of your spiritual life, and to be absolutely certain what there is in your life that is primary and what is secondary, you have to be...*by yourself alone*. It's hard. It's always been hard. It requires several things:

1- You have to become less than essential to your world. If, in your heart, your world will fall apart without you, you'll never go to be apart. You will always justify that if you take that time to be alone with God, God's work or your family or your business will crash and burn. So you determine that until God sends along somebody to take your place (and who could do that?), He'll just have to deal with you on the run.

2- You have to be willing to change your plans. If you are willing to take a few hours to be alone with God to have Him confirm that you are infallible, don't bother. God wants us alone to direct us. Sometimes that direction is the opposite of the direction we're going, and one reason we don't stop to linger before God is because we don't want to face that possibility.

3- You have to be willing to look at besetting sins. Often,

we throw prayers up to God for His leading, but *“our iniquities have hid His face from us that He cannot hear.”* Without slowing down for a spell, we can gloss over those constantly nagging diseases of the heart that are quenching the flow of His power in our lives. It’s easier to overlook sin when you are not in the presence of the Savior.

4- You have to humble yourself. Here is the key. We can go apart to keep from coming apart and never really have the mind of Christ restored in us because *as we go, we are unconsciously going to rest and give God a chance to renew us, without realizing that we ought to be going just to be with God.* “We ask and receive not because we ask amiss”. It is a fine point, but a crucial one. The thing that gets our attention may be our weariness. That’s okay. But once we realize the problem, the solution isn’t getting God to be our servant and tend to our tired spirits. That will happen. But the key is that we are weary and out of step because *we need more time in the presence of His Holiness.*

Jesus never sinned, so He didn’t remove Himself for cleansing. Jesus was never out of fellowship with the Father, so He didn’t retreat to have His intimacy with the Father restored. *He did always those things that pleased the Father.* No, Jesus went to be *by Himself alone* because *He wanted to be in the presence of His Father without the distractions of the world.* His world wasn’t falling apart. From man’s perspective, it was coming together. But man didn’t understand why He came. Man still doesn’t. And in order to *keep God’s perspective,* Jesus had to keep *God’s priorities.* That meant lingering at His Father’s throne until He was so bathed in His Father’s love that the world’s subtle temptations to compromise that which is spiritual for that which is temporal would be seen for what they were.

They wanted to make Him a king. They wanted to give Him the kingdom. But it wasn’t theirs to give, and it wasn’t to be given here and now. They had an easy answer. It would bypass that ugly cross and rewrite the script so there need not be suffering for there to be glory. They could stamp out the symptoms of sin through legislation and absorb the consequences of sin through government. And King

Jesus would be at the center of it all. The problem was, the symptoms of sin cannot be dealt with unless you do surgery on man's heart.

There are no shortcuts, Beloved. Jesus *had to go through Samaria*. Jesus *had to go to the pool of Bethesda*. And Jesus *had to go to that cross*. The world will come up with *other* ways. They will seem plausible, sensible, even preferable. Often they will circumvent the sin question in the name of love, and often they will come in the form of what the world calls "success". The church will flourish. The ministry will blossom. Your testimony will be in demand. People will begin flocking to you for help. Subtly, ever so subtly, you will begin to rest on the finished work of Christ, *plus*. Plus anything. And the end of your effectiveness will be signaled in heaven, even though on earth, everything you touch seems to be mushrooming into spiritual fruit.

The beginning of the end for many of us comes when the world wants what we have and we forget *that all we have is Jesus*. And *we will forget, Beloved*, mark it...unless we learn the secret. When the winds of success begin to howl, we need to stop in our tracks and say to the flattering world about us: "*Excuse me, I need to be gone for a while.*" Then, without fanfare, without publishing any press releases, we need to steal away until we are *by ourselves, alone*. Not just to rest. Not just to refuel. We need to withdraw, just to be with God. If He gives us rest, so be it. If He renews us, praise Him. If He convicts, us, respond. But our goal in going is *just to be with Him, by ourselves, alone*.

When was the last time you did that? Do you only consider it when the winds of adversity are blowing tornado-like storm clouds into your life, and there seems to be no other solution? Or do you, even then, understand the utter necessity of taking a protracted time apart with God?

If you tell your wife or husband or some other loved one you care about them more than life itself, but never have the time to spend just being with them to hear from them and tell them you love them, do you think they believe you? If you're always promising those you love, "I'll have time for

you someday, as soon as...”, but “as soon as” never happens, does not your love seem to have an empty ring? Are we not, in essence, in love with whatever or whoever controls our time?

And when we say to God, “I don’t have time to be with you because I’m too busy being about your business,” isn’t it like telling your children I can’t listen to what you care about because I must wash your socks.” Forget the socks. They need you. And if we’re so busy doing God’s work, we can’t find time to be alone with God, we are placing ourselves as more important in the kingdom than Jesus was. He had only three years to transform the world. Yet again and again, He took precious hours from His schedule and marked them “Time with My Father”. No, He didn’t stay there. He went straight from the mountain to the valleys where hurting people were. But because He stayed on the mountain long enough, when He got to the valley, He knew what was important, and He knew that *in and of Himself He could do nothing*.

Time alone with God not only renews our strength, it renews our realization that we can do nothing apart from Him. So we enter again into His rest where we belong. Where we belong, Beloved, is where Jesus was: *by ourselves, alone*. It will transform our ministries, because it will transform our lives.

Before you put this booklet down, why not settle in your heart a time when you can leave the harried world you live in for a few hours or a few days and go and be...*by yourself alone*. Don’t advertise it; just go. And don’t give God an agenda. He may have one that’s different from yours. You may want answers. He may just want to give you more of Himself. You may want relief. He may want to give you more grace, instead. You may want Him to confirm your ministry or your success, and He may want to quietly show you that you have ever so subtly begun to operate in your own strength and your ministry is headed for oblivion.

Leave the agenda to Him and leave the results to Him.

It will all make sense when you come to Him...*by yourself, alone*.

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