



# Friday Mornings With the Rabbi

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**A** Jewish rabbi lived a long, long time ago in a little village in Russia. Every Friday morning he vanished—no one seemed to know where he went. Most of the people in the synagogue respected him so much they started to think his Friday morning absences were times when he went to heaven to personally talk with God.

One day a newcomer came to the village. His skepticism about faith in general caused him to doubt the stories of the rabbi spending time with God on Friday mornings. So one Friday morning the newcomer decided to follow the rabbi to see what he was up to.

The somewhat cynical new village resident arrived at the rabbi's house before the sun came up, and waited for him to come outside. When the rabbi emerged from his house he was not dressed like a rabbi—he was dressed like a poor peasant. In today's world one might see a person dressed as the rabbi was and presume him to be a homeless person.

The suspicious village newcomer watched the rabbi carry an axe into the forest, chop down a tree and then cut the tree into firewood. The rabbi then gathered up the firewood and walked to a little shack in the poorest part of the village, where an old woman and her sick son lived. He stacked up the wood, which was

enough for cooking and warmth for a week, and then he quietly returned to his own house.

The service, the love, the self-sacrifice and the humility of the rabbi so impressed the newcomer that he decided to stay in the village and learn of God from the rabbi. The former skeptic was intrigued that faith wasn't just something that the rabbi practiced on Friday mornings—his faith was a way of life.

History provides endless stories and illustrations of famous, wealthy and attractive people obsessed with “me, myself and I.” Many who are rich and famous often fall prey to thinking their genius and their hard work earned them their fame and fortune.

Sadly, giving thanks to God and sharing their blessings with others in need are often not a priority in their lives. When an endless quest for more defines a life, rather than thanksgiving and gratitude, sad and empty stories of greed and futility often result.

I often think of an inscription in a museum of the American Wild West in Deadwood, South Dakota. The prospector hoping to live to enjoy his riches is portrayed as saying:

*“I lost my gun. I lost my horse. I'm out of food. The Indians are after me. But I've got all the gold I can carry!”*

## **Doesn't Religion Always Put God First?**

*“For what I received I passed on to you*

*as of first importance: that Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Is an emphasis on the life, work, teachings and primacy of Jesus automatically the priority of churches that define themselves by the buildings in which they meet and the programs they sponsor and promote? Is it a foregone conclusion that churches are, de facto, by their very nature, Christ-centered and Christ-focused? Is God always first in religion?

A *Doodlesbury* comic strip once portrayed the state of many brick-and-mortar churches today.

The first frame was of a typical New England church building nestled near a lake and a forest—the sign outside announced “Little Church of Walden.”

The next frame illustrates the long-haired, bearded pastor, wearing a clerical collar, reading announcements to a congregation. He is, as the term is generically used today, “woke.”

The pastor begins his discussion of the weekly activity calendar by saying “This Monday we have a lecture on nutrition from a celebrity chef.”

He continues, “Then on Tuesday and Thursday we will have our usual 12-step program evening get-togethers.”

One of the church members interrupts asking, “Pastor, will the 12-step programs be about drugs or sex addiction?”

The pastor responds, “We have cut down Drugs and Sex Addiction to nine steps, and they are offered Friday evenings at 6:30, right after organic co-gardening. Then on Saturday night we have aerobics and yoga. Any questions?”

One of the parishioners asks, “Yes, is there a church service?” The pastor answers, “Canceled. There was a conflict with the self-esteem workshop.”

### **Have You Tasted Jesus?**

There’s an old story about a lecture given by a celebrated theologian at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The theologian attempted to explain the thesis of his newest book—that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a myth—it never happened. The progressive theologian was attempting to prove that the resurrection—you know, the resurrection that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 is to be of “*first importance*”—the theologian was attempting to prove that it never happened.

He quoted learned scholar after learned scholar, he referred to the original languages of Hebrew and Greek in which the Bible was written, all in an undertaking trying to prove that the early Christians just invented the story of the resurrection as a way to attract people to Christianity.

At the end of his attack, dedicated to destroying the resurrection, he asked his audience if anyone had a question. An old preacher stood up in the back of the auditorium.

“Doctor, I have just one question.”

The old preacher took out an apple from the sack lunch he was carrying and took a bite.

“Doctor,” he continued, CRUNCH/MUNCH... “my question is simple.” He took another bite of the apple... and chewed... CRUNCH/MUNCH.

“I’ve never read those fancy books you mentioned, and I don’t know any Hebrew or Greek.” He paused and took a few more bites... CRUNCH/MUNCH.

The preacher finished the apple and held up the core: “All I want to know is this: The apple I just ate—was it bitter or sweet?”

The theologian paused for a moment before answering and then said, “I cannot possibly answer that question because I did not taste your apple.”

The white-haired preacher dropped the apple core into the paper bag that contained his sack lunch, and he calmly said to the learned theologian: “You have not tasted my apple, and neither have you tasted my Jesus.”

The audience of grad-school students training for the ministry and many pastors who were in attendance erupted in cheers. The theologian left the platform.

### **Thanksgiving Flows From God**

*It’s inexpensive and easy to build a spiritual house based on lies and delusions, but it’s drafty to live in.*

Spiritual houses built on anything other than Jesus Christ are flawed, according to Jesus’ warning in Matthew 7:24-27, they are built on sand and they will come tumbling down during the storms of life.

All authentic faith and belief is centered in and on Jesus, who is the only foundation that endures all. All else will fail or be destroyed. All other spiritual dwelling places are but religious houses built on sand. All else will one day be but dust in the wind.

When it comes to thanksgiving and gratitude, all is centered in and on God, who is responsible for all that we are and all that we enjoy.

True thanksgiving and gratitude is based on God as pre-eminent and of “*first importance*”—true and lasting thanksgiving and gratitude is actually a gift of the grace of God, for without God we are not only incapable of true thanksgiving, but without him we have no one to whom we may direct our thanksgiving.

The gratitude that God produces in us by his grace involves humility about who and what we are and how important we are, and it involves serving others in the name of Jesus in a spirit of self-sacrifice.

Most of all, when God is number one, as he was with the rabbi in the little Russian village, we are not simply thankful for what we possess and enjoy. Most of all, we are thankful and grateful because of what we have been given—the beauty of life, the majestic love of God and his amazing grace that energizes us to serve others. □



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