Lessons from Mere Christianity

Jerimiah 29:13 “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

The key verse today is from Jerimiah. Today’s message is a bit special and definitely unusual. Normally we read a passage from scripture and the pastor preaches from it. Today I was asked to give a sort of lecture on the book Mere Christianity. Every summer we either read a book or do a bible study. This summer was Mere Christianity, last summer was Romans. So Pastor Paul asked me to give a summary of the book today. “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” Is the key verse today. It isn’t found in the book but mirrors the last line of the book “But look to Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.” Mere Christianity is a book by Cs Lewis written in 1952. It is a combination of talks he gave on the radio while at Oxford during World War II. It is divided into 4 books. Book 1 “Right and Wrong as A Clue To The Meaning of The Universe”, book 2 “What Christians Believe”, book 3 “Christian Behavior” and book 4 “Beyond Personality or First Steps in The Doctrine of The Trinity”. Now we didn’t read all of these books. Book 1 is primarily an apologetics book detailing the argument from morality. Lee Stroble’s Case for Faith, which we read 4 years ago detailed this and, in many places, completely borrowed from Mere Christianity. Book 2 is primarily about basic Christian beliefs: the fallen state of man, the need for salvation, and the gospel of Christ. These are topics that we hear about every Sunday and which all of us were very familiar with. So, with that in mind we read books 3 and 4 on Christian Behavior and the Doctrine of the Trinity. Now it would be impossible for me to summarize the entirety of two books in my time today, not only because it’s a ton of material, but also because its so varied. With that in mind I present his defense of theology, from book 4. Next, I will give his overview of the 7 virtues from book 3. And finally, I will talk about explanation for the Christian life.

First, I want to talk about Mere Christianity as a theology book and defend its use as a discipleship tool – using Lewis’ own argument for theology. I don’t know that anyone here holds this view, but I have met Christians who have sincerely expressed the view that books that are not the bible are a waste of time. Their argument goes like this “I as a Christian have a limited amount of time. And any time I spend reading a book like Mere Christianity is time I could spend reading the bible. And since the bible is the word of God, I should read that. The word of God is better than any other book, so given the option I pick it.” In a broader sense, one can argue that theology is really a pointless, and perhaps even dangerous activity. Cs Lewis explains in Mere Christianity that theology is a lot like a map to a place you have never been. The map points you to a thing but it is not the thing itself. It is certainly true that if you spend all your time looking at the map, and never actually start your journey you will never get anywhere. Nobody made it across the Atlantic by sitting in his house studying the ocean. But the map provides more than just direction. A map was made by many people who lived dangerous lives trying to chart the exact course. In the same way theology is made by the millions of Christians who lived before us and in many cases died for the sake of Christ. History demonstrates that theology was often bought with blood. In this church we have an emphasis on discipleship, in the model of Paul and Timothy. We pray weekly for more 1 to 1 bible studies. In the same way that older Christians guide younger Christians so do the writing of those who came before us. In the same way that we become disciples of Jesus through reading the bible, we become disciples of Christians who have long since passed by reading and accepting their advice. Moreover, its not as if you won’t have theology if you don’t read theology. You will just have bad theology. Every year at easter in the Philippines there are Christians who crucify themselves for a period of time. They do so because they have a wrong understanding of what Paul meant when he said “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). Cs Lewis in his essay “Learning in Wartime” goes beyond this by expressing that the whole of a life cannot be divided into strictly secular and spiritual activities. He points out that Jesus attended weddings and that scripture says to do everything unto the lord. My point here is simply that books like Mere Christianity have some value. They clearly don’t have as much value as the Bible itself, but they are worth reading even then.

And so, book 3 is all about Christian morality. What was quite funny to me reading through this section on Mere Christianity is that almost nothing I hear week to week in church covers much about morality directly. We see and learn weekly about Jesus, and take him as the architect of our faith. He is our example. We are to strive to be like Jesus. But it is usually in the context of the life of Christ that we are called to justice. We don’t spend a ton of time thinking about what it means to love our neighbor, we simply read that Christ commanded us to. It seems to me that the exact application of these rules is usually taught by example within the church. There is nothing wrong with this, but I think it often times confuses people who come to church newly expecting church to be all about common morality. Several years ago, at an easter bible conference a Christian woman brought her fiancé to the retreat. He was not a Christian. I remember his complete bewilderment at the bible passage. It had nothing to do with morality and everything to do with Jesus. But here in Mere Christianity we get a through treatment of the topic. Lewis explains that morality has to do with three things. 1) Harmony between individuals 2) Harmony within one’s self and 3) The general purpose of human life as a whole. He explains that non-Christians tend to think of morality only as the first one. This is why they often don’t think of things like personal addiction or prostitution as immoral. These sins affect a person internally, and have nothing to do with harmony among individuals. Lewis explains that we can think of Christian morality in terms of 7 virtues. This idea dates back to the 5th and 6th century. The Christian virtues are prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude, faith, hope, and charity. The first four are called the cardinal virtues (from the latin word cardnalis- the hinge of a door- because they are “pivotal”). The last three faith, hope, and charity are called the theological virtues. These are taken from 1 Corinthians 13 where the scripture in the KJV reads “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” Prudence means common sense. This virtue is sometimes thought of as “discernment”. When Christ tells us to be as wise as serpents it is a call to prudence. Much of the book of proverbs are lessons in prudence. The next virtue is temperance. Temperance means enjoying things in moderation. Lewis laments that in his time temperance had come to mean someone who does not drink any alcohol. In his view, not all Christians should be totally abstinent from alcohol. Only those for whom find it hard to control themselves. For example, my family has a history of alcoholism- so it is both prudent and temperate for me not to have any alcohol. He says “A Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons- marriage, meat, beer, movies; but the moment he starts saying those things are bad in and of themselves he has taken a wrong turn.” Justice is a fairly obvious virtue. In our day to day lives it means something more like fairness. It includes honesty, give and take, and keeping promises. The last of the virtues is fortitude. It means courage, both the kind that faces danger and the kind that endures under hardship. Lewis remarks that it is very hard to practice any of the virtues for very long without fortitude. As for these virtues we might be tempted to think of them as a set of actions, but they are not. They are qualities of a man. Lewis remarks that God doesn’t just want obedience to rules. He wants people of a certain kind. Right actions done for wrong reasons do not help build the virtue in a person. In the same way that getting a homework answer correct by guessing doesn’t do much to help you prepare for a test. So those are the four cardinal virtues, the three theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity. Faith means both believing the right things and doing actions based on those beliefs. Lewis dispenses with the old argument of if faith is belief or action. He compares faith to two blades of a scissors. This calls back to the verse “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (Phil 2:12-2:13) The first half of the verse makes it sound like we are doing everything, and then the second half makes it seem like God is doing everything. But it is both. It may seem odd that faith could be considered a virtue. How can what we believe be some sort of internal quality? But Lewis points out that our feelings and moods may assault our reason. Faith in this sense is an art of holding onto things your reason has accepted in spite of your changing moods. The next theological virtue is Hope. Hope means looking forward to the eternal world. It is exemplified in the Hebrews 11:10 where Abraham is described as “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” The struggle with hope is that because man is fallen they often don’t want to look towards heaven. They stand content in their sin. They want to make their way in the world, and so the world makes its way into them. It is perhaps not surprising them to learn that Romans chapter 5 teaches that suffering eventually produces hope. For it is only in suffering that we realize that this world doesn’t have what it claims. The last virtue is charity. In Greek this word is “agape”. The NIV translates this word as love. Now Greek has five words for love: eros, philia, storge, philautia, and agape. Agape here means the type of love that sacrifices for others. Tertullian, a Christian writing in the second century remarked that pagans notices that Christians loved each other "What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is our loving kindness. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another' ". Christian writers often use charity to not only describe love between people, but God’s love for man and man’s love for God. As a younger man I was often confused by this command to love God. Love was a feeling and I felt like a failure that I didn’t feel particularly fond towards God. But Cs Lewis explains that it is not a feeling. God doesn’t particularly care about feelings. Christian love is an “affair of the will”. If we are trying to do his will, we are obeying the commandment. And although our feelings may come and go His love for us will not. It is not wearied by our sins, or indifference. It is relentless in saving us, at whatever cost to Him. Even his own son. There is much more in this book. I skipped topics of forgiveness and psychoanalytics. He also spends a whole section on sexual morality and Christian marriage. To finish I will talk about book 4.

Book 4 covers a wide variety of topics from predestination, to the cost of discipleship, to the resurrected body, he briefly touches on the Arian controversy of the 4th century around the begetting of Christ. But of all these things I think the most helpful to me was the idea of how to become like Christ. We are told to be like Christ. We are told to live like Christ. There is a question then as to how this is supposed to happen. Cs Lewis says the way to do this is to pretend like you are Christ and strive to always pretend to be this way, and overtime you will become like him. In many ways this plain idea is the whole concept behind studying the life of Jesus. To know how to be like Jesus we must learn what he did. But more than that Jesus is alive, and he sends his holy spirit to us as our advocate. John 14:26 says that “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” Put in this way much of the application of the Christian life is a constant running to Christ. We are told to be perfect, and Lewis says that the only fatal thing is to stop trying. I learned from this book that we live each day one at a time. And each day is very important. Every day we are either moving closer to Christ and being transformed into his image or we are drifting away. For us as believers every act is important. Every act of kindness, every act of malice- they are all either moving you closer to Christ. And God who wants us relentlessly pursues us and is patient with us. Cs Lewis concludes the book with his belief that Christ represents for mankind a new evolution. The new man is alive with the spirit and is something different than those who came before him. This new man, who Christ was the first of- doesn’t reproduce physically but spiritually. Through discipleship they pass on the teachings of Christ and transform others. He says “They will not be very like the idea of “religious people” which you have formed in general reading. They do not draw attention to themselves… They will usually have a lot of time: you will wonder where it comes from. You think you are being kind to them when really, they are being kind to you.” Lewis concludes that when we become like Christ, it is not as though Christ replaces us with himself. He is not like some parasite looking for a host. Rather Christ makes us into who we truly are meant to be. And so we learn that nothing we give to God is ever really given away. We experience what the bible meant in Matthew’s gospel when it said “whoever loses their life for [Christ’s] sake will find it.”

So Mere Christianity ends. It provides to us a map and directions so to speak in understanding the claims and demands of the gospel. I was given this book my first semester in college by a roommate and put it in a box for years. When I graduated college, I found it again and read it. The book contributed greatly to my spiritual life. And I hope that it might help others. It may surprise people, but Cs Lewis towards the end of his life felt himself a failure. He was sure that his works would convert and evangelize more people. But Lewis was constrained by the bounds of his life. Mere Christianity is the most important Christian book written in the last 100 years. Wikipedia has a long list of famous people who were converted by it. Almost all of who lived after his death. It for us is a reminder that whatever efforts we take in advancing the gospel. They do not always produce obvious fruit. Nevertheless, our command is clear and the only thing truly fatal is to give up.