

A young man with short brown hair is shown in profile, looking down at a smartphone he is holding in his hands. He is wearing a grey and white patterned shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

To The Work

**A Thirteen Lesson Bible Study
by Jeff S. Smith**

Introduction

Poetry and lyricism are filled with odes to work, most of them rather negative. “Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, It's Off to Work We Go” is not as jaunty a sentiment as it might sound, especially when so many modern people loathe their jobs and secretly covet the slothful existence of the unemployed. Bible occupations were naturally rather different from those in today’s technologically based economy. In reality, though, until the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, much was quite the same. These occupations were chosen, not necessarily because they represent the most basic Bible occupations, but because they best lend themselves to modern spiritual application. The study’s goal is to provoke thought, discussion and practical execution.

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Lesson 1: Soldier

“Soldiers of Christ, arise, and put your armor on, / Strong in the strength which God supplies through His eternal Son.” The words belong to Charles Wesley, waxing lyrical around the year 1741, but the sentiment is plainly biblical, despite some disciples’ discomfort with the martial imagery.

1. What was the name of the mighty hunter before the Lord (Genesis 10:8-12)? See if a lexicon or commentary can tell you what he hunted.

2. Warfare as we might recognize it seems to begin in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis. Who was the ultimate victor in those battles (1-16)? What is the significance of the number 318?

3. What resemblance did the Exodus pilgrims bear to an army (Exodus 13:18, 20; Numbers 1:3, 2:2, 31:14)?

4. Soldiers seem to be present everywhere in the New Testament, readily lending themselves to spiritual imagery. Why were there so many soldiers about?

5. In what way are Christians themselves then likened to soldiers (Ephesians 6:10-13)? Whom does Paul identify as our enemy (Second Corinthians 2:11, First Peter 5:8)?

6. Describe the Christian's suit of armor (Ephesians 6:14-17):

- girded your waist with
- breastplate of
- feet shod with
- shield of
- helmet of
- sword of Spirit

7. Does this imagery license the Christian or the church to engage itself in literal battle? For what kind of fight are we intended (Second Corinthians 10:1-6)?

8. Paul specifically compared the young preacher, Timothy, to a soldier (Second Timothy 2:1-4). What did Paul warn him about?

9. Just as we saw Israel marching in ranks, there is a sense in which Christians must also march in order. What causes disorder in the ranks (Colossians 2:1-6, First John 2:1-6, Second Thessalonians 3:6, 15)?

10. Consider the paring of the army of Gideon (Judges 7:1-7). What were the two reasons that so many potential soldiers were discharged? What are the two corresponding virtues the soldiers of Christ must possess (First Corinthians 16:13, First Peter 5:8)?

Lesson 2: Athlete

The ancient Olympic games were very central to Greek culture for almost a thousand years until they were canceled in A.D. 393 because they seemed to contradict the new nominally Christian perspective of the empire. It is the Isthmian Games, however, conducted in Corinth, that probably provide even more of the athletic flavor of the apostle Paul's writings and illustrations.

1. How do the following items from athletics relate to Christianity?

- uniforms:
- finish line:
- disqualification:
- competition:
- rules:

2. One key to athletic success is determined training. What does Paul command the Christian "athlete" (First Timothy 4:6-9)?

3. What will a well-rounded diet of the word of God effect in us?

4. Many movies have been made of the gladiators who lived in the first millennia. It was a time when Christians were executed by being thrown in with lions. That image survives in several New Testament passages, including First Corinthians 4:7-13, where Paul notes that the apostles are a spectacle to the Greek world. What was their response to such ill-treatment?

5. At least one central doctrine of Christianity made such suffering worthwhile. Identify it and what threatens it (First Corinthians 15:30-35; cf. Galatians 5:7-8).

6. Read Hebrews 12:1-2. The scene is a cross-country foot race observed by a great throng of spectators. Who are they? What is the writer's recommendation for obtaining victory (cf. verses 14-16)?

7. What kind of vision is necessary to finishing the race (Philippians 3:12-15; cf. Luke 9:62)? What is the prize (cf. Second Timothy 2:5, 4:6-8)?

8. What is meant by being temperate in all things (First Corinthians 9:24-27; cf. Titus 2:12)?

9. What would render vain the boxer's match or the runner's race? What could render vain our faith and efforts as Christians (Second Peter 1:5-11 and Philippians 2:16)?

10. How do you know you are fighting the good fight (First Timothy 6:11-12)?

Lesson 3: Farmer and Vinedresser

Farmers and vine dressers still labor today, but most of them are cogs in a giant agribusiness machine. In the days of the Bible, most men worked the soil to some extent, making for fertile territory in the teacher's parables. We lose something if we don't bother to translate that teaching into our own understanding today.

1. Who was one of the first farmers (Genesis 4:1-8)? Compare his vain worship in this passage to the one who went to his own farm in the parable of the marriage supper (Matthew 22:1-14).

2. When Paul references the farmer for Timothy, it is clear that the young man is not actually a farm worker at all (Second Timothy 2:1-7). What is Paul's point throughout this passage and especially in the farming reference (see also First Corinthians 9:9-14)?

3. One of the most famous parables is that of the soils, or the sower of seeds, found in Matthew 13:1-23. All disciples are eligible to be seed sowers—but what is the seed (see also James 1:21 and First Peter 1:23, 4:11)?

4. Describe the four basic types of soil the sower is prone to find:

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

5. What was the problem that Jesus recognized as he beheld lost souls (Matthew 9:35-37)? Why does the problem persist? Think!

6. If Christians can see themselves in the vein of farmers according to so much New Testament literature, then two agrarian assets emerge as vital to success—diligence and fruitfulness. How can we ensure both (First Corinthians 3:5-9)?

7. Consider the parable of the vineyard workers in Matthew 20:1-16. What would be the application in the ears of Jews who were about to see Gentiles in the kingdom? What would be the application to longtime Christians today who watch some live lives of sin, only to seek forgiveness or conversion late in life?

8. Our God is patient with us as we listen to invitations to which we do not respond and as we learn lessons which we fail to apply. What should we learn about his patience, however, from the parable of the fig tree planted in a vineyard in Luke 13:6-9 (see also Matthew 21:18-22)?

9. In another parable, Christians are not so much vineyard workers, but something else (John 15:1-8). What are we? What is the lesson of the parable?

Lesson 4: Fisherman

A surprising number of people continue to enjoy fishing today as a recreational sport, but very few make fishing their occupation. Nevertheless, the fisherman is a pretty relatable symbol to most people who have at least limited experience baiting a hook and waiting ... and waiting ... and waiting.

1. One of the first places we see the metaphorical fisherman is in the prophecy of Jeremiah, who lived about 600 years before the incarnate Christ (16:10-18). What was the work of the fishermen there (cf. Habakkuk 1:12-17)?

2. Which of the 12 apostles were fishermen by trade (Matthew 4:18-21, John 21:2-3)?

3. What was Christ's invitation to them?

4. How would fishing compare to the apostles' work?

5. What "bait" did they use in fishing for men (Romans 1:16, 6:23, 10:17)? What other, more carnal, baits, are commonly used by churches today?

6. Proverbs 11:30 suggests that “he who wins souls is wise.” There are two ways to take that—that winning souls is a wise thing to try to do, and, that it takes wisdom to win them successfully. What kind of wisdom does the Bible recommend in the following passages:

- First Corinthians 9:19-23:
- Colossians 4:5:
- First Thessalonians 4:9-12:
- First Peter 3:15:

7. The fishing motif shows up in the writings of James as he discusses the power of temptation. What is the universal lure that he identifies (1:12-15; cf. Proverbs 5:22 and Job 18:5-10)?

8. Forgive the mixed metaphors, but if the devil is doing the fishing, what advantage do we still possess (Proverbs 1:17, Second Corinthians 2:11, First Corinthians 10:13)?

9. Jesus makes reference to Jonah, who was swallowed by a “great fish” (NKJV) or “whale” (KJV) in Matthew 12:38-41. What is “the sign of the prophet Jonah”? What was the Jews’ main interest in fish signs (John 6:1-32)?

10. What is the lesson of the parable of asking for a fish in Luke 11:5-13?

Lesson 5: Tax Collector

Two things are certain, they say—death and taxes. And nobody likes the grim reaper who represents either. Case in point is the New Testament treatment of the venerable tax man—the publican in antiquated parlance and tax collector to you and me. The lowly tax collector, however, redeems himself quite a bit in the gospel accounts.

1. The history of taxation can be traced all the way back to the book of Genesis, at least as far as the story of Joseph in Egypt (41:25-36; 47:20-26). What was Joseph's flat tax percentage plan? What was its purpose?

2. The history of taxation also includes tribute paid to foreign kings and a levy made against the Israelites for the upkeep of the priests and the temple. How did Peter's background come in handy for the payment of the latter (Matthew 17:24-27)?

3. No one much enjoys paying taxes, but the support of the faith was surely less galling than the other major tax of the first century. Describe that tax and explain why it was so frustrating for the Jews to pay (Mark 12:13-17).

4. What made the tax collector so unpopular in Israel was the fact that so many of them were native Jews who went to work for Caesar and gathered the taxes from their neighbors for him. How is that disdain reflected in the teaching of Christ (Matthew 5:43-48)?

5. Even more telling is the company that Jesus puts the tax collectors into when church discipline is considered (Matthew 18:15-17). Who are they?

6. But then several surprising developments occur. How does the perception of tax collectors begin to change (Mark 2:13-17)?

7. Jesus became known as “a friend of tax collectors” (Matthew 11:19), a designation he did not reject. Does this mean that Jesus compromised with greed and guile (Luke 15:1; Matthew 21:28-32; Luke 3:7-13, 7:29)?

8. One can only imagine the seething reaction to a parable Jesus taught which featured a Pharisee and a tax collector as its major characters (Luke 18:9-14). What lesson was Jesus trying to teach?

9. How does this lesson relate to Romans 14:10-13 and James 2:13, 4:11-12?

10. The second-most famous tax collector was actually a chief publican. What spiritual lessons do we learn from Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)?

Lesson 6: Harlot

While not actually the oldest profession in the world, harlotry sadly comes pretty close. Whoredom, as it also sometimes called, has a checkered history even for such a notorious sin, mixing sex with greed and idolatry and producing an enticing package for those of both genders.

1. Who is the first Bible character we find visiting a harlot (Genesis 38:1-23)? Who was the “prostitute” in question?

2. What did he want to do with his daughter-in-law when he learned that she was pregnant due to harlotry (Genesis 38:24)? What changed his mind (25-26)?

3. Two issues emerge on the periphery of this story. One involves the obvious sexual double-standard in which a woman will be burned to death for harlotry, but the man feels no shame. Think about another issue. Is pregnancy out of wedlock the sin or is it something else?

4. Harlotry invaded Israel along with idolatry, so that noble kings had to fight very powerfully to keep the worship of Jehovah from adopting the perverted pagan practices of Syria and Canaan (Deuteronomy 23:17-18). What did Asa and Jehoshaphat do with them (First Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46)?

5. Harlotry was so prevalent, however, that much of the book of Proverbs is written in order to protect one's son from falling into her clutches. How did she entice (Proverbs 2:16, 7:11-21, 9:13-18)?

6. What became of the young man who fell prey to the harlot (Proverbs 7:22-27 and Luke 15:30)?

7. What does harlotry cost men today (First Corinthians 6:15-20)? *Think!*

8. What was the name of Hosea's "wife of harlotry" (Hosea 1:3)? Why would God want him to marry such a woman (1:2)?

9. Who is the Bible's most famous and lovable harlot? Why is she noteworthy (Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25)?

10. Give some examples of ways that modern women might sell their bodies, even if it is not for actual sexual intercourse (Matthew 5:27-30).

Lesson 7: Theologian

Today's theologians are the products of seminaries and are expert in many things with the usual exception of the Bible. Simple texts are complicated by skepticism, modernism and some -isms that haven't even been identified yet. Things were much the same in the first century—the theologians were among the least faithful and obedient of the whole population.

1. What seat did the scribes and Pharisees occupy (Matthew 23:1-4)? What quality harmed their reputation with Christ (cf. Matthew 23:23-28)?

2. The Pharisees were a separatist group who prided themselves on circumspect attention to the minutest matters of the law. The scribes were lawyers, or professional students of the law, who were called rabbis and were often members of the sect of Pharisees as well. Perhaps they were the clergy of their day; what did Jesus and Peter teach about common clergy trappings (Matthew 23:5-12, First Peter 2:9-10; cf. Psalm 111:9)?

3. What problems are created or exacerbated by a clergy/laity separation (Acts 17:11, First John 4:1, First Peter 3:15)?

4. Consider Matthew 15:1-9. What had the scribes and Pharisees thought they found in Corban (cf. First Timothy 5:8)? Discuss.

5. The Sadducees were a political party that also encompassed theological matters as well. Their background in the Aaronic priesthood gave them a deep interest in ceremonial exactness, but they were more known for their rejection of certain honored doctrines. List them (Matthew 22:23-33, Acts 23:8).

6. Which group comes to look upon the church more favorably after the resurrection of Christ (Acts 15:5, 23:1-9)?

7. What kinds of theologians did Paul meet in Athens (Acts 17:16-34)?

8. What famous theologian saved the lives of Peter and John (Acts 5:34-40)? What famous theologian was his student (Acts 22:3)?

9. Is Christianity a philosophy (John 8:28-32)?

10. How necessary is a seminary degree today in order for one to preach the gospel effectively (Second Timothy 2:2)?

¹ Brown, David, D.D. "Commentary on Acts 17". "Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible". <<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/JamiesonFaussetBrown/jfb.cgi?book=ac&chapter=017>>. 1871.

Lesson 8: Carpenter

Carpentry continues to be an important trade even today in our tech-heavy economy. There is just no substitute or obsolescence for one who can work with wood and turn dead trees into houses, pianos and Louisville Sluggers. Ninety-nine percent of American carpenters are men as are the two most noted tradesmen in the New Testament.²

1. Compare Matthew 13:53-58 with Mark 6:1-6. The two accounts appear to detail the same event and yet there is at least one noteworthy difference between them. What is it? How can it be harmonized?

2. What did the crowd intend by remarking about Jesus's trade and his family?

3. How were the other commoners receiving Jesus at this point (Mark 12:35-37). Why didn't the rulers receive him the same way (John 12:42-43, 7:45-49)?

4. Why aren't more from the elite class of humanity saved (First Corinthians 1:18-29 and Romans 1:18-21)?

² Wikipedia entry for "Carpenter." <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carpenter>> Retrieved August 31, 2007 11:47 AM.

5. Consider Romans 12:16. What becomes of Christians who set their minds on high things and refuse to associate with the humble (First Peter 5:5-6, First Corinthians 3:18-20)?

6. Carpenters, though esteemed to be common, are valuable in their ability to build things. That ability lends itself then to a common New Testament analogy. Where does the wise carpenter lay his spiritual foundation (Luke 6:46-49; First Corinthians 3:11, 10:4)? Explain how this is accomplished (John 8:28-32, I John 2:6).

7. What does the solid foundation of God say (Second Timothy 2:19)?

8. A carpenter can also build dishonorable things. Consider Isaiah 44:13-20. What was the foolishness in this construction? How does it compare to similar foolishness today (Matthew 6:19-24, Second Timothy 3:1-5, First John 5:21)?

9. What carpenter's tool is described in Amos 7:7-8? What is its literal and spiritual purpose (John 12:48, Hebrews 4:11-13)?

Lesson 9: Smith

Statistics say that “Smith” is the most common surname in the English language and that must indicate that “smithing” was once an overwhelmingly popular trade. Smithing is very present in the Old Testament, especially in the construction of the tabernacle and idols.

1. Who is the father of smithing (Genesis 4:19-22)?

2. Part of the metal smiths’ work was in refining, an application that finds its way into the Hebrews’ wisdom literature and into the New Testament. What is the refinement analogy in Proverbs 17:3? What application did Peter make regarding it (First Peter 1:6-9)?

3. Consider Proverbs 25:4. What is dross and what is its spiritual equivalent (Second Timothy 2:19-22, Galatians 5:19-21, First Corinthians 5:7)?

4. What is your understanding of Proverbs 27:21?

5. What smith does the Bible reader meet in Second Timothy 4:14? What does Paul think of him?

6. How does Paul's wish harmonize with what he wrote the Romans about vengeance (12:17-21)?

7. We meet a silversmith in Acts 19:21-41. Why was Demetrius so upset with Paul?

8. Which motivated Demetrius more—love of Diana or love of money? What is love of money, according to First Timothy 6:10?

9. How do greed and idolatry intersect in the New Testament (Colossians 3:5, Ephesians 5:5)?

10. What is the solution (Jeremiah 10:14 and First Timothy 6:17-19)?

Lesson 10: Sailor

Sailing might have taken Christopher Cross away, but a careful voyage can lead the believer to even closer proximity to the Lord.

1. Read First Kings 9:15-28. What did Solomon build? What did the seamen know? Make an application!

2. Sailors are noted for reading the skies for clues as to direction and weather, part of an allusion that Jesus made in condemning the Pharisees in Matthew 16:1-4. What were the signs of their times?

3. Perhaps this was also the time that Isaiah anticipated in his inspired prophecy, specifically chapter 33:20-24. What exactly is he predicting?

4. The Bible's second-most famous sailor was not a seaman by trade, but a passenger. Why did Jonah take to the sea (Jonah 1:1-3)? Who proved to be more honorable—God's prophet or the heathen seamen (1:4-16)? What might this teach Christians who live in a world with many sinners?

5. Sometimes we feel like we are drowning in a sea of despair, disappointment and anxiety and the words of Jonah provide us with an explanation of what is occurring (2:1-9), especially to the degree that some wounds are self-inflicted. What was the key to Jonah's restoration (see also Acts 3:19-21 and First John 1:5-10)?

6. Paul told the Corinthians about being "in perils of waters ... in perils in the sea" and much of the book of Acts is taken up with his maritime misadventures (13:13, 20:3, 16; 21:1-2). Rather than boast of his courage and commitment in such matters, in what did he choose to boast (Second Corinthians 11:22-30, 12:9-10)? Why?

7. Noah is surely the Bible's most famous seaman. What is the enduring lesson of his voyage, according to the apostle Peter (First Peter 3:18-22)?

8. What causes people's faith to suffer shipwreck (James 1:5-8 and First Timothy 1:18-20)?

9. Every spiritual seaman should be able to discern one sign in the sky. What does the rainbow signify (Genesis 8:20-9:17)?

10. What is the fate of the Earth (Second Peter 3:1-13)?

Lesson 11: Magician

Our modern fascination with magic is actually not so novel after all. Man has been concerned with sorcery, astrology and all sorts of other superstitions and deceptions since his earliest days. While entertaining at times, modern deceivers and those who trade in the works of the flesh fall under the same condemnation as that in the Old and New Testaments.

1. Magic, or sorcery, is condemned throughout the Bible, but its practice never ceases. One of the first places we observe them is in Egypt when Moses asks Pharaoh to let God's people go to worship. Consider Exodus chapters 7-10. What is the difference between what Moses and Aaron did compared to the work of Pharaoh's sorcerers and magicians?

2. Jewish tradition connects Pharaoh's sorcerers with the Jannes and Jambres mentioned by Paul in Second Timothy 3:1-9. What attribute do they epitomize for New Testament readers?

3. The Old Testament is replete with tales of competitions between God's prophets and the devil's astrologers and sorcerers. How did Daniel prove the authenticity of his ability (Daniel 2:1-19)?

4. What was God's legal position on sorcery during the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:26-28,31; 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:9-14)?

5. Who practiced magic in the following passages?

- Second Kings 9:22:
- Nahum 1:1, 3:4-5:
- Isaiah 47:9-13:
- Micah 3:6-7:

6. What is God's judgment regarding sorcery, witchcraft, astrology, etc. in the New Testament (Galatians 5:19-21)? Would this include today's palm reading, horoscopes and magic acts?

7. What did it take for Simon to be converted out of sorcery (Acts 8:9-24)?

8. We learn something about the genuineness of ancient magic from Paul's condemnation of Elymas (Acts 13:4-13). What was Paul's opinion of it?

9. There was, however, something to divination, at least in the age of miracles. Where did the power come from (Acts 16:16-24)?

10. What two groups of pretenders were exposed by the evil spirits (Acts 19:11-16)?

11. How did the Ephesian magicians prove their repentance (Acts 19:17-20)? How far should we go to imitate them regarding today's magic?

Lesson 12: Preacher

How can one go wrong when his work is compared to that of an ox, but his feet are deemed to be beautiful nonetheless?

1. What kind of a preacher was Enoch (Jude 14-15)? Who was the original “preacher of righteousness” and how many souls did he save (Second Peter 2:5)?

2. Where did Ezra the scribe do his preaching (Nehemiah 8:1-4)? What were the three parts of his preaching technique (verse 8)?

3. How was Paul ordained to preach (First Timothy 2:7, Second Timothy 1:11, Acts 22:10-16, 26:16)? How was Timothy trained to preach (Acts 16:3)?

4. Why are the preacher’s feet beautiful—even when they’re not (Romans 10:11-15, First Thessalonians 5:12)?

5. What is the difference between an evangelist and a preacher (Second Timothy 4:5, Acts 21:8)? What is a minister (First Timothy 4:6, First Peter 4:10)? What is the difference between a pastor and a preacher (Ephesians 4:11, Acts 20:28)?

6. On what basis is it proper to pay a preacher (First Corinthians 9:1-14)?
7. Paul describes the qualities of elders and deacons in First Timothy and Titus, but also touches on some qualities that preachers like Timothy needed in Second Timothy. What are they (2:24-26)?
8. With what is he thoroughly equipped (Second Timothy 2:15, 3:16-17; Ecclesiastes 12:10)? What other things is the preacher sometimes tempted to augment his toolbox (First Corinthians 2:1-5, First Peter 4:11)?
9. What is involved in preaching the word “in season and out of season” (Second Timothy 4:1-5; cf. Acts 20:26-27)?
10. What does the preacher’s uniform look like (Mark 1:6, Matthew 23:5)? What titles should he wear (Matthew 23:6-12; Psalm 111:9)?

Lesson 13: Review

1. In what way are Christians themselves then likened to soldiers (Ephesians 6:10-18)? Whom does Paul identify as our enemy (Second Corinthians 2:11, First Peter 5:8)? How is a preacher like a soldier (Second Timothy 2:1-4)?
2. What is meant by the athlete's being temperate in all things (First Corinthians 9:24-27; cf. Titus 2:12)?
3. What was the farming problem that Jesus recognized as he beheld lost souls (Matthew 9:35-37)? Why does the problem persist? Think!
4. What "bait" did the apostles use in fishing for men (Romans 1:16, 6:23, 10:17)? What more carnal baits are commonly used by churches today?
5. What spiritual lessons do we learn from Zacchaeus the chief publican (Luke 19:1-10)?
6. Who is the Bible's most famous and lovable harlot? Why is she noteworthy (Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25)? Give some examples of ways that modern women might sell their bodies, even if it is not for actual sexual intercourse (Matthew 5:27-30).

7. What seat did the scribes and Pharisees occupy (Matthew 23:1-4)? What quality harmed their reputation with Christ (cf. Matthew 23:23-28)?
8. What carpenter's tool is described in Amos 7:7-8? What is its literal and spiritual purpose (John 12:48, Hebrews 4:11-13)?
9. Consider Proverbs 25:4. What is the metal smith's dross and its spiritual equivalent (Second Timothy 2:19-22, Galatians 5:19-21, First Corinthians 5:7)?
10. What causes people's faith to suffer shipwreck (James 1:5-8 and First Timothy 1:18-20)?
11. What is God's judgment regarding sorcery, witchcraft, astrology, etc. in the New Testament (Galatians 5:19-21)? Would this include today's palm reading, horoscopes and magic acts?
12. What is involved in preaching the word "in season and out of season" (Second Timothy 4:1-5; cf. Acts 20:26-27)?

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