

The background is a stylized landscape with a warm orange and brown color palette. At the top center is a solid orange circle representing the sun. Below it, the title 'becoming REAL' is written in a white, handwritten-style font. The word 'becoming' is in a cursive script, while 'REAL' is in a bold, uppercase, sans-serif font. The landscape below features rolling hills in shades of orange and dark brown. A small, simple orange silhouette of a person is walking on a ridge of a hill in the lower middle section.

becoming  
REAL

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL  
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

*eastbrook church*



*becoming*  
**REAL**

*A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL ON  
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT  
[MATTHEW, PART 3]*



*eastbrook church*

# INTRODUCTION

What does it look like to live real life with God?

There may be numerous answers to that question, but perhaps no portion of Scripture provides a clearer picture of what it means to live real life with God than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

St. Augustine of Hippo said that anyone who would "soberly consider" the Sermon on the Mount would encounter there "a perfect standard of the Christian life." Even those who do not follow Christ experience the power of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon of the Mount. Writing of his own encounter with the New Testament and the message of Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi wrote: "the Sermon on the Mount...went straight to my heart."

The Sermon on the Mount shows us what it means to become real in our life with God.

The Gospel of Matthew alternates between narrative—stories from Jesus' life—and discourse—teaching by Jesus. Five major teaching sections punctuate the gospel with the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 being the most revered of them all. While other portions of Scripture echo the Sermon on the Mount, particularly the "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke's gospel (Luke 6:20-49), in an unparalleled way this sermon displays Jesus' wise and astute teaching.

In this master sermon, Jesus articulates what living in God's kingdom looks like, touching on topics like prayer, fasting, alms-giving, murder, truth-telling, adultery, divorce, worry, and so much more. While the entire Gospel of Matthew can be described as a handbook for discipleship, the Sermon on the Mount offers the most clear and concise outline of the pathway of true discipleship—true life with God—found anywhere in Scripture.

In particular, the Sermon on the Mount displays Jesus as the new Moses. In ways that echo the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount shows Jesus as the One who has come from God with a deeper revelation of God's truth. There is a consistency with the Old Testament law in Jesus' teaching here, as Jesus says: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*" (Matthew 5:17).<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, there is something that refreshes and surpasses that law, as Jesus offers many contrasts: "*You have heard that it was said...but I tell you*" (5:21-22). The response from the crowds gathered around is powerful: "*When Jesus had finished saying these things,*

*the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (7:28-29).*

The devotional booklet you hold in your hands is a an 11-week guide written by people within the Eastbrook family to help us draw near to Jesus Christ as we prepare ourselves for the joys of Easter. Traditionally, this journey is called Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and carrying forward to Easter Sunday. Lent is a forty-day journey, echoing the forty-year journey of Israel to the Promised Land and Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness. Lent aims to lead us into deeper engagement with God through prayerful reflection and reading of Scripture. In particular Lent focuses on Jesus' path to Jerusalem and the crucifixion, a time when things became real for Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

This year, our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount will extend beyond Lent, and so, our Lenten devotional is part of a longer devotional that accompanies that longer series on the Sermon on the Mount. Beginning in Lent, with its emphasis on Jesus' steady walk toward the Cross, we will carry forward into Easter season, with its emphasis on Jesus' resurrection from death. This echoes two basic movements of our discipleship to Jesus: dying to self and rising to new life in Christ.

I can think of no more meaningful portion of Scripture to serve as the anchor of our forty-day journey during the season of Lent than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps now more than ever we understand that living as disciples means living with Christ and in His Kingdom in the face of many other options. Perhaps now more than ever we feel the challenge of our calling to truly live in Jesus' way in the face of many temptations and challenges. May God grow us through this journey together so that we might truly "become real" in Christ.

The peace of the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matt Erickson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Matt Erickson

Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church

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## **ABOUT EASTBROOK 365:**

Due to the uncertainty of the season we find ourselves in, we at Eastbrook are writing and producing a year of daily devotionals that we are calling "Eastbrook 365." These devotionals will align with our sermon series from September 2020-August 2021 and will help Eastbrookers near and far grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus, while also continuing to pilgrimage together as a Church.

### **YOU CAN READ THESE DEVOTIONALS IN A VARIETY OF WAYS:**

- Download the Eastbrook App for your phone and read each day ([eastbrook.org/app](http://eastbrook.org/app))
- Download individual PDFs of each devotional to read at home or print out at home ([eastbrook.org/devotionals](http://eastbrook.org/devotionals))
- Sign up for the Eastbrook 365 Devotional email to be delivered to your inbox each morning ([eastbrook.org/email](http://eastbrook.org/email))
- Pick up a paper copy at church, either at a service, or in the Church Office, as each devotional begins (limited copies available)

We pray God's blessings on you as you spend time with Him each day.

## **HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL:**

1. Plan a 15-minute window each day when you can thoughtfully do the daily reading. Set a time, create a pattern, and stick to it.
2. Decide whether you want to invite your friends, family, or small group to join you.
3. Begin each day by reading the Scripture passage printed at the top of each page. Each Saturday is a "Sabbath Day" for rest, reflection or catch-up.
4. Read the devotional and reflect on it. Use the reflection questions to talk about it with someone else or to journal on your own.
5. Use the online version of the devotional readings to reach out to friends online and around the world. Invite them to follow along with you during this year of devotionals from Eastbrook, which we are calling "Eastbrook 365." Find the online version at [eastbrook.org/devotionals](http://eastbrook.org/devotionals). Use Eastbrook's Facebook page ([facebook.com/eastbrook-church](https://facebook.com/eastbrook-church)) and other social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram ([@eastbrookchurch](https://twitter.com/eastbrookchurch)) to share ideas. Post your comments, thoughts, and questions in the online version. Read others' comments. This is a great way to learn from the perspective of others.



# DYING TO BECOME REAL

READ MATTHEW 16:24-28

*"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)*

I remember when as a teenager I had a tumor removed from my leg. The growth wasn't cancerous but was interfering with the development of my muscles and tendons, specifically around my knee joint, and could cause long-term difficulties. If I wanted to avoid trouble in the future, it would need to be removed through surgery and a long recovery afterwards. While painful at the time, I'm thankful that I can easily run and walk without hindrance now later in my life.

Sometimes things have to come apart before they can be put back together. Sometimes life has to go down before it can go up.

Jesus knows that in a world touched by sin and evil everything is upside-down. What we think is life is often deadly or lifeless. What we think is abundance is often vacuous. Who has not had the realization at some point in their life that a pursuit, a relationship, an activity is more of a dead-end than it is a living way forward?

Jesus knows that an upside-down world with upside-down lives needs to be put to rights. It is because of that need that Jesus, the one and only Son, came as Messiah from the Father. It is because of this that He will walk steadily toward Jerusalem and the suffering that waits for Him there. It is because of this that Jesus will be crucified and die. It is for this that Jesus will rise victoriously by the Father's will and power.

And it is because of this that Jesus invites all who hear Him to become real, fully human, by dying to self in order to live in Him. This calling to take up the cross is not rooted in some perverse love of suffering, but rather in a clear-eyed understanding of the radical change He knows is necessary. Like a surgeon diagnosing the problem and naming the resolution, Jesus calls us to die in order to become real in Him.

We begin our Lenten journey with our eyes also clear through the vision that Jesus gives. May we take up our cross this Lent that we might become even more real because of His transforming truth and grace at work within us.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What is one way you might need to die to yourself this Lent?
- What is a specific practice or activity you might want to take up as you begin this Lenten journey?

# LOOK TO THE CROSS

READ MATTHEW 10:32-39

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18

Among the elders at the church I attended in college was an assistant district attorney. Affable and energetic, he made a point of encouraging the visiting students in particular. I didn't get to know him well, but he knew me enough so that when I showed up in court for a public affairs reporting assignment one weekday, he recognized me—but not warmly.

Fortunately, I had already learned from one of my journalism professors that there was an attorney at the courthouse who had a particular loathing for reporters. My professor assured us that we should not take such things personally; it comes with the job.

Next time I saw the attorney in church, I got the cold shoulder. I resisted the impulse to say to him, "Hey, I'm not that guy," for had I really understood his issues, I may very well have been that guy, and with nothing to apologize for. In any case, I wasn't long to remain in that town, and not likely to see him again at his day job. His aversion toward members of the press, even a college kid who wore the same pair of pants five days a week, was not my problem.

But conflict is a problem, and it is not something we can escape by moving to a new town. Life is contentious, and peace at any cost, including at the cost of our integrity, is not the way of the Cross. Jesus wants us to know how much more this will be true when contending for the Faith. Sometimes people are simply not going to like us, or like what we have to say, because of what we believe as Christians.

Certainly we see this in public affairs, but perhaps all the more among the people we long to be closest to—our families. While some may love to fight, Jesus is not asking us to be obnoxious; He is letting us know that being double-minded and belonging to Him don't go together. We are called to acknowledge Him even when doing so is alienating for us while in this world. No, we should not expect this to be easy. Will we fail? Ask the Apostle Peter.

At this start of Lent, a season in which we give particular attention to examining our hearts and loyalties, let's look to the Cross as our hope and salvation.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- When has your faith brought you into conflict with family or friends?
- What aspect of your faith is hardest for those around you to accept?

*by john schuessler*

## OUR NECESSARY FOOD

READ JOHN 6:60-69

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." (John 6:53 & 55)*

For many of us, John 6 is well known for the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee and His familiar declaration, *"I am the bread of life."* Today's Scripture reading, however, brings into focus a passage we perhaps skip over or completely avoid because, well, it's hard to swallow.

The claims Jesus makes in the previous verses (see v. 35-59) are startling, even offensive to His followers, to the extent that some of them turn away in shocked rejection while others draw near with awe and renewed faith.

Feast on me, Jesus invites His followers. To eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood is to be united with Jesus Christ, as intimately as the food and drink we consume and digest. He is our real food, our real drink, our lasting nourishment. To convey how life-giving and necessary this union is, Jesus compares it to His own relationship with His Father: *I live because of the Father.*

Likewise, eternal and abundant life for us can only be found in Jesus. It is a union made possible through the Holy Spirit and granted by the Father. How will we respond? Will we turn away and reject Jesus and His words? We may be quick to say, "That's an interesting perspective, Jesus, but I know where to find food and drink elsewhere."

How prone we are to consider Jesus as our Sunday meal, pursuing our weekday satisfaction in other places, in other people, in ourselves.

Jesus turns to face His small group of followers and asks, *Do you want to go away as well?*

We can trust that Jesus will never water down or retract what He says. His words cut to the heart of the matter, and they are true. With confidence and childlike trust, Peter responds, *To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

In Jesus, he has found his master, his friend, his Lord and Savior...his life. May Jesus receive our "yes" as well, for truly, He is the living bread that came down from heaven.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- When is it hardest for you to follow Jesus? What helps you continue?



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS CALLS US TO radical CHANGE

Over the course of the last few days, we have been reading challenging words from Jesus: *"take up your cross," "deny yourself," "follow me," "I did not come to bring peace but a sword," "eat my flesh and drink my blood."*

These last three days have reminded us that Jesus calls us to radical change. Take a moment to look at the cover of this devotional booklet. You will see a very small pilgrim, climbing a hill, journeying upwards. But the peaks and valleys depicted here reflect that the journey of faith is not linear. What does this bring to mind from your own life of faith? Where are you in your journey with Jesus right now? What is He calling you to do in response to this week's readings?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# THE WAY DOWN IS THE WAY UP

READ MATTHEW 5:1-11

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10)*

This has been a challenging year like no other. The hits just seem to keep on coming. If you're anything like me, reading these familiar words from Jesus that begin the Sermon on the Mount are like a balm for my soul. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is a masterful lesson in which Jesus calls us to a new way of living, a truly Christian ethic. And it all, unexpectedly, begins with these proverb-like blessings called the "Beatitudes" (*beati sunt*, meaning "blessed are" in Latin).

But rather than blessing great deeds and kind words, Jesus proclaims eight blessings over kingdom people that seem to be a sort of progression downward. To start, these kingdom people are *"poor in spirit,"* but in the next verse they are actually *"mourning."* Their mourning results in *"meekness,"* which leads them to *"hunger and thirst for righteousness."* After hungering and thirsting for righteousness, they are filled with *"mercy"* (makes sense!), which makes them *"pure in heart."* Eventually their journey takes them from a change of mindset and heart into action: they take up the hard work of *"peacemaking."* But the tenderized, transformed, humbled peacemaker isn't the end goal of being a kingdom person. Jesus goes on to bless those who are actually *"persecuted because of righteousness,"* those who are insulted and slandered for their faith. Jesus is laying out a new ethic here that is one in which the way down is the way up; the blessings flow as we allow the Holy Spirit to tenderize our lives through pain, hardship, and persecution.

I think what this means for us today is that the painful seasons of growth, silence, death, mourning, and challenge are actually an opportunity to walk the path of sanctification; to take the next step. As we allow life circumstances and the work of the Holy Spirit to humble us, we are walking the path of Christ and becoming kingdom people. Humility is actually the pathway to glory in Jesus' kingdom; hardship like we have experienced this past year can tenderize and prune us into more sensitive people who are blessed: the way down is the way up.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Which of these beatitudes do you desire to experience more of in your life? What does it mean to you that persecution for our faith is a way that we are blessed as kingdom people?

# REAL LIFE

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

Are you familiar with the phrase, "What Would Jesus Do?" It was popular in the 1990's among church youth groups. It served to remind Christians that they are called to live like Jesus in everyday life. Did you know that this same phrase was used in the late 1800's? Yes! It was used by Charles Sheldon who wrote, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* The novel depicts an encounter with a homeless man who hears people singing inside a church, "All for Jesus...all my thoughts, all my doings, all my days and all my hours." He imagines how different the troubled world would be if the people singing were motivated to live out the song lyrics.

Back in 55 AD, Paul pointed to what (or who) is our motivation for *real life!* It's Jesus! He is our divine example, our moral compass, the One who inspires every believer to surrender all that we are, all that we have, for God's divine purposes.

If the song of salvation is truly in our hearts, our worship will be *real* worship that extends beyond the brick and mortar of a church. So, is my *real* identity in the name of Jesus, or am I lost in trying to make a name for myself? Have I been set free by the truth that is in Jesus or am I still imprisoned by lies? (Self-absorption, self-preservation and self-interest...)

In other words, if Christianity was a crime would there be enough evidence in my *real life* to convict me? Has knowing Jesus transformed the way that I live in my *real life*? Are my daily choices portraying the humility of Christ or self-absorbed person? Is my *real life* displaying the wardrobe of Christ, adorned by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience or am I modeling self-righteousness? Have I surrendered all that I am, all that I have to God, for His purposes, or does pride, privilege or politics still have a hold on me?

*Real life* calls us to put off the old self which is corrupted and to put on the new self that is ours In Christ!

*Real life* frees us to live as God's servants, just like Jesus, the Son of God.

*Real life* empowers us to not only sing on Sundays but to actually live out the worship song lyrics, so that our lives exalt the Name of Jesus and bring glory to God.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Read Ephesians 4:22-5:2 and use this passage to make a list of the ways that you desire to portray more of Christ in your real life. Name them and invite God to transform your life into the likeness of Christ.

*By Teresa Freding*

## WHAT IS REQUIRED?

READ MICAH 6:6-8

*"And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)*

Over the years God has given me opportunity to engage with male inmates in state prisons. Serving inmates has opened my heart to God's love for those incarcerated as He has allowed me to preach, lead Bible studies, and do one-on-one pastoral Zoom calls. It has been a rich time. However, in order for me to be allowed in the prisons, there have been a number of requirements for me to first meet according to Department of Corrections regulations: a personal application, in-person meetings with department of correction officials, background checks to be conducted, rules of conduct to observe, and a recommendation from an approved prison ministry—all these required in order to gain access to minister within the walls of state prisons. Requirements must be met.

In our reading today, the Old Testament prophet, Micah, asks questions about the requirements to be met by the people of Israel in order to live lives which are God-honoring. His question is birthed out of his deep concern for the poor, marginalized, and often forgotten ones in Israel 700 + years before the life of Jesus. Justice, mercy, and humility are the requirements, not burnt offerings, not offering one's firstborn, not perfunctory activities performed to fulfill the law's requirements. The LORD looks for actions that flow from the heart.

Centuries later, Jesus underscores this in the Beatitudes as He reminds His audience that blessing flows out of an individual's compassionate consideration for those in need of God's kindness and goodness. *"Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy"* (Matthew 5:7). Daily acts of extending mercy (Greek: *mercy, eleos, ἔλεος*) to others is a requirement for us as Christ-followers in order for us to fully taste God's daily mercy in our lives. This is normal Christian life stuff—not simply required of those who serve the poor in far-off lands or destitute areas in our own nation. So, what does God require, ask of us? Mercy.

Theologian Millard Erickson writes, "If grace contemplates humans as sinful, guilty and condemned, mercy sees them as miserable and needy."

### FOR REFLECTION:

- How is your faith at work for those in need of experiencing God's covenant-keeping love—those living in need or experiencing misery?
- What one thing will you do to live out mercy this week?

# BLESSED

READ PSALM 24:1-10

We are blessed. It has always been the plan of God to bless all the peoples of the world. Even when Adam and Eve sinned, and life and death was introduced into the world, God was committed to find a way to bring us back to Himself, the Source of real life. He would do this through Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). Psalm 24 complements the beatitudes in Matthew 5 because it shows us how we can be blessed with real life in Jesus.

Psalm 24:4 states: *“The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Savior.”* This is very similar to Matthew 5:8 where Jesus states: *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”* As King David mentions in Psalm 24, and King Jesus expounds on in Matthew 5, we receive the blessing of God when we have a pure heart. However, the fact is that no one has a pure heart, but for the saving work of the Holy Spirit. That is exactly the point. To be blessed and enjoy real life with God in His kingdom where Jesus is King, we must be poor in spirit (Matthew 5:4), acknowledging that we have nothing without God. That is where Jesus takes over. He cleanses us with His precious blood (1 John 1:7), adopts us into His family (John 1:12), and ushers us into God’s kingdom that is boundless, limitless, unending in its spiritual blessings in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

It is fitting therefore that having received God’s blessings; we lift up the gates of our heart that the King of Glory may come in. Who is this King? Who is He, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—He is the King of glory. (Psalm 24:9-10). Yes, Jesus is the King of glory. He blesses us with real life and the ability to have a pure heart. Praise be His holy name forever.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What does it mean to you to have a pure heart?
- How has following Jesus as King blessed your life?



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25 **DEVOTED IN LOVE, FAITHFUL IN PRAYER**

READ ROMANS 12:9-21

After a thirteen-year estrangement, my dad and I reconciled toward the end of 2018. Five months later he was diagnosed with advanced small cell carcinoma, and this past March, just as the Covid tidal wave was slamming into our world, I was with him at his home in Oklahoma when he died.

Within the space of those two sentences lies a story of one of the most miraculous gifts of my life, an experience that showed me what it means to *“be devoted to one another in love.”* (Romans 12:10) It was a time when every task and effort was in service not just to my dad’s care, but to the clarity that God provided for me the day he was diagnosed. The message was clear and unequivocal: *Show up. Say yes. Keep your eyes on God.*

I started traveling to Oklahoma to be with my dad nearly every month after that, where I spent my time doing whatever needed to be done. Helping my dad hang pictures and driving him to chemo appointments shifted to managing meetings with hospice nurses, which then gave way to the task of keeping him as comfortable as possible. Some days that was about dabbing his forehead with a tissue when he became feverish. One night it was about driving to Sonic to fulfill his craving for a cold lemon slushie. It didn’t much matter to me where and how I was called to be of service; what mattered was knowing that everywhere I went—Walmart, the post office, and, yes, Sonic—I was not alone. Even as I slept in my dad’s guest bedroom, I knew God was with me.

I started each morning and ended each day on my knees with the Lord’s Prayer, knowing that by being faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12) my focus would stay on Christ’s love for us. It was a time of tremendous focus, profound grief, and spectacular joy. *How easily time could have slipped by without my dad and I finding our way back to each other,* I’d think, which would then inspire an immediate, wholehearted THANK YOU to God. Thanks to Him, and the love of Jesus Christ, my dad and I were given the greatest gift we could have ever asked for, which was time—to be together, and to love each other. In the end, we overcame everything that had gotten in our way years earlier. In the end, what we had was good. (Romans 12:21)

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- What does it look like in your faith community to be devoted to one another in love?

# ONENESS

READ EPHESIANS 4:1-7

*"Search me O God and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts.  
See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."  
(Psalm 139:23-24)*

Lent is a time of soul searching. As I walk with Jesus through the final weeks of His life on earth, I ask myself, "Is my life what He desires it to be?" Jesus knew the Cross was the key plan to restore life on earth. He lived in constant communication with His Father. His love for me and the salvation of mankind propelled Him forward. He laid down His life so I could live with Him. How do I respond to such a sacrificial love?

Paul says it so succinctly: *"Live a life worthy of the calling you have received."* Love Him the way He loves you. Let Him use the life He has purchased. Love is a commitment: I am yours and you are mine. It calls for a lifestyle of submission: I want what you want. *"Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."* There is nothing more important in my life than Him. He's given us His Word, constant open access to Him, and His Spirit to live in us and empower us. Am I utilizing these treasures? *"Be completely humble."* I can't do anything for Him in my strength, I must come to Him to receive the power to do anything. *"Be gentle, patient, bearing with each other in love."* These qualities build a secure community. Everyone is equally important and valuable; we need each other. There is no room for pride or competition. We need the Holy Spirit to make us humble, gentle, patient and loving. It is counter-cultural. We have learned to look out for ourselves; we value independence, strength, competence and winners. God has to put those values to death and remake our minds to see our need for oneness, the strong with the weak, the rich with the poor, the old with the young. We need each other, like the organs in our body, we need to work together. *"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."* How am I growing here? All other important issues of our day must fall away for the sake of unity in the Spirit. Oneness is the goal of God for His church: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father—over all, through all, and in all. That's a lot of oneness.

His grace has been given to us to accomplish this. By His grace I want to live a life worthy of His calling.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Make an honest comparison of your heart versus the list of attributes Paul gives in Ephesians 4. Where do you most need God to lead you?

*by nancy erickson*



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS' Blessing IS ACCESSIBLE TO YOU

This week, we have been studying the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as other Old and New Testament passages that support these passages. The beatitudes reveal that being blessed with the good life with God is accessible to us through Jesus Christ.

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week? Was it the blessings of Matthew 5? The call to real life from Philippians 2? The challenge of humility and mercy from Micah 6? The promise of blessing from Psalm 24? The call to devotion, love, and prayer from Romans 12? The appeal for oneness from Ephesians 4? Take a little more time to consider what God is speaking to you this week.

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# SALT AND LIGHT

READ MATTHEW 5:12-16

*"...And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)*

Jesus called His disciples to their real identity in God. They experienced God's power and love in Jesus' teaching, ministry and fellowship. God's covenant with His people was being fulfilled in Jesus, and His kingdom was breaking in! The contrast between God's blessed kingdom and the sinful, wounded world was great. God's righteousness was offensive to the ways of the world and would bring them persecution. Yet this high calling was reason to rejoice! Jesus called His disciples salt and light. Salt was for preserving and flavoring and in Jesus they had new life. His light was to shine in the world through them. They were to carry the work of Jesus to a world in need of deliverance from the spiritual darkness of sin and death.

The high calling of Jesus continues for all members of the Body of Christ to be salt and light. We believe in Jesus and His sacrificial death and resurrection, and God's kingdom has come into our hearts. In our new and eternal life in Jesus, the Holy Spirit works in our confession and repentance of sin, forgiveness and restoration. Jesus is with us as we meditate on God's Word, pray, trust and obey God's will, gather and serve together, and grow in His love and goodness. Rejoicing in God's presence, we are present in the world to bear good fruit in all we do. In humility we influence others with the mercy, grace, truth and love of Jesus and are His life preserving and illuminating presence in the world.

Jesus warns His followers of *"salt that loses its saltiness."* If we live in sinful ways we will be ineffective and trampled on. We are not to be proud, false, hypocritical or self-centered. Instead, when we humbly acknowledge our weakness to God, He transforms and gifts us to bear His image and share His Good News with joy and hope. God brings us to greater glory as we worship Him with renewed hearts and minds. When people see Jesus in our lives as we follow Him, they are drawn to our Heavenly Father and praise Him!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What does being God's salt and light mean to you? Take time to reflect on and pray with Jesus about your identity in Him.
- Where and with whom is God calling you to be His salt and light?

# BECOMING THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD: THE MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

*"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

I've always loved different translations of God's Word. Oftentimes I search out words or phrases, letting the Word teach me the Word. I'm not one to read too many commentaries, rich as they are. I prefer to search out gems as the Holy Spirit guides me. So in reading 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, I ventured into personalizing it as though God were speaking right to me...

"So now, I don't regard anyone from a worldly point of view, although I used to! I also thought of Jesus Christ that way, distant, for 'others' and not me because of my sinful lifestyle. BUT GOD opened my eyes, redirected my path, reached down and pulled me out of my wayward and blind life! I no longer viewed Jesus Christ the old way—I was made new, becoming a new creation! My heart, eyes, whole being were gone and I became an eye-opened, heart pumping new person. I was so aware of God's cleansing of my old self, becoming a new creation, that I couldn't help but share it with everyone.

I know that all of this is from God, who showed me the lengths He went to save me...that in sending Jesus He was reconciling me to Him—the whole world even! And He didn't count my sins against me. So now, He's made me an ambassador of reconciliation. It is my privilege and OBLIGATION to tell others about this great mystery of which I now know and believe"...

In my life I have had the honor of meeting Christians from all over the world. Some 'salty' in the sense that their lives are making a difference in the flavor of their culture. Others are beacons of light. Their examples spur me on. My prayer is that my life too would bring flavor and light to my own little neck of the woods.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How has God made you a new creation?
- How has this motivated you to share His love with others?

# NO MORE EXCUSES

READ LUKE 12:8-12

*"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

I used to read Exodus 3 & 4 and get so mad at Moses. I mean, here he is in conversation with God via the burning bush and God is giving him clear instructions on a job He has for him. But all Moses does is try and weasel out of it: "Who am I that I should go?" "What can I say to them?" "What if they don't believe me?" And my favorite, "But I don't talk good!"

Excuse after excuse after excuse.

I mean, if I had been God I probably would have made the fire shoot out and give Moses a little burn just to get him to stop!

Then I think about myself. I know I am called to be an "ambassador" for Christ, a witness if you will. But how often do I hesitate and make excuses? "I need to build a better relationship with them first, I don't want to scare them away." "I don't know where they're coming from, I should probably know more about them so that I can be more intentional with what I say." "I don't have the right Bible verses memorized for this situation."

Excuse after excuse after excuse.

Our verses today tell us that we should expect to have opportunities to be witnesses for Christ that we're not "prepared" for, but that what we're expected to do is be faithful and honest. To be true to who we are and to be willing to simply say, "I am a follower of Christ."

And like God said to Moses in 4:12, *"Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."* Here in Luke, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will help us know what to say when we need words of Truth to share.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What situations do you find yourself hesitating to share your faith in? How can you become more confident and ready in those situations?

## ...WAIT?

READ ACTS 1:4-8

Christ gives them the command to wait. We need to be obedient to His perfect timing and plan regarding the “when, the where and the how” of fulfilling His good work: not our natural understanding.

How did the Apostles feel about this? Remember that after His crucifixion they were dispirited, they went into hiding and didn’t know what to do.

Then imagine them as they got to spend 40 joyous days with the Risen Christ. They were ready to GO! ...and He says to wait!

Do we think that they knew what they were waiting for? Did they understand? Even then they were still thinking in terms of an earthly, political kingdom. Christ gently rebukes them and implies that much more is coming.

Today’s text and Matthew 5:12-16 show us how God esteems us when we are obedient to His commands: “*salt and light*”, “*my witnesses*” (to everywhere). The disciples were able to be effective in doing the LORD’s work only after the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It’s clear that they would have caused harm if they had charged ahead on their own.

It’s clear that only after we can see ourselves as the LORD does that we see ourselves as we really are. Only then, led by The Holy Spirit, can we encourage and witness however, wherever and whenever He leads.

We all are magnificently blessed to be a part of working out His plan for the salvation of the world. It’s in understanding that while His plans will be accomplished, our part begins when we accept His vision for our lives: we choose to become His. He is truth; therefore any understanding of the reality of His plan that is based on our own understanding is false and just won’t work.

The disciples’ obedience by waiting in Jerusalem enabled them to “*become real...witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.*”

At various stages in our work, we prayed for the LORD to show us His plan, to give us His heart for His plan and then to make us obedient. The LORD has never failed to delight us as His better plans have unfolded during our walk: wherever, whenever and with whomever He wished.

We humbly give Him Thanks.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- What do you think is the most difficult aspect of following Christ? Doing *what* He wants you to do, or doing it *when* He wants you to do it?

# COMMISSIONED

READ MATTHEW 28:16-20

Since I was a young child in social studies, I have been interested in watching the presidential inauguration ceremonies. There was something so awe-inspiring about seeing someone take on such a deep commitment to so many people from so many backgrounds. I was amazed that anyone could or would want such a job.

As I watched this year's inauguration, the same feelings came back. It is not the political backing or even the level of leadership that intrigues me. It is the willingness to give up one's individuality for the collective good of all. It is a needed role, but a man or woman cannot fully meet the needs of all people, but Jesus was, is and always will be!

Matthew 28:16-20 is an extremely important passage of Scripture, because we receive our commission from the King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus has risen and has met the disciples. The moment is awe-inspiring, because what few could comprehend had indeed happened as Jesus told them. The disciples were given the commission to go and tell everyone about the precious gift of relationship with Jesus; to offer them the free gift of salvation that was given to us by the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. They were to go to all nations, because this was not a race or culturally-exclusive gift. This gift was and is for anyone willing to receive it.

One thing that I have heard from every President that has been inaugurated is their desire to do what they feel is best for our nation. This is a huge burden and undertaking, because as human beings, we are limited in our ability to do what is best for all. However, Jesus is able! Let us remember the great commission that was given by the Almighty. Let us proclaim the goodness and the gift of Jesus Christ that was freely given. This gift is a unifier and the only thing that draws us together as a people. The Word of God can and will break down the walls that have been built up in the hearts and minds of people. I am thankful that no matter where God places me, that I am able to walk in the commission that He has proclaimed. We are blessed that God has given His Holy Spirit to help us accomplish this great task.

God has already laid out the blueprint for what our country and world needs, let us refocus our attention to doing the job He commissioned us to do.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Which part of the great commission is most intimidating to you?  
How does His promise to be with you reassure you of this call?

*By Frederick Pierce, Sr.*



# SALT AND LIGHT FOR THE MASTER

READ COLOSSIANS 4:1-6

Whether we are employers or not, all believers also have a Master in heaven. The word “Master” can be substituted with the word “Lord” and refers to someone supreme in authority.

As followers of Christ and ones who are resolved to learn at His feet, we must remember that He submitted Himself to His Father. He did not do His own will but the will of the One who sent Him (John 6:38). As Christians, we know Jesus is watching and we are accountable to Him.

Be prayerful. Be watchful. Be thankful. Be wise. Make the most of opportunities. Speak with grace and salt... All qualities which should characterize our lives as disciples. After all, a disciple should be like his lord and a slave like his master. If we consistently did the will of the Master, we would be like a shining city set on a hill. Our light would be visible for all to see (Matthew 5:14).

Was Jesus prayerful? Watchful? Thankful? Wise? Did He make the most of opportunities? Speak with grace and salt? Check . Check . Check . He was and yes, He did all this and more.

There is a watching and waiting world out there. For those who have no idea who the God of the Bible is or who grew up with a skewed view of Him, we may be the first or only true representative of Jesus they encounter. Will they be able to see Christ in us, or are we so full of ourselves or so much like the world that there is no room for Christ to shine through?

Lent is a time for sober reflection—for abstaining from the fleshly to free up room for spiritual contemplation and growth. It can be a time of pruning and recalibration if we are willing. As we ponder Christ’s journey to the Cross in submission to His Master and Father’s will, we have the opportunity to once again pledge ourselves to be faithful disciples of our Lord.

What is inside of a vessel is what shines through and what spills out when full. You do not find oranges growing on pepper plants or get milk from a chicken (compare with Matthew 7:16-18). People see who you really are from your words and your actions. Let us resolve to be faithful disciples of Christ who bring glory to our Master in word and deed.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What are some ways employers can treat their employees justly and with fairness? What happens when Christians do not extend justice and righteousness to others?



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS' FOLLOWERS ARE TO BE *salt + light*

This week we examined some of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in which He calls His followers to be "salt and light," as well as some other New Testament passages that expound upon this calling. The loss of saltiness in our lives seems to occur when we fail to take up our cross daily, and follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

What challenged you this week? Did anything encourage you? Is there any action that you are called to do as a result of what you have learned and read?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# THE LAW OF GRACE

READ MATTHEW 5:17-20

At first glance there seems to be two responses to this passage: 1. Strive toward the impossible goal of perfection in our own broken humanness or 2. Throw up our hands in total despair at the impossibility of ever perfectly following the Law in our own strength. Neither option seems optimal. In searching our own hearts and memories, each of us knows the many times we have failed, have come up short, have ended up right back where we had resolved we would never go again.

Fortunately, the Lord in His wisdom, love, mercy, and grace knew that left on our own, we were utterly hopeless.

*"But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* (Ephesians 2:4-10)

Praise God—for this is our hope! The impossible task of fulfilling the Law to completion was never meant to be shouldered by us. We cannot and will not ever rescue ourselves from our sin. No one can ever BE good enough or DO good enough. It is only through our faith in Christ that we are saved, and even our very faith is a freely given gift from a merciful and kind God. May we live in the freedom from perfection and performance, knowing that Christ has done it all out of his great love for us and offer Him our days out of gratitude and gratefulness. To Him to be the glory and the honor and the praise forever and ever. Amen.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What does it mean to you personally that Jesus came to fulfill the law?
- How can you rest from striving for perfection and instead move forward in confidence of God's grace?

# GO AND BE RECONCILED

READ MATHEW 5:21-26

Every culture has strengths and weaknesses that reveal themselves over time. While Bengali culture has many excellent points, one weakness became apparent when a trusted and respected Christian leader, Jamal, divorced his wife. Other believers, who previously only had positive things to say about him, suddenly started speaking about Jamal's faults and misbehavior that they had noticed over the previous years. When I probed the reasons for their previous silence, I discovered that when Bengalis gain "dirt" on someone, they do not go to that person to help him or her overcome the problems. Rather they save this knowledge for a strategic moment when they can weaponize it for their own advantage. I was stunned at this example that reminded me how every culture has unholy values and behaviors that, if left unexamined, can bind and blind believers.

In today's passage, Jesus talks about fulfilling the law by examining the heart behind behavior. The Mosaic law said do not murder; Jesus tells us that holding anger, insulting, and cursing are all on the same spectrum as murder, and all are worthy of judgment. Real righteousness requires us not merely to restrain our violent behavior, but also to resolve our lingering anger and grudges against believers.

So, what steps can we take when we are offended by a believer and we find ourselves nursing a grudge in our hearts? Or when we understand that another is offended by something we have done? Jesus tells us to take rapid initiative to seek reconciliation and peace with the other. Do not delay. Seek them out. Apologize; that is, admit fault and express remorse. This takes priority over routine religious practices. Do your best to settle the matter in the relationship, before going to authorities. Because if authorities become involved, the penalty is more serious.

My experience is that none of these steps come naturally. Our hearts are deeply self-centered, easily offended, and desperate to avoid pain and shame. The unnatural work of remaking our hearts requires the supernatural work of God's Spirit.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Today, what relationship do you need to mend? What grudges are you still nursing? What self-concern keeps you from seeking the best for others? Take action today to seek reconciliation.

# FRUIT OF LIFE

READ MATTHEW 5:27-32

Take a moment to slowly read the passage today. What feelings or thoughts come to you as you read it? Do you find yourself skimming through it? Or, does it stir a sense of obligation or even guilt?

It is quite the heavy teaching. For me, this passage has been poorly used by myself and others to instill a sense of religious ambition and legalism. We can get laser-focused on Jesus's example of cutting off a hand or poking an eye out. We focus on how corrupt our hearts are, and how much we must conquer this corruption through making rules and restrictions.

But let's take a step back from that for a moment and pause to journey back to the Garden. Remember the image we're given in the Garden? Two trees, two choices: the choice to eat of the tree of Life, or eat of the tree of Death.

As we read Matthew 5 we need to remember who is speaking: Jesus Himself. We need to keep the Garden in our mind here. We need to remember that Jesus never left the Garden. He has enjoyed complete fellowship with God since before time began. He only knows the fruit of the tree of Life, and the wholeness that comes with being in complete relationship with God. To Him, that wholeness is so fulfilling, so wonderful, that it far outweighs any temptation to wander off. And if we're lucky, we get to experience a glimpse of this in our own lives, friendships, families, and marriages.

I think of the deepest relationships in my life. The ones that have been with me through all the twists and turns of life. Because our relationships have grown so deep through the years, the thought of ever hurting them or betraying them doesn't even come to mind. It isn't even a fleeting thought. Because I am bound to them in love. What if we chose to pursue the fruit of the tree of Life, and let go of the religious burdens we can lay on ourselves and others?

And let's think of our friends struggling with lust, or hurting from a divorce. This passage can be a particularly heavy burden for them to carry. If either of those are true of you, I'd encourage you to return to the start of Matthew 5, and reflect on the Beatitudes. Does Jesus say, "Blessed are the fervent religious ones"? No. His message is far different. Let us rest on that truth, seek the fruit of the tree of Life, and find the deep fulfillment that makes wandering off a distant memory. Where living blind or one-handed would be such a no-brainer decision compared to the thought of missing out of such beautiful relationships.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How has God removed things from your life that led to destruction, and replaced them with life-giving sources?

# REAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

READ MATTHEW 5:33-37

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10

I read our verses in Matthew today and am reminded of the “games” we would play with the truth when we were kids. You probably know what I’m talking about. When we were children, we learned that if we would embellish our promises (“cross my heart and hope to die...” or “I pinkie promise...”) then we were far more likely to get people to trust us. I mean, obviously we really meant it if we were willing to pinky promise! Unless we had our fingers crossed. Or legs crossed. Or eyes crossed. Then of course any promises made were void.

Good thing all that stops when we’re kids, right?

In our verses today, Jesus is pointing to the issue of our character; our integrity. Are we people of our word, that is, will we actually do what we’ve said we’ll do? Would people in our life trust us with their needs, their secret, with their burden?

The man or woman who strives to be that kind of person, who feels confident that most people do think of them in those terms, that person has no need to say anything but “yes” or “no”... “their sober words should be as sacred as their solemn oaths”. The people around should be able to say, “If he said yes, then he’ll do it”, or “if she said no, then I believe her. It wasn’t her fault.”

As Christians, we should have a reputation for being honest and dependable. Jesus says we should keep things simple. Yes or no. And then follow through. Tell the truth. Keep our promises. Do what we say we are going to do. Don’t use our promises to manipulate others. Live with integrity. Real righteousness doesn’t have to convince someone with flowery words, it is words backed up by consistent actions.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What situations do you face where you are most tempted to not follow through on a promise or expectation? How can you lessen these opportunities and increase your ability to let your yes be yes and your no be no?

# GROW UP

READ MATTHEW 5:38-48

Read today's passage in The Message paraphrase to hear Jesus' words afresh: *"Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.*

*You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.*

*In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."* (Matthew 5:38-48, The Message)

The renowned Russian author Leo Tolstoy was deeply impacted by the words of Christ in this passage. In his book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which was largely influenced by the Sermon on the Mount, Tolstoy wrote: "Accept the teaching of Christ as it is, clear and simple; then you will see that we live among the big lies." Tolstoy's writing was deeply influential even with non-Christians, leading Mahatma Gandhi to read the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi later wrote: "It is a first class human tragedy that people of the earth who claim to believe in the message of Jesus, whom they describe as the Prince of Peace, show little of that belief in actual practice."

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Why do you think the teaching of Jesus to love your enemy and choose peace over revenge is so transformative as to inspire such great movements such as those led by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.?

# PERFECT LAW ABIDING

READ ROMANS 3:19-31

FRIDAY,  
MARCH 12

Any corporation, organization, club, or society must have rules set in place to properly govern its members. And all good policies, procedures, laws, standards, or rules of conduct must have a reference point in order to have validity and reason for compliance.

For those who consider themselves part of the family of God, we are told in verses 19 and 20, that our reference point is the Law of God. It holds us accountable to Him AND gives us no credit for our attempts to fulfill the law. All our attempts to do what the law requires only reveal our weakness to accomplish it. We have zero power within us to comply fully with the standards set by the Holy God. His law is the real truth teller.

Yet, separate from the law, the righteousness of God has been given to us by faith. In a way, the law and my God-declared righteousness both require a faith. Either a faith in myself to fulfill the law, which I cannot, or a faith in the giver of the law. A dichotomy that can only be understood and reconciled from the reference point of God Himself since He is *"the author and perfecter of our faith."*

Where the law brings justification of punishment because we cannot do what it requires, it also brings justification of restoration because what we cannot do is fulfilled in Jesus. He is the One determined from before the creation of the world to be our Savior. The One who knows the depths to which our obedience must go.

Jesus' life requires us to understand that His ability to *"surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees"* is more than a checklist of rules. To realize that though the hidden parts of our life contain hate, lust, deceit, greed, prejudice, pride, laziness, worry, a lukewarm heart; *"filthy rags,"* it has all been covered by the One who held the power to obey every law, jot and tittle.

There really is power in the name of Jesus.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How has the truth of verses 23-24 revealed itself in your life?
- What difference does this passage make in how you live out your faith?

*By Jennifer Degees*





GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS CALLS US TO righteous LIVING

This week, we have done a deep dive into Matthew 5, as we pored over Jesus' words on righteous living. Hearing Jesus' words about real righteousness for His disciples reveals that He came to fulfill, but not to abolish, the law.

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week? What challenged you? What encouraged you?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# A HUMBLE HEART

READ MATTHEW 6:1-4

On first glance, my response to this passage is “Done. Got it. I do not boast about how I help people; I never bring a trumpet or ask for applause when I give so I am accomplishing what Jesus is saying here.” Joking aside, this sentiment is missing the point. Jesus is not interested in ensuring I appear to have good behavior; He is interested in my heart. He says in Matthew 6:1, *“Do not practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.”*

*“To be seen by them”* is key here: it touches on heart motivations. Whether serving in secret or in front of others with a trumpet and applause, if my heart desires to perform, gain recognition, or get something from my service, I lack humility and that is going to be empty generosity.

Think about it this way for a moment: serving and giving with a humble heart posture sounds like asking, “What does God have to show me in this situation or about this person/experience/etc.?” Do you sense the quiet peace and humility that comes with such a posture? It is getting out of the way to make room for God. It is submitting to how God intends to work. I picture it as the release of my tightly clasped hands.

Now, compare it to entering into a serving situation with a mindset of “I am here to serve, I will make a difference.” There is nothing outright wrong with this sentiment, but the focus is on my actions, my works, my service, and leads toward trumpet wielding and applause seeking motivations. Again, it’s all about the heart posture. Make room for God to enter into your serving and giving and allow Him to lead. He promises us it will be worth it.

The God of the universe who constructed this magnificent earth and every unique human on it loves and cares for you with the utmost humility. I pray we can be like Christ in this way.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Ask God to join you in mining the depths of your heart today. When giving and serving, what are you holding on to in the name of earthly recognition or achievement? What can you do this week to practice serving with a humble heart posture?

## SIMPLE WORDS OF THE HEART

READ MATTHEW 6:5-8

*"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:6)*

There was a time when I wanted to pray like those who used fancy words. I was raised Catholic; however, the thought of praying the rosary seemed more like reciting a bunch of repetitive, memorized words. When I began attending a protestant church, I guess I wasn't sure how to pray. Listening to some of the other people praying intimidated me. "Why can't I pray like that?"

Jesus says to pray simply and honestly. He says to find a quiet secluded place. My day now starts out with prayer before my feet even touch the ground in the morning. I thank our Lord for another day of life. I ask Him to help me honor Him and give me opportunities to tell others about Him. Throughout the day I often stop to tell Him how much I love Him and how thankful I am for His presence and protection in my life. My prayers are many times short and simple but they are always from my heart.

God is not impressed with our words. No matter where or when you pray, whether by yourself, with a friend or in a group, God should be the only one we're talking to. The good news is, He hears the simple words of our heart and loves us all the more.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- Where are you most able to be your truest self when praying to God?
- When are you most tempted to "embellish" your prayers for the sake of others?
- Pray to God to help you keep your heart focused on Him whenever you pray.

# THIS THEN IS HOW YOU SHOULD PRAY...

READ MATTHEW 6:9-15

TUESDAY, MARCH 16

How do you pray? In this passage, Jesus teaches us how:

*"Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name,"* (vs. 9)

Jesus begins by inviting us to reverently approach the Father with Him. As we come to Him, we must acknowledge to whom we are praying. He is both personal (our Father) as well as Holy (seated on the throne).

*"...your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* (vs. 10)

We are taught to pray with a kingdom mindset. This calls us to die to ourselves. Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, *"Abba, Father...everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."* (Mark 14:36) How challenging! When we come before the Father, it is only natural that we share our desires with Him. However, ultimately we need to surrender fully to His will, acknowledging it is perfect. We must put off our earthly mindsets and be kingdom focused.

*"Give us today our daily bread."* (vs. 11)

Living in Costa Rica last year, this passage often came to mind. At almost every corner, little bakeries abound where locals go to buy fresh bread to accompany their morning coffee. In John 6:35, Jesus says, *"I am the bread of life..."* Seeking Jesus as our daily bread isn't something we binge on some days and starve ourselves the next. It is a daily practice. Just as Costa Ricans recognize their desire for bread and that it is best when fresh (not stale or day-old), so we too should nourish ourselves each day from the one who not only gives life, but is life.

Verses 12-15 compel us to pray against our sinful nature. Although we are taught to pray that we would not be led into temptation, Jesus doesn't promise that temptation won't come. However, when we are faced with it, He holds the power to *"deliver us from the evil one."* (vs. 13)

Interestingly, the end of this passage is often left unspoken in communal prayer, but it is definitely worth examining! Here, we are reminded that if we truly desire God's forgiveness, we must extend that same forgiveness to those that have wronged us. If Jesus could take on the sin of the world as the Spotless Lamb to give us salvation, then we must follow His example and forgive others.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Pray through The Lord's Prayer today, taking time to pause and reflect on each aspect Jesus emphasizes.

*By Rachel Sanfelippo*

# SECRET DEVOTION

READ MATTHEW 6:16-18

*“So that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:18)*

“Secrecy: Consciously refraining from having our good deeds and qualities generally known, which, in turn, rightly disciplines our longing for recognition” (The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible, 2308).

The practice of secrecy cuts against the grain of our world’s image-driven culture. Jesus is calling us to a radical unknownness—an upside down, completely different alternative to our self-promoting culture. I do not need to be seen. I do not need to be understood by others. I do not need others to know the good things I am doing. I simply need to seek my Father’s face first.

Love for my Father must motivate my actions, instead of my actions being motivated by the opinions of others. I must make it my ultimate priority to seek the love of my Father. My Father’s love for me is shown in allowing his Son to die a horrific death on a tree. My Father says it is by His Son’s piercing that I am brought healing and peace. My ultimate goal in secrecy is to seek My Father’s face not only for myself, but for others.

My self-denial is out of love for this Father, who has shown the ultimate self-denial for me. I let go of food to let my Father know how I long for unity in His Bride, the Church. I let go of needing to be seen, in order to surrender to my Father’s ways before mine. I seek my Father’s face with my time in order to wait for a heart to hear His voice above the drone of media and opinions of others.

My Father of love sees me. His word sustains me. He asks me to rely on His lovingkindness. He graciously allows me to trust in His faithfulness. He allows me to see His ability to sustain the universe with one Word. He is in control; I am not. He loves His bride and will keep her. His ways are higher than my ways. In secret, He comforts me in the brilliance of His love.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How can I practice the discipline of secrecy?
- How might I incorporate fasting into the rhythms of my week?

# GIVING WITH AN UNDIVIDED HEART

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15

THURSDAY, MARCH 18

How much should I give? This question has come up countless times in my adult life. The myriad of requests that come in the mailbox or email inbox—some financial, while others may be requesting my time dedicated to service or time spent in prayer. How much should I give?

In our passage in Corinthians, Paul lays out wide parameters in verse 6; to give sparingly or to give generously. Could the key to giving be in verse 7 where he lays out the follow up to these parameters?

We have been instructed to give according to what we have decided in our heart to give. Not a percent, or to a certain level of sacrifice.

So, the million dollar (pun intended!) question then becomes...how is my HEART?

One of my favorite passages as a heart guide is Psalm 86: 11,12: *“Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name. I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.”*

Our heart should be undivided. It should be bent on praise to God.

Additional heart guides in our passage specific to giving point to a heart that is cheerful and not reluctant. And finally, a heart that mirrors the Father with His indescribable gift—of Jesus!

Did you notice the promises that come from heart-focused giving? How about... generous reaping, (v. 6), abundant blessings (v. 8), enrichment to be further generous (v. 11), and expressions of thanks (v. 12) and praise (v. 13) from others toward God?

Exciting stuff!

We all have tangible opportunities to give.

We have a decision to make with each opportunity that involves integrating many factors to form our response. As we respond, let us be people with an undivided, kingdom-focused heart!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- When it comes to generosity, what are the things that can keep you from having an undivided heart? Pray for God to help you overcome them.

*By Kevin Peterson*

# GOD'S ARMOR

READ EPHESIANS 6:10-20

I like action movies. My favorite parts are dramatic scenes where the hero reveals his or her extraordinary abilities and courage against seemingly invincible enemies. As fun as they are, I'm afraid these movies have influenced my imagination too much about this passage. I've expected spiritual battles to mirror action movies—victory in my own strength, glory for me as I save the day, and an unseen cool outfit. Reality is much more humbling. Paul wasn't writing about how to be a Christian action hero. He was describing the spiritual protection available to believers, God's own strength and armor. Paul begins this passage urging the Ephesians to *"be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power,"* and as he lists the pieces of the armor, he seems to be recalling God's own armor described in the book of Isaiah. God has shared them with us, but He is the deliverer.

Realizing this, there is a helpful element from action movies—the training montage. Let me share a scene: night, a kitchen sink piled with dinner dishes. A pendant light shines on the dishes and a tired lady standing in coffee pajama pants and a hot pink fuzzy bathrobe. As she washes, thoughts of the day bubble up in her heart. Some are like flaming darts. "Why did I get so mad about toys in the living room? I shouldn't have yelled." "I'm not doing a good job loving my mom right now." "I'm a failure." Some are like lead. "I don't know what to do." "This world is full of evil and wrong." Some are sparkling daydreams, magic mirrors where she is always right and the hero of every story. All are used by the enemy to trip and wound.

Unseen is her Teacher. He's provided her armor and weapons against the flaming darts, the lead balls and the false mirrors, and He's training her to use them. Like a soldier in training learns lunge, parry, feint; she learns remember, trust, pray. Remember, hope, pray. Remember, repent, pray. Remember, worship, pray. Verses and sermons, podcasts and hymns bring His truth to her memory.

Night after night (dishes never seem to end), this fuzzy robed soldier comes back to her Teacher. Over time, the lessons spill out into the rest of the day. Prayer comes more quickly, words of hope and peace spill out to others. She's grown in trust of God, and she is able to stand.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What are the flaming darts, lead balls and magic mirrors that are often shot at you?
- What are the verses and truths from Scripture that you turn to for protection from those attacks?

*By colleen mittag*



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS KNOWS YOU AND KNOWS YOUR heart

This week, we have been studying portions of Matthew 6 and corresponding New Testament passages that address core practices of the Christian faith: serving, prayer, fasting, and giving.

Each reading this week pointed us back to the fact that Jesus cares about our hearts above all else. Not how much we're serving, but why we serve. Not how fancy our prayers are, but what our heart posture is. Not whether or not we fast, but what our motivation is behind it. Not how much we give, but the state of our heart as we do so.

What challenged you this week? What encouraged you?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**



# TREASURE RE-DEFINED

READ MATTHEW 6:19-24

Evening had finally come to the tiny village of Xaman, Guatemala. Earlier in the day half of our team had worked on a church construction project, while the other half gathered children for the first day of VBS. Teaching about God, our good King, we led the children in making cardstock crowns. To be “fair” we judiciously metered out the exact same number of “precious gemstones” for each child. Now, while waiting for the evening outreach to begin, one little girl sidled up to me on the platform steps. Under the light of a single bare bulb, she looked me in the eye and uncurled her little fingers. There, in the cup of her hand she held about a dozen fake gemstones—rescued from other kids’ discarded crowns. She couldn’t speak English, and my Spanish was rudimentary, but I looked her in the eye and smiled. Girlfriend, I get you. As a little girl, I would have done exactly the same thing!

As humans we are naturally drawn to the colorful, the sparkly, the new and the different. We are created to appreciate beauty because it points us to the Creator of all beauty. But at the same time, we are called to see with spiritual eyes, “the lamp of the body.” We are called to look beyond the colorful, the sparkly, the new and the different and instead, to catch a glimpse of what is real and what is lasting.

Just about an hour after my encounter with this little girl, almost everyone on the team fell ill. Several, including my daughter who was 12 at the time, ended up in the village hospital for antibiotics and IV fluids. It was a long, sweltering, scary night.

But I have treasures from that trip. The kindness of the medical staff, including a lone female doctor, who treated us with all they had on hand, never judging us as “dumb Americans.” The hospitality of the hotel owner who brought fans to our hospital room. Our friend who drove us 12 hours to the beautiful city of Antigua to recover and then back to his home church. And through it all, God’s hand sustaining us every step of the way, bonding us to one another and to Guatemala.

Spiritual sight does that to you. As you walk with Christ, it loosens your grip on the treasures of this world, and redefines what is beautiful. You gladly trade in the fake gemstones of the world for the true beauty His kingdom.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- When have you experienced “treasures” in the midst of a difficult situation? What can you do to “open your eyes” to the true treasures God has all around you?

# REAL TREASURE

READ MATTHEW 19:16-26

Today is my wife's birthday. Besides being a treasure in my life, my wife has helped me to understand these verses in a multitude of ways.

While we are not "rich" in the American sense, I know have been blessed abundantly. Yet, if Jesus had spoken these words to Mary Ann I know without a doubt she wouldn't hesitate to sell anything and everything she has to follow Him. Stuff just doesn't matter to her.

But, what if He asked her to sacrifice the things that she does treasure? Well in 2006 He did.

About a year after we were married God called us to move 5 hours away to Springfield, IL. It was a tough decision, but we truly felt the church there was where God wanted us. Keep in mind this was the first time Mary Ann would be living more than 10 minutes from her family and friends in Waukesha! While it was hard, she knew we had to follow where Jesus led us.

God honored her sacrifice, bringing many friends and "family" members into her life through our ministry there. And yes—that is where our two children were born.

The point of all of this is that we all have "treasure" we can tend to hold onto tightly. But when we lay it before Jesus, when we open our hands and say, "I want you more than anything!" He is faithful to replace those treasures with the true treasure of knowing His joy and peace above all else.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What have you given up to follow Jesus? How has your life changed as a result?

# A CONFESSION

READ LUKE 12:13-21

I worry about money and about my stuff. I'll just confess this right away. Now you know that this parable makes me uncomfortable, deeply so.

Society and that paranoid inner voice tell me to hoard my possessions, my gifts, my time, and everything else. "Do what's best for you," they yell. "No one else will take care of you," is their refrain. And you know what, I believe them. So, I squirrel away my time and my talents, I sit on the knowledge that my inaction for others enriches my self. And I wait, watching my barns burst at the seams, only to plot ways to gain more.

At what cost? At what destruction?

The rich man's sin is not his wealth, though his wealth is certainly not a force for good. The rich man's sin is not the abundant harvest, nor the mean's to secure a storage solution. Rather the rich man's, and indeed my own, sin is the never ending need to fill up, hoard, and secure for his-self. He already has barns, multiple barns, for his own needs. He doesn't need more.

God grants him an abundant harvest and instead of looking around the community to see who else may need this excess he hoards it for himself. The rich man's sin is greed and gluttony.

Often I (and possibly we) really miss the point of excess granted by God. We treasure this excess and build shrines to it, bigger houses, bigger barns, bigger bank accounts. This treasure becomes our only interest, we work to maintain it and enjoy it.

At what cost? At what destruction?

The parable of the rich man gives us a glimpse into the economy of Jesus. In which, Jesus flips the norms upside down. I like to look at parables backwards. What if the rich man didn't hoard? What if he gave all he had to the poor, as Jesus calls another rich young ruler to do? How would this parable have played out? Would the rich man have lived? I don't have the space here to answer these questions, but I would ask that you take the time to answer them for your self. There isn't necessarily a right answer, but I do think your answers will offer you a glimpse of what Jesus is wanting you to learn through this parable.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- In which area do you need to be generous? (time, relationships, possessions, talents) Find a way to share the blessing God has given you.

# WAITING FOR JUDGMENT

READ JAMES 5:1-8

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24

As a gardener, I have come to understand our total reliance on the Lord: from the gift of life, with sprouting seeds, to favorable weather and a productive harvest in spite of all the things that can damage a crop. It gives me a perspective that all I have is a result of the blessing and gifting of God.

When that perspective gets off track, terrible things can occur.

In this passage, James points out the harsh judgment coming for those who have hoarded wealth and misused it: storing up treasures, at the cost of others only to realize the treasures of this world will not last. This judgment is a warning to those with wealth who use it for the wrong purposes. As we look at the injustice recorded in this passage, and as we look at the injustice in our world today, do we understand the responsibilities and opportunity required of wealthy Christians? Do we seek out those opportunities to be fair in our financial transactions? Do we give GOD the glory for the source of that financial wealth and look for opportunities to help in our communities?

As Christians, the injustice of this world at times makes us cry out for the Lord to take action. But in the last two verses, James asks Christians to be patient. We are to wait on the Lord's timing. We wait, not just with patience, but with assured patience, know that judgment will come. As sure as we are of the sun rising the morning, of the spring rains and, for the gardeners in Wisconsin, the last frost in May. We live in the assuredness that the Just Judgment is coming.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Is there a situation in which you want/need God's justice?
- What does it look like for you to wait with assured patience?

# INVESTING FOR ETERNITY

READ 1 TIMOTHY 6:17-19

On October 25, 2019, a single bottle of 1926 Macallan single malt scotch whiskey sold at auction for \$1.9 million, making it up to that point in time the most expensive bottle of whiskey ever sold. It was one of many bottles sold that day from one man's whiskey collection that in total sold for close to \$10 million. Obviously, the seller and the buyers were people of means and whiskey was one of their common treasures. Treasure can take many forms. Some treasures are universal like silver and gold, valued by most everyone, while others, like that high end whiskey are only treasured by a select few. If you have enough money you can buy most any treasure that you set your heart on. There is one treasure however that money cannot buy. One that you can't store up for later use or buy more of from somebody else. We all have it, yet there never seems to be enough of it. That treasure is time.

In this world we have all been given a limited amount of time by our Creator along with the freedom to use it most any way we want. True, in the long run some may have more time than others, but tomorrow is promised to none of us. Anyone's time can be "up" at any moment. As valuable as our time is we often squander much of it. Just as we are to be good stewards of the financial and material resources the Lord has blessed us with, we need to be good stewards of the time God has given us as well. We can choose to spend our time pursuing material things and experiences that benefit only us. In moderation, there is nothing wrong with that. God intends for us to enjoy abundant life, yet if we're to be "rich in good deeds," we need to also make the choice of dying to ourselves and investing time in God's Kingdom. Pleasing Him by generously loving and serving others—this is how we convert our time here to eternal treasure.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What does it look like for you to use your time generously for God's Kingdom?

# THE GIVER OF THE GIFTS

READ ECCLESIASTES 2:4-11

FRIDAY, MARCH 26

This passage from Ecclesiastes has always felt like a real downer to me throughout my life. But after graduating college about two years ago I see this passage in a totally new light.

As I started post-graduate work in May of 2019, I felt like there was a lot of pressure to get my finances in order and become a stable adult. So, over the last year and a half I have focused a lot of time and energy on figuring out the perfect strategies for 401ks, find the best apartment and other common post-graduate endeavors. What I failed to keep in mind is what Ecclesiastes 2 reminds me, that whether it is finding the perfect apartment or getting better at scheduling time for hobbies none of it is going to satisfy me or be what gives my life meaning, only God can fill that role and I should be focusing on Him. It also assures me that my life's meaning and value does not rest on my ability to succeed at achieving my goals or building something incredible in this world.

While this new perspective on the passage changes this passage from just a lament into a comforting reminder of what is important, this does not answer the thing about this passage that had bothered me for so long. Why would a loving God give us the desire and drive to build a life and relationships if in the end all our life's work is like chasing the wind?

I think that I kind of found an answer later in the chapter. Near the end of Chapter two in verse 24 Solomon states, *"So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy the food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him?"*

To me this means that while the work we do and times we enjoy with our loved ones cannot fulfill us or give our lives meaning in place of God, He has given the joys we find in this world as a gift. We should not spend all our time hunting for the importance or value in a gift from our Father but thank Him for it and cherish it while continuing to deepen our relationship with Him.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How do you express gratitude to God for all the joys He has brought into your life? Make a point of spending extended time in thanksgiving to God today.

*By samuel thompson*



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS DEFINES TREASURE DIFFERENTLY

What does it mean to treasure something and how does it impact our life? How does this relate to the power of money in our life? This week, we have looked at Old and New Testament passages that attempt to answer some of these questions. How do you define "treasure" after this week? How did you define it before? What challenged you this week?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# BORROWING TROUBLE

READ MATTHEW 6:25-34

PALM SUNDAY, MARCH 28

Jesus tells His disciples in verse 23 that they shouldn't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will *"worry about itself."* Sometimes Jesus is funny! How can tomorrow worry? In a humorous way, Jesus is trying to get His disciples to realize that if they live their lives in worry, they are stressing out for no benefit. And what's more, they're not pleasing God, who wants us to live our lives in faith, not fear. Jesus is not saying life is easy. Look at the end of verse 34: *"Each day has enough trouble of its own."* Jesus wants his disciples to live in the present by real faith, making plans for the future, certainly, but holding those plans lightly. We are not in control of the future; God is.

The life of a disciple is one of childlike trust, not adultish anxiety. Jesus is not saying we should be passive and not work! The birds of the air have to go and look for food, but the point is that the food is there for them because God makes sure it is. *"Do not worry"* should be one of the most joyful, freeing commands for us to follow! Why do we resist it? I think it is because we human beings want to believe that we are in control. We are not. Think about how sad it would be if our little children worried about where their next meal was coming from. We as parents want them to trust us! In the same way, our heavenly Father wants us to trust Him.

I had a wonderful mother, and although she is with the Lord now, I hear her words in my mind frequently, and one thing she said to me often was, "Don't borrow trouble." She saw me borrowing lots of trouble, doing immense amounts of "worry work" about things I had little or no say about. I still have a tendency to think that if I can imagine over and over the worst possible scenario in any situation, I can control the outcome. This, of course, is ridiculous. May we all *"seek first His kingdom and His righteousness."* When we make this our priority, God will provide all our needs. This is living by real faith.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What trouble are you borrowing from the future right now? Ask God to help you cast all your anxiety on Him, as the Apostle Peter writes (1 Peter 5:7). Remember that Peter was one of the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking in today's passage!

*By Ruth Thompson Carver*



# STANDING STRONG IN FAITH

READ JOSHUA 1:6-9

It's one thing to say we believe God is at work on our behalf and will make a way in our seemingly impossible situations. It's another thing completely to live out this belief when the road is strewn with stones that trip us and we come to a fork in the road and can't quite remember where the next turn leads.

At these crossroads, we are to stand firm and unmoving in the movement of God. Many people think standing strong and courageous means we have to do the work and it's up to us to be brave. But true strength stands on the unchanging Word of God. When we dig our heels into Scripture, we build a firm foundation that offers us confidence as we are reminded of God's character and stand on His promises.

God assured Joshua that His presence will be with him and gives the command to take heart. Multiple times, God mentions this, even adding very courageous as emphasis. Leading the Israelites is no small task as they geared up to cross the Jordan River and take the land God promised, without the help of a proper road map. Of course knees would be knocking and anxious thoughts would swirl. But in this moment of embarking into the unknown, God encouraged Joshua that He would be with him, and that was to be his strength. God then gave Joshua a game plan to combat the fear: meditate on His Word and keep it close. The Bible keeps us grounded and guides us in His truth for the tasks ahead.

Trust is hard when we're wrapped in worry, but God, as our Creator, knows our humanity and emotions. He doesn't say we are exempt from fear, but He promises us His presence and Word so we may step forward in faith despite our worry.

Real faith stands firm on what we can't see and moves us forward with eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of that faith. We don't have to wonder if we're making the right choice or where our lives will lead, because we can rest assured that God is with us no matter where we are. Like Joshua, we can live a daily faith through communion with God, Scripture, and bold moves that build our belief brick by brick to establish our own Promised Land in Him.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- When has your faith in God been most tested? How did you stand strong in that situation?

# THE ANTIDOTE FOR ANXIETY

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

TUESDAY, MARCH 30

As a new believer, Philippians 4:6-7 was one of the first verses that I memorized. I loved the fact, and still do, that I could present my anxious thoughts and difficult situations to God and He would take them and in return He would give me His peace. This allowed me to take my focus off myself and place it on God. Paul states in every situation by prayer and petition present your requests to God. The word petition suggests an intensity of prayer such that we fully transfer our requests into God's hands, trusting in His faithfulness to handle them.

On further study, I saw that the verse stated "with thanksgiving." Now this was more difficult to do. The verse does not mean that we are to thank God for everything but "within everything", recognizing that He hears us and will work on our behalf trusting that He is a wise and loving Father. The practice of thankfulness is well known to be one of the best antidotes to worry. Physicians have even been known to prescribe this practice to anxious patients.

If we entrust God with our concerns with thanksgiving and do not take them back, the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Paul's use of the word guard here may reflect the fact that while writing this letter, he was being guarded in a Roman prison. The peace that God promises transcends or goes beyond our understanding and beyond our circumstances.

Paul then moves on from our hearts to our minds where anxiety often starts—what if...? Instead, Paul exhorts us to focus on whatever is true, noble etc. We are to fill our minds with those things that help us to worship God and serve others. As we all know, this is easier said than done. First, we need to be careful what we let into our minds through reading, social media or what we view. Second, in order to develop a focus on God, it is helpful to meditate on God's word, pray, worship and fellowship with other believers.

Finally, Paul asks the Philippians to practice what they have seen him do and Paul promises that if they do likewise then the peace of God will be with them. They will experience not only the peace of God but also the actual presence of God.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Which part of this passage is most challenging for you? How can you practice focusing on what is true, noble, etc.?

*By Bonnie Tesch*

## LIFTER OF MY HEAD

READ JOHN 4:1-4; 25-27

*"But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head."  
(Psalm 3:3)*

The account of the woman at the well has always held a special place in Scripture for me, as it is filled with many lessons to be learned. This woman's divine appointment with the Savior gives us the picture of Jesus going out of His way to speak love and compassion into the heart of a woman lost in the messiness of a life of bad choices. She lived a life filled with worry and anxiety. Her lifestyle made her an outcast. Her worry of what others would say sent her to fetch water in the hottest time of the day. Corrie ten Boom says:

"...worrying is carrying tomorrow's burden with today's strength. Worried people are like tightrope walkers, trying to walk over a rope from the past to the future, balancing between hope and fear. In one hand they hold a bag with the disordered past, in the other a bag, the feared future. Worrying does not take away tomorrow's grief, it takes away today's strength."

This thinking sets the scene for this woman's encounter with the One who knew her best. He knew what she needed and was there to open her heart and her eyes to the reality of her need for a Savior. What a moment it must have been when Jesus said to her, *"I, the one speaking to you—I am he."* Jill Briscoe has said that sometimes God gives a "peek around the corner of Scripture". As Jesus speaks these words to the woman, the peek I see is Jesus lifting her head so she would see Him face to face. They would be eye to eye when He spoke those words to her. Jesus had her full attention and His words touched her heart and soul with its truth. And only as Jesus can do, her worry and despair were replaced with joy and hope! We know this because, she gave testimony to everyone she met. If we read a little further in John 4:39 we read, *"Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony..."*

Has worry and despair been ruling your everydayness? Allow Jesus to lift your head that you might look into His eyes. Allow Him to free you from the burden that binds you in worry and anxiety. Hear His words, *"I am He!"*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- Listen to the song, "O Come to the Altar" by Elevation Worship. Allow the truth of these words to lift your heart and head.

# STINKY FEET

READ MATTHEW 26:17-30

"Simon Peter said, 'You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'"  
(Matthew 16:16, The Message)

When I worked in a homeless clinic, my nurse friend and I would go to Milwaukee Rescue Mission on Holy Week Thursday to provide foot care to the residents. We sat on newspapers and the men came and sat in the chairs in front of us. Their feet showed the difficulties of life lived outside in the cold winter. We soaked and dried their feet, pared corns and calluses, carefully removed macerated skin from between their toes, and clipped long toenails. We powdered their feet and rolled on new, absorbent socks. When the line of men finished, we stood and shook the clippings and dead skin off our clothes and out of our hair. The men were so grateful for such personal service. We disposed of the newspapers and returned to the clinic to clean our supplies. Each time was a vivid reminder of our Lord's humble service.

On Maundy Thursday, we remember Jesus' last supper and footwashing. How He rose from the table and washed the disciples' dirty feet. How He reclined at the table with them and predicted His betrayal. Today is our time to call to mind our Lord's terrible and lonely journey to the Cross. He knew what was coming. He willingly walked into betrayal and made Himself so vulnerable, so surrendered. He loved to the end those who didn't understand Him, who couldn't stay awake to pray for Him, who denied knowing Him, who betrayed Him with a kiss, and who fled as He was crucified.

Today, let's take time to carefully remember Jesus' experiences of betrayal and the extraordinary love that propelled Him forward. The men who received foot care from us expressed amazement and gratitude that we would enter into care that they considered disgusting and shameful. How much more profound should our response be to Jesus's personal care for us. May we cry out anew from our hearts, "*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!*"

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Imagine Jesus decisively and tenderly caring for the hardened, dirty, and wounded parts of you. Let go in His healing care.
- Imagine sharing an intimate meal with Jesus. Feel Him look into your eyes, knowing all your denials and betrayals. Offer them up for His forgiveness.

# THE ASTONISHING STORY

READ MATTHEW 27:27-54

Although as a child I attended a church where Good Friday was reverently observed each year, I'd never wept over Jesus' crucifixion. Then, when I was about 11 years old, I read C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Through the eyes of the children in the story, I watched in disbelief as the good lion Aslan, ruler of Narnia, allowed evil creatures to bind and muzzle him—though he could easily have knocked them aside with a mighty paw. I was appalled as they sheared off his mane, then mocked, kicked, spit—and finally killed him. He gave his life willingly to save someone else! I cried for Aslan, but I also knew I was crying for Jesus.

If we let the Good Friday story past our guard, it triggers many emotions. Some are all too familiar in our fallen world. *Anger* at injustice—as sinless Jesus is accused in a sham trial, convicted for political expedience, sentenced to a shameful death. *Dismay* at brutality—as a company of soldiers beats a lone prisoner and attires him in “royal” garb for their amusement. *Outrage* over cruelty—as a dying man is taunted by spectators calling him an impostor, daring him to save himself.

Then there is an emotion that's less familiar—*astonishment* at great self-sacrifice. For Jesus was no helpless victim. He was the Son of God! If the scene were in a superhero movie, we'd be leaning forward in our seats, waiting eagerly for Jesus to come down from the cross, reveal His power, and punish His tormentors. When He did not, we'd be stunned. Devastated. We might even cry.

Jesus chose not to defend His body from pain, His name from slander, or even His soul from being forsaken by the Father. Instead He trusted God's plan and “*humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross*” (Philippians 2:8). This obedience was so momentous that darkness fell and the earth shook. His incomprehensible sacrifice was made for selfish beings who did not deserve it at all. For us.

How can we allow these truths to truly touch us? While my son was in college, he watched a movie about the crucifixion every year. Someone else I know listens to special music. Everyone is different. But we all need to coax our hearts open to Jesus, because he “*gave himself up for us*” (Ephesians 5:2).

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Spend time allowing the crucifixion to impact your heart today. Watch, read, or listen to versions of the crucifixion and reflect on all Jesus experienced.

by susan giffiland



GOSPEL TRUTH:

jesus  
LIVED, WAS  
CRUCIFIED,  
DIED, AND  
WAS BURIED

Today is a Holy Saturday in the Christian tradition, the day between Good Friday, when we remember Jesus' death on the Cross, and Easter Sunday, the day when we remember Jesus' resurrection. Holy Saturday is traditionally meant for somber reflection on a world of darkness that would exist without the hope of Christ's resurrection.

Spend some time today reflecting on this past week, Holy Week, and the events that transpired in the Biblical narrative. Spend some time also reflecting on the meaning of Holy Saturday: what would a world be like without the hope of Christ's resurrection?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

## REAL LIFE

READ MATTHEW 28:1-10

*"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."* (Matthew 28:5-6)

When I read the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection, I often imagine and wonder about what that experience was like. Imagine it with me.

What did the tremors of that angelic earthquake feel like? How was it that the angel rolled back the stone of Jesus' tomb? What did the brilliance of the angel's appearance feel like to the human eye? What did the angelic voice that the women heard announcing Jesus' resurrection sound like? How did the mixture of fear and joy feel as it tingled up their spine and surged through their souls as they turned to go? And what about when they saw Jesus, clasped His feet and worshiped Him?

Have you ever woken up from sleep without knowing clearly whether you are awake or asleep? When could you discern what was real? How do you know what is real life?

I wonder if these women felt the same way. Did they wonder if they were dreaming? When was the moment that they knew this angelic visitor and message, as well as the final encounter with Jesus, was real?

Regardless, there He was standing right in front of them: Jesus in real life. The best of their hopes and dreams now stands in resurrection reality before them. Then, Jesus urges them to tell the other disciples. And so, the first ones ever sent by Christ with the fullness of the gospel bring His message to others.

In my imagination I stand there with them. Many times, with a pang in my heart, I wish I could have been there too. I'm sometimes jealous of these first believers who saw, heard, and touched our risen Lord. Then I think of Jesus' words to Thomas: *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"* (John 20:29). Blessed as they are, there is blessing for us, too. We, too, can know the power of His resurrection and enter into real life. We too can know the joy of sharing His message with others.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- On this resurrection day, enter into the gospel story with your imagination set on fire by the Holy Spirit. Take time to thank the Lord for the new life you have found in Him. Take some time to consider the blessings He has given you through Jesus, the Messiah, who has risen with real life for all of us.

*by matt erickson*

# HOLDING THE SILENCE

READ MARK 16:1-8

MONDAY, APRIL 5

As I write this devotional, it's winter and Milwaukee is covered in eight inches of heavy snow which is appropriate, because I've been thinking a lot about winter lately. In fact, God has been discipling me through winter. It started with a trip to Scandinavia in 2019 and a fascination with Scandi culture: how are they the happiest people in the world and yet they live in such a cold climate? Here in Wisconsin it seems that we tolerate, avoid, and complain about winter, we don't enjoy it. Then, a trip to Montreal revealed another culture that seemed to delight in winter. I ate frozen maple syrup at an outdoor sugar shack and attended an outdoor music festival in freezing temperatures—and I loved it! And so I have been asking God, why this fascination with winter? What do you have to teach me in this?

I have learned that winter is an annual invitation to trust in the promises of God. Do I believe in the promise of spring and new life? Do I believe the snow will melt and tulips will emerge from below the earth? Do I trust that trees are merely sleeping and the lake is alive beneath its frozen crust?

Winter is also a season of silence and ambiguity. The bustling East Side of Milwaukee has never been as quiet as it was yesterday, covered in sound-absorbing snow. It was as if a holy hush descended over the city; even cars made less noise! Instead we navigated snowy shapes: What is under this mound of snow? Where does the sidewalk begin?

Today's resurrection passage from Mark reminds me of winter. In this passage we see an invitation to deep trust, as well as silence and ambiguity. As the gospel of Mark was originally written, both the story and the gospel end abruptly after verse 8. This is the way Mark wanted his gospel to end: suddenly, in ambiguity, with witnesses holding the silence. In the silence of Mark's ending, we are faced with questions: where is Jesus? What will happen next? We have no answers, no conclusions, but rather an invitation to trust the promise that He is risen, is alive, and is going to Galilee (v. 6-7).

I like this ending. It feels true to my life, a life filled with unanswered prayers and promises not yet fulfilled. Many things don't seem clear, they seem ambiguous and unfinished. I have to trust that God is at work in the silence, in the ambiguity, beneath the wintry snow (1 Kings 19:9-13; Habakkuk 2:20).

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Spend intentional time in silence today. What are you hearing most clearly from God during this time?

*By Liz Carver*



# THE FAITH OF ONE

READ MARK 16:9-20

Having wonderful news and a wonderful story to go along with it is such an amazing gift, it makes it all the more frustrating when people that know you do not believe you. This is where we find ourselves in our passage for today out of Mark 16. A lot of the early manuscripts of the Bible do not have this story included in it, which makes it all the more mysterious and powerful in a way. There are a couple of details that we cannot miss, because they are so specific to who Jesus was.

In verse nine we read that Jesus rose early on the first day of the week. We see all throughout Scripture that Jesus' days in ministry were busy and a lot of the times they started early in the morning, and this day, the day Jesus rose from the dead, was no different. The next detail we see in this passage is who Jesus reveals Himself to, and it is Mary Magdalene, the mother of James, who Jesus drove demons out of. One of the most amazing things about Jesus to me personally is His ministry to the one. What I mean by that is, all throughout the gospels, Jesus has powerful and amazing conversations with individuals. Sure, He preaches and He heals in front of crowds, but some of the most powerful stories we know about Jesus are when He is talking to an individual when no one else is around. And not only that, so many of the individuals He talks to have been marginalized by society and have been put in lowly positions where they do not have a lot of power or status.

Jesus chooses to reveal Himself to Mary Magdalene, and when she goes back to report this amazing thing that has happened, she is not believed by the other disciples. Later on, Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith, and Jesus leaves them with a short but powerful command, *"go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."* Jesus tells them that there are specific signs that will happen as a result of this. After all the things the disciples have seen Jesus do, Jesus is now giving His authority to them. A great task and responsibility, but one that they do not have to do alone.

Sometimes life becomes so lonely, and believing in Jesus may feel frustrating when you feel as if He is not answering your prayers. If you are in this place today, I encourage you to make space to remember Jesus revealing Himself to the woman at the well, to Mary Magdalene at the tomb and to the disciples, and that He cares about revealing Himself to you, His child as well.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How has Jesus revealed Himself to you personally? What encouragement do you find in the fact that He loves you individually and fully?

# JESUS TAKES ACTION

READ LUKE 24:36-48

Have you ever felt the deep weight of loss? Not the feeling of defeat in a game or something of that sort, but the total collapse of things you believed to be true, the ripping away of hope you had for the future, and the loss of the comfort you took from things you once had? This is sobering to think about. I would guess most of us have experienced this in some way, and the memories are painful to bring back. I believe this is exactly where we find the disciples in Luke 24:36-49. Their worlds had crumbled before their eyes only a few days previously, to the point where they cannot even grasp a shred of hope from the reports that the grave was empty and Jesus has been seen alive. Grief and loss have crowded their thinking, and this is precisely when Jesus walks into the room.

When I read passages like these, I make special note of every time an action takes place from God to man. We see an endless amount of actions from Jesus to His disciples here, as He attempts to fully convince them that He is risen and physically in the room with them. Jesus knows their pain and confusion, because He experienced it while in the grave, and He uses actions and demonstrations to bring hope back into their lives.

As hope is slowly being restored, Jesus does one more physical act by eating a fish in their presence. He has their full attention; it is time for Him to speak an extremely moving and important message. He opens their minds to the Scriptures; all confusion is gone instantly. He speaks a prophecy for the hope of future peoples, a mandate to direct the disciples, and a benediction over them, all in a few quick sentences. When He is finished, He departs to heaven, and the disciples have been completely transformed. What once was total confusion, grief, and anguish is now faith, hope, and passion for the preaching of the Gospel.

This year has been one filled with deep, deep loss, and hardly anyone has been left unmoved by it. If you are feeling the weight of loss, I want to encourage you with this: Jesus is taking action to restore hope within you. He has joined you in the pain and struggle, and He has made you a witness of the resurrection by restoring those broken places.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What losses have you experienced that you need Jesus to heal? How have you already seen Him take action to restore you in these areas?

*By Zack Johnson*

# TURNING SHOCK TO BELIEF

READ JOHN 20:1-9

Read John 20:1-10 and pay attention to the reactions of the different people arriving and leaving the tomb. Imagine the shock of Mary Magdalene when she discovers the stone had been removed from the tomb's entrance. First, they were still grieving over their teacher and the man that said He was Lord suffering a gruesome death. How insulting that someone disturbed the tomb so soon after Jesus' burial! Second, practically, the stone was enormous, so how could something like this happen?

After Mary told Simon Peter and the other disciple, they too were likely shocked and ran. What is interesting is the difference in reactions between the two when they reached the tomb. The other disciple who remains nameless in this passage arrives first, investigates, is a little more unsure about what happened and does not enter. Simon Peter however, boldly enters and looks around, seeing that Jesus was not there and just the linens remained. Building confidence, the other disciple enters as well and it says *"he saw and believed."*

Which disciple are you most like in times of faith-testing events? Do you dive right in or carefully investigate prior to making a move? The passage does not mention any emotions except perhaps the fact that the unnamed disciple believed. Even so, Mary Magdalene and the disciples' minds must have been running a mile a minute. Think of what might be going through their minds. What happened to Jesus' body? How did the stone get moved? There might have been a sense of hopelessness considering that not only was their teacher and supposed Savior dead, but also stolen. What had they believed in prior? Was it all just a flash in the pan?

Going through life is full of surprises, both back in the times described in this passage and also in our present-day. Have you had an instance in your life when something happened and you don't know how to respond? How did you eventually respond? Have you had an instance in your life when you experienced something profoundly negative to then afterward result in something positive? We can give thanks to the Lord because we know what happens next, Jesus' appearance and confirmation of resurrection to the disciples, a gloriously positive event. Praise God for His triumph over death, a profoundly negative situation turned on its head!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- When have you experienced what at first was a negative situation, but ultimately God turned into something good?

# THE HIGH PRICE OF PRIDE

READ JOHN 20:24-31

FRIDAY, APRIL 9

'Mixed emotions' perfectly describes how I initially felt upon discovering the invitation to participate in the writing of this devotional. I enjoyed the honor of being selected, but dreaded the thought of taking on yet another task.

Between serving as the founder of the Christian Writers Collective, LLC, (CWC) and the live-in caregiver for my 88 year old Dad, I battled against feeling overwhelmed and sleep deprived for six consecutive weeks in order to edit, publish, print, and promote the first book of the CWC's series, *Jesus Can...Give You A New Life!* How I was going to squeeze writing a devotional between the two time consuming responsibilities I already had seemed unimaginable. Thankfully, when I put God's will above my worries, He quickly guided me to select this passage (my spiritual birthday is April 10, 1983) and He reminded me that I write a Wisdom Study for the blog on the CWC's website every Friday. I could write about John 20:24-31. Jesus made the unimaginable, easy.

It took prayer and perseverance to get me through six dense pages of text in the Matthew Henry Commentary (MHC) to study just eight verses. As always, prayer and perseverance paid off...

John 20:24 opens this passage with a 'tradition' most of us are familiar with: we're called one name by the general public and a different name by family and close friends. Sadly, Thomas earned a second nickname: Doubting Thomas. In my opinion, this nickname isn't accurate. Thomas wasn't guilty of doubting. His sin was choosing not to believe Jesus had risen until after He had passed several credibility tests of his choosing. Thomas' sin was pride.

The MHC illuminated another fact: Jesus was so gracious to Thomas, even though Thomas publicly shamed Him by his disbelief and could have spread his disbelief to the disciples and others by proclaiming it out loud.

The snowball that started this avalanche of unfortunate events was that Thomas was absent when the other eleven disciples saw Jesus. Only Thomas had to endure the pain and sorrow of unbelief while the other eleven enjoyed the joy and comfort of knowing that Jesus, their Savior, was alive!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What was the hardest hurdle for you to overcome in believing Jesus is alive? How have other believers helped you overcome this?

*By Stephanie Reynolds*



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS HAS RISEN AND CONQUEGED DEATH

This week we have pored over the resurrection passages in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each one is an account of what happened after Jesus' death but from a different author's point of view.

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week? Was there one reflection, or one of the gospels that resonated with you more deeply? Whose reaction to the resurrection do you relate to most strongly? Mary? Thomas? Simon Peter? Someone else?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# THE BEST CONSTRUCTION

READ MATTHEW 7:1-6

SUNDAY, APRIL 11

Concluding His teaching on the spiritual life, Jesus transitions His teaching to talk about human relationships. How should we relate to our neighbors?

He begins by saying *“Do not judge.”* Judging people is His job, not ours. When the woman caught in adultery was brought to Him, we recall how He silenced those who judged her leaving Him alone as the Judge. This is how it should be.

In the parallel version of this teaching found in Luke, Jesus further admonishes us not to condemn but to forgive and to give generously to our neighbor. He promises that if we obey His instructions, we will not be judged or condemned but forgiven and not only given back, but will be given back the container filled to the full and heaped above its lip. In both Gospel accounts, Jesus then quotes a common Jewish proverb of the time; the measure you use will be used for you.

When is it proper to reprove our neighbor? The illustration of a small speck of wood, dust or grass that gets in our eye is helpful because you may need someone to take it out for you. Likewise, we may need help from others in identifying and helping us to give up or eliminate the small wrongs we seem to fall into. But why do we think we can point out the small wrongs of others without first removing our obvious faults? Jesus instructs to deal with these faults first. And then to give us some real perspective, Jesus contrasts the small irritating speck with a large construction beam. A beam would not just obstruct our view but would actually blind us. Once removed, we can then see the other’s speck with clarity.

Jesus also counsels us to not reprove those who live a worldly life. Like a wild coyote, they just go scavenging about, seeking satisfaction of their hunger. Or like a pig, they get angry and ignore you. You may find words of reproof precious, but the people in the world find them both irritating and useless.

In the end, erroneous reproof is bearing false witness against one’s neighbor. Luther comments on this Commandment by saying, "out of our fear and love of God, that we should not deceitfully belie, betray, slander nor defame our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything." I’m sure Jesus the carpenter agrees!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How can you keep yourself from criticizing/judging your neighbor and instead build them up?

*By Tim Teesch*

# WE ALL NEED GRACE

READ ROMANS 2:1-11

Our passage today specifies that none of us is morally qualified to judge another human being. When we look around the world and see lawlessness caused by our fellow humans, we often have a thing or two to say/think. Read Romans 1:18-32. Would you say, I am not the person Paul is describing? I don't murder, I am not filled with every kind of wickedness. I am just rough around the edges; Okay maybe I still gossip occasionally and get boastful, but I'm for sure not greedy and I don't hate God. Maybe we only struggle with one sin or three. The reality is that we all need God!

God is the only one who can condemn another human, and He chooses to show kindness and patience to every human. He has set a time to judge all of us. See Romans 2:5-11; Romans 14:12-13.

Does this mean that we cannot correct one another? No. Paul wrote to many churches about the importance of correcting and rebuking in love.

It is key to know that rebuking or correcting is different from judging. When we rebuke, we express disapproval of (someone) because of their behavior or actions. Whereas when we judge, we give a verdict about someone. We tend to write them off. We show no mercy.

Rebuking and correcting in love is often to restore to faith. However, judging others condemns and separates us. It creates a sense of rightness in us and wrongness in the person judged. And we know our righteousness is in Jesus alone.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Do you see your need for God's grace and mercy daily?  
(Romans 3:23-24)
- Do you extend the same grace you receive from God to others?  
(Luke 6:31,36)
- Does God's Word guide your opinion on what is right, or do you lean on your personal preference or what others say?  
(2 Timothy 3:16)
- How can you correct or rebuke in love?  
(2 Timothy 4:2; Galatians 6:1-2)

# WHAT WE LEARN FROM SILK

READ COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Legend has it that silk was discovered by Chinese Empress Leizu, or Xi Ling-shi, wife of Emperor Huang Ti, about 3000 BC. In one story, she is sitting down with a cup of tea when a cocoon falls into her cup and begins to unravel. In another account, she was investigating the cause of some damage to mulberry bushes, and found the silkworms eating the leaves. She tried spinning the threads, invented a loom, and eventually produced the first silk garments. The Chinese kept the silk-making a secret for many years, and Ancient Romans paid a high price for it. Trading with China led to a 4,000 mile trade route called the Silk Road. Not one group made the entire journey all the way, as the goods were passed from group to group along the trade route, but that was the incredible distance people were willing to travel for this precious fabric.

Each morning, we decide which clothing to wear for the day. Likewise, putting on compassion, kindness, forgiveness, patience, love, etc., is also a choice. It is not something we are magically bestowed with upon waking up each morning, or a special gift we received at birth: we choose to be those things, or we choose not to be those things. It is a daily decision, requiring prayer, a daily emptying (confession and asking forgiveness), refueling (asking God for help), and the word dwelling in us “richly” (reading and praying His word, singing songs, sharing with one another), and being thankful.

It is interesting to note that the exhortation to let “the peace of Christ rule” in our hearts comes after we are told to put on patience, love, humility, and forgiveness. Adopting the posture of compassion, love, and gentleness is a precursor to peace.

Silk, like other fabrics on earth, will eventually fade and decompose. What is eternal is not found in our external physical looks, or what we wear, but what emanates from within. These are qualities possessing eternal value and worth—and people would be willing to travel the world over to find these qualities in their fellow human beings. We can wear a cloak of distrust, impatience, or hatred. Or we can clothe ourselves with enduring qualities that attract others to us, such as love, humility, kindness, and peace. What sort of fabric are we creating with our daily choices?

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What will you do to put on love, humility, kindness, and peace today? How do you think consciously deciding to “wear” these things will change your day?

*by prasanta reza anumolu*



# HOW DO YOU DEFINE GRACE?

READ JAMES 4:7-12

In verse 6, which directly precedes our passage today, James tells us that God gives us grace. That is why we “submit, then” to God. One reaction to God’s merciful kindness to us and the undeserved favor that we receive, should be to recognize and repent for our sinful actions. We turn back to God. We are to become humble and in doing so, grow closer to God. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that whatever we do, we can’t earn God’s grace. What we can do is to follow the path back to God. We walk the path of the prodigal son back to our Father, who always rejoices and welcomes us.

Isn’t it interesting, then, that directly after James reminds us to become humble, that he needs to remind us that it is not our job to slander or judge others? Our humility contrasts with our judgment. Sometimes our eyes stray to what others are doing. When reprimanded as children, we try to justify ourselves that “so-and-so was doing it too!” We prefer to take our eyes off our own sin to remind others that they need to repent as well. But growing in Christ-likeness means that our focus should remain on ourselves. We do not and should not sit in the judgment seat.

Often, we don’t see the full picture of someone else’s struggle. God, who does see the full picture, is the only good Judge. He has the power to judge. Our job is to keep our eyes fixed on Him, to choose to follow Him, and to extend his merciful kindness to others when we can.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How does a proper awareness of our standing before Christ impact how we treat others?
- What can you do when you're tempted to judge someone else to reset your mind so that your eyes are focused on Christ?

# REAL PERSPECTIVE

READ ROMANS 14:10-19

THURSDAY, APRIL 15

I've always been fascinated by those ambiguous pictures that can be viewed multiple ways (the effect is called the Gestalt Switch). The first one I remember seeing is the drawing of the young women wearing a feathered hat that can also be seen as an old women wearing a kerchief.

I've seen dozens of these through the years. Is it a rabbit or a duck? Is it two men facing each other or is it a vase (Rubin's Vase)? One drawing that can be viewed multiple ways. Perspective changes what you see.

That's the context for our text today. In Romans 14 Paul is dealing with an argument that developed in the early church that was centered on the perspective two groups of people brought to issues like "food" or "holy days". (Feel free to replace those topics with "masks" or "politics" or... whatever helps you get the idea) One group thought they were more spiritually mature than the other based on their approach to those issues, and in doing so, they missed the opportunity to show love towards each other in a self-sacrificial way.

To be a community truly centered on Christ means we will bump up against people that think differently than we do, that have been shaped by different experiences and relationships. Ultimately, Paul reminds us we will all kneel before Christ and give an account of our lives to God (vss 11-12). And he makes it clear that what matters most in that moment is the righteousness, peace and joy we demonstrate as part of God's kingdom. Let's "*make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification*" (v.19).

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What reasoning does Paul give us for not judging our brothers or sisters?
- What does verse 15 say is the consequence of causing a brother or sister to stumble? (see also vs. 20).
- Do you think it matters if you are the "weaker brother" or "the stronger brother" in any given situation? If not, what does that say about what really does matter?

# DON'T JUDGE ME!

READ GALATIANS 6:1-5

"Don't judge me!" It's a phrase often uttered in jest between friends over awkward dance moves or strange food combinations. It's often yelled in defense of oneself when differing perspectives stand in the way of reconciliation.

Regardless of the context, this word carries some pretty hefty connotations. It conjures images of people being shunned from their communities and courtrooms filled with jurors and judges waiting to dole out verdicts. When we pick apart the idea of judgment it always points back to broken relationships in one form or another.

If a fellow believer you know does something wrong, it's not a great idea to immediately ram down their throat to correct them. I think we often forget that while the Holy Spirit is working in our personal lives the Spirit is also working in the lives of other believers. We need to trust the Holy Spirit's work and not try to do it ourselves. We all make wrong choices from time to time and if we are walking in the Spirit we will note our own wrongs without someone else pointing them out.

However, there are some times when those in our community fall into sinful, unhealthy patterns or make poor choices that severely impact others. At these times it is appropriate for someone in a good standing relationship with God and that person (not the random church lady who heard about it from Jan, who heard it from Kyle) to come alongside them and gently walk the road of restoration with them. Paul says to carry each other's burdens; this becomes a communal effort between the fallen believer, their friend, and the Holy Spirit. An act of love and humility to see a sibling in Christ restored rather than an act of pride and self-righteousness which will ultimately tear others down.

Paul addresses those who *"think they are important when they aren't."* When we worry about how others are contributing or detracting to the work of the Kingdom rather than focus on our own calling, it's like trying to micro-manage the Holy Spirit. I believe this is what Paul meant when he said to carry our own loads. Our relationships with fellow believers and with God work better when we keep in step with the Spirit personally so that we have the ability to pour ourselves out into the lives of others.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What would make you more attractive to others as a person who can walk alongside them in restoration and reconciliation? Who would you turn to when you find an area in your life God needs to restore?



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# ONLY GOD CAN JUDGE THE heart

This week, we have been studying a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as other New Testament letters, that address judgment. We're often told not to be judgmental but how do we approach others and ourselves with appropriate perspective and right judgment?

What challenged you this week? What encouraged you? Is there any action that you sense God is calling you to do as a result of what you've learned and read this week?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# ASKING OUR FATHER

READ MATTHEW 7:7-11

Years after it happened, our son told us about some bullying he'd experienced in middle school. We hurt for him, but we also wondered, "Why didn't you share this with us before? Maybe we could have helped somehow!" Fathers and mothers want their kids to communicate about their joys and sorrows, dreams and needs. "Please talk to me; please ask me!" is the parent's plea.

On the mountainside, Jesus is speaking to people in need of physical healing or with spiritual yearning—or both. He offers a promise: *"Ask and it will be given to you."* Isolated from other Scriptures, this might seem like a "blank check." Can we ask God for anything and receive it?

Jesus does promise, *"Ask and it will be given to you."* But then He explains prayer in the context of parents and children: *"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"* The parent wants the child to ask, and wants to grant good gifts. Jesus is urging us to approach the Father boldly, to pour out our hearts to Him. It's true that the Father *"knows what you need before you ask him"* (Matthew 6:8), yet He yearns for us to present our requests to Him (Philippians 4:6). Rather than burying our hurts or longings, or assuming that God can't or won't help us, we must ask.

Can we ask for anything? Advocates of a "prosperity gospel" say "Yes"—with an emphasis on health, wealth, and power. But prayer is not a cosmic vending machine, where we insert requests and receive whatever we want. How foolish and arrogant that would be, when God's wisdom is so much greater than ours! He is our Father, but also the ruler of the universe! He is not forced to grant our requests, and we will not always understand His answers. We beseech humbly, knowing that our Father in heaven will *"give good gifts to those who ask him."*

One thing we can ask for is help with prayer. Jesus says that one request our Father will grant is the good gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). This is wonderful news, because *"we do not know what we ought to pray for"* but *"the Spirit helps us in our weakness"* (Romans 8:26). With the Spirit's aid, our growing desire for the Father's will can shape our hearts as we ask, seek, and knock.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How easy is it for you to truly be honest with God about what you really want in life? How have the desires of your heart changed throughout your time following God?

# LESSONS FROM A FIG TREE

READ MARK 11:12-14; 20-25

MONDAY, APRIL 19

What does a cursed fig tree have to do with prayer? Is this just an extreme example of hanger (anger brought on by hunger)?

First, a quick botany lesson: fig trees produce their fruit before leaves. When Jesus saw the leafy tree it was natural to assume it had bloomed unseasonably early. However, this was not the case. The tree was fruitful only in appearance, and Jesus used this opportunity to show what happens with fruitlessness and to teach a lesson on prayer. Just as a fig tree ought to produce fruit, so should faith. If there is only the appearance of faith, it is fruitless. Jesus takes this very seriously.

After coming upon the deceptive fig tree, Jesus and His disciples went to the Temple in Jerusalem; what He found there paralleled the fig tree. In Mark 11:15-19, Jesus expresses righteous anger at the fruitlessness of the Temple. In quoting Isaiah 56:7, Jesus reminds His audience that God's heart is for people of all nations. The part of the Temple court they were in was intended as a space for Gentiles (non-Jewish people) to pray. Those present had turned it into a place of profit rather than prayer, a place where corruption and greed were barriers to people of all nations coming to God.

Both the fig tree and the Temple appeared fruitful and should have been fruitful. Being found fruitless was not tolerated. In 11:23, Jesus taught His disciples to pray boldly for *"this"* mountain to be removed and that it would be. *"This mountain"* is the fruitless systems in our faith that prevent people from coming to God. Both in our personal faith and church communities, our response to fruitlessness should be prayer as Jesus teaches here.

We are called to follow Jesus' example of dismantling unjust, fruitless systems that prevent all people from knowing or coming to God. Our first steps should be prayer, forgiving others, and seeking forgiveness. When we pray for the lack of fruit we see in our faith and in our churches, we must first seek forgiveness for the ways we are part of those unjust, fruitless systems. Then we can boldly pray for God to forgive us and to remove those systems and He will.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What kind of fruit is your faith producing in your life? Pray for God's Spirit to truly transform you into a fruitful follower.

By mac Appel

# PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

READ EPHESIANS 6:18-20; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

These verses have always challenged me.

*"Pray without ceasing!"*

*"Pray at all times with all kinds of prayers!"*

As a kid I pictured myself walking around, interacting with people and then dropping to my knees, bowing my head, grasping my hands together and praying in the classic sense. It was hard for me to grasp the concept of prayer as anything other than the formal way I was taught to pray: before meals, beside my bed at night and in Sunday school for the start of class.

As I've grown, God has worked to expand my understanding of what prayer really is (and isn't). God is not some "phone call away." I don't have to "dial Him up" in order to have a conversation with Him.

When I'm hanging out with my family around the house, I don't schedule a time for us to talk about stuff, when things come up, we talk.

Similarly, as my awareness of God's constant presence (in the form of the Holy Spirit) has increased, so has my desire and ability to have an ongoing conversation with Him throughout my day.

"God thank you for that person's encouragement!" "God, help me give this person good advice in our conversation." "God what should I do about \_\_\_\_\_?" "God, HELP!"

If I believe God is always with me, then I have the awesome opportunity to share with and hear from Him about all aspects of my day, which empowers me to live that day fully committed as a witness for Him.

So pray without ceasing, make your day an experience of walking with God, and see where He takes you!

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- Why do you think Paul could say so confidently, *"pray without ceasing"* when it sounds like such an impossible thing to do?
- What gets in the way of us *"praying without ceasing"*? How can we grow in this area?

# DELIVERANCE

READ PSALM 34:1-10

Deliverance describes our lifelong journey and has special meaning in relationship with Jesus. We are sick and sinful. We have trials and troubles. We have opposition and contention. We live in an earthly place, we long for our spiritual home in God. What do we do? We pray. He provides deliverance physically and spiritually not as we expect or desire, necessarily, nor in our preferred time or timing, but deliverance with His purpose and in His time.

Psalm 34 finds David when he had just experienced pain and opposition and then found deliverance. He gratefully attributes it all to God's plan. He praises God with his whole heart for his physical deliverance from enemies. The physical deliverance extends to encompass his spiritual relationship to God and how he comes to God on regular basis. David's praise provides a process to begin our own prayers. Extol him, glorify him, praise him are the words used in the beginning of his prayer of worship and thanksgiving. The act of praise is the beginning of receiving God's deliverance from fear and sin, physically and spiritually, in his life and kept David tethered to the deliverer throughout his life. Praising God brings us to the realization that our God is far above the madness that can encompass our lives and yet God walks with us in our everyday lives by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the example of his incarnational son, Jesus. We enter His courts by extolling His works and presence, bringing our minds and hearts into sync with His truth as we go forward. It is when we call out to Him then read His Word, meeting Him in the wilderness of life, that we are assured He hears us and knows our troubles. Deliverance may mean protection and blessing but, whatever the cost, by our praise and supplication, we need to be brought to hear and obey Him. The deliverance we experience in obedience returns us to glory in and glorify the Lord in our prayer. The presence of God in our prayers, in his redemption, fills us and satisfies us as only He can. Taste, fear and seek the Lord in prayer. He is good.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How often do you spend time with Jesus? Do you exalt God with your prayer and life? Is it a regular event to get to know Him and His presence and deliverance? Make it about His will and grace in your life.

*By David Bies*



# PERSISTENT PRAYER

READ LUKE 18:1-8

In this parable Jesus is talking to His disciples. A disciple is a follower or learner. If we have surrendered our lives to the Lord by confessing our sin, believing He can and will forgive us of our sin and fill us with His Holy Spirit to live in obedience to Him, then we are followers and He is speaking to us.

Jesus begins talking about a widow, who in that culture had very little standing and many times would have received very little support from others. She had been taken advantage of, and must depend on the local authority for help. The problem is that the judge from whom she needs help seems only concerned about himself, does not care about her situation, and will not help her against someone who is mistreating her.

Jesus points out that the widow did receive justice from her adversary, not because of her mistreatment but because she constantly complained to him. If an unjust judge can provide justice for someone he does not care about, imagine what Jesus can do for his followers who have been declared righteous in his sight (Romans 2:13). If we will cry out in faith (trust), we know He will listen and answer our prayers in His perfect timing.

The most important lesson to take from this parable is that we need to be reminded that He loves us and His timing is always perfect. He will act in our best interest as we continue trusting and surrendering to His perfect will no matter how long it takes. I see in this passage that He will act quickly, but in 2 Peter 2:8-9, we know a day is like a thousand years.

His timing is different from ours.

Do you have someone like a boss, a coworker, neighbor or acquaintance who has wronged you? Have you taken that disappointment to Jesus day and night until you see a way out? In Philippians 4:6-7 we are told not to fear but *"in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Consider keeping a prayer journal to track your prayer needs and God's responses. In which prayers have you exhibited enduring patience as you wait for God's response?

# OUR HOPE EVEN IN THE DARKEST OF DAYS

READ PSALM 86:1-13

FRIDAY,  
APRIL 23

Late one evening, my mother called. She had just spoken with a police officer who told her that my brother “was not doing well.” She asked me to meet the ambulance at the hospital. My brother had overdosed on drugs. A week later, our family laid my youngest brother to rest.

Four days after my brother’s funeral, our son called in a tremendous panic. Our soccer player son severely injured his foot in a lawn mower accident. Paramedics transported him to the hospital. Our nineteen-year-old was asked to give consent for the potential amputation of his foot.

In this season of grieving for my brother and son, loneliness, sadness, sorrow and fear engulfed me. Although present at the hospital with our son, I was unable to change or fix the circumstances. In this place of quiet anguish and desperation, I experienced the compassion, grace, love and faithfulness of God, as I never had before.

I read from the book of Job. After Job suffered tremendous loss, Job’s friend, Eliphaz, counseled him. While not everything that Eliphaz said was helpful, he was right when he counseled Job to focus on the greatness of God: *“But if I were you, I would appeal to God; I would lay my cause before him. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.”* (Job 5:8-9)

In Psalm 86, King David, in undefined affliction, cries out to God, saying, *“Hear me, Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.”* (v. 1) and *“When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me.”* (6b) As in the book of Job, David acknowledges God’s greatness and kindness: *“Among the gods, there is no one like you, Lord; no deeds can compare with yours.”* (v. 8) and *“For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.”* (v. 10).

I clung to the verses in Job and appealed to God. My prayers were not eloquent, but rather raw and honest cries to the Lord of mercy, who is *“close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”* (Psalm 34:18).

Years later, I am yet mindful of God’s profound goodness during those uncertain days. I will forever be grateful for His provision, as well as for the kindness of others. Miraculously, our son’s foot was healed, and within a year of the accident, he returned to the soccer field. Praise be to our loving God and Father, He *“who is over all and through all and in all. . .!”* (Ephesians 4:6b)

## FOR REFLECTION:

- When has life overwhelmed you to the point of anguish? How did God carry you through that season?

*By maureen gibson*



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# THERE IS NOTHING YOU CANNOT SAY TO GOD IN prayer

Jesus says, "Ask, seek, and knock, and it will be given, you will find, and the door will be opened." But what does Jesus really mean by these words in the Sermon on the Mount? This week we explored a variety of prayers and parables on prayer found throughout the Bible to help us understand Jesus' meaning.

Which passage resonated most with you? Which challenged you most? Was it the parable of the persistent widow's prayers? The prayers of King David in distress? The challenge to pray without ceasing? The challenge from Mark?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

READ MATTHEW 7:12

SUNDAY, APRIL 25

The word love is used hundreds of times throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament. Love is both a noun (a thing) and a verb (an action). Love is not just about having feelings, it's about putting those feelings to work.

*"How can you say you love God, Who you haven't seen and hate your neighbor who you have seen"* (1 John 4:20-21). Jesus never calls us to do anything that He did not first do Himself, and that He didn't show us how to do. A perfect example of loving your neighbor as yourself is the "good Samaritan" (Luke 10: 25-37).

God commands us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). He also tells us, *"If you love me, keep my commandments"* (John 14:15). Jesus doesn't give suggestions, He gives commands. Obeying His commands is our way of showing we love God, as He showed His love for us by dying on the Cross. Jesus didn't feel like dying on the Cross but He did so in obedience to the Father and because He loved us, His children. The *agape* love Christ showed and we are commanded to show supersedes our feelings and emotions.

During this most holy and precious season, let's take the time to show the love of Jesus Christ to those who are lost and hurting. Let's live as Jesus did (1 John 2:6). When Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, He is not telling us to die for them as He did for us, just to love them. We can do this in simple ways; a warm smile, an encouraging word, a kind deed, a phone call, a card, forgiveness. Simple things that we should be doing all the time, not just during this season, that can mean so much. Jesus showed His love for us when He stretched out His arms and died for us. We can show our love for Him by obeying His commands *"to do unto others as we would have them do unto us,"* and *"to love your neighbor as yourself."* That's the least and the best we can do.

Let's show the love of Christ so we can set the captives free one person at a time. We might not always like our neighbor or the things they do, but we are still commanded to love them. We serve an awesome, amazing, merciful, loving God who loves us so much, surely we can do the same for each other.

At the end of the day when Jesus asks us if we did *"unto others as we would have them do unto us,"* what will our answer be?

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What is one thing you can do today to show love to your neighbors?

*By monroe & patricia kirby*

# HUMILITY & SERVICE

READ JOHN 13:34-35

Have you ever had someone serve you in an unexpected way? I'm sure the disciples were shocked that someone in authority over them would stoop down to the dusty & dirty ground just to wash their feet. In 8th grade, I remember my Sunday school teacher teaching us about this act of service Jesus performed by washing our feet as an object lesson. I felt uncomfortable, as I knew she saw any imperfections and flaws—I've always had eczema and was especially self-conscious about it at the time. As she was a mentor and someone I respected, I felt vulnerable that she would see a part of me that I was self-conscious about.

I'm sure the disciples felt the same way—stripped away, self-conscious, or uncomfortable. This certainly wasn't typical behavior of a respected teacher to wash their dirty feet. Maybe they remembered the places they had walked during the day, the filth that had acquired on their sandals and feet from the course of a regular day.

Yet, Jesus didn't hesitate to wash the feet of His disciples, even the one (Judas) who would betray Him. This is the type of example He asks His disciples to follow. In verses 14-15 Jesus says, *"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."*

They might have been repulsed by His challenge to serve one another so humbly. This type of sacrificial love & service required the disciples to serve in a gritty and real way; there was nothing glamorous or pretty about washing filthy feet that had seen many miles of wear and tear. Even today, while we don't typically wash the feet of those around us as an act of service, we have the call to humbly serve those around us and to respond with love.

This is a challenge to us. I'm sure it wasn't glamorous or easy for my Sunday school teacher to wash the feet of several middle school girls, yet her service and love for us still sticks with me to this day. I want to be humble enough to be able to serve the people around me in the same attitude of love and humility—even the people I don't agree with or have a hard time getting along with. That is the love for one another that Jesus calls us to have.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What is a way you can humbly serve someone around you this week?
- Think back to a time you received an act of service. Did it make you feel uncomfortable? How did this act teach you about God's love?

# THE LOVING PATH

READ ROMANS 13:8-12

TUESDAY, APRIL 27

"No, the burned hand teaches best. After that advice about fire goes to the heart." —J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*

We humans often know the path we *should* take—get plenty of sleep, exercise more, don't eat raw cookie dough, blah, blah, blah—but we generally don't follow that path until confronted with a crisis. That crisis could be a health scare or a spiritual crossroad; and without it we resist change. Why must I break all ten commandments before I realize I'm on the wrong path, when Jesus has laid the righteous path at my feet: love.

Love is like the "Lane Departure Prevention" feature in many modern vehicles. If you are acting in love, it is harder to leave the path of righteousness. If you are loving the Lord with all your heart, you will not break the first four commandments. If you are loving your neighbor as yourself, you are prevented from breaking the other six. This is not always easy, and we certainly fall short. Often, though, being enlightened by how our actions negatively impact others can be a different kind of catalyst for change. True, Godly love provides a space where we can do no harm to our neighbor. Our personal agenda is replaced by concerns outside ourselves, and that is when God can really use us.

My prayer is we humans will choose the loving path rather than continually running headlong into a brick wall. That the young would listen to the old, who having learned from their mistakes and would dearly love to see the next generation avoid them. Time is short and the day is near. As we choose love more often, we can live more fully in the light, and clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What is one lesson on loving others you've "learned" the hard way? How can you use that experience to help others avoid going through it?

By Brian Degeer

# MAKING SENSE OF THE LAW

READ MATTHEW 22:36-40

As a geometry teacher, I teach my students formulas for problem-solving in many situations. It's better, though, and more fun, to teach them the basic theorems and postulates that make up the mathematical world, and also how to think like a mathematician. Then, formulas just make sense, and sometimes they come up with them on their own!

In Matthew 22:37-40, this is how Jesus taught. From what I have been told about the Pharisees, I know they had a billion little sub-rules that helped them keep the ten commandments. Jesus, however, boiled them down to the two main rules on which the rest of commandments hinge. "If you keep these two commandments at the front of your mind," he basically said, "then the rest just make sense—and you might even be able to come up with them on your own!" Love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself.

If you really love God, of course you won't worship another god or use His holy name in ways He didn't mean it to be used. You'll even obey His order to spend one day out of the week enjoying His creation and worshipping Him! And if you are truly acting out of love for your fellow humans, how could you murder them? Or cheat on your spouse? Or steal, or lie, or behave out of selfish jealousy? When you know God's laws well, and when you know Him, these things just make sense.

Math isn't a series of rules that come out of nowhere; it's a playground with infinite possibilities derived from a set of observed rules! (That may not be as exciting to you as it is to me. That's fine.) Similarly, though, living life God's way isn't about memorizing a bunch of disconnected, illogical rules! Living life God's way is about using the basic tools and rules He's given us to create and work in His world to make it look more and more like the Kingdom He created it to be. And the better we know Him, the more the commandments He has given us make sense to that end. "*Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the Lord*" (Psalm 1:1-2)!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Pray. Ask God to let you see His ways—His laws—and to make them make sense to you.
- How has God called you into creating and working in this world to make it more like His Kingdom?

# THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

READ MARK 12:28-33

THURSDAY, APRIL 29

The teacher who approached Jesus recognized Jesus' knowledge and needed a simple answer. He knew the law, but trusted that Jesus could help him truly understand it. As a man, he knew the heart of man and needed to know how to follow God.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, there was no hesitation.

The first thing He shared was to love God, the one and only true God, with all our hearts and minds and souls and strengths. Jesus gave us a priority - that before we worry about anything else, we need to acknowledge God.

Once we accept this and direct our lives to the presence of God, the second commandment is a no-brainer. In order to truly love God, we have to see each other as equal children under one God, and love each other as brothers and sisters.

Jesus knew that only by speaking to us simply, like children, would we be able to see the greatness of God. Jesus knew that when we are making choices in our lives, we would often choose wrong or unwisely. Jesus knew some people would justify cruelty or bias or selfishness by interpreting or confusing the individual commandments.

There have never been so many "except for's" added to a list than by someone explaining the ten commandments. Parents like number 5. Rich people are fond of 8. We all have our personal favorite, and we all have ones we tend to hedge on. The person having an affair finds a loophole in number 7 and the person who needs to succeed may put an addendum on number 9.

Jesus knew the commandments said simply "God is Lord. And to fully serve and honor Him, love each other as God loves us."

Especially in today's disarray and confusion, we are crying out for answers or instructions. Well it is easy: the instructions have remained the same from the dawn of time. The answer is Jesus. And He told us what to do.

Just remember: Everything changes except God. But the one thing we can do is change back, for the better.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What does it look like for you today to love God fully? To love your neighbor? To love yourself?

*by margaret duchow*



# FRIDAY, APRIL 30 **SELFLESS LOVE WHEN TREATED UNFAIRLY**

READ EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2

Ephesians 4 concludes with calling us to some specific things in order that: "...you should no longer walk as the rest of the nations walk, in the futility of their mind..." but rather that we should, "be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4:17, 22-23)

The Word then tells us what it means to be "set apart" when we are treated unfairly. When it happens, anger and disappointment set in. It is at these critical moments that we must not forget that the Lord is enough for us to handle ANY such situation without falling short of His glory. Yet each of us has a natural tendency to throw a rope down the rampart so that the devil may climb up (4:27).

Jesus' alternative runs in stark contrast to this. His way says, "I haven't forgotten what you did to me, but I'm going to choose to let it go and bless you instead. I'm giving up holding onto bitterness." In other words, "Put the fleshly response away. All of it. Soften your heart. This is true strength in me."

When we get to chapter 5, Paul exhorts us throughout the chapter to walk in "(selfless) love", "light", and "wisdom". To walk in these three important "ways" he naturally starts with *agape* (selfless love), but he doesn't just mention it and move on. He elaborates why we can and should walk in love: "...walk in love (*agape*) as Christ has also loved us and given Himself for us, as an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Ephesians 5:2 NKJV).

Jesus was more than just a good example of this love in His kindness and teachings. God went through with the unthinkable and did what Abraham did not have to do on Mount Moriah. He responded to the wrongdoing of the world that still walked in sin and darkness and chose to sacrifice His one and only Son that those still undeserving might yet find life.

This is why we can respond at any moment of unfair or poor treatment with selfless love, forgiveness, and letting go.

*"But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil."* (Luke 6:35 KJV)

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Which aspect of this passage is the hardest for you to live out? The "do nots" or the "dos"?



GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS CALLS US TO LOVE ONE another

This week, we have been examining Matthew 7:12, known as the Golden Rule, by examining other New Testament passages that expound on Jesus' call to love. What did you learn (or unlearn) this week about love?  
What does Jesus really tell us about how to love others?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**

# THE HARD ROAD

READ MATTHEW 7:13-14

*"For the gate is narrow and the road hard that leads to life, and there are few that find it." (Matthew 7:14)*

I wonder how many Christians take time to ponder what this saying of Jesus might mean? We think to ourselves, "It could not be talking about me! I read the Bible every day; I go to prayer meetings; I absolutely love corporate worship!"

But, what kind of narrow way is Jesus promoting? Firstly, from Jesus' words, we see that the narrow way is not the wide gate that is easy, but rather it is the narrow way that is hard.

As I reflect on my Christian life, has it been easy? Or has my expectation been that it would be easy? Am I taking the easy way out of my sin—explaining it away? Am I taking the easy way out of my marriage—instead of choosing to lay down my life for my spouse each day? Am I taking the easy way out of loving my kids—only when they agree with me and it is convenient for me? Am I taking the easy way out of loving those at my workplace—gossiping about others when I don't agree with their stands on an issue?

What might the hard way, the narrow way, look like in each of these circumstances? What might Jesus be calling each of us to that may look more like suffering, more like being out of control, more like failure, rather than the triumphant Christian life? How could the hard path actually be the narrow gate that Jesus is referring to?

The hard path will inevitably be the path of letting go of myself—dying to myself—and living to Christ. It will be a difficult path of suffering and failure, persecution and downward mobility. It will not look like success, yet it will be a life of identifying with Jesus. The hard road will put others before myself, even my enemies. The narrow gate will seek the lovingkindness of the Lord for those who persecute me, slander me, and attack me. This is the hard way of love that Jesus modeled for us.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What difficult road is Jesus calling you to accompany Him on?
- How might you choose the narrow gate in your daily walk?

# DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED

READ JOHN 14:1-7

MONDAY, MAY 3

These verses follow Jesus telling His disciples that He's going away and the disciples are troubled. In John 14:1 Jesus says *"do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in Me."* He then tells them that He is going to prepare a place for them. My brother, sister and I were getting a room ready in assisted living—first for my father, and several years later for my mother. We said to each other *"this must be how Jesus is preparing a place for us in heaven!"* The room that we got ready for my father was very different than the room for my mother. God is creative, and I believe the room that He's preparing for me is going to be just for me and the room He prepares for you, will be just for you!

Thomas then asks *"Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"* Jesus replies with the well-known verse *"I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me."*

My husband and I have been studying Jonah, and God prepares many things for Jonah—He prepares a fish, a plant and a worm among other things. God is always at work preparing things/events/people in our lives. May we become more mindful of this! Lord, help us to KNOW that You are the Way, the Truth and the Life! Jesus says in verse 7 *"If you really know Me, you will know My Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him."* Jesus, thank You for showing us the Father! Help us to realize that we do, in fact, know You—the God Who is preparing a place for us and is coming back to take us to be with You, so we may be where You are.

Our response so often is to be troubled, when You, God, tell us things in Your Word, or by events in our lives. God doesn't want this for us! He tells us: Don't LET (allow) your hearts to be troubled. Help us, Jesus, to respond by trusting You and Your way! Help us to be mindful of Your preparations for us and to hear Your words of comfort, truth and life in Your Word. AMEN

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What piece of this passage brings you the most comfort as you consider Jesus' words?

# REAL RESPONSE

READ MATTHEW 7:15-23

Do you remember playing the game, “follow the leader”? My kids used to love playing this game with me at the playgrounds around our house. They knew which tubes or slides I couldn’t really fit in and would always laugh to see me struggle to get through. Yep, they love to see me in awkward situations!

Now imagine, instead of one leader, the group lines up behind three leaders, each heading out in different directions. What do you do? Who do you follow? How would you know?

When it comes to our faith, there is only one true path to the Father: Jesus. He said very clearly, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”* At times, there will be many people trying to tell us what it means to follow Jesus. “Jesus says do this!” “No, Jesus really wants you do this!” “Jesus promises if you do this, you’ll get this!” And I know this will be shocking to hear (sarcasm), but not all of them truly represent what Jesus really said or desired. Just because they lead a large church or have a television show of their teaching doesn’t make them “True” Prophets.

In this passage, Jesus makes it clear that the voices we listen to matter. They can lead us down the path of destruction. So He warns us to be discerning of who we follow. Examine their fruit if you want to know if they are legitimate or not.

God gave us His Word to serve as a measuring stick of the fruit we see. Good trees, good prophets, good leaders will not only guide us to and through the narrow gate, but will be demonstrating the fruit of God’s Spirit being lived in their own lives. Then we can be confident they are helping to point us to the one true Path, the path of righteousness and life.

For me, this passage is a reminder that it is not enough to listen to someone else’s teaching to grow. There is a need and responsibility for me to respond to God’s grace by studying and knowing His Word, so that I can effectively discern the other teachers I hear.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- Why do you think it can be easy for us to follow “wolves in sheep’s clothing”? What makes it easier or harder for this to happen?
- Have you ever questioned the teaching of a leader in a church you’ve attended? How did you pursue or reconcile your concerns?

# FAITH IN ACTION

READ JAMES 2:14-26

WEDNESDAY, MAY 5

This passage is an important teaching on how faith must not be just “head” knowledge; it must include knowledge, which will shape your beliefs and worldview, but it must also be seen in how you live your life. If you follow a God whose unselfishness led to the ultimate sacrifice of His own Son, and whose Son was humble enough to die a shameful death for sinners, how is that same unselfishness and humility reflected in your own life? We can show these through our actions, our “deeds”.

Abraham and Rahab did not replace faith with deeds, but it is faith that pushed them into action. When Rahab saved the Israelite spies, she already knew that *“the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below”* (Joshua 2:11). It was only because Abraham believed God that he was willing to take such an unthinkable step.

Faith, of course, is necessary to the Christian life (when a jailer asked Paul in Acts 16:30-31 “What must I do to be saved?” the answer was “Believe in the Lord Jesus”). Faith cannot be underestimated; the focus in this passage, though, is adding actions to faith. Actions are the practical ways we serve God and others, and show our faith to the world.

Our deeds should be a sign that we are Christ-followers, and different from the world; the examples above (Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son, Rahab risking her life by helping Jewish spies) are not easy or automatic. They require a decision, and a willingness to sacrifice: Abraham his son, Rahab her life and safety. Even the example in verses 14-16, of caring for those in physical need, could require sacrificial giving of money or goods, and spending time with people from other sectors of society.

Eastbrook Church (see [eastbrook.org/serve](http://eastbrook.org/serve)), local community organizations, and international organizations offer so many practical ways—even during a pandemic—to respond to this teaching. There are many ways to humbly serve God and others to live out this passage; ask God what deeds He would have you perform, and then do them!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- How does what you do with your time and resources reflect your faith? If it doesn't, what needs to change?

*By maggie freitag*

# SAND-CASTLES OR LEGO-CASTLES

READ MATTHEW 7:24-29

When I go to the beach, sometimes I build sand-castles with my brother. We can spend hours digging trenches, making walls, towers and everything. One thing that frustrates me and also makes me sad is when the waves come up higher and all our hard work gets washed away in seconds. It makes me really mad!

But other times, Landon and I will build castles and houses with his Legos. These buildings last for days and even weeks. (Sometimes mom will knock one off the table and it might take a little damage, but they still stay together for the most part!)

The difference in these two buildings is kind of like what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 7:24-29. Jesus gives us two different pictures of how we can build our lives. We can listen to Him and trust in Him and that's like a house built on a rock (like the Legos—it stays together for a long time). Or we can choose to not listen and trust in Him and that's like a house built in the sand. A little trouble comes along and everything collapses, we get washed away or drowned in our troubles.

If we want our lives to be strong and secure, listening to Jesus gives us the right foundation.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What can you do to make sure you are building your life on the strong foundation of Jesus?
- What does it mean for you to stand firm when the storms come?

# BECOME REAL

READ JAMES 1:22-25

*"Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says."*

You have to *do*.

True story. I love to workout and I follow many inspiring female athletes on Instagram. I love to see them lifting heavy things and doing crazy feats of strength and flexibility. HIIT, Flow, Cross Fit, Kettlebell training. I often watch these workout videos while lying in bed with my pajamas on. I save many of them, to do later. But, sometimes I get in a rut and realize that I am watching much more than I am doing! I'll open one of the saved workouts and do it, feeling pretty good about myself. But that's not enough to change me! If I don't do the work I won't get stronger, I won't get more flexible or lose unwanted pounds! I'm deceiving myself!

*"Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."*

The *useless* mirror.

We use the mirror to check ourselves, to make sure we're alright before going out, or before logging on to ZOOM. As someone living in the Middle East, I think of tabbouleh. The delicious parsley salad is notorious for getting caught between the teeth. If we check our teeth and find there is a big piece of parsley right in front and do nothing about it, our mirror is useless. What if our Bible becomes useless, reading becomes routine. We may read Scripture and see our sin as we read it, feeling that pressing of the Holy Spirit...we may ignore it and run out into the world with tabbouleh in our teeth, UNCHANGED.

*"But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."*

FREEDOM-BLESSING!

So, we can hear and not do, we can see and forget/ignore or we can look intently (with intention) and do what it says and live in freedom and blessing. This is our final devotional. My prayer is that we can all learn from God's Word, from each others lives, and Become Real.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- What is one area where it is easier for you to hear the truth, but not do it? How can you improve your response?

*by teggi plant*





GOSPEL TRUTH:

# JESUS WANTS US TO LIVE OUT OUR FAITH IN action

This week, we concluded our study of the Sermon on the Mount with a look at Matthew 7, James, and a passage from John. In these passages, Jesus offers several pictures of appropriate responses to Him and His teaching. How do we take what He is saying and respond to it ourselves?

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week? What aspect of faith do you need to put into action?

**USE TODAY TO PRAY, REST, WORSHIP, AND REFLECT ON THIS WEEK'S STUDY.**



# ***SPECIAL THANKS***

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## **WORKS CITED**

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO LIVE *real life* WITH GOD?

THERE MAY BE NUMEROUS ANSWERS TO THAT QUESTION, BUT PERHAPS NO PORTION OF SCRIPTURE PROVIDES A CLEARER PICTURE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE REAL LIFE WITH GOD THAN JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT (MATTHEW 5-7).

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT SHOWS US WHAT IT MEANS TO BECOME REAL IN OUR LIFE WITH GOD. JOIN US FOR AN 11-WEEK JOURNEY THROUGH LENT AND BEYOND, AS WE DIG INTO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT.

