

FUN IN THE SON:

A Summer Journey Through the Parables

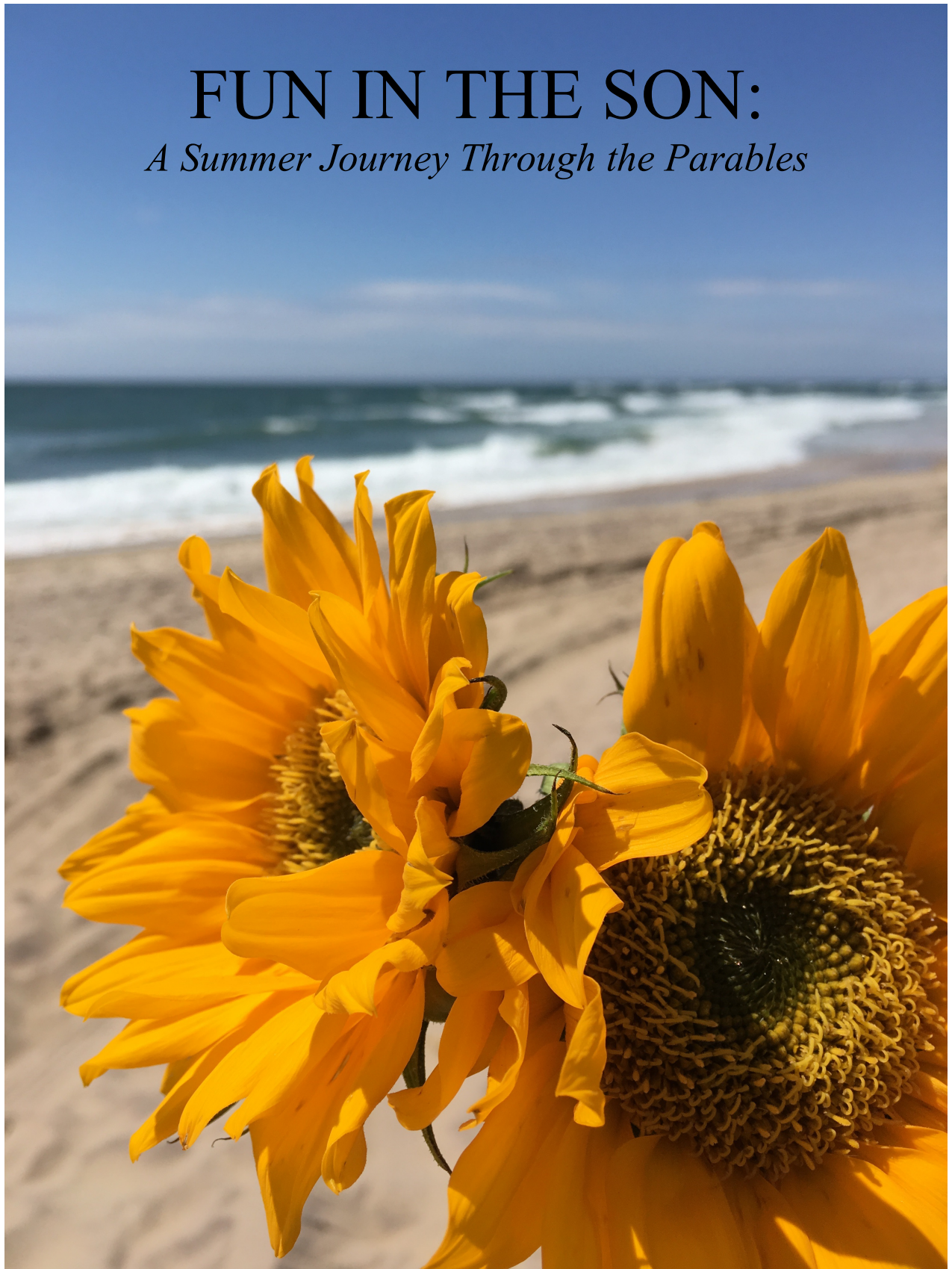


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Chapter 1

SEA GLASS

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied.

He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

-Matthew 13:44-52

SEA GLASS

Reading the Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price, I am reminded of walking along the beach, looking for sea glass. I was introduced to Sea Glass by good friends who live in Bethany. On the table in their living room is a bowl filled with pieces of glass of every color. Many times, one side is frost covered and the other shiny, the effect of sand and waves.

In researching sea glass, one discovers that purple, gray, pink (*often from Great Depression era plates*), teal, yellow, and especially, red and orange are the rarest colors to find as you walk along the beach. Orange sea glass is estimated to be found only once in every 10,000 pieces. People have begun to collect Sea Glass and it is used in jewelry and artwork. The North America Sea Glass Association has an Annual Conference and produces a newsletter for collectors.

I enjoy walking the beach treasure hunting, looking for pieces of sea glass, of various colors, searching for that rare piece from the Great Depression era, or an old cobalt blue bottle top from a Milk of Magnesia bottle, or perhaps a piece of black glass that can be traced back to an old eighteenth-century wine bottle. It is always exciting to find a piece, imagining that it was dropped from a pirate ship traversing the shores of Delaware. One day I would love to find a pink shard from an 1845 Baltimore Torpedo Soda bottle, washed up upon the shores over 150 years later.

But as exciting as it might be to find sea glass on an outing to the beach, it doesn't compare to the treasure Jesus speaks of as He stands in a boat, pushed off a few yards from shore, along the Sea of Galilee.

Can you imagine the man Jesus describes? First century Hebrew, staff in hand, with pressing business in the city he decides to take a shortcut through a field. This was a courtesy allowed. As he is walking along, in a hurry, "thunk." He trips and falls into the dirt. He looks to see what he tripped over and sees the corner of a chest sticking up among the weeds. He begins to dig, getting more excited as each handful of dirt is pulled away from his find.

Beneath the surface he finds a chest, a chest filled with gold coins issued in Rome 70 years ago, a secret, he realizes, that died with a wealthy man, the previous landowner. He buries the treasure deep and marks the spot and skipping to the city, he decides he will sell all he has and will buy the field. He doesn't want to steal. Filled with new focus he works toward his goal. Just in case the crowds and his disciples missed His point with the first story, Jesus reiterates His point with a second story, the parable of the pearl of great price.

Men willing to sell all they had in order to possess the treasure they had discovered. Jesus tells them that the Kingdom of God is like such treasure, worth sacrificing everything to possess, and Jesus reminds them that this treasure is of eternal consequence...so listen closely.

What is the treasure Jesus speaks of? What exactly is the treasure, the pearl, Jesus speaks about?

First, it is Salvation. The Bible tells us, Romans 3:23, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* We have drunk from the dirty water of the world. Paul quotes the Psalms, Romans 3:10-12, *“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away; they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”*

R.C. Sproul, in his commentary on Romans, writes, *“On numerous occasions in the teachings of Jesus we are told that at the final judgment there will be a profound silence. Why is that? When we stand before the judgment seat of God, the indictment against us will be so clear and the evidence so overwhelming that it would be futile, foolhardy, to even protest our innocence. The time for excuse-rendering, for explanations and rationalizations, will be over...”*

Sproul goes on to say, *“If I sin once, I cannot undo the transgression. I may try to compensate for it, make retribution for it, apologize for it; I can do all of those things, but I cannot undo it. I cannot make the imperfect, perfect.”*

“There is no one righteous, not even one...” The Bible teaches us that God cannot allow the plague of sin to cross His shore. God refuses to compromise the spiritual purity of heaven. Therefore, as imperfect, sinful, unrighteous individuals, we are lost.

We must understand this truth. R.C. Sproul writes, *“Why does Paul labour this point of the universality of human guilt? Is he one of those preachers who seems to enjoy wallowing in the corruption of the human race, giving us a bad self-image, paralyzing us with guilt feelings? This is not his intent at all. But it is impossible to really hear the gospel, until one has first heard the gavel crash and the verdict sounded unequivocally – Guilty! As long as we delude ourselves by attempts at self-justification, or try to make light of, deny, or shift to somebody else’s responsibility or blame, the sin that is a reality in our lives, we can never really hear the gospel. Unless we understand the justice of God, how can we possibly know anything of his mercy and grace.”*

This is the greatest treasure, worth sacrificing everything for, God’s mercy and grace as shown in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Christ died for us, took our place, allowed the sin we carry to be placed on Him and the punishment, separation from God (*for the plague of sin cannot cross God’s shores*) to be His punishment. Jesus cried out with a loud voice, *“My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?”* He felt our punishment. He felt, in that moment, what it was like to be separated from His Heavenly Father. He felt, what you and I, if we choose to believe, will never have to feel.

Isaiah’s prophecy describes what Jesus would go through for you and I. Isaiah cries out, *“He was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped and we were healed. All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on Him the guilt and sins of us all”* (53:5-6).

Paul would later reiterate the truth of the cross, of Christ’s sacrifice, explaining, *“You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you*

alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14).

This is treasure worth selling everything for, worth sacrificing for, worth dying for.

Paul explains how one can accept this treasure, can embrace it. He writes in the book of Romans, *“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved” (10: 9-10).*

Our sins forgiven. Grace. Salvation. A treasure of endless worth. It is a treasure we cannot earn, a treasure we do not deserve.

But this treasure Jesus speaks of is so much more. Secondly, it’s New Life.

Paul explains in 2 Corinthians, *“This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun” (5:17).* John 10:10 states, *“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of” (The Message).*

The gifts of this New Life available to us include:

- (1) Clear Conscience (*Romans 8:1*)
- (2) Life and Peace (*Romans 8:6*)
- (3) Help with Weakness (*Romans 8:26*)
- (4) Purpose (*Romans 8:28*)
- (5) Confidence (*Romans 8:31*)
- (6) Security (*Romans 8:39*)
- (7) Power and Strength (*Philippians 4:13*)
- (8) Fulfillment (*Philippians 4:19*)
- (9) Freedom (*John 8:32, 36*)
- (10) Love, Self-Discipline, Power (*2 Timothy 1:7*)
- (11) The Fruits of the Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace,
Forbearance, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness,
Gentleness, Self-Control (*Galatians 5: 22-23*)
- (12) To Become More & More Like Jesus
(*2 Corinthians 3:18*)

When we open this treasure, we find the strength to break addictions, to forgive the unforgivable, to love the unlovable, to achieve the unthinkable. We find peace in the midst of chaos, comfort in the midst of grief, confidence in the midst of weakness, and joy in the midst of sorrow. We find the strength to change. We find the strength to be different tomorrow than we are today, to be more tomorrow than we are today, to make more of an impact on this world tomorrow than we are making today. When we open this treasure, we begin to discover, we find life and life abundant.

But there is even more. Thirdly, this treasure, is Adoption.

Paul tells us in the book of Romans, *“So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go! This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike ‘What's next, Papa?’ God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance”* (8:14-16, The Message).

Paul reiterates this point in his letter to the Galatians, *“But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father, God sent his Son, born among us of a woman, born under the conditions of the law so that he might redeem those of us who have been kidnapped by the law. Thus, we have been set free to experience our rightful heritage. You can tell for sure that you are now fully adopted as his own children because God sent the Spirit of his Son into our lives crying out, ‘Papa! Father!’ Doesn't that privilege of intimate conversation with God make it plain that you are not a slave, but a child? And if you are a child, you're also an heir, with complete access to the inheritance”* (4:4-7).

Those of us who open this treasure, who sacrifice all to have it, who believe in the Son, we have adoption as children of God.

In Max Lucado's book, Come Thirsty, Lucado talks about a little girl, Carinette, who lives at the Cape Haitian orphanage. Lucado talks about how Carinette, though she may appear similar to the other kids in the orphanage on the outside, is very different. She lives in a world called “home-to-be.” She has been adopted and will soon be picked up to go to her new home. Lucado writes, *“Carinette's situation mirrors ours. Our Father paid us a visit too. Have we not been claimed? Adopted? ‘So, you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family – calling him ‘Father, dear Father’”* (Romans 8:15).

Lucado goes on to explain that, like Carinette, we are adopted but not transported. We are caught between what is and what will be. No longer orphans but also not yet home and every day brings us closer to that home, that completed adoption. This is where our joy comes from, joy in the midst of trials and hardship. Lucado writes, *“I've been known to let a day, even two, pass without a glance to the eastern sky. Let's do better. ‘Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth’* (Colossians 3:2). *Don't you know Carinette's home-to-be dominates her thoughts.”*

We are called to live unafraid of death, joyful, for we *“wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us. Now that we are saved, we eagerly look forward to this freedom from death and decay...we must wait patiently and confidently...”* (Romans 8). Our future home should dominate our thoughts as our lives show thanks for this gift God has blessed us with.

A treasure worth sacrificing everything for. A treasure filled with Salvation, New Life, and Adoption papers. Will you dig up and open this treasure? Will you sacrifice for it? Would you be

willing to give up all you have to possess it? Will you allow such treasure to change your life, change your focus? Will you, through Jesus Christ, embrace the Kingdom of God in your life? Will you simply open your heart and receive it? No earthly treasure compares, not even that rare piece of orange sea glass washed up on the beach.

Monday

Read Matthew 13:44-52.

The Sea of Galilee was full of fish and surrounded by small towns filled with people who made their living on the water. Jesus would walk along the beach and finding people at work, sit among them and teach them about God. On this occasion, there were so many people who had come to hear Jesus speak, that He got in a boat and pushed off from shore a few yards. Using the boat as a floating pulpit, Jesus spoke and taught on the kingdom of God.

He taught that the Kingdom of God was like a *“treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”* He goes on to make another comparison, stating that the Kingdom of God is like a *“merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”*

Jesus makes it clear that the Kingdom of God is worth more than any earthly possession, is worth leaving your livelihood and profession to obtain, and will bring joy unavailable anywhere else. Jesus goes further by lifting up in verses 47-50 a solemn warning for anyone who misses the opportunity to grab hold of the Kingdom of God, to dig up the hidden treasure or capture the pearl of great price. Jesus is saying, “Don’t miss out on the Kingdom, this treasure. Grab hold of it. Sacrifice for it. What I’m telling you is of ETERNAL consequence.”

As Matthew Henry writes, *“...all who search the Scriptures, so as in them to find Christ and eternal life, will discover such treasure in this field as makes it unspeakably valuable; they make it their own upon any terms. Though nothing can be given as a price for this salvation, yet much must be given up for the sake of it. All the children of men are busy; one would be rich, another would be honorable; another would be learned; but most are deceived, and take up with counterfeits for pearls. Jesus Christ is a Pearl of great price; in having him, we have enough to make us happy here and forever. A man may buy gold too dear, but not this Pearl of great price. When the convinced sinner sees Christ as the gracious Savior, all things else become worthless to his thoughts.”*

I get excited combing the beach and finding sea glass. It is like finding buried treasure, but it is nothing compared to the ultimate treasure. Forgiveness, grace, mercy, salvation are *“pearls of great price”*? What are you willing to sacrifice for Christ, for the Kingdom of God? Are you uncovering the treasure found in the scriptures, looking to Christ rather than the “pearls” of the world for happiness and peace? Do worldly treasures have a hold on you or do you, like Paul, consider *“everything else...worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”*?

Pray and ask God to help you recognize fully the “treasure” made available to you through faith in Jesus Christ. Ask God to help you recognize where you are focused on treasures of the world rather than the ultimate treasure, the Kingdom of God. Give God thanks for His great gift, for His pearl of great price, Jesus Christ.

Tuesday

Read John 3:16-17; Romans 10:9-13; Colossians 2:13-14; Ephesians 2:1-10.

What exactly is the treasure, the pearl, the Kingdom, Jesus speaks about?

First, forgiveness, grace, salvation. Sin has been conquered. Christ died for us...took our place...allowed the sin we carry to be placed on Him and the punishment...separation from God...to be His punishment (Jesus cried out with a loud voice, *‘My God, My God, Why hast thou*

forsaken me?”). For that moment, Jesus felt our punishment, felt what it was to be separated from the Father.

Max Lucado puts it so beautifully, *“What if a miracle worker had done something comparable with the Black Plague? Imagine a man born with bubonic resistance. The bacterium can’t penetrate his system unless he allows it to do so. And incredibly, he does. He pursues the infected and makes this offer: ‘Touch my hand. Give me your disease, and receive my health.’ The boil-and-fever-ridden have nothing to lose. They look at his extended hand and reach to touch it. True to the man’s word, bacteria pass from their system into his. But their relief spells his anguish. His skin erupts and his body heaves. And as the healed man stands in awe, the disease bearer hobbles away. Our history books tell no such story. But our Bible does.”*

Isaiah 53: 5-6 states, *“He was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped and we were healed. All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on Him the guilt and sins of us all.”* Through Christ our sins are forgiven and we are cleansed and able to stand before a Holy and Perfect God.

Take time tonight to pray and confess before God any sin that lays covered in your heart, in your life. Lift it up to God and seek His forgiveness. Know that Christ died that those sins you are lifting up in prayer might be forgiven, erased. Give God thanks for this tremendous gift of grace and for His Son, Jesus Christ. Show Him how grateful you are by making changes in your life, in your actions, living out God’s teachings and commands in your day-to-day life.

Wednesday

Read Philippians 4:6-7; Hebrews 4:14-16; 2 Timothy 1:7; 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 10:10; Psalm 16:11.

Secondly, this treasure, this pearl of great price, is new life and life abundant. Through Christ, we not only find forgiveness and grace, but we also find new life. We experience God’s many gifts in our lives, as God’s Holy Spirit comes to live in us as we open our hearts to Him. God’s Spirit brings strength, joy, peace, guidance, purpose, understanding, and a heart to love like Christ. Throughout our lives, the Spirit helps us grow more and more into the image of Jesus Christ, leading us to leave old habits behind, to forgive those who hurt us, to experience peace in the midst of chaos, to gain perspective on the difficulties we are facing and how God might be teaching us through the valleys we traverse.

When we have allowed God’s Spirit to invade our lives, our hearts, the results are *“love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* Opening our eyes to God’s Kingdom, receiving this hidden treasure, brings many things into our lives including clear conscience (Romans 8:1); life and peace (Romans 8:6); help with weakness (Romans 8: 26); purpose (Romans 8: 28); confidence (Romans 8:31); security (Romans 8:39); power and strength (Philippians 4:13); fulfillment (Philippians 4:19); and freedom (John 8: 32, 36).

Take time tonight to give God thanks for the new life He offers each of us who believe, who accept His Son. Lift up to God those aspects of your life that you need God to change...those areas of your life you need to leave behind so that you can move on to become more like Jesus. Ask God to give you “life abundant,” His peace and joy...a peace and joy not found in the world.

Thursday

Read John 1:12; John 14:1-3; Revelation 21:1-7; Ephesians 1:3-8; Philippians 3:20-21; Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:4-7.

Thirdly, this hidden treasure, the Kingdom of God, is adoption, adoption into the family of God. And with that adoption, a home...a home eternal. Eternal life. Death has been defeated. As it says in I Peter 3:18, *“Christ...never sinned, but he died for sinners that he might bring us safely home to God.”*

In Max Lucado’s book, *Come Thirsty*, he talks about a little girl, Carinette, who lives at the Cape Haitian orphanage. Lucado talks about how Carinette, though she may appear similar to the other kids in the orphanage on the outside, is very different. She lives in a world called “home-to- be.” She has been adopted and will soon be picked up to go to her new home.

Lucado writes, *“Carinette’s situation mirrors ours. Our Father paid us a visit too. Have we not been claimed? Adopted? ‘So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God’s very own children, adopted into his family – calling him ‘Father, dear Father’” (Romans 8:15).*

Lucado goes on to explain that, like Carinette, we are adopted but not transported. We are caught between what is and what will be. No longer orphans but also not yet home and every day brings us closer to that home, that completed adoption. This is where our joy comes from, joy in the midst of trials and hardship. This is our treasure...a treasure we bury deep within our hearts.

Lucado writes, *“I’ve been known to let a day, even two, pass without a glance to the eastern sky. Let’s do better. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth” (Colossians 3:2). Don’t you know Carinette’s home-to-be dominates her thoughts.”*

May our “home-to-be” dominate our thoughts. Reflect on whose you are...your adoption as a child of God...on the “home-to-be” that awaits. Try to picture that home...heaven. Give God thanks.

Friday

Read Matthew 13:44-52.

After Jesus shares the Parable of the Hidden Treasure & Great Pearl, and emphasizes the eternal importance of grabbing on to the Kingdom of God, He asks His disciples, *“Have you understood all these things?”* They reply, *“Yes, Lord.”* And then Jesus says, *“Therefore...every teacher...who becomes a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven...is like a homeowner who brings from his storeroom new gems of truth as well as old.”*

“Therefore...” Jesus is saying, “Now that you have understood these things, let me tell you what you are to do with this knowledge.” *“Therefore...every teacher...who becomes a disciple...”* Jesus tells His disciples, that if they have grabbed hold of the truths He has shared...if they have grabbed hold of the Kingdom of God...they now have “*gems of truth*” to bring out of the “storeroom” and share. If one finds the Kingdom of God and grabs hold of it, they will carry this truth, this treasure, like precious gems, into the world...sharing with others what they have found. One cannot be a disciple, find this treasure, understand what they have found, and not go forth and share it.

Who are you telling? Who are you sharing the Kingdom of God with? Who have you helped find the precious treasure God offers us in Christ? Pray that God will lay names on your hearts of those whom you can share these “*gems of truth*.”

Saturday

Read the lyrics to the hymn, “*O The Beautiful Treasures*,” and reflect.

*O the beautiful treasures laid up for the wise,
How precious the value, how glorious the prize!
Far brighter than diamonds on princes' brow
And richer than royalty can bestow.
O the beautiful treasures laid up for the wise.*

*O the beautiful treasures provided by God,
And promised good people who follow the Word.
And streams of sweet mercy shall bring them home,
To rest from the sorrowful paths they roam.
O the beautiful treasures provided by God.*

Chapter 2

SONTANNED

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them."

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So, he got up and went to his father."

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So, they began to celebrate."

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So, he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'"

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'"

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

-Luke 15:11-32

SONTANNED

Thirty young men, dressed in shrouds (and thus, nearly naked), were led to the scaffold. The morning was bitter, the temperature below freezing, as they were compelled to stand for half an hour while the burial service was slowly read. They had spoken out against the current regime...treason.

Facing them stood the soldiers with their muskets. A pile of coffins was stacked suggestively in a corner of the yard. At the last moment, with the muskets actually at the shoulders of the guards, a white flag was waved, and it was announced that the czar had commuted the sentence to ten years' exile in Siberia. Several of the prisoners lost their reason under the strain; several others died shortly afterward. Author Fyodor Dostoyevsky passed courageously through the ordeal, but it affected his nerves; he never recalled the experience without a shudder, and he referred to it with horror in several of his books.

On Christmas Eve, 1849, he commenced the dreadful journey to Omsk and remained in Siberia...he wrote, *"Like a man buried alive, nailed down in his coffin."* On his arrival in that desolate region, two women slipped a New Testament into his hand and, taking advantage of a moment when the officer's back was turned, whispered to him to search it carefully at his leisure. Between the pages he found twenty-five rubles. The money was a comfort to him, but the New Testament itself proved to be infinitely more.

His daughter, Aimee, tells us in her book Fyodor Dostoyevsky: A Study (1921) that during his exile the little new Testament was his only solace. *"He studied the precious volume from cover to cover, pondered every word; learned much of it by heart; and never forgot it. All his works are saturated with it, and it is this which gives them their power. Many of his admirers have said to me that it was a strange chance that ordained that my father should have only the gospels to read during the most important and formative years of his life. But was it a chance? Is there such a thing as chance in our lives? The work of Jesus is not finished; in each generation he chooses his disciples, beckons to them to follow Him, and gives them the same power over the human heart that He gave to the poor fishermen of Galilee."*

Aimee Dostoyevsky believed it was by that divine hand that the Testament was presented to her father that day. *"Throughout his life,"* she adds, *"he would never be without his old prison Testament, the faithful friend that had consoled him in the darkest hours of his life. He always took it with him on his travels and kept it in a drawer in his writing-table, within reach of his hand. He consulted it in the important moments of his life."*

In Siberia, Dostoyevsky discovered the beauty of the parable of the prodigal son. Siberia was the far country. It was there that he was the prodigal among the husks and the swine. His companions were the lowest of the low and the vilest of the vile. Dostoyevsky wrote from Siberia, *"One sees the truth more clearly when one is unhappy."* He further explained, *"And yet God gives me moments of perfect peace; in such moments I love and believe that I am loved; in such moments I have formulated my creed, wherein all is clear and holy to me. This creed is extremely simply: here it is. I believe that there is nothing lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic,*

more rational, more manly and more perfect than the Savior: I say to myself with jealous love that not only is there no one else like Him, but that there could be no one."

On his bended knees, Dostoyevsky blessed God for sending him into the Siberian steppes. For it was amidst those stern and awful solitudes that he, a homesick and penitent prodigal, found the road that leads to the Father's house. The parable that had opened to him a paradise in the midst of perdition was in his thoughts through all the years that followed.

Years later, Dostoyevsky lay on his bed dying. *"He made us come into the room,"* his daughter recalled, *"and, taking our little hands in his, he begged my mother to read the parable of the prodigal son. He listened with his eyes closed, absorbed in his thoughts. 'My children,' he said in his feeble voice, 'never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God and never despair of His pardon. I love you dearly, but my love is nothing compared with the love of God. Even if you should be so unhappy as to commit some dreadful crime, never despair of God. You are His children; humble yourselves before Him, as before your father; implore His pardon, and He will rejoice over your repentance, as the father rejoiced over that of the prodigal son.'"*

The parable of the Prodigal Son, called by many to be the *"greatest short story"* in the world, found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, called by many to be *"the Gospel in the Gospel."*

Luke describes the moment, *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them' (15:1).* The religious leaders, the Pharisees, are offended by the group of men and women flocking to hear Jesus, to sit at His feet and listen to His teachings. To the Pharisees, these people were sinners; they did not keep Jewish law. In fact, the Pharisees labeled them, *"People of the Land."* Pharisaic law stated, *"When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey."* A Pharisee was forbidden to be the guest of any such man or to have him as a guest. It was their aim to avoid every contact with people who did not observe the Jewish law.

As William Barclay points out, strict Jews believed that *"there would be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God."* Surprisingly, they found Jesus surrounding Himself with such sinners and speaking a very different message, a message that stated *"there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents."* They were shocked to the core that Jesus would keep company with these *"People of the Land,"* these outsiders, these sinners, let alone state that God would accept and love them.

The focus of the story is the father..."Jesus told them this story: 'A man had two sons.'"

As William Barclay points out, *"It should never have been called the parable of the prodigal son, for the son is not the hero. It should have been called the parable of the loving father, for it tells us rather about a father's love than a son's sin."*

But in order to understand what Jesus is trying to convey through the father in the story, we do

need to look at the younger son's actions. *"The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.'"* This was an outrageous...a shameless request, tantamount to wishing your father was dead because it was customary, it was acceptable only for a son to receive his inheritance after the death of his father. The son is therefore saying, "I wish you were dead, I want what is mine. I want it now." A shameless rebellion.

"So, his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living." Another translation states, *"...he squandered his estate with loose living."* Luke 15:17 is the turning point in the younger brother's story, *"When he finally came to his senses..."*

This young man realizes how far he has fallen. He tells himself that he will go home and cry out to his father, *"Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son."* This young man has come to understand that he is *"a great sinner"* and he is in need of *"a great Savior."* The prodigal makes a choice, takes the step toward home, a step begun in the heart.

What I want you to focus on though is not the son's repentance, but the Father's response to that repentance. What does the father do?

First, he sees his son coming down the road and he gets up and runs to him...runs to him. Kenneth Bailey writes, *"One of the main reasons why Middle Easterners of rank do not run is that traditionally they all have worn long robes. This is true of both men and women. No one can run in along robe without taking it up into his or her hands. When this occurs, the legs are exposed which is consider humiliating...exposure of the legs was considered shameful."* The father shames himself by running to his son, the son that the entire town would have known rebelled and shamed his father.

And why does the father run to his son? Not only because he loves him but to protect him. It would have been typical that one who had shamed his father, who had sinned, who returned in rags, smelling of pigs, would be ridiculed, taunted, and perhaps even beaten. By running to him, he cannot only protect his son, but he turns the taunts and ridicule on himself, legs exposed, shamed...the father takes the scorn. Isn't this what Jesus did for us?

And then, before restitution can be made, before the last words of repentance, *"Please take me on as a hired hand"* can be spoken, a robe and ring are brought and the fattened calf killed. Radical, extravagant forgiveness. John MacArthur writes, *"This is radical stuff, folks...The father condescends, humbles himself out of this deep love for this son, comes all the way from his house to the dirt of the village, runs through bearing the scorn and the shame, throws his arms around the penitent believing sinner who is coming to him in his filthy unclean rags...that father is doing exactly what Jesus did...exactly what He did. He came down into our village to run the gauntlet and bear the same and the slander and the mockery to throw His arms around us and kiss us and reconcile with us."*

According to the world, to society, this is unfair. God's grace goes in opposition to that which society teaches. Grace or the unmerited love of God is offered without price. Grace is not about

getting what you deserve; it is about getting what you do not deserve. God's love is not based on our abilities, how hard we have worked. God loves people because of who God is, not because of who we are or because of what we have done.

Throughout the Bible, in the Kingdom of God, there are dozens of examples of God's "unfair love." These include:

- Israel forgiven time and time again.
- The city of Ninevah spared after Jonah visited.
- David forgiven for adultery and murder.
- Adam & Eve were told if they ate from the tree they would die. Even after they rebelled, they were allowed to live, and God even provided furs for them, a sacrifice for their sin.
- Zaccheus the tax collector after cheating the people, his own people, Jesus gives him the great honor of eating in his home and Zaccheus receives forgiveness.
- The woman caught in adultery, ready to be stoned, Jesus reaches down and lifts her up out of the dirt, forgiving her sins.
- Peter being embraced by Christ on the beach after denying Him three times.
- The Prodigal Son after taking his inheritance, wasting it, and ruining His father's name is taken back with open arms and given the best robe and fattened calf.

Perhaps the most radical example of God's "unfair love," of God's grace, is found in Luke 23: 35-43 (New Living Translation).

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Michael Yaconelli, in his book, Messy Spirituality, writes, “*God’s grace is unfair. How unfair! Shouldn’t the thief have been asked to repent, to make amends, to at least declare he was sorry? No lectures, no sermons, no teaching or demands for repentance, Jesus just ushers the man into the kingdom of God.*”

The Father ran to meet his son along the road, forgiving his son after what he did. The Pharisees were shocked at the Father’s behavior. They were shocked at the thought of such forgiveness offered because everything...the father’s taking on his son’s scorn, forgiving his son, welcoming him back into the family...everything was done without works. The son never gets out the words, “*Make me as one of your hired men.*” The son doesn’t have to work his way back.

Like the Prodigal Son, we are given the opportunity to turn back to our Heavenly Father, to turn back to God, and accept His gift of love. We are given the opportunity, the choice, to accept the gift of Jesus Christ and become SONTANNED, allowing Christ to cover our sins, our past, everything about us, with His love. God is ready to shine His light upon us and change the complexions of our hearts.

Medical people advise us that it is not healthy to stay in the sun too long in order to get a deep, “healthy” tan. A “healthy” tan is an oxymoron. Healthy suntans can really be dangerous and carcinogenic. When it comes to basking in the light of Christ, the opposite occurs. Our spiritual health gets better, not worse. As we bask in the light of His presence, our spiritual complexions become deeper and richer, and we experience the grace and forgiveness the Prodigal felt when he saw His Father running toward him and felt His Father’s arms embrace him. It is then, when the world looks at us and hears our testimony, that they know we have been in the SON’s presence.

Paul writes, in Ephesians 2:8-9 (New Living Translation), “*God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.*”

In Titus 3:4-5 (New Living Translation), it is written, “*But then God our Savior showed us his kindness and love. He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins and gave us a new life through the Holy Spirit.*”

The father, watching and waiting for his son to return...sees him far off and runs to him...forgiving his son. Jesus’ parable teaches us that God forgives us and takes us back and celebrates our return no matter how disgusting we look and feel when we decide to return to him. No matter what type of mud and how much we have wallowed in it, he runs to us and embraces us, and says, “*forget about your explanations and apologies, all is already forgiven, let’s celebrate that you’re back where you belong!*”

Philip Yancey once wrote an article called “The Atrocious Mathematics of Grace”. He writes, “*From childhood we are taught how to succeed in the world of ungrace. ‘You get what you pay for.’ ‘The early bird gets the worm’. ‘No pain, no gain.’ I know these rules well because I live by them. I work for what I earn; I like to win; I insist on my rights. I want people to get what they deserve. But Jesus’ parables about grace teach a radically different concept...The more I reflect on Jesus’ parables proclaiming grace, the more tempted I am to apply the word atrocious to*

describe the mathematics of the gospel. I believe Jesus gave us these stories to call us to step completely outside our tit-for-tat world of ungrace and enter into God's realm of infinite grace.

Yancey continues, *"If I care to listen, I hear a loud whisper from the gospel that I did not get what I deserved. I deserved punishment and got forgiveness. I deserved wrath and got love. I deserved debtor's prison and got instead a clean credit history. I deserved stern lectures and crawl-on-your knees repentance. Instead, I got a banquet spread for me."*

Like the older brother in Jesus' story, we often fail to see the sin we ourselves carry; therefore, we can be very slow to show grace to others.

There are also times we DO see our sin, but we do not accept God's grace for ourselves and instead allow ourselves to be weighed down by the burden of guilt.

*Amazing Grace
How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind but now I see.*

John Newton wrote those words. Newton was on a homeward voyage. While he was attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm, he experienced what he was to refer to later as his *"great deliverance."* He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, *"Lord, have mercy upon us."* Later in his cabin he reflected on what he had said and began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm and that grace had begun to work for him. For the rest of his life he observed the anniversary of May 10, 1748 as the day of his conversion, a day of humiliation in which he subjected his will to a higher power.

He opened his eyes to the horrors of the slave trade which he was participating in, making money on. He became an advocate against the slave trade, for the first time being able to see the injustice and pain he had caused. For the first time his eyes were opened to these slaves, these men and women of color, being children of God, having great beauty. For the first time he looked deep within and he came face to face with his own sin, his own ugliness. *"I once was blind but now I see."* John Newton discovered the biblical truth that only those who realize their own blindness can learn to see. When he was 82 years old, he was quoted saying: *"My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things; That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."*

Yes, we must recognize the truth that *"We are great sinners."* But we must also recognize that *"We have a great Savior."*

Once Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they had finally been defeated and had returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take a dire vengeance, but he answered, *"I will treat them as if they had never been away."*

It is the wonder of the love of God that He treats us like that. When we turn toward home, filth and all, our Heavenly Father lifts his robes and runs to meet us. The Pharisees of our day, like

long ago, cringe, but the Kingdom of Heaven rejoices, as our Heavenly Father throws His arms around us, robes us in the finest robes, prepares a banquet before us, and lavishes us with kisses.

Monday**Read Luke 15:11-32.**

This past week as I read the story of “The Prodigal Son,” I sat in awe of the love God has for each of us. To think, that no matter how far we have strayed from home, how low we have become, how rebellious we have been, God runs down the lane to welcome us home when we turn back to Him. Wow! What amazing love...amazing grace. All this week in these devotions we are going to look at this story, this parable Jesus told. Perhaps in Jesus’ stories, this one and others we will study and read throughout the summer, we will catch a glimpse of His love for us...a glimpse that will stay with us and change us.

One of the major problems is that many of us have trouble seeing ourselves in the role of “The Prodigal Son.” We don’t see ourselves having traveled so far, been so “bad” (harlots and wild living?), been so lost (willing to eat the food of the pigs). We don’t see ourselves having rebelled like the Prodigal Son did, taking his inheritance, leaving his father. Yet, we have. We have, in many, many instances, done just the opposite in our lives from what we know God would have wanted for us. We have, in many instances, chose possessions over God, television over God’s Word, the beach over God’s house on Sunday morning. We have, in many instances, put God on the “back burner” and placed the things of this world up front. We have treated the poor, those of different color, those of different backgrounds, in ways that Jesus would have never allowed. We have strayed...we have rebelled against the things of God.

The first step in understanding the story of “The Prodigal Son” is to understand that, yes, we are the prodigal son. We have rebelled...we have gone astray...we certainly have not embraced fully the things of God, the way God expects us to live, the priorities God wishes us to place first in our lives.

Take time tonight, to lift up to God your faults, your shortcomings, to admit that you have not lived each day with God and what He wants for your life at the forefront of your thoughts. Confess where you have placed the world above God, your own desires above His desires. Repent and turn back to Him and know that He will run out to meet you.

Tuesday**Read Luke 15:11-32.**

Take another look at the story of “The Prodigal Son,” but this time take a look at the older brother. The older brother gets extremely upset over the fact that his father is willing to go to great lengths for the brother who rebelled, wasted his inheritance, slept with prostitutes. The older brother sees himself as having been faithful all these many years and never having received a party for his faithfulness and devotion.

How many of us have been here? How many of us have been the older brother, seeing ourselves as superior to another, looking down on another for their life of sin, their years of running away and rebellion? How often do we look at ourselves and say, “I deserve a party...look at what I have done...look at how faithful I have been?”

We are so quick to see ourselves in a good light...like the older brother, “*Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time...*”

Again, take time tonight to humble yourself...to recognize the areas in your life, where you are thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. Are there people that you look down at for their life of sin, their past rebellions? Like the older brother, do you see yourself superior to others sitting in the pews across from you because you’ve been part of the church longer, a Christian longer, or you’re involved more heavily in the ministry? Pray that God will help you

to not judge another and know, remember, as the father says to the older son, *“Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.”* You are a child of the living God. Be sure to give God thanks for such an amazing gift.

Wednesday

Read Luke 15:1-10.

Jesus wanted to make sure we understood the great love God has for each of us, so He not only told one story, but three. The “Parable of the Lost Sheep” and the “Parable of the Lost Coin” continue to point out how willing God is, the great depths and lengths God will go, all that God will do to reach us...to touch our hearts...to pull us into His family. Remember in the “Parable of the Prodigal Son” that the Prodigal, the younger son, had the thought of his father in his mind and heart while he was off in the far-away country. The thought of his father never left him. God will travel the lengths of the earth to reach us. His presence never leaves us. He is always attempting to connect with us.

Take time to simply give God thanks that He went to and continues to go to great lengths to let you know how much He loves you. Give God thanks that you can rest in knowing that He will continue to, through you and others, reach out to your loved ones and neighbors who do not know Christ. You might be at the point of giving up on someone, but God never will. Pray for those you know that do not know Christ, that are lost like the sheep, the coin, the Prodigal Son. Pray that they will open their eyes to the God that is pursuing them with a never-ending love.

Thursday

Read I John 3:1-3 and Romans 8:12-17.

Throughout the scriptures we are told that we are children of the living God, we are sons and daughters of the Almighty, having been adopted into His family through Jesus Christ. Think about that for a moment. We are adopted children...sons and daughters of the creator of the universe.

We have been given this status in the family of God, not because of anything we have done or anything that we can do. We have been given this gift of adoption not because of our own merit, but because of God’s mercy and love. It is a free gift, bestowed on us through Christ. Free. Amazing Grace. Unmerited love. But like the Prodigal Son, we must accept it. We must turn back to our Father in heaven. We must turn back from this far-away country, this world and its values, priorities that we have been immersed in since birth. Just as we leave the indoors each summer and travel to the beach, to lay and face the sun, to seek that perfect suntan, we must turn our backs on the world, seeking and turning toward the gift of “*sonship*” that God offers us. We must let His love and grace burn into us.

As someone once said...the problem isn’t that we don’t love God enough...the problem is that we don’t truly understand how much God loves us.

Take time to reflect on the gift of grace, unmerited love and mercy, that God offers us. Reflect for a time on being a child of God...being given that opportunity to be adopted into God’s family. Take time tonight to simply give God thanks and if you have not accepted that gift, or if you have strayed into a far-away country, turn to your Father in heaven, accept his gift of love, and allow Him to run to you.

Friday**Read Luke 15:11-32.**

Take one more look at this parable. Note what the younger son plans to say to his father upon his return home after years of rebellious living. The Prodigal has his speech rehearsed. He is going to tell his father, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”* It is clear here that, not only is the younger son willing to admit that he has destroyed the father-son relationship, he has sinned greatly against his family, but that he is willing to work off the damage done. The son is willing to work off the pain he has caused, the money he has spent. He is willing to work as a hired servant to make up for what he has done.

Like the Prodigal son, we all, after messing up, feel that we need to first undo our mistakes. We need to work hard to make up for what we have done. We feel if we work hard enough to make up for our mistakes, God will truly forgive us and love us. God will see our faithfulness and reward us.

Now take time to read again the father’s response to seeing his boy return. **Read verses 20-24.** The father doesn’t give the son time to complete his rehearsed speech. The son only gets out, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* The son doesn’t even have time to get out the request to be made one of his father’s hired servants.

We must come to understand that God doesn’t even give us time to say, “Lord, I know I’ve sinned but I’m going to join the church and work real hard...I’m going to be a good person and make up for what I’ve done.” God stops us after, “Lord, I know I’ve sinned.” And then He robes us with His forgiveness and cleanses us...coming into our lives in a powerful way. We cannot earn God’s forgiveness...we cannot work off our sin, our years of rebellion...we must simply accept the gift...accept His love.

If we truly understand this forgiveness, we will want to serve Him and we will want to let everyone know His love for them.

Take time to reflect on this gift and to give God thanks. What can you do to serve in gratitude for what God has done for you?

Saturday**Read and Reflect on the lyrics to the song, “*Prodigal*,” by Casting Crowns.**

*Living on my own, thinking for myself
Castles in the sand, temporary wealth
Walls are falling down, storms are closing in
Tears have filled my eyes, here I am again
And I’ve held out as long as I can
Now I’m letting go and holding out my hand*

*Daddy, here I am again
Will You take me back tonight
I went and made the world my friend
And it left me high and dry
I drag Your name back through the mud
That You first found me in*

*Not worthy to be called Your son
Is this to be my end
Daddy, here I am...Here I am again*

*Curse this morning sun
Drags me in to one more day
Of reaping what I've sown
Of living with my shame
Welcome to my world
And the life that I have made
Where one day you're a prince
The next day you're a slave*

*And I've held out as long as I can
Now I'm letting go and holding out my hand*

*Daddy, here I am again
Will You take me back tonight
I went and made the world my friend
And it left me high and dry
I drag Your name back through the mud
That You first found me in
Not worthy to be called Your son
Is this to be my end
Daddy, here I am...Here I am again*

Chapter 3

SONBURNED

The Parable of the Tax Collector & Pharisee

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don’t cheat, I don’t sin, and I don’t commit adultery. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’”

“But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

-Luke 18:9-14

SONBURNED

I love how John Ortberg describes the Bible in his book, Everybody's Normal Til' You Get To Know Them. Ortberg writes,

One of the most ironic remarks about the Bible I hear from time to time is when someone says that it's a book about pious, stained-glass characters who do not reflect the real world. I always know that means they haven't read it. Have you ever noticed how many messed-up families there are in Genesis? Here's a quick summary: Cain is jealous of Abel and kills him. Lamech introduces polygamy to the world. Noah – the most righteous man of his generation – gets drunk and curses his own grandson. Lot, when his home is surrounded by residents of Sodom who want to violate his visitors, offers instead that they can have sex with his daughters. Later on, his daughters get him drunk and are impregnated by him – and Lot is the most righteous man in Sodom! Abraham plays favorites between his sons Isaac and Ishmael; they're estranged. Isaac plays favorites between his sons Jacob and Esau; they're bitter enemies for twenty years. Jacob plays favorites between Joseph and his other eleven sons; the brothers want to kill Joseph and end up selling him into slavery. Their marriages are disasters: Abraham has sex with his wife's servant, then sends her and their son off to the wilderness at his wife's request. Isaac and Rebekah fight over which boy gets the blessing. Jacob marries two wives and ends up with both their maids as concubines as well when they get into a fertility contest. Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, sleeps with his father's concubine. Another son, Judah, sleeps with his daughter-in-law when she disguises herself as a prostitute. She does this because she is childless since her first two husbands – both sons of Judah – were so wicked that God killed them both; and Judah reneged on his obligations to her. These people need a therapist. These are not the Waltons. They need Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, Dr. Ruth, Dr. Spock, Dr. Seuss – they need somebody. (Feel any better about your family?).

Ortberg goes on to write, “Why does the writer of Genesis include all this stuff? There's a very important reason. The writer of Scripture is trying to establish a deep theological truth: Everybody's weird.”

Paul puts it this way, “For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard” (Romans 3:23). Ortberg explains, “When you deal with human beings, you have come to the “as-is” corner of the universe. Think for a moment about someone in your life. Maybe the person you know best, love most. That person is slightly irregular. That person comes with a little tag: There's a flaw here. A streak of deception, a cruel tongue, a passive spirit, an out-of-control temper...” Human beings come “AS IS.”

Unfortunately, we often fail to see our own “As Is” tag.

Jesus teaches, “Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are

judged. And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log from your own eye; then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye" (Matthew 7:1-5).

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, *"Anybody who has once been horrified by the dreadfulness of his own sin that nailed Jesus to the cross will no longer be horrified by even the rankest sins of his brother."*

The problem is that many of us do not even realize we have fallen into judgment and pride. Don't we see this in the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee?

Two men, a Publican, or tax collector, and a Pharisee, a religious leader, priest, come into the church. Now it is important to note the similarities in these two men. Both believe in God, both pray, both go to church, but Jesus said, only one *"returned home justified before God."* The difference was the heart.

The Pharisee comes in, walks up to the altar, stands before God, and says, *"I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don't cheat, I don't sin, and I don't commit adultery. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income"* (Luke 18:11-12). Such judgment passed on others, such pride, such self-righteousness.

But the Publican, the tax collector, *"...stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner'"* (Luke 18:13).

But let's look, not only at the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, but also another familiar parable, as well as a profound moment from Jesus' ministry. Two other stories.

The first story we spoke of in the previous chapter, the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus explains that the prodigal son *"returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So, the party began"* (Luke 15:20-24).

And then we read in Luke 15: 28-30, *"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'"*

A second story. In Luke 7: 36-39, we read about the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Luke records, *"One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!'"* (Luke 7:36-39).

Christian thinkers have divided sin into two categories: Sins of the Flesh and Sins of the Spirit. These three stories show individuals in these two categories.

In each story the people guilty of the Sins of the Flesh knew they were in big trouble. Sins of the Flesh involve appetites that get out of control such as lust, greed, gluttony, drunkenness, and laziness. In all three of these stories we see the one who sinned including the tax collector who cheated the people in taxes, the younger son who left home and squandered his inheritance on wild living, and the sinful woman who gave into her lust, recognize their "As Is" tag. We see them repent, fall to their knees, and cry out to God. We see them forgiven and welcomed home. They recognize, as the prophet Isaiah voiced, *"We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags"* (Isaiah 64:6).

Furthermore, in each story we see those guilty of the Sins of the Spirit. These *"sins of the spirit"* are much more difficult to see; they include things such as pride, arrogance, self-righteousness, and being judgmental. In each story, there is an individual Blind to their own "AS IS" tag. The Pharisee who notes that he is doing all the right and religious actions, the older brother who is angry for he has stayed home and been the "good" son, and the religious leader who is quick to call out the woman's sin are all blind, focused on the other person in the story, judging them, refusing to look in the mirror. These individuals actually see themselves as "giants in the faith;" they don't have a clue that they are guilty of self-righteousness, arrogance, and pride.

Pope John Paul VI stated, *"Most serious sin is one of thought, the sin of pride."* A danger exists, the danger of seeing ourselves as "normal," righteous individuals because our battle may not be with the *"sins of the flesh,"* those sins that are easily visible out in the world. Instead our battle may be more with the *"sins of the spirit,"* those sins that we may not even realize we are guilty of such as judgmental thoughts, a superior attitude, impatient words, bitter resentments, unforgiveness, pride, arrogance, little room for love, a contempt for the weak.

We fail to see these *"sins of the spirit"* because we are basking in our spiritual maturity, having avoided the *"sins of the flesh"* which we see visible in those around us. We catch ourselves comparing ourselves to others, saying, "I read my Bible, am part of a small group, pray each night...I'm on track...Heck...I'm much further along than he is...You'll never catch me doing what she did...Adultery, not on your life...neglected his children, not me..." Our scarlet letter is easily hidden, many times even from ourselves.

Often, we are quick to point out another's mistakes, another's faults, yet, so slow to look in the mirror. People want the world to change around them, but they don't want to change themselves.

Often one is quick to offer criticisms but slow to offer suggestions and the hands & feet to put those suggestions into action.

The reason many are so slow to look in the mirror and so quick to point out another's mistakes is because we are afraid. We are afraid of what God will show us if we look too closely. Once we begin to look in the mirror, take our eyes off our neighbor's sins, look to God, God begins to show us ourselves in God's light and all our blemishes and warts begin to show, the darkness can no longer hide them. And we get burned. We get Sonburned. As Paul writes, *"And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him"* (2 Corinthians 3:16-18, MSG).

Michelangelo, the artist, never created. He discovered, uncovered his art, bringing out what God had created. He would often stand in front of an unfinished piece and yell in frustration, *"Come out."*

It hurts as God shows us and then begins to chip away, begins to burn away, those attitudes and behaviors that are not Christ-like. God's grace is like a wire-brush moving across our being, scraping away anything that is not, as Paul writes, in Philippians 4:8, *"...true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable...things that are excellent and worthy of praise."*

Max Lucado writes, *"God loves you just the way you are but refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus."* In other words, as William Barclay explains, *"True prayer comes from setting our lives beside the life of God. No doubt all that the Pharisee said was true. He did fast; he did meticulously give tithes; he was not like other people; still less was he like that tax-collector. But the question is not, 'Am I as good as my neighbor?' The question is, 'Am I as good as God?'"*

Barclay continues with a story. *"Once I made a journey by train to England. As we passed through the Yorkshire moors I saw a little whitewashed cottage and it seemed to shine with an almost radiant whiteness. Some days later I made the journey back to Scotland. The snow had fallen and was lying deep all around. We came again to the little white cottage, but this time its whiteness seemed drab and soiled and almost grey in comparison with the pure whiteness of the driven snow. It all depends what we compare ourselves with. And when we set our lives beside the life of Jesus and beside the holiness of God, all that is left to say is, 'God be merciful to me – the sinner.'"*

Let's take a moment to look in the mirror.

Are you the younger son, repentant and returning home to your Heavenly Father or are you the older brother, seeing yourself as the "good" son, worthy of reward and respect? Are you the woman, falling to her knees, anointing Jesus' feet, or are you the religious leader, seeing yourself as a very spiritual person, sitting on the sidelines in judgment? Are you the publican, the tax collector, coming to the altar and beating upon your breast, *"O God, be merciful to me for I am a sinner,"* or are you the Pharisee, rating yourself highly in comparison to others, feeling no need to throw yourself upon God's mercy?

Do you recognize your “AS IS” tag or are you blind to the “*log in your own eye*”? Will you look in the mirror, stare deep into your own life, attitudes, and actions? Will you trust God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, to begin to change you, transform you? Will you fight against the pride and self-righteousness, the sins of the spirit, which so easily sneak their way into our hearts? Will you show grace to others because you recognize the grace God has shown to you? Knowing your Heavenly Father loves you and is merciful, will you allow yourself to be Sonburned?

Monday

Read Luke 18: 9-14.

Jesus stands before the religious leaders of his day and tells them this parable of “Publican & Pharisee.” To truly get the “punch” of this story and how shocking it was to Jesus’ audience, we have to modernize it. As you read this story, and read about the Pharisee, replace “Pharisee” with your pastor or yourself. As you read the story, and read about the Publican or tax collector, replace “Tax Collector” with prostitute or drug addict or adulterer. Then allow Jesus’ words, *“I tell you, this sinner, not the ‘pastor,’ returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored.”*

Let’s take a hard look at this parable. The “Pharisee” was the religious leader of the day, the pastor. The Pharisee was very committed to God; in fact, his actions showed great sacrifice on behalf of his faith. He would fast twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Jews were only expected to fast once a year on a special day designated for the Lord. They went beyond this expectation. The Pharisee was committed to high moral living. The Pharisee gave a tenth of all he owned to the Lord and God’s work. Even today, he would be considered a great spiritual leader. People would look to him as an example to follow.

The tax collector on the other hand was a “traitor.” He was a traitor to his people. He was a Jew, who accepted a job with the Roman occupier, and went around collecting taxes from his fellow Jews. If they did not pay, he had the Roman soldiers support his request. He became rich, collecting a little extra each time for himself, while his fellow people became poor.

On the outside, we would not hesitate to judge who was more in line with God, who was the greater person; but Jesus saw on the inside. Jesus saw the heart. The tax collector was truly repentant, saw his “true self,” truly understood the majesty of the God he prayed to. His heart had been burned by the light of God’s love and mercy. The Pharisee was proud and lacked humility. He did not see himself as the Prodigal, did not see himself in need of God’s mercy.

Who are you? Are you the Pharisee? Are you the tax collector? Are you proud and walk around “strutting” your Christianity...you have it together...God is “lucky” to have you on His team? Are you humble...recognizing that you are a sinner...you continue to mess up...you are in need of God’s mercy? Are you proud seeing yourself better and more spiritual than your neighbor? Are you humble seeing yourself in need of a Savior?

Pope John Paul VI once said, *“The most serious sin is one of thought, the sin of pride.”* Ask God to help you fight against the pride that plagues all of us and to be humble, recognizing our need for God and recognizing His grace, His unmerited love, for us.

Tuesday

Read Luke 18: 9-14.

Again, take a look at Jesus’ parable. The Pharisee is quick to look over and judge the tax collector. He says, *“I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there!”* He has the tax collector “pegged.” “That tax collector is a sinner. He is not nearly as spiritual or as godly as I am,” the Pharisee is thinking. Remember the story of the Prodigal Son we spoke about last week. Remember the older son, who stayed home, did not rebel, and got angry with his father when the younger son returned home. The older son saw his brother as a sinner, and saw himself as having always been faithful.

Like the older son in the Prodigal story and like the Pharisee in this parable, do you ever find yourself looking across the pews in church, across the table at a meeting, in conversation with one of your friends...do you ever find yourself labeling someone else in church, in your

family, in your neighborhood, as less spiritual, less godly, less “good” than yourself? Do you ever see yourself as more spiritually mature and together than another? Are you ever quick to judge someone else?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it best. He wrote, “*Anybody who has once been horrified by the dreadfulness of his own sin that nailed Jesus to the cross will no longer be horrified by even the rankest sins of his brother.*” Thomas a’ Kempis wrote, “*How rarely we weigh our neighbor in the same balance in which we weigh ourselves.*”

Have you put down someone else; have you judged them? Ask God to forgive you and perhaps seek forgiveness from the person you passed judgment on. Ask God to help you to stop judging others and take more time looking inward at your own life. Sit with God and take a hard look at yourself, “weigh” your own sins, and be thankful for God’s forgiveness and mercy. We would not be anybody without Christ. Give God Praise.

Wednesday

Read Romans 5:6-11.

Like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable admits before God, we are sinners. We have all “*fallen short of the glory of God,*” as Paul writes. We say it all the time – “Nobody’s Perfect.” Compared to a Holy and Perfect God we all fall short and we all continue daily to place God low on our priority list, placing so many other things above Him. Yet, there is “Good News!” Paul tells us, “*When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.*”

Once we have admitted that yes, indeed, we are sinners, we then can discover the wonderful unconditional love, the wonderful gift of mercy and forgiveness, the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us on the cross. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “*The full impact of forgiveness cannot be felt apart from the full impact of what has been forgiven.*”

We must face our sin...face our faults...face our fears and past...we must confront the part of us that we don’t like. Richard Baxter said, “*Kill sin before it kills you.*” We must confront it before it eats away at us and there is only one way we can confront our sin. We know we cannot make up for it. We must confront it with the power of God. Henry Drummond writes, “*Sin is a power in our life: let us fairly understand that it can only be met by another power.*” That power is Jesus Christ.

Confess your sins before God. Lay them all out in front of the cross of Christ in prayer and allow God’s forgiveness to sweep over you. There is “Good News!” “*Christ died for us while we were yet sinners*”...You are forgiven. Simply accept the gift. Let the Son burn His love into you!

Thursday

Read 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 and Romans 8:29.

The tax collector stood before the altar of God and could not even lift his face to God because he felt so ashamed. God had revealed to him an understanding of his sin, his willingness to cheat his own people, his disobedience to God, his putting God low on the priority list of his life, his hearing the word of God but not living it. The tax collector had been “convicted” of his sin and it hurt. It hurt. “*He beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’*”

Throughout our lives God continues to reveal to us our sin...where we are not putting God first...where we are living ungodly lives. Many times when God shows us this we are

ashamed, it hurts, and it hurts to change our behavior, our habits, the things we watch and listen to. Yet, God wants to make us into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ. God wants to make us just like Jesus.

Max Lucado writes, “*God loves you just the way you are, but refuses to leave you that way...He wants you to be just like Jesus.*” Lucado goes on to say, “*God is willing to change us into the likeness of the Savior. Shall we accept his offer? Here is my suggestion. Let’s imagine what it means to be just like Jesus. Let’s look long into the heart of Christ...considering his compassion, reflecting upon his intimacy with the Father, admiring his focus, and pondering his endurance. How did he forgive? When did he pray? What made him so pleasant? Why didn’t he give up? Let’s fix our eyes on Jesus. Perhaps in seeing him, we will see what we can become.*”

How can you become more like Jesus? What is God showing you that you need to get rid of...that you need to seek forgiveness for...that you need to throw out of your life in order to be a “better man or woman?” Pray. Spend time with God tonight and ask Him to help you to see what needs to change in your life and to help you become more like Jesus Christ.

Friday

Read Psalm 136 & 148.

God is so good. God shows us mercy even while we are sinners. God offers us forgiveness. God sent His Son Jesus Christ. God gave us the world, our families, our children. God allows us to experience love. God makes us stronger through our difficulties. God loves us with an everlasting love.

Spend some time with God tonight, simply giving God praise...simply saying “Thank you.” Take a walk in God’s creation and give God thanks.

Saturday

Read and Reflect on the lyrics to the hymn, “*Amazing Grace*” by John Newton.

*Amazing grace (how sweet the sound) that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

*Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come:
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.*

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease:
I shall possess, within the veil, a life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine;
but God, who called me here below, will be forever mine.*

Chapter 4

SONSCREEN

The Parable of the Sower

Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

"The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

-Mark 4:1-20

SONSCREEN

Top Ten Signs You're In A Dry-Bones Church

10. The praise team quits and no one notices for three months.
9. The baptismal bowl is now being used for chips and dip in the fellowship hall.
8. The pew Bibles donated a year ago still have the cellophane on them.
7. The pastor takes a month-long sabbatical and is told upon his return that his sermons over the last month have been better than ever.
6. The custodian passes away while cleaning the sanctuary and no one realizes it for three weeks.
5. The pastor has been using the same scripture passage for two months.
4. The altar table was moved six inches to the left, and twenty-five people volunteer to serve on a task force to investigate.
3. The altar rail has not been cleaned since the custodian passed away.
2. The nursery is being used for long-term storage.
1. Jesus Christ visited and was told he was sitting in someone's seat.

Top Ten Ways To Tell If A Church Is Spirit-Filled

10. You have to assign numbers to people who want to share their testimony in worship.
9. As the pastor closes the sermon, the chant of "We want more! We want more!" erupts.
8. The ushers have to empty the collection baskets halfway through the service because they are too full.
7. The praise team begins to sing and can't stop.
6. Members begin buying new Bibles because they wore the others out.
5. There is an influx of people asking, "Is there something I can do?"
4. New classes and small groups have to be formed because so many people want to teach and learn.
3. People offer their seats to newcomers.
2. New altar rails have to be installed to handle the crowds.
1. The congregation douses the pastor with a cooler of water at the end of the service.

What is The Difference Between
A Dry-Bones Church & A Spirit-Filled Church?

What is the Difference Between
A Dry-Bones Christian & A Spirit-Filled Life?

The answer lies in Jesus' Parable of the Sower.

In writing about Jesus' parable, Brian Stiller writes, "*Responsibility for being receptive to God's kingdom is put on the hearer, a rather shocking wake-up call for the listener.*"

What is the Difference Between A Dry-Bones Church & A Spirit-Filled Church? The Difference Between Being A Dry-Bones Christian or A Spirit-Filled Christian?

The Difference is You! The Difference is how you respond to His Word.

Jesus said, “*Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand*” (Mark 4:9). We must respond. We must battle, work, choose to allow God to till the soil of our hearts, to plant His Word deep within, to water it and allow it to grow and produce a crop “*a hundred-fold*.” Unlike when we go outside in the summer, when we go to the beach, or plan to be out in the sun, in this case, we must do everything we can to make sure we are NOT wearing SONSCREEN.

We must make sure we are not allowing things of this world, allowing baggage from our past, allowing attitudes and habits that have developed, allowing worries and stress, allowing anything whatsoever to BLOCK God from tilling up our hearts and filling the ground with His Word and Spirit.

Which soil are you? Are you the “Path”?

Paths surrounded small tracts of land in Palestine and were walked on quite a bit. The many footsteps hardened these paths.

Our paths, those around our hearts, our lives, are hardened by past experiences. Our paths are hardened by unresolved anger, guilt we are carrying for past mistakes, or by traditions and our upbringing. We say, “*it’s just the way I am*.” Sometimes our paths are hardened by addictions, bad habits, or personality traits like “prejudice.”

Charles Spurgeon puts it this way...

...the soil of your heart is so hard beaten by continual traffic, that there is no hope of the seed finding a living root-hold. Satan is constantly passing over your heart with his company of blasphemies, lusts, lies, and vanities. The chariots of pride roll along it, and the feet of greedy mammon tread it until it is hard as adamant...No, the road of your heart is such a crowded thoroughfare, that there is no room for the wheat to spring up. If it did begin to germinate, some rough foot would crush the green blade ere it could come to perfection...The word has not time to quicken in his soul: it lies there an instant, but it never strikes root, or takes the slightest effect.

Why do men come to hear if the word never enters their hearts? That has often puzzled us. Some hearers would not be absent on the Sunday on any account; they are delighted to come up with us to worship, but yet the tear never trickles down their cheek, their soul never mounts up to heaven on the wings of praise, nor do they truly join in our confessions of sin. They do not think of the wrath to come, nor of the future state of their souls. Their heart is as iron; the minister might as well speak to a heap of stones as preach to them.

But we must never forget who these birds in Jesus' parable represent. Mark 4:15 reads, *"The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away."*

We have an enemy who is about his work, doing everything he can to keep us from hearing the Word of God, to keep us from taking it in and allowing it to germinate in our hearts.

Joyce Meyer writes, *"Why does the devil try to make us tense, get us tied up in knots, upset, disturbed, worried, disquieted, and distracted? He wants to keep us from focusing our attention on the good things God has given us. He wants to keep us from enjoying our relationship with the Lord and the abundant life Jesus died to provide for us."*

Which soil are you? Are you the "Rocky Soil"?

Jesus talks about the farmer scattering seed and some of the seed falls on rocky ground where the seed germinates in the thin layer of soil. The soil is too hard for roots to penetrate; therefore, the plants spring up quickly but then wilt beneath the hot sun because the roots did not go deep.

There are times we would rather choose comfort and security than sacrifice, times we look for a quick fix to our problems. We would say, if we were asked, that Jesus is the answer, but when problems continue to arise we drop Him and look elsewhere for answers. We lose enthusiasm. Our roots are not deep enough.

When we begin to go through problems, that is the time we need to drink deeply. That is the time we need to read, study, pray, worship, learn, grow, and drive our roots deeper, creating a more intimate relationship with the SON!

Like the psalmist we must desire the *"living water"*. We must seek after it, drink in God deeply. The psalmist cries out, *"As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?"* (Psalm 42:1-2).

Does your heart *pant* for God?

As I ask myself that question, I struggle with the answer. Many times, I would have to say my heart does not *pant* for God. This is because of the next type of soil Jesus talks about in His parable, the thorns that have grown up around me are choking me. It is the thorns that tear into my heart and so often take my focus and passion off of God.

Which soil are you? Are you the "Thorns"?

Jesus speaks of soil that is unable to provide nutrients for growth. There is too much competition with surrounding weeds.

Isn't this what many of us deal with on a daily basis? We allow the worries of life block out the Word of God. We allow the worries of life to shift our focus from God over to money, materialism, and the future. Yet, God's Word says, "*Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you*" (1 Peter 5:7).

This is where I struggle. I struggle with the thorns. I often catch myself worrying and anxious, stressed out over things that are happening around me. I even experience moments of hopelessness, feeling there is no way out of this problem. What can I do? How often I attempt to solve the problems I'm dealing with on my own instead of going to God.

Jesus told us,

Look at the birds. They don't plan or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? So, don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need (Matthew 6:26-33).

When I catch myself focusing more on the thorns around me than my relationship with God, I have to remember to fight my inclination to focus on my problems, to spend time in prayer, trust in His promises, allow Him to guide me and take care of me, recognizing that I am not alone, the enemy is real, and the enemy and the world has no power over me when I am walking with my Heavenly Father. I thank God that He gave me my wife, Debbie. It is often she who reminds me of these things.

You and I must do everything we can to keep the soil of our hearts tilled and ready to receive His Word and His Spirit that they may germinate in our hearts, that we might be ready when the birds attack, when the drought comes, when the thorns grow up around us.

The more we till the soil of our hearts today, the more we allow God's Word, His promises to penetrate our hearts today, the more prepared we will be to handle the thorns when they appear for we will have deep roots and deep faith.

Which soil are you? Are you the "Good Soil"?

Receive God's Word by faith. Trust God. Turn to Bible each day, allowing seeds to be planted and to grow, fighting to keep out the birds, heat, drought, and thorns of life.

Psalm 1:1-3 tells us,

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.

And the fruit we will bear? Jesus said, “*And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God’s word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted*” (Mark 4:20).

People will see our lives. They will see our fruit, our deep roots, our unwavering faith. They will see that the Word of God, the seed of Christ, has germinated in our lives, and what they see in us will draw them to their heavenly Father, producing a harvest of eternal consequences.

What is the Difference Between A Dry-Bones Church & A Spirit-Filled Church? The Difference Between Being A Dry-Bones Christian or A Spirit-Filled Christian?

The Difference is You! How You Respond to His Word.

Which Soil Are You?

Will we be the good soil? Will you feed the seed?

- Get into His Word. Start with Gospel of John.
- Join a Bible Study/Small Group.
- Write Scripture on Post-It Notes & Put on Mirror/Learn His Promises.
- Trust Him During Difficult Times & Worries of Life.
- Pray.
- Give.
- Get more involved in Worship & in your Church, helping in ministry & mission.
- Surround yourself with Christian Friends; talk and pray together.
- Do whatever it takes!

God has thrown out a seed of life to us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

If we allow our hearts to receive it, if we work to have the soil of our heart softened by God’s grace, saturated by the “*living water*,” the thorns overcome with God’s strength, the seed will grow. It will take time. Things will not change overnight, but over time, along this great journey, God will “*produce a crop a hundredfold*” resulting in forgiveness, love, adoption, peace, help in times of trouble, salvation, eternal life, and strength. Will we receive it?

What is the Difference Between A Dry-Bones Church & A Spirit-Filled Church? The Difference Between Being A Dry-Bones Christian or A Spirit-Filled Christian?

The Difference Is You! The Difference is How We Respond to His Word.

The Difference is letting God in to till the soil of your heart! The Difference is fighting to keep the enemy at bay, getting our roots to go deep, and focusing not on our problems but on the problem-solver.

We must get rid of anything we are wearing, allowing nothing to BLOCK God from having full access to the soil of our hearts.

Will You Listen? Will You Trust? Will You Believe? Will You Hear?

God is ready to plant His Word, His Spirit in your heart. Don't allow anything to get in the way of a bountiful crop!

Monday

Read Mark 4:1-20.

Jesus tells this parable of the farmer scattering seed and then Jesus explains it to His disciples. There are four different types of people that are spoken of in this parable. Today, let's look at the first.

First, Jesus talks about the farmer scattering seed across his field and some of that seed falling on the footpath where birds came and ate it. Jesus goes on to explain that the seed that fell on the *“hard path represents those who hear the message, but then Satan comes at once and takes it away from them.”*

Brian C. Stiller writes, *“The seed along the path had no chance of survival. It is not as if the farmer did not try to keep the seed from falling where the birds could pick it up. No farmer can guarantee that 100 percent of the seed will land in favorable places. Fields in Palestine were small, separated by footpaths. As the sower walked the field, some seed would fall on hardened paths where birds would more readily pick it up. People's lives become resistant as they choose familiar cultural paths often hardened to the gospel. When the seed of faith falls on worn paths, the hardened soil leaves it vulnerable to “birds” searching for food.”*

What familiar paths of money, material possessions, relationships, career, tradition have you chosen? What familiar paths of the world are taking precedent over God's path? What worldly paths are so surrounding your life that when the Word of God is sown in your life, when you hear the message Jesus offers, much of it falls on worn paths that you have walked for years, paths of addictions, selfishness, greed, pride, tradition, prejudice and other things of the world?

Pray that God would show you the “worn paths” in your life, the paths of the world you have walked for years, hardening the soil, so that Jesus' Word cannot penetrate. Pray that God will allow you to remove these worn paths, to rake them over, to break the soil up and make it good for planting. Pray that God will protect you from the enemy snatching up the Word He lays on your heart.

Tuesday

Read Mark 4:1-20.

Let's take a look at the second person spoken of in Jesus parable of the farmer scattering seed.

Jesus talks about the farmer scattering seed and some of the seed falling on rocky ground where plants quickly sprang up but then wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots did not go deep. Jesus goes on to explain to the disciples that this soil represents those who hear the message and receive it with joy, *“but like young plants in such soil, their roots don't go very deep. At first, they get along fine, but they wilt as soon as they have problems or are persecuted because they believe the word.”*

Read Revelation 2:1-7.

God speaks to the church in Ephesus and criticizes that congregation because they do not love God like they first loved Him. They have lost their enthusiasm and their passion. Many times, people hear the word of God and are excited; yet when troubles come or the realization of commitment draws near, enthusiasm shrivels. They begin to back away and the plant which had sprung up excited about Jesus begins to fade away.

Do you still have the same enthusiasm you had when you first discovered and came to Christ? Do you still have the same passion? Or have the troubles of life and the realization of commitment caused you to shrink, to back away from the One who loves you so much?

Pray that God will help you break free from the rocks of life, that God will help you not be afraid to take the next step, to trust Him, and commit your life fully. Pray that God will help you keep your passion and enthusiasm for Christ, and will help you share it with others.

Wednesday

Read Mark 4:1-20.

Now, we take a look at the third person spoken of in Jesus' parable of the farmer scattering seed.

Jesus talks about the farmer scattering seed and some of the seed falling among thorns. This seed was choked out by the thorns that grew up among the tender blades. Jesus goes on to say, *"The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things, so no crop is produced."*

Read Luke 12:22-34.

Jesus tells us not to worry and not to get concerned with the cares of this world, that God will give us all that we need. People get so preoccupied with the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth. These things choke out the Word of God, push God down on the priority list, and place themselves at the forefront of our lives.

Have you allowed the things of this world to push away and choke out God from your life? Are your days filled with worry or with trust in God to care for your needs? Are your days filled with thoughts of money and possessions or thoughts of God and His love for you? Are your days filled with the need for material possessions and getting further in your career or are your days filled with thinking of ways to serve God and reach out to others? Are your days so busy with the cares of this world that you spend no time with God and His Word, the Bible?

Pray that God will help you to push the cares of this world aside and trust in Him. Pray that God will help you to focus on Godly things and not worldly things. Pray that God will help you find time to spend in His Word each day.

Thursday

Read Mark 4:1-20.

Let's look at the last person spoken of in Jesus' parable of the farmer scattering seed.

Jesus talks about some of the seed falling on good soil and producing a crop thirty, sixty, a hundred-fold. The good soil, Jesus says, are those who hear and accept God's message; they will produce a huge harvest.

Read Proverbs 6:20-23.

The Word of God is a lamp to our feet in the darkness. It is counsel to lead us through the curves of life. It is protection and wisdom that leads to many blessings, a harvest, not only in the next life, but in this one.

Pray that God will give you a love for the Word of God, the Bible. Read every day. The Bible is God's foremost way of communicating with us. Pray that God will help you to listen, to hear, and to accept God's message. Pray that you may be the "good soil" that reaps a harvest. Just like you wear sunscreen to protect you from the sun's harmful rays, wear God's Word in your heart and life to protect you from the enemy and the cares of this world.

Friday**Read Psalm 34.**

“Taste & See That the Lord Is Good...The Lord Hears His People When They Call to Him for Help.” Read His Word tonight. Taste God by reading the Bible. Cry out to Him for help & in Praise!

Saturday**Read and Reflect on the lyrics to the hymn, “*Jesus Calls Us, O’er the Tumult.*”**

*Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea;
day by day His sweet voice soundeth, saying, "Christian, follow me."
Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us, saying, "Christian, love me more."*

*In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
still He calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."
Jesus calls us-- by Thy mercies, Savior, may we hear Thy call;
give our hearts to Thine obedience, serve and love Thee best of all.*

Chapter 5

SANDCASTLES

The Parable of the Rich Man

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’”

“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’”

“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

-Luke 12:13-21

Sandcastles

Jesus walks up on a hillside near Capernaum, near the Sea of Galilee. The scriptures tell us, *“And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying...”* (Matthew 5:1).

It is here that Jesus delivers His most powerful sermon, probably over the course of several days, teaching the Lord’s Prayer and the Beatitudes, proclaiming that position, authority, and money are not important in His kingdom, that what matters is faithful obedience from the heart. Jesus challenges the proud and legalistic religious leaders of the day, calling them back to the message of the Old Testament prophets, who, like Jesus, taught that heartfelt obedience is more important than legalistic observance.

The last verse of Chapter 5 could perhaps be a summary statement of Jesus’ message on that hillside near Capernaum. Jesus says, *“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48).

Jesus explains that there are two ways. There is the narrow gate, the narrow path, that leads to life, and there is the wide and spacious road that many will take that leads to destruction.

There are two ways to build our lives. We can build on the rock or we can build on the sand.

In Palestine, many would build their homes during the dry season. When the fall rains came, earth and homes were sometimes washed away. Jesus wants us to understand that both builders get along well in the dry season, but only one built with the coming rains in mind. Have we prepared? Have we built on a strong foundation?

What are the rains that will come, the rains Jesus refers to?

Jesus is referring to the final judgment. Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount with the following description of that moment, when Christ will return. Jesus says, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’”* (Matthew 7:21-23).

In that day, when Christ returns, we will stand before Him. Many will be washed away for they will have built their lives upon sand. Jesus will declare to them, *“I never knew you; depart from me...”*

Jesus is saying, “I hate sandcastles.”

So how can one build their house on rock? How do we do this? Jesus answers that question, *“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock...”* (Matthew 7:24).

The Message translation puts it this way,

These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards (Matthew 7:24-27).

Jesus says if one hears His “words” and does them, lives them, that person is like a man who built his house on the rock and was prepared for when the rains came. When the day comes and Christ returns, this person will withstand the rains. His foundation will pass inspection and he will be welcomed into the kingdom.

What “words” does Jesus speak of?

Remember, the parable of the house built on rock and sand comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The crowds have sat for days, perhaps, listening to Jesus’ teachings, and now at the end of this discourse Jesus states, *“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock...”*

What “words” does Jesus speak of? Jesus is talking about the “words” He has just shared in the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about the heart.

Jesus challenges us to look at our hearts. Jesus explains throughout His Sermon on the Mount that a true follower, by acting on His words, is like a person who builds their house on solid rock. The one who builds on rock is a hearing, responding disciple, not superficial. The one who builds on sand is one whose heart is truly centered on Christ and is putting Jesus’ teachings into practice out of love for Him. His or her obedience flows out of a heart centered on God.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses this truth. He makes it clear that on judgment day, Jesus will expose those who sound religious and who do religious deeds, but who have no personal relationship with Him, no heart change.

Remember Dr. Seuss’ *The Grinch*. His heart was too small and then, atop the mountain, hearing the Whos down in Whoville sing and praise, his heart grew several sizes. There was a heart change and because of this heart change, the Grinch acted. He returned the many gifts he had stolen from the Whos down in Whoville.

Jesus challenges us to look at our hearts.

Jesus states, *“You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call*

a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill” (Matthew 5:21-22, The Message).

Jesus continues, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28, NIV).*

F. LaGard Smith writes, *“Jesus is not even saying, ‘Be moral.’ If His teaching stopped there, the Christian walk would be easy enough to accept. After all, few of us have ever murdered anyone. But Jesus takes us behind the rule and within the heart of the law to its very essence. It is not enough not to kill; we must not even hate. It is not enough to not commit adultery; we must not ever wish we could. It is not enough to love the loveable; we must also love those who are unlovable, even those who we might consider to be enemies.”*

Jesus is looking at the heart, not outward appearance.

And His teaching gets even tougher.

Jesus declares, *“You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also” (Matthew 5:38-39, NLT).*

Furthermore, Jesus says, *“Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow” (Matthew 5:42, NLT), and “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44, NLT).*

How can we do these things? How can we be obedient?

Only with a change of heart. Only with a heart focused on and filled with God.

Even when we pray, Jesus reminds us that it is not about the outward appearance. It is about how we pray in private, when it is just us and God. It is about our hearts communing with and loving God. It is about a relationship, a personal relationship, that we spend time nurturing and nourishing.

Jesus teaches, *“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you” (Matthew 6:5-6, NLT).*

Jesus says, *“I do NOT see your works...I see your heart...,”* challenging us to *“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”*

John Wesley, preaching on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, proclaimed,

...the one who builds his house upon a rock is he "who does the will of my Father in heaven." He sees and feels all his sin and all his guilt — till it is washed away by the atoning blood. He is conscious of his lost estate, of the wrath of God abiding on him, and of his utter inability to help himself — till he is filled with peace and joy in the Holy Ghost...His soul is athirst for nothing on earth, but only for God, the living God. He loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his mind, and soul, and strength...How truly wise is this man! He sees, clearer than the light of the noonday sun, that the end of man is to glorify God and to love and enjoy him forever. And with equal clearness he sees the means to that end — which is to know, love, and imitate God, and to believe in Jesus Christ who he has sent...This wise man "builds his house upon a rock," upon the Rock of Ages: The Lord Jesus Christ. He builds only upon Jesus' blood and righteousness. On this cornerstone he fixes his faith, and rests the whole weight of his soul upon it...He is taught of God to say, "Lord, I have sinned; I deserve the nethermost hell — but I am justified freely by thy grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ — and the life I now live, I live by faith in Him, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I now live — even in the flesh — a life of love, a life of holiness and happiness, praising God and doing all to his glory.

John Wesley is saying that the wise man or woman comes to understand that there is nothing they can do to make God love them any more and there is nothing they can do to make God love them any less. Salvation is not based on anything they have done or will do. Salvation is based on who God is. The forgiveness of their sins, the cleansing of their Spirit, redemption is made possible by Christ's sacrifice, by God's mercy, by the Amazing Grace offered to us.

The wise man recognizes that without Christ, without God's mercy, they are lost. As Wesley's contemporary, George Whitefield said, *"What! Get to heaven on your own strength? Why, you might as well try to climb to the moon on a rope of sand!"*

As C.H. Spurgeon wrote, recognizing that on his own merit he could never enter the gates of heaven, *"If heaven were by merit, it would never be heaven to me, for if I were in it I should say, 'I am sure I am here by mistake; I am sure this is not my place; I have no claim to it.' But if it be of grace and not of works, then we may walk into heaven with boldness."*

Spurgeon recognizes he could not walk into heaven on his own merits but because of God's invitation, because of God's hospitality, because the Master has told His servant, *"Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full,"* we can enter God's presence.

Colossians 2:14 states, *"He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross"* (NLT).

Furthermore, I John 3:1 tells us, *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are"* (NIV).

John Wesley wrote in his journal on May 24, 1738, *“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”*

Wesley, that night in 1738, recognized, truly realized, not only the depth of his sin, that which no matter how hard he tried he could not erase, but that night, Wesley realized the depth of God's grace.

Once one understands, really understands, grasps their own sinful state and God's amazing gift of grace and adoption, it is then and only then that one's heart is *“strangely warmed,”* that one undergoes a heart change.

Jesus understood that there would be many in the church, many Christians who declare *“Lord, Lord,”* who will not experience this heart change. Jesus knew that there would be many who will build their house on the sand, attempting to achieve on their own strength that which only God could do. Thus, many would fail to be obedient, many would hold grudges, many would refuse to love the unlovable, many would seek their own rewards, many would give expecting return, many would be doing right by outward appearances and might have the respect of their brothers and sisters, but their heart would be in the wrong place.

Many of God's children would simply fail to realize the gift that is presented them. They would operate under the absurd thought that they could earn their way, that on their own strength they could live a Godly life, and on their own strength they would fall into selfishness, pride, and worldly desires, failing to love as God had loved them, to forgive as they had been forgiven.

Jesus said, *“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock...”*

Jesus understood that many would build their house on the sand, their own merits and strengths, the world and its acceptance. They would not know God so deeply that their hearts were forever changed by the knowledge of what God had done to save them. They would not have experienced a heart change that would now result in a life of holiness and service, a life of love and praise, a life such as Jesus speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount. They would not have the strength, the passion, the drive to live out God's commands. The world would too easily break in, the rains would too easily wash away one's convictions, one's faith, one's commitment.

Building our house on the rock begins with a heart change, declaring as Wesley wrote, *“...I have sinned; I deserve the nethermost hell — but I am justified freely by thy grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ — and the life I now live, I live by faith in Him, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I now live — even in the flesh — a life of love, a life of holiness and happiness, praising God and doing all to his glory.”*

This is the foundation that we can build our lives upon, the foundation that pushes us to no longer commit murder with our words, no longer lust in our hearts, no longer call for an “*eye for an eye*,” no longer pass by the beggar on the street, no longer hate those who persecute us, no longer fail to “*seek first the kingdom of God*”.

When Jesus checks your heart, will Jesus find one who has struggled, fought, strived to live a life of obedience? Will Jesus find one who lived their faith not out of obligation or fear or show, but out of love and gratitude? Will Jesus find that you, like the foolish man, built your house on the sand or will Jesus find that you, like the wise man, strived to build your house on the Rock? Will Jesus find that the Cornerstone has been laid in the recesses of your heart and has affected every nook and cranny, creating a structure, that because of Christ, no flood can destroy?

Monday**Read Matthew 7:21-29.**

Jesus offers us and His disciples some strong words in these verses. In verses 21-23, Jesus says that simply saying, “*Lord, Lord*” will not lead to one entering the kingdom of heaven. Furthermore, those who simply do good works, “*prophesying in [God’s] name...and [doing] many mighty works in [God’s] name*” will not enter the kingdom of heaven. What is Jesus saying?

Jesus is speaking of the heart. Jesus is asking us and His disciples if we have truly internalized our faith; if we have truly given our hearts to Christ. Are we simply coming to church and shouting “Lord,” and praising God in the songs, because it is what is expected? Are we praising God on Sunday mornings with all our hearts, loving Him, giving all we are to Jesus? Are we doing good works, works of charity, serving in positions in the church, reaching out to our neighbors to be “good people,” because it is expected, to earn our reward, or are we reaching out and serving out of love for Jesus Christ? Where is our heart? What is our motivation? What is behind all that we do?

Jesus says, on the last day, He will not listen to our words or look solely at our works, but will look at our heart. And to some, He will say, “*I never knew you.*” Does Jesus know you? Have you given Him all of your heart? Is He the motivation for your “good” deeds? Have we truly given all to Him?

Recommit your life to Jesus in prayer tonight. Like a popular contemporary Christian song declares, tell Him, “*I want to know you...I want to know you...I want to know you more.*”

Tuesday**Read Matthew 7:21-29 again.**

Focus on verses 24-27. Have you built your house on the rock or have you built your house on the sand? Jesus says that those “*who hear these words of Mine and acts upon them*” will be like one who has built his house on the rock. What words is Jesus speaking of? Jesus is speaking of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount covers chapters 5, 6 & 7. In his sermon, Jesus gives many instructions, much guidance, and, as the people say, “*teaches [us] with authority.*” Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount about putting our total trust in God, loving our neighbor and our enemy, and offering our hearts to God in prayer. Jesus gives us a model to work toward, a model that none of us will probably ever live up to, but one to strive toward daily as we give our hearts to Him.

Throughout the rest of the week we will look at the Sermon on the Mount, but for today, what are you doing daily to strive to be more and more like Jesus Christ, to open your heart more deeply to Him, to trust, to love and pray more? Pray to God to help you on your daily walk with the Lord.

Wednesday**Read Matthew 5:22-25.**

Jesus understood that you could not give your whole heart to God and could not be living for Jesus Christ and “*harbor malice against*” another. If you have given your heart to Jesus, and Christ and His Spirit has come to live in you, then whenever you hold a grievance against another, it blocks you from Christ, and suddenly you are living on the sand instead of the rock.

Jesus says in verse 23-25, that before you are to give your offering, before coming to the altar in prayer, if you have any grievance against another, it must be dealt with. Jesus says, *“First make peace with your brother, and then come back and present your gift.”*

Are you holding any grudges against another? Have you made peace with those you have found yourself in opposition to? Have you allowed Christ’s love to flow through you even for one you don’t necessarily like? Is a grievance against another getting in the way of you and God? To build our house on the rock, we must go to those we have had a problem or grievance with and make things right.

Pray that God will give you the strength to go to someone who your relationship with has been strained and make amends in the name of Jesus Christ. Pray for those whom you have difficulty with.

Thursday

Read Matthew 5:27-30.

Jesus is not only talking about adultery but temptation when He says, *“If your right eye serves as a trap to ensnare you...pluck it out and throw it away.”* What are your temptations today? What is drawing you away from the presence of God, from sitting with Jesus? What is pulling your heart away from Jesus? Are you tempted to allow fear of the future to control your life? Are you tempted by alcohol, pornography, gambling, soap operas? Are you tempted by your neighbor’s new car, clothes, home? Are you tempted to yell at your kids after a hard day’s work?

We face many temptations...every day. And some of them we simply need to separate ourselves from? We need to push them away with God’s help and not go near them. Pray for God to help you push away anything that is getting in the way of you and God, anything that is tempting you away from being the person God has created you to be, anything that is tempting you away from the Rock!

Friday

Read Matthew 7:1-5; 15-20.

Jesus says that before we are to criticize and judge others, we are to take a real hard look at ourselves. What kind of fruit is our life growing? Are we living a life that shines Jesus Christ? Are our lives lifting others up? Are we holding grievances, being stubborn, hurting others, or are we loving *“even our enemies”* with the love of Jesus?

Pray that God will help you to be honest with yourself, and that God will show you your faults. Pray that God will help you with those faults and help you to not judge others, but to simply love them.

Saturday

Read Matthew 7:7-11.

Seek after God in prayer. Keep on asking Him for guidance and keep on opening your heart more and more fully to Jesus. God will answer the door if only you knock.

Read the lyrics to the hymn, “My Hope Is Built,” and reflect. Do these words ring true for you? Are you standing on the *“solid rock”* or are you standing on *“sinking sand”*? *“When all around [you] gives way,”* is God your *“hope and stay”*? Ask God to anchor you in Him. Give thanks this day!

My Hope Is Built

*My Hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus Blood and Righteousness
I dare not trust the Sweet Frame
But wholly lean on Jesus Name*

Chorus:

*On Christ the solid rock I Stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand*

*When darkness veils his lovely face
I rest on his unchanging grace
In every high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil*

Chorus:

*His oath, his covenant, his blood
Support me in the whelming flood
When all around my soul gives way
He then is my hope and stay.*

Chorus:

*When he shall come with trumpet sound
O may I then in him be found,
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne*

Chorus:

Chapter 6

BEWARE THE UNDERTOW *The Parable of the Great Feast*

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'"

"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'"

"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'"

"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'"

"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'"

"'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'"

"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

-Luke 14:12-24

BEWARE THE UNDERTOW

Top Ten Excuses for Not Attending Church:

Sorry I missed church, but...

10. I can find God in nature.
9. I prefer watching televangelists (*There's just something about a remote control that makes me feel like I'm in control of my own spiritual life*).
8. It would make me miss my Zen class.
7. There are too many hypocrites in church, and besides it interferes with my tee-time.
6. There's too much hugging and real warmth.
5. There isn't enough hugging and real warmth.
4. I went once, but I didn't recognize the place without the lilies and poinsettias.
3. I'm an atheist – I swear to God!
2. Even Jesus wouldn't have gone if he'd had to wear pantyhose.
1. The dog ate my offering.

Excuses. Excuses are deadly things. They poison the life of the Christian. They keep us from growing closer to God. They prevent us from following God's guidance. They hold us back from the blessings God has for each of us.

God gives us a tremendous gift, a tremendous invitation. God gives us an invitation to dine with the Creator, to live as one of His adopted sons and daughters. God gives us an invitation not just to eternal life but to benefits and blessings in this life including power and strength, purpose, confidence, fulfillment, security, help with weakness, peace and freedom.

God has sent us a personal invitation in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ, to invite us to a relationship, to a banquet, to life. Unfortunately, like the undertow at the beach that can pull even an able-bodied swimmer out away from shore, there are so many distractions and things in this world, so many excuses we make, that pull us away from dining with our Father in heaven.

Excuses are not something new. In the garden of Eden, we find the first excuse for not following God's commands. In Genesis 3:12-13, we read, "*The man replied, 'It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.' Then the LORD God asked the woman, 'What have you done?' 'The serpent deceived me,' she replied. 'That's why I ate it' (NLT).*"

Just think of how many excuses Moses offered up to God, explaining why he could not be the one to lead Israel out of bondage. Moses responds, "*Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue...Oh, my Lord, please send someone else*" (Exodus 4:10, 13, NLT).

And Jeremiah? God tells Jeremiah, "*I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations.*" Jeremiah responds, "*O Sovereign LORD...I can't speak for you! I'm too young*" (Jeremiah 1:5-6, NLT).

And then there is Gideon. In the book of Judges, we read, *“And the LORD turned to Gideon and said, ‘Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?’ And he said to him, ‘Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house’”* (6:14-15, ESV).

Throughout scripture, throughout history men and women have made excuse, and throughout God has responded in different ways.

- With Moses we hear, Exodus 4:14, *“Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses...”*
- With Adam and Eve, God kicked them out of the garden.
- With Jeremiah and Gideon, God told them that they would go and do what God commanded them.
- With the Rich Young Ruler and with the many disciples in John 6 who *“turned away and deserted [Jesus],”* Jesus simply let them go.

In Jesus’ parable of the Great Banquet, the Master becomes *“furious,”* lets those who have their excuses go ahead and miss out on the great banquet prepared; furthermore, the Master sends His servant into the *“country lanes and behind the hedges,”* urging anyone who wanted to come and feast at His home.

Never are excuses good or acceptable behaviors, nor are they listened to by a Holy and Righteous God who calls us to follow Him.

Paul writes in Romans 1:20, *“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse”* (ESV).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus challenges those who wish to follow Him to not make excuse. We read, *“To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Yet another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’”* (9:59-62, ESV).

In other words, Jesus is saying “No Excuses.”

Unfortunately, like those throughout the scriptures, throughout history, at times we are quick to make excuses.

Excuses can not only have eternal consequences, but can affect one’s relationship with Jesus Christ and with others today. Excuses can cause us to miss out on the abundant life one can have here on earth as one walks with Christ and lives out their purpose.

Jesus tells the story of the Great Feast. He begins, *“A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, ‘Come, the banquet is ready.’ But they all began making excuses. One said, ‘I have just bought a field and*

must inspect it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I now have a wife, so I can’t come.’”

First, our excuses stand in the way of our COMING TO CHRIST.

Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon, “A Straight Talk,” writes,

It is not merely a supper that you will lose when you say, ‘I cannot come.’ To lose a supper would be little and might soon be set right when breakfast-time came around. But you lose eternal life, and that loss in time can never be found in eternity. You lose the pardon of sin, reconciliation to God, adoption into the family of love – these are heavy losses. You lose the joy of faith for life, and you lose comfort in death – who can estimate this damage? Lose not your immortal soul! Oh, lose not that! For, if you gain the whole world, it will not recompense you for such a loss. Lose what you will, but lose not your soul, I pray you!

I’m not ready...I don’t understand...when I get my life together...God couldn’t possibly forgive me...you don’t understand...I have things to do...

When our hearts are nudged, touched, for those we love who do not have a relationship with Christ, may we cry out, “*Please, Lord...help them stop making excuses...*”

But Jesus’ parable is also for those who know Christ, who have accepted Him, who attend church most Sundays and worship, believing in Jesus, but at times are easily pulled out by the undertows of this world. In other words, Jesus’ parable is for you and me.

Our excuses might not be standing in the way of us coming to Christ, but our excuses could be standing in the way of our GROWING WITH CHRIST.

How many blessings will we miss because of our many excuses:

- *I can’t be involved in Bible study right now...*
- *I don’t know enough of the Bible....*
- *I can’t be involved in a small group...*
- *I’m not good opening up to people....*
- *I can’t love my enemy...you don’t know what they’ve done...*
- *I can’t get closer to God...my life is too messed up right now...*
- *I can’t get involved in a ministry...I don’t have those gifts...*
- *I don’t have time to get more involved in the church, in my relationship with God, in prayer...maybe when things in my life calm down...*
- *I’ve never done it that way before...*

Spurgeon writes, “*Let me be plain with you and say that you could find time for thought about your soul if you had a mind to do so. To plead that you have no time for religion is a fraud. It is lying unto God to say that you have no time. When a man wants to do a thing, if he has no time, he makes time. ‘Where there’s a will there’s a way.’ Where there is a heart to religion there is plenty of time for it.*”

He goes on to say, *“If you still intend to say, ‘I cannot come,’ will you speak the truth now? Will you altar a word, and get near the truth? Say, ‘I will not come.’”*

Will we continue to make excuses and find ourselves in the same place in our relationship with Christ a year from now as we are today? Or will we stop making excuses, jump in and grow in our relationship with Christ and His Church?

Our excuses can not only stand in the way of our coming to Christ and our growing with Christ, our excuses can stand in the way of our LIVING IN CHRIST.

Christ literally wants us to follow Him, His commands, and His example. Christ wants us to live in Him, in obedience, in word and action, in the every day.

Have you ever heard the Gospel preached, read God’s Word, and said to yourself, *“Well, that doesn’t apply to me...”*

- God says *‘Forgive one another as Christ forgave you,’* but we say *“After what he did?”*
- God says, *“Do not steal,”* but we say, *“The government didn’t earn this money, I’m giving enough in taxes...I’m just not reporting this amount.”*
- God says, *“Love your neighbor,”* but we say *“My neighbor is the wrong color...plus do you see the way they act.”*
- God says, *“Whatever is true...noble...right...pure...think about such things,”* but we say, *“I’m just looking a little bit...I’m not hurting anyone...it’s just me and the computer.”*
- God says, *“Go and make disciples of all nations,”* but we say, *“Why do we have to go to them, they should come to us...I’m not qualified to speak about Jesus...We have a preacher that can share the message.”*
- God says, *“The book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, you shall meditate on it day and night,”* but we say, *“I don’t have time to read my Bible...I’m just too busy...I get enough from the sermon on Sunday.”*
- God says, *“Do not neglect in meeting together,”* but we say, *“I don’t have to go to Church to be a Christian...there are too many hypocrites there.”*
- God says, *“Speak evil of no one,”* but we say, *“It’s not gossip...I’m just concerned...Anyway, everyone already knows.”*
- God says, *“For all have sinned,”* but we say, *“At least I’m not as bad as that person over there.”*
- God says, *“Give to the one who begs from you...do not refuse,”* but we say, *“They probably will use it for alcohol or drugs...they’re lazy...they need to get a job like the rest of us.”*

Through our many excuses, we end up failing to live in Christ. We end up failing to be obedient in our walk; thus, we miss out on a closeness with our Heavenly Father, an intimacy that is only possible through obedience.

I John 3:24 tells us, *“Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him”* (ESV).

Psalms 112:1 shouts, “*Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments*” (ESV).

James 1:25 declares, “*But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing*” (ESV).

Lastly, perhaps most devastating, our excuses stand in the way of us WITNESSING FOR CHRIST.

- When we make excuses rather than attempt, with God’s help, to change our actions and to obey God’s Word each day...
- When our daily decisions, church meetings, marriages, work places, and relationships look no different from those who do not follow Christ...
- When we blame others or blame our environment for our bad decisions and hurtful actions...

When we do these things, it shows the world that we might profess what Christ taught but we don’t really believe it enough to obey when the going gets tough. The world is watching and when our relationships break down, our money gets tight, our lives become overwhelmed, they see us react no differently than those outside the faith.

Such a witness pushes people away from the church and its message of forgiveness and hope, rather than pulling them toward it. We become the undertow for others.

We have been given the freedom and power to choose just like the three men in the parable that Jesus told. We have the opportunity to accept the wonderful invitation Jesus gives us.

An invitation to...

- A relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

An invitation to...

- Grow in our relationship with Christ, walking closer with God and growing into the man or woman we were created to become.

An invitation to...

- A life of obedience and faithfulness resulting in others seeing Christ in us and being drawn to Him.

An invitation to...

- One day hear God say, “*Well done, my good and faithful servant.*”

We have been given the same invitation that the Master sent His servant to declare in Jesus’ parable. God has even told us that when we accept His invitation, we have the Holy Spirit and Christ Himself to guide us and help us along the journey. We have been blessed with the “*body of Christ*,” the Church, to support and undergird us, to teach us God’s Word. We are not alone on the journey to the Master’s feast.

But like those who were invited by the servant to the feast made excuses, turned away, and the undertow of this world pulled them out to sea, the same can happen to us if we are not careful, intentional, and lean on God and His people for support. The same can happen to us if we make excuses for ungodly behavior, for actions that send a poor witness to the community, for decisions that result in broken relationships, for words that hurt those across the pew from us, for failing to decide to truly give our lives over to Christ.

What will we do? Will we choose to accept the invitation? Will we come to Christ, grow in Christ, live in Christ, and have our lives witness for Christ?

Will we stop making excuses?

Monday

Read Luke 14:12-24.

Jesus tells the parable of “The Great Feast.” Like the undertow at the beach that can pull even an able-bodied swimmer out and away from shore, there are many distractions and excuses that can pull us away from accepting the invitation God has given each of us to come to Him through Christ. God has offered us a great gift and has sent an invitation, in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ, to inform us of the banquet that has been prepared. The invitation is in front of us; an invitation that is not just to eternal life but to benefits in this life including clear conscience (Romans 8:1), purpose (Romans 8:28), power & strength (Philippians 4:13), life & peace (Romans 8:6), confidence (Romans 8:31), fulfillment (Philippians 4:19), help with weakness (Romans 8:26), security (Romans 8:39), and freedom (John 8:32, 36).

We have all been given a tremendous gift...an invitation to dine with the Creator, to live as one of His adopted sons and daughters; unfortunately, many of us are so distracted by the things of this world that we make excuse after excuse for not accepting the invitation. Like the three men in Jesus’ parable, many times we decline the invitation to meet with and dine with the Master.

The greatest invitation God gives us is to be reconciled through His son, Jesus Christ. We are invited to be forgiven our sins and rest in Him, to have a relationship with God. This is a tremendous gift and opportunity that so many people, many in our own families, have not accepted. We must help others to see the gift, the invitation that stands in front of them and to understand that it is not just a supper that they will miss out on if they decline God’s invitation.

Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon, “A Straight Talk,” writes, *“It is not merely a supper that you will lose when you say, ‘I cannot come.’ To lose a supper would be little and might soon be set right when breakfast-time came round. But you lose eternal life, and that loss in time can never be found in eternity. You lose the pardon of sin, reconciliation to God, adoption into the family of love – these are heavy losses. You lose the joy of faith for life, and you lose comfort in death – who can estimate this damage? Lose not your immortal soul! Oh, lose not that! For, if you gain the whole world, it will not recompense you for such a loss. Lose what you will, but lose not your soul, I pray you!”*

Have you accepted the invitation God has given you through His son, Jesus Christ? Have you accepted the invitation to the banquet and trusted in Jesus? Will you now, instead of making excuses and letting the world distract you from coming, resolve to come at once? And if you have come, and have a relationship with God, having accepted His invitation, will you go out into the “*streets and lanes of the city*,” “*the highways and hedges*,” and “*compel them to come in, that [God’s] house may be filled*?” Will you tell others? Will you tell them about the invitation God offers?

Pray that God will lay names on your heart...people you need to invite to church...need to tell about God’s invitation for them.

Tuesday

Read Luke 14:12-24.

Excuses are deadly things. They poison the life of the Christian because they block the path to confession and forgiveness and rob faith of its vitality. They keep us from growing closer to God, opening our lives up to God’s guidance. They keep us from the blessings God has for each of us.

One of the excuses many of us give for not accepting the invitation God gives us to go deeper, to be fed, to spend time with Him is “I Have No Time.” We know that spending time each day with God in prayer, getting involved in a small group, being a servant through a particular ministry in the church, getting into a Bible study are all things that will help us grow in our relationship with God and go deeper in understanding His love for us. We know this truth but unfortunately we reply, “I Have No Time.”

Spurgeon writes, *“Let me be plain with you and say that you could find time for thought about your soul if you had a mind to do so. To plead that you have no time for religion is a fraud. It is lying unto God to say that you have no time. When a man wants to do a thing, if he has no time, he makes time. ‘Where there’s a will there’s a way.’ Where there is a heart to religion there is plenty of time for it.”*

Have you used this excuse? “I Have No Time.” What does God want you to make time for? Bible study? A small group? A ministry? Pray that God will show you what He wants you to make time for and help you to go ahead and do it, that you might grow closer to Him. Accept His invitation...no excuses.

Wednesday

Read Luke 14:12-24.

Another excuse many of us give for not accepting the invitation God gives us to go deeper, to be fed, to spend time with Him is “I Have More Important Things To Do.” Spurgeon writes, *“Now, come! I shall contradict you flatly. You have nothing more important to do. That would be utterly impossible. Nothing under heaven can be of one-hundredth part of the importance of your being reconciled to God, and saved through Jesus Christ. What is that more important business? To make money? Where is the importance of that? You may get a pile of it, and the net result will be greater care, and the more to leave when you die. But you tell me you must have an opportunity for study. Well, that is better; but what are you going to study? Science? Art? Politics? Are these important compared with the saving of your soul? Your first duty is to be right with your God, who made you. Had Christ redeemed you? Rest not till you know the truth of that redemption by being reconciled to God.”* God offers us daily to get to know Him better.

Pray that God will show you areas and things in your life you might be able to give up for the most important thing in life...a relationship with your Father in heaven.

Thursday

Read Romans 1:18-21.

Paul writes that we “are without excuse,” that “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen...” When I coached soccer for Woodbridge High School years ago, our team had a shirt made and on the back of that shirt was the phrase “No Excuses.” God wants us to accept His invitation and to stop making excuses. Spurgeon writes, *“If you still intend to say, ‘I cannot come,’ will you speak the truth now? Will you alter a word, and get nearer the truth? Say, ‘I will not come.’ I wish you would say that rather than the other, because the recoil of saying, ‘I will not come: I will not believe in Jesus: I will not repent of sin: I will not turn from my wicked ways’ – the recoil, I say, from that might be blessed by God to you to make you see your desperate state. I wish you would then cry, ‘I cannot sit down, and make my own damnation sure by saying that I will not come to Christ.’ Will you now, instead of refusing to come, resolve to come at once? Say, ‘I will come to Jesus.’”*

In other words, there are no excuses. Will we come to Jesus? Will we grow closer through Bible study and prayer? Will we get involved in His church? Or won't we? We have been given the freedom and power to choose just like the three men in the parable Jesus told. They were all given the invitation and all had the choice to accept it or turn away and do their own thing. We, too, have that choice.

Pray that God will help you to stop making excuses and to accept the invitation God is giving you to go deeper with Him through prayer, study and service.

Friday

Read John 6:22-40.

So often we "*labor for food that perishes*" instead of focusing our energies and lives on Jesus Christ, the bread of life. We must not allow the things of this world to distract us from feeding on Christ, on His Word, on His love, on His commands to serve one another.

God will give us, through Jesus Christ, "*food which endures to everlasting life.*" Read His Word. It will speak to you. Share in worship. It will reenergize you. Surround yourself with Christian friends. It will strengthen you. Pray. It will change you.

Don't allow that which cannot feed you and nourish you fully (money, success, possessions, power) to distract you from the living bread. Take time to simply pray and sit with God and His Word tonight.

Saturday

Read Luke 14:17; Psalm 119.

Just take in God's Word. Taste & See That the Lord is Good. Remember that Jesus in the Parable of the Great Feast tells of the Master of the House sending His servant to invite all He could find to the banquet. God calls us, the Church, to be His servants, going out and telling everyone that they are invited to a great feast, inviting them to come and "*taste and see that the Lord is good.*" Offer the invitation to church to someone. Call them tonight and tell them you will pick them up. Pray for those who haven't accepted God's invitation.

Chapter 7

UNDER AN UMBRELLA *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

-Luke 10:25-37

UNDER AN UMBRELLA

The story of “The Good Samaritan” is a familiar story; many of us have heard it before. I am sure many of you have had experiences where you had the opportunity to be “The Good Samaritan,” and I’m sure there have been times, like me, you have stepped boldly into the role and other times you have been the priest or Levite, crossing to the other side of the road.

As I was preparing this message, I remembered a poem I wrote in my late teens after picking up a man along the side of the road who had run out of gas. I searched and found that poem and thought I would share it with you.

Sunday School

I picked up a gentleman today;
His name was Junebug.
The eleven-year old Honda out of gas,
Sweat pouring down his swarthy arms.
His curly hair matted down
Due to the pressure of the sun.

As we drove to the Texaco,
He spoke of driving trucks,
Getting married,
Home,
And New York City.
Here was a life
With as many portals
As there were shades of color.

I needed Karma I kept thinking.
Why else would I pick this stranger up?
But then again...
I had spent years stopping to help turtles cross the road.

In the center
Of a good deed,
My mind floated back to past transgressions,
Infractions,
Lapses in my character.
My sins surfaced on the dash, in the speedometer.
Selfishness, egotism, the telling of untruths.
Thoughts of past flings.
The need to impress.
The need to be some body.

The worst part
Was the digression.
The digression so many times
From my character -
Who I knew I was,
Who I wanted to be.
The type of person that would pick up
A black man
During a lonely push.

If we travel through this life with open eyes and open hearts, asking God to show us where we can serve Him, where we can love His children, God will give us opportunities, situations, where we can step into the shoes of “The Good Samaritan.”

Charles Spurgeon, in one of his sermons, talks about the two men, the priest and Levite, who passed by the fallen man without helping him. He writes, *“They were brought to the spot by God’s providence on purpose to do so. What better thing could the Lord himself do for the poor man half dead than to bring some man to help him?”*

Spurgeon continues, *“God brought them to this position, but they willfully refused the sacred duty which providence and humanity demanded of them. Now, you that are wealthy are sent into our city on purpose that you may have compassion upon the sick, the wounded, the poor, and the needy. God’s intent in endowing any person with more substance than he needs is that he may have the pleasurable office, or rather let me say, the delightful privilege, of relieving want and woe.”*

You have been given gifts and resources in order to reach out to others, to lift them up, to help them in times of need.

I John 3:16-18 tells us, *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”*

We are called to not only get near to God but to become like Him. We are called to be like Christ, to ask *“What would Jesus do?”* Julian of Norwich wrote, *“Every act of kindness and compassion done by any man for his fellow Christian is done by Christ working within him.”* We must let God in and allow Christ to change us and move in our lives.

In his sermon, Spurgeon explains how the priest and the Levite both were engaged in holy work in the temple of God, yet they both came away from it with a *“hard heart.”*

He writes, *“This is a sad fact. They had been near to God, but were not like him. You may spend Sabbath after Sabbath in the worship of God, or what you think to be so, and you may behold Christ Jesus set forth visibly crucified among you, and themes which ought to turn a heart of*

stone to flesh may pass before your minds, and nevertheless you may return into the world to be as miserly as ever, and to have as little feeling toward your fellow-men as before. It ought not to be so."

We must not simply talk about God and go to church, but we must allow God to change our hearts, to move in our hearts and teach us to love like Him. If we are not helping more, reaching out more, caring more, thinking of others more, after coming to Christ than before, perhaps we have not truly given our hearts to Him.

In John 15:9-17, Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other."

We are called by God to love our neighbor, to reach out and care for those around us who are hurting and in need, to care for our church family and for the stranger.

Look at the Samaritan in Jesus' parable.

Further along in Spurgeon's message, writing about the Good Samaritan, he states, "This man helped his poor neighbor with great tenderness and care. He was like a mother to him. Everything was done with loving thought and with whatever skill he possessed. He did the best he could. Let what we do for others always be done in the noblest style. Let us not treat the poor like dogs to whom we fling a bone, nor visit the sick like superior beings who feel that they are stooping down to inferiors when they enter their rooms; but in the sweet tenderness of real love, learned at Jesus' feet, let us imitate the good Samaritan."

Furthermore, Jesus teaches, in Matthew 5:43-48, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Jesus' parable of "The Good Samaritan" shows this kind of love.

Spurgeon continues, "Moreover, the Jews were great haters of the Samaritans, and no doubt this Samaritan might have thought, "If I were in that man's case he would not help me. He would

pass me by and say, 'It is a Samaritan dog, let him be accursed.' The Jews were accustomed to curse the Samaritans, but it did not occur to the good man to remember what the Jew would have said: he saw him bleeding and he bound up his wounds. Our Savior has not given us for a golden rule, 'Do ye to others as others would do to you,' but 'as ye would they should do to you.' The Samaritan went by this rule, and though he knew of the enmity in the Jewish mind he felt he must heap coals of fire upon the wounded man by loving help; therefore, he went straight away to his relief."

There are times we don't even notice those alongside the road. We are so focused on our own lives, our own problems, we have blinders on, and, like the priest and Levite, we walk by without seeing.

And what does it mean to be "The Good Samaritan" to love like Jesus taught us to love, when it comes to the immigrant situation? And what about our homeless veterans?

Following Jesus is never easy; thus, the answers to such questions, such situations going on in our world, are not easy. The answer is not "*either/or*." I see so many Facebook posts in which Christians state we should care for our veterans, our homeless before we care for the immigrant. The biblical response is not "EITHER we care for one OR we care for the other." Biblically, God often challenges us to approach issues with a "*both/and*" mentality. We are to respond to "BOTH our homeless, our veterans AND the immigrant" with love and compassion.

What this means, what responding with love and compassion looks like in all these situations, may be very different. These are complex, complicated, and highly-emotional issues. I certainly don't have the answers. Every situation has to be looked at, prayed about, and compassionately dealt with. Individual families' stories need to be heard. The situations surrounding each of our veterans and homeless assessed.

One thing that is clear, is that Jesus reminds us, through His parable and teaching, that IGNORING the hurting is not an acceptable response.

Lastly, we must not forget there are times we are the Jew, beaten and bleeding, bruised and hurting, in need of help. Life is full of hardship and every one of us will at one time or another be the person on the road, beaten. Will we accept the help that God sends to us? The Jew could have turned away from the Samaritan, pushing him aside. In his pride, the Jew could have said he could take care of himself.

How often, do we, in need of help, try to care for the problem ourselves, allowing our pride to get in the way of the help God has sent us in the form of a Christian brother or sister? Not only do we not accept the blessing God has for us through the people He places in our lives, but we steal a blessing away from them, the blessing they would receive in serving, helping us.

Remember, when someone serves another, they are actually serving and loving Christ, reaching out to Him personally. Jesus is very clear about this.

Jesus explains this in another familiar scripture, speaking about the last days, when, as C.S. Lewis describes, “*you [will] see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else - something it never entered your head to conceive - comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time, it will God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.*”

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus teaches,

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”

They also will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?”

He will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Often on the beach, we set up our umbrellas, put up our beach chairs, and plop down to a good book or a nap. We don’t see the many people walking up and down the beach; sometimes we even lose sight of our own children splashing in the waves.

Are you living “*under an umbrella*,” failing to see those around you who are hurting and in need, failing to get up and go to them?

We must be intentional in making sure the umbrella, the to-do-lists, problems, issues, temptations around us, don’t block our view, block us from seeing the people God has cross our path, some in our own families, some in our church family, some in our community who are strangers, and some who live on the other side of the ocean. We must ask God to help us see, to open our eyes, to look out from beneath our umbrella-shadowed lives to see God’s other children walking by. We must get involved in ministries and missions that place us in situations where we are called to step out of our comfort zones, and like the Good Samaritan, cross over to the other side of the road.

Just imagine a day when we will stand before Christ and He will say to us, “*Well, done...my good and faithful servant...When I was thirsty you gave me something to drink.*”

Monday

Read Luke 10:25-37.

The story of “The Good Samaritan” is very familiar to many of us. I want to share this week with you a few thoughts from another of Charles Spurgeon’s sermons that might open our eyes to some new insights concerning this story and its application to our personal lives.

Spurgeon first talks about the two men, the priest and Levite, who passed by the fallen man without helping him. He writes, *“They were brought to the spot by God’s providence on purpose to do so. What better thing could the Lord himself do for the poor man half dead than to bring some man to help him?”*

Spurgeon continues, *“God brought them to this position, but they willfully refused the sacred duty which providence and humanity demanded of them. Now, you that are wealthy are sent into our city on purpose that you may have compassion upon the sick, the wounded, the poor, and the needy. God’s intent in endowing any person with more substance than he needs is that he may have the pleasurable office, or rather let me say, the delightful privilege, of relieving want and woe.”*

You have been given gifts and resources in order to reach out to others, to lift them up, to help them in times of need. Spurgeon goes on to point out how sad it is that the wealth that has been put into many of our hands to help the needy is being spent on excessive luxuries for ourselves.

God calls us to reach out to those in need and God places us in people’s lives at the time they need our help. We need to be on the lookout and aware of those around us and their needs. God may have placed us in that location, at that moment, like the priest and Levite, to help out. Pray that when God asks you to help someone that has fallen, you don’t walk by. Pray that God will give you the insight, courage, and compassion to stop and help.

Tuesday

Read I John 3:16-23.

We are called to not only get near to God but to become like Him. We are called to be like Christ, to ask “What would Jesus do?” Julian of Norwich wrote, *“Every act of kindness and compassion done by any man for his fellow Christian is done by Christ working within him.”* We must let God in and allow Christ to change us and move in our lives.

Spurgeon writes about how the priest and the Levite both were engaged in holy work in the temple of God, yet they both came away from it with a “hard heart.” He writes, *“This is a sad fact. They had been near to God, but were not like him. You may spend Sabbath after Sabbath in the worship of God, or what you think to be so, and you may behold Christ Jesus set forth visibly crucified among you, and themes which ought to turn a heart of stone to flesh may pass before your minds, and nevertheless you may return into the world to be as miserly as ever, and to have as little feeling toward your fellow-men as before. It ought not to be so.”*

We must not simply talk about God and go to church, but we must allow God to change our hearts, to move in our hearts and teach us to love like Him. We cannot be satisfied with simply sitting on the beach under an umbrella and watching the world walk by. If we are not helping more, reaching out more, caring more, thinking of others more, after coming to Christ than before, perhaps we have not truly given our hearts to Him.

How are you showing love in “deed and in truth?” How are you living your faith? How are you becoming more like Christ in your life, your actions, your speech? Pray that God gives

you even greater compassion for your fellow human beings and you will begin to see others as God sees them, as His children.

Wednesday

Read Romans 13:8-10 & John 15:9-17.

We are called by God to love our neighbor, to reach out and care for those around us who are hurting and in need. In fact, Jesus commands us to love one another just as He has loved us.

Look at the Samaritan in Jesus' parable. Spurgeon writes, *"This man helped his poor neighbour with great tenderness and care. He was like a mother to him. Everything was done with loving thought and with whatever skill he possessed. He did the best he could. Let what we do for others always be done in the noblest style. Let us not treat the poor like dogs to whom we fling a bone, nor visit the sick like superior beings who feel that they are stooping down to inferiors when they enter their rooms; but in the sweet tenderness of real love, learned at Jesus' feet, let us imitate the good Samaritan."*

How are you showing love for your neighbor? How are you reaching out to the poor and hurting in your community? Are you loving others like Jesus loved you? How do you view the poor...how do you speak of them? Is it with love and compassion or is it with distaste? How would Jesus see them? Pray that you might be more like the model God gave us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Thursday

Read Matthew 5:43-48.

Wow! This is one of the most difficult teachings Jesus has given to us, to love our enemies. Not only are we called to lift up the hurting and oppressed, the poor and the hungry, but we are also called to love our enemies, those who despise us, curse us, threaten us, and cause us pain. Is such a love possible? It is only possible with the heart of Christ.

Jesus' parable of "The Good Samaritan" shows this kind of love. Spurgeon writes, *"Moreover, the Jews were great haters of the Samaritans, and no doubt this Samaritan might have thought, 'If I were in that man's case he would not help me. He would pass me by and say, 'It is a Samaritan dog, let him be accursed.' The Jews were accustomed to curse the Samaritans, but it did not occur to the good man to remember what the Jew would have said: he saw him bleeding and he bound up his wounds. Our Saviour has not given us for a golden rule, 'Do ye to others as others would do to you,' but 'as ye would they should do to you.' The Samaritan went by this rule, and though he knew of the enmity in the Jewish mind he felt he must heap coals of fire upon the wounded man by loving help; therefore, he went straight away to his relief."*

Who in your life are you holding a grudge against? Who are your enemies? Who are you having trouble loving, trouble reaching out to, trouble forgiving, trouble helping? Ask God to help you see your enemy as a child of God, and therefore, a brother or sister. If they are in need, reach out to them this week; take the first step.

Friday

Read Luke 10: 25-37.

Read the story of "The Good Samaritan" again, but now take a look at the parable through the eyes of the Jew, beaten and bruised upon the path, in need of help. Have you been

there? Have you been the one lost and hurting? Have you felt that you couldn't go on, beaten and bleeding? Most of us have been in the place of the Jew, left to die along the road.

Spurgeon writes, *"This story is but one among a thousand based upon an unhappy occurrence. 'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves.' He went upon a short journey, and almost lost his life on the road. We are never secure from trouble; it meets us around the family hearth and causes us to suffer in our own persons or in those of the dearest relatives; it walks into our shops and counting-houses, and tries us; and when we leave home it becomes our fellow-traveler and communes with us on the road. 'Although affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground; yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.'"*

Life is full of hardship and every one of us will at one time or another be the person on the road, beaten down, ready to give up, bleeding and lost. Will we accept the help that God sends to us? The Jew could have turned away from the Samaritan, pushing him aside. In his pride, the Jew could have said he could take care of himself. How often, do we, in need of help, try to care for the problem ourselves, allowing our pride to get in the way of the help God has sent us in the form of a Christian brother or sister?

Have you shared the difficulties you are facing right now with another Christian brother or sister? God has placed people in your life to help. Are you opening up to them about your needs, allowing them to help you, allowing them to reach out to you with God's love?

Saturday

Read Matthew 25:31-46.

When we serve another, we are actually loving Christ, reaching out to Him personally. There are so many ways to get involved. There are countless ministries in the church where you can serve others, reach out to newcomers, go into the community and serve those in need. Just ask. Seek how you might get involved. Seek how you might serve Christ. Just imagine a day when we will stand before Christ and He will say to us, *"Well, done...my good and faithful servant...When I was thirsty you gave me something to drink."* Let us serve Him faithfully.

Pray about how you might serve the King of Kings.

Chapter 8

LOCALS ONLY

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.”

“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So, they went.”

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’”

“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.”

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’”

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’”

“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’”

“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’”

“So, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

-Matthew 20:1-16

LOCALS ONLY

I remember when I was a teenager, driving down every weekend to 52nd street in Ocean City to hang out on the beach with my friends. Many of us had a bumper sticker on our car that said, “*Locals Only.*”

We wanted people to know we were from there, this was our home turf, our beach. Those who came to Ocean City for vacation, even though they soaked up the same sun and surfed the same waves, were, nonetheless, outsiders.

Years later, I came across the same mentality in the first church I served, Asbury United Methodist in Salisbury. Deb was talking to someone and a person’s name in the congregation came up in conversation. The woman Deb was talking to responded, “*Oh, she’s not a true Asburian.*” In other words, even though she attended Asbury UMC and worshipped with us, she was an outsider, for she had not been born into that church.

Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard workers to challenge us on such attitudes.

Jesus states that the Kingdom of God is like a landowner who goes out early in the morning to the market-place to hire laborers for his vineyard. The market-place was the equivalent of the labor exchange. A man came there first thing in the morning, carrying his tools, and waited until someone hired him. The men who stood in the market-place were waiting for work, and the fact that some of them stood on until even five o’clock in the evening is the proof of how desperately they wanted it.

In Jesus’ parable, the landowner went out at 6 am, and then again at 9 am, 12 noon, 3 pm, and 5 pm, which is the “*eleventh hour.*” In Palestine, the grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, and then close on its heels the rains came. If the harvest was not gathered before the rains broke, then it was ruined; and so, to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could give only an hour to the work.

The workers hired at 5:00 p.m., only one hour before the work day ended, were paid the same as those hired at 6:00 a.m. that morning.

According to the world, to society, this is unfair; but, God’s grace goes in opposition to that which society teaches. Grace or the unmerited love of God is offered without price. Grace is not about getting what you deserve; it is about getting what you do not deserve. Like the workers hired at the eleventh hour were paid a full-days wage, that which they did not deserve, by the grace of God, we too, are given a free invitation to walk with God in this life and the next, regardless of where we have been, what we have done, or what age we are when we finally accept the gift.

God’s love is NOT based on our abilities, how hard we have worked. God’s love is based on who God is...on His mercy...His decision to reach out to us through His Son, Jesus.

The workers that were hired early in the morning and worked a full-day, only to receive the same wages as those who worked an hour, were furious. Upset, they say to the landowner, “*These last*

men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.” Jesus says that the ones hired early in the day, when they saw what the eleventh-hour hires were paid, assumed they would be paid more than the “denarius” promised.

They weren’t upset about what they were paid; it is what they had agreed upon. They are upset because someone else got paid as much for less work. They are upset that others were blessed when they were not.

The workers hired early in the morning had entered their job, the vineyard, with a “*legal spirit*” about them. “*Equal pay for equal work.*” “*You get what you work for.*” “*The harder you work the more you get.*” These phrases ran through their minds. This is what they believed and how they saw the world working. The landowner, on the other hand, saw things differently.

Jesus’ parable challenges us to reflect, to examine ourselves, to test if we have a “*legal spirit*” about us.

There are those of us who have been Christians for years. We have helped build our churches into what they are today. When someone new walks in the door, accepts Christ for the first time late in life, and begins to reach out in small ways, we may, if even for just a moment, look at them as less-deserving, judging ourselves as more devout, the church belonging more to us than them. Like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, we resent one receiving the benefits of what we have worked so hard for, receiving the same blessings we are receiving without putting in the same amount of sacrifice.

William Barclay writes, “[The parable] *is in one sense a warning to the disciples. It is as if Jesus said to them, ‘You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian Church and fellowship very early, right at the beginning. In later days others will come in. You must not claim a special honor and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All men, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God.’*”

Barclay goes on to write, “*There are people who think that, because they have been members of a Church for a long time, the Church practically belongs to them and they can dictate its policy. Such people resent what seems to them the intrusion of new blood or the rise of a new generation with different plans and different ways. In the Christian Church seniority does not necessarily mean honor.*”

But a “*legal spirit*” can not only be thrown at others, but can be directed inward. We judge ourselves to not be “*good enough.*” So, we work harder and harder, trying to make up for past mistakes, trying to earn God’s love.

Writing about Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers, Barclay states, “*Here also is the generosity of God. These men did not all do the same work; but they did receive the same pay. There are two great lessons here. The first is, as it has been said, ‘All service ranks the same with God.’ It is not the amount of service given, but the love in which it is given which matters. A man out of his plenty may give us a gift of a hundred pounds, and in truth we are grateful; a child may give*

us a birthday or Christmas gift which cost only a few pence but which was laboriously and lovingly saved up for--and that gift, with little value of its own, touches our heart far more. God does not look on the amount of our service. So long as it is all we have to give, all service ranks the same with God."

Barclay continues, *"The second lesson is even greater--all God gives is of grace. We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace."*

Again, this is the opposite of what society teaches us. For example, In the film, *Saving Private Ryan*, a squad of Army Rangers led by Captain John Miller (*played by Tom Hanks*) sets off deep into Normandy, France in the wake of the D-Day invasion to find and rescue a single private named James Ryan. All of Ryan's three other brothers have been killed in action on the same day, prompting military high command to demand a rescue operation to send Ryan home.

Along the way, almost everyone in Miller's squad dies trying to save Private Ryan. Captain John Miller himself is hit fatally. In one of the closing moments of the film – and the most powerful – a dying Miller whispers to Ryan, *"earn this."*

Instead of whispering to us, *"earn this,"* we hear the words of Paul, *"Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him...in all you do, give thanks to God the Father through Jesus"* (Romans 12:1; Colossians 3:17).

Instead of *"earn this,"* we hear, *"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"* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Jesus communicates through this parable that we do NOT earn our salvation by the hours of hard work we put in. Like the vineyard workers, whether we come to Christ, whether we accept His offer, His invitation, very early in our lives as children, or late in our lives, near death, we will be given the same gift of eternal life, heaven, citizenship in the family of God. Therefore, we live a life of gratitude, trying to do, as Paul writes in Philippians, *"whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, whatever is excellent or praiseworthy"* (4:8).

Why do we do this? Not to *"earn it,"* but to give God thanks and to praise Him for the gift He has given us.

Furthermore, Jesus is sending a message to the Jews. The Jews believed that they were the chosen people and they looked down on the Gentiles. Usually they hated and despised them, and hoped for nothing but their destruction. They believed that if the Gentiles were to be allowed into the fellowship of the Church at all, they must come in as inferiors. Jesus' parable teaches the opposite.

We must remember that it is not by works that we are saved; it is by faith alone. We can do nothing to make God love us any more and we can do nothing to make God love us any less. Let us do our jobs in the church out of gratitude for what God has already done for us and never feel we must work out of obligation or to earn God's love. Let us never compare ourselves to others, thinking ourselves better than our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us rejoice when others benefit from the work we have done and have arrived to soak up the Son!

The parable is not done with us yet. Some of us relate to the workers hired at the end of the day. Some of us have come late to the vineyard. We are new to the faith and perhaps at times feel very small, perhaps unworthy, compared to those who have obviously been in the church for many years, who have a deep faith and intimacy with Christ. We have missed out on much. We recognize, as Spurgeon writes, *"What [we] might, if [we] had believed in Jesus, have done...for God and for the souls of men,"* BUT we have come and the Master has hired us, received us into His arms.

We will discover, if we lean in close enough to Jesus, that just like those who were hired early in the day, we are loved just as much, have just as many gifts to offer, and we, too, have the opportunity, in whatever time we have left, to make a huge difference in the lives of others and the life of this world for Christ.

As William Barclay writes, *"When a man enters the Kingdom, late or soon, in the first flush of youth, in the strength of the midday, or when the shadows are lengthening, he is equally dear to God...In the picture of the holy city in the Revelation there are twelve gates. There are gates on the East which is the direction of the dawn, and whereby a man may enter in the glad morning of his days; there are gates on the West which is the direction of the setting sun, and whereby a man may enter in his age. No matter when a man comes to Christ, he is equally dear to him."*

Barclay continues, *"May we not go even further with this thought of comfort? Sometimes a man dies full of years and full of honor, with his day's work ended and his task completed. Sometimes a young person dies almost before the door of life and achievement have opened at all. From God they will both receive the same welcome, for both Jesus Christ is waiting, and for neither, in the divine sense, has life ended too soon or too late."*

Lastly, there are some of us haven't entered the vineyard. We feel it is too late...too late...too much water under the bridge...what hope is there for me. As Spurgeon says, *"It may be late...terribly late...years missed that you could have served God and made a difference in people's lives...It may be late...but it is not too late."* It is NOT too late to make the right choice. Come into the vineyard, even if it is an hour before closing.

Remember, the landowner in Jesus' parable said, *"Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you."* (Matthew 20:14).

Regardless of when we enter the vineyard, we should be most thankful to be hired, thankful for the gift of grace God has offered. Regardless of when we came to know Christ, what hour we entered the vineyard, we should live lives of gratitude and worship. Again, as Spurgeon writes, *"We who have come early love much because we have been spared much sinning and*

heartache...we who have come late love much because we have been delivered from much sinning and years of rebellion against God...Called early or late, called at midday or called at early noon, we have been called by grace alone, moved by the mighty constraints of God's love, and will work for him till we can work no longer, and then we will praise him in glory."

When I look back on my life, the years of rebellion, running, the people I've hurt, the time I've spent away from God, I cannot help but to thank God that God's love is not exclusive or limited.

I cannot help but to thank God that I'm not getting what I deserve, that His love is unfair. I cannot help but to thank God that, in the Kingdom of God, there is NO sign that reads, "*Locals Only*".

Monday

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

Jesus tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard, shocking His listeners, surprising them at the end of the parable with the landowner paying those who came during the last hour the same wage as those who worked all day in the fields. Jesus communicates through this parable that salvation is not any kind of achievement; it cannot be earned by our hard work or our devotion to the Lord. On human terms, entering the kingdom of God is not merely hard, but impossible. It is only by the grace of God that we can enter, that we can be in relationship with our Father in heaven.

The workers hired at 5:00 p.m., only one hour before the work day ended, were paid the same as those hired at 6:00 a.m. that morning. Like the vineyard workers, whether we come to Christ, whether we accept His offer, His invitation, very early in our lives as children, or late in our lives, near death, we will be given the same gift of eternal life, heaven, citizenship in the family of God.

According to the world, to society, this is unfair. Society teaches that those who work more, get more; but, God's grace goes in opposition to that which society teaches. Grace or the unmerited love of God is offered without price. Grace is not about getting what you deserve it is about getting what you do not deserve. Like the workers hired at the eleventh hour were paid a full-days wage, that which they did not deserve, by the grace of God, we too, are given a free invitation to walk with God in this life and the next, regardless of where we have been or what age we are now.

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...that saved a wretch like me...I once was lost, but now am found...was blind but now I see." Amazing. Eugene Peterson once wrote, *"All the persons of faith I know are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves but because we trust that God is sure of us."* It's not about our abilities; it is about God's mercy.

It is not about how hard or how long we have worked or been a Christian; it is all about God's amazing love and grace. We have done nothing to deserve such love. Take time tonight to simply thank God in prayer for the many gifts you have been blessed with, and especially to thank God for the gift of grace...for the gift of love...for the invitation to have a relationship with our Father in heaven.

Tuesday

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

Note in the parable that Jesus uses the word, "hire." Jesus says, *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to **hire** laborers for his vineyard."* What does it mean to be hired? Why did Jesus choose this word?

Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon, "Early and Late," writes, *"I think we may say that there is this likeness between hiring a servant and the engagement of a soul to Christ, that henceforth a man hired has no right to serve another, he serves the master who has hired him. When a soul is called by grace into the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, he cries, 'O Lord, other lords have had dominion over me, but now thee only will I serve.' He plucks off the yoke of sin, its pleasure, its custom, and he puts upon him that yoke of which the Master says it is easy, and he bears that burden which Jesus tells us is light. A hired servant must not work for another, he is not his own master; and 'ye are not your own, ye are bought with a price' (I Corinthians 6: 19-20)."*

I believe Jesus chose His words carefully and the word “*hired*” here is very important. Jesus often spoke of how we could not choose to serve “*two masters*,” but we must choose one over the other. When we accept Jesus as Master, allow the master to hire us, to have control of our lives, we cannot serve another. We must “pluck off” those things that would pull us away from Christ, away from the work He is ready to give us; we must “pluck off” those things that will pull our attention away from God.

Are there others in your life that are “pulling” you away from your relationship with God? Are you trying to work for two masters? Are the things of this world causing you to not show up for the commitment you have made with God or perhaps even causing you to be found “idle” in the marketplace? Pray that God will show you those areas of your life, people in your life, things in your life that you are attempting to serve alongside serving God? Is God first?

Wednesday

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

The workers that were hired early in the morning and worked a full-day, only to receive the same wages as those who worked an hour, were furious. Upset, they say to the landowner, “*These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.*” Jesus says that the ones hired early in the day, when they saw what the eleventh-hour hires were paid, assumed they would be paid more than the “*denarius*” promised. They weren’t upset about what they were paid; it is what they had agreed upon. They are upset because someone else got paid as much for less work. They are upset that others were blessed when they were not.

The workers hired early in the morning had entered their job, the vineyard, with a “legal spirit” about them. “Equal pay for equal work.” “You get what you work for.” “The harder you work the more you get.” These phrases ran through their persons. This is what they believed and how they saw the world working. The landowner, on the other hand, saw things differently.

As Christians, we often make the same mistake. We believe in the church that those who work the hardest, serve on the most committees, volunteer the most time, are not only the most reverent and faithful, but will also be the most blessed. They are most deserving of God’s many blessings and love. When someone new walks in the door, accepts Christ for the first time late in life, and begins to reach out in small ways...we simply look at them as less-deserving, less-faithful than we are. We cry, “Locals Only!”

Or as Christians we make the mistake of judging ourselves harshly, not “good enough.” So, we work harder and harder in ministry, trying to make up for past mistakes, trying to earn God’s love, forever under a shackle of guilt.

We cannot enter the vineyard with a “legal spirit.” So many Christians serving on committees and in ministries because they feel they have to, they must earn their way. So many Christians looking down on others because they feel they have earned their way, working years in ministry and volunteering thousands of hours. Both focusing on themselves instead of the God that shows the mercy and grace, and gifts each of us with salvation.

How do you see yourself? Deserving of more? One of the faithful? Or do you see yourself as not good enough, having so much to make up for...to work for? Or do you simply see yourself as a recipient of God’s mighty grace and amazing love and therefore, give Him thanks.

Thursday

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

If the workers hired at the end of the day are paid the same as those at the beginning, if those who accept Christ at the end of their lives are given the same gift of eternal life as those who come to Christ early in their life, then why worry about it now? Why not enjoy life to the fullest, *“drink and be merry,”* and then come to Christ later in life?

Spurgeon writes, *“To give those first days to Jesus will spare us many sad regrets, prevent us acquiring many evil habits, and enable us to achieve good success through the Holy Spirit’s blessing.”* Spurgeon goes on to talk about someone who comes to Christ late in life. He writes, *“The fact is terribly appalling – sixty, seventy years spent in the service of Satan! Oh what good the man may have done! Had he but served his God as he served the world, what good he might have done! He has made a fortune, has he! How rich he might have been in faith by this time. He has built a house! Yes, but how he might have helped to build the Church. The tabernacle is beginning to crumble about the man, and the warning is loud which reminds him that he must soon be gone and leave his wealth and his house; and so if this be all, in the end it will turn out that he has done nothing; he has piled up shadows, heaped together thick clay, and that is all he has done; when he might, if he had believed in Jesus, have done so much for God and for the souls of men.”*

For some of us who haven’t come to Christ yet, it is late...but it is not “too late.” The sooner we come, the more blessed we will be. We have years left, many of us, to serve and reach out, to touch a hurting world. Let us pray that our friends and neighbors come to Christ quickly that they do not waste a life that could be spent serving the Lord. And let us promise God to allow Him to have the years we have left, to serve Him faithfully.

Friday

Read Luke 23:26-43.

Spurgeon writes, *“God, however, in his abundant mercy can do as he wills to the praise of the glory of his grace, and at the eleventh hour he can call his chosen. It is very late, it is very very, very late, it is sorrowfully late, it is dolefully late, but it is not too late, and if the Master call thee, come – though a hundred years of sin should make thy feet heavy to thee, so that they steps are painfully limping. This is what God did for the thief. Here in his last moments, dying on a cross, a life spent in crime, the thief cried out to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’”*

Michael Yaconelli, in his book, *Messy Spirituality*, writes, *“God’s grace is unfair. How unfair! Shouldn’t the thief have been asked to repent, to make amends, to at least declare he was sorry? No lectures, no sermons, no teaching or demands for repentance, Jesus just ushers the man into the kingdom of God.”*

The thief cries out and Jesus answers, *“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”*

This is grace. In the civilized world it doesn’t make any sense, but in the kingdom of God there are countless examples of God’s “unfair love” including the prodigal son, Zaccheus the tax collector, and the woman caught in adultery.

Let us give thanks that God’s grace, God’s “unfair love,” God’s amazing love, extends to you and me. May we accept this great gift and live a life giving back, telling others of God’s love. And may we celebrate and not complain like the workers hired early in the morning, when God’s grace extends to someone we might consider less-deserving.

Saturday

Read I Corinthians 13:12, Romans 6:23, and Matthew 25:21.

Spurgeon writes, *“One does not serve God for nought, they shall not work without a reward. ‘The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.’ We shall have our reward for what we do for the Master, and though it be not wages in the sense of debt, yet verily I say unto you, there shall not be a single true-hearted worker for God who shall not receive of his Master most blessed wages of grace in the day when he comes to take account of his servants.”*

Take time tonight to sit with God and just imagine heaven, being with Jesus, hearing the words *“well done, my good and faithful servant.”* Give God thanks for such a promise.

Chapter 9

ARE WE THERE YET?

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

“For some time, he refused. But finally, he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

-Matthew 18:1-8

ARE WE THERE YET?

I remember traveling every summer with my boys, driving to the Shenandoah Mountains or Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, or visiting our friends in North Carolina. I could not count the times one of my boys asked, “Are we there yet?” There persistence at times was unbearable. Often, multiple times in an hour, I would hear, “Are we there yet?” They would not give up; they wanted to know. They wanted to get to their destination.

Perhaps that is why Jesus told us the parable of the Persistent Widow. She would not give up. She pressed in to the judge, seeking justice. She would not give up. She would not quit. Eventually, she wore the judge down and the judge, talking to himself, said, *“because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!”*

Jesus explains that God hears His children as they cry out day and night, as they cry out during times of stress and trial and suffering. God hears and God will answer. God sees our perseverance, our continual faith. God hears our constant prayers and will, He promises, answer.

Prayer. As Bishop T.D. Jakes once stated, *“She (my mother) became a warrior far superior to any epic hero. She became a giant on her knees. With a sword in one hand she battled the enemies of death and disease, and with her other hand stretched toward heaven she kept beseeching God’s help and His mercy.”*

I remember hearing a story about a hunter came face to face with a huge, angry bear. He prayed to God, *“Please make this bear a Christian. If you will do this for me, I will be happy with whatever lot you give me for the rest of my life.”* Suddenly, the bear stopped in its tracks, looked up to heavens, fell to its knees, and spoke, *“Lord bless this food of which I am about to partake. Amen.”*

If we want God to “make” us His, we must ask God to help us learn to pray. Our faith, repentance and forgiveness, power and peace, the fruits of the Holy Spirit, intimacy with Jesus Christ, our very identity as a child of God, begins and grows with opening our hearts to God, begins and grows with prayer. As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, *“To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”*

I need this focus in my life as I realize my spiritual life, my prayer life, is not where it should be. I work through my to-do list each day, run to meetings, carve out time with family, find myself overwhelmed by the pressures of the day including finances, ministry, responsibilities, and the future’s unknowns. I often carry these things through the day and they weigh on me, leading me to be depressed, unable to sleep. I find myself worn out.

There were times when Jesus was tired and worn-out from all He had done and perhaps, from thinking about all that was yet to be done, the cross He would one day carry. At times life would hit Him hard.

In Matthew 14, Jesus had just been told the news that his cousin and close friend, John the Baptist, had been beheaded, killed by Herod. I am sure Jesus hurt, hurt deeply, when he heard about his cousin. I am sure his heart broke at the untimely and unjust death of this man of God whom he loved.

We are told in the scripture, *“As soon as Jesus heard the news, He left in a boat to a remote area to be alone”*...to pray...to ask God for comfort, strength.

But people followed Jesus and Jesus saw the crowds and the scripture says, *“had compassion on them.”* Jesus performed a miracle that day by turning five loaves of bread and two fish into enough food to feed over 5,000 people. After the people were fed, the scripture tells us, *“Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that His disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while He sent the people home. After sending them home, He went up into the hills by Himself to pray. Night fell while He was there alone”* (Matthew 14:22-23).

Like Jesus, we must Yield. We must Refuel. We must Pray.

John Bevere writes, *“There is a call – no, a cry – coming from the heart of God and with each passing day its intensity increases: ‘Why are you satisfied without My presence; why do you remain distant when you could have intimacy with Me?’ All of us have friends of people we admire and want to be closer with. They hold a special place in our hearts, and spending time with them is a treat, especially when it comes at their invitation. Such a request to share their company fills us with anticipation, joy, and excitement. We happily do whatever it takes to clear our calendar and accept their request. Within the book of James, we find the greatest invitation every issued, ‘Draw near to God and He will draw near to you’ (4:8). Stop for a moment and ponder this: The Creator of the universe, the earth, and all its inhabitants, requests your presence.”*

Jesus made sure the disciples understood this truth. In Acts 1, Jesus gave the disciples instruction. Verses 4-5 tell us, *“On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”*

The disciples went back to Jerusalem. There were about 120 of them, followers of Jesus. They met together and they *“all joined constantly together in prayer”* (Acts 1:14).

Then they received.

Acts 2:1-4a states, *“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...”*

The church was never the same. In that upper room in Jerusalem, 120 disciples, followers of Jesus Christ, sat and waited, in prayer together, for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. It is

unlikely that any of the 120 followers had ever been out of Palestine. In Palestine there were living 4 million Jews, which means that only 1 in every 30,000 were Christians; yet, Jesus had told them to *“Go and make disciples of all nations.”* Out of these small beginnings, the kingdom of God grew to encompass the entire world. Jesus had touched a handful of men and women, and through them, through prayer, and through the power of the Holy Spirit the entire world was touched.

Two questions:

- (1) How can you and I, men and women God promises, *“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God”* (Isaiah 41:10)...men and women God promises, *“When you walk through the waters I will be with you...When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned”* (Isaiah 43:2)...men and women God promises, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28)...How can you and I, as children of God, account for feeling like giving up at times...how can we account for our feeling run down, overwhelmed, and depressed?

And...

- (2) How can you and I, the church...the church God promises, *“I will fight for you; you only need to be still”* (Exodus 14:14)...the church God promises, *“No weapon forged against you will prevail”* (Isaiah 54:17)...the church God promises, *“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”* (Mark 11:24)...How can you and I, the church, account for when it fails to live up to the marvelous tenets of its founder, Jesus Christ?

First...We believe too little in the power of prayer.

Andrew Murray, in his book, With Christ in the School of Prayer, writes, *“We believe too little in the power of prayer to bring about definite results. We do not live close enough to God to be capable of the confidence that He will answer. We have not surrendered entirely to His service and Kingdom.”*

Murray goes on to say, *“The power to provide for the needs of the world and secure the servants for God’s work has been given to us in prayer. The Lord of the harvest will hear. Christ Who taught us to pray this way will support the prayers offered in His Name and interest.”*

Do you believe? Will you believe in the power of prayer?

Secondly...We are too quick to focus on the mountain in front of us instead of the “mountain-mover.”

Bill Hybels writes, *“How do you pray a prayer so filled with faith that it can move a mountain? By shifting the focus from the size of your mountain to the sufficiency of the mountain mover, and by stepping forward in obedience. As you walk with God, your faith will grow, your confidence will increase and your prayer will have power.”*

Hybels goes on to write, *“Israel’s warriors are standing on a hill overlooking a battlefield, and the Philistine champion Goliath swaggers out to frighten them. The warriors say, ‘We’re not*

going down there to fight him. He's nine feet tall. Look at his armor! Look at his spear! I don't want that thing in my ribs.' The adolescent shepherd David comes out, surveys the field, and says, 'Look at the size of our God. Let me go!'"

Hybels continues, *"Probably every human being alive is standing in the shadow of at least one mountain that just will not move: a destructive habit, a character flaw, an impossible marriage or work situation, a financial problem, a physical disability. What is your immovable mountain? Have you stood in its shadow for so long that you've grown accustomed to the darkness? I challenge you to shift the focus of your prayer. Don't spend a lot of time describing your mountain to the Lord. He knows what it is. Instead, focus your attention on the mountain mover – his glory, power and faithfulness. Then start walking in faith, following his leading, and watch the mountain step aside."*

Thirdly... We are not yielding to God in our prayers.

So often in our prayers, we pray for what we want, what we desire, what we think is best for our lives. When the disciples went back to the upper room in Jerusalem to "wait" for power from on high, they did not know what to pray for, they were simply told by Jesus to pray. They could not have known to pray specifically for the beginnings of the church, Peter's speech leading to the conversion of thousands, protection from the persecution that was coming, Stephen's martyrdom, Peter's vision and the opening of the Gospel to the Gentiles. They simply poured their hearts and love out to God. They surrendered themselves, as did Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, to God's will.

Glenn Clark, in his book, *The Soul's Sincere Desire*, writes, *"'Not my will, but thine, be done.' 'Thy will' – whether the seeker knows it or not – is always the spiritual will, just as 'my will' is always the material will. Thus, this simple statement, when uttered from the heart and not from the lips only, is a veritable Aladdin's lamp for converting a petition for material things into a petition for spiritual things. In other words, it grants to God the privilege of substituting His will for ours..."*

Lastly... We are not "slowing-down" to pray.

Hybels writes, *"You can't become an authentic Christian on a diet of constant activity, even if the activity is all church related...Strength comes out of solitude. Decisions that change the entire course of your life usually come out of the holy of holies...it's time to slow down, reflect, and listen."*

John Ortberg writes, *"Not long after moving to Chicago, I called a wise friend to ask for some spiritual direction. I described the pace at which things tend to move in my current setting. I told him about the rhythms of our family life and about the present condition of my heart, as best I could discern it. What did I need to do, I asked him, to be spiritually healthy? Long pause. 'You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life,' he said at last. Another long pause. 'Okay, I've written that one down,' I told him, a little impatiently. 'That's a good one. Now what else is there?' Another long pause. 'There is nothing else,' he said. Ortberg goes on to say, 'Hurry*

is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. Hurry can destroy our souls. Hurry can keep us from living well.' As Carl Jung wrote, 'Hurry is not of the devil; hurry is the devil.'"

We must slow down. Before doing anything, the disciples were asked to go to Jerusalem and "wait." Wait and listen...wait and pray...wait on God to move in their midst.

A closing story: A tale is told about a small town that had historically been "*dry*," but then a local businessman decided to build a tavern. A group of Christians from a local church were concerned and planned an all-night prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. It just so happened that shortly thereafter lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground. The owner of the bar sued the church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible, but the church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they were not responsible. The presiding judge, after his initial review of the case, stated that "*no matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear. The tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not.*"

May we be a church, a group of Christians, men and women of God, who believe in prayer, and in so believing, are able to witness in our lives and the life of our church, God's presence, power, and peace.

Monday

Read Luke 18:1-8.

Jesus tells His disciples the story of the persistent widow, who “badgers” the unjust judge day in and day out with her plea, “*Avenge me of mine adversary.*” What is it that Jesus is trying to teach us through this parable?

First, there is the importance of prayer. Jesus not only taught us about prayer, Jesus modeled prayer. He lived it and asked us to follow in His steps. Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon, “The Importunate Widow,” writes, “*If any one of all the members of the mystical body might have been supposed to need no prayer, it would certainly have been our Covenant Head, but if our Head abounded in supplication, much more ought we, the inferior members. He was never defiled with the sins which have debased and weakened us spiritually; he had no inbred lusts to struggle with. But if the perfectly pure drew near so often unto God, how much more incessant in supplication ought we to be!*”

We are called to pray; in fact, it is very natural for us to pray. Humankind has been looking to the heavens since creation began. There is a “*tendency to pray – the reflexive crying out in the face of pain or trouble; the spontaneous shout of joy in the presence of beauty, accomplishment, fulfillment,*” according to Maxie Dunnam. Dunnam goes on to write, “*Natural it is; easy it isn’t! To live a life of prayer is something else. To pray consistently is not easy. It requires commitment and discipline. Don’t condemn yourself if you find praying difficult. Most of us do. Even the disciples didn’t find it easy.*”

Nevertheless, we are called to pray and Jesus shares this parable with us for many reasons, one of which is to tell us to persevere in our prayer life, to not give up, regardless of how we feel or how many times we forget to pray. Keep at it.

Ask God tonight to help you learn to pray. Ask God to help you to pray deeply and to connect to God throughout the day, to build the habit of prayer. This is a prayer God will always answer. Even if you’ve struggled with prayer in the past, don’t give up. Like the persistent widow, keep at it, asking God for help, asking God to take you deeper and more consistent in your prayer life with Him.

Tuesday

Read Luke 18:1-8.

Like the widow, Jesus tells us that we are to persevere in prayer. Spurgeon writes, “*When we ask God for a mercy once, we are not to consider that now we are not further to trouble him with it, but we are to come to him again and again.*” He goes on to say, “*Men ought always to pray. Week by week, month by month, year by year; the conversion of a dear child is to be the father’s main plea. The bringing in of that unconverted husband is to lie upon the wife’s heart night and day till she gets it; she is not to take even ten or twenty years of unsuccessful prayer as a reason why she should cease; she is to set God no times nor seasons, but so long as there is life in her and life in the dear object of her solicitude, she is to continue still to plead with the mighty God of Jacob.*”

Brian Stiller writes, “*Be careful, as [this story] can be upsetting for those who think they have mastered prayer. Jesus puts a new spin on prayer: Absent is the gentle, acquiescing type of petition. Instead, he tells of a tough, no-nonsense woman who refuses to cave in. Prayer to her is not just a matter of keeping on but a refusing to give in ‘to the sin of despair.’*”

May each of us refuse to give in to our loved ones, our neighbors, our friends not knowing, not having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. May we pray night and day for

our children, our spouses, our friends. Like our children badgering us on those long summer road trips from the backseat, screaming “are we there yet,” let us be persistent in our prayers for one another. Take time tonight to pray for those you know who do not know Jesus Christ.

Wednesday

Read Luke 18:1-8.

Perhaps Jesus is letting us know through this parable that many of us “have not” because we leave too quick. We seek God out, but only briefly. We throw a prayer up to heaven and when that is not immediately answered we begin to plan and figure out how to solve the problem ourselves, or we simply give up.

Spurgeon writes, *“But how many times we ask of God and have not because we do not wait long enough at the door! We knock a time or two at the gate of mercy, and as no friendly messenger opens the door, we go our ways. Too many prayers are like boys’ runaway knocks, given, and then the giver is away before the door can be opened. O for grace to stand foot to foot with the angel of God, and never, never, never relax our hold; feeling that the cause we plead is one in which we must be successful, for souls depend on it, the glory of God is connected with it, the state of our fellow-men is in jeopardy....we must urge and plead again and again until we obtain the answer.”*

Is there an area in your life that you have lifted up in prayer for quite a while and feel ready to give up because the prayers have gone unanswered? Is there a person you’ve been praying for these many years and they still have not come to know Jesus Christ? Is there something going on in your life that you are not praying for everyday; yet, it is only God’s intervention that will help you deal with it? Pray now...and pray every day for those things in your life in which you need God’s help and guidance, for those people in your life that need Jesus. Go to the door and not only knock once, but many times.

Thursday

Read I Thessalonians & Matthew 6:5-15.

We are told in God’s Word that we are to “*pray without ceasing.*” We are to learn how to praise God throughout the day while we work, while we play, while we live our lives. But Jesus also teaches us that we are to have time away from the world, set apart, each day with Him. “*Give us this day our daily bread,*” we are to pray.

Spurgeon writes, *“Every Christian will find it exceedingly useful to have his regular times for retirement, and I doubt whether any eminent piety can be maintained without these seasons being very carefully and scrupulously observed...O that our intervals of prayer were not so distant one from the other; would God that on the pilgrimage of life the wells at which we drink were more frequent. In this way we should continue in prayer.”*

Ask God to help you develop a daily prayer time if you have not built the habit already. Pray that God will show you not only how to keep your mind centered on Him throughout the day and the day’s duties, but also to take time away from the world each day to just sit with Him. Be persistent, unwavering in building a prayer habit. You will be blessed.

Friday**Read Romans 8:12-17.**

The Bible teaches us that we are children of God, that we can cry out to God, “*Abba, Father.*” Jesus taught us to pray, “*Our Father, who art in heaven.*” God is our loving Father, waiting to hear from His children.

Now look at the parable Jesus told about the unjust judge. This judge took bribes. The scripture says “*he did not fear God or man.*” He was unjust. If the widow, with no advocate, could prevail over this unjust man, this unjust, crooked, uncaring judge...how much more will we, children of the living God, with an advocate in Jesus Christ, be able to prevail, to communicate with, to petition our loving Father in heaven?

Spurgeon writes, “*If this poor woman prevailed with a judge whose office is stern, unbending, untender, how much more ought you and I to be instant in prayer and hopeful of success when we have to supplicate a Father! Far other is a father than a judge. The judge must necessarily be impartial, stern, but he father is necessarily partial to his child, compassionate and tender to his own offspring. Doth she prevail over a judge; and shall now we prevail without Father who is in heaven.*”

Let us pray tonight, giving thanks to God for a friend, in Jesus Christ, who makes intercession for us...for the Holy Spirit who speaks words that we cannot...for a God who is a loving Father, ready to hear and answer our petitions. Give God thanks and cry out tonight with all that is on your heart to your Father in heaven.

Saturday**Read I John 5:14-15.**

We can have confidence that God is always ready to listen and we are able to come before Him with boldness in our prayers. We are called to submit to God’s will for our lives and if we pray in His will, knowing what God expects of us and teaches us through Jesus Christ, our prayers will be heard.

It all begins with asking forgiveness for where we have done wrong, and then thanking God for the gift of forgiveness through His Son, Jesus Christ. Prayer is also a time to praise and adore the God who loves us so much He sent His Son to die for each of us. Lastly, it is a time to seek God’s guidance for our lives and ask that God’s plan take root in our futures, not our own plans.

Read and reflect on the lyrics to the hymn, “*Sweet Hour of Prayer.*”

*Sweet hour of prayer
Sweet hour of prayer
That calls me from a world of care
And bids me at my Father's throne
Make all my wants and wishes known*

*In seasons of distress and grief
My soul has often found relief
And oft escaped the tempter's snare
By Thy return, sweet hour of prayer
Sweet hour of prayer
Sweet hour of prayer*

*The joys I feel, the bliss I share
Of those whose anxious spirits burn
With strong desires for Thy return
With such I hasten to the place
Where God my Savior shows His face
And gladly take my station there
And wait for Thee, sweet hour of prayer
Sweet hour of prayer
Sweet hour of prayer
And wait for Thee
Sweet hour of prayer*

Seek God in prayer each day. Be persistent.

Chapter 10

KICKING SAND

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.”

“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.”

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.”

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’”

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.”

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.”

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

-Matthew 18: 23-35

KICKING SAND

I remember this advertisement in comic books when I was a kid:



There certainly a lot of people in the world that seem to “kick sand.” A lot of people who cause hurt and pain. Often, we want to, like Mac in the advertisement, “kick sand” back.

That is the challenge we face as Christians, the challenge that exists between what we want to do and what Christ calls us to do. This is the endless battle that holds every one of us, but not everyone succumbs to their initial reaction when hatred “kicks sand” in their face. What makes the difference?

Knowing. Knowing makes the difference.

Leonard Griffith tells the following story. On the evening of April 25, 1958, a young Korean exchange student, a leader in student Christian affairs in the University of Pennsylvania, left his apartment and went to the corner to mail a letter to his parents. Turning from the mailbox he stepped into the path of eleven leather-jacketed teenage boys. Without a word they attacked him, beating him with a blackjack, a lead pipe, and with their shoes and fists.

Later, when the police found him in the gutter, he was dead. All Philadelphia cried out in vengeance. The district attorney secured legal authority to try the boys as adults so that those found guilty could be given the death penalty. Then a letter arrived from Korea that made everyone stop and think. It was signed by the parents and by twenty other relatives of the murdered boy. It read in part:

Our family has met together and we have decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal action...In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational, and social guidance for the boys when they are released...We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins.

John Ortberg writes,

As an adult, Jesus would give himself to all people, and to twelve friends in particular. One of them would betray him, another would deny him, all would abandon him. On the cross, the entire weight of the unpayable debt owed by sinful humanity would fall on him. He would pay it all. This is why the cross is at the heart of Christianity. It shows us the heart of God. Jesus feels compassion, his eyes fill with tears, his lips tremble a little out of love for his children. He chooses to pay the debt we never could. He longs to forgive. And what Jesus does at infinite cost, he invites us to do as well, though at much lesser expense.

The Amish understand Jesus' invitation. In October 2006, Charles Roberts walked into the Nickel Mines School in Pennsylvania and killed five young girls.

The world was shocked as the Amish community reached out, not only to each other and the families of the victims, but also reached out to Robert's family.

On the very night of the murders, an Amish neighbor of Robert's family went to the family and offered them forgiveness. Speaking of the Robert's family, Daniel Esh, an Amish woodworker with three grandnephews inside the school during the attack, said, *"I hope they stay around here and they'll have a lot of friends and a lot of support."*

The Amish verbally expressed their forgiveness to the memory of the killer. They refused to talk badly about him or degrade his character. They reached out to his family as fellow victims; they wanted to extend compassion to his family. Half of the people who attended his funeral were Amish. The Amish also designated a portion of the fund that poured in from around the world for the Amish schoolgirls to the widow and the children of the shooter.

What makes the difference? Knowing makes the difference. Knowing the depths Jesus went in order to forgive you.

As Paul wrote in Colossians 3:13, *"...bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, if any man has a complaint against any; even as Christ forgave, so you also do."*

Ephesians 4:32 tells us, *“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God also in Christ forgave you.”*

The Amish summed up in one sentence Paul’s teachings and Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant, *“If you have Jesus in your heart and he has forgiven you...[how] can you not forgive other people?”*

This is what Jesus teaches Peter. Before Jesus shares today’s parable of a King who wanted to settle his accounts with his servants, and the servant, who after being forgiven his debt, refused to forgive his fellow servant, Peter came to Jesus and asked, *“Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”* (Matthew 18:21).

Peter is upset. Someone has hurt him and he has come to Jesus and asked the question that so many of us have asked at one time or another in our lives, *“Why should I forgive? Why should I always have to be the one to forgive?”*

Jesus responds to Peter’s question, *“No, not seven times...but seventy times seven”* (Matthew 18:22).

What is Jesus saying?

What Jesus is doing is reversing the Law of Lamach found back in Genesis 4:23-24. Lamach vows that anyone who attacks him, harms him, will be punished seventy-seven times. Lamach is saying there will be vengeance.

Jesus makes the point that there are two ways to live with hurt. There is the way of vengeance and the way of forgiveness. The first leads to death, and the second leads to life. Jesus tells Peter that he must forgive.

Just in case Peter doesn’t get it, Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

The debtor had been forgiven his debt by the King, forgiven an unbelievable debt, and refuses to forgive his fellow man. He refuses to forgive a debt of just a few dollars. The King replies, *“Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?”*

Again, as one Amish neighbor said to reporters, *“If you have Jesus in your heart and he has forgiven you ... [how] can you not forgive other people?”*

Ortberg writes, *“Human beings have a tendency to think they can receive forgiveness from God without having to forgive others. In telling the story, Jesus doesn’t say that this is a bad idea; he calls it impossible. This is why Jesus says elsewhere that we are to pray, ‘Forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us.’”*

As Dorothy Day once said, *“I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”*

Ortberg goes on to write,

True forgiveness is never cheap. Hurt is deep; hurt is unfair. You want the offenders to know the pain they have inflicted on you. You want them to get paid back. In fact, only one thing I know costs more than forgiving someone. Know what it is? Not forgiving them. Non-forgiveness costs your heart. You start out holding a grudge, but in the end the grudge holds you. Jesus said that the unforgiving employee ended up in prison. I think that, spiritually speaking, the prison term for non-forgivers begins on earth. Bitterness and coldness of heart are far stronger than any iron bars.

Michael Williams shares the following illustration,

In his book, Lee: The Last Years, Charles Bracelen Flood reports that after the Civil War, Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly cried that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, 'Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it.'

Williams goes on to write, *“It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to remain, let bitterness take root and poison the rest of our life.”*

Don't forgive, and your anger will become your burden.
Don't forgive, and bit by bit all the joy will be choked out of you.
Don't forgive, and you will be unable to trust anybody, ever again.
Don't forgive, and the bitterness will crowd compassion out of your heart.
Don't forgive, and that little grudge you nurse will grow larger and stronger.
Don't forgive, and you will kill any hope of relationship.
You will kill community.

When we forgive and don't "*kick sand*," we relieve ourselves of the burden of anger and bitterness, and free our heart to love and be open to Christ and His blessings. But that is not the reason we forgive.

The reason we forgive is as Paul writes in, 2 Corinthians 5:14, “*Christ’s love compels us.*”

The word compels literally means “leaves me no choice.” Paul is saying, “I have no choice but to respond to Christ with my whole being. After what Christ has done for me, shown me in His act of sacrificial love, how can I not forgive, how can I not serve, how can I not worship, how can I not act.”

I remember several years ago, speaking at Camp Pecometh. God moved in a mighty and unmistakable way. Because of lightening off in the distance, the Galilean service, a culminating service for the week was held inside instead of at the outdoor chapel. I spoke to the youth about the themes we had discussed in Bible study throughout the week, how we are called to show gratitude, hospitality, generosity, and how we are called to live a life of worship, doing everything, every action, every task, as if we were doing it for God. I spoke about how our

showing gratitude, hospitality, and generosity each day was our act of worship, and how church was a very small piece of the puzzle, a very small piece.

As Paul wrote in Romans 12:1, “*And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.*” Our worship is every action, every thought, every word, every day.

I then spoke to the youth about why we give ourselves as a “*living sacrifice*,” why we attempt to live a life of worship.

As Casting Crowns sing, why should we “*make our Lifesong sing*”? We “*make our Lifesong[s] sing*” because we have much to sing about.

Or as Pope John Paul II stated, “*God has freely given us his Son: who has deserved or could ever deserve such a privilege.*”

Because of all God has done for us, we offer God back a life of worship, a life of forgiveness, mercy, love, service, grace, gratitude. Because of all God has done for us, we refuse to give into our bitterness. We refuse to allow the world to mold us. We refuse to become the unforgiving servant in Jesus’ parable.

I love the story of Eddie Rickenbacher, a famous World War II pilot.

His plane, *The Flying Fortress*, went down in 1942 and no one thought he would be rescued. Perhaps you have read or heard how he and his eight passengers escaped death by climbing into two rafts for thirty days. They fought thirst, the sun, and sharks. Some of the sharks were nine feet long. The boats were only eight feet long. But what nearly killed them was starvation. Their rations were gone within eight days and they didn’t have anything left.

Rickenbacher wrote that even on those rafts, every day they would have a daily afternoon devotional and prayer time. One day after the devotional, Rickenbacher leaned back and put his hat over his eyes and tried to get some sleep. Within a few moments he felt something on his head. He knew in an instant that it was a seagull that had perched on his raft. But he knew that they were hundreds of miles out to sea. Where did this seagull come from? He was also certain that if he didn’t get that seagull he would die. Soon all the others on the two boats noticed the seagull. No one spoke, no one moved. Rickenbacher quickly grabbed the seagull and with thanksgiving, they ate the flesh of the bird. They used the intestines for fish bait and survived.

Rickenbacher never forgot that visitor who came from a foreign place, that sacrificial guest.

Every week, Rickenbacher can be found, out on the pier near where he lives, with a bucket of shrimp, feeding the seagulls, allowing them to land on his shoulders, at his feet. He feeds them to say thank you, thank you, thank you.

Every time we serve...every time we show a stranger hospitality...every time we use our gifts, give of ourselves, to help others...every time we love our neighbor...every time we speak the name of Jesus to another...every time we forgive...we are saying to God, "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you..."

As Paul wrote, in Romans 12:1, "*This is truly the way to worship Him.*"

C.S. Lewis in his book, Mere Christianity, states the following on forgiveness,

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we had during the war. And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue: it is that they think it hateful and contemptible. 'That sort of talk makes them sick,' they say. And half of you already want to ask me, 'I wonder how you'd feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew?'

So, do I. I wonder very much. Just as when Christianity tells me that I must not deny my religion even to save myself from death by torture, I wonder very much what I should do when it came to the point. I am not trying to tell you in this book what I could do—I can do precious little—I am telling you what Christianity is. I did not invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us.' There is not slightest suggestion that we are offered forgiveness on any other terms. It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are not two ways about it. What are we to do?

It is going to be hard enough, anyway, but I think there are two things we can do to make it easier. When you start mathematics, you do not begin with the calculus; you begin with simple addition. In the same way, if we really want (but all depends on really wanting) to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. One might start with forgiving one's husband or wife, or parents or children, or the nearest N.C.O., for something they have done or said in the last week. That will probably keep us busy for the moment. And secondly, we might try to understand exactly what loving your neighbor as yourself means. I have to love him as I love myself. Well, how exactly do I love myself?

What are some small steps you can take to begin to be a more forgiving person? Think of the last 24 hours. Has someone said something to you that has caused you pain or frustration? Have you harbored unforgiveness? Are you ready to forgive him or her? Are you ready to stop "kicking sand"?

Do not focus on what the other person has done. Focus on how much you have been forgiven, how much the Master, God Himself, through His Son, Jesus Christ, has forgiven you. Focus on how much God has blessed you, has loved you. Knowing the depths Christ went for you makes all the difference.

And then, in response to God's gift of forgiveness and grace, look across the table and forgive your neighbor and in so doing, in this beautiful act of worship, more powerful than any day in church, God will hear you saying in your actions, "Thank you...Thank you...Thank you..."

Monday

Read I Peter 4: 10-11; Galatians 5: 13-14; John 13: 1-17; Luke 22: 24-27.

“LOVING [them] sacrificially as Christ loved us.” On the night Jesus was arrested He sat with His disciples and kneeling, Jesus washed their dirty feet. The King of Kings, the Bright Morning Star, the Savior, knelt and washed the mud and sweat off the feet of his disciples, including one who would betray Him, one who would deny Him. All but one who would abandon Him hours later.

Jesus says, *“Do you understand what I was doing? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and you are right, because that’s what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.”*

Jesus has given us the example. We are called to love others sacrificially as Christ loved us. As Paul writes in Galatians, *“For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”* Jesus tells His disciples that they will be different, those who follow Him will be different from the world. Jesus says, *“But among you it will be different. Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant.”*

How often we are more about being served than serving others? How often we fail to use our gifts to serve others rather than ourselves? Christ challenges us to *“love others sacrificially,”* to serve and through our service, witness for God. How are you following Christ’s example, washing the feet of others? How are you loving your neighbor as yourself? How are you “stepping across” the chasms that exist between you and others? Who might God be nudging you to love sacrificially as Christ loved you?

Tuesday

Read Luke 5: 27-32 and Luke 7: 34.

Unlike many of the pictures we see of Jesus where he is ministering to men and women like ourselves or asking the little children to come to Him, Jesus was criticized by others for eating and drinking with, as the New Living Translation puts it, *“scum.”* He had gained a reputation as a *“glutton”* and a *“drunkard.”* Yet, Jesus continued to reach out to the destitute, the homeless, the criminal, the prostitute, the poor.

Jesus continued to reach out to people, love them, and walk with them. There was no one Jesus did not see to be a child of His Father God in heaven. Today, Jesus would have lunch with people of different color & beliefs, walk with people radically different, people who would be considered ungodly.

How often do we judge our neighbor and instead of ministering to them, being with them, we allow ourselves to feel superior in our walk with the Lord and/or we turn away from the person that is very different than we are? Is there a time you did not welcome someone into the church or your home because they were different, because you judged them? Is there someone you are not spending time with now because they are different? Where in your community is the message of Jesus not being preached due to fear/unfair judgment? Remember, Jesus said, *“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servant also will be.”*

Pray that God will help you become more and more like Jesus, allowing you to “step across” and see all people as children of the Most High God.

Wednesday

Read Mark 9: 33-35; Philippians 2: 1-11.

St. Augustine wrote, *“Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance.”* Thomas Merton described humility by saying, *“Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real.”*

Jesus made it very clear, when the disciples argued over who was the greatest, *“Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.”* Paul tells us in Philippians that we must count others as more significant than ourselves...we must be like Jesus who *“humbled Himself in obedience to God.”* I love how The Message translation describes how Jesus humbled Himself. Paul writes, *“[Jesus] set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death...”*

How often do you find yourself battling with pride? St. Augustine wrote, *“It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.”* How might your life look different if you lived it with a sense of humility, recognizing your own defects, willingly submitting your life to God, attempting to live after the example of Christ? How might you see, treat, and love others differently if you began to see them as Jesus sees them, more important than one’s self, precious to God?

Spend time in prayer and ask God to show you any pride that might rear its ugly head in your life and relationships, and to give you a humble heart modeled after His Son Jesus.

Thursday

Read Matthew 6: 14-15; Ephesians 4: 17-32; Luke 6: 36-38; Matthew 18: 21-35

“...by loving others sacrificially as Christ loved us.” Certainly, in order to love others as Christ loved us, we must learn to forgive. Someone once said that the most difficult word in the Bible is “AS”...*“forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us.”* Jesus makes it very clear, *“If you forgive people their sins, your Father in heaven will forgive your sins also...If you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* Jesus makes this point clear in His parable of the unmerciful servant.

Alexander Pope stated, *“To err is human; to forgive, divine.”* Not only are we to forgive someone once who wrongs us, but we must be willing to forgive an infinite number of times. Lewis Smedes, in his book, The Art of Forgiving, explains that as human beings we will have lapses, the hurt and bitterness we once felt will come back even after we believe we have forgiven the person. During these times we need to repeat the words “I forgive” until once again the bitterness and resentment loses its bite.

Smedes also explains that forgiveness does not mean *“welcoming back the relationship we had before”* and *“forgiveness does not require us to reunite with the person who broke our trust”* or put up with hurtful behavior. We should protect ourselves from being hurt again; more importantly we must protect our hearts from bitterness. We are called to *“walk...in stride with the forgiving God,” “imitating His style.”* Ask God for the strength to forgive and to love like His Son.

Friday**Read I Corinthians 1:18; Luke 23: 26-34.**

Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:18 (NIV), *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* In the cross we see what it is to LOVE COMPLETELY, to “STEP ACROSS”. Christ showed us the most powerful demonstration of love when He hung between earth and sky, allowing His hands and feet to be pierced. In the cross we find the power to love others, for on our own power it is impossible to LOVE COMPLETELY, but with God’s power we can love as Christ loved.

It is only by looking to the cross, remembering the example Jesus set for each of us, *“Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do”*...It is only through the power of God, the Holy Spirit, that we will be able to love as Jesus loved, sacrificially and unconditionally.

Reflect on Jesus asking His Heavenly Father from the cross to forgive those who had hammered the nails and hung Him on a cross. Reflect on the depth of such forgiveness, such love. Ask God to help you love like His Son, to forgive like His Son.

Saturday**Read Romans 15:7; Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4: 31-32 & I John 3:16.**

Every one of us has been hurt when someone else has wronged us. And it’s so easy when you’re hurt in a relationship to build this mountain of bitterness around your heart to protect yourself from being hurt again. This mountain of bitterness poisons your relationship. C.S. Lewis wrote, *“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket- safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”*

We must allow for one another’s mistakes. We must show grace when those we care about, when our neighbors, when our pastor, messes up. We must not allow bitterness to build up when others let us down. This bitterness will eat away at us, slowly destroying us.

F.B. Meyer wrote, *“As we pour out our bitterness, God pours in His peace.”* Are you holding bitterness against someone in your family, in the church, in the community? Tonight, pray for them. Don’t pray that they will come to see they are wrong and apologize; simply pray that God would bless them, would touch their hearts. Pray for them daily until God takes all the bitterness away. Trust God with the relationship, with the situation. Trust that God can bring good out of what has been hurtful and painful. As Jerry Bridges writes, *“Bitterness arises in our hearts when we do not trust in the sovereign rule of God in our lives.”*

Christ showed us what the power of love was about when He went to the cross, and then He tells us that we’re to love other people in our lives like that. We’re to lay down our lives, our selfishness. We’re to lay down our wants and desires and meet the needs of others first, serving others before we serve ourselves. We’re to forgive our brothers and sisters, sincerely and without reservation.

Don’t put it off any longer. It is time to write that letter. It is time to make that phone call. It is time to cherish the people God has placed in your life. It is time serve your neighbor, to adore your spouse, to talk with your children. It is time to forgive, truly forgive, those who have wronged you, to let the bitterness go. It is time to ask forgiveness from those whom you have wronged, to admit your mistakes. It is time to push “self” out of the way. It is time to love our

brothers and sisters, and throughout our community as Christ loves us. It is time to reach out to those who need to feel acceptance, who need to experience the love of Jesus Christ. It is time to “STEP ACROSS” whatever chasm exists between you and another. TODAY. NOW. Not someday. TODAY!

Ask God to give you strength. Ask God to lay the name of someone on your heart you can reach out to today.

Chapter 11

METAL DETECTORS

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’”

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’”

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’”

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’”

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

-Matthew 25:31-46

METAL DETECTORS

*But if we are the body'
 Why aren't His arms reaching?
 Why aren't His hands healing?
 Why aren't His words teaching?
 And if we are the body
 Why aren't His feet going?
 Why is His love not showing them there is a way?
 There is a way.*

Jesus makes it clear that there must be a direct correlation between how we have lived our lives and our relationship with God. If we truly have a relationship, if we truly have opened our hearts to Christ, to our Father in heaven, it will be reflected in our actions.

Once we recognize our own sinfulness, the fact that we are a mess, and realize what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross two thousand years ago, if we wrap our minds around the depth of love Christ has shown us, we cannot help but to be changed and to want to serve God out of gratitude for all He has given us. This acceptance of Christ, this gratitude for what God has done for us, will be seen in our daily actions and love of others.

Have you ever been at the beach and seen someone with a metal detector combing the sand, pulling out trinkets, coins, perhaps a watch, and maybe, even a diamond ring?

The metal detector sends out vibrations, sound, that helps separate the trinkets, the treasure, the metal, from the sand.

One day, we will stand before Jesus Christ, who has been given all authority by God, the Father, and Jesus, like a metal detector, will begin to separate

God will separate those who have talked about their love of God, who have “voiced” a relationship, *from* those who truly have a relationship with God expressed through their lives, their actions, their works of mercy and compassion.

We are told in James 1:22, “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*” The New King James Version...“*But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.*”

We must “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only.*”

I John 2:6 states, “*He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.*”

The scriptures tell us that God is love. When we accept Him into our hearts through Jesus Christ, our hearts should be filled to overflowing, and our lives should begin to grow beyond ourselves. In fact, Charles Spurgeon goes as far to say, “*If Christ does not work such things in you, you have not part in him; if you have not produced such works as these you have not believed in Jesus.*”

Be very clear that Jesus never says that it is our works that will gain us entrance to heaven. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 7:21-23,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and, in your name, perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Jesus wants us to understand that it is a real, vibrant, deep, and true relationship with Him that is necessary. This relationship is expressed outwardly by the works we do, the actions we take. It is expressed outwardly by a changed life. Our acts of charity and compassion must come out of a love for Jesus Christ, a love of God, and a love for what God loves.

If we simply say we love God but our lives do not show love for others, our lives do not show joy in serving, perhaps our relationship with God is in word only. If we do good works, serving the church and the community, but have not a relationship with Jesus Christ, our works are empty and as Spurgeon says, “*smell of selfhood*” and “*it is you yourself that you are clothing.*”

We are called to love as Christ loved.

How then can the believer in Christ love as Christ loved?

The believer in Christ has the Holy Spirit living within him (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). By obeying the Spirit, through the Word of God, the believer can love like Christ does. He shows that unconditional, sacrificial, forgiving love to fellow believers, but it doesn't stop there. He also shows the love of Christ to friends, to family members, to coworkers, etc. (Ephesians 5:18–6:4; Galatians 5:16, 22–23). Even enemies are the recipients of Christ's love (Matthew 5:43-48).

Christ's love displayed through the believer is unlike the “*love*” generated by the flesh, which can be selfish, egotistical, unforgiving, and insincere. Paul gives a wonderful description of what Christ's love will be like in and through the believer who walks in the Spirit. He writes, in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, “*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*”

People don't naturally love with a 1 Corinthians 13-type love. To love like that, there must be a change of heart. A person must realize that he is a sinner before God and understand that Christ died on the cross and rose again to provide him forgiveness; then he must make the decision to accept Christ as his personal Savior. At that point he is forgiven by Christ and receives God's gift of eternal life—in fact, he becomes a participant in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). In Christ he knows that he is genuinely loved by God. The new life the believer receives includes a new capacity to love like Christ loves, for the believer now has living within him the unconditional, sacrificial, forgiving, eternal, and holy love of God (Romans 5:5).

Do we have a relationship with Christ? Have we received “*a new capacity to love like Christ loves,*” having now the Holy Spirit, the “*holy love of God*” living within us?

And if we claim to have that relationship but our actions do not reflect our faith, our love for God and all God loves, Jesus challenges us to take a hard look at ourselves. As Casting Crowns sings,

*But if [you] are the body
Why aren't His arms reaching?
Why aren't His hands healing?
Why aren't His words teaching?
And if [you] are the body
Why aren't His feet going?
Why is His love not showing them there is a way?*

Many years ago, a man wanted to play in the Imperial Orchestra, but he couldn't play a note. Since he was a person of great wealth and influence, however, he demanded to be allowed to join the orchestra so that he could perform in front of the king.

The conductor agreed to let him sit in the second row of the orchestra. Even though he couldn't read music, he was given a flute, and when a concert would begin, he would raise his instrument, pucker his lips, and move his fingers. He went through all the motions of playing, but he never made a sound.

This deception went on for two years. Then one day a new conductor took over the Imperial Orchestra. He told the orchestra that he wanted to personally audition all the players to see how well they could play. The audition would weed out all those who weren't able to meet his standards, and he would dismiss them from the orchestra.

One by one the players performed in his presence. Frantic with worry when it was his turn, the phony flutist pretended to be sick. The conductor insisted that the man appear and demonstrate his skill. Shamefacedly, the man had to confess that he was a fake. That was the day he had to “*face the music.*”

Jesus wanted us to understand that sitting in church doesn't make us any more a Christian than sitting in an orchestra makes us a musician or sitting in a garage makes us a car. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “*For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in our bodies.*”

The things Jesus picks out to define one who is faithful, who follows Christ – giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner – are things anyone can do. As William Barclay writes, “*It is not a question of giving away huge sums of money, or of writing our names in the annals of history; it is a case of giving simple help to the people we meet every day. There never was a parable which so opened the way to glory to us all.*”

Furthermore, Jesus stresses that we are to care for the “*least of these*,” those that many deem least valuable, less than desirable.

Two men who discovered the truth of this parable, the truth that help given from a loving heart to those we meet, is help given to Jesus Himself, were Saint Francis of Assisi and St. Martin of Tours.

Francis of Assisi was wealthy and high-born and high-spirited, but he was not happy. There was a void in his life. One day when he was out riding, he met a leper, loathsome and repulsive in the ugliness of his disease.

Francis was moved to dismount and he flung his arms around the leper. In that moment, as Francis tells the story, the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ.

A second man who discovered the truth of this parable was St Martin of Tours. Martin was a Roman soldier and a Christian, and became the third Bishop of Tours in the year 371.

While a soldier, one winter day, as he was entering the city a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money but saw that the beggar was shivering and cold. He took off his soldier’s coat, cut it in two, and gave half of it to the beggar.

That night, Martin had a dream and, in this dream, he saw heaven and angels and Jesus. Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s cloak. In the dream, one of the angels asked Jesus, “*Master, why are you wearing that old battered cloak? Who gave it to you?*” And Jesus answered softly: “*My servant Martin gave it to me.*”

Lindsay P. Armstrong writes, “*This passage provides a wellness check and possibly even a warning to those living in unhealthy, self-centered ways. Akin to measuring weight or blood pressure, Matthew 25:31-46’s emphasis, on freely sharing with strangers, prisoners, and all who are hungry, thirsty, naked, and/or sick, is a key diagnostic tool to help us assess our righteousness and health. If we cannot share freely and fully or if we do not make ourselves available to do so, this indicates that our relationship with God and the world is not as healthy and whole as Jesus’ triumph on the cross makes possible. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued, is a primary expression of our love of God and of our experience of God’s love for us.*”

Did we live our faith? Did we live a life of love, of joy in Christ? Did we help others come to know and experience that love or were we a hindrance? Was the relationship we voiced in our worship and among our Christian friends, expressed outwardly in our day-to-day living, in our giving, in our marriages, with our children, in how we reacted to the stranger on the street or in the pew next to us on Sunday?

We must constantly be growing in our faith with God and how we live out that faith day-to-day. One day we will hear, “*Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*” (Matthew 25:34).

Jesus will beckon the faithful to come and receive their reward and the reward is a place that has been prepared, since the creation of the world, just for us. Spurgeon writes, *“It is a kingdom prepared, and it has been so long a time prepared, and he who prepares it is so wondrously rich in resources, that we cannot possibly conceive how excellent it must be.”*

May we never forget that we are children of God, who will *“inherit”* all that has been prepared, NOT because of what we have done, NOT because of what we do, but because of God’s grace, His gift...and His LOVE.

Armstrong continues, *“God created the world out of an abundance of love. Like a bubbling fountain, God is love and overflows with love. In creation, God gives something of self, and in sending Jesus and His Holy Spirit, God repeatedly and generously pours love out upon all people...Created in the image of this freely giving god, we freely share, because this is what it means to be created in God’s image...We give as an expression of the love that is inside of us, bubbling up, spilling over, and flowing out.”*

May Christ’s church, each of us, be grateful and thankful for all God has done for us.

May our relationship with Christ be so deep, true, and vibrant, that our arms are reaching, hands are healing, words are teaching, feet are going.

May our lives, like Paul said...

HAVE LOVE, SHOW LOVE, and BE LOVE. May this love for all God’s children flow out of Christ in us, flow out of a gratitude and love for the One who loved us first!

Monday**Read Matthew 25:31-46.**

Jesus makes it clear that there is a direct correlation between how we have lived our lives and our relationship with God. If we truly have a relationship, if we truly have opened our hearts to Christ, to our Father in heaven, it will be reflected in our actions. Once we recognize our own sinfulness, the fact that we are a mess, and realize what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross two thousand years ago...if we wrap our minds around the depth of love Christ has shown us...we cannot help but to be changed and to want to serve God out of gratitude for all He has given us. This acceptance of Christ, this gratitude for what God has done for us, is seen in our daily actions and love of others. If God is love...when we accept Him into our hearts through Jesus Christ...our hearts are filled to overflowing, and our lives begin to grow beyond ourselves.

We know “actions speak louder than words.” In the last judgment, God will separate those who have talked about their love of God, who have “voiced” a relationship, *from* those who truly have a relationship with God expressed through their lives, their actions, their works of mercy and compassion. As it is written in James 1:22, we must “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only.*” I John 2:6, says, “*He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.*” In fact, Spurgeon goes as far to say, “*If Christ does not work such things in you, you have not part in him; if you have not produced such works as these you have not believed in Jesus.*”

I have often heard the question, “If it was against the law to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Are you living your faith? Does your life, your actions, show your love for God? Are you reaching out to others, the hungry, the imprisoned, the poor, with mercy and compassion? Is the love in you for God so much that it simply overflows into the real world, touching the lives of others? Is your faith more than Sunday, more than words...is it flowing out of a love and gratitude for God, for all He has done for you?

Tuesday**Read Matthew 25:31-46.**

God will also show those who have done “good works” simply for the benefit of their neighbor’s praise or to earn God’s love & reward for what they are. Our works must come out of a relationship, a love for God.

Read Matthew 7:21-23.

Jesus is clear that not everyone who says “*Lord, Lord...*” will enter heaven. In fact, many will tell of the many “good works” they have done in the name of Jesus, but Jesus says that He will tell them, “*I never knew you; depart from Me.*”

Our works must be an outward expression of an inward relationship, an inward love for God. Spurgeon writes, “*If you perform deeds of charity out of the idea of getting to heaven by them, why it is yourself that you are feeding, it is yourself that you are clothing; all your virtue is not virtue, it is rank selfishness, it smells strong of selfhood, and Christ will never accept it; you will never hear him say, ‘Thank you’ for it. You served yourself, and no reward is due. You must first come to the Lord Jesus Christ, and look to him to save you; you will for ever abjure all idea of doing anything to save yourself, and being saved, you will be able to give to the poor and so on without selfishness mixing with your motive, and you will get a reward of grave for the love-token which you have given. It is necessary to trust Jesus, and to be yourself fully saved, before there is any value in your feeding the hungry or clothing the naked.*”

Our acts of charity and compassion must come out of a love for Jesus Christ, a love of God, and a love for what God loves. Are you serving God, reaching out through acts of love and compassion, due to your love and relationship with Christ? When you see someone in need, do you see Christ...and remember what Christ has done for you? Do you reach out to others and sacrifice your time, energy, and money because you simply love God so much? Have you opened your heart to God and are you nurturing that relationship? The more you nurture your relationship with God, the more you will want to serve Him by serving and reaching out to others in the church and the world.

Wednesday

Read Matthew 25: 31-46.

Note that in the last judgment when the “righteous,” the faithful, receive their reward. Notice the time of the reward, when Christ says, *“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”* We will talk more about this reward tomorrow, but for now notice the timing. The reward, entrance into the kingdom of God, only comes after the separation of the sheep from the goats, the faithful from the unfaithful.

Spurgeon writes, *“My reward, if I be a child of God, cannot come to me while I am in union with the wicked. Even on earth you will have the most enjoyment of Christ when you are most separated from this world; rest assured although the separated path does not seem an easy one, and it will certainly entail upon you persecution and the loss of many friends, yet it is the happiest walking in the world. You conforming Christians, who can enter into the world’s mirth to a certain degree, you cannot – you never can – know as you now are the inward joys of those who live in lonely but lovely fellowship with Jesus. The nearer you get to the world the further you must be from Christ, and I believe the more thoroughly a bill of divorce is given by your spirit to every earthly object upon which your soul can set itself, the more close will be your communion with your Lord.”*

How much does the world have hold of you? How much do you allow yourself to be surrounded by and influenced by the world? Are you allowing yourself time to be “set apart” from the world, and to sit with God each day? Are you making your decisions based on others’ opinions or are you going to God for guidance? Are you spending more time worrying about money, watching television, or being a sports fan than spending time with God? How much does the world have hold of you?

Thursday

Read Matthew 25:31-46 and Revelation 21 & 22.

Jesus says, in Matthew 25: 34, *“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”* Notice in Revelation 22:17, Jesus says, *“Come...let Him who thirsts come.”* Come. Jesus beckons the faithful to come and receive their reward and the reward is a place that has been prepared, since the creation of the world, just for us. Wow! Spurgeon writes, *“It is a kingdom prepared, and it has been so long a time prepared, and he who prepares it is so wondrously rich in resources, that we cannot possibly conceive how excellent it must be.”*

Too often, as Christians, we look for reward for our labors now, but our reward awaits us. What an awesome day it will be when we receive our reward from the King Himself.

Just reflect for a while on the picture of heaven in Revelation 21 & 22. Reflect on a “*place prepared for you.*” We are children of God, who will “inherit” all that has been prepared, not because of what we have done, but because of God’s grace, His love, His gift.

Friday

Read I Corinthians 4:1-5, Matthew 25:31-46.

The last judgment. The moment Christ returns and all is revealed. Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon, “The Reward of the Righteous,” writes, “...*your state and glory shall be revealed before the sons of men.*” *In those last moments, the King, God will separate the sheep from the goats, the truth from the lie, the sin...are we ready to allow Him to come in and help us bring our faults to the light that we might be rid of them...that we might be cleansed and made ready for His return?*”

Just as a metal detector separates coins and medal from sand, Jesus will separate those who love Him from those who do not. One day, Jesus will bring to light the hidden things in the hearts of men and women. We will stand before Him and those who have opened their hearts will enter into a place that has been prepared especially for them.

Others will see us as we truly are, not as they have seen us on Sunday mornings for the last decade but how we are in secret. Others will see our hearts, what our eyes have watched, what our ears have heard, what our hands have done, where our feet have gone. All will be known.

Does that thought make you cringe or are you ready, prepared like the bridesmaids who had enough oil in their lamps?

We must constantly take inventory of our lives. What are our eyes watching? What are our ears listening to? What are our hands doing? Where are our feet going? No one knows the complete history of our eyes, ears, hands and feet than us. We know what our bodies do in secret. God also knows and one day will reveal all. In those last moments, God will separate us from the mask that we wear.

If God were to shine light into our closets and secret places right now, what would He find? Are we ready to remove the mask, face up to our shortcomings, our addictions, our problems, our sin...are we ready to allow Him to come in and help us bring our faults to the light that we might be rid of them...that we might be cleansed and made ready for His return?

Read Psalm 51 and allow God to help you look closely at your life, “purging” you of that which is not of Him. Jesus is ready to come into our lives now and begin to prepare us for our true home. He is ready to bring to light the things in our lives that need to change and to fill us with His love so we can touch a hurting world. Take time in prayer. Open your heart and lay everything in your life, every thought and action, before Him.

Saturday, September 1, 2018

Read the lyrics to the hymn, “*Lo! He Comes With Clouds Descending,*” and reflect.

*Lo! He comes, with clouds descending, once for our salvation slain;
thousand thousand saints attending swell the triumph of His train.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! God appears on earth to reign.*

*Ev'ry eye shall now behold Him, robed in dreadful majesty;
those who set at naught and sold Him, pierced, and nailed Him to the tree,*

*deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.
Every island, sea, and mountain, heav'n and earth, shall flee away;
all who hate Him must, confounded, hear the trump proclaim the day: Come to judgment! Come
to judgment! Come to judgment, come away!*

*Now redemption, long expected, see in solemn pomp appear!
And His saints, by men rejected, coming with Him in the air.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! See the day of God appear!*

*Yea, amen! Let all adore Thee, high on Thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the pow'r and glory, claim the kingdom for Thine own:
O come quickly, O come quickly, Alleluia! Come, Lord, come!*

Chapter 12

LIFEGUARD ON DUTY *The Parable of the Good Shepherd*

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore, Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.”

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”

-John 10:1-16

LIFEGUARD ON DUTY

One summer a few years ago, our family once again traveled to Shenandoah, Virginia, to the Skyline Drive, and camped and hiked atop the mountains above Luray, at Big Meadows. That year we did something new and exciting, something we had never done before. We went Rock Climbing and Rappelling off Little Stony Man cliffs.



After we climbed to the top of the cliffs, the guides explained the many apparatus necessary for a safe and successful climb. Dozens of ropes, harnesses, locking carabineers, belay devices, anchors, and special climbing shoes were just some of the equipment used to set up and complete our climb. Every rope was anchored at multiple points in case one of the anchors slipped or gave way. Our guides held us as we rappelled down the cliff and as we climbed up, ready to stop us if we slipped and began to fall.

Those ropes and anchors, the equipment and guides, held us and kept us from falling to our deaths, kept us from serious injury. They were our lifelines.

Jesus tells us in John 10 that He is the “*good shepherd*” and He will “*lay down His life for the sheep*.” The shepherd, Jesus, knows each one of us by name. Jesus says, “*He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice*” (John 10:3).

A Palestinian shepherd did not drive his sheep but led them.

They knew his voice and the shepherd knew each sheep by name, seeing and caring for each sheep in the flock individually. The shepherd knows His sheep and the sheep know the shepherd; there is intimacy. There is a closeness.

The first verse of Psalm 23 says it all.

“*MY shepherd.*” Jesus knows you intimately. Jesus knows what you like, what you desire, what you need. Jesus knows your troubles and the darkness that you’re dealing with in your life. Jesus is concerned about your world, your troubles. He knows you intimately; by name. You are a sheep of His fold.

Jesus makes it clear that we are sheep in need of a shepherd. There are thieves and robbers standing ready to attack us, to steal us away. We are told, “*whoever enters through [the gate], through [Jesus, the shepherd], will be saved.*”

We are sheep in need of a shepherd.

Like sheep, we get lost and cannot find our way back. Like sheep, we must be led to new pasture and fresh water. Like sheep, we cannot protect ourselves from “*thieves and robbers*” and other dangers that come upon us unexpectedly.

Jesus says, “[You] *will come in and go out, and find pasture...*[You will] *have life, and have it to the full.*” Jesus will keep us on the right path.

David wrote in the 23rd Psalm, “*He leads me in the paths of righteousness.*”

Elmer Towns, in Praying the 23rd Psalm, writes, “*The Shepherd is like a guide, taking the sheep where they ought to go. And what are the qualifications of a guide? He’s been there before and knows how to get his sheep to green pastures. He knows the safest paths. Best of all, he knows what is waiting for the sheep when they get to their destination. So, the shepherd gathers his sheep together to lead them, guide them, and go before them to greener pastures. Notice the Shepherd doesn’t necessarily lead us in easy paths, beautiful paths or even prosperous paths...but always the right path.*”

God showed us through His Son, Jesus, that we have a lifeline. We have a lifeline that will get us safely to the top of the cliff we are climbing, safely down the mountain we have found ourselves atop, or safely rescued out of the waves and storms that have washed over us and caught us by surprise. A mountain guide, a Shepherd, a lifeguard always on duty.

Jesus is willing to sacrifice all to keep us safe and bring us home. God is ready to undergird us and hold us up when we begin to fall.

Isaiah 41:10 (NIV) states, *“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”* The Message translation says, *“I’ll hold you steady; keep a firm grip on you.”*

Isaiah 42:16 (The Message) declares, *“But I’ll take the hand of those who don’t know the way, who can’t see where they’re going. I’ll be a personal guide to them, directing them through unknown country. I’ll be right there to show them what roads to take, make sure they don’t fall into the ditch. These are the things I’ll be doing for them—sticking with them, not leaving them for a minute.”*

Isaiah 43:1-3 (The Message) tells us, *“Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you. I’ve called your name. You’re mine. When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you. When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down. When you’re between a rock and a hard place, it won’t be a dead end—Because I am God, your personal God, The Holy of Israel, your Savior.”*

Our God, our Savior, our Lifeline.

But Jesus also makes it clear that we are to participate with God in throwing out a lifeline to those who are falling or drowning. That God will not only lift us up, shepherd us, guide us, rescue us, but God will also use us, work through us, to lift up and support others.

Remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus tells the story of a man stripped and beaten, lying by the side of the road and the many travelers who walked by without stopping, without helping. *“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him”* (Luke 10:33-35).

The Samaritan, enemy to the Jew, saw beyond the lines that separated him from the man lying beaten alongside the road, and saw instead someone who needed a lifeline thrown to them. The Samaritan saw someone who needed lifting up.

How many people in our community, in our own families, need a lifeline right about now? How many feel as if they are falling or feel as if the rocks are too many to climb, the distance too great? How many feel the sea too rough, the waves too high? How many need to feel that they are not alone?

God tells us through the Old Testament prophets and shows us through His Son, Jesus Christ, that a lifeline has been thrown out for you and I. John 3:16 (NKJV) declares, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* This is a rope that cannot be broken and cannot be cut.

Many of us have grabbed hold of this lifeline and it is what holds us up. This lifeline, this faith gives us hope, helps us through difficulties and tribulations. The writer of Hebrews tells us, Hebrews 4:16 (NKJV), *“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

The psalmist declares, Psalm 46:1-3 (The Message), *“God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him. We stand fearless at the cliff-edge of doom, courageous in sea storm and earthquake, Before the rush and roar of oceans, the tremors that shift mountains. Jacob-wrestling God fights for us, GOD-of-Angel-Armies protects us.”*

God asks us to recognize the lifeline that has been thrown to us and then, as Jesus said, *“Go and do likewise.”* Like the mountain guides who attached themselves to my boys and I, in order to protect us, to lift us up, lower us down gently, keep us safe, Jesus tells us to attach ourselves to others.

Remember, the good Samaritan, *‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’* He did not leave him and go about his way. The Samaritan attached himself to his hurting brother, a line now connected him and the man who had been beaten, a line of great compassion and love that would eventually lead to the beaten man’s healing and recovery.

Jesus said, John 15: 12-13 (The Message), *“This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.”*

A year ago, during a message series, “Lessons from Shenandoah,” I shared a story of a mother of three who had recently completed her college degree. The last class she had to take was Sociology. Her last project of the term was called "Smile." The class was asked to go out and smile at three people and document their reactions.

She records her experience,

I am a very friendly person and always smile at everyone and say hello anyway, so, I thought, this project would be a piece of cake, literally. Soon after we were assigned the project, my husband, youngest son, and I went out to McDonald's one crisp March morning. It was just our way of sharing special playtime with our son. We were standing in line, waiting to be served, when all of a sudden everyone around us began to back away, and then even my husband did. As I turned around I smelled a horrible "dirty body" smell, and there standing behind me were two poor homeless men.

As I looked down at the short gentleman, close to me, he was "smiling". His beautiful sky-blue eyes were full of God's Light as he searched for acceptance. He said, "Good day" as he counted the few coins he had been clutching. The second man fumbled with his hands as he stood behind his friend. I realized the second man was mentally deficient and the blue-eyed gentleman was his salvation. I held my tears as I stood there with them.

The young lady at the counter asked him what they wanted. He said, "Coffee is all Miss" because that was all they could afford. (If they wanted to sit in the restaurant and warm up, they had to buy something. He just wanted to be warm). Then I really felt it -

the compulsion was so great I almost reached out and embraced the little man with the blue eyes. That is when I noticed all eyes in the restaurant were set on me, judging my every action. I smiled and asked the young lady behind the counter to give me two more breakfast meals on a separate tray. I then walked around the corner to the table that the men had chosen as a resting spot. I put the tray on the table and laid my hand on the blue-eyed gentleman's cold hand.

He looked up at me, with tears in his eyes, and said, 'Thank you.' I leaned over, began to pat his hand and said, "God is here, working through me to give you hope."

A lifeline, attaching ourselves to others, lifting them up, keeping them from falling. *"God is here, working through me to give you hope."*

On a Sunday morning back in the 1960's, there was an elderly deacon at the rear of the church greeting folks as they arrived. It was very crowded that day and the deacon noticed that there were very few seats left. He was just about to go to his own seat and join the service when a young man entered the church. He was unlike anybody that had arrived that day. He had long flowing hair, wore beads around his neck, sandals without socks, and dirty jeans with patches and holes.

While looking around to find him a seat, the deacon was surprised when the young man simply walked down the aisle and sat on the floor cross-legged squarely in front of the altar. The deacon soon followed him down the aisle. The congregation thought he would ask him to take a seat or perhaps show him to a seat. However, all were amazed when the elderly man sat, with some degree of difficulty, on the floor right next to him.

A lifeline, attaching ourselves to others. *"God is here working through me to give you hope."*

The stories could go on and on. Many of us could share similar stories and we could probably all share stories when we failed to throw out a lifeline, when we walked by, we ignored one's plight, we avoided one's gaze, we held on to our money, we made excuses, we lacked hospitality. And when we fell into need a bit later, we cried out to God to lift us up, to not let us fall, and God in His infinite mercy, regardless of how we acted to our brother or sister on the street, in our neighborhood, at the grocery store, at church, held on to us and helped us along.

I John 3:16 (NLT) tells us, *"We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So, we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters."*

May you and I be men and women of God who connect ourselves by a rope of compassion to those less fortunate because God has connected Himself to us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

May you and I be men and women of God who offer hope to the hopeless, love to the unlovable, a hand to the untouchable because God has offered hope, love and His nail-scarred hands to us. May you and I be men and women of God who shepherd others who are lost and hurting, who find the rocks too difficult to climb, the mountain too high to traverse, the waves too rough to defeat, because we have a shepherd who knows us by name, who leads us in *"paths of*

righteousness,” who makes us “*lie down in green pastures,*” who protects us from our enemies, who gives us the power to love, and who laid down His life that we might live.

As God, our lifeguard, is always on duty for us, may we always be on duty for others, watching over those whom God places in our path, allowing God to work through us to give them hope. May we help them “*rest secure from all alarms...leaning on the everlasting arms*” of the Savior.

Monday

Read John 10:1-16.

Jesus explains His relationship to us through this parable of the good shepherd and His sheep. The shepherd, Jesus, knows each one of us by name...each one of us intimately. And He is ready to watch over us, to lead us to “greener” pastures, and to protect us from the “wolves” of this world, from death itself. Most importantly, He lets the disciples know that He will give His life for the sheep, He will “lay down [His] life” voluntarily for the sheep; His love for them is that strong.

There are many truths about our relationship with Christ that we gleam from this passage. The first truth is that like a shepherd knows the names of his sheep, Jesus knows our names; Jesus knows each of us intimately. In biblical times the shepherd knew each of his sheep by name and would call to them. The sheep would recognize the shepherd’s voice and come.

Elmer L. Towns, in his book, Praying The 23rd Psalm, writes, “*What kind of shepherd would you choose if the choice were yours to make? Before you answer, let me tell you what kind of shepherd most sheep would want to avoid. Your shepherd would not be like a businessman, because he would want to make a profit off of you. Your shepherd would not have the manner of an army sergeant, as he would want to lead you into battle. Your shepherd would not be like a coach, as he would want you to win the big game. And you would not want a king, because he would want to rule you. You would want none of these. You would want a personal shepherd who loved you, not one who make money off you. You would want a shepherd who would protect you, not one who would get you killed in battle. You would choose a shepherd who knew what you like to eat and where you liked to go. You would seek someone who knew how to care for you when you were sick. He should know how to protect you from parasites, predators, and poison weeds. You would choose a shepherd who would find comfortable places for you to sleep. If you became lost, you would want an unselfish and brave shepherd who would come looking for you.. Isn’t it good to know that you do not have to worry about choosing the right shepherd because **the** Shepherd has chosen you?*”

Jesus knows you intimately. Jesus knows what you like, what you desire, what you need. Jesus knows the troubles and darkness that you’re are dealing with in your life. Jesus is watching over you, walking with you, and has shown that He is willing to die for you. He loves you with an everlasting love. You are a sheep of His fold.

Read Psalm 23. Repeat verse one over and over a few times emphasizing the word “my.” “The Lord is **MY** shepherd.” “**MY** shepherd.” God condescended to be concerned about your little world, to care about your troubles, to love you. “The Lord is **YOUR** shepherd.” He wants to lead you, to call you by name. He wants to be your protector and guide. He is always on duty.

Take time tonight just to thank Him for being there for you...for loving you and caring for you like a shepherd loves and cares for his sheep. Ask Him to be **YOUR** shepherd. Let Him know you want to know Him intimately and personally. Thank Jesus for offering His life for you, for the relationship and love He has offered you.

Tuesday

Read John 10:1-16.

A second truth we can gleam from this passage is that we are sheep in need of a shepherd. This is not a terribly flattering statement about us considering that sheep are not among God’s most intelligent creatures. Sheep get lost and cannot find their way back. They

will graze in the same spot until food is scarce or runs out and then they will starve not finding new pasture. Sheep cannot find their own way to water. They must be led to survive.

Isn't this true of us? We get lost so easily...pulled astray by the temptations of this world...pulled away from Christ by the voices of society. Many times we cannot find our way to new and greener pastures, stuck in the past, stuck in our ways. We must be led to deeper understandings of God's love and greater blessings down the road. We must be led away from the things of the world and toward the things of God. We need God like sheep need a shepherd. We need guidance.

Towns writes, *"Sheep have no sense of direction. They can't find their own way, and they need a guide to lead them to water. You are like that. You have no sense of spiritual direction on your own. Yes, you may realize when you are lost, and you know when God is far off, but you will never find Him on your own. God has given you a conscience to tell you when you are in danger, and He gives you correction to scare you and unsettle you when danger is nearby. You are lost, you are miserable and you ask, 'What now?' That's when the Shepherd comes to you and leads you to green pastures and cool, still waters. Will you follow? Or will you stand there in the wilderness, confused and scared?"*

Isaiah 58:11 reads, *"The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy you needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame."* **Psalms 25:9**, *"He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way."* **Isaiah 48:17**, *"This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.'"*

Jesus is ready to guide you through whatever maze of problems or difficulties you are dealing with. Jesus is ready to guide you to a greater intimacy with Him, a greater knowledge of God's grace and love for you. Jesus is ready to guide you toward a greater purpose. Take time tonight to ask Christ to lead you, to help you discern what you need to do...in your work, your marriage, with your children...to guide you to "greener" pastures where your life will glorify Him. Ask Him for guidance for your problems.

Wednesday

Read John 10:1-16.

A third truth we can glean from this passage is like sheep who are helpless to care for themselves, there are many matters in life over which we have no control, evils against which we cannot defend ourselves. Jesus does not promise an absence of the darkness, but he promises to lead us through it.

Towns writes, *"Why must the shepherd give you personal attention? Because serpents slithering through the grass will poison sheep, wolves watching in nearby caves will attack sheep, rushing water will drown sheep and high places will cause sheep to fall to their death. And sheep walk through dark, threatening valleys where shadows stalk them. You need a Shepherd; so remember, the Lord is your shepherd and protector. He is not just any type of shepherd; He is your personal Shepherd who cares for you and will protect you."*

Jesus will lead you away from many of the decisions many of us make as human beings that lead us instead into great danger, regret, and heartache. The closer we cling to Jesus the easier it is to notice when it is Satan tempting us, when the voice we hear directing us toward a decision is not God. Jesus is ready to protect us from the things that would pull us away from God in the world and in ourselves.

What are you struggling with? What dangers surround you? What decisions are you facing? Have you prayed about these things? Have you sought Jesus' guidance and protection? Take time tonight to lift your problems up to Jesus, asking Him to walk with you and help you through them.

Thursday

Read John 10:1-16.

Focus on verses 11-13. **Also read John 10:17-18.** Towns writes, *"Your shepherd made the most incredible sacrifice in history. He was sinless, but He gave His life for sinful people like you and me. He did not like the idea of dying any more than you do. He prayed, 'O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will' (Matthew 26:39). Then He allowed soldiers to slap Him, beat Him with a leather whip and crown Him with needle-sharp thorns. They finally nailed His hands and feet to a cross and lifted Him up for all to see, and a mob ridiculed Him. His strength was drained as He hung six hours in the blistering sun. Even then they did not kill Him. Jesus said, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30). And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit and His life. Your Shepherd voluntarily gave up His life for you. He said, 'I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me.' (John 10: 17,18)."*

Take a few moments tonight just to reflect on Christ dying for you...**your** shepherd laying down His life for you. Thank Him for such an act of love, amazing love.

Friday

Read I Peter 2:25 and Psalm 23.

Once we were lost but now we have turned to the shepherd. Newton sang, *"I once was lost, but now am found..."* We must cultivate a faithful attitude of walking with our Shepherd every minute of every day...He is with you all the time so talk with Him often. Get your head out of the grass and focus on Him.

There was once a story of a young boy whose father ran alongside him as he swam in competition. The boy would keep his eyes on his dad and won every race. One day, before a huge competition, the boy was nervous and talked to his dad. His dad told him he would run alongside him as before, but during the race the boy focused on his opponents, taking his eyes off his father. He lost.

Are you keeping your eyes on the shepherd? Are you walking with Him daily?

Saturday

Read Hebrews 13:20-21.

God is ready to produce in you great works and to touch the lives of many other people through you. You have been redeemed by the *"great Shepherd of the sheep," "signed with His blood."* You have been adopted into the family of God; now, go and tell others of the great Shepherd ready to love them, guide them, protect them, and who died for them.