
Lessons From Shenandoah

A FOUR-WEEK JOURNEY
BY REV. DR. DREW M. CHRISTIAN





STEP UP



My family and I love to travel to the Shenandoah Mountains. Every summer, for years, we load up the camper and head off for a week or more atop the mountains that tower over Luray, Virginia.

Up at Big Meadows, we set up camp and spend the week watching deer, skunks, and bear walk through our campsite. Every day, after breakfast we head off to the many trails along the Skyline Drive to hike. Many of the trails are a challenge. Mary's Rock, BearFence, Lewis Falls, Old Rag and Chimney Rock have us climb upward, and upward, over rock scrambles and ledges to magnificent views.

Many times, I am near the back of the group, out of shape, wondering if I can make it to the top. But I realize if I stop, if I fail to reach the top, I will miss out on the blessing, the view of the falls or the valley below, the feel of God all around you, God's magnificence, His awesome power and majesty seen in creation. I realize I cannot stay where I am and experience all the mountain has to offer, all God created for me.

When hiking I focus on the next step. I focus on the next rock, the next hill, the next turn, and I simply “*step up*” and then I “*step up*” again. Before I know it I am looking down over the valley or hearing the rush of waters cascading over the rocks down into the gorge. Before I know it, I am seeing the face of God in His creation.

I want to get to the top of the mountain. I want to “*taste and see that the Lord is good.*”

It was on top of Mount Sinai that God spoke to Moses. We read in Exodus 19:3-6, “*Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain...*”

Elijah met God on top of Mount Horeb.

The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

-I Kings 19:11-13

The Disciples had an extraordinary moment with Jesus atop Mount Tabor.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light...

-Matthew 17:1-7

The Transfiguration.

Jesus invites us to walk with Him up the mountain, to “*step up*” onto the mountaintop and into the presence of God.

Before we do anything else, we must “*step up*” into God’s presence.

Isn’t this the lesson Jesus taught Martha?

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.” And Jesus answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

-Luke 10: 38-42

“But ONE THING is needed, and Mary HAS CHOSEN that good part.”

Jesus told us, in Matthew 6:33, “*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*”

I wonder how often James gave thought to the moment he was with Peter and John atop the mountain with Jesus. I wonder if James thought about the transfiguration along with the many other miracles and moments he had witnessed and experienced with Jesus, when God spoke through his pen, and gave us the greatest invitation ever given.

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

-James 4:8

John Bevere, in his book, Drawing Near, writes, “*Stop a moment and ponder this: the Creator of the universe, the earth, and all its inhabitants, requests your presence. Not only your presence, but He desires to be intimately close, for we are told (Exodus 34:14) “He is a God who is passionate about His relationship with you.”*”

Jesus paid a huge price to pave the way for you to have a personal relationship, a close relationship with God. *“However,” as Bevere writes, “this reunion of God and man has not been preached nor experienced in its fullest extent. We’ve emphasized the liberation from sin and death [salvation], but neglected to declare the intimate fellowship awaiting all who’ve been made free. This neglect is costly, and even disastrous, as so many miss the beauty of knowing God intimately.”*

God wants you to climb up the mountain, to climb into His presence. God wants you to *“step up.”*

It is only by *“stepping up”* that we experience God, that we draw close to Him, that we begin to know Him, whether it is in a thunderclap, a still, small whisper, or a moment of dazzling light.

Bevere writes, *“Many have settled for the intellectual knowledge of belonging without ever pursuing the reality of interaction with Him in the moment. So deeply embedded is the concept of salvation that few go any further. They’ve said their prayers and will one day die and go to be with Him. Yet, the reality of Christ is missed, and the powerful revelation of God’s desire to walk with us is lost. It is not a one time or far away experience, but His real desire is abiding communion.”*

In other words, God wills that we should *“Step Up”* into His presence.

Bruce Wilkinson tells the story of a man who gets to heaven. He looks around and notices a huge warehouse. Inside the warehouse are shelves and shelves, stretching as far as the eye can see, each filled with boxes and each box wrapped with a ribbon and name. *“Do I have one of these boxes?”* the man asks Peter. Peter responds, *“Yes, but if I were you I wouldn’t look.”* The man cannot help himself and opens the box with his name attached to it. In the box the man finds all the blessings God wanted to give Him but He did not seek after them, did not open them.

Bevere writes, *“The baffling question is: Why do so many believers have a shallow relationship with God? Why don’t they delve into a deeper, more consistent relationship with Him? What holds them back? What would ignite and cause them to respond to His call to draw near? The answer is not complex: it’s our hunger and thirst to know Him. David cried out, ‘My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.’”*

“*Why do so many believers have a shallow relationship with God?*” One answer can be found in Proverbs 27:7 reads, “*A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb.*”

In other words, as Bevere writes, “*If your soul is filled with cares, pleasures, the love of riches, or the desires of this world, you’ll be full and actually despise the sweet honeycomb of God’s fellowship...*”

We must be intentional about “*stepping up*” into God’s presence, climbing the mountaintop and spending time with God or we will find ourselves staying below, surrounded and satisfied with the things of this world, satisfied with “*stepping around.*”

Understand that you and I will hunger for what we feed on. We feed on chocolate, we will crave more. We feed on sports, we will crave ESPN. We feed on movies, we will wait on the edge of our seat for the next big attraction. We feed on hunting, we will jump out of bed at 4 am to go sit in the cold and freeze for that one chance. We feed on cars, we will talk shop whenever we are with others. We feed on money, we will always be talking and worrying about it. We feed on material possessions, we will be looking for every opportunity to shop.

I am sure many of you can relate. I know I can. I so often feed on things of this world filling my life with movies, books, vacations, hunting, money. The list goes on-and-on. In doing so, time with God gets pushed aside. God is no longer the priority.

If we feed on the things of God, we will hunger more and more for Him. It has been those seasons of my life when I was involved in a small group, when I was studying the scriptures each day and meeting with others to discuss and to pray, or I was involved in Disciple Bible Study, *Experiencing God*, or an Emmaus weekend, that I came to know God more intimately, felt His presence more visibly, experienced Him personally. I can look back and remember the mountaintop experiences I had with God during those times in my life.

Charles Stanley offers three practical steps for “*stepping up*” and spending time on the mountaintop with God.

First, Stanley tells us to Schedule Time With God.

How many times have you told someone, “*Hey, let’s get together*” only to never follow through. When one is serious about getting together with someone, you make an appointment. Each night when you go to bed decide on a time and place to be alone with God the next day, a time and place to refuel. Write it down in your planner, on your calendar. Make a note and then follow through.

Secondly, Stanley says one needs a place that is off the beaten path of your daily activities. Choose A Place Where The Only Thing You Do There Is Meet With God. This spot will take on special significance and being there will affect your mood and ability to concentrate.

Lastly, Use A Variety Of Methods.

Stanley suggests a devotional book. When that becomes stale, journal your thoughts and prayers. If you are on a Bible reading plan taking you through the scriptures, switch it up one day and focus on one book of the Bible. Stanley writes, “*This is a relationship. Look for ways to keep it fresh.*”

One person I read, Kenneth Boa pulls no punches in stating that it is “*absurd to think that we could excel at any sport such as golf or tennis without investing the needed time, training, and practice. But when it comes to living the Christian life, we suppose that we are doing well if we attend church and open a Bible once or twice a week. If believers expended the same time and energy cultivating their spiritual lives as they are willing to invest in becoming reasonably skillful at any sport or hobby, the world would look with wonder at the power of the body of Christ. We desire to know Christ more deeply, but we shun the lifestyle that would make it happen.*”

We cannot truly experience the mountaintop, come into the presence of God, without climbing, without “*stepping up.*” We must make a commitment to climb into His presence.

Commit to “*step up*” out of the everyday and the world that surrounds you into God’s light. Commit to sitting down with your Heavenly Father each day and allow Him to fill you, to quench your thirst.

What will God do? God will, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “... *fill you will all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*”

What will God do? God will, as spoken through the prophet in Isaiah 40, “*give power to the weak and strength to the powerless*”...will “...*renew their strength*” and cause them to “...*soar on wings like eagles...run and not grow weary...walk and not be faint.*”

What will God do? God will, a Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, “... *supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.*”

One lesson drawn from the wilderness and mountaintops of Shenandoah. “*Draw near to God*”...STEP UP...”*and He will draw near to you.*”



DEVOTIONS

Sunday

**Read Matt. 6:33; Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 12:1-3; &
2 Tim. 3:16-17.**

In the book, The Love Dare, the author writes, “*When a man is trying to win the heart of a woman, he studies her. He learns her likes, dislikes, habits and hobbies, but after he wins her heart and marries her, he often stops learning about her. If the amount he studied her before marriage was equal to a high school degree, he should continue to learn about her until he earns a college degree, a master’s degree, and ultimately, a doctorate degree. It is a life long journey that draws his heart ever closer to hers.*”

Our relationship with our Heavenly Father is no different. We need to study everything about him, learning what God likes and dislikes, what is pleasing to God and what is displeasing to Him. James 4:8 tells us, “*Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*” Hebrews 1:3 tells us, “*The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him represents God exactly.*” Looking at Jesus allows us to understand the character of God. The life and teachings of Jesus allow us to understand the character of God. If we want to know God we first have to get to know Jesus.

We are called to be “*transformed by the renewing of our minds,*” to “*seek first the kingdom of God.*” We are called to STEP UP, to look up, to draw near to God, getting

to know who He is, going “deep” with our Savior, Jesus Christ, coming to understand what Jesus taught, and coming to understand God’s Will for our lives. We cannot stay where we are and go with God. We must constantly be taking the next step in our relationship with Him.

What is the next step that you need to take in your relationship with God? Are you reading His Word, seeking to know Him more deeply? Can you spend more time curled up in prayer with Him? You cannot stay where you are and go with God.. What is the next step God is calling you to take in your relationship with Him? Go ahead...STEP UP!

Monday

Read James 4:8; Psalm 107:9; and Romans 15:13.

James 4:8 tells us, “*Draw near to God and He will draw near to you*” (NKJV). Psalm 107.9 tells us, “*For He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.*”

If you are feeling worn down or you are frustrated about someone, are anxious about a situation at work, your ministry has become a chore instead of the joy it once was, or you find yourself stressed and looking at things negatively, perhaps the answer doesn’t have to do with fixing the problem outside, but perhaps the answer has to do with fixing the problem inside. Perhaps the answer is that you need to refuel. You need to renew your commitment to spending time alone with God. As Jesus tells the Pharisees, “*First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too*” (Matthew 23:26).

“Step Up” the mountain and spend some time with God this week. Allow God to quench your thirst, filling you with His living water.

Tuesday

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18 and Philippians 2:12-13.

On a past Emmaus weekend in which I served as Spiritual Director, one of the speakers stated, “*Maybe after we accept Him [Jesus] we think that is all we have to do-we have crossed the finish line, but really we have just begun-we have just stepped into the starting gate...*”

When we accept Christ, the work begins. Paul tells us to “*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*” As Rev. Bruce Goettsche writes, “*We are to work at making sure that our hope is truly grounded in Christ and not on our own efforts. We are to work at taking advantage of the ways that God has given us to help us grow. We should read the Bible, pray, worship, serve, give, fast and so forth. We should work to make a break with sin. We are not to just sit back passively, but are to work at repentance and renewal. We are to work at adopting and applying the positive behaviors that the Bible admonishes. In other words, we are to work at love, compassion, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, endurance and others. We are to guard against the influence of the world. In other words we will adjust our friendships, our amusements, our use of time in order to combat the real presence of sin in our lives.*”

We are to “STEP UP,” working out our faith, working at taking the “next step” in our relationship with God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

What is God asking you to work on in your life? What is God asking you to do differently? Remember that if you always do what you’ve always done, you will always get what you’ve always got. Let us not be satisfied with where we are in our relationship with God. Pray that God will help you take the “next step,” being transformed from one degree of glory to the next into the likeness of the Son. “*Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*”

Wednesday

Read Matthew 17:1-8.

Peter, James and John “stepped up,” and followed Jesus up the mountain. It was there that Jesus was transfigured before them. It was there God spoke and said, “*This is My beloved Son...*” Peter, James and John got a glimpse of who Christ was. They took a “next step” in their relationship with Jesus. They went from a high school diploma to a Master’s degree in moments and Peter wanted to capture the moment. He wanted to stay there. Peter asks, “*Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles...*”

Now God did not want Peter, James and John to stay there, to rest in this new knowledge, but instead God wanted Peter to learn about Christ. This was the Messiah. God wanted Peter, James, and John to move on, to walk down from the mountain, into the valley, where there was work to be done.

I am sure there were many times throughout Peter, James and John's ministry where they remembered that moment with Jesus atop the mountain, when they remembered Jesus being transfigured before them. I am sure remembering this moment energized them, strengthened them, and reminded them of whom they serve. We, too, must "step up" the mountain, coming into the presence of God through prayer, retreats, spiritual disciplines, worship. These "God-moments" will energize, strengthen, and helped us remember the God we serve.

Are you taking time to "step up" the mountain? Are you taking time to "step up" and remember how awesome and beautiful is God? To remember how Jesus is "dazzling light" that breaks up all darkness?

Thursday

Read Isaiah 40:27-31.

How do we "step up" the mountain and meet with God? Charles Stanley offers three practical steps for effective quiet time with God. Each day is always a wonderful time to recommit ourselves to these three simple steps to grow in our relationship with our Creator, to begin to spend time each and every day with God, allowing Him to, as Paul writes in Romans 15:13, *"to fill you will all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

Stanley tells us to first, schedule time with God. How many times have you told someone, "Hey, let's get together" only to never follow through. When one is serious about getting together with someone, you make an appointment. Each night when you go to bed decide on a time and place to be alone with God the next day, a time and place to refuel. Write it down in your planner, on your calendar, make a note and then follow through.

Secondly, Stanley says to choose a place that is off the beaten path of your daily activities; you need a place where the only thing you do there is meet with God. This spot will take on special significance and being there will affect your mood and ability to concentrate.

Lastly, use a variety of methods. Stanley suggests a devotional book. When that becomes stale, journal your thoughts and prayers. If you are on a Bible

reading plan taking you through the scriptures, switch it up one day and focus on one book of the Bible. Stanley writes, “*This is a relationship. Look for ways to keep it fresh.*”

The main step toward refueling is to commit to doing it. Commit to sitting down with your Heavenly Father each day and allow Him to fill you, to quench your thirst. Listen to how God describes, through the prophet Isaiah, what He will do to those who “*wait upon Him.*” Read again, Isaiah 40:27-31.

Friday

Read Hebrews 11:1-40; Hebrews 12:1-3; & John 15:1-17.

Today, we look at a list of some of God’s past heroes, heroes of scripture. The one thing that each of these heroes have in common is that they were all ordinary people, just like you and I. They stand out, not because they were some sort of “superman” or because they were endowed with “superhuman” qualities or talents, but because they loved God, committed themselves to God’s will, and devoted themselves to God’s work. Because of their faith, God was able to accomplish great things through each of them.

Phillips Brooks said, “*It does not take great men to do great things; it only takes consecrated men.*” Consecrated means to be dedicated to God’s Word & purposes. Consecrated men and women are men and women who “step up” and spend time on the mountaintop with God.

John Wesley once said, “*Give me a hundred men who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I will shake the world. I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; and such alone will overthrow the kingdom of Satan and build up the kingdom of God on earth.*”

May we be heroes of the faith, heroes for our families, our husbands and wives, our children, our neighbors. May we surrender ourselves to God and allow God to work through us to do amazing, miraculous, and heroic things. May we draw closer to the One who is able to do through us “*immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us*” (Eph. 3:20).

Take time this weekend to ask God to work through you to accomplish great things for the kingdom. Recognize that you do not need to have amazing gifts or talents. You just have to “step up,” “*connect to the vine*,” visit the mountaintop. God will do the rest.

Saturday

Make that appointment with God today. Schedule 1/2 hour to sit with God, walk with God, read His Word. Keep your commitment.



STEP DOWN



When my family and I travel every summer to the mountains of Shenandoah, we know we are getting close when we hit the town of Sperryville, Virginia. Then it is onward and upward, the road winding around and through the mountains to Thornton Gap, the entrance to the Skyline Drive. Then it is onward and upward again, for an hour, to the top of the mountain and Big Meadows.

We finally arrive at the top of the mountain with breathtaking views and each day we hike trails like Bear Fence, Little Stoney Man, Old Rag, and Hawksbill to magnificent overlooks.

Often, after hiking for an hour or more we come out of the woods to a rock outcropping overlooking the valley and God's magnificence. God's majesty lays before us.

After we have sat atop the mountain for awhile, watching the sunrise or sunset over the surrounding mountains, the peregrine falcons fighting in air, the Shenandoah River as it travels below through the valley, someone says, "*It's time to go.*" Often, I want to stay. I don't want to "*step down.*" It is hard to come down off the mountain.

It is even more difficult at the end of the week, to get in the car and drive down the mountain, back through Thornton Gap, and down into Sperryville toward home. I dread leaving the mountain, coming back down into the valley. I want to stay atop God's creation, where I feel close to Him, where there are no problems, issues, headaches, bills, meetings, arguments, news, wars, or poverty. I want to stay atop the mountain where there is just beauty, peace, God, and family.

I understand, perhaps just a bit, how Peter must have felt at the Transfiguration, the moment, atop the mountain, with James and John, he saw Jesus transfigured before him, shining like light itself, talking to Moses and Elijah...the day, God spoke, "*This is my beloved Son...*"

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

-Matthew 17:1-3

It was then Peter spoke up.

Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

-Matthew 17:4

Peter wanted to build three tabernacles.

A tabernacle was a tent sanctuary used by the Israelites during the Exodus. It was a place of worship. It was also a dwelling place, a temporary shelter, where they slept on those wilderness nights as they made their way to the Promised Land.

But while Peter was speaking.

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."

-Matthew 17:5-9

God interrupted any thought of building three tabernacles atop the mountain and after God spoke and Peter and the other disciples fell to the ground in fear and awe of God, Jesus touched them and said, *"Arise, and do not be afraid."* Arise. And they *"came down from the mountain."*

Now I am sure Peter and the other two disciples would have liked to stay atop the mountain for awhile, to bask in the experience of God they just witnessed, to reflect on the words they heard God speak. Perhaps they yearned to see Jesus once more transfigured before them, light and love, the Savior. Perhaps they desired to stay and worship and look out upon God's majesty.

Peter knew what awaited him and the others in the valley, just as I know every year when we pull out of Big Meadows and head down the mountain road toward home. Peter knew the world below was filled with sufferings and trials, war and hunger, sickness and death. Jesus even told Peter, James & John as they descended from the mountain, *"Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead,"* which meant that Jesus was going to die.

I believe Peter probably wanted to stay on the mountaintop for awhile.

Don't we all want the same. We experience God in our lives. We invite Him in and experience His forgiveness and love. We feel His presence in our lives and grow close to others who profess His name. We want to hold on to how we feel in God's presence. We want to hold on to the moment so we build tabernacles where we will spend our time, where we are comfortable, where we don't have to face the problems below in the valley and can stay in the presence of God, worshipping and praising Him and fellowshiping with others who also believe. We build tabernacles where we can insulate ourselves from the outside, from the problems of the world and from ourselves.

And they "*came down from the mountain.*"

But what we fail to understand is that (1) There is no life on top the mountain; and (2) Our mission exists in the valley.

First, There Is No Life On Top The Mountain.

As we hike to the top of the mountains each summer, the trees begin to thin out the higher we go, the animals become scarcer, the vegetation becomes sparser. Up at the top where the wind blows violently and the weather attacks, there is little growing. We usually climb across rocks and boulders, void of any life. The life, the forest growth, is below in the valley, on the hillsides.

Jesus understood this. He understood that life was in the valley, life for all who would believe, eternal life. It was in the valley he had to go. It was in the valley, toward Jerusalem, that he would travel. He would make His way to the cross. Jesus could not stay on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. He could not stay in His glory. God had simply given Him a glimpse of what was to come, the end of the story, to give Him strength for the journey ahead, for the cross and the nails and the crown of thorns. Jesus understood He needed to go through the valley and take the long, dusty road to the cross if we were to have life, if our shackles were to be loosened, if our sins were to be forgiven, if the doors of heaven were to be opened. Jesus understood He had to go through the valley.

It is the same with us. If we are to become men and women of God, we, too, have to “*step down*” from the mountaintop and journey into the valley. It is in the valley, with all its sufferings and trials that we are molded and our faith is strengthened. It is in the valley that we grow in our relationship with God, we learn to lean on Him, trust Him, love Him.

As Paul writes, in Romans 5: 3-5 (Amplified Bible), “*Moreover [let us also be full of joy now!] let us exult and triumph in our troubles and rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that pressure and affliction and hardship produce patient and unswerving endurance. And endurance (fortitude) develops maturity of character (approved faith and tried integrity). And character [of this sort] produces [the habit of] joyful and confident hope of eternal salvation. Such hope never disappoints or deludes or shames us, for God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit Who has been given to us.*”

It is our trials, our sufferings, in the valley, that turn us to God, and when we turn to God we grow. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 3: 16-18 (The Message) what happens when we turn to God. He writes, “*Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone...Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. 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.*”

It is through our trials we do the hard work of becoming the man or woman God created us to be, focusing our thoughts upward, fighting those attitudes and actions within us that are not Christ-like. It is in the valley that we learn to trust God, work on our relationships with God and others, learn how to serve and how to love like Christ.

Peter, James and John had so much more to learn. They had further to grow. God was not done with them. God knew Peter, James, and John still needed to be molded, built up, taught, helped along, and shown and put through things so they might become more like His Son, Jesus. And they “*came down from the mountain.*”

Secondly, we come down off the mountaintop because Our Mission Exists In The Valley.

Not only must we come down off the mountaintop, into the valley, to find God in the midst of our trials, to grow in our faith, to become the men and women God created us to become, but we must also come down off the mountaintop because there are people that need us. There are people that need what we have found, what we have seen. There are people that need Jesus.

This is depicted so well in Raphael's painting, "Transfiguration." In the painting, Jesus, Moses and Elijah are floating above the three disciples. Peter, James, and John who are below the feet of Christ are prostrated in fear. But below the mountaintop are crowds of people including the epileptic boy that Jesus healed after coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration. One of the people on the ground, perhaps a disciple, is pointing upward, to Jesus at the top of the mountain, sending the message that He is the answer. Jesus is the One who can heal.

We are to come down off the mountain & share the answer with them, the answer we've discovered, Jesus! Paul tells us we are "*Christ's ambassadors*," that God is "*making his appeal through us*."

Jesus speaks to us, "*Do you love me? Feed my sheep.*" Jesus says, "*Don't just tell me you love me...show me...Show me by feeding, caring, and loving my 'sheep,' my children.*" David Humpal writes, "*Let us not neglect our responsibility in caring for the family of God. We must be willing to minister to hurts, to encourage the disheartened, to pray for those who are sick, to help the needy, and to reach out to those who are drifting away. Let us never neglect the job that the Lord has given us to tend the sheep. We must not only care about them, but we must also take care of them.*" We are called to serve, to put our "love" for God into action by loving His people.

One day Fulton Sheen, the famous Catholic bishop, was in a leper colony over in Africa, and he was repulsed by these open cancerous, cankerous sores on the lives of everybody laying there in the dirt. And he walked by one man laying there. He not only had leprosy, but he had a bunch of other skin diseases too, and open wounds on his legs. And as Fulton Sheen leaned over to talk to him, the cross that he was wearing on a chain around his neck broke. The chain broke and it fell into that open wound. He said, "*You know, for a minute I was just repulsed. I*

wanted to just kind of step back. And then all of a sudden I was filled. I was overcome for this love for this person who had nothing.” He said, *“I reached into the sore and I took up the cross.”*

That is what Christianity is all about. It is about healing broken, messed up lives. We are called to come down off the mountain & reach out to the many people in the crowds below who are hurting, lost, sick, guilt-ridden, poor, and angry.

Often we as Christians, insulate ourselves from ourselves. We cover over the hurts and pains, problems and guilt. We cover our true selves with fake smiles and nice clothes. We keep busy in the church, doing good and focusing on others, so we don't have to face our own personal issues. We don't have to think about them. We build a tabernacle around us so we don't have to deal with the many issues within, in the valley of our past, our mind, our hearts. We change very little over the years. We bury our hurts and guilt. We rationalize our behavior.

Often we as Christians, we as the Church, fail to enter the valley. We insulate ourselves in our church buildings, our tabernacles, praising God, expecting the people in the valley to come to us. We insulate ourselves from the problems and sufferings of the world, comfortable and content amidst our friends and comrades in Christ.

God reaches down to us and says, *“Arise, and do not be afraid”* and leads us down the mountain to grow and learn, to serve and love, to do the hard work, the hard work within the valleys of our hearts, the hard work within the valleys of our community and world.

Ask God to lead you through the valleys to resurrection, to new life.

Ask God to help you trust Him on the journey, to help you deal with the deep issues, the areas of your life that are not Christ-like. Ask God to help you learn and grow through the difficulties you face.

And pray that God will show you where to go. Pray that God will show you who to tell about Jesus, will lay names on your heart that you can call, pray with, and talk to. Pray that God will give you the words and strength to be His ambassador and will help your church go outside its doors to those throughout the

surrounding communities, ministering to people where they are instead of waiting for them to come to church.

I know what it is like to want to stay on the mountaintop, to be comfortable, but there is no life atop the mountain and our mission is in the valley. Christ calls us to come down, to travel the road to the cross, and at the end of that road we will find that God will have molded us more into the likeness of His Son. God will have shown us time and time again that He can be trusted, that His grace is sufficient, and God will have filled us with His love and His Holy Spirit. And not only will God do these things for us, but also for those whom we share Christ with.

Let's look up and like the disciples, let us only see Jesus, and let us take His hand. Let us "STEP DOWN," following Jesus down the mountain and into the valley.



DEVOTIONS

Sunday

Read Matthew 17: 1-13.

Peter wants to put up three shelters or tabernacles, one for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. During the Feast of Tabernacles, Jews would build shelters for themselves and live in them for seven days (Lev. 23: 42-43), remembering their journey through the wilderness. It was at that moment, God spoke, and told the disciples that Jesus was His Son, and to “*listen to Him.*”

Jesus tells the disciples to not be afraid and then to follow Him down the mountain. It is down the mountain that we find our ministry, we find our mission, we find our purpose as we help to build the kingdom of God on earth. It is in the valley we work to fulfill the Great Commission. And Jesus’ first action in the valley is not to share the mountaintop experience with others, but to heal an epileptic boy (Matt. 17: 14-20).

The mountaintop is where we gain our strength, where we draw close to the One who created us and calls us. But we must not only “step up” into the presence of God, drawing closer to Him and allowing Him to draw close to us; we must also “step down” from the mountaintop, into the valley, reaching out to the least, the lost, and the lame, letting them know of the love of God.

Are you taking time to “step up” the mountain and sit with Jesus? Are you finding yourself wanting to stay there or are you coming down from the mountain, into the valley, and using your life to touch the lives of others for Christ? How are you serving Him in the valley?

Monday

Read Titus 3:14 & Philippians 4:19.

Paul tells Titus, *“People must learn to do good by helping others who have urgent needs.”* We are called to serve others, to meet their needs, to “step down” from the mountain. Jesus demonstrated this, modeled this, throughout His life. He served the prostitute, tax collector, blind man, leper, adulteress, insane, and the lost. He taught us, by His example, to serve others and to meet their needs.

Why do we do this? Paul writes in Philippians, *“And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from His glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.”* Why do we serve? We serve because of all God has given us. We serve because God meets our needs. We serve because God gave His Son, Jesus Christ to the world. As a Danish proverb states, *“What you are is God’s gift to you; what you do with yourself is your gift to God.”*

John Wesley said, *“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can.”* Again, why do we do this? As Rick Warren writes, in The Purpose Driven Life, *“It cost Jesus his own life to purchase your salvation. The Bible reminds us, ‘God paid a great price for you. So use your body to honor God’ (I Corinthians 6:20). We don’t serve God out of guilt or fear or even duty, but out of joy, and deep gratitude for what he’s done for us. We owe him our lives. Through salvation our past has been forgiven, our present is given meaning, and our future is secured. In light of these incredible benefits Paul concluded, ‘Because of God’s great mercy... Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service’ (Romans 12:1).”*

How are you serving God? In what ways are you meeting the needs of others, reaching out beyond yourself in service to the church, the community and the world? As Warren writes, *“If I have no love for others, no desire to serve others, I should question whether Christ is really in my life.”*

Pray about how you might serve God, showing thanks for all God has given you. Pray that God will fill your heart with love for others and open your eyes to the needs around you.

Tuesday

Read I Corinthians 12: 12-31.

The Bible is clear that each of us in the church have a role to play. Each of us have been given by God gifts for that role and every role is important. Warren writes, *“There is no small service to God; it all matters.”*

Warren goes on to write, *“There are no insignificant ministries in the church. Some are visible and some are behind the scenes, but all are valuable. Small or hidden ministries often make the biggest difference...There is no correlation between size and significance. Every ministry matters...Today thousands of local churches are dying because of Christians who are unwilling to serve. They sit on the sidelines as spectators, and the Body suffers.”*

We have so many needs in our churches. Some of these needs are being met and some that are not. Every ministry is vital to the church creating an opportunity for those who walk in our doors to hear and have their eyes opened to the message of Jesus Christ, vital to our church reaching out beyond our doors to those in need.

How might you step up and serve in your church? What job might you be willing to take on? How might you work behind the scenes to help your church create an atmosphere conducive to receiving visitors and welcoming them in the name of Christ? Pray that God will show you an area that you can help out in.

Wednesday

Read John 13: 1-17 & Galatians 6:3.

Jesus taught His disciples by example, saying, *“And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example to follow.”* “Step Down.”

Warren writes, *“God will never exempt you from the mundane. It’s a vital part of your character curriculum. The Bible says, “If you think you are too important to help someone in*

need, you are only fooling yourself. You are really a nobody' (Galatians 6:3). It is in these small services that we grow like Christ. Jesus specialized in menial tasks that everyone else tried to avoid: washing feet, helping children, fixing breakfast, and serving lepers. Nothing was beneath him, because he came to serve. It wasn't in spite of his greatness that he did these things, but because of it, and he expects us to follow his example. Small tasks often show a big heart. Your servant's heart is revealed in little acts that others don't think of doing...No task is beneath you when you have a servant's heart."

Warren goes on to write, *"Don't look for great tasks to do for God. Just do the not-so-great stuff...try serving in ordinary ways."*

Again, take time tonight to pray about how you might serve another...how you might serve in the church and in the community.

Thursday

Read Mark 10:35-45 & Romans 16:18.

The disciples are arguing with each other about who is the greatest. James and John decide to ask Jesus if they can sit in places of honor next to Christ in His kingdom. Jesus explains to them that anyone who wants to be a leader, must first be a servant. Jesus states, *"Whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many."*

Warren writes, *"Servants don't promote or call attention to themselves...The most significant service is often the service that is unseen. In heaven God is going to openly reward some of his most obscure and unknown servants...people we have never heard of on earth, who taught emotionally disturbed children, cleaned up after incontinent elderly, nursed AIDS patients, and served in thousands of other unnoticed ways. Knowing this, don't be discouraged when your service is unnoticed or taken for granted. Keep on serving God!"*

Paul writes, in I Corinthians 15:58, *"Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort"* (The Message). Even the smallest service is noticed by God.

We must not serve our *"own personal interests"* as Paul writes, but instead take the focus off of self and place it on others. Richard Carlson, in An Hour to Live,

An Hour To Love, writes about the time he decided to stop playing tennis, a sport in which he was headed toward turning professional. He writes, *“When we first met, I was a top-ranked competitive college tennis player with plans to turn professional. The problem was, my heart wasn’t in it anymore... Virtually everyone I knew encouraged me to keep playing... Who cared if I was miserable? But it turned out someone did care, and that was Kris. She was the first person I met who said to me, ‘Richard, if you’re not happy, it’s time to quit being competitive and start listening to your heart. It’s time to change direction.’ A month later, I was spending time as a Big Brother for the Big Brothers of America program, phasing out of competitive tennis. It was one of the first times I had listened to my heart instead of my head. As a Big Brother, I was focusing on someone else’s needs instead of my own, so it was also one of the first times I felt the intense inner joy and satisfaction of giving.”*

Our focus need to shift from self, from being noticed, from rewards and attention, to simply serving, giving, giving because God gave us His own Son, giving because Christ gave us His own life. And in giving, we will be blessed.

Friday

Read Colossians 1:25 & Ephesians 3:7.

Paul is clear that he has been given a responsibility to serve the church, to preach the message, to reach out to others in the name of Christ. This is a responsibility given to all who claim the name of Christ, to all who are disciples. Paul goes further, because Paul is not serving Christ simply because it is his responsibility, but Paul is serving and reaching out because it is a *“WONDERFUL PRIVILEGE”*. Paul understands the awesome opportunity and blessing we have been given by God to help God in His work in the world.

Not only are we invited to “step up” on the mountaintop and sit in intimacy with our God, but we are invited to “step down” into the valley and serve alongside Him to reach a hurting world. Not only is it a privilege to be asked to help, but when we help, try to reach out and help others see Christ, we are mightily blessed. Our lives are forever changed and transformed. As the psalmist sings, *“Who are you Lord that you are mindful of me?”* What an awesome gift, a *“wonderful privilege”* to have God’s love and to be able to work for Him in the world.

Take time tonight to give God thanks for the gift of His attention and the gift of being able to serve God in the world.

Saturday

Read Malachi 3:6-18 & Colossians 3:24.

The people ask, *“What’s the use of serving God? What have we gained by obeying his commands or by trying to show the Lord Almighty that we are sorry for our sins.”* People ask, *“Why bother with God?”* as they look around at the world and see the wicked get richer, the unjust gain power, and the faithful suffer. It is a question we all ask as we notice the injustice in the world, we wonder *“Why do bad things happen to good people?”*

But God answers through the prophet Malachi and cries out, *“On the day when I act, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient and dutiful child. Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.”* God says that there will be justice and the faithful will be rewarded.

Paul writes in Colossians 3:24, *“Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward.”* Ecclesiastes 2:8 reads, *“You who fear the Lord, trust in him, and your reward will not be lost.”*

As Richard Fuller wrote, *“Today, let us rise and go to our work. Tomorrow, we shall rise and go to our reward.”*

We are called to serve and we are promised a great reward for our faithfulness. When it seems like our service is going unnoticed or our work seems unimportant or perhaps many around us who are not putting in the time and sacrifice for God are experiencing material rewards beyond our dreams, we must keep our sights on Jesus Christ and the heavenly reward God promises each of us.

Give thanks tonight for all of God’s promises. Continue to pray about how you might serve God more in and with your life. **“STEP DOWN”** the mountain.



STEP ACROSS

Part I



Often when my boys and I backpack in the Shenandoah Mountains we come across streams or chasms which we have to traverse. Once in a while we have to travel up the stream one or two hundred yards to find a place that is suitable to cross, that isn't too deep. Sometimes, when we are hiking we come across crevices in the rock. We can look down into small caves that could be the home of all sorts of creatures. Often my boys have fun jumping across many of these chasms.

As I was thinking about the streams we find ways across and the deep cuts in the rock we “STEP ACROSS,” I began thinking about the many chasms that exist between us and others, and how hard it is at times to “STEP ACROSS.”

Two chasms that exist that Christ calls us to “STEP ACROSS” are (1) Relationships that have been broken; and (2) Relationships with those who are different. There are so many examples throughout history of how the power of God helped someone “STEP ACROSS” these chasms and find themselves in right relationship with another, and through that relationship experience God.

First, We Must “STEP ACROSS” The Chasm Of Broken Relationships.

One of the greatest examples of this happened October 2, 2006 at the West Nickel Mines School in Lancaster County, PA. I am sure many of you remember and were affected by the tragedy that occurred that day.

On that day, gunman Charles Carl Roberts walked into the Amish one-room school house, shooting ten girls between the ages of 6 and 13 years old; five of the girls died. Roberts then shot himself.

The response of the Amish community, of the parents of the victims, was as important a story as the shooting itself. On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, “*We must not think evil of this man.*” An Amish neighbor comforted the Roberts family hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them. Amish community members visited and comforted Roberts' widow, parents, and parents-in-law. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. The Amish set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. About 30 members of the Amish community attended Roberts' funeral, and Marie Roberts, the widow of the killer, was one of the few outsiders invited to the funeral of one of the victims.

Some commentators criticized the swift and complete forgiveness with which the Amish responded, arguing that forgiveness is inappropriate when no remorse has been expressed.

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing..”

Enos Miller, grandfather of two girls, Mary Liz (8) and Lena (7), who were both killed by the gunman, was asked by a reporter if he had forgiven the gunman. Miller replied, *“In my heart, yes,”* he said, explaining it was *“through God's help.”*

“...but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

It is only by looking to the cross, remembering the example Jesus set for each of us, that such forgiveness is possible.

“Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.”

It is only through the power of God, the Holy Spirit, that one can “STEP ACROSS” such a chasm as the Amish did in 2006.

We pray that most will not have to face a chasm the size of the one the Amish faced that October, but there will be times along this life journey when we will have to deal with chasms, crevices, and cracks developing between us and others. Sometimes these chasms will develop because of the other person's actions, sometimes because of our own, and sometimes because both of us generated the break in the rock of our relationship.

Kerry and Chris Shook, in their book, One Month To Live, talk about three mountains that exist, that get in our way, that often create chasms that cause us to step back rather than “STEP ACROSS.”

There is the Mountain of Misunderstanding.

We are all human beings; thus, we are all flawed. Not only that, we don't listen well. Thus, there will be miscommunication and misinterpretation. Furthermore, we would like everyone to be like us but unfortunately God likes variety and has created each of us with different gifts, personalities, and passions. Thus, there are differences of opinion. Instead of communicating, sitting down and talking it out, attempting to see where the other is coming from and appreciating the gifts they bring to the table, we fail to understand the person on the other side of the table from us. There are relationships within our families, within our church, within our community that are broken because of a simple misunderstanding, because of an unwillingness look past the flaws, the words, the differences in opinion and personality, and understand.

James 1:19 states, *“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”*

There is the Mountain of Me-First.

How often our “self” gets in the way. We want our way. We want to be in control. We want to be the center of attention. Often instead of asking what we can do for our spouse, our church family, our community, we are wondering what they can do for us? The entire Christian walk is about dying to self. It is a long and painful death, much like crucifixion, the criminal sometimes lingering on for days before succumbing to death. We must ask God to continue to help us push “ME” aside, helping us focus on others ahead of ourselves.

Paul wrote, in Philippians 2:3, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”*

And there is the mountain is **THE MOUNTAIN OF MISTAKES.**

We all make mistakes. Just as we have misunderstandings and the desire to put ourselves first, we all have faults. We all mess up. 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 allow bitterness to grow around your heart to protect yourself from being hurt again. This mountain of bitterness poisons your relationship. It creates a chasm that becomes harder and harder to “**STEP ACROSS.**”

We must allow for one another’s mistakes. We must show grace, the same grace we have been shown through Jesus Christ, when those we care about, when our neighbors, mess up. We must not allow bitterness to build up when others let us down. We must learn to forgive.

Paul tells us in Colossians 3:13, *“Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”*

Understand there will be times when the chasm is too deep, the gorge too wide. There will be times the other person will not listen to you, will continue to be selfish, will refuse to accept the forgiveness you offer. And remember, forgiving and loving another does not always mean the relationship will be restored, it does not

mean we excuse the person's behavior, it does not mean we surrender our right to justice, it does not mean we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again.

As Lewis Smedes writes, in his book, The Art of Forgiving, "...when we are the ones who have been hurt, we simply cannot afford to wait for the other person to come to his senses before we begin healing ourselves...Each time we grope our reluctant way through the minor miracle of forgiving, we are imitating [God's] style...When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us..."

You must remember that it is not about them. It is not about their response, their behavior. Mother Teresa once wrote,

*People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.*

*If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.*

*If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.*

*What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.*

*If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.*

*The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.*

*You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;
It was never between you and them anyway.*

We listen, put others first, and forgive because God commands us, because God modeled the way we should live through His Son, Jesus Christ.

On the night of His arrest, celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples, Jesus knelt and washed the disciples' feet, including the feet of the one who He knew would soon betray Him. John writes, John 13:1, *"It was just before the Passover Feast... Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love."* Jesus said to His disciples in John 13: 14-15, *"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."*

We Must "STEP ACROSS" The Chasm Of Broken Relationships. This is only possible through the power of the cross.

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 and 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.

Step up the mountain and allow God to fill you with His Spirit, His strength. It is time to "STEP ACROSS" whatever chasm exists between you and another...TODAY.

STEP ACROSS

Part II



While hiking my boys and I, and our friends, we often come across streams and chasms in the rocks that we have to jump over, that we have to “STEP ACROSS.” One of the lessons I have gleaned from Shenandoah and these moments is the need to “STEP ACROSS” the chasms that exist in our lives. These moments in the mountains remind me that Christ calls us to “STEP ACROSS” the chasms created by broken relationships.

Secondly, these moments in the mountains remind me that Christ calls us to Step Across The Chasms Between Us And Those Who Are Different. Paul writes in Romans 15:7, “*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*”

I remember seeing a great example of this a few years back. Pitcher Cliff Lee dominated the Rays, pitching 9 innings with 11 strikeouts, and the Texas Rangers had its first postseason series victory ever. It was the first time that a MLB playoff series ended with the road team winning every game. But even more special was the way the team celebrated the big win: with ginger ale.

The Rangers passed on the usual champagne in honor of MVP candidate Josh Hamilton, who is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. Hamilton was quoted, “*It meant a lot,*” he said. “*It just says a lot about my teammates, them understanding the sensitivity of my situation.*” Hamilton’s teammates were willing to sacrifice their tradition, “STEP ACROSS” the chasm, out of love for him.

But sometimes it gets harder when it is a neighbor, someone of a different color, faith, lifestyle. Sometimes it gets harder when it is a stranger, someone who acts different, speaks different. Sometimes the chasm seems too wide to cross so we turn back to our churches and the people we know so we can be comfortable.

Reggie McNeal, in his book, *Missional Renaissance*, writes, “*Because God is on mission, the people of God are too. God is a sending God. Just as he sent his Son and his Holy Spirit to the world, he is sending his people into the world.*” In Matthew 22: 37-40, Jesus replies, “*‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*” McNeal writes, “*...followers of Jesus take seriously Jesus’ claim that loving one’s neighbor ranks right up there with loving God.*”

I am reminded of a story I heard at a Christian concert years back. The speaker talked about how one day he went into the local motorcycle shop in order to get his bike fixed. The shop was filled with what he termed “*colorful characters.*” Leather jackets, pierced bodies, and tattoos filled the shop. These characters started talking to him about things they had done, experiences that they had.

Watson says his eyes were opened to quite a few things. But he went on to talk about how he couldn't wait to get to heaven and see many of these same bikers, piercings and tattoos a many, walking around. And he spoke of the straight-laced church member who will arrive and stand there, wide-eyed, mouth gaping, wondering, *"Oh my...oh my...how did they get here?"* His response to such a question, *"They got here the same way you did..."*

In the book of Revelation, it is written, *"I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"*

McNeal explains, *"In a kingdom-oriented worldview, the target of God's redemptive love is the world, not the church ('For God so loved the world,' Jesus said; NOT 'for God so loved the church')...as the church engages the world, it finds Jesus, whose home is in the streets or wherever he has to go to connect with the people he is pursuing, meaning everybody. In a church-centric world, our responsibility is to bring people out of the streets into the church. A kingdom-oriented approach seeks to leverage the gospel into people's lives right where they live, work, and play. The church is wherever followers of Jesus are. People don't go to church; they are the church. They don't bring people to church; they bring the church to people."*

This is certainly what Paul did. Paul did not bring people to church; he brought the church to the people.

In Acts 20: 19-24, Paul sends a message to the Christians in Ephesus, *"I have done the Lord's work humbly — yes, and with tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. Yet I never shrank from telling you the truth, either publicly or in your homes. I have had one message for Jews and Gentiles alike — the necessity of turning from sin and turning to God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus. And now I am going to Jerusalem, drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit, not know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit has told me in city after city that jail and suffering lay ahead. But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus — the work of telling others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love."*

Paul always kept his mission in front of him. Paul understood that his life was not his own, that God had created him for a purpose, for a mission. Paul knew that he had the greatest news to offer the world, news of salvation, of hope, of forgiveness, of eternal life. Paul was willing to press on in the midst of persecution, beatings, heartache, loss, and threat of death. He was willing to “STEP ACROSS” whatever chasm lay in his path to help someone else know about God’s love.

In Acts 21, several people, with the gift of prophecy, let Paul know that if he goes to Jerusalem, he will be bound and turned over to the Romans. Paul’s friends and fellow Christians try to convince him not to go to Jerusalem; yet, Paul is ready to follow the Lord’s Will no matter what the consequences. When the other Christians see Paul’s faith and resolve, they too respond, “*The will of the Lord be done.*” Paul understood that he was called to “STEP ACROSS.” There were others he needed to tell about Jesus, others he needed to love in the name of Jesus. This was the path God wanted him to take in order to reach Rome with the message of the Gospel.

In Acts 22, Paul is arrested, but throughout the last six chapters of Acts, Paul uses every opportunity to “STEP ACROSS,” to build relationships with his jailers, with kings, with Roman officials, with soldiers. He even takes time to speak to the mobs about Christ, the very mobs that call for his death.

Each of us, this church, has one mission. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, to tell people, to share with others, to touch lives with the love of Jesus. Each of us have been given unique gifts, passions, skills to use in this mission. Each of us have been placed in different neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, areas where people have been placed in our lives to connect with, where we can “STEP ACROSS” the chasms that exist, build relationships, and share the love of God.

The question becomes will you accept? Will you accept the mission? Will you “STEP ACROSS” when the opportunity is placed in front of you? And there are countless opportunities.

As I look back over my life the times I have often felt closest to God when I have served others, when I have accepted this mission to “STEP ACROSS.” Whether it was traveling to Peru or Kentucky, God appeared in a mighty way in the midst of us denying ourselves in order to reach others for Him. Whether it was stopping, helping, and praying with a beggar on the streets of Chicago or Washington, DC, God appeared in a mighty way when I stepped out of my comfort zone, across the walls created by fear and prejudice, and allowed my life to touch a life very different from my own.

And there are times I have missed God. There are times I was focused on myself, my own issues, times I was afraid to reach out to the person asking for help who looked very different from the people I often associate with. There have been times I judged the other person unworthy of my attention. I am sure you, too, can recall such moments.

In the future, when you and I realize we have missed an opportunity, when we realize we have failed in our mission to love our neighbor, let us remember that, like Paul, we must “*press on toward the goal.*” We must get back up, confess our shortfall, and ask God for the faith and strength to not fail to “STEP ACROSS” the next time the opportunity to love another presents itself.

Will you accept the mission? Will you “STEP ACROSS” when the opportunity is placed in front of you? Will you “STEP ACROSS” when the opportunity arises to help with the local homeless shelter, reaching those who are without a home, or the opportunity to travel to Kentucky or Tennessee one summer with your church? Will you “STEP ACROSS” when the opportunity arises to give, to talk to, the person at the intersection holding a sign, “*Please Help,*” the opportunity to reach out to the stranger who comes into church on Sunday morning? Will you “STEP ACROSS” when the opportunity arises to connect with that co-worker and share with them the story of a God who loves them so much? Will you “STEP ACROSS” the next time the opportunity arises, fulfilling Christ’s command to love your neighbor as you love yourself?

I want to share with you a final story. A mother of three (ages 14, 12, 3) 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, "I did not do this for you. God is here working through me to give you hope.""

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 have never looked eyes on anyone whom God did not love, anyone whom God did not yearn for, anyone whom God did not want to come into a relationship with Him. 1 John 4:7 tells us, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God."

Loving others, forgiving others, reaching out to others, Smedes writes, “*comes naturally to anyone who has felt the breath of [God’s] forgiving love on her own heart.*”

”STEP ACROSS.” Isn’t this exactly what Christ did? Didn’t Christ step across the chasm, the gulf, that existed between us and God, building a bridge from one nail scarred hand to the other for us to cross and have a relationship with our Heavenly Father.

May we reach out to those who need to feel acceptance, who need to experience the love of Jesus Christ. May we show God’s love to those who look different, live different, speak different, and think different. At times this will be difficult, way out of our comfort zone. The chasm may seem too wide. Only with God’s strength, only with faith, will we be able to “STEP ACROSS.” Let us start somewhere. Let us start today.

Start with the stranger who comes into church on Sunday morning. Do all you can to make them feel welcomed. Then move to your neighborhoods, your workplaces. Who can you reach out to, start a conversation with, take to lunch? Then move to your community. How can you reach out to those less fortunate? How might you not simply tell them but show them the love of God?

Step up the mountain and allow God to fill you with His Spirit, His strength. “STEP ACROSS” the chasms that exist between you and others, filling those chasms with Christ’s love and grace.



DEVOTIONS

Sunday

**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?

Monday

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.

Tuesday

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.

Wednesday

**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.” Jesus taught us to pray, *”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.

Thursday

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. 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*" that we can truly forgive. 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.

Friday

Read Romans 15:7; Colossians 3:13; & Ephesians 4: 31-32.

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, mess 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.*”

Saturday

Read I John 3:16.

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 are to lay down our wants and desires and meet the needs of others first, to serve others before we serve ourselves. We are 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 to 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 in Christ 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 LOVE COMPLETELY. It is time to “STEP ACROSS” whatever chasm exists between you and another...TODAY!

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



STEP INSIDE



Two summers ago, my friend Carlton and I took all the kids on an adventure that was somewhat different from what we were used to. Often our adventures included climbing, whether it was hiking the trail up to the platform on top of Hawksbill Mountain or rock climbing the face of Little Stony Man with harnesses, anchors, and climbing ropes.

But this time we took our kids underneath the earth that we had hiked atop so often over the years.

Now I am sure many of you have experienced Luray Caverns and the splendor of its stalagmites and stalactites. Years before, we had taken our families through the caverns of Luray, so we wanted to do something a little more adventurous.

We went caving. The kind of caving without a constructed path, where one could take the wrong tunnel and become lost. Caving in a cave without electric lighting or a gift shop at the end. At times we would have to use ropes to climb down steep inclines, going deeper into the earth. There were times we had to crawl on our bellies, our helmets hitting the rock above us, the space being so narrow, as we shimmied through to the next open area of the cave. Some of us barely fit.

And, unlike our experience walking through Luray Caverns years before, we got a bit dirty. Here we are before going into the cave.



If you notice, the women are not with us. They stayed back at the campsite for this trip.

After seeing our picture having exited from the cave, they were glad they did...



God invites us to “STEP UP” the mountain, into His presence, and spend time with Him.

God calls us to “STEP DOWN” the mountain so that we might be able to complete our mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ, but also so that we might be molded into the likeness of His Son through the many experiences and trials we will face in the valley.

And God commands us to “STEP ACROSS” the chasms in the mountains we traverse, the chasms of broken relationships and unforgiveness, the chasms between us and those who are different.

God also pushes us to “STEP INSIDE.”

In Matthew 3:3, John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness, “*Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.*”

How do we “*prepare the way of the Lord*”? We “STEP INSIDE.”

We have to Break Up The Unplowed Ground.

Hosea 10:12 states, “*Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, For it is time to seek the LORD, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you.*”

“*Break up your fallow ground...*”

God reiterates His message through the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah 4:3 states, *“Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns.”*

The *"unplowed ground"* (NIV) or *"fallow ground"* (KJV, NRSV) is the land that could be productive, but for whatever reason has not been broken up, tilled, plowed, and prepared for planting. The prophets, speaking the Word of the Lord, are commanding the people to break up that land -- spiritually!

Unplowed ground won't let a crop grow. It's hard, preventing seeds from penetrating, germinating, and growing to maturity. When it's time to put in the garden we get out the rotor tiller and turn the soil so that seeds are able to get into it and let their roots go down deep where moisture can be found.

Isn't this what Jesus told us in the Parable of the Sower? In Matthew 13:3-6, Jesus states, *“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.”*

Stumps & Rocks must be removed. As our forefathers moved West, they began by logging the trees on their land and rooting out the stumps. Removing stumps was hard work. They had to dig down and cut each of the main roots with an axe and then attach a rope or chain to the stump and pull it out with a team of horses or oxen. Finally, they had to pile all the stumps together and burn them as they continued to clear the land, collecting all the rocks they found, both large and small, getting rid of them so they could plow the soil.

We must remove the stumps and rocks that continue to get in the way of God enriching the soil of our hearts. Hatred, bitterness, lust, greed, pride, worry are all stumps that must be rooted out and rocks that must be gathered and transported away so a new crop can be planted. They must be removed so the new crop can grow, so we can receive all God has in store for us.

“Break up your fallow ground...” “Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”

Hardness must be broken up. A plow or rotor tiller does the hard work of opening up the ground. It takes energy to pull the plow, to guide the plow, to keep the furrows straight so the field can be plowed efficiently.

Where is the hardness in your heart? Where is the unbelief that is lurking in your soul? What guilt are you carrying? Unforgiveness? Selfishness? Bitterness?

The hardness in your heart must be faced squarely and broken up if God is to plant something new and fruitful in your heart. It is through heartfelt repentance and confession that we plow deep.

“Break up your fallow ground...” “Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”

And Thorns must be gathered and burned. *“And do not sow among thorns.”*

Jesus said, in the Parable of the Sower, Matthew 13:7, *“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”*

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson writes, *“When a field goes unplanted for several years it often becomes covered with thorns or other weeds. Depending on your particular plot of land, those thorns may represent sexual temptations and lust, self-indulgence, pride, anger, selfishness, a love of entertainment and recreation, addictions, greed, and other thorns. Each of these chokes the Word. Each has a devastating effect on the crop that God wants to grow in you and me. We must root them out.”*

There is a great scene in the film, *Facing the Giants*, in which Coach Taylor is approached by Mr. Bridges, a devout Christian who walks the halls of the school everyday praying over each locker, praying for each student. He tells Coach Taylor that God has opened a door for him to walk through. He tells him a story about two farmers. Each farmer prays for rain, but only one went out and prepared his field to receive the rain.

We must prepare the fields of our hearts to receive all God is ready to shower down upon us. We do this by “STEPPING INSIDE.” We do this through The Spiritual Discipline of Self-Examination, going deep underground, deep within ourselves.

We are quick to examine one another, but often afraid to spend too much time looking in the mirror. Yet scripture tells us, “*Examine yourselves to see if your faith is really genuine...*” James tells us to “*keep looking steadily into God’s perfect law...*” He says to not be like one who looks “*at your face in a mirror but [does] nothing to improve your appearance.*” Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 13: 5-6, “*Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don’t drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it.*”

James Bryan Smith writes, “*Every day we must begin anew... Though the past is written in stone and cannot be changed, the future is like wet cement, pliable, smooth and ready to be affected by what we do...*”

Ask yourself questions to discover if there is anything growing that would inhibit God’s fruit to be produced in their lives, that would keep God’s grace from welling up in their hearts, that would keep them from becoming more like Jesus. William Barclay writes, “*One of the great neglected duties of the Christian life is self-examination, and maybe self-examination is neglected because it is so humiliating an exercise.*” Why? Because it forces us to face the real within ourselves. This is not a forty-day wilderness experience as in the life of Jesus, one who was without sin, but for us it is a life-long process, involving our surrendering to God and wrestling for God’s meaning afresh every day.

When we came out of the cave into the light, we were exhausted. We had crawled and clawed our way through the mud and tunnels of the cave, and we were dirty. We were covered with dirt.

The same will happen to us if we “STEP INSIDE” ourselves and “*prepare the way of the Lord.*” It will be exhausting work. We will have to get dirty. At times we might not like what we find.

Ephesians 4: 23-24 tells us, “*...everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It’s rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.*”

By “STEPPING INSIDE” ourselves, after the hard work, having prepared the soil of our hearts, we will be able to “STEP” more deeply into the light, allowing it to immerse us, cover us, embrace us. Jesus tells us the results we should expect in Matthew 13: 8, “*Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*”

Don’t be afraid. God can be trusted to lead you through the caverns of your heart into a more intimate relationship with Him. Go ahead, “STEP INSIDE.”



DEVOTIONS

Sunday

**Read 2 Corinthians 13:5; Psalm 51; Acts 2:38; James 1: 23-25;
Ephesians 5:26.**

In order to grow, become like Christ, we must practice daily self-examination. We are quick to examine one another, but often afraid to spend too much time looking in the mirror. Yet scripture tells us, “*Examine yourselves to see if your faith is really genuine.*” James tells us to “*keep looking steadily into God’s perfect law.*” He says to not be like one who looks “*at your face in a mirror but [does] nothing to improve your appearance.*” Christ gave up His life, Paul writes, “*to make [the Church...us] holy and clean, washed by baptism and God’s Word.*”

We must examine ourselves. Benjamin Franklin said, “*There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one’s self.*” And Plato stated, “*The first and best victory is to conquer self.*” It is a difficult task to allow God to shine His light into the dark areas of our person...to bring to light our secret sins, faults, inadequacies, weaknesses, fears, and insecurities. Yet, that is what God wants. God wants all of us. He wants to cleanse us and grow us into the likeness of His Son, Jesus.

Spend time this week in self-examination. Each day’s devotion this week will deal with examining our hearts, ourselves in order to become more like Christ.

Be honest. God knows your heart. God knows your secret sins, your pride, your dishonesty, and your weakness. Don't try to hide it from Him as Adam and Eve tried to hide from God in the garden after eating of the tree of knowledge. Come out from hiding, allow God to embrace you, cleanse you, and grow you.

Monday

Read Psalm 51; Matthew 23: 27-28; Amos 5: 21-24; Psalm 63:1-8; Jeremiah 29:13.

In Psalm 51, David cries out to God. His prayer is personal, sincere, real. David understands that God does not care about “*sacrifices [and] burnt offerings.*” God wants “*a broken and repentant heart.*”

The Pharisees in Jesus' time did not understand this. Jesus criticizes them, calling them “*whitewashed tombs,*” beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones. God speaks through the prophet Amos, explaining that He hates “*show and pretense,*” the hypocrisy of “*solemn assemblies.*” It is not about going to church. It is not knowing about God. It is not about religion, following certain laws, acting a certain way. It is ALL about the HEART!

Proverbs 15:11 asks, “*Even hell holds no secrets from God...do you think He can't read human hearts?*” God knows what is in a person's heart. God knows if we are simply going through the motions on Sunday morning or if, like the psalmist we cry out, “*As the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for you, O God*” (Psalm 42:1). God wants us to KNOW Him, to love Him with all our hearts, minds and souls. A real, deep, vibrant, loving relationship.

Have you given God your heart? Do you have a personal relationship with Him or are you simply going through the motions? Is it more about church than a personal relationship with God for you? Does your inside match the way you act on the outside? Do you long for God like the deer pants for streams of water?

If you don't have a personal relationship with God, read Psalm 51 again. Then pray, like David, confessing your sin, crying out to God for forgiveness, accepting Christ as your Savior and the leader of your life. God wants “*a broken and repentant heart.*”

Tuesday

Read I John 2: 3-4; Micah 6:8; James 2: 14-16.

How does one know if they have a personal relationship with Christ? The scripture tells us, *“And how can we be sure that we belong to him? By obeying his commandments.”* What does Micah 6:8 tell us? Micah tells us, *“This is what the Lord requires: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”*

If we have truly given God our heart, we are going to do our best to obey His commandments. We will never be perfect; thus, we thank God for grace, for mercy, for forgiveness. Though not perfect, we will have the deep desire in us to obey, to serve, to do what is right out of our love for God. As James wrote, *“Faith without works is dead.”* Works are the outward expression of our faith.

Do your actions each day, each night, in public and in private, show your love for God? When you mess up, do you quickly seek God, asking His forgiveness? Do your actions show that you KNOW Him?

Wednesday

**Read Colossians 1:10; Matthew 5:48; 2 Peter 3:18;
2 Corinthians 3:18.**

When we come to Christ, give Him our hearts, begin, out of love for God, to obey Him, it is the beginning of the journey.

Paul tells us, *“...continually do good, kind things for others. All the while, you will learn to know God better and better.”* One of my favorite quotes is by Max Lucado. It is a quote I repeat quite often and hold in front of myself, pushing myself to be a stronger Christian. Lucado writes, *“God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus.”* That’s what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, *“...as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more.”* Jesus, Himself, said, *“But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”*

To be perfect. I know I have a long, long, long way to go. John Wesley believed we were going on to perfection. He wrote, “*But whom then do you mean by ‘one that is perfect?’*” *We mean one in whom is “the mind which was in Christ,” and who so “walketh as Christ also walked,” a man “that hath clean hands and a pure heart,” or that is “cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,” one in whom is “no occasion of stumbling,” and who, accordingly, “does not commit sin.”* But Wesley was clear, “...*there is no such perfection in this life.*” Nonetheless, this is our goal...to be like Christ.

When you look at your life today compared to this time last year, are you more or less like Christ in your thoughts, words and actions? How have you grown in your faith over the last year? Are you being intentional about growing in your faith, about becoming more like Christ?

Thursday

Read Hosea 6:6; Psalm 51: 15-17; Matthew 23:27.

When Jesus enters the Temple, He doesn’t simply see what is taking place around Him. He doesn’t only see the men and women making sacrifices to God, the priests praying and blessing the people. Jesus sees beyond the outer trappings. Jesus sees beneath the busy and religious Temple courts. Jesus sees into the hearts of the worshippers, the hearts of the priests, the religious authority. Jesus takes on the role of prophet, protesting against the profaning of the Temple, against debasing the worship of the Lord, against substituting ritual for devotion. As Jesus tells the Pharisees at another time, “*For you are like whitewashed tombs,*” beautiful on the outside, appearing to do all the right, religious actions and speech, yet inside your hearts are decaying and far away from God.

The moneychangers and animal merchants appear to be doing a service for those who have traveled far to worship and make sacrifice. It is a service encouraged by the priests. Yet, Jesus sees within and finds greed, selfishness, and injustice.

As we spoke of earlier this week, David understood this...In the Psalms he prayed, “*For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering...The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart.*” Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee that stood before the altar, praying before God, “*God, I*

thank you I am not like other men.” Next to him, was a tax collector, who “*beat his breast*” and cried out to God, “*be merciful to me, a sinner.*” Jesus concludes His parable saying, “*I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted*” (Luke 18: 9-14).

We must always remember it is not about what everyone sees on the outside, our doing the right and respectable and religious things expected of us. It is about what is on the inside, our hearts, a relationship with Jesus Christ. Out of that relationship our actions flow. God sees the heart.

Ask the tough question: When God looks at your heart, what does God see? Spend time in prayer and ask God to mold your heart into the likeness of the Savior’s.

Friday

Read John 2: 13-22.

As Paul C. Shupe writes, we must see “...*Jesus with the whip of cords in his hands and hearing him with the righteous judgment of God on his lips...knowing that he speaks for us, yes, and with us, but also to us and even against us.*”

As Shupe points out, “*imagine Jesus entering our own sanctuaries, overturning our own cherished rationalizations, and driving us out in the name of God.*”

If Jesus were to enter our homes, our hearts, our daily lives, what would He say, what would He drive out? This is a tough and disturbing question that requires great honesty and self-examination. Pray and ask God to show you areas in your life that need to be “*driven out,*” that you and your family may be more in tune and more intimate with Christ.

Saturday

Paul tells us to “*Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don’t drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it*” (2 Cor. 13, MSG).

James Bryan Smith shares a treatise Madame Guyon wrote to her daughter entitled *How to Pass the Day Devotionally*. She writes, *“As you prepare for sleep try to examine yourself, particularly, your thoughts and words and actions of the previous day. Do this with a contrite heart and make a resolution to improve tomorrow and ask God for his assistance.”*

There are many spiritual disciplines that can assist us in moving ourselves, our spirits, toward conformity in Christ including prayer, fasting, Bible reading, Devotional reading, and meditation. These practices allow our spiritual life and relationship with Christ to be, as Kenneth Boa points out, *“progressively cultivated in the disciplines of faith.”* Boa goes on to explain, *“you and I will not wake up one morning to find ourselves suddenly spiritual. This is why Paul uses the metaphors of an athlete, a soldier, and a farmer to illustrate the discipline of the Christian life (see I Cor. 9: 24-27; Eph. 6: 10-18; 2 Tim. 2: 3-6).”* Furthermore, Boa recognizes, *“we have bought the illusion that we can be like Christ without imitating his spirituality. If we wish to be like our Master, we must imitate his practice; if we believe he knew how to live, we must seek the grace to live like him.”*

Therefore, we must constantly be examining our walk of faith and if we are progressing in becoming more like our Master or if we are failing to progress as we are continually immersed in the world. **“STEP INSIDE”** and allow God to shine His light and show you where you need to work and grow, where you need to confess, where you need to forgive. **“STEP INSIDE”** and let Christ work on your heart. **“STEP INSIDE”** and allow the practice of self-examination to help you face the real within. Don’t be afraid. God is ready to lovingly develop your soul. Let Him.