



# Seedlings

*"Little thoughts that grow big results."*

Paula J. Marolewski

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# God and Daring

*"God and daring! Daring is not imprudence. Daring is not recklessness." Jose Escriva*

Too many people view Christianity as a milksop ... nice people meeting in a nice building doing nice things. The words "adventure," "excitement," and "risk" don't come to mind when thinking about Christianity.

Strange, when you read through Hebrews 11 of the great heroes of the faith, "men of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38), who believed great things, achieved great things, and suffered great things.

Strange, when you consider Jesus' confrontations with authority, Peter's miracles, and Paul's impressive litany in II Corinthians 11 which included beatings, stonings, and shipwrecks.

Strange, when you remember Gladys Aylward who led 100 children through war-torn China to safety, Bruce Olsen who – at 19 – walked into the South American jungle to evangelize a Stone Age tribe, and Dave Wilkerson who set the gangs of New York on fire for Jesus.

God and daring do go together! We serve a mighty God who is both our great Deliverer and our conquering King: he dared much to save us ... let us dare much to serve him!

- Would you describe your faith as daring? If not, what holds you back from taking risks for God?
- What issue burns in your heart? Social justice? The growth of the Church? The salvation of the lost?
- What new action can you take to make an impact on the issue that you are most intensely concerned about?

# Stretch Your Brain!

*"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Psalm 119:11*

*"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." II Timothy 2:15*

We don't place much emphasis on memorizing the Bible these days – at least as adults. There may be Bible memorization in children's Sunday School, and teens sometimes have quiz teams where they work at packing in the Scripture, and even in college I remember a Swordbearer's group. But as an adult?

We claim our brains aren't as limber as they used to be. We point to our schedules and say we don't have time. We shrug our shoulders and admit we just don't consider it to be that important.

But consider the two verses above – in order to avoid sin and accomplish good, we have to know the Bible well. Memorization is an important part of knowing God's Word and hiding it in our heart.

Can everyone memorize to the same degree, and with the same degree of ease? Of course not. But I would challenge you that most of us do not work up to our potential – not even close!

So I challenge you: push yourself! See how far you truly can go! Take pride in every verse or passage you commit to memory!

Here are a few tips that will help you learn the Scriptures to your highest capacity:

- Pick a translation you understand. NIV, RSV, NAS: whatever works for you.
- Select a passage you can handle. Single verses, short groups of verses, long sections: whatever you are able to readily memorize.
- Find your real capacity by pushing yourself occasionally to see if you can memorize longer passages. If you find yourself getting frustrated or disappointed, you are probably pushing yourself beyond your limits – let it go, and don't worry about it.
- Find a way to keep the verse or verses constantly in front of you. Index cards tucked into your mirror, on your bulletin board at work, or as bookmarks in your daily calendar can all be helpful aids.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Don't worry about memorizing things in a day or in a week. The longer you keep at it, the longer you will keep it in your memory. Some passages may take months to memorize – but they will be with you for life!

# Stop Wasting Time

*“Get rid of those useless thoughts which are at best a waste of time.” Jose Escriva*

Author-physician A. J. Cronin calculated that only 8% of our worries were real and legitimate. All the rest – 92% – were composed of things that couldn’t happen, had already happened, were beyond our control, or were simply petty.

That means that most of us are wasting a whole lot of time and effort every day! Consider the good thoughts and positive mental activity that could be taking place during the minutes and hours, days and weeks, we spend time in useless worry.

- How much time do you waste worrying about things that may never happen, or that have already happened?
- What is the subject of those worries?
- Why do you worry about them?

Consider the following verses:

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:2

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” Colossians 3:2

- What practical steps can you take to renew your mind and set your mind on things above?

# Becoming Heavenly-Minded

*“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.” Matthew 24:42*

Are you alert for the Lord’s coming? Do you “long for his appearing” (II Timothy 4:8)? Is heaven your bright, eternal hope (Romans 8:22-25)?

Heaven can seem very far away – removed and distant from our world. With long hours at the office, children to care for, constant cell phones ringing and all the rest of it, eternity is a word that is in the Book but often far from our heart.

What difference would it make if we were on the alert for heaven? If we set our hope there, and kept our eyes on the prize?

- We might handle trials and difficulties better: “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” (II Corinthians 4:17)
- We might have more courage, knowing that the war has already been won. “The last enemy that will be abolished is death.” (I Corinthians 15:26)
- We might take more care to live a holy life. “But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.” (I Thessalonians 5:8)

These are just a few of the benefits we reap by keeping our eyes focused on the hope of heaven – there are many more.

So don’t wander off the track or sit down on the sidelines. Keep your eyes on the finish line – your reward is waiting!

- How often do you think of heaven or eternity? What do you think about it?
- What areas of your life would benefit from having an eternal mindset?
- How can you incorporate a heavenly perspective in those areas of your life?
- What are you most looking forward to in heaven?

## Neither Poverty Nor Riches

*“Two things I asked of You, do not refuse me before I die:  
Keep deception and lies far from me,  
Give me neither poverty nor riches;  
Feed me with the food that is my portion,  
That I not be full and deny You and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’  
Or that I not be in want and steal,  
And profane the name of my God.”  
– Proverbs 30:7-9*

I remember the first time I really noticed these verses. They jumped off the page, and I knew God was asking me to make this prayer my own. I was fine with the part that said “Give me neither poverty” but my tongue stumbled on the “nor riches”! Oh, how I wrestled with the words as they became a beacon to reveal hidden sin in my heart!

Greed and envy are subtle enemies, and pervasive in our materialistic culture. “I want...” becomes our refrain, spoken and unspoken, conscious and unconscious. I Timothy 6:6 assures us that “Godliness with contentment is great gain,” but we reply, “I will certainly be content as long as I have everything I want!”

- Examine your heart, your actions, your thoughts ... and your checkbook and credit card statement. Have you slipped, knowingly or unknowingly, into the sins of greed or envy? If so, spend time in prayer and confession.
- Are you content? Why or why not?
- Pray the above verses from Proverbs. Your heart may resist; persevere until these words become your own true desire.

# Afflicted But Not Crushed

*“Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him .... He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends, He may throw me among strangers, He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me – still He knows what He is about.” – John Henry Cardinal Newman*

To a culture driven by a desire for entertainment, health, wealth, and prosperity, the above words are shocking. Even as a Christian, I don't like them. I don't want sickness, perplexity, sorrow, loneliness, and desolation. And I don't like the fact that God may ask any or all of those things from me to bring about his own glory and his own purpose.

But that is the truth. Paul writes in II Corinthians 4:7-12, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you.”

- Are you or is someone you love struggling with pain in some area – financial trouble, emotional upheaval, mental doubt, difficult relationships, physical illness?
- What is your response to this trial?
- Commit the trial to God: ask for the grace to glorify Jesus in the midst of trials and suffering, and for insight to see how the power of God, the wisdom of God, and the love of God are at work.

# He Sets the Prisoner Free

*“He breaks the power of cancelled sin,  
he sets the prisoner free:  
his blood can make the foulest clean;  
his blood availed for me.”*

– Charles Wesley, “O For A Thousand Tongues To Sing”

Sometimes, as I see sin’s strong hold on people – including myself – I become discouraged. Deep-grained anger destroys relationships. Addictions turn smiling people into violent criminals. Envy embitters the heart. And I think to myself, “Surely, it is hopeless! The sin is too strong; even God can’t seem to help this mess.”

But that is a lie. Jesus “breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free.” Colossians 2:13-15 puts it this way: “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.”

Never forget – Jesus conquered all sin and all evil on the cross. It is because of his victory that Paul says in II Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

There is always hope!

- Is there someone in bondage to sin whom you have given up praying for because you feel hopeless? If so, reaffirm your faith in the sovereign grace and power of God, available to us in Jesus Christ. Commit to pray for that person regularly.
- Do you feel in bondage to a certain sin yourself? Feel “stuck” and helpless to overcome it? Power, grace, mercy, and hope are yours, too. Confess your sin, repent, and ask God to help you walk the victorious life in Christ. It may not be easy, but because of Jesus, it is possible.

# Do Not Fret

*“Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing.” Psalm 37:8*

David had plenty to fret about – he was chased, hounded, attacked, and assaulted for years. Yet he stated, “Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing.”

Fretting truly does lead to evildoing. It erodes our trust in the Lord. It destroys our peace. It makes us edgy, nervous, and anxious. It undermines our physical health. It drives a wedge into relationships.

So how do we stop fretting? David provides the answer a verse earlier in the same psalm: “Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him.” When you are fretting, you are not resting. When you are resting, you are not fretting. The very antithesis of fretting is to rest, to wait, to be patient, to trust. And all that comes when we move our focus off ourselves and the thing that is causing us to fret, and onto the Lord, who is sovereign over all.

- How much time do you spend fretting? What do you fret about?
- Do you think that the Lord either isn't concerned or isn't able to deal with the things you are fretting about? If so, why?
- Memorize I Peter 5:7: “Cast all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you.”

# A Solemn Commission

*“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.” II Timothy 4:1-2*

*“I solemnly charge you ...”* The words roll off your tongue with grandeur and nobility. Paul calls God and Christ as witness to his charge to young Timothy. He then delivers his commission: Preach! Be ready! Reprove, rebuke, exhort!

To Paul, church wasn't about sipping coffee in the sanctuary on Sunday morning. Ministry wasn't a volunteer list tacked up on the bulletin board. The church was the kingdom of God at work in the world, and ministry was a matter of commitment, rigor, suffering, and purpose.

Perhaps it's time to re-think how we approach ministry. How we commission people to do ministry. What we expect out of ministry.

Ministry should be done with a purpose. People who are called into that ministry should be commissioned by the church body to fulfill their divinely-appointed charge. And the results of the ministry should be regularly examined, to make sure it is bringing forth good fruit.

When we do so, the kingdom of God will transform our world!

- What is God's calling to you right now? (Remember, God may call you to very different ministries over the course of your life.)
- Are you struggling with feeling like your calling has turned into monotonous routine? Or a thankless, fruitless task? If so, why? Is it a problem inside you (for instance, in your attitude or spirit), or a problem outside you (for example, are you burdened down by unnecessary red tape that is impeding your success)?
- What would it do for your approach and attitude if the apostle Paul were to give you a commissioning statement like he did for Timothy?
- How can you and your church better commission and support others in their ministries?

# Have You Committed an Omission?

*“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.” Proverbs 3:27*

Sins of omission are subtle. Easy to fall into. Whereas you may not be able to deny going out and getting drunk or cheating on your spouse, there’s no “evidence” if you turn a blind eye to someone in need, drop a “tip” rather than a “tithe” into the offering plate as it is passed, or forget to pray for family members, friends, neighbors, or missionaries.

Ask yourself:

- Have I been interceding in prayer as I should for the people I know?
- Have I been giving financially as the Lord would want?
- Have I been generous with my time, effort, and talents to help those in need?
- If I have been withholding good that is within my power to do, what am I going to do to change?

# A Dream Denied

*“For our good God sometimes tries our courage and our love, depriving us of the things that seem to us, and which really are, very good for the soul. And if he sees us ardent in their pursuit, and yet humble, tranquil, and resigned to doing without and to the privation of the thing sought, he gives us blessings greater in the privation than in the possession of the thing desired. For in all things and everywhere, God loves those who with good heart and simplicity, on all occasions and in all events, can say to him, ‘Thy will be done.’” Francis de Sales*

“He gives us blessings greater in the privation than in the possession of the thing desired.” Those words stung the first time I read them. They still sting now, years later. Because I have had dreams denied to me.

Good dreams. Dreams whose fulfillment would have glorified God. Dreams that touched the core of my soul, the essence of my being. But dreams that were denied.

It is perhaps the hardest lesson I have ever learned, and I don’t know that I have fully learned it yet: I must love God more than my dreams. Even good dreams. Trust him to do what is right, even when it hurts. Say “Thy will be done” ... whatever his will is, no matter how many tears I may cry, despite the pain, right through the grief. “Thy will be done.”

- Have you ever desired and sought after something good, and had it denied to you? What was it?
- How did you respond to the denial?

Consider the following verses:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” James 1:2-5

- Trials consist of many things, including sometimes being denied good things that we very much want. How can the above verses help you to focus on what is truly important in life?
- What wisdom, blessings, or character development have you gained as a result of being denied something good?

# Get Your Perspective Right

*“All right: that person has behaved badly toward you. But, haven’t you behaved worse toward God?” Jose Escriva*

How easy it is to get on my high horse when someone offends me! Full of self-righteousness, I gripe and murmur and complain to all and sundry of how hurt/irritated/angry/victimized I am. No wonder I can find it hard to forgive! The focus is all on me.

When that happens, it is imperative to get the focus off myself, and onto Christ. Ephesians 4:32 commands us to “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

As I focus on Christ, I remember all that he has done for me. I remember my sin, and his incomparable grace in forgiving it. And when I remember all that he has forgiven, then the offense someone else has given me suddenly becomes not the breeding ground for resentment and anger, but a field where the seeds of forgiveness, hope, reconciliation, and grace can be sown.

- Are you holding any offenses close to your chest, refusing or believing it impossible to forgive the person who hurt you?
- Spend time reviewing your sins, both against God and others. Then, remember that Jesus has forgiven them all – every single one of them, even the ones that were the most heinous. And he did it freely, and with great love. Consider what Jesus went through on the cross to achieve your forgiveness.
- Ask God for the grace, strength, and love to forgive the person who hurt you.

# Devotion, Not Distraction

*“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving.” Colossians 4:2*

I am glad that Paul admonished us to “keep alert” in prayer ... because I need that admonition all too often. I get distracted. I get tired. I get bored.

I have found certain aides to keeping alert in prayer:

- Writing my prayers out so that I am forced to focus on the words.
- Using the Scriptures as an outline for my prayers so that I pray more comprehensively for a situation. For instance, I have used I Corinthians 13 while praying for a troubled marriage, praying through each aspect of love that is mentioned there.
- Praying prayers written by other people, such as those found in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.
- Spending time in worship to focus on God and who he is, and letting the words of the songs become my prayer.
- Scheduling time to pray when I am energized and at my best, rather than when I am tired.

Consider:

- What is your main barrier to effective prayer? Do you get distracted? Tired? Bored? Busy?
- What has helped you in the past to keep alert in prayer?
- What new steps could you take in the future?

# Jesus Our High Priest

*“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 4:14-16*

Have you ever sinned and felt that you had to “make things right” before you could come to God? You knew that God was holy and just, so you desperately tried to “become righteous” before coming to him so that you wouldn’t offend him.

It’s strange how we can get the most basic truths backward. Jesus came, died for us, rose from the dead, and serves now and forever as our high priest because we sinned. Because we cannot make things right on our own. Because there is no way we could possibly avoid offending God.

When you sin, don’t focus on the sin, and don’t focus on yourself. Don’t try to “make things right” on your own. Ironically, your very efforts are keeping you away from the God you crave fellowship with, because they are your efforts.

Instead, remember Jesus: your high priest. Your intercessor. Your advocate before the Father. He is sympathetic to your weakness. He came because of your sin. None of this is a surprise to him.

Because of what he did on the cross, you can come with confidence to him. Did you hear that? With confidence! Not with worry or fear, but with confidence, knowing that he is ready, willing, and able to provide you with all the grace and mercy you need to forgive your sin and overcome it forever. He is ready to help in your time of need.

- Do you have a sin you need to bring before the Lord? What has been stopping you from doing so?

Picture in your mind Jesus as your high priest. Imagine his compassionate eyes, his confident stance, his outstretched arms, his scarred hands. Place your sin in his hands. Allow him to take the sin from you. Open your hands and to receive the mercy and grace you need from him.

# Where Are You Drinking From?

*“For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”* Jeremiah 2:13

What an indictment! The Israelites had turned away from God, the fountain of living water, and turned to idols – broken cisterns that could not possibly satisfy.

But perhaps it’s time we looked in the mirror. Would God have any reason to say these terrible words to us? Here are some “broken cisterns” that Christians can be tempted to buy into:

- “Gospel lite” preaching that portrays Jesus as our friend, sin as our mistakes, and the Christian life as our party where prayer provides all the refreshments.
- Post-modern thought that proclaims, “What’s true for you may not be true for me,” and, “There are no objective morals, just differing opinions.”
- Social expectations that make the pursuit of money, career, and ambition the be-all and end-all of existence.

Take time to review the worldview and philosophy that you live by – and make sure you are drinking from the right source:

- How would you define or describe God, sin, salvation, the Bible, and the Christian life?
- How would you respond if someone contended that there were many ways to God or that morality was subjective?
- What is your purpose in life? What are your goals? What are your ambitions?

# Faith and Failure

*“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” Luke 22:31-32*

These words of Jesus underscore the entire drama of Peter’s bravery at following Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, his angry tri-fold denial, his bitter weeping in the black of the night.

What impresses me is that Jesus did not pray that Peter’s courage wouldn’t fail. He didn’t pray that Peter wouldn’t deny him. He didn’t pray for Peter’s will. And he didn’t, because he knew that Peter would sin. Knew it ahead of time; knew it was inevitable that the rock would shatter.

What Jesus prayed – knowing these things – was that Peter’s *faith* would not fail. Why this focus on faith? Because as long as you have faith, you have everything:

- By faith, you know you can be forgiven for every sin, no matter how terrible.
- By faith, you know that failure isn’t the end, but is a place to grow in wisdom, character, and humility.
- By faith, you know that you can be strong again, and that you can strengthen others.

Too often, we look at sin and failure as the end of the road. We fail – and we stop dead in our tracks. We sin – so we assume we can never accomplish anything good ever again. We betray the Lord – and we believe that we will never be worthy to speak his name again. But in his words, Jesus declared that sin isn’t the final answer – faith is.

- Have you allowed sin to stop you in your tracks? Have you listened to the voice of Satan whispering that you are a failure, so you should give up completely?
- If you have not confessed your sin, do so after reading I John 1:9.
- Once you have confessed your sin, pray that the Lord would help you to put it behind you and to move forward with confidence.

# Be Wise!

*“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.” James 3:17*

When you hear the word “wisdom,” do you picture an old, bearded guru sitting on top of a mountain? Do you think privately, “I can’t possibly be ‘wise’ – that’s for special, super-holy saints, not for me!”

But we – all of us – are called to be wise, and James describes very clearly what that wisdom looks like. It is “pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.”

Do you notice something interesting about that list? It doesn’t say, “The wisdom from above involves a rare and mysterious enlightenment,” or “The wisdom from above is reserved for special men and women who are somehow holier than everyone else.” Instead, each item on the list describes a *character trait* – traits that are completely within everybody’s grasp.

If wisdom is a matter of character, then being wise is primarily about how we *approach* a situation, not about whether we have *answers* to every dilemma.

To begin to think of wisdom as it is described in James 3:17, consider a perplexing or difficult situation you are currently facing and ask yourself:

- Have I been responding to this situation in a pure manner, or do I have sin that I need to confess and repent of?
- Have I been seeking peace in this situation, or have I been adding fuel to the fire?
- Have I been gentle with everyone involved, including myself?
- Have I been reasonable in what I say and how I say it, or have I been reacting out of my emotions?
- Have I been willing to extend mercy and forgiveness to other’s faults, or am I holding onto my hurts and grudges?
- Have I been willing to do good to the others involved, or am I withholding myself from them?
- Have I been unwavering in my commitment to what is right?
- Have I been honest and open with everyone involved?

# No Comparison

*“Be an instrument of gold or of steel, of platinum or of iron – big or small, delicate or rough. They’re all useful. Each serves its own purpose. Who would dare say that the carpenter’s saw is any less useful than the surgeon’s scalpel? Your duty is to be an instrument.” - Jose Escriva*

We live in a culture of comparisons. We compare our bodies to the models on magazine covers, we compare our lives to the excitement of a TV drama, we compare our houses to the mansion on the next block. And yes, in church we compare our gifts, our calling, and our service with names like James Dobson, Billy Graham, or Mother Theresa.

Such comparisons are deadly for many reasons, but let us focus here on just one. When we compare ourselves with others and then disparage ourselves and our gifts and calling as “not good enough,” we are less likely to put time, effort, and energy into those gifts and calling. It’s like the child on the playground who sits on the sidelines and pouts because he didn’t get picked to be team captain. Rather than play the position he is good at, he would rather do nothing at all.

If we act the same way, the advance of the kingdom of God grinds to a halt. It’s time to stop making useless comparisons – and start living the life God has called us to!

- What are your spiritual gifts? Do you feel that God is calling you to a specific task or role? If so, what is it?
- Have you been guilty of making inappropriate comparisons? If so, confess this to God, and ask him to give you a true perspective of yourself and others.
- To help understand the impact you have in the world, make a list of everyone with whom you have regular contact – at home, in your neighborhood, at work, at church, etc. Then ask yourself: How am I currently ministering to each of these people? How could I minister to them in the future?

# Sustain the Weary

*“The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.”* Isaiah 50:4

The above words, spoken prophetically by Isaiah, truly describe Jesus’ life when he walked this earth: Jesus knew how to sustain the weary one with a word. He brought hope to the hopeless, life to the dying, comfort to the grief-stricken, peace to the distraught.

Since we are to follow in his steps, how can we “sustain the weary one with a word”? We are surrounded by people who are life-weary and heart-sick, but we don’t seem to always be doing that good a job at sustaining them – strengthening, encouraging, uplifting, supporting. Take time to identify someone in your life who is hurting, then seek to sustain them by:

- **Spending time really listening.** Remember, a three-minute conversation on Sunday morning or on a lunch break at work isn’t going to sustain the soul of someone in trouble. If your life is busy, schedule in time to be a good friend.
- **Avoiding platitudes.** When people are hurting, the last thing they need is a flip response that minimizes their pain.
- **Choosing your words carefully.** We tend to ramble on when we are nervous. Think about what you want to say, say it quietly and succinctly, and then stop.
- **Accepting silence.** Don’t be afraid of silence. Sometimes, there is nothing that can be said in the moment of grief.

# How Hungry Are You?

*“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.’”*  
John 4:34

Think for a moment about what it feels like when you are hungry. Very hungry. The growling in your stomach, the shakiness in your limbs, the focusing of all your thoughts on getting food.

Jesus equated his need to do the will of God with his need for food. In essence, he said, “I can’t live apart from doing God’s will. If I don’t accomplish his purpose, I will die. I hunger for his will as if I were starving; my desire to do his will eclipses everything else in life.”

Is that our attitude? Is accomplishing God’s purpose our central focus in life? Would we rather die than wander away from him and his will for us?

Or is it possible that we could spiritually starve and die ... and never even notice the fact? Could we go about our daily routines, never thinking about God, about eternity, about holiness, about saving the lost or advancing the kingdom?

Unfortunately, unlike our bodily hunger, we can deaden our spiritual hunger until the pangs no longer bother us. Fortunately, God can help quicken our hunger again when we turn to him!

- As you consider Jesus’ words above, ask yourself, “How hungry am I for God’s will and purpose?”
- What aspects of life can deaden your spiritual hunger? What do you need to do to address those areas?
- We often think about God’s purpose “for our lives,” but that can be a bit too broad a scope. Think about your day today. What is God’s purpose in your life *today*? What would God like to see you accomplish in the next 24 hours?

# The Deceitfulness of Sin

*“But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Hebrews 3:13*

I wish that Satan walked around with a placard that said, “Satan! Beware!” But he doesn’t. Instead, he is “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44) and appears as “an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). Some of his most common tools are deceit, half-truths, lies, falsehoods, and trickery.

The simple fact is that we need each other in order to combat the subtleties of sin. We can’t expect that we will never be tricked. We can’t assume that other people will always see sin for what it is. We need to be watching out for one another, encouraging each other in the truth of the Word of God, helping to keep each other on the straight and narrow. Paul speaks on the same theme in Galatians 6:1, “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.”

- Look back over your life: where has the deceitfulness of sin tripped you up in the past?
- Are you involved in any activity, relationship, or thought-pattern right now that should be examined more closely? Perhaps you have felt uneasy about it, or some friends or family members have raised questions or concerns about your involvement?
- Are any of your friends or family members involved in or leaning toward sinful activities, relationships, or thought-patterns? How can you encourage them toward a holy lifestyle?

# Your Will Be Done

*“Without reserve, without ‘if,’ without ‘but,’ without exception, without limitation, Your will be done.” - Francis de Sales*

Imagine living back in a time when kings truly were the sovereign power of the land. You are standing before the throne, and the crowned figure in front of you has just given you a command. And you say ...

“Well, Your Majesty, I’d like to, as long as you bear in mind that ...”

“I would be glad to do that, Your Highness, if you will do something for me in return ...”

“Certainly I can do that, O King, but only after ...”

A human king would never tolerate such disobedience, presumption, or half-heartedness. Yet we treat the Almighty God of the universe with such phraseology regularly. We point out how busy our lives are, so we don’t have time to do what he is calling us to do. We try to bargain with the omnipresent word “if.” We make exceptions to his commandments because we obviously have knowledge that he isn’t privy to.

It’s time to remember the circumstances in which Jesus himself spoke the words “Your will be done” ... in the garden, sweating drops of blood, in the face of excruciating pain and agony, knowing he would bear the wrath of God in our place. Truly, Jesus was our living example of these words: “Without reserve, without ‘if,’ without ‘but,’ without exception, without limitation, Your will be done.”

- When is the will of God easy for you to do? When is it hard?
- When the will of God is hard for you to do, what actions, words, or attitudes make it easier for you to ignore and avoid his will?
- When the will of God is hard for you to do, what actions, words, or attitudes make it easier for you to commit yourself to accomplishing his will?

# True Comfort

*“I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, and of the son of man who is made like grass; that you have forgotten the Lord your Maker, who stretched out the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth; that you fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, as he makes ready to destroy? But where is the fury of the oppressor?” - Isaiah 51:12-13*

These are times of upheaval. Natural disasters, political friction, bloody wars, and economic chaos are the subject of every newspaper headline. It is enough to tie your stomach in knots, and to make you stare into the darkness at night ... exhausted, but too tense to sleep.

But through the prophet Isaiah, God calls us to a higher standard: “Why are you afraid of people? Why are you sleepless about the economy? Why are you terrified about what is happening in the national and international political scene? Have you forgotten? I am the sovereign Lord of the Universe and there is nothing – *nothing* – that is outside my control. I have sworn that all things will work out for good if you love me. Why are you afraid?”

You can almost hear him snap divine fingers dismissively: “Where is the fury of the oppressor? The worst that people – the worst that the world – can throw at you is nothing compared to my strength and my power. Remember this: and be comforted!”

- What are you afraid of? Why?
- What does fear do to you? What does it do to your relationship with God?
- What is your view of God? What word-picture can you use to describe his sovereignty?
- What difference would it make to your fears if you could truly grasp the sovereignty of God?

# Confronted by Deity

*“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” – Luke 5:8*

Jesus had just been preaching from Peter’s boat. He finished teaching the crowds, and told Peter and the other disciples to sail out further and let down their nets. Peter reproached Jesus that they had worked hard all night and caught nothing, but he obeyed ... and pulled in the catch of his life.

When Peter saw the fish spilling over into the boat, the nets breaking, the boats sinking, and, no doubt, a smile on Jesus’ lips, his reaction was immediate and definitive: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”

Peter knew he had been confronted by Deity. God was sitting in his boat. His first reaction was not praise for the miracle, as we might have thought – it was complete horror as he compared his sinfulness to the Holy Lamb of God in the stern.

- Compare Peter’s response to our general attitudes in the church. Have we become too comfortable with God, taking him, his holiness, and his gifts for granted? If so, how has this happened?
- Compare Peter’s response to your personal attitude toward God. Have you become too comfortable with God, taking him, his holiness, and his gifts for granted? If so, how has this happened and what will you do to change it?
- Have you ever prostrated yourself before God, either in public or in private? If you haven’t, would you be willing to do so, or do you feel an internal resistance at the thought? Why?

# Commanded to Suffer

*“Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” 2 Timothy 2:3*

In a culture that preaches instant gratification, aspirin for every headache, and a health-and-wealth gospel, the command from Paul to Timothy hits us like a slap in the face: “Suffer hardship with me!”

Suffer hardship? Why would I want to do that? I want to avoid suffering at all costs, thank you very much!

But Paul knew that the Church was at war in the world against the forces of darkness, and by extension, each Christian was a soldier of Christ Jesus. Soldiers are not in the army to sit idly by, munching popcorn and watching movies. They are there to do battle ... and both the preparation for battle and the battle itself entail significant hardship. A true soldier accepts this fact.

Consider just a few of the hardships a soldier must endure:

- He trains rigorously to achieve his top physical condition.
- He studies the enemy’s tactics.
- He enters enemy territory.
- He experiences physical pain and emotional stress.
- He risks his life for a greater cause.

Each of the above points has a spiritual corollary to the Christian life. Examine yourself and honestly answer these questions:

- Am I in top spiritual condition? How am I doing in each of the spiritual disciplines (prayer, study, meditation, worship, giving, etc.)? Where do I need to strengthen myself?
- Am I practicing discernment every day about what is going on around me? Do I know where danger areas lie – in my relationships, in what I hear on TV, in my own thought patterns, in my church life, etc.?
- Am I willing to take the fight into the enemy camp? Confront sin in my own life, or in the lives of others? Volunteer with organizations on the front line of missions, justice, or peace?
- Am I willing to undergo need, deprivation, pain, and stress if that is what it takes to accomplish God’s will?
- Am I willing to die for Jesus Christ?

# Happiness Doubled By Wonder

*“I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.”* – G. K. Chesterton

We say “Thank you” so frequently and automatically that it becomes all too easy to have the phrase mean nothing. “Thank you for holding the door.” “Thank you for waiting.” “Thank you for inviting me over.” The words become more the rote fulfillment of an obligation than conveyors of any inward reality or emotional outpouring.

G. K. Chesterton gives us a fresh view of thanks, claiming that thanksgiving is “the highest form of thought.” Why? One reason is that thanksgiving brings us outside of ourselves. You cannot be thankful for something you did for yourself: you are thankful for something someone else did for you. For the Christian, thanksgiving is ultimately God-focused, looking to the one who is the Divine Giver. As such, thanksgiving reinforces a proper view of God and of ourselves, and in fact puts us in positive relationship and communication with God himself.

Chesterton goes one step further, then, by defining gratitude as “happiness doubled by wonder.” True thanksgiving can never be mere words: it encompasses and reflects the soul. Gratitude is an upwelling of the heart, and a realization that “every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17).

- Have your prayers of thanksgiving to God become dry or automatic? If so, why?
- Spend time thinking about the blessings that God has given you. Consider what your life would be like without them – the void and emptiness and pain and hardship you would experience in their absence.
- Write out a prayer of thanksgiving in the form of a psalm, going into detail why you are thankful for each blessing, and expressing that thanks to the best of your ability.

# My Dread Champion

*“But the Lord is with me like a dread champion; therefore, my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will be utterly ashamed, because they have failed, with an everlasting disgrace that will not be forgotten.” – Jeremiah 20:11*

The season of Advent is full of the names of God: Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. We sing of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man. We proclaim him King of kings and Lord of lords in the rousing Hallelujah chorus.

But there are other names for God, sometimes mentioned just once, hidden away in the scripture texts, unseen and unpondered. Jeremiah 20:11 contains one of these names: the Lord my dread Champion.

The prophet Jeremiah was at a dark point in his life. He felt that God had deceived him. He had become a laughingstock among men. His trusted friends had betrayed him. He cursed the day he was born. But in the midst of his despair, he made this great proclamation: “The Lord is with me like a dread Champion.”

He pictured God as a warrior: not fighting *beside* him, but fighting *for* him. A champion is one who fights on your behalf – taking up your cause and going into battle so that you don’t have to do so. When the champion wins, you win.

Jeremiah affirmed that his persecutors would be overcome and would fail utterly – because God was fighting for him. That cry of faith sustained him through the dark night and gave him the courage he needed to continue on a long and difficult road.

- What battles are you fighting? What enemies are you facing?
- Have you been relying on God in the midst of these battles, or on your own strength? With what results?
- What difference would it make to your faith and your courage to truly understand that God is fighting for you as a dread champion – that is, one who is incredibly strong, skilled, and cunning; a champion who *cannot* be beaten?

# Go Forward!

*“Always to go forward, never to turn back!” – Junipero Serra*

What keeps you from moving forward? Fear? Shame and guilt? Failure? Weakness?

There are many reasons we do not go forward: forward into new ministries, new careers, new relationships, new freedom, new horizons. We may not want to turn back, but we do, overcome by the dark cloud of the things that are holding us down, sapping our strength, and destroying our courage.

Junipero Serra had one response for this: “Always to go forward, never to turn back!”

*Go forward:* even when the fear clutches at your chest – because God is at your side.

*Go forward:* even when your past is full of shame, sin, and guilt – because God has forgiven you entirely.

*Go forward:* even when you have failed before – because God redeems even failure to use for his good purposes.

*Go forward:* even when you are at your weakest – because God’s power will be perfected in your human frailty.

No matter what your past contains, no matter what present trials you are enduring, no matter what fears the future may hold, make this the battle cry of your life: “Always to go forward, never to turn back!”

- Is there anything you should be moving forward into – a calling, relationship, career, ministry, etc. – that you have been avoiding?
- What keeps you from moving forward, and why does it stop you?
- Imagine for a moment what it would be like if you did move forward – what might you accomplish or become?
- What verses can you find that will challenge the things that are stopping you from moving forward, and that will affirm God’s grace and strength to meet your needs?

# The Revival Trap

*“Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Return to Me,” declares the Lord of hosts, “that I may return to you,” says the Lord of hosts.” – Zechariah 1:3*

It is easy to fall into the revival trap: to pray for revival but to take no personal responsibility for it.

It happens when we want the outward fire and emotion and fervor of revival ... but we don't want to make any changes to the sin that saps our inward strength.

It happens when we want unbelievers “out there” to experience salvation ... but we don't realize that we ourselves are in desperate need of sanctification.

It happens when we want to see God do a great work for us ... but we don't want to put forth any effort to do great works for God.

Zechariah declares God's response to the revival trap: “Return to me, that I may return to you.”

It is as if God is saying, “So you want revival? You want the fire, the zeal, the conversions, the miracles? The ball is in your court, not mine! What will you do about it? Will you confess and repent of your sin? Your apathy? Your ignorance? Your rebellion? Your laziness? Will you return to me with your whole heart and an undivided spirit? Will you follow me 100%? When you do, then I will open heaven and pour out a revival like nothing you have ever dreamed of! *But it starts with you.*”

- How important is it to you that you, your church, and your community experience revival?
- Is there anything that you are you doing or not doing that could prevent revival from happening in your life, your church, and your community?
- If there is something you need to change in your life, what concrete steps will you take to “return to the Lord” so that God can bring revival to your heart, your church, and your community?
- Spend time in prayer for revival in your heart, your church, and your community.

# Preach the Whole Story

*“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” – Luke 19:10*

Never forget for a moment that the cradle of Bethlehem led to the cross of Golgotha. That the tears of the baby crying for his mother’s milk were the foreshadowing of the tears of the Son of Man crying for his Father’s touch. That the carpenter of Nazareth would build the bridge between earth and heaven with the heavy wooden beam he carried up the streets of Jerusalem.

Preach the whole story.

Reach the whole world.

- Spend time meditating on what Christ gave for you – suffered for you – from Bethlehem to Golgotha.
- Play out a dialogue in your mind where you share the gospel with a friend. What verses would you turn to? What would you say? How would you explain the magnitude of sin, the mystery of the incarnation, and the miracle of salvation?
- Pray for your friends, family members, and co-workers who do not know the Lord. Plead with the Lord to pour out his grace upon them to draw them to himself, and for the opportunity to share the gospel with them.

# Are You Ready?

*"I beg God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, all my outward acts, all my inward operations, may be directed purely to the praise and service of his Divine Majesty." – Ignatius of Loyola*

In Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, he exhorts the reader to pray the above prayer, called the Readiness Prayer. It is a particularly appropriate prayer for the advent of the new year, for it re-focuses us on what is truly important in life: living our lives 100% toward the praise and service of God.

Spend serious time in contemplation of this simple prayer. Ask yourself:

- What characterizes my intentions: at work, at home, at church? Why do I do the things that I do?
- What do my outward acts – including what I say – tell about my priorities, goals, and character?
- How do I structure my thought life? What do I put into my mind? What do I dwell on and think about?
- How does my will interact with God's grace? In what circumstances do I tend to work with God, and in which do I tend to fight against him?
- What areas do I need to change so that everything in my life may be "purely to the praise and service" of God?

After you have truly examined yourself and all this prayer is really asking God, make this Readiness Prayer *your* prayer.

# God in a Box

*“Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for me?” – Jeremiah 32:27*

Have you put God in a box? Set limits around him? Made assumptions as to what he would or would not do ... or about what he could or could not do?

Most of us put God in a box occasionally. Perhaps even regularly. We don't believe he *can* do great, powerful, or miraculous things, so we don't bother praying for them ... then we feel perfectly justified in our belief when nothing happens.

We need to examine our beliefs about God and get them in line with what Scripture says about him: He is the LORD, the God of all flesh. He is the all-powerful, almighty, and sovereign King. Nothing is outside of his control. Nothing is too difficult for him.

When we believe the truth about God, it will transform our prayers. Will we always get huge, miraculous answers to our prayers? By no means. God is sovereign, and that means *he* chooses how to answer our prayers.

The point is not believing that God will do *a certain thing* that we ask: that is too narrow a focus. Instead, it is about believing that God is capable of doing *all things*, and that he will *always* act for our good and to his glory.

That is where miracles begin.

- Have you ever stopped praying for something (or perhaps never even started) because you thought it was “too difficult” for God? If so, is God calling you to begin praying about it again?
- What challenges are you facing right now in your life? Are you praying about those challenges in faith, believing that God is able to work powerfully in and through them?
- What difficult situations are going on in the lives of your family and friends?
- Spend time in prayer for yourself and others about these challenges and difficulties. Pray that God would increase your faith, and show you how to pray effectively.

# The Least of These

*“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” – Matthew 25:40*

Do you remember the litany of “the least of these”? The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner.

It is so easy when we have food, shelter, comfort, family, friends, and freedom to cozy down in our little nook and shut our eyes to the rest of the world.

But “the least of these” are still there. And you don’t have to go far to find them:

- They are in your city’s jail or prison. Alone, caught in the cords of sin, fighting anger, depression, addiction, and fear.
- They are in your church. The young mother struggling to feed her children, desperate that no one know how tight things really are.
- They are in your local nursing home. Once vibrant parts of the church and community, they now sit lonely and forgotten.
- They are in your office. The odd-man-out, the socially-awkward woman, trying to fit in and failing miserably.
- They are in your neighborhood. The young boy who hides the bruises on his arm. The little girl who hides the bruises on her heart.

You have to get out of your comfort zone to find “the least of these.” Jesus knows who they are. Do you?

- Who do you know right now whom you could reach out to with help, support, and encouragement?
- What is one activity you could engage in this year that would bring you out of your comfort zone and into contact with “the least of these”?

# The Praise Test

*“A man is tested by the praise accorded him.” – Proverbs 27:21*

We often say that we are tested by the hard things in life: trials, temptations, grief, loss, difficulties. But did you know that you are also being tested when things go well and people are praising and congratulating you?

Think of all the ways you might respond to praise from others for a job well done:

*“Oh, there was nothing to it, really.”*

*“I wasn’t that good. I could have done better.”*

*“Yes, I was truly magnificent!”*

*“Thank you! I am so glad you liked it.”*

Praise is a tricky thing, and we often fall into one of two opposite traps: we either deprecate ourselves (false humility, passing the accomplishment off as nothing, denigrating what we did as not very good), or we puff ourselves up (feed our ego, covet adulation, take the praise to ourselves rather than giving glory to God).

Both attitudes are equally destructive, because neither gives appropriate praise to God or reflects an appropriate perspective of self. In contrast, a mature response to praise combines humility, confidence, joy, gratitude, and generosity.

- How do you respond when people praise you? Do you fall into either of the two traps described above?
- How can you be both humble and confident with regard to your abilities?
- What skills, talents, and spiritual gifts has God given you? How have you used them in the past? How are you using them now? How could you use them in the future?

## Learning to Pray

*“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” – Ephesians 3:14-19*

What do you spend your time praying for? It is very easy to fall into the habit of praying almost exclusively for what you might call “tangibles”: money needs, health needs, job needs, etc. And all of those things are perfectly fine – when we have needs, we should pray about them.

But in this prayer found in Ephesians, we have a pointed reminder not to neglect praying for the “intangibles” as well. The spiritual side of things: strength for the inner person, the power of the Spirit, the indwelling of Christ, the growth of faith, the development of love, the understanding of God, the fullness of life.

It is these “intangibles” that ultimately matter the most in life – which is why you will find Paul recording prayers like this throughout the epistles. These are prayers for our character and innermost being; prayers for who we are at the core of our soul. It is prayers like this that have eternal impact on our lives and the lives of others.

- Pray the above prayer for yourself. Don’t rush: dwell on each phrase, and consider what it means to you personally, in your own life’s circumstances.
- Pray the above prayer for someone else whom you know. Again, dwell on each phrase, and prayerfully consider what it means to them as a unique individual.

# A Sacrifice for God

*“Grant me no more than to be a sacrifice for God while there is an altar at hand.” – Ignatius of Antioch*

Our word “martyrdom” comes from the Greek word meaning “witness.” A martyr is one who bears witness with his life to the truth of the gospel.

Ignatius of Antioch longed for martyrdom. Not because he longed for death, but because he longed to give that ultimate witness to the God he loved. He knew the cost of following Jesus and he was willing to pay it: to take up his cross, and follow his Lord.

In one sense, we are all called to be martyrs. We are called to be witnesses of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, no matter what the circumstances and no matter what the cost.

- Have you ever been in a situation where you should have borne witness to God, and instead kept silent? Why?
- Would you be willing to suffer or even die as a witness to Christ?
- What practical steps can you take to help strengthen your faith and your love for God so that you would not hesitate to be a witness for God in life or in death?

# Think First

*“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer.” – Proverbs 15:28*

Have you ever been the victim of a pat answer? You asked a serious question, you bared your soul to someone, you acknowledged internal pain, grief, doubt, or fear – and you got what amounted to a flip response. No thought behind it. No effort at understanding your situation. No consideration for what solution might fit your unique needs.

“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer.” One of the characteristics of Christian maturity is thinking before speaking. Listening with the heart, striving to understand the other person to the greatest degree possible, sifting through Scripture to find what is most appropriate to uplift and encourage, seeking wisdom for every word spoken.

Pat answers are fast and easy. Wisdom takes time and effort. Which would you prefer to receive? Make sure that is what you are giving others!

- Think of a time when you were the victim of a pat answer. How did you react (internally or openly)? Why? What kind of response would have helped you in that situation?
- Think of a time when you gave someone a pat answer. Why did you respond to them in that way? Consider the situation again: if you could go back and do it over, what would you say now?

# A Gracious Work

*“But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.”  
– II Corinthians 8:7*

What is the “gracious work” referenced in the above verse? It is giving. Think of it for a moment: Paul puts giving (and here it is referencing the very practical aspect of financial giving) on the same plane as faith, utterance, knowledge, earnestness, and love.

What do you feel when the offering basket comes around, or when you receive a request for charitable giving in the mail or on the phone?

- Sometimes, you undoubtedly give gladly; you truly understand that this is God’s grace at work in and through you.
- Sometimes, you may resent the call on your checkbook; giving, but giving reluctantly and grudgingly.
- Sometimes, you may look guiltily away; you have the money to give, but would rather keep it for yourself.
- Sometimes, you may not even feel a twinge of conscience as you let the opportunity slip away, too caught up in yourself to even notice.

Giving – even when times are tight and money is scarce – is an outward demonstration of the grace of God at work within us. “Just as you abound in everything ... see that you abound in this gracious work also.”

- When is it easy for you to give? When is it hard?
- How do you decide how much to give to the church and to other philanthropic causes? What criteria do you use?
- Earnestly consider: is your giving in line with Scripture’s teaching?

# Forgiving from the Heart

*“And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall my heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” – Matthew 18:34-35*

Have you ever watched this scene played out? Two children are quarreling. One hits the other. The parent scolds them, and says, “Now, Johnny, say you’re sorry.” And little Johnny grimaces, and says reluctantly, “I’m sorry.” The parent turns to the other child expectantly. Little Jimmy also grimaces, and says, “It’s okay.” But there’s a look in Jimmy’s eye that tells you clearly that little Johnny had better watch out!

How often do we, as adults, do the same thing? Instead of truly forgiving “from the heart,” we tell the offending party that it’s okay ... but inside, we harbor anger and resentment, making careful note of the infraction so that we can pull it out at a later date and use it as ammunition.

God forbids this attitude. He commands us to forgive “from the heart.” He warns us, “Forgiveness isn’t about lip service. It has to be real. Otherwise, I’m not accepting it.”

The fruits of true forgiveness are a restored relationship with the other person, a willingness to bury the incident and never bring it up again, and a sincere desire for the good of the other individual. That, after all, is what it means when God forgives us.

- Are you harboring anger, resentment, or grudges against anyone right now? If so, why? What steps do you need to take to resolve this situation?
- Do you currently need to ask anyone’s forgiveness for an offense? If so, why haven’t you done so yet? What steps do you need to take to resolve this situation?

# Human Busyness vs. God's Business

*"Why that rushing around? Don't tell me it's activity: It's confusion!" – Jose Escriva*

Our calendars, day timers, PDAs, Blackberries, and iPhones are bursting with meetings, tasks, jobs, programs, events ... every minute is scheduled; every hour is full.

Perhaps it's time to schedule in a few hours to do some serious evaluation:

- How much of my schedule is about my *busyness*, and how much is about God's *business*?
- How much stress am I experiencing on a daily basis? What is the source of that stress?
- Do I make time for a Sabbath rest each week? Or do I keep on going 24/7?
- Do I spend quality time with my family? That is, unrushed, uncluttered time when I am not multi-tasking?
- How much time do I have for cultivating deep friendships?
- Do I have the freedom for spontaneity in my schedule?
- Do I have time for personal creativity and recreation?
- How am I engaged in using my spiritual gifts to further God's kingdom?
- Am I focused on what is urgent, or on what is important?
- Do I have trouble being still and silent because my thoughts are always whirling to the next thing on my list?

After careful reflection, ask yourself the following:

- Do I need to make changes in my life? If so, what are they and how will I go about making them?

# Look at the Sparrows

*"Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows." – Luke 12:6-7*

Do you ever question your value? Doubt your worth? Do you sometimes look up at the sky and ask if God really loves you?

God knows how much we struggle with a proper self-esteem. He knows that in the midst of a world that idolizes beauty, strength, riches, and fame, it is hard to remember that each one of us is made in God's image, and is the recipient of his unfathomable love.

That is why God gave us the sparrows.

The most common of all birds, sparrows can be found in country lanes and on city streets, casting a bright eye on the rich and the poor, fluttering past the windows of the healthy and the ill, singing sweetly to the famous and the forgotten.

And God said: "Look at the sparrows. They are so common that most people overlook them – but I never do. I know each feather of each bird, see every fledgling leave the nest, and hear every chirp and twitter. If I do that for the commonest of birds, how much more do you think I am concerned about you: you who are made in my image, you whom I sent my Son to die for, you whom I am preparing heaven for? Never fear! Look at the sparrows and remember your worth, remember your value ... and remember that I love you."

- Do you struggle with having an appropriate sense of self-worth or self-esteem? If so, why?
- Are there certain times when your sense of self-worth plummets? Under what circumstances does that happen? Why?
- What image can you fix in your mind – perhaps a sparrow, perhaps something more personal to you – that can help you remember your true value and the love God has for you?

# A Bond-Servant of Christ

*“Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus...” – Romans 1:1*

We often gloss over the first verse or two in each of the epistles. After all, it’s just Paul giving a standard greeting. Right?

Actually, there is more than that packed into those verses than just “Hi! This is Paul. Hope things are going well for you ...” For instance, look at the first phrase in the book of Romans: “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus.”

A bond-servant. There’s a challenge right there. A bond-servant was one who made a choice to be a lifetime slave to another. You heard that correctly: a slave. That means the person made the choice to give up their rights and decided voluntarily to do – 100% of the time – the will of the other person.

We use a lot of terms to describe our relationship with Christ: Friend to friend, Shepherd to sheep, Groom to bride, Savior to sinner. All of those are absolutely true, and together begin to provide a picture of what our relationship really involves. But we need to add one more to our list to fill out that picture. One that is gritty, and sometimes hard to wrestle with: Master to slave.

- Say aloud, “I am a slave of Christ.” What emotions does that statement bring up? Why?
- What rights do you find it most difficult to give up to Christ? Why?
- When is it most difficult for you to be obedient to Christ? Why?

# Dusty Days

*“For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.” – Psalm 103:14*

I have dusty days.

Days when I am particularly frail. Particularly weak. Particularly prone to give in to temptation.

Days when I am full of questions. Doubt. Worry. Fear.

Days when nothing seems to go right, and every effort I make ends in failure.

Those are my dusty days.

I used to feel guilty when I had one of those days. All I could focus on was how I was failing my Lord. How I wasn't living up to scratch. How disappointed I imagined that God must be in me.

But then, I saw this verse: “He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.” And I finally understood: God asks us to strive toward perfection, but he knows we're not going to reach it in this life. He knows that we are sinners saved – every day – by his grace.

He is mindful that we are but dust.

- What characterizes your “dusty days”? How do you feel on one of those days?
- What do you believe on those days about yourself, and about God? Are those beliefs true or false in light of Scripture?
- The next time you are having a “dusty day,” pray “Lord, I'm having a dusty day today. Everything is going wrong, and I can't seem to do anything right. Thank you for being mindful that I am but dust. Please give me the grace I need to get through this day.”

## Putting Feelings in their Place

*“The feelings we receive from our devotional life are the least of its benefits. The invisible and unfelt grace of God is much greater, and it is beyond our comprehension.” – St. John of the Cross*

We live in a very feeling-oriented culture. We’re supposed to feel good about ourselves, our bodies, our jobs, our churches, our government, our entertainment ... if we don’t feel good about something, then something is very wrong!

That belief system, however, is completely incorrect. To be sure, feelings are an important aspect of life; they are part of how God made us. But feelings are never to be a barometer of truth or well-being. They are too volatile for that, and too easily manipulated.

Take the case of our devotional life: we often think that if we “feel good” after spending time in prayer or Scripture reading, that we have had a “successful” devotional time with God. Maybe. But quite frankly, maybe not. I can feel good but not really have quieted my heart in prayer or been listening to what the Scripture had to say to me. Likewise, I can feel completely miserable after baring my soul to God and hearing truth from his Word.

So how do we know if we have had a “successful” quiet time with God? Well, first, examine your thoughts, your words, and your actions during your quiet time. They are a much more reliable gauge than your feelings because they are objective, not subjective. And second, remind yourself that your goal is not to feel good: it is to connect and communicate with the Lord of Hosts, and to receive the outpouring of his love and grace. And that can happen even if we don’t “feel” anything at all.

- How much do you rely on your feelings as a barometer of truth or well-being?
- How would you characterize your thoughts during a typical quiet time? Are you able to focus on God and his Word and your prayers, or are you easily distracted? If the latter, what distracts you, and why?
- How would you characterize your words during a typical quiet time? Do your prayers contain a balance of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication? Or do you lean more in one direction than another?
- How would you characterize your actions during your quiet time? Do you try to multi-task while having your devotional time? Does your physical posture indicate reverence?
- Do you find it easy or difficult to realize that God’s grace may be at work even if you feel nothing or actually feel terrible? Why?

# Endure

*“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” – Hebrews 12:3*

Good Friday. A day of mock trials, ridicule and scorn, beatings and floggings, a crown of thorns, and a bloody cross. But Christ endured. And because he endured, we can be saved.

Now, today, we also suffer as we strive to advance the Kingdom of God in the world:

- “the world has hated them because they are not of the world” – John 17:14
- “after you have suffered a little while” – I Peter 5:10
- “you have been distressed by various trials” – I Peter 1:6
- “we are afflicted in every way” – II Corinthians 4:8

How do we not grow weary and lose heart during times when our feet are bloody and our heads are bowed? How do we press on to victory when the enemy is pressing in on all sides?

The answer? Consider Jesus. Look to him. Focus on him. He endured more hostility than you or I will ever see. He conquered.

And because he did, so will we.

- What was the most difficult trial in your life? Or what is it, if you are going through it right now?
- Do you find it hard or easy to focus your attention on Jesus in the midst of a trial? Why?
- How can it help you to endure in your trials to truly realize that Jesus endured even greater trials for your sake?

# One Thing

*“One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple.” – Psalm 27:4*

Did you ever make a list of goals for your life? Or, on a smaller scale, jot down a Christmas or birthday wish-list? Chances are, there was more than one item on those lists.

But what if you had just one space to fill in ... just one thing and one thing alone that you could wish for in your whole life? What would it be?

Would it be hard to cut down your list of goals to one single ambition? Difficult to cross off everything on your wish-list until just one item remained?

The psalmist knew his answer: “I want just one thing – and that is, God alone. I want to be with him, behold him, and be in relationship with him. God is my all-in-all, and he is the only thing I want in life.”

- What are your life goals (your full list)?
- Would it be hard to give up all of them for God alone? Why or why not?
- Pray the above verse from the Psalms. If you have difficulty praying it honestly, ask the Lord to make it your heart’s desire.

# Engage Your Brain

*“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.” – 2 Peter 2:1-3*

Never doubt it: evil is alive and well, and it is attacking the Church today.

It’s depressing when you consider it. Not only do we have to fight enemies on the outside – whether that is outright physical persecution or the intangible philosophies of an ungodly society – but we also have to fight heresies inside our own doors.

We cannot let our guard down. We must be sober and alert at all times – engaging our brains to examine everything that comes our way, whether it be from people we meet, the TV, Internet, radio, book, or pulpit.

Fortunately, Peter gives three keys to discern falsehood in these verses. If a book, philosophy, person, or teaching does any of the following, we are to name it for what it is – heresy – and avoid it at all costs:

- Denies Jesus – his Person, his death, or his resurrection.
- Promotes sensuality – focusing on the body and material things rather than on spiritual character and Christian growth.
- Demonstrates greed – preaching God but living like the devil.

So take the time to carefully consider:

- What books am I reading? What and who am I listening to? How do they stack up to these three keys Peter gives?
- What are the popular Christian books and speakers of the day? How do they stack up to these questions?
- Suppose you identify a popular Christian book or teacher as heretical based on one or more of these three points (yes, it does happen): how should you react if another Christian thinks the book or teacher is wonderful?

## “Wouldings”

*“The kind of religion that God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless ‘wouldings’ – those weak inclinations that lack convictions – that raise us but a little above indifference. God, in his word, greatly insists that we be in good earnest, fervent in spirit, and that our hearts be engaged vigorously in our religion: ‘Be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord’ (Romans 12:11, modified KJV).” – Jonathan Edwards*

There’s a world of difference between the word “would” and the word “will.” Consider the following sets of statements:

- “I would have given to that needy family, but ...”
- “I would like to have a regular quiet time, but ...”
- “I would have spoken up, but ...”

vs.

- “I will give freely out of what God has given me.”
- “I will make the time for prayer, study, and meditation.”
- “I will speak out for truth, even when it hurts.”

Interesting, isn’t it, that our “weak, dull, and lifeless ‘wouldings’” are almost always followed by the word “but”? It’s a little word, yet it carries a huge impact, sucking up our time, our energy, our desires, our ambitions, and our calling.

“I will,” on the other hand, leaves no room for “but.” It’s a thunderclap of commitment over a sea of good intentions, it slams the door against all interlopers that would weigh us down or suck us dry, it raises itself as a battle standard above the chaos of life.

Now, ask yourself: not “What *would* you do for God?” but “What *will* you do?”

- Where could God convict you of “wouldings” in your Christian walk?
- What *will* you do about it?

# What Might God Say?

*“May our God come and not keep silence.” – Psalm 50:3*

We are so quick to ask for God’s presence. We are so eager to hear his voice. “May our God come and not keep silence!” we cry out.

And I agree: we should desire the presence of our God. We should yearn to hear his voice. But we should make no assumptions or presumptions about God – about what his presence might bring, or what his voice might say.

Psalm 50, where this verse comes from, is a psalm of judgment and warning. Not spoken to some pagan people, but spoken directly to Israel, the people of God. Israel had fallen into sin – rebellion, adultery, deceit, slander ... the list is long and damning. They were still burning sacrifices and going through the motions of worship, but their heart was far from the Lord.

So before we come before God, before we ask for his presence, before we pray for his voice, it would be wise to ask ourselves: *What might God say when he comes?*

- Do you ever assume that God will speak or act in a certain way? If so, what are those assumptions, why do you have them, and are they biblically accurate?
- What might God say to you about your life right now, both positive and negative?
- What might God say to your church right now, both positive and negative?

# A Forgotten Word

*“But the noble man devises noble plans, and by noble plans he stands.” – Isaiah 32:8*

Nobility. It’s a little-used word nowadays. To be noble is to “have high moral character.”

Here is Isaiah, we see three important points about nobility:

**God’s people should have noble characters.** That means that we should be *above reproach*, as Daniel was when “the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him” (Daniel 6:4).

**God’s people should have noble actions.** *“The noble man devises noble plans”* – nobility goes beyond who we *are* into what we *do*. Character always results in action. Action always reveals character.

**God honors nobility in his people.** The noble man *stands*. He is made strong, sure, and steadfast by his high moral values and his reliance on God. We can be sure of God’s favor when we seek to demonstrate noble character.

- Who do you personally know who demonstrates noble character and noble action? Spend time considering their defining attributes.
- How do you and your actions compare to the definition of nobility? Is there any area – of character or action – that you need to work on? If so, how will you proceed to effect change in that area?

# Solidity

*“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” – Mark 13:31*

Think of the Earth beneath your feet. Not just the ground you are standing on, which may be wet or dry, rock or soil, but the Earth itself: the planet, huge beyond our comprehension, a solid ball hanging in space.

Think of the space that it is hanging in: the millions upon millions of stars, planets, asteroids, comets, nebulas, galaxies, every one huge and big and beautiful.

Then imagine it all gone. Not empty, not destroyed: *gone*.

Someday, God is going to wrap up this fallen universe into a small ball, clap it between his hands, and make it disappear. Cause it to vanish completely. No debris left over, not even a wisp of interstellar gas.

It might make you feel a little shaky. Things you think of as solid are actually ephemeral in the grand scheme of things.

But thanks be to God, there is something to hold on to even when all heaven and earth are shaken: *his Word*.

- Taking an *eternal* perspective, what does it mean to you to realize that God’s Word is more solid than heaven and earth, that his promises and his plan are omnipotent despite a fallen world, and that his judgment and his rewards are sure and everlasting?
- Taking a *personal* perspective, what does it mean to you to realize that God’s Word is more solid than heaven and earth, that his promises and his plan are omnipotent despite a fallen world, and that his judgment and his rewards are sure and everlasting?

# Ignorance is No Excuse

*“... so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.” – II Corinthians 2:11*

Whoever first said that “Ignorance is bliss” was a fool. Ignorance in the Christian life results in being blind-sided by sin, being deceived by heretical teaching, and being sabotaged by doubt. A colossal amount of pain, suffering, sin, and despair is – pure and simple – the result of ignorance.

But in the Christian life, ignorance is no excuse. Paul adjures the church that we are to study how Satan works – his traps, his tricks, his tales – so that “no advantage would be taken of us.”

How do we gain such wisdom and leave ignorance behind us? Through serious study of God’s Word, by seeking godly counsel, by studying the past to learn from it, by reading the wisdom of the saints who have gone before us ... there is much that we can do; and more than that, there is much that we *must* do.

It will require time and effort, but the reward is worth it: “Wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will guard you, understanding will watch over you, *to deliver you from the way of evil*” (Proverbs 2:10-12, italics mine).

- When have you personally been blind-sided by Satan? What happened? Why and how did it happen?
- What are some common ways Satan tries to undermine individuals? Families? Churches? Communities? Nations?
- What are you actively doing to gain wisdom to protect yourself from Satan’s schemes?

# Slow Down!

*“Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!” – The Red Queen, Alice in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll*

Do we really want our lives dictated by the Red Queen? Whether or not we want it, we all too often live it. We run as fast as we can, packing our calendars down to the minute, shutting out time for prayer, solitude, relationships, and relaxation.

And then we wonder why we aren't getting anywhere.

But Jesus modeled a different principle. Every time he had to “get somewhere else” – that is, every time he faced a major change, decision, or crisis – he *slowed down*:

- He went into the desert for forty days before entering his public ministry.
- He spent the night in prayer before selecting the apostles.
- He retreated to Gethsemane before facing the suffering of Calvary.

Why is slowing down so important to moving forward? Because when we slow down, we regain a true perspective of the situation. When we slow down, we can refocus on our priorities. When we slow down, we can hear ourselves think. When we slow down, we can hear God speak.

- Who have you been modeling your life after? The Red Queen, or Jesus Christ? Why?
- Are you facing a major change, decision, or crisis? If so, what will you do to carve out time to slow down so that you can spend unhurried time in prayer?
- Do you need to make any lifestyle changes in order to slow down the pace of your life in general to make time for prayer, solitude, relationships, and relaxation?

# Sweetness of Speech

*“The wise in heart will be called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.”*  
*Proverbs 16:21*

In the marriage relationship, both partners do not always agree on how to proceed in a given situation. When this happens, several negative things can happen:

- **Nagging.** Wear the other person down – eventually, they’ll give in.
- **Dictating.** Get on your power pedestal and decree “This is how it’s going to be!”
- **Complaining.** Even if you don’t get your way, you’ll get even – because everybody around you will know exactly how you’ve been wronged.
- **Punishing.** Use the silent treatment or hold some other equally deadly weapon over the other person’s head until they capitulate.

All of the above are foolish, ungodly, and ultimately unproductive. Instead, consider Solomon’s alternative in the art of persuasion: sweetness of speech.

Sweetness of speech. Not the saccharine sweetness that sours on the tongue, but real sweetness, such as:

- Using reason to present your point instead of volume.
- Seeking to understand your partner’s viewpoint.
- Respecting your partner at all times.
- Being willing to engage in positive give-and-take.
- Valuing the relationship and seeking your mutual good.

Will sweetness of speech always result in persuasion to your point of view? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But it will *always* result in the strengthening of your marriage bond. And that should be the ultimate goal from anyone’s point of view!

- How do you approach differences of opinion or conflict? Why?
- Is your approach in line with Scripture – demonstrating love and respect for the other person in thought, word, attitude, and action?
- If your approach is not in line with Scripture, what steps will you take to effect positive change?

# Practicality

*“I’m afraid I’m a practical man,’ said the doctor with gruff humor, ‘and I don’t bother much about religion and philosophy.’*

*‘You’ll never be a practical man till you do.’ said Father Brown.”*

- G. K. Chesterton

Theology. Philosophy. Doctrine. Belief systems. World views. To many people, such words define irrelevancies. “Life,” they say, “is about work and money and relationships and all the rest of it. I don’t have time for all that pie-in-the-sky mumbo-jumbo.”

But the fact is, until we understand what we believe and why we believe it, none of the rest of life makes sense. Consider: what you believe determines ...

- Your choice of career and your attitude toward your job.
- Your desire for and your use of money.
- Your words, actions, and attitudes in all your relationships.

And the list goes on. The fact is, *everything in life that you think, say, or do is based upon your theological or philosophical belief system.* Read that again, slowly. Now, can you really say that thinking through what you believe is irrelevant? When what you believe determines all the subsequent nitty-gritty of life ... how you act in it, and how you respond to it?

Are you going to go through life like a puppet on strings, not knowing why you do all that you do? Or are you going to choose carefully what you believe, so that you know exactly and for all time why you then choose to do all that you do and say and think?

- How well do you know your own theological or philosophical belief system? Why do you do the things you do, say the things you say, and think the things you think?
- Is your belief system your own, or have you simply accepted a belief system handed to you by your family, your church, or your society?
- If you have accepted someone else’s belief system without truly making it your own, take the time to examine it carefully: Is it a good and true belief system, supporting godly principles? If so, make the decision to purposefully take it as your own. Is it a belief system that is riddled with falsehoods, supporting worldly principles? If so, you will need to spend serious time and effort renouncing the lies and distortions and replacing them with God’s truth.

# Jonah and the Worm

*“But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered.” Jonah 4:7*

We always read about Jonah and the whale. But an equally important lesson is to be gleaned from Jonah and the worm.

Jonah had preached to Nineveh, and the Ninevites had repented. God, honoring their repentance, spared them from his judgment. Jonah, however, being of a rather more unforgiving nature, was unhappy with this situation. He left the city, and, quite frankly, sat and sulked.

So God sent a plant to grow up over his pouting prophet to shade him from the sun. And Jonah was glad.

Then God sent a worm to destroy the plant, and brought on a localized heat wave. And Jonah was mad.

God then pointed out that Jonah had more compassion on a single plant than on all the thousands of people in Nineveh.

From this, we see that God doesn't only use major crises (whales) in order to teach us important lessons – he also uses the minor irritants (worms) of every day life to get his point across to us.

For example, suppose you drop a glass while cleaning up, and it shatters on the floor. You find yourself exploding in anger. Your response is completely out of proportion to the irritation. Why? Perhaps, upon reflection, you realize that you have an anger-management issue that needs to be resolved. Or perhaps, instead, you realize that you have allowed the demands of life to get the better of you, and you need to re-prioritize and re-order your days.

The question is, are we attuned to God's voice ... even when he uses a worm to get across his message?

- What “worms” are irritating you in life?
- Why do you find these situations irritating?
- Is there something inside *you* that needs to change in response to the irritation?

# Are We Vindictive?

*“Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord God. “Therefore, repent and live.” – Ezekiel 18:31-32*

God truly is love. Yes, he is a God of justice and will mete out punishment to those who refuse to repent and turn to him. But that isn't what he wants. It gives him no pleasure. You can hear the yearning in his voice as he pleads, “For why will you die, O house of Israel?” His heart breaks as he calls out, “Why die, why be punished, why suffer, when all you need to do is turn to me, repent, and live?”

I think that far too often, we are not like God in this respect. We want the bad guys to get what's coming to them. We may say that we hope they'll repent, but we really want to see them feel God's wrath and judgment.

Think about it – how does it really make you feel to realize that Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, and Saddam Hussein could all have been completely forgiven by God and had their sins wiped away if only they had turned to him? That they would have entered all the blessings of heaven without a lick of the fire of hell?

Or bring it closer to home. Most likely, you or someone you love has been traumatically hurt by another person. Maybe it was rape. Maybe murder. Maybe assault and battery.

Not a simple “Ouch” that you can forgive and forget, but unbelievable pain that carries its effects throughout a lifetime.

Do you really want to see the person who hurt you or your loved one repent and be saved? Or, in the secret or not-so-secret places of your heart, would you rather that they burned in hell for eternity?

God is love. He takes no pleasure in anyone's death or judgment. If we are to become like him, then we need to do the same.

- Are you struggling to forgive someone who has hurt you or a loved one? If so, what makes it hard to forgive?
- What is your real, honest attitude about that person? Do you desire their repentance and salvation, or would you take pleasure if they were punished – perhaps eternally?
- Spend time in prayer asking God to help you through the process of forgiving that person, and to give you a heart of love that will truly desire their good, their welfare, their repentance, and their salvation.

# The Subtlety of Envy

*“Envy is a great leveler. If it cannot level things up, it will level them down; and the words constantly in its mouth are ‘my rights’ and ‘my wrongs.’ At its best, envy is a climber and a snob; at its worst, it is a destroyer; rather than have anybody happier than itself, it will see us all miserable together.” – Dorothy Sayers*

Envy is one of the most insidious of sins. It starts small, but its ramifications are huge. Envy circles around these three statements:

- I resent that you have something I don’t have.
- I want to have it rather than you.
- If I can’t have it, nobody should.

But envy is subtle. You don’t wake up one day resenting everything and everyone. Instead, you might begin with honest admiration or a true and perfectly acceptable desire to have something you see. But then you dwell on the fact that you don’t have it. Perhaps don’t have it and can’t get it. Then resentment builds. And bitterness. Then you start thinking dark thoughts about the person who has it. After all, they don’t deserve it! In fact, you hope that they’ll lose it. You might even try to make them lose it.

In the end, you are wrapped up in a seething internal maelstrom, wanting everything, hating everyone, your soul shrinking down, your fists clenched on empty air.

Not a pretty picture. Yet Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman comment in their excellent study *The Workbook on the Seven Deadly Sins*, “While envy is the sin no one confesses, it is the sin of which most of us are guilty.” Be honest: are you guilty of envy?

- In the past, when have you been envious of someone else? What were the circumstances? What did you do about the envy?
- Are you envious of someone now? If so, what are the circumstances? Why are you envying them?
- If you are envious of someone now, spend time in confession, asking the Lord to forgive you and cleanse your heart from sin.
- How can you guard your heart against envy?

# We Cannot Stop Speaking

*“And when [the Sanhedrin] summoned [Peter and John], they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.’” – Acts 4:18-20*

Consider the boldness of the apostles’ words: “We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.” This was said in the midst of the Sanhedrin, to the religious leaders of the Jewish nation. The Sanhedrin was a group of men who hated them, who had imprisoned them, and who were now threatening them (v. 21). Soon, violent persecution would start in earnest, and the blood would begin to flow.

And yet the apostles never stopped speaking the name of Jesus. All but one would die a martyr.

Sobering, when I consider how hard it can be to speak up for the truth, for my faith, and for the name of Jesus to my non-saved family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

Sobering, when I consider how hard it can be to take a stand for what is right in the community, in politics, in the school system, or in the corporate world.

Yet we, in America at least, are not typically threatened with physical violence. The fact is, fear of scorn, the force of peer pressure, and a general attitude that “I shouldn’t make waves” is often enough to keep our mouths shut.

Oh, that the fire would burn brighter in our souls! That we would be able to say with conviction, along with Peter and John, “We *cannot* stop speaking what we have seen and heard! Listen! Let me tell you about Jesus!”

- Have you ever *not* spoken up about your faith or about Jesus and wished afterward that you had said something? What were the circumstances? Why didn’t you speak?
- Examine your beliefs and heart: do you truly believe that Jesus is the most important Person in life? That his Word is ultimate and eternal truth? How would you gauge your conviction on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being where Peter and John stood? If your conviction isn’t at the high end of the scale, what do you need to do to get it there?
- How would you gauge your courage on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being where Peter and John stood? What can you do to gain greater courage to speak out for your convictions?

# Growing Up

*“But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into him, who is the head, even Christ.” – Ephesians 4:15*

Sometimes we try to separate our spiritual growth from various other aspects of our life. So my career doesn't have anything to do with my Christianity, or my friendships shouldn't be impacted by my spiritual state, or my emotions aren't tied into my belief system, etc.

But the fact is, if we are to mature in our faith and become like Christ, our spiritual growth has to touch each and every area of our lives. We have to grow up “in all aspects” into Christ-likeness. That means:

- How we relate to and within our family.
- How we choose our friends and the nature of those friendships.
- How we select our career, how we act on the job, and how we relate with our associates.
- How we treat our physical bodies.
- How we understand and are affected by our emotions.
- How we use money.
- How we elect to relax and what we choose for entertainment.

The list goes on and on. *Everything* in life should be a target for spiritual growth. *Every* aspect of our lives should reflect the light of Christ to a darkened world.

- How would you judge your own level of spiritual maturity? Don't be pseudo-modest, and don't be proud. Take a careful look at your life and give an honest answer.
- In what aspects of your life are you currently experiencing growth? What are you doing to encourage that growth?
- Are there any aspects of your life that you would prefer that God not take too close a look at? That you would prefer that he ignore? If so, what are they, and why? What will you do about that?

# Blood

*“For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” – Hebrews 9:13-14*

For many of us, life has been incredibly cleaned up. I buy chicken that has no feathers, bones, skin, or blood. My trash disappears every Tuesday and Friday. I have four scented shower gels to choose from each morning. Probably the messiest things I have to deal with are washing the dishes after a barbeque dinner or cleaning up cat throw-up.

When I think about it, Christianity doesn't really fit in with my sterilized, carefully moderated interaction with the world. The core of Christianity centers around blood ... something I would rather avoid, whether we are talking about *my* blood, or anyone else's. Before Christ, it was the blood of goats and bulls and heifers. But they simply pointed the way to the final sacrifice, where the blood of Jesus was poured out for the salvation of the world.

The core of Christianity isn't comfortable to think about. It's not about incense and flowers and books and paintings and cathedrals, though all those can teach us about God and help us to worship. It's not about serving others or finding fulfillment or experiencing everlasting joy, though all those spring from its depths.

No, the center, the heart of Christianity, its very core, is blood.

The core of Christianity is the blood of Christ. The blood that proves God's love, the blood that forgives all our sins, the blood that brings us new life, turning our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

It almost seems too raw. Too tangible. Too *real*.

But that's the wonder and the joy of it all: we serve a God whose feet walked this earth. Whose hands touched lepers to comfort and heal. Whose body was broken and whose blood was spilled.

You can never claim that God is distant when he shows you the nail scars in his hands.

- Spend some time considering that Jesus – fully man and fully God – bled for you. By the time he died, he had been beaten, scourged, crowned with thorns, pierced by nails, and stabbed with a spear. What impact does this have on you?
- Why might people find the centrality of blood in the gospel to be offensive?
- What can you do to bring to mind more clearly the blood and body of Christ when you celebrate communion?

# According to My Righteousness

*“The LORD judges the peoples; vindicate me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and my integrity that is in me.” – Psalm 7:8*

Here’s a challenging psalm: David affirms that God judges justly, stating with assurance, “If a man does not repent, [God] will sharpen his sword; he has bent his bow and made it ready” (v. 12). He then says calmly, “Vindicate me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and my integrity.”

Think of it: No hesitation. No caveats. No qualifiers. David is so confident in the holiness of his life that he asks God to vindicate him and intercede for him “according to my righteousness and my integrity.”

Would we be willing to make the same statement? Or would we have to say, “Vindicate me, O Lord, because I’m righteous most of the time ... just ignore those websites I know I shouldn’t be looking at.” Or perhaps, “Vindicate me, O Lord, because I act with integrity at work, even though I’m nasty to my spouse at home.” Or even, “Vindicate me, O Lord, because my righteousness looks good to other people, even though you and I know otherwise.”

- Can you say with assurance, “Vindicate me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and my integrity,” or are there things in your life that would make you hesitate to make such a statement? If so, what are they? What will you do about it?
- What are the benefits to living a holy life – a life of righteousness and integrity?

# The Poetry of God

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” – John 1:1*

Many people believe a lie these days: that lie is that doctrine is dry and dusty and boring.

With that in mind, read John 1:1 again: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*

That’s doctrine, my friends. It establishes the pre-existence of Christ (“in the beginning was the Word”), the nature of Christ as the full expression of God (“the Word”), the relationship within the Godhead (“the Word was with God”), and the unity of the Godhead (“the Word was God”). All in seventeen words that sparkle with life, glow with power, and are the epitome of the poetry of God.

Doctrine isn’t about complicated phrases, esoteric facts, and polysyllabic words. Doctrine is simply the study of real life: who God is, who man is, why we’re in trouble on this earth, and what God decided to do about it.

Doctrine is the most practical topic you will ever study, because in it you will find answers to the deepest questions that have ever troubled mankind: What is the greatest good? Why do bad things happen to good people? How can I be free of guilt? Is there eternal justice?

Because doctrine is about life, it brings freedom, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, character, depth, maturity, and discernment.

Because doctrine is about God, it brings you closer and closer into an intimate relationship with your Creator, your Savior, your Sanctifier.

Doctrine isn’t dry and dusty ... we are. So cleanse your mind and heart with the refreshing water of the Word of the Lord and discover anew how magnificent is the God we serve!

- How good is your knowledge of Christian doctrine (that is, your understanding of God, man, sin, salvation, Christ, etc.)?
- How would you characterize the time you spend reading your Bible? Are you giving it a quick read or a thorough study? Do you spend time meditating on what you read? Determining how to apply it to your life?
- How would you explain the gospel (which carries with it many of the major points of Christian doctrine) to someone who is completely unfamiliar with Christian “lingo”?

# Standing Strong

*“Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might.” – Ephesians 6:10*

Christianity is a matter of balance. On the one hand, we are to rely on God’s power. On the other hand, we are to give life our 100%. On the one hand, we are to hate sin. On the other hand, we are to love the sinner.

And here is another one: On the one hand, we are to recognize our weakness and that we always stand in need of God’s grace. But on the other hand, as Ephesians 6 reminds us, we are to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, standing firm against the devil and all his minions.

I think we have perhaps allowed the pendulum to swing a bit far in the direction of the former – emphasizing to such an extent that we are in need of God’s grace to accomplish anything of worth that we aren’t teaching people to stand on their own two feet and get the job done. We are so concerned with humbly admitting our neediness that we have forgotten God’s unbelievable provision that makes us strong enough to withstand the onslaught of Satan himself.

The point is not to allow the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction, so that we forget our need and our weakness and our inadequacy. The urgency is to come back to the center point, the balance point, where we recognize our own inadequacy and our sufficiency in Christ; that we practice humility and courage; that we spend time on our knees and standing firm in the battle.

Certainly, we should never forget that in ourselves we are weak.

But don’t let that stop you from standing strong.

- Do you have a good balance in your belief system between recognizing your personal weakness and understanding your strength in Christ? Or do you emphasize one more than the other? What effect does your belief system have as it is played out in your life?
- Do you find it easy or hard to affirm that you personally can grow in faith so that you are strong in the Lord, able to stand firm against all the schemes of the devil? Why?
- Can you say honestly that you are strong in the Lord? If not, do you truly want to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might? Remember, it takes a life of discipline, effort, and often pain to achieve!

# Have You Really Tried?

*“I don’t know how to conquer myself!” you write me despondently. And I answer: But have you really tried to use the means?” – Jose Escriva*

I recall a time when I wanted to lose weight. For months, I moped and moaned and fussed that the weight wasn’t coming off. I hoped and hoped that things would change, but they only got worse.

The problem?

I hadn’t changed either my eating habits, nor my exercise habits. And all the moping, moaning, fussing, and hoping in the world wasn’t going to burn those excess calories.

Now, when I started eating less and exercising more – lo, and behold! – the weight came off.

It’s the same with sin. We know we have a problem, and we mope and moan and fuss and hope that we will change. But we fall into temptation again and again and again. Why? Because all too often, *we aren’t really trying to overcome the sin!* We want our sinful tendencies to go away all by themselves, to slink away in the night, without applying any effort of our own.

Let me state this very simply: sin doesn’t do that anymore than weight does.

Overcoming sin means digging into Scripture, examining ourselves, spending time on our knees, practicing discipline and self-control, and accepting accountability. *When we really try, we will overcome.*

Remember, God calls us to holiness and sanctification.

He never commands the impossible.

So if you’re finding it “impossible,” the problem lies with you, not with him. *“Have you really tried?”*

- What sins are you struggling with?
- What have you done thus far to overcome these sins?
- What additional means can you try in your effort to achieve victory over these sins?

# Complaints, Complaints!

*“I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.” – Psalm 9:1-2*

What fills your speech? Is it thanksgiving, praise, gladness, and song? In other words, is your speech holy and pleasing to God and beneficial to others? Or might other words characterize your speech? Like complaints, gripes, moans, groans, and general all-purpose pity-parties?

All too often, complaining is our natural bent and where we find synchrony with others. Think about it: if the weather is bad, at least we can all gripe about it together. If you're sick, you always have a ready topic of conversation. If your marriage is lousy, you can easily find people to commiserate with you (not necessarily help you – just commiserate with you!).

I recall a time when I was over a friend's house, and the conversation lagged. And I actually thought to myself, “Oh no! What else can I complain about to get the conversation going again?” What a wake-up call! I realized that my friend and I had had nothing positive to say all evening. Ouch! Time to wash my mouth out with spiritual soap!

But we get into habits, and habits are hard to break. Negativity is a habit, and it is essential that we break it. The best way to break it is to follow David's recipe above: “I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.” Put simply, it's hard to be negative when you're full of positive praise!

- If you had to divide the content of your speech into percentages, how much of the time are you positive, and how much of the time are you negative?
- When you are negative, what are you negative about? Yourself? Other people? Circumstances?
- What practical steps can you take to fill your mind and speech with positive praise?

## A New Name

*“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.” – Revelation 2:17*

In America, we are casual with our use of our names. Names are not a secret, nicknames are freely bestowed, names can even be legally changed if one is dissatisfied with what is on the birth certificate.

But in other cultures, names are treated with special care. They signify the person’s core identity, so a person has a true name – known only to himself and to a few close friends – and a nickname by which he is publicly known.

I find it comforting that God knows my real name. He knows my identity, he sees the core of my soul, he is intimately aware of my every thought (cf. Psalm 139). In fact, God knows me better than I know myself. I can easily be swayed by other people’s opinions of me, or try to be something or someone that I’m not. But God is not fooled. He knows who I really am. That is why he alone is qualified to tell me my real name.

Someday, in the purity and brightness of heaven, he’s going to give me a white stone, and on that stone will be written a new name – my real name, the name that encompasses everything about me. Then, unfettered by sin, by weakness, or by ego, “I shall know fully, just as I also have been fully known” (I Corinthians 13:12).

- How would you define or describe yourself?
- How well do you understand yourself – why you think and act and feel the way you do?
- What impact does it have on you to realize that God knows you fully and completely, down to the innermost detail?
- How does it make you feel to realize that one day you will step into the fullness of everything you were ever created to be?

# One Big (Happy?) Family

*“But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men.” – I Thessalonians 5:12-14*

It has been said that if you ever find a perfect church, don't join, because otherwise it won't be perfect anymore.

The fact is, any local church is made up of a whole bunch of people. Some will be wonderful, some will be terrible. Some will be strong in the Lord, some will be weak in faith. Some will be wise, some will be foolish. Some will be peacemakers, some will be contentious. If you're going to thrive in that church, the sooner you realize that fact and come to terms with it, the better.

Paul's advice is this: no matter whom you are interacting with, always respond in a Christ-like manner to them. Give esteem, love, and honor where it is deserved. Seek to live in peace, but remember that peace doesn't mean compromise – so be sure to admonish the unruly and call sin what it is. Encourage those who are weaker than yourself. Be patient, even when you don't see eye to eye with people.

Here's the bottom line: you can never change other people. You can only change yourself. So focus on living the life of Christ in your local church body. If we all do, we still won't have perfect churches, but we'll get a lot closer to that goal.

- Whom do you dislike in your local church? Why do you dislike them?
- Have your actions been Christ-like toward the people whom you dislike? If not, what do you need to do to change your behavior and your attitude?
- On a larger scale, how does your church do with Paul's injunctions in I Thessalonians: to “admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men”?

# Work and Fun

*“Without work it is impossible to have fun.” – St. Thomas Aquinas*

We live in a culture that worships fun. Entertainment, pleasure, happiness, ease, relaxation, recreation ... the list goes on. We want to have fun, and we would like to have it 24-7-365.

But is it possible to have fun without work? Thomas Aquinas thought not. He recognized that real relaxation happens on the heels of “a job well done.” Recreation is necessary when we have been depleted by the toil of daily living. Pleasure taken by itself surfeits and sours as we become bored and self-centered. Entertainment palls as we grow jaded and addicted to excitement.

Work is necessary for a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Work establishes a healthy daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly routine. Work makes relaxing “fun.”

It’s all a question of balance: we need both work and fun. Any time one or the other is overemphasized, our lives are thrown out of kilter.

- Do you tend to overemphasize either work or fun? Why?
- What is your attitude and approach toward work?
- What is your attitude and approach toward fun?
- If you feel that you are out of balance one way or the other, what can you do to come back to a healthy center point?

# Prickly Doubts

*“The reason many of us do not ardently believe in the gospel is that we have never given it a rigorous testing, thrown our hard questions at it, faced it with our most prickly doubts.” – Eugene Peterson*

Good little Christians don’t doubt.

Good little Christians don’t question.

Good little Christians don’t test.

If that is what good little Christians do, I can tell you a few other things about good little Christians:

- They can’t answer tough questions put to them by an unbelieving world.
- They can’t stand firm in the face of devastating adversity.
- They can’t preach the gospel with unfettered passion.

Testing, questions, and doubt are an important and normal part of the Christian life. They push us to build spiritual character, challenge us to learn spiritual truth, and lead us to ponder spiritual wisdom.

Sometimes people ask me how I am able to respond so readily to questions about the Christian faith. Part of the answer is this: I have doubted just about every aspect of the Christian faith, and have searched for the truth until I found it: in Jesus Christ.

- Do you feel guilty when you doubt or question your faith? If so, why?
- How do you respond when doubts or questions arise? What do you do? How do you address them?
- Do you think that there ever comes a time in a person’s Christian life when they are beyond doubts and questions? Why or why not?

# A Light in the Darkness

*“For You light my lamp; the LORD my God illumines my darkness.” – Psalm 18:28*

Do you remember being afraid of the dark as a child? I remember my sister and I turning off the light in our bedroom each evening and then jumping into our beds as fast as we could, trying to “beat the speed of dark”!

I’m still not so fond of being in the dark – even in my own home, shapes and shadows can take on grotesque forms at 2:00 a.m., and every creak and groan of the house becomes magnified.

But far, far worse than this is the darkness that can settle over my soul – the darkness of anxiety, fear, depression, anger, pain, grief ... all these and many more cause my spiritual sight to dim, making me lose my way, doubt my God, and question myself, my life, my faith, and my future.

Here is good news! The LORD our God can bring light into *every* form of darkness: spiritual, mental, emotional, relational ... the list goes on. The beacon of his Word brings truth to cut through lies and to resolve doubts. The glory of his presence provides comfort and the strength to carry on. The lamp of his Spirit shows us where to go and what to do, leading us every step of the way.

Whatever darkness you fear or are facing today – the LORD your God can light a lamp and illumine your life.

- What form of darkness do you fear the most? Why?
- When you are in some form of darkness, do you tend to turn to the Word of God and to prayer, or do those activities often fall by the wayside? Why do you respond the way you do?
- What physical object can serve as a reminder to you that God is with you, that he loves you, and that he will help you? Find an object and put it in a prominent location or carry it with you.

# Consider Your Epitaph

*"... and [Pekahiah] did evil in the sight of the LORD ..." – 2 Kings 15:24*

*"... and [Jotham] did what was right in the sight of the LORD ..." – 2 Kings 15:34*

Two kings. They only get a few verses each in the Bible. Nothing incredibly noteworthy. But at the beginning of each biography – as we see time and again throughout the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah – there is a one-sentence summary. An epitaph.

"He did evil."

"He did what was right."

How will your epitaph read? And expand on that a bit: how would your obituary read? What would people say in a eulogy about you tomorrow if you died today?

If you don't like the answer, then set about changing it now – because *today* is the only day you ever have.

- Ask someone you absolutely trust to honestly describe your life in two to three sentences. Don't prime the pump: just ask them, if they had to describe you and your life to a complete stranger, what would they say?
- Consider carefully the answer you receive. Is it what you expected? Wanted? What does it tell you about your life, your character, and your impact on others?
- Is there anything in your life you'd like to change? If so, how will you go about it?

# A Deadly Masquerade

*“Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore, it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness...” – 2 Corinthians 11:14-15*

It’s getting toward Halloween. Not my favorite holiday, to be sure, given the nasty images that run rampant through the season. But it brings up the question of disguises, and that is important for us as Christians.

Consider this: not darling little children dressed up as ghosts and goblins, but the arch-enemy of mankind – incredibly powerful and utterly evil – dressed up as an angel of light. Pretending to exude goodness and truth and wisdom to everyone around him. And not just him, but an entire army with him, all looking purer than Ivory soap’s 99.44%.

You know, I’d rather that the enemy always looked like the bad guys in *Lord of the Rings*. You could always tell who to skewer ... anyone who was ugly and hideous!

We have it harder. *The enemy doesn’t always look like the enemy*. The enemy often looks like a friend. For instance,

- A preacher or author whose theology is mostly right ... but just a little bit wrong.
- A co-worker who offers such wonderful sympathy during lunch breaks and after hours ... and a bit of adulterous sex thrown in for added comfort.
- A friend who says they want to build up your self-esteem ... but who actually feeds your ego and pride.

Unlike the wandering trick-or-treaters, Satan doesn’t unmask himself on November 1<sup>st</sup>. He keeps this masquerade up 365 days a year, and so do his servants – both demonic and human.

God will help you see through these deadly disguises, but you have a part to play: Be aware (Ephesians 6:11-12), be alert (1 Peter 5:8), be prepared (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). It’s time to unmask the enemy!

- When have you been deceived by Satan or one of his servants appearing as an angel of light? What happened?
- What areas of life are you most vulnerable in? These are likely the areas that Satan will attack you.
- What active steps can you take to strengthen your most vulnerable points? Don’t be general: be specific!

# What is the State of Your Armor?

*“Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.” – Ephesians 6:11*

I have often heard people “pray” through the armor of God listed in Ephesians 6 as if it were a magic formula or a talisman – with no real thought behind what they’re saying. It’s easy to make the mistake: the words are powerful and compelling, rolling off your tongue with all the majesty of the ages behind them.

But they’re not a magic formula, and they’re not a talisman. They are clear instructions for how we are to *live our life* if we want to defeat the devil.

So take the time and ask yourself:

- **The belt of truth:** How well do you know the Word of God? What are you doing to increase and deepen your knowledge of the Bible?
- **The breastplate of righteousness:** Righteousness has two parts – the recognition that we are right with God because of what Jesus has done for us, and the commitment to live righteously ourselves through the power of his Spirit living within us. How are you doing in each respect?
- **The shoes of peace:** Are you spreading the good news of the gospel to everyone you meet, and telling them how they can have peace with God through Jesus Christ?
- **The shield of faith:** Are you just “existing” in the Christian life, or are you believing God with assurance, conviction, and action?
- **The helmet of salvation:** Do you trust in Jesus for everything – from eternal salvation to day-to-day deliverance?
- **The sword of the Spirit:** Again, we see the Word of God – it is necessary both to withstand attack and to press forward. Do you know how to use it wisely and well?

And one last question, because we sometimes forget the verse that comes right after the litany of the armor of God ...

- **Praying at all times:** Your armor is nothing if your lines of communication with your Commander-in-Chief are broken. How’s your prayer life?

# Recognize and Refute

*“Well, I do believe some things,’ conceded Father Brown; ‘and therefore, of course, I don’t believe other things.’” – G. K. Chesterton*

As Christians, we are surrounded by philosophies, beliefs, and attitudes that are contrary to the truth revealed in Scripture. It’s important that we learn to *recognize* and *refute* them when we encounter them. Hone your reasoning skills by developing responses to the following statements:

- If it feels good, it can’t be wrong.
- There are no moral absolutes.
- Jesus was a good teacher, but not God.
- There are many paths to God.
- You are intolerant if you say someone is wrong in what they believe or how they live.
- There is no God.
- This life is all we have.
- We are all part of a single, unified divine consciousness.
- Since God is love, there is no hell.

P.S. If you would like to learn more about how to answer these issues, I strongly encourage you to explore one of my favorite sites, Stand to Reason, at [www.str.org](http://www.str.org). Enjoy and grow strong!

# I'm Just A-Passing Through

*"LORD, make me know my end, and what is the extent of my days, let me know how transient I am." – Psalm 39:4*

Now this is a strange prayer in our youth-idolizing, age-concealing, death-denying culture! David prays that God would make him intimately aware of the fact that his days were numbered, that he would die, and that his life would be but a flicker in the grand march of time.

Why? Why would David pray this (at first glance) depressing prayer? Well, consider:

- Contemplating our mortality reminds us of who we are vs. who God is ... always an important distinction!
- Remembering that we don't know which day will be our last can encourage us to make each day worth living ... for ourselves and for others.
- Understanding that we will be called to account for our actions in the future can give us the impetus to change them in the present.

So ... it's time to pray this prayer for yourself, and as you do so, ask yourself seriously:

- Am I honoring God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength?
- Am I doing everything possible to make an impact on my world for God?
- Am I living a holy life?

# From Wretchedness to Thanksgiving

*“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ... There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” – Romans 7:24-8:1*

Counting your blessings and expressing thanksgiving to God for them is something we should do “early and often.” But I urge you today: make it a full list of blessings! Give God thanks for all the physical things he has given you, for the help he provides through each day, for your treasured relationships ... as the list goes on, be sure to remember the deepest things of all: thanksgiving for salvation from your sin, for freedom from slavery, for redemption from wretchedness. Without this core, all the other blessings would never have come to be!

- Spend some time remembering your “B.C.” days – what was your life like before you accepted Christ as your Savior? What sins tormented you? What fears gripped you? What addictions enslaved you?
- Picture the cross in your mind, with Jesus hanging on it. Consider that every beat of his heart was for you – to save you from those sins, those fears, those addictions ... from the absolute wretchedness of your life.
- Now picture him risen from the dead – your savior, your brother, your friend, your king, your captain, your advocate, your peace, your hope, and your God! Offer him great thanksgiving from the depth of your heart!

# Press On!

*“So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD.” – Hosea 6:3*

I am reminded of C.S. Lewis’ words describing God: “He is endless. Come and feed.” With those words and the words of Hosea running through my mind, I wonder ...

- Are we content with our knowledge of God, or do we have an unending hunger to know him more?
- Do we hold our ease and comfort as of greater importance than our relationship with God? Or, put another way, are we willing to put forth real energy and effort to know God in a deeper way?
- Have we put God in a box? Are we convinced that we have defined him and labeled him down to the last little detail? Or do we see God as infinite, endless, mysterious, intriguing, and compelling?

# Don't Take Grace for Granted

*"Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, 'Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you.'" – John 5:14*

For 38 years, the man had been afflicted. For who knows how many years, he had lain beside the pool of Bethesda, waiting for the stirring of the waters. Then, in a moment of grace, Jesus had healed him.

He hadn't known who Jesus was: only that a stranger had made him well and bidden him to take up his pallet and walk. And so he had. But then Jesus found him later in the temple, and gave him a solemn warning: *"Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you."*

If you were given such a great gift – complete healing after 38 years of misery – wouldn't you heed such a warning? Love God with your whole heart, mind, and strength? Serve him in every way you could think of?

I don't know what the man in John chapter 5 did. But I know myself, and that knowledge is a humbling thing.

- What has Jesus rescued you from in the past?
- Do you ever treat Jesus like a "get out of jail free" card: trusting him to rescue you, with no real intention of repentance?
- What sins do you tend to return to time and again, and why?
- If necessary, spend time in confession ... and purpose in your heart to commit yourself to true repentance.

# Not Even One

*“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’  
They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds;  
there is no one who does good.  
The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men  
to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.  
They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt;  
there is no one who does good, not even one.”  
- Psalm 14:1-3*

Do you think that people are basically good, or basically corrupt? Well, quite honestly, it doesn't matter what you or I think on the subject, because God has already made an omniscient evaluation: *corrupt*. Totally and universally.

And that, my friends, is why we are now celebrating the season of Advent. Because God, who declared all of humankind hopelessly corrupt, sent us Hope to us in the form of his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

- Read the verses above, and spend time acknowledging before God that that is what you were before you knew Christ: foolish, blasphemous, corrupt, and evil.
- Did you find the above exercise easy or difficult? Why?
- Spend time in quiet meditation, focusing on the fact that Jesus came *because* you were utterly corrupt and incapable of saving yourself – simply because he loves you so very, very much.

# Keep Silence

*“Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand;  
Ponder nothing worldly minded, for with blessing in his hand  
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.”  
- Liturgy of St. James, 4<sup>th</sup> century*

Stop.

Stop the rush, the hustle, the bustle, the crossing of items off lists, the frantic last minute purchases.

Stop.

Remember what you are celebrating – and Whom.

It is time for silence.

- Do you find it difficult to stop and spend time in silence, reverence, and awe before God? If so, why?
- When can you make the time (notice, not “find” the time ... we have to *make* the time) to spend in true worship – worship that is “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24)?
- What can you do to stop worldly-minded thoughts and replace them with true homage of God, as the carol above urges?

# Remember

*“Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume  
Breathes a life of gathering gloom:  
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
Sealed in stone cold tomb...”*

- *“We Three Kings of Orient Are” by John H. Hopkins, Jr.*

I have always loved the carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” The words of each and every verse are powerful, expanding our understanding of who Christ is.

But I admit, my voice always catches as I sing the fourth verse, noted above. Its poignancy throbs through every word, carrying a blast of bone-chilling air from a rock-hewn tomb, and the memory of a bloody cross.

And that is a good thing to remember. Amidst the peppermint candy canes, the sweet scent of the evergreens, the piles of gifts, and the joyful comings and goings of friends and family, take a moment to remember. Remember why this celebration is happening. The Incarnation, the Birth, the Noel was just the beginning. Jesus was born as a babe only so that he could die as a man on a cross.

- Do you ever have trouble connecting the Babe in the manger with the Savior on the cross? If so, why?
- How would you explain Christmas to someone who didn’t understand the significance of the holiday?
- What physical object can you use to help remind you during the Christmas season of why Jesus came? (i.e., a thorn, a nail, a rough piece of wood)

# The Lord is Not Restrained

*“Then Jonathan said to the young man who was carrying his armor, ‘Come and let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; perhaps the LORD will work for us, for the LORD is not restrained to save by many or by few.’” – 1 Samuel 14:6*

Do you ever feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders? Have you ever spent sleepless nights trying to figure out if you had enough resources to meet the demands of life? Have you ever counted up the problems and realized they outnumbered your solutions?

I have good news for you! The Lord is not restrained – he is not hindered, nothing can prevent him, and no one can stop him – from saving you! Not your personal limitations, not your financial constraints, not your past mistakes, not the size or number of your problems ... *nothing* can restrain the Lord’s saving power.

- As you look toward the coming months, what potential problems might you face?
- What are your personal resources that you can apply toward those problems?
- What more will you need than you are able to give to face those problems?
- Spend time in prayer acknowledging your need and limitations to God, and asking for his saving grace and power to meet the challenges ahead.

# Have You Given Permission?

*“I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?” – C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce*

In C.S. Lewis’ novel *The Great Divorce*, there is a scene where an angel confronts a man tormented by lust, which is represented as a lizard perched on the man’s shoulder. The man wants to be free of the lust – which the angel says he can help him accomplish – but at first he tries to make excuses for keeping the lizard. In the course of his argument with the angel, he exclaims, “If you wanted to help me, why didn’t you kill the damned thing without asking me – before I knew? It would all be over by now if you had.”

It is at that point that the angel says clearly, “I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?”

There is a very great lesson here: God cannot and will not free us from sin unless we ourselves want to be freed. It isn’t enough to say, “Oh, if only I didn’t struggle with <fill in the blank>!” ... if we keep on making excuses to continue in our course every time God offers to help us conquer our sin.

Do I sometimes wish God would override my free will “for my own good”? Yes, I do. But then I realize why he will never do so: he values me too much. He values my partnership in this journey called life. He values my love. He values my trust. He values my identity. He wants to pour out his power and grace and love and Spirit in my life, but he wants me to be an integral part of that outpouring. For that reason, he will not force himself on me, but is waiting patiently for my permission ... and with it, my cooperation and submission ... so that he can act on my behalf.

- What sins are you struggling with regularly?
- Do you want to be freed from these sins? Be completely honest. If you don’t really want to be free of one or more of these sins, why not?
- How have you been cooperating with God to overcome these sins? How have you been hindering his work in your life?
- Spend time in confession and repentance, and give God permission to do whatever is necessary to help you grow in holiness.

# Are You Zoning Out, Or Zoning In?

*“For his lovingkindness is everlasting.” – Psalm 136:1*

Psalm 136 is composed of 26 verses, with the second half of each and every verse repeating the phrase “for his lovingkindness is everlasting.”

Repetition is a funny thing – it can either make you zone out, or zone in. If I read this psalm quickly, the second half of each verse begins to blur, and I find myself racing through it. I’ve even skipped the repeated phrase entirely on occasion, and just read the first portion of each verse! After all, why should I re-read a single phrase 26 times??

Or, I can zone in. There is a reason this psalm, with its 26-fold repetition, was included in the holy Scripture. And maybe – just maybe – it’s because the phrase is so incredibly important that God wants to draw our attention to it. Help us focus on it. Encourage us to plumb the depths of this wonderful truth.

Are we going to zone out, or zone in?

- Read Psalm 136 out loud. Don’t rush. Savor each word, and every repetition of the phrase “for his lovingkindness is everlasting.”
- Consider: God’s lovingkindness is everlasting ... in your past, in your present, in your future, in your troubles, in your joys ... in every circumstance of your life.
- What difference does it make to know that God’s steadfast love is supporting you every moment of the day?
- What can help you remember – every day – God’s eternal love for you?

# Kindle Afresh

*“For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you...” – II Timothy 1:6*

We have all been given spiritual gifts by God (cf. I Corinthians 12:7). It would be great to think of these gifts as working almost independently of us ... always pouring out strong and clean and powerful, like Niagara Falls. Unstoppable.

But the truth of the matter is, spiritual gifts are more like a fire – a fire that waxes and wanes depending on what we’re putting into it. Their effectiveness depends not only upon God, the Giver of the gifts, but also upon us, the recipients of the gifts. What are we doing with what we have been given?

To keep a fire burning steadily requires constant vigilance and effort. You have to gather the right kind of wood, place it properly, and feed the flame regularly. Failure to do so will allow the fire to burn down to its embers, and to eventually go out entirely.

That is why Paul, in his second epistle to Timothy, reminded the young man to “kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you.” He knew that the world could easily smother Timothy’s fire. He then showed Timothy exactly how to ensure that the fire of his spiritual gifts would burn hot and strong: Timothy would need to be disciplined (II Timothy 1:7). To ground himself in Scripture (II Timothy 1:13). To devote himself completely to God (II Timothy 2:4). To pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace (II Timothy 2:22). To use his gifts in every time and place (II Timothy 4:2,5).

What was true for him is also true for us. Let us “kindle afresh” the gifts that God has given to us. When we do, we will set the world on fire.

- What are your spiritual gifts?
- Is the fire of your spiritual gifts burning hot and strong, or are the darkness and the cold closing in around you?
- If the fire of your spiritual gifts is waning, what do you need to do to “kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you”?

# Jealous

*“For you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” – Exodus 34:14*

Shepherd. Savior. King.

The Lord my Provider. The Lord my Banner. The Lord my Righteousness.

El-Shaddai. Elohim. Adonai.

But ... *Jealous*? Are you serious? One of God’s names is “Jealous”?

Yes – and no less than that, it’s not even one of the descriptive names we gave him: *it’s a name he gave himself*.

That tells me that we should pay close attention to this name of God. He describes himself as Jealous. The jealous one. A jealous God.

Isn’t jealousy something to avoid? In most cases, yes. That is, when it has connotations of “envy, apprehension, or bitterness” (The American Heritage Dictionary). But there is another meaning of “jealous” listed in the dictionary: *“intolerant of disloyalty.”*

That is what God means when he describes himself as jealous. He wants our complete love, obedience, trust, and loyalty. He wants us: 100%. Anything less than that, and he experiences a holy, consuming jealousy.

- Have you allowed God’s rightful place in your life to be taken by any other person, idea, thing, or activity? If so, how and why did this happen? What steps will you take to correct the situation?
- Are you giving God 100% of yourself: your energy, time, love, obedience, worship, etc?
- Pray a prayer centering around this special name of God: *Jealous*.

# Right in the Eyes

*“If the devil tells you something is too fearful to look at, look at it. If he says something is too terrible to hear, hear it. If you think some truth unbearable, bear it.” – G.K. Chesterton*

The devil has many schemes to hold us back. One of his key methods is fear. Consider:

- We are afraid of failing. So we never try.
- We are afraid of what might be lurking deep inside us. So we never root out the sin in our lives.
- We are afraid of facing the consequences of our actions. So we run away.

The list goes on. Fearful to speak, lest we upset the person spoken to. Fearful to confront, lest we destroy a relationship. Fearful to admit, lest people scorn us. Fearful to commit, lest we not be able to live up to expectations.

And on, and on.

When we are afraid, we do what a child does during the scary part of a movie: we hunch up, screw up our eyes tightly, and clap our hands over our ears.

If I can't see it, if I can't hear it, if I deny it exists ... it can't get me.

But the truth is, shutting our eyes and ears will never succeed in protecting us from the scary things in life. Think what would happen if a soldier was afraid and closed his eyes and started singing nonsense songs loudly so he couldn't hear the noise of battle around him? He would be dead in a moment.

No, the only way to conquer both fear and the enemies you are frightened of is to open your eyes. Open your ears. Acknowledge the truth. Look reality right in the eyes.

When you do, you will see the situation in vivid color. And it may be even scarier than you thought. But by opening your eyes, you'll be able to see something else as well: the God who is right beside you, leading you, guiding you, directing you.

And suddenly, you'll find there's nothing to fear.

- How have you historically dealt with issues that frightened you? Why?
- Are you frightened of anything right now? Why?
- If you are fearful of something today, take a deep breath, and bring the whole matter before the Lord in prayer. Be detailed and specific – about the situation, about why you are frightened, and about what you have done about it to date. Then ask the Lord to give you the courage, wisdom, and grace to face the situation.

# Can You Hear Him?

*“And your ears will hear a word behind you, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ whenever you turn to the right or to the left.” – Isaiah 30:21*

*“Your ears will hear a word behind you ...”* I get the feeling that Isaiah wasn’t talking about God standing a few feet away, cupping his hands around his mouth like a megaphone, and hollering at the top of his lungs to get our attention. Instead, I picture him close beside us, just over our shoulder, giving a helpful whisper in our ear.

If that is the case, can you hear him?

Can you hear him through your cell phone or iPod, or would he have to physically disconnect you just to get a word in edgewise?

Can you hear him over the noise of the TV, radio, sports, or movies?

Can you hear him through the chatter of family, friends, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter?

Can you hear him in the midst of your own turbulent thoughts, to-do lists, and busyness?

This is not about casting a judgment on any of the above. Cell phones are great, iPods are fun, TV can help us relax, Facebook provides valuable interconnectedness, etc. It’s simply a question of balance. All those things are “loud.” They grab and engage our attention. We need to instill a balancing amount of “quiet” in our lives as well, so that we can *“hear a word behind you, ‘This is the way, walk in it.’”*

- How would you describe the balance of your life: do you have a healthy amount of quiet time in which you can focus on God and hear his voice?
- Where do you most often get out of balance in life? Watching TV or surfing the Internet? Too much chatting on the phone? Trying to accomplish too many things in too little time?
- If you feel like your life has too much “noise,” what steps will you take to carve out areas of quiet?

# God of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*“By him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created by him and for him.” – Colossians 1:16*

On occasion, I think we peg God in the Middle Ages. He seems to fit well in Gothic cathedrals, surrounded by candlelight and worshiped with antiphonal choirs.

Or perhaps we place him back even farther: on the shores of Galilee, preaching from the boat and breaking bread in the upper room.

If we think that way too often, however, he can seem removed and distant from our 21<sup>st</sup> century life. He doesn't seem to “fit” in a world of Blackberries, iPods, video conferencing, and satellite TV. I mean, where would Jesus have hooked his cell phone? On his sash?

It's important to take the time to realize that God is just as much the God of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as he was of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. And one way to help bridge that gap is to spend some time worshiping God by acknowledging how his creation – the physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, etc. – that he set up impacts us in our every day lives. The technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes as no surprise to him, my friends – *God is the one who made it all possible!*

So as you go through your daily life, consider:

- God made instant telecommunication possible. Praise him when you make your next phone call or send your next email.
- God made the information age possible. Praise him the next time you hit “Search” on Google.
- God made cutting-edge medicine possible. Praise him the next time you open your medicine cabinet or visit your doctor.
- God made high-speed travel possible. Praise him the next time you get in your car or board a plane.
- God made modern conveniences possible. Praise him the next time you go to your fridge or use your microwave.

# A Time for Everything

*“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.” – Ecclesiastes 3:1*

“There is an appointed time for everything.” These words are followed by the familiar litany of opposites: “A time to give birth, and a time to die ... to plant and to uproot ... to kill and to heal ... to tear down and to build up ... to weep and to laugh ...” and the list goes on (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:2-8).

We can take one of two approaches as we consider all the events that make up life. On the one hand, we can look at life and say, “Life is always going to have ups and downs. Therefore, since I know that something bad will always follow something good, I’d better not get too comfortable or really throw myself into enjoying the moment, because at some point things are going to get ugly again. I just need to resign myself to that.”

This edges toward a Buddhist attitude: desire nothing, remove emotional attachments, accept life as it comes.

Alternatively, we can look at life and say, “Life is always going to have ups and downs. Therefore, I will enjoy all the good moments that God brings my way thoroughly and completely, with praise and thanksgiving. And when the bad times come, I will accept them, too, as part of life. But I will do so with the knowledge and confidence that God will see me through them with his grace and strength and presence. And at some point, I know things will get better again, so I will praise God even in the dark times.”

That is the Christian attitude: experience the fullness of life, the fullness of humanity, and the fullness of God.

- Which approach and attitude do you have toward life? Why?
- Do you secretly hold to the belief that as a Christian, life should always be good and only get better? Why?
- How have you tended to react when bad things happen in life?
- Are you able to fully enjoy the good times in life? Why or why not?

# A True Evaluation of Your Worth

*“But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this he called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm ...” – II Thessalonians 2:13-15a*

Do you struggle with a feeling of unworthiness? Then listen carefully: God doesn't roll his eyes when he thinks of you. Your salvation is no afterthought. God isn't grudgingly cracking the doors of heaven to let you slip in.

His word here reminds us that we – each and every one of us! – are:

- beloved by the Lord,
- chosen for salvation,
- sanctified by the Spirit, and
- destined for glory!

Worthless? No way! God has given us a true evaluation of our worth – signed in blood and sealed with love!

- Take time right now to meditate on these four amazing truths: that you are beloved by the Lord, chosen for salvation, sanctified by the Spirit, and destined for glory.
- Ask God to help you stand firm with a true understanding of your worth!

# Wisdom and Reproof

*“Reprove a wise man, and he will love you.” – Proverbs 9:8*

We all want to be wise. But here’s an interesting point: we tend to think that people who are wise are pretty much perfect. Certainly they don’t act in ways that deserve reproof, correction, or discipline! Isn’t that the essence of being wise?

That is true in the abstract: perfect wisdom would indeed yield perfect action and be a sign of perfect character. In fact, that describes God himself: he is Wisdom personified.

But we are humans – and as such, sinners. So though we may attain a level of wisdom, we are hampered by human limitations and human failings. No matter how wise we may be, we can fall into sin. (Remember Solomon and his wives and idols?)

It is then that Proverbs 9:8 comes into play: when we are wise, we will *recognize*, *accept*, and be *thankful* for the reproof of others that calls our sinful actions to account. Only by doing so will we continue to grow in wisdom.

- What is your first reaction when someone reproves you for something you said or did?
- Why can it be difficult to recognize that we have sinned?
- Why can it be difficult to accept our personal responsibility when we have sinned?
- Why can it be difficult to be thankful when someone corrects us?

# No Ivory Towers

*“Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near to [Jesus] to listen to him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” – Luke 15:1-2*

A word of warning: it can be all too easy to immure yourself in the Christian community. To only have friendships with Christians, to engage in activities exclusively with Christians, and to focus all your attention on Christians.

When you do, it can be very easy to slip into another attitude: looking down on anyone who associates with non-Christians. Getting on your religious high-horse and throwing up your hands in horror at anyone who (heavens!) befriends a practicing homosexual, a drug addict, an adulterer, a convicted felon ... or even just an unchurched neighbor. After all, we must avoid the corruption of the world, right?

Yes, we must. But not by hiding away in ivory towers. Jesus kept himself unstained by the world, but he ate every day with tax-gatherers, sinners, and prostitutes. He touched lepers, unclean women, and the demon-possessed. He associated with Samaritans, Syrophenicians, and Romans. He was, simply, “the friend of sinners.”

We are called to follow his example.

- Have you ever looked down on someone because they had friends who were “questionable”?
- Have you ever avoided befriending someone because of their sin, past or present?
- Would you rather live in the safety of the church than be a light of the world? If so, why?

# Good News about the Good News

*“For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” – 1 Thessalonians 1:5*

I have good news for you today about the Good News! Here it is: *the success of evangelism doesn't depend on you*. You don't have to have a silver tongue, a doctorate in theology, or deep insight into the human heart.

God only requires two things from you: a conviction of the truth and the willingness to speak that truth to the best of your ability. Then he adds two things of his own: divine power to trample the forces of hell and the Holy Spirit to restore and renew broken hearts.

Never worry about your human limitations. Don't beat yourself up because you “botched” an opportunity. Don't fall into despair because your sin got in the way of the message (repent, yes – but don't despair!). God is so much bigger than your limitations, your failings, and your sins. After all, that's what the Good News is all about!

- Has anything ever kept you from sharing the Good News with others? If so, what?
- Where have you seen God's perfect grace work through your imperfections to accomplish his will?
- Ask God for an opportunity to share the Good News!

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