

A man and a child are walking away from the camera on a dirt path that winds through a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The man is on the left, wearing a grey puffer jacket, dark pants, and a tan cap. The child is on the right, wearing a blue hoodie and blue pants. They are holding hands. In the background, a massive, craggy rock wall rises steeply, partially obscured by trees with autumn foliage. The sky is bright with some lens flare effects.

THE WALK

FIVE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

LENTEN JOURNAL

WHAT IS LENT?

The word Lent, an old English word, means “spring.” It is a time of repentance, reflection, fasting and preparation for Easter—the celebration of our risen Jesus! Lent is the 40 days (not including Sundays, if you’re counting!) that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Most Christians don’t count Sundays because they consider them to be a time of “mini-resurrection,” a time to celebrate in anticipation of Easter. The 40 days represents the time in between Jesus’s baptism and when his earthly ministry began, time he spent in the wilderness experiencing and defeating the temptations of Satan.

In the early days of the church the season of Lent was a time to prepare new believers for the sacrament of baptism. While some Christians still participate in Lent for this, most Christians today embrace Lent as a time of repentance, reflection and fasting and strive to turn their full attention to God. One of the ways Christians turn their attention to God is to choose to give up something they value—chocolate, screen-time or social media, candy, food or certain foods, etc. We choose to give something up to remind ourselves who really sustains us—Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. For this reason, we encourage people to not only give something up, but to take something on. For example, some take on more regular Scripture reading and study, giving time to volunteer or in some other way giving something of themselves for the sake of others.

What will you give up?

What will you take on?

We’ve created this Lenten Journal for you to use as a guide. A spiritual guide, that will work with our weekend Lenten worship services. We pray the guide will help you in giving something up, but also in taking something on. The guide is designed to help you read Scripture daily, reflect on and apply what you read, pray and consider tangible responses to serve God and others.

HOW TO USE THIS JOURNAL:

To get the most out of this journal you’ll need to ...

1. Keep it with you throughout the season of Lent.
2. Strive to use it every day.
3. Share what you are learning with others in your group, class, home, work, etc.
4. Celebrate the completion of each day – small win!
5. Record new or old thoughts you’d like to remember for future reference.
6. Have questions from the Scripture reading? Find a pastor, friend, someone in your small group, etc. and talk about it with them.
7. Move through the four daily sections at a pace that helps you remember what Lent is all about.

Grow in grace

1 Peter 1:22-2:3

²² As you set yourselves apart by your obedience to the truth so that you might have genuine affection for your fellow believers, love each other deeply and earnestly. ²³ Do this because you have been given new birth—not from the type of seed that decays but from seed that doesn't. This seed is God's life-giving and enduring word. ²⁴ Thus,

All human life on the earth is like grass,
and all human glory is like a flower in a field.

The grass dries up and its flower falls off,

²⁵ but the Lord's word endures forever. [Isaiah 40:6-8]

This is the word that was proclaimed to you as good news.

1 Peter 2

¹ Therefore, get rid of all ill will and all deceit, pretense, envy, and slander.

² Instead, like a newborn baby, desire the pure milk of the word. Nourished by it, you will grow into salvation, ³ since you have tasted that the Lord is good.

From today through Easter, we will be focused on teaching Bible principles and time-honored spiritual practices that help Christians of all types, temperaments and circumstances become more deeply rooted in their trust. Whatever your starting point, we hope you will join us in this journey.

Peter's searching words show us what happens deep inside when Christians grow: we love deeply, sincerely, from our heart. Hypocrisy, deceit, envy or unkind speech are signals that we need a closer walk with Jesus, learning to love as he loves.

- Peter told his readers (and us) that hypocrisy, deceit, envy and unkind speech are qualities to “get rid of.” How has God made your life better by replacing those negative qualities with “the pure milk of the word”? In what areas of life do you want God to fill you more fully and nourish your spiritual growth more completely during this Lenten season?

- Peter referred in 1:23 to Christians receiving new birth--being born again. “Born again” did not mean, as it sometimes does today, to align yourself with a religious organization or political persuasion. It was Jesus’ way of describing the new inner life that Holy Spirit brings into any heart that is open to him. Notice the qualities Peter said show in the life of a person to whom God’s power has given new birth. Do you find those qualities desirable?

Respond

Confess. We have all fallen short of who God wants us to be, in things we have done or things we have left undone. The opportunity to confess our sins comes with the absolute affirmation that the God of grace offers forgiveness and restoration.

Lord Jesus, give me the gift of honesty with myself, so that I can recognize where I need to change. Show me the places where you call me to grow in your amazing grace. Amen.

I need grace, specifically in this situation. God, forgive me...
(after writing, tear out, trusting in God’s grace)

Deepening our roots to grow

Jeremiah 17:7-8

⁷ Happy are those who trust in the LORD,
who rely on the LORD.

⁸ They will be like trees planted by the streams,
whose roots reach down to the water.

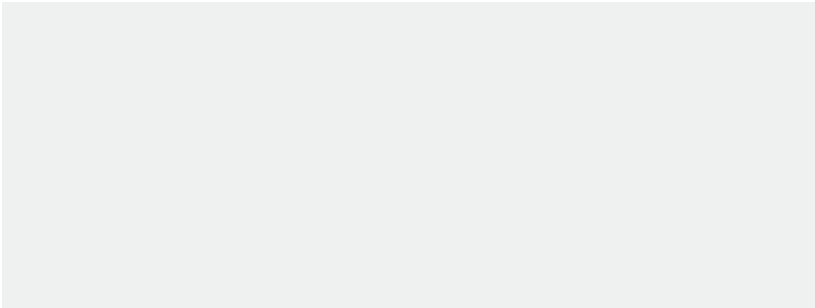
They won't fear drought when it comes;
their leaves will remain green.

They won't be stressed in the time of drought
or fail to bear fruit.

These verses may sound pious and abstract, but that's not how Jeremiah meant them. They are surrounded by a whole set of warnings that the Israelites are not trusting God, and instead trying to navigate life with their own wisdom while ignoring God's principles. Today's reading, far from abstract, was a passionate call from God (through the prophet) for God's people to change their ways. If they would root their lives in trust in God, they would grow spiritually strong enough to withstand any test that came their way.

- We don't have to be experts to know that whether we want a green lawn that can survive summer's heat or trees that will stand firm in the midwestern winds that sweep across our prairies, the depth of the plants' roots is critically important. Following Jeremiah's lead, how firmly rooted do you believe your trust in God is right now?

- Scholar J. Andrew Dearman focused on the way Jeremiah contrasted those who are “cursed” with those who “trust” in God. “These two terms are used in the great listings of curses and blessings in Deuteronomy 27–28. The contrast is between trust in human effort and design, and reliance on God.”
* Which do you trust more: your own effort, or God’s leading? In what ways do you want your trust in God grow more deeply rooted, less likely to be stressed by any “drought” conditions life throws your way?



* J. Andrew Dearman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah, Lamentations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, p. 175.

Respond

Fast. A conscious decision to abstain from something to focus more on God. Examples include: fasting for an entire day or meal (please check with your doctor before choosing to do so), eliminating a specific food (desserts or alcohol for example), or refraining from a practice (mindless web browsing or complaining). Each time you feel the urge to participate in the activity chosen, devote time in prayer to redirect that time to focus on God.

My fast this Lent

Lord, sometimes my soul gets so dry and thirsty. Help me learn how to sink my roots deeper into your way of life, so that I can be firmly anchored for good or bad challenges that come in life.
Amen.

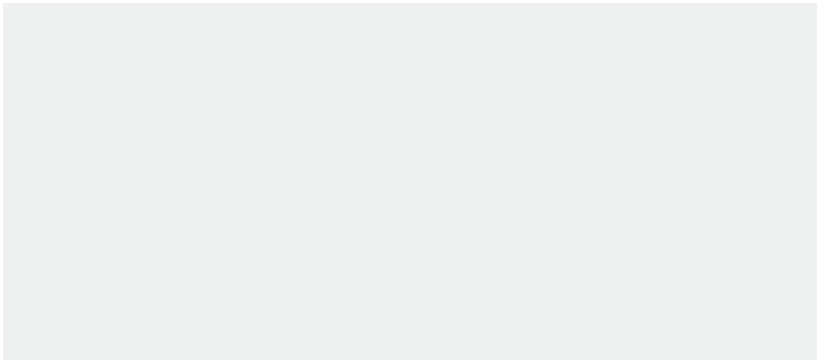
How will you finish Jesus' parable?

Luke 13:5-9

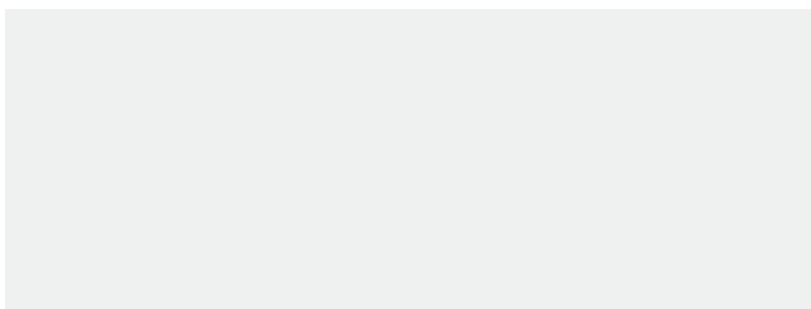
⁵ "No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did." ⁶ Jesus told this parable: "A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ He said to his gardener, 'Look, I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I've never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil's nutrients?' ⁸ The gardener responded, 'Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. ⁹ Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.'"

We could call the parable Jesus told in today's reading "The Unfinished Parable." The story was common enough. A fig tree was planted in a vineyard (apparently that was good for the vines). But it wasn't bearing any fruit. The owner was ready to cut the fruitless tree down, but the gardener (Jesus?) pleaded the tree's case. "Give it one more year," he said. Hauntingly, Jesus stopped the story there. He didn't say whether the tree bore fruit or got cut down.

- Jesus told this parable on his way to Jerusalem, where he would die on the cross (cf. Luke 9:51). He had been preaching and ministering for about three years, but if anything, the religious leaders seemed more determined to resist and do away with him than they were when he began. How did his story challenge those who first heard him speak it?



- The gardener pleaded for one more year to help the tree bear good fruit. Verse 5 showed what Jesus meant by “bearing fruit.” And his story’s meaning wasn’t limited to the people who first heard him tell it. Its open-ended quality speaks to all of us who claim to be his followers. So what about you—how will you finish Jesus’ unfinished parable in your life?



Commit. A bit of a different take on fasting, choosing instead to take on something to draw you nearer to God. It could include a specific time of day to pray, an activity you choose to add, or a person with whom you will connect spiritually.

Respond

Lord Jesus, you dig up the soil around me, water and fertilize, and watch eagerly for the fruit to appear in me. Help me to work with you, so that my life may indeed bear fruit to your glory. Amen.

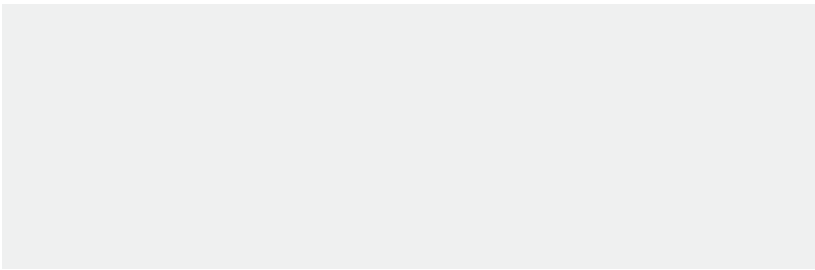
The qualities “the walk” produces in you

2 Peter 1:3-8

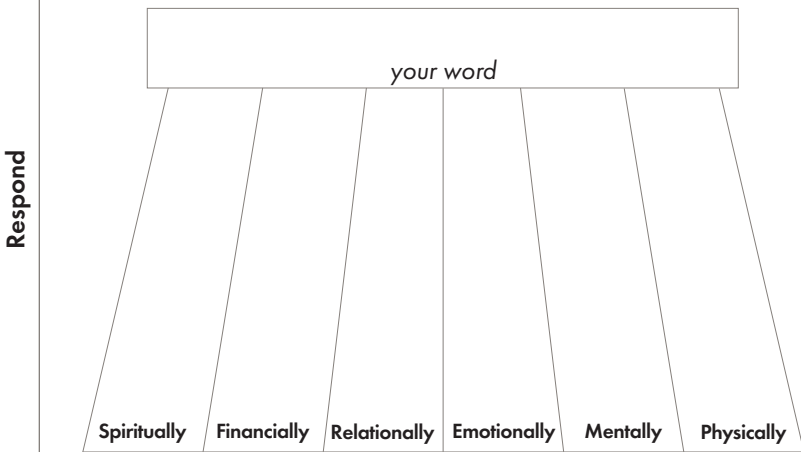
³ By his divine power the Lord has given us everything we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of the one who called us by his own honor and glory. ⁴ Through his honor and glory he has given us his precious and wonderful promises, that you may share the divine nature and escape from the world’s immorality that sinful craving produces. ⁵ This is why you must make every effort to add moral excellence to your faith; and to moral excellence, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, endurance; and to endurance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, affection for others; and to affection for others, love. ⁸ If all these are yours and they are growing in you, they’ll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter said God’s forgiveness and divine love give us the inner power we need to escape all that is wrong in our world. He set forth how every part of our life grows as we open ourselves to let God’s power work in us. John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, wrote of this passage in his *Notes on the Bible*: “In this most beautiful connection, each preceding grace leads to the following; each following, tempers and perfects the preceding.” Wesley urged Methodists to serve God with their heads, their hearts and their hands, and this passage pictured qualities that transform our whole life. Cooperate with God to add each of these qualities to your life, Peter said. They will give you everything you need for life and godliness.

- Peter made the sweeping claim that God has given us everything we need for a godly life. Which of the positive qualities he listed in verses 5 through 7 do you find most appealing? Which of these qualities are already present in your life? Thank God for them! How can you more completely connect with God's spiritual power to add the other good things to your life? Mr. Wesley's notes on these verses also said that "'sour godliness,' so called, is of the devil." Have you ever known anyone who seemed to believe that "moral excellence" required "sour godliness"? What helps you trust that God wants your life to be sweet, not sour, that God's gift of moral excellence offers you a life filled with joy and beauty?



Focus. Choose a way to focus your efforts by narrowing on a word that guides your actions & intentions.



Jon Gordon, Dan Britton & Jimmy Page, *One Word That Will Change Your Life.*

Family Activity

Gather your family in a comfortable setting outside. Invite your family to be loud and talkative while trying to listen to the sounds around them. Then invite them to be quiet and still while listening to the sounds around. Talk about and listen to what each person heard each time. Discuss under what circumstances it was easier to listen to the surrounding sounds. Connect this with how we listen to God. How do we best hear God? Is it when we are rushing around, full of activity and constantly talking? Or is it when we pause to be still, read our Bibles, pray and worship? How are we listening to God as we seek to give and serve generously? As a family, build some time into your schedules for listening more intentionally to God and one another. Ask God to help you be better listeners.

Lord Jesus, remind me that I am never "done growing" in this life. Pour your Spirit into my heart, leading me on from one positive step of growth to the next. Amen.

Week 2



WORSHIP



Jesus often expressed gratitude

Luke 22:14-19

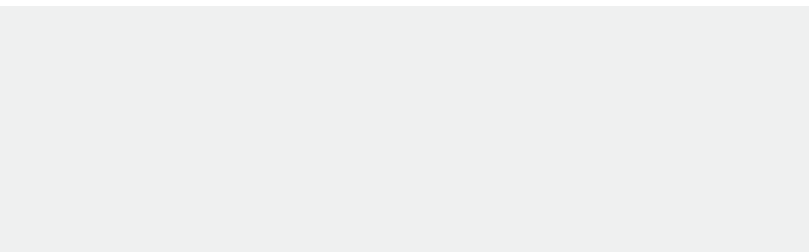
¹⁴When the time came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles joined him. ¹⁵He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶I tell you, I won't eat it until it is fulfilled in God's kingdom." ¹⁷After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸I tell you that from now on I won't drink from the fruit of the vine until God's kingdom has come." ¹⁹After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Luke 22:14-19, John 11:35-42

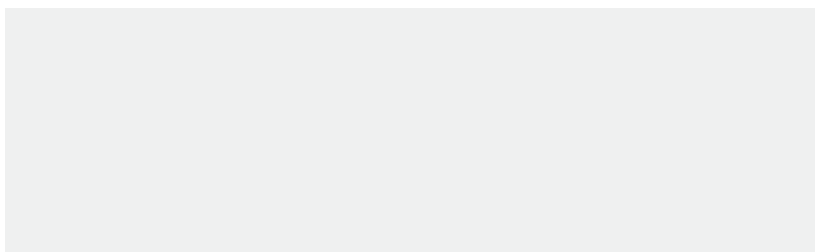
³⁵Jesus began to cry. ³⁶The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" ³⁸Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. ³⁹Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" ⁴¹So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. ⁴²I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me."

The creator of the world, the ruler of the universe, chose to "become flesh" and live on earth as a human being (cf. John 1:14). Would you expect such a being to have the ultimate attitude of "entitlement," to demand everything that was his by right? Well, we know Jesus didn't do that. As he gave us a model of what it means to be fully human, the gospels showed that his healthy human life included giving thanks in many different settings.

- The Greek root of the word "Eucharist" meant "to give thanks." As you read Luke 22:14-19, picture Jesus eating with his disciples, with the cross just ahead. On what realities do you think he focused to be able to "give thanks" at that moment? In what ways can you include the healing, strengthening power of gratitude in your prayers, even in hard times?



- Do you think Jesus' reasons for praying were different from your reasons for prayer? Why do you believe Jesus prayed at all, and didn't just say, "I'm the son of God—I can handle this on my own"? If you had been one of the first disciples, what difference, if any, do you imagine you would have noticed in Jesus after he had been praying?



Respond

Share. We draw nearer to God by sharing all of who we are, including our doubts, our fears, our worries, our temptations, our delight, our excitement. Take this time to share everything with God, and with gratitude acknowledge that God longs to be invited into every part of our lives.



Lord Jesus, at one point, praying, you said, "Thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me." Help me share that confidence and say "thank you" for it more often in my own prayers. Amen.



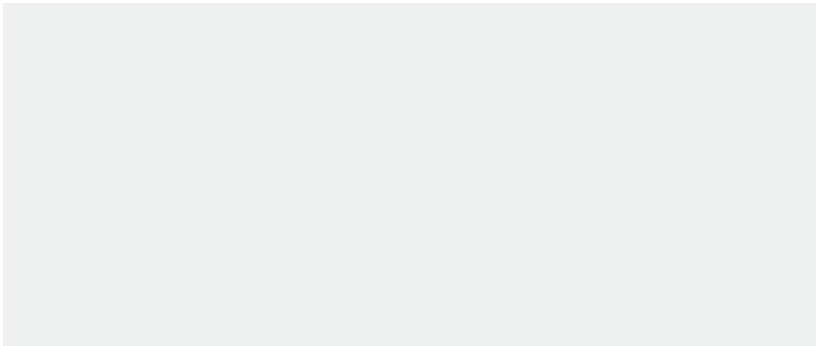
Gratitude: chosen attitude, not just temporary emotion

1 Thessalonians 5:15-18

¹⁵ Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. ¹⁶ Rejoice always. ¹⁷ Pray continually. ¹⁸ Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

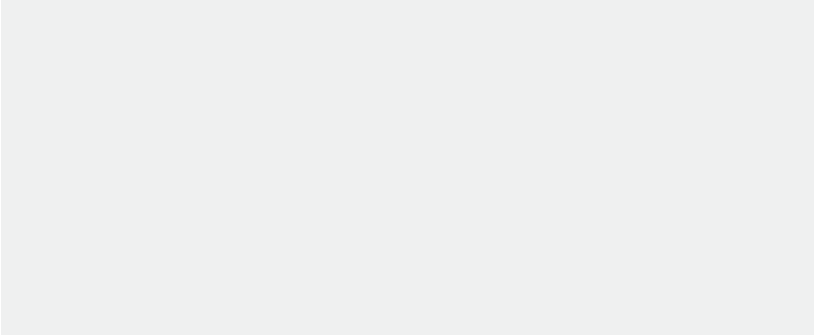
We often think gratitude is purely a feeling, a reaction to something outside of us. That makes "give thanks in every situation" puzzling—some situations do not trigger positive feelings. But psychology researcher Robert Emmons wrote, "It is vital to make a distinction between feeling grateful and being grateful.... being grateful is a choice, a prevailing attitude that endures and is relatively immune to the gains and losses that flow in and out of our lives." *

- A recurring theme in gratitude research is that choosing to be a grateful person does not mean you become blind to the bad things in life, or the sad or angry feelings you may have about them. It does mean, however, that we also choose not to let the bad things blind us to the things for which we are grateful. What way(s) have you found to remember the things for which you are grateful when your life takes a difficult turn?



- Scholar William Barclay wrote, "There is always something for which to give thanks; even on the darkest day there are blessings to count. We must remember that if we face the sun the shadows will fall behind us but if we turn

our backs on the sun all the shadows will be in front.” ** As you reflect on gratitude’s benefits, are you finding yourself more inclined to resist changing the direction your life faces, or to seek to increasingly “face the sun”?



* Robert Emmons, “How Gratitude Can Help You Through Hard Times,” syndicated from *Greater Good*, Sep 12, 2013 at <http://www.dailygood.org/story/532/how-gratitude-can-help-you-through-hard-times-robert-emmons/>.

**William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians (Revised Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, p. 207.

Observe. There is so much beauty all around us, so much to be grateful for, but we often fail to recognize it. Walk outside and pick up a rock and place it in your pocket. Use it as a reminder to give thanks throughout the day. Write down instances when this rock was a reminder to give thanks.

Respond

O God, you are like the sun, always shining your love and mercy into my life, whatever may happen in my family, my workplace or my health. Help me learn how to keep my focus on you every day.
Amen.



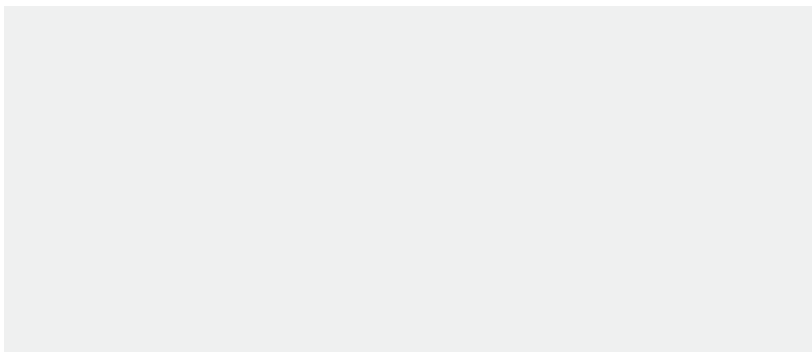
Gratitude—central in prayer and worship

Philippians 4:6-7

⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Paul did not write this counsel from some abstract ivory tower, sheltered from all trouble or conflict. He was in prison when he wrote Philippians (cf. Philippians 1:13). When some "super apostles" scorned his ministry in Corinth, he sent the Corinthian Christians a vivid portrait of his challenging path of service (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28). He knew well what it meant to "give thanks in every situation."

- Artists and photographers know that often how we frame a picture alters what we focus on in it. Paul urged a kind of framing in Philippians 4. "When we bring the things that cause us stress into prayer, we put ourselves and our troubles inside a much bigger picture: the story of God's love for us in Jesus Christ...And that leads to thanksgiving." * What helps you remember to look at life's big picture more than the unpleasant little details?



- Memorizing key parts of the Bible takes the Bible's message off the page and stores it in your mind and heart, where the Holy Spirit can call it to your attention at any moment of challenge or need. Which part(s) of today's

passage would you most like to keep handy in your mind, where you don't even need a printed card or Bible to draw on their wisdom at a time of need?

* Cynthia M. Campbell, sidebar article "Stress" in *The CEB Women's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, p. 1492.

Appreciate. We are grateful to God for so many things, but we don't always specifically take time to say thank you. Use this time to specifically recall instances when you have seen God at work.

Write a letter to God expressing your appreciation for an event that took place this week. Try to be as specific as possible and include how you felt God connecting with you in this experience.

Respond

Lord, thank you for inviting me to draw near to you. And thank you for giving me the community of believers who can encourage and support me as we draw near to you together.
Amen.



Giving thanks when we worship

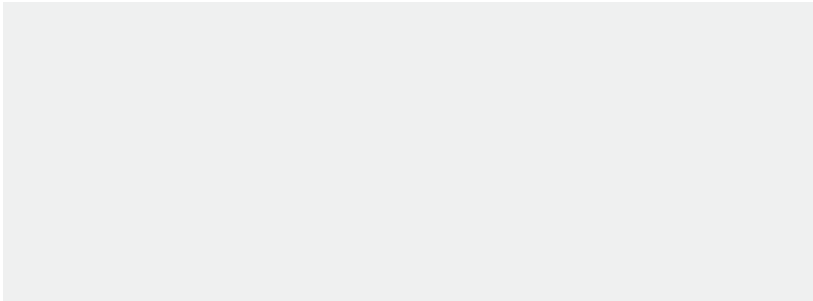
Psalm 95:1-7

¹ Come, let's sing out loud to the Lord!
Let's raise a joyful shout to the rock of our salvation!
² Let's come before him with thanks!
Let's shout songs of joy to him!
³ The Lord is a great God,
the great king over all other gods.
⁴ The earth's depths are in his hands;
the mountain heights belong to him;
⁵ the sea, which he made, is his
along with the dry ground,
which his own hands formed.
⁶ Come, let's worship and bow down!
Let's kneel before the Lord, our maker!
⁷ He is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
the sheep in his hands.

Israel understanding of the one God they worshiped developed over time. At times, they adapted language from the cultures around them, as in verse 3 of today's reading. They tended to refer to all supernatural beings, who the New Testament and most Christians call "angels," as "gods." But God was the great person they worshiped and thanked, the "great king over all other gods."

- One continual hazard of Israel's sacrificial system was the temptation to see the sacrifices as a way to "buy off" God and win divine favor. Psalm 50:13-14 expressed the reality: God didn't need people's sacrifices, but valued them as an expression of gratitude for God's gifts. How have you learned to "come before him with thanks" in your times of worship?

- Verse 7 echoes many other psalms (including the beloved Psalm 23) in identifying us as sheep for whom God cares as a shepherd. The image may have been clearer to pastoral Israelites than to modern city dwellers. Sheep are utterly dependent on their shepherd to keep them fed, watered and safe. Left to their own devices, they tend to be helpless to ensure their own survival. How grateful are you that in a big, complex universe you are one of God's sheep, watched over with caring and love?



Thank. Think about someone who has taught you something valuable. It may be a school teacher, a family member, someone at church. Take this opportunity to reflect on how their words and action have changed you.

(In this space, write a thank you note to a teacher. Consider sending them a hand written note or an email sharing this note.)

Respond

Lord Jesus, thank you for promising to be the "good shepherd" who cares for me, who doesn't run away in the face of trouble but is always there. I gratefully worship and praise you. Amen.



Gratitude every day: a life of worship

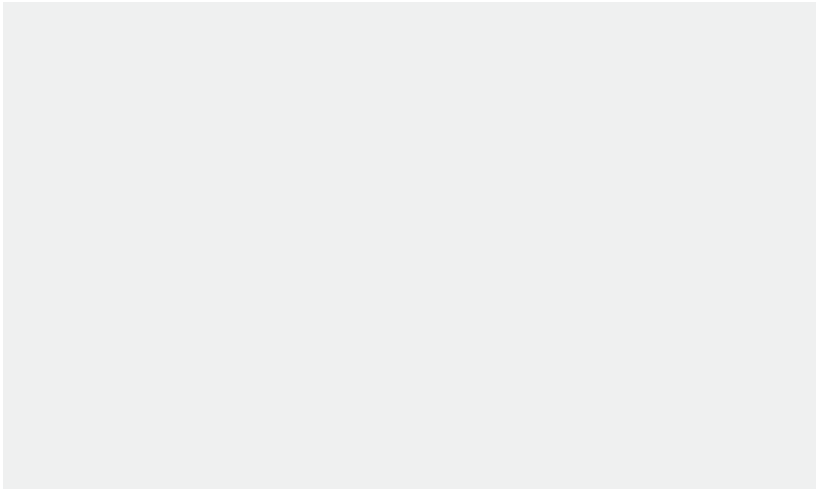
Psalm 96:1-2

¹ Sing to the Lord a new song!
Sing to the Lord, all the earth!

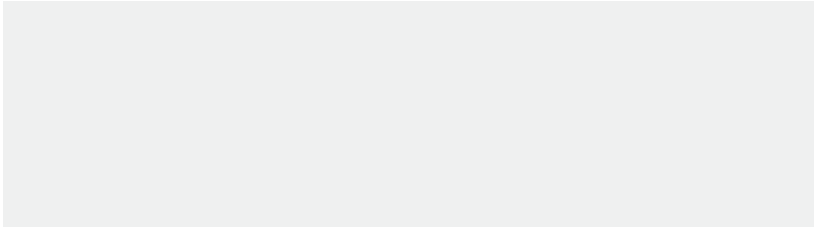
² Sing to the Lord! Bless his name!
Share the news of his saving work every single day!

Worship is not limited to one hour (or even one day) each week. Psalm 96 anticipated much modern psychological research as it invited us to express gratitude for God's saving work "every single day." The apostle Paul similarly urged Colossian Christians to "overflow with thanksgiving" and "be thankful people" (cf. Colossians 2:7, 3:12-17). Each day and hour of our week can be a time of gratitude, an ongoing act of worship.

- "96:2 *the news*: The Greek word that translates the underlying Hebrew is usually translated as 'good news' or 'gospel.' See Isaiah 52:7, where 'good news' is also associated with the proclamation of God's rule." * What are some ways (besides standing on a street-corner handing out tracts) you can share your gratitude for the good news of God's saving work every day?



- Some of us are musically gifted, and we like the idea of “sing to the Lord a new song.” Others, of course, suffer in silence through the singing parts of worship, whether traditional or contemporary. Regardless of our musical aptitude or tastes, what is the inner spirit of gratitude expressed by the poetic imagery of singing to the Lord a new song? How can all of us join in that spiritual experience?



* J. Clinton McCann, study note on Psalm 96:2 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 946-947 OT.

Notice. It can be easy to let the minutes and hours pass without taking time to stop and give thanks. Be intentional about noticing all of the things, big and small, that you have to be grateful for.

Set the timer on your phone to go off every hour. Stop in that moment and focus on something at that very moment that you are grateful for. Write them down here.

Respond

8 am _____	3 pm _____
9 am _____	4 pm _____
10 am _____	5 pm _____
11 am _____	6 pm _____
12 pm _____	7 pm _____
1 pm _____	8 pm _____
2 pm _____	

Lord of my life, continue touching and transforming me to make my everyday, ordinary life an offering of gratitude to you, an ongoing act of worship. Amen.



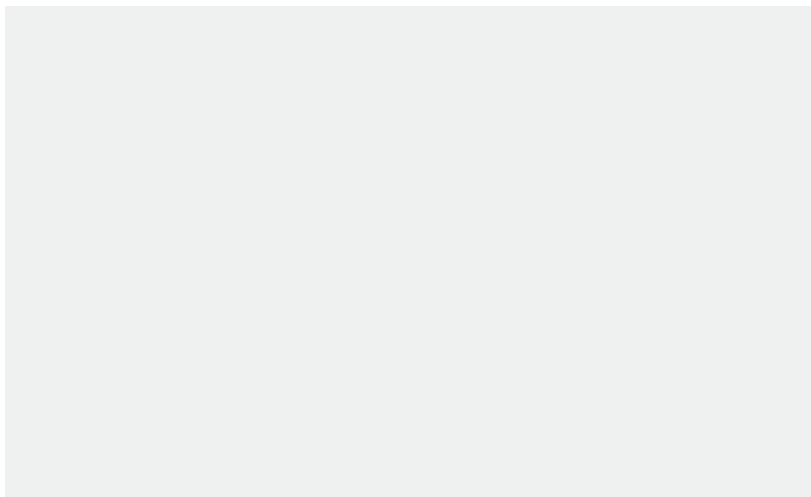
Gratitude for God's works is always in order

Psalm 92:1-5

¹ It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, Most High;
² to proclaim your loyal love in the morning,
your faithfulness at nighttime
³ with the ten-stringed harp,
with the melody of the lyre
⁴ because you've made me happy, LORD,
by your acts.
I sing with joy because of your handiwork.
⁵ How awesome are your works, LORD!
Your thoughts are so deep!

The psalmist wrote long ago: "It is good to give thanks to the LORD." Here's some research that supports the goodness of giving thanks: "Take just a few minutes each day to jot down things that make you thankful, from the generosity of friends to the food on your table or the right to vote....List-keepers sleep better, exercise more and gain a general contentment that may counteract stress and contribute to overall health." * The ultimate source of joy in Psalm 92 was God's loyal love and faithfulness, realities that are always with us if we just recognize them.

- In verse 2, the psalmist spoke of expressing gratitude to God in the morning and at nighttime. In what ways have you, or will you, build recognizing and expressing gratitude into your habit patterns, so that you don't always have to try to remember to do it? Spend some time today praying about choices you can make to incorporate gratitude more fully into your daily practices as a Christ follower.



* From Lauren Aaronson, "Make a Gratitude Adjustment." *Psychology Today*, March 1, 2006, found at www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200603/make-gratitude-adjustment.

Respond

Bless. If it is not your custom to pray before every meal, take a moment to offer a blessing over your meal. Taking time to connect with God at this routine time will give you a time to reflect on the gift of the meal that you are sharing.

Consider one of these prayers:

Be present at our table Lord. Be here and everywhere adored. These mercies bless and grant that we, may live in fellowship with thee. (UMH, 621)

Thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the friends we meet, thank you for the birds that sing, thank you God for everything.

Family Activity

How does your family approach going to church each week? Are you excited, happy and joyful? Do you complain about the weather and the walk from the parking lot? Are you struggling to get dressed and out the door on time? Is your home filled with words of encouragement or hollering and hurried words? To help you remember you are going to God's house for worship, consider playing some praise music as you prepare. Maybe you could say a prayer for a soft heart and positive spirit the afternoon or evening before you go. Read a story from the Bible to help center your mind on God. Nothing works perfectly in family life, but choose one to focus on this next week and appreciate a more fulfilling experience in God's house!

Lord Jesus, you made me for praise and gratitude. When I'm tempted to grump my way through a day, remind me to worship you—to give you thanks for your ever-present love and faithfulness. Help me to be grateful. Amen.

Week 3



GROW



Jesus valued all his people growing

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. ⁴⁰ By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." ⁴¹ The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. ⁴² One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

In the New Testament, to "sit at someone's feet" meant becoming that person's disciple. (In Acts 22:3, the apostle Paul described his student days with the literal Greek phrase "at the feet of Gamaliel.") In this story, "Martha did what the culture valued in women: cleaned the house and cooked the food. Mary did what the culture valued in men: became a disciple." * Jesus put no gender or other limits on who he wished to teach. He wanted all his followers to grow spiritually.

- The contrast challenged stereotypes about gender roles: one sister was "preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal," the other one "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message." Which one sounds more like the way you live your life? Jesus said, "Mary has chosen the better part." Are there ways in which you are choosing, day by day, to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to his message?

- Jesus told Martha, who seems to have seen many details of her role as hostess as critically important, that “One thing is necessary” (or, as *The Message* renders it, “One thing only is essential.”) What would making Christ the only essential thing in your life look like? How would it affect your priorities, time use, leisure activities and other choices? How might it offer you greater freedom in your life?

* John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012, pp. 54.

Listen. In our conversations, we can at times find it difficult to listen without interruption, but being attentive to the person in our presence can help us to hear something new. Sit with someone whose faith you admire and ask them how Scripture has shaped their life.

Write out here what you learned.

Respond

O Lord, I have a lot to do. It's hard to stop all my doing to listen to you. Help me recognize how important that is to my growth as your follower. Amen.



“Be fully mature, complete”

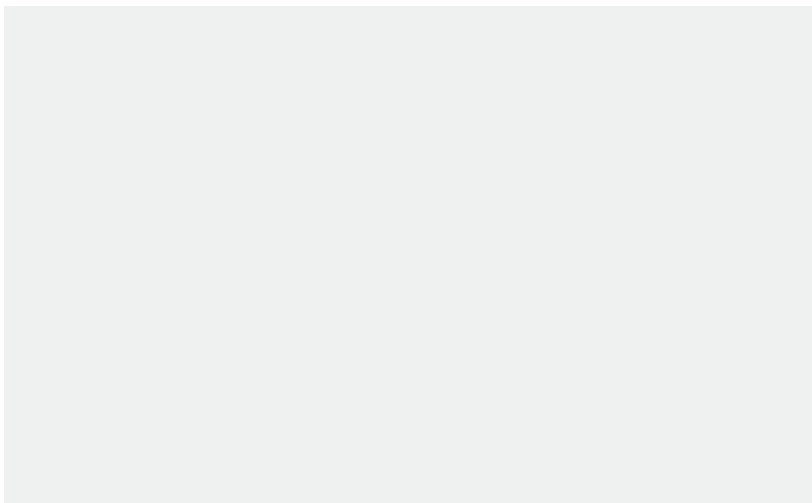
James 1:2-5

² My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. ³ After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing. ⁵ But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask.

Every life has challenges—sometimes minor, other times trials that test the very fiber of our being. James urged Christians to meet life’s tests as “occasions for joy.” He didn’t mean the tests were pleasant, but rather that times that test us, in small or large ways, are chances to grow endurance. God will use that endurance, James went on, to “complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing.”

- James offered a realistic view of life: there will be hard times. How can our faith shape the way we view these trials? James urged his readers to see the tests as “occasions for joy.” When have you faced a trial in your life and learned from it? How have you seen God use hard times to test and grow your faith toward greater endurance and maturity?

- James did not write through naïve, rose-colored glasses. He knew human nature is not at all inclined to view tests as “occasions for joy.” That’s why in verse 5 he wrote that God will freely give wisdom to anyone who asks. In what ways does God’s ability to “grow you” through life’s challenges help you view hard times differently? When has God given you wisdom to face a tough challenge?



Endure. Pray this passage of scripture which speaks of the power of endurance and the hope that we can feel. Romans 5:3-5

Respond

We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Lord God, I find it hard to see even a gray, wintry day or a jam-packed parking lot as an occasion for joy. Keep teaching me to view life your way, to value the endurance and trust you can grow in me tough times. Amen.



Interpret the message of truth correctly

2 Timothy 2:14-15

¹⁴ Remind them of these things and warn them in the sight of God not to engage in battles over words that aren't helpful and only destroy those who hear them. ¹⁵ Make an effort to present yourself to God as a tried-and-true worker, who doesn't need to be ashamed but is one who interprets the message of truth correctly.

2 Timothy 2:23-25

²³ Avoid foolish and thoughtless discussions, since you know that they produce conflicts. ²⁴ God's slave shouldn't be argumentative but should be kind toward all people, able to teach, patient, ²⁵ and should correct opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will change their mind and give them a knowledge of the truth.

Paul urged Timothy to value reading and applying the principles of the Bible. As Timothy's spiritual mentor, Paul urged him to "Present yourself to God as...a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Doing that correctly also involved embodying its principles in the way he taught and shared. "Be kind toward all people" was an important part of teaching effectively.

- You may have heard the saying that "if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." In what ways are you learning and understanding more of the Bible's overarching message, and not just snippets here and there? How can an informed, Christ-centered study of the Bible help you discern truth from falsehood among the many religious ideas that clamor for your attention?

- Verse 14 says, “Keep reminding people of these things...” Paul didn’t just call Timothy to study the Bible for himself. He wanted him to accurately share its story with others. How is what you learn in the Bible shaping your life, especially the ways that you interact with others in your family, neighborhood, school or workplace? What spiritual subjects “trigger” in you a desire to argue? How does the Holy Spirit help you deal with those feelings?

Respond

Read. Lectio Divina means “divine reading” and is a way for you to be open to what God might be saying to you in Scripture. Practicing this can allow you to let go of your own agenda and connect deeper with what God might be saying.

Read the passage 4 times by following these steps

Read – What word or phrase speaks to you?

Meditate– What does your word or phrase means to you?

Pray - How is God calling you to act in response to this passage?

Contemplate – Silently reflect.

Lord of my life, help me to keep growing into a “tried and true worker” for your kingdom. Make me accurate, kind and gentle in sharing what I learn from you. Amen.



Devotedly studying God's word

Psalm 119:11-12

¹¹ I keep your word close, in my heart,
so that I won't sin against you.

¹² You, Lord, are to be blessed!
Teach me your statutes.

Psalm 119:103-105

¹⁰³ Your word is so pleasing to my taste buds—
it's sweeter than honey in my mouth!

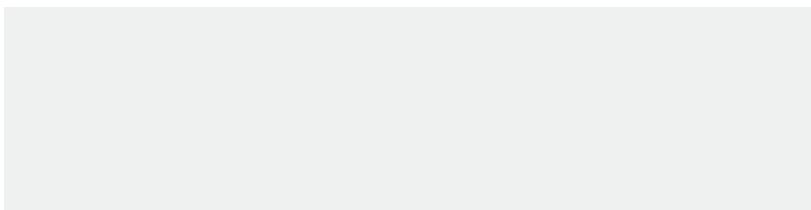
¹⁰⁴ I'm studying your precepts—
that's why I hate every false path.

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp before my feet
and a light for my journey.

To grow spiritually from Bible reading calls for us to open our heart as well as our mind to what God wants to say to us through the Bible. Sometimes all we know of Psalm 119 is that it is "the longest chapter in the Bible." But it is so much more than that. Today's passage offers a lovely prayer model that can prepare us to "hear" and value God's word on the pages of Scripture.

- "I have hidden your word in my heart," the psalmist wrote. What does it take to move the word from the printed page (or the screen) into your heart? One effective way to start is to choose a Bible passage (e.g. John 3:16-17, Psalm 23, or even if you want to start with a really short passage Psalm 119:11 from today's reading) and commit it to memory this week.

- At the same time, remember this: “The Bible is more than just a big book of inspirational verses and some do’s and don’ts. It’s a story. And like any story, it requires proper context. The Bible we hold in our hands today has been translated across multiple languages and was originally written in a culture much different than ours. This is important to understand because without proper context you will ultimately read the Bible out of context.” * How can you grow in your ability to relate all the “pieces” of the Bible to the big story it tells?



* Tyler Speegle, “Five Signs You’re Reading the Bible All Wrong.” *Relevant Magazine*, July 27, 2017, web version (click here to read the full article).

Respond

Memorize. Memorization is a way to implant within our heads and our hearts something that we can turn to in the midst of challenging and joyful times. It offers us an opportunity to center our thoughts on something that connects us deeply to God.

Write your favorite passage of Scripture here – read it at the beginning of every hour today, and by the end of the day you will hopefully be able to recite it.

Lord Jesus, in the Bible, I find the centuries-old story of how you’ve dealt with all kinds of people who loved and followed you. Help me learn more about how my walk with you is woven into that same story. Amen.



“Put it into practice”

James 1:22-25

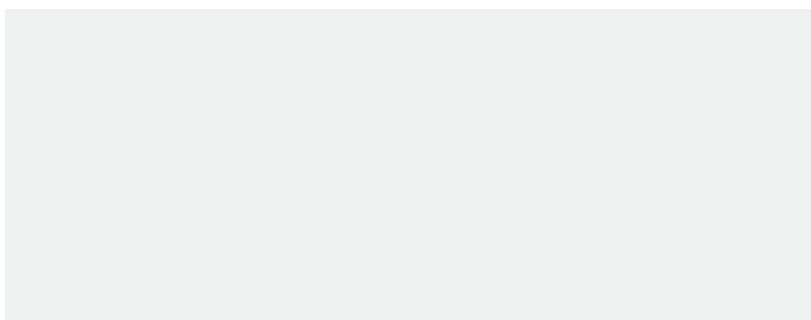
²² You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves.

²³ Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. ²⁴ They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

Growing in faith involves study, but it is not simply an intellectual exercise. James the apostle said God seeks “doers of the word,” not just “hearers.” That idea shaped the life of John Wesley, Methodism's founder. He and his friends got actively involved in helping prisoners and widows in Oxford. Holding together personal and social holiness has remained important to Wesley's spiritual descendants ever since.

- Have you ever known a person who “talked a good game” about religious devotion, but whose actions and attitudes did not match their words? If so, how did that person affect the other people over whom they had influence? When have you discovered a mismatch between your words about faith and your actions? In what ways has your allegiance to Christ altered your activities, priorities and lifestyle?

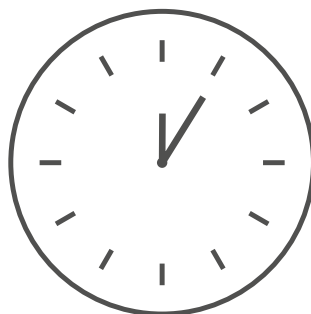
- James used a phrase that may startle us at first, writing of “the perfect law, the law of freedom.” When have you found in your own life that ignoring God’s principles to do whatever you feel like produces, not freedom, but a hurtful kind of slavery? In what ways have you found that living out God’s calling increases your freedom rather than limiting or frustrating it?



Reflect. “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives” – Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*. Reflect on how you spend your time each day and ask yourself the question, do my days reflect how I want to be spending my life? Specifically, how often are you engaging in the study of scripture?

Read this passage at breakfast, lunch and dinner today. Does doing so change your perspective?

Respond



Lord Jesus, I want the true freedom you offer me. Help me use my freedom to serve and bless others, as you did. Amen.



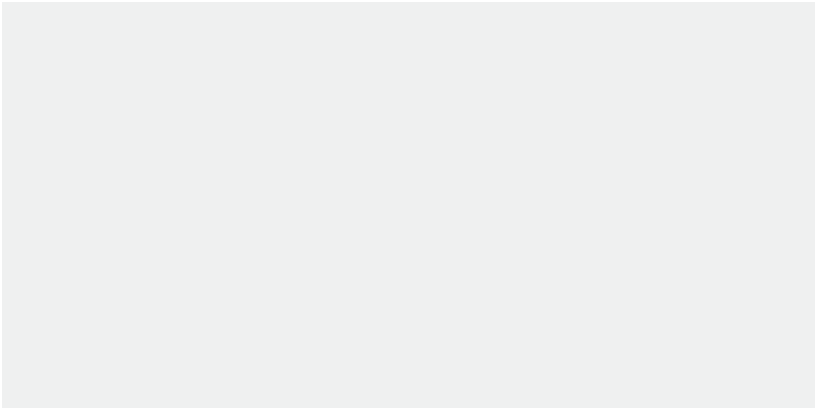
“Let’s grow in every way”

Ephesians 4:11-16

¹¹ He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. ¹² His purpose was to equip God’s people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ ¹³ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God’s Son. God’s goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ As a result, we aren’t supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. ¹⁵ Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let’s grow in every way into Christ, ¹⁶ who is the head. The whole body grows from him, as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part.

“God’s goal,” Ephesians said, “is for us to become mature adults...fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ.” At times when we find that unity with Christ and one another is still hard. But God calls us to become spiritually mature so that nothing can knock us off course. Building this kind of community requires us to speak the truth in love, to grow in together our faith each day so that we become more like our Savior Jesus Christ. All our different gifts need to work together so that we can strengthen and equip one another.

- Changing the world and building God’s kingdom calls us to take our faith beyond our weekend worship service. What are some of the steps you recall that moved you beyond being an “infant” in your faith, and helped you grow toward greater maturity? What are you doing in your day-to-day life that nurtures spiritual maturity in you and others, building up the body of believers in love? What one or two items are most clearly on your growth horizon right now?



Read. One of the most powerful things that we can do is to share our faith with another generation. If you have children, read a passage of scripture to them today and talk about what it means to them – if they are young children, you can read from a children’s Bible. If you don’t have children, read from a children’s Bible and talk with someone about how you might talk to a child about their faith.

Respond

How does reading from a children’s Bible change your perspective?

Family Activity

We experience God through Jesus as the Living Word and through the Bible as the written Word. Create a box filled with Bible verses. Obtain a shoebox or photo box. Using colored paper, markers, ribbon, magazine cut-outs, family photos and other fun materials, decorate the box to represent your family and your faith journey. Write some favorite Bible verses on colorful strips of paper and place them in the box. (The Book of Psalms is a great place to find many verses of praise and thanksgiving as well as promises from God.) Once a day, possibly at mealtime, pull a strip from the box and share the passage aloud. Ask older children and youth to also find it in the Bible. Thank God for the gifts of Jesus and Scripture.

Lord Jesus, you are building me—you are building us—into a community of spiritually mature people, growing in every way into your life of love. Help me to do my part as a faithful builder growing more and more into your image. Amen.

Week 4



SERVE



Serving others is serving Jesus

Matthew 25:31-40

³¹ "Now when the Human One [or Son of Man] comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left. ³⁴ "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. ³⁵ I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ "Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸ When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ "Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.'

Scholar William Barclay told this story: Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier, and a Christian. One winter day, Martin met a beggar who was blue and shivering with cold. Martin took his worn and frayed soldier's coat, cut it in two, and gave half of it to the beggar. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and Jesus amid the angels. Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. An angel asked, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak?" And Jesus answered softly, "My servant Martin gave it to me." *

- People who don't have enough to eat or wear, can't afford care if they're sick, are in prison, are different from you—most of us are willing to do a little something to help them. But Jesus called such people "these brothers and sisters of mine." To truly "buy into" in God's world-changing work of service means seeing that the poor, the sick, the prisoners, the outcast are not "them"—they're "us." What has helped you grasp the truth of Jesus' words?

- In Jesus' story, those he said had helped him were surprised: "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?" They saw need, not a chance for reward. What can help you learn to see the face of Jesus in the people you meet, especially those who are outcast or hurting? When have you found the freedom and joy that comes from blessing others because you know God cares about them?

* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 2, Chapters 11–28 (Revised Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 326.

Respond

Kindness. Being kind to the people around us, especially those who are suffering, helps us to feel connected to them rather than separate from them.

Loving kindness meditation

Pray in love for:

1. Family and friends
2. Someone with whom you are having tension or conflict
3. Strangers suffering
4. Self-compassion, forgiveness and self-love

O God, keep my eyes and my heart open to see your face in the faces of hurting people around me who need your touch through me. Amen.



Serve each other with sincere love

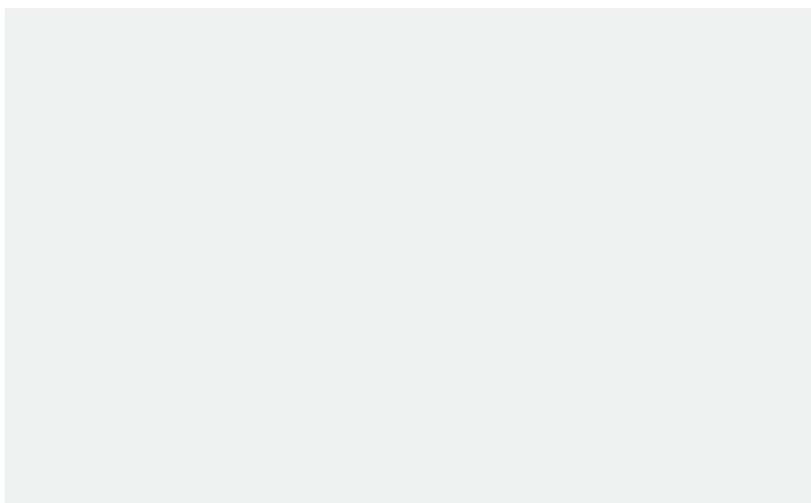
1 Peter 4:8-11

⁸ Above all, show sincere love to each other, because love brings about the forgiveness of many sins. ⁹ Open your homes to each other without complaining. ¹⁰ And serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God's diverse gifts. ¹¹ Whoever speaks should do so as those who speak God's word. Whoever serves should do so from the strength that God furnishes. Do this so that in everything God may be honored through Jesus Christ. To him be honor and power forever and always. Amen.

Too often, we have a "one size fits all" idea of what it means to serve. In fact, there are as many unique forms of service as there are people. The apostle Peter's letter called Christians to "use whatever gift you have received to serve others." As Paul wrote elsewhere, "If our bodies were only an eye, we couldn't hear a thing" (1 Corinthians 12:17). The call is to be yourself, as long as "being yourself" includes being a servant to God and others.

- In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul said that using our gifts without love renders them useless to God (and, most often, to anyone else). In today's reading, Peter, in a shorter, less-poetic form, made the same point. What makes love so vital as the environment in which we use our widely varying gifts? Who do you know who is finding joy by using his or her gifts in love?

- What Peter said in verse 8 seemed to draw from the Hebrew wisdom of Proverbs 10:12. Of that passage, scholar John Goldingay wrote, “Honesty (v. 11) and self-giving build up the community (v. 12).” * We still hear heated debates about whether pure self-interest or community-mindedness make for better human lives. Both Old and New Testament scriptures came down firmly on the side of building community. How easy or hard do you find it to accept that wisdom?



* John Goldingay, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 46.

Respond

Help. We all know that life gets messy, and in our hurry, we might be overwhelmed with all that we have to do, and cleaning becomes the furthest from our minds. Spend some time decluttering a space in an effort to allow a little space to breathe. Examples include: doing a chore that isn't yours, picking up trash around your neighborhood, or cleaning up a public restroom.

Lord Jesus, help me not just to act loving on the outside, but to show “sincere love” to all your human children. Keep making my heart more like yours. Amen.



Freedom for Spirit-guided service

Galatians 5:13-16

¹³ You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. ¹⁴ All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. [Leviticus 19:18] ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other! ¹⁶ I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires.

The apostle Paul planted new churches in the Roman province of Galatia (modern day Turkey). But after Paul left, "false teachers" came to Galatia and began convincing people they still had to follow certain rules and laws for God to accept them. Paul, in his letter, strongly resisted the false teachers. He urged his readers to claim their spiritual freedom in Christ, a freedom defined by the words Jesus identified as one of the "great commandments": "love your neighbor as yourself."

- In verse 13 Paul bluntly stated a truth we may struggle to admit. We all have selfish impulses, especially if given the ability to choose freely. He pointed his readers to the one who can give us the ability to live in love: the Holy Spirit: "Be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires" (verse 16). In what parts of your life do you want to invite the Spirit to empower you to more fully love your neighbor as yourself?

- Paul used strong words about the great commandment: “All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement.” He was echoing Jesus’ teaching. But even many Christians have struggled to accept that. We add baptismal practices, specific ways of reading Scripture or doing communion, and a whole variety of doctrinal nuances to the list of things needed to “fulfill the law.” Can you trust, in your own walk with Christ and that of others, that “love your neighbor as yourself” truly fulfills “all the law”?

Respond

Converse. None of us agree on everything, and there is always something that we can learn from someone else. John Wesley reminded us, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?” (*The Catholic Spirit*)

Take the time to connect with someone who thinks differently than you on an issue – give of your time by listening to them. How can you show love to this person? If you don’t feel comfortable having a conversation, take the time to read an alternative viewpoint. Pray for God to open your heart and mind to show love.

Lord Jesus, “loving” sounds so simple, but in real life it gets harder to apply. As I draw nearer to you, through your empowering Spirit, teach me more and more what it means to love as you love. Equip me to do that. Amen.



World-changing service, not ceremonies

Isaiah 58:5-8

⁵ Is this the kind of fast I choose,
a day of self-affliction,
of bending one's head like a reed
and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes?

Is this what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ Isn't this the fast I choose:
releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke,
setting free the mistreated,
and breaking every yoke?

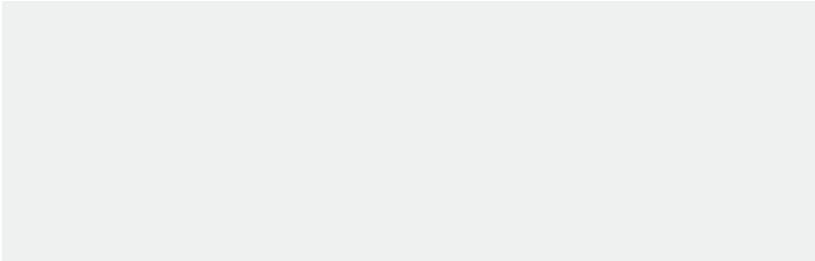
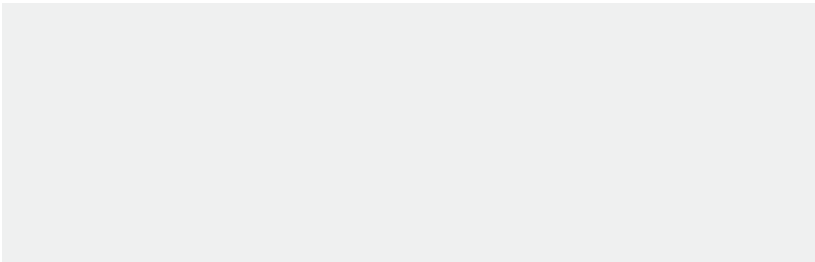
⁷ Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,
covering the naked when you see them,
and not hiding from your own family?

⁸ Then your light will break out like the dawn,
and you will be healed quickly.

Your own righteousness will walk before you,
and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.

When Jesus said to love your neighbor, many in his day wanted to limit that to their Israelite neighbors—and even then, it was a hard ideal to live up to. Isaiah 58 spoke to Israelites who took part in many religious practices, including fasting, but did so from self-serving motives. Why, they asked, didn't God honor their religious feasts and fasts? The prophet said the problem was their piety was only skin-deep. They didn't need showy, external fasts. They needed to "fast" from mistreating other people.

- Fasting is a helpful spiritual practice, but theirs only seemed to go skin-deep. Isaiah 58:3-4 noted sadly that the pious "fasters" kept exploiting their workers and fighting each other. How do verses 6 and 7 speak to your heart and your life today? What is one step you can take this Lenten season to step into the kind of life-changing fast the prophet said God chooses?

- 
- Jesus' echoed Isaiah 58 when he said, "'Go and learn what this means: I want mercy and not sacrifice.'" (Matthew 9:13)? How have you seen your spiritual practices change your heart and lead you to a life of greater service? What would it look like for you to "fast" as Isaiah 58 called God's people to do today? How have you grown in your ability to show mercy to others? To whom can you extend mercy today?
- 

Respond

Remember. When we take the time to remember how someone we know has offered grace and love to us, it inspires us to live a life of service.

Think of a time someone served you.

How did their gift free you up to attend to what you needed to do?

How did it make you feel?

Send them a thank you note.

Heavenly Father, thank you for opening my eyes and heart to care for and show mercy to your children in need. Use me and whatever good things I have so that through me "your light will shine in the darkness." Amen.



God's call: serve those who need it most

Psalm 82:1-4

¹ God takes his stand in the divine council;
he gives judgment among the gods:

² "How long will you judge unjustly
by granting favor to the wicked?"

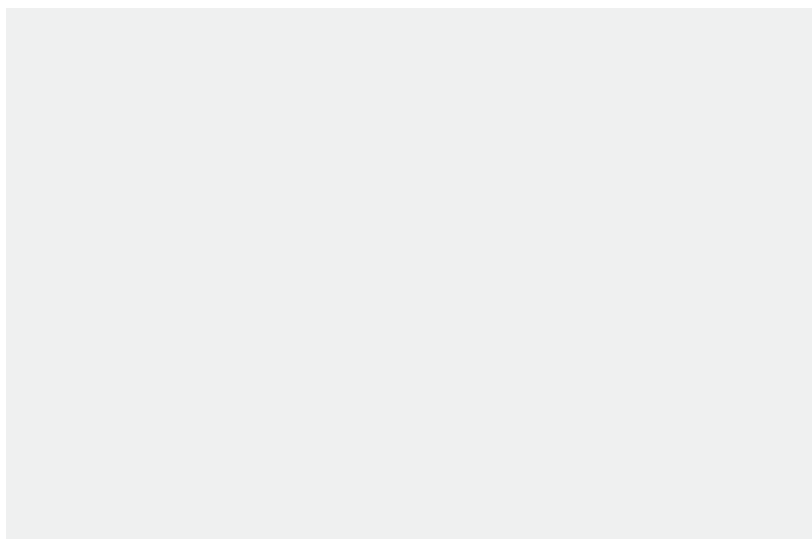
³ Give justice to the lowly and the orphan;
maintain the right of the poor and the destitute!

⁴ Rescue the lowly and the needy.
Deliver them from the power of the wicked!

In this psalm, the entire "divine council" heard a basic principle of God's rule: to ensure justice and rescue for "the lowly and the needy." Some Hebrew writing drew from images common in the nations around them, like the image of a council of gods. Israelites, however, saw the one true God as presiding, with angels or heavenly spirits as council members (cf. also Job 1:6). With no legal or social status, and no male relative to take their side, widows or orphans in that society simply had no way to help themselves. Yet in the psalms and in many of Israel's laws, it was clear that God cared passionately about helping the most helpless.

- Psalm 82 represented a whole strand of Israelite worship. For example, Psalm 146:9 sang the praises of "The Lord: who protects immigrants, who helps orphans and widows." But God usually acts through people, through us, to accomplish divine purposes. In what ways, big and small, can you partner with God in carrying out God's wish for justice and rescue to take place on earth?

- A key part of our heritage as Methodists came from John Wesley's stress on holding together the "evangelical gospel" (the good news of salvation as God's gift, received by faith) with the "social gospel" (the good news that God actively seeks justice and help, particularly for the weak and powerless). When have you needed spiritual salvation? When (if ever) have you felt powerless, and needed justice or help? Why is it important that God's people address both needs?



Respond

Volunteer. This is an opportunity to give of your time freely to offer hope to those who are in need.

Call a charity of your choice and ask, one of these questions

1. What is your greatest need now?
2. How can I volunteer my time?
3. How can I pray for your team or your volunteers?

Lord Jesus, thank you for the preachers who have spoken, not their own wisdom but yours, to guide my life into your ways. Help me listen attentively, and to be ready to speak your word when you give me chances to do so. Amen.



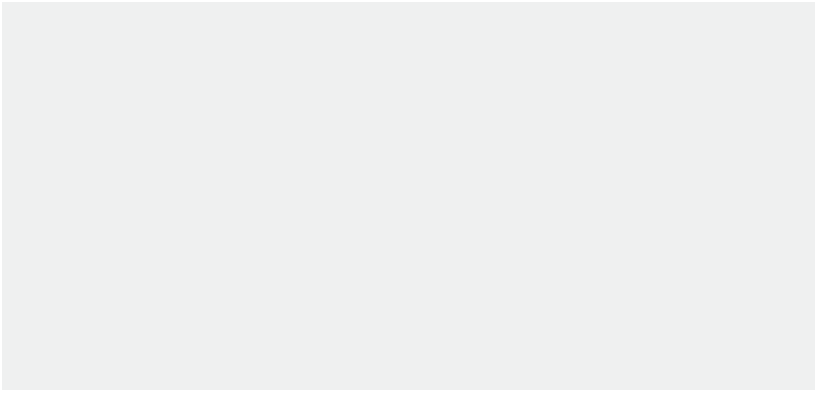
She served by sewing

Acts 9:36-42

³⁶In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas). Her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need. ³⁷About that time, though, she became so ill that she died. After they washed her body, they laid her in an upstairs room. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two people to Peter. They urged, "Please come right away!" ³⁹Peter went with them. Upon his arrival, he was taken to the upstairs room. All the widows stood beside him, crying as they showed the tunics and other clothing Dorcas made when she was alive. ⁴⁰Peter sent everyone out of the room, then knelt and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!" She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and raised her up. Then he called God's holy people, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. ⁴²The news spread throughout Joppa, and many put their faith in the Lord.

There are many ways of serving others. There's no record of a church building in the city of Joppa, but the church was there. Exhibit A was a marvelous seamstress named Tabitha (Dorcas—meaning "gazelle"—in Greek). There's no evidence that she ever preached a sermon, but God equipped her to sew, and gave her a heart for the poor. The "show and tell" time in verse 39 is a deeply touching scene. Tabitha lived her faith in such beautiful ways that God used Peter as a channel to allow her to keep living it longer.

- Tabitha loved people, lived out her love through her gift of sewing, and changed a whole city. What are you able to do that God can use to bless others? To what extent do you think behavior like Tabitha’s is a matter of natural inclination, and to what extent do you believe it reflects intentional moral choices? God used both Peter, the apostle, preacher and healer and Tabitha, the seamstress with a compassionate heart, to lead many to believe in Jesus. What role(s) has God equipped you to play in serving others? How committed are you to doing your part in helping others to “put their faith in the Lord”?



Offer. Think about the things that you love to do. What brings you joy, and how might you be able to share that joy with someone else. Love kids – offer babysitting to a neighbor or friend. Love to knit – make a shawl and bring it to the hospital. Love to fix things – connect with a neighbor and ask if there is something around the house that you could fix.

Respond

What brings me joy?

How might I share that joy in the form of service?



Family Activity

Serving others helps build relationships that honor and glorify God. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Gather your family for a late night drive out to the country. Find a place where the sky is dark and the stars shine through the darkness. Depending on the weather, place blankets on the ground, lie down and look up at the sky. Take the first moments to simply be still and give thanks for God's beautiful creation. Invite everyone to try and count the stars. Discuss the difference the stars make in the night sky. Imagine together what the sky would look like without any stars. Read the above quote from King and Matthew 5:14-16. Share ideas about ways each of you can be lights in the darkness for God by serving others. Pray and ask God to help you.

Lord Jesus, help me never to think, "All I can do is _____,
and that doesn't matter." Make my life, and whatever abilities I
have, count as much for you as Tabitha's lovely life of service.
Amen.

Week 5



GIVE



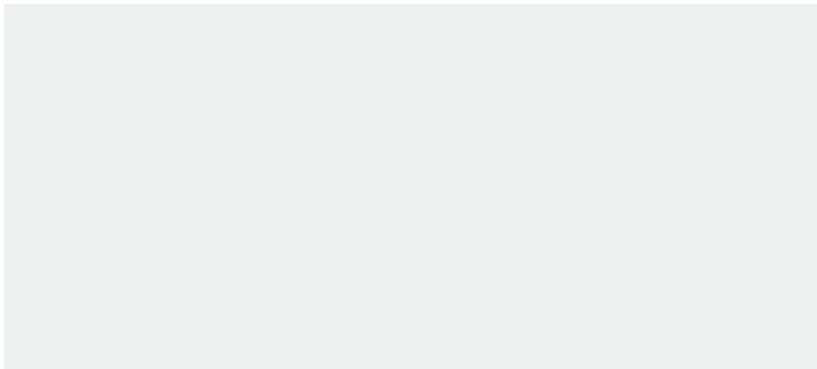
Jesus noticed a small gift from a big heart

Mark 12:41-44

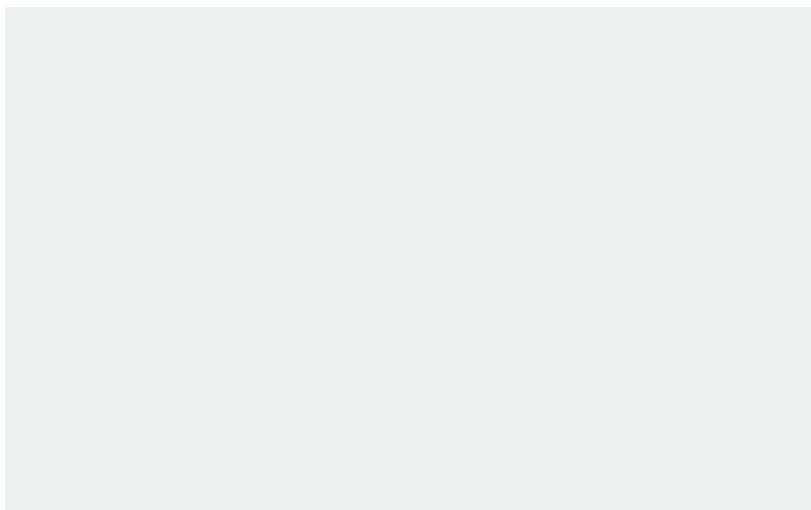
⁴¹ Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. ⁴² One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny. ⁴³ Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury. ⁴⁴ All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on."

The Jerusalem Temple was a huge religious, social and even business center, bustling and noisy. Sustaining the institution took many large gifts—and many people gave such gifts. (Matthew 6:2 even hinted that some people hired a bugler to attract notice as they gave large gifts to good causes.) But Jesus noticed, and honored, a different kind of giver. He praised a generous, trusting widow who gave her "fortune"—two tiny copper coins—to the Temple.

- How much equipment or staff would the widow's offering, which Jesus praised, have made possible for the Temple? Sometimes we think we give just to boost the church or other worthy institutions. In honoring the widow's trusting generosity, what spiritual impact of generosity did Jesus recognize? How does giving, of any amount, enrich you spiritually?



- Scholar Craig Keener noted, “The temple sported ostentatious wealth, and its officials would probably waste this widow’s money; but this powerless woman, ignorant of that likelihood, acts in good faith and is the greatest giver in God’s sight.” * In her mind, she wasn’t giving to people; she was giving to God. As you consider your resources, and ask God to guide your giving, to what or whom are you most focused on giving?



* Craig S. Keener, comment on Mark 12:41-44 in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Respond

Sacrifice. The woman gave all she had. Most of us are not in a position to sacrifice our entire paycheck, but we could have a taste of what this might feel like. Look at the line items in your budget for the week, how much do you plan to spend on food? Could you eat the food that you have already in your home – in the pantry, fridge, and freezer - and donate the money you would have spent? If a week is not possible, could you do so for one meal?

Lord of heaven and earth, teach me how to love you as much as the widow Jesus noticed. Teach me how to offer my time, my talents, my treasures, and myself for your glory. Amen.



Who do you serve: God or wealth?

Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹ “Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. ²⁰ Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. ²¹ Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

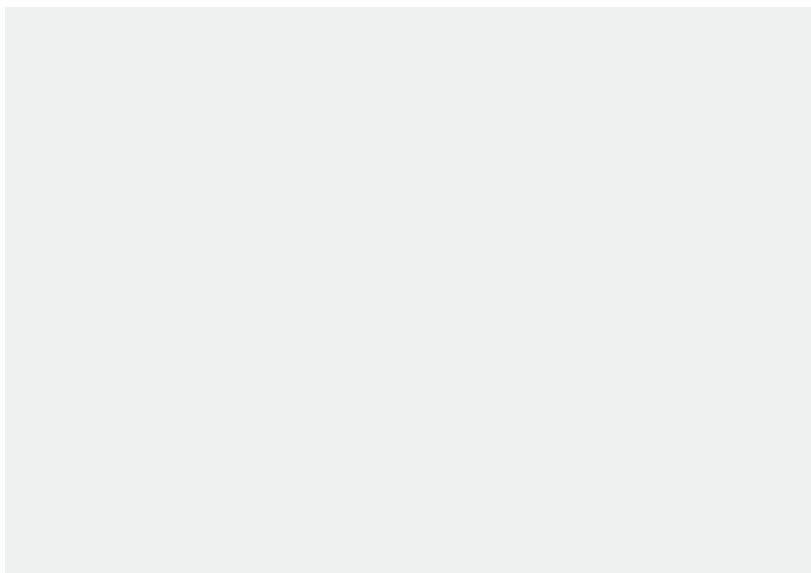
²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. Therefore, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how terrible that darkness will be!

²⁴ No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

We must choose what we value most even in our hobbies (e.g. if a band you love has a concert on the same night your favorite team has a big game, which do you attend?). Jesus focused on the biggest choice God calls all of us to make in life—the choice of our ultimate, governing loyalty. Wealth in and of itself is value neutral, but Jesus said putting it at the emotional center of your life is not. He taught that “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and added, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

- Scholar Craig Keener wrote that “Mammon” (the word translated “wealth” in verse 24) was “an Aramaic word for possessions or money, and Jesus seems to be personifying it as an idol.” * Few of us would ever think of physically bowing down before our bank account or a valued possession. Given that, what do you think making wealth an idol looks like today? What does it mean, tangibly, for you to choose to serve God rather than wealth?

- We can spend money on many things—vacations, various collectibles, prized belongings, tickets to special events, houses, retirement savings. Have you ever put money into something touted as “secure” that proved to be insecure? What do you think Jesus meant by collecting “treasures in heaven”? Where is your heart—do you put as much time and energy into “investing” in heaven as into earthly investments and spending choices?



* Craig S. Keener, comment on Matthew 6:24 in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Respond

Simplify. We all have things stored up that we do not need. Take some time to go through one closet, drawer, or cabinet. Ask yourself this question - what in there have you not used that someone else could benefit from? Gather these things up and take them to a local charity.

Lord Jesus, you are Lord of my life, and I want to “collect treasures” in heaven. As I make concrete, everyday choices of how to spend my time, energy and money, increase my capacity to live out your values. Amen.



“Desire first and foremost God’s kingdom”

Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵ “Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you’ll eat or what you’ll drink, or about your body, what you’ll wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? ²⁷ Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. ²⁹ But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, won’t God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? ³¹ Therefore, don’t worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ ³² Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Using exaggeration to make a point (as in “That bag weighs a ton”), Jesus warned against worry, not against planning. That’s why today’s passage may feel radical, against common sense, at first. That may have been even more true for Jesus’ first hearers. “Jesus’ audience would have been ordinary peasant people who had to worry about their next meal all the time, yet Jesus tells them not to worry about anything. He asks them instead to view the world with new eyes, to see all around them evidence of God’s care and provision.” *

- Jesus didn’t condemn planning, if we do it with our values straight. How easy or hard do you find it to live out Jesus’ wisdom to “desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness”? What wishes or dreams matter so much to you that (if you’re honest) you might want them more than God’s kingdom and righteousness? What choices have you made (or do you want to make) to keep those wishes and dreams in proper perspective?

- Jesus seemed to anticipate modern research, saying, “Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?” (verse 27) In fact, worry shortens our life! What inner arguments, if any, do you make about why it “makes sense” for you to worry, or why it would be “irresponsible” not to worry? How can you distinguish needs from wants, and make plans without worrying?

* Eugene Eung-Chun Park and Joel B. Green, study note on Matthew 6:25-34 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 17 NT.

Respond

Connect. Jesus calls us to live into today, rather than worry about the past or the future, as a way to remain grounded in what is happening here and now, make a conscious effort to connect with every person you see today. By doing so, you will be giving of your full attention.

Before every interaction you have today – pray this prayer.

God, may this interaction be full of love and grace, may I feel deeply connected to them and in turn, be more deeply connected to you.

Lord Jesus, you modeled a life of peace and trust. Help me to keep learning how to live a life in which my energy can focus on your purposes rather than my fears. Amen.



“Guard yourself against all kinds of greed”

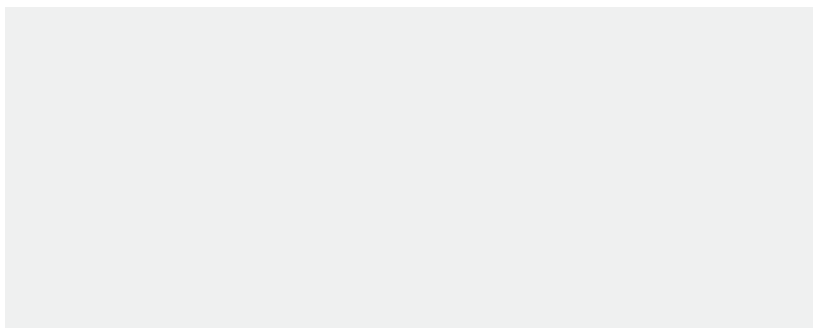
Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ Jesus said to him, “Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?” ¹⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions, even when someone is very wealthy.” ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: “A certain rich man’s land produced a bountiful crop. ¹⁷ He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! ¹⁸ Then he thought, Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I’ll store all my grain and goods. ¹⁹ I’ll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?’ ²¹ This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God.”

Jesus’ sad parable underscored a basic kingdom principle: “One’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions” (verse 15). The day comes for all when the only question is, “Who will get all the ‘stuff’ I’ve amassed?” Both Colossians 3:5 and Ephesians 5:5 called greed a type of “idolatry,” of loving something more than God. This life, and any material possessions we enjoy in it, will end. Only God can (and does) offer us eternity.

- The man in Jesus’ story never asked the question, “How much do I need?” He never said, “Maybe I’ll give some of this huge harvest I have away.” How easy or hard is it for you to be generous with the money, time or “stuff” you have? What wishes or fears get in the way of living generously?

- How do you understand Jesus' challenging phrase about being "rich toward God"? What steps can you take, in your day-to-day life, to become "rich toward God"? What kinds of choices help you focus on the riches that last for eternity? How can you share that approach to life with your children, grandchildren or other people with whom you have influence?



Release. We have a tendency to over-plan, over-prepare, over-schedule our lives and we have left no room for margin. What would it look like to release some of the "obligations" that we have which no longer serve us.

What is one thing that no longer brings you joy but you feel obligated to do? What would it look like to release that? Rather than fill it with something else, keep that space and time open to connect with God.

Respond

Lord Jesus, whenever my life ends, I want my greatest treasure to be stored up with you, not left behind for an auctioneer to dispose of. Guide me into the kind of life that is rich toward you.
Amen.



What would make you saddest?

Mark 10:17-22

¹⁷ As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?”

¹⁸ Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony. Don’t cheat. Honor your father and mother.” [Exodus 20:12-16; Deuteronomy 5:16-20]

²⁰ “Teacher,” he responded, “I’ve kept all of these things since I was a boy.”

²¹ Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.” ²² But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

A devout, apparently earnest young man asked Jesus what he needed to do to obtain eternal life. Jesus “looked at him carefully and loved him,” and identified the man’s fixation on wealth as his main spiritual obstacle. Unwilling and unable to reset his priorities, the man went away sad. It didn’t seem to take him long to decide that he didn’t want eternal life THAT much.

- Jesus’ words in verse 21 were personal for that particular young man, not a command he meant to apply to all Christians. (Remember that God did NOT tell every affluent person in the Bible to sell all they had—e.g. Abraham in the Old Testament, Zacchaeus in Luke 19.) What was the heart issue Jesus tried to get the young man to face up to?

- Jesus' startling question to the young man wasn't a general command. But the young man's response confronts each of us with the hard question, "Which possessions, if any, do I value so much that I'd choose them over following Jesus?" We know the young man turned away from the "treasure in heaven" Jesus offered. If Jesus asked you to give up, not everything, but maybe just your biggest treasure, how would you answer?

Respond

Consider. We own lots of possessions, but many times the things that might have value to us, are valuable because of the memories associated with them. Consider the things that remind you of a person or an experience that points to a deeper connection beyond the physical item.

What is something of value to you?

What emotions does it elicit when you see it?

If it relates to an experience, how might you recreate it?

If there is something that belonged to a loved one, could you take time to spend with them? If they are no longer living, share a story about them with someone else.

Lord Jesus, you offer me heaven's riches. Give me a heart that can accurately assess the treasure of your kingdom, valuing it properly against any other claims. Amen.



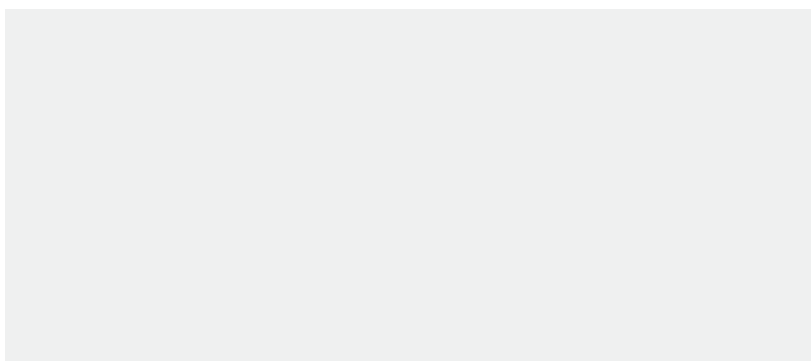
Practical guidelines for giving

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop. ⁷Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. ⁹As it is written, He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever. [Psalm 112:9] ¹⁰The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. ¹¹You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. ¹²Your ministry of this service to God's people isn't only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. ¹³They will give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ's gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. ¹⁴They will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you because of the outstanding grace that God has given to you. ¹⁵Thank God for his gift that words can't describe!

Paul was gathering a gift for Christians in Jerusalem. He was more concerned with the spirit in which people gave, though, than with the amount raised. "God loves a cheerful giver" was not just an upbeat slogan. It was a serious call to check why they gave—"They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure," he said. Paul didn't invent that idea. In Exodus 25:2, the word about offerings to build the desert tabernacle was "Receive my gift offerings from everyone who freely wants to give." Then Paul wrote, "God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace" (verse 8), and "You will be made rich in every way" (verse 11). Paul, a traveling Christian preacher who owned, as far as we know, no real estate, no life insurance policy, and no retirement plan, wrote about having more than enough!

- Have you ever given reluctantly or under compulsion? What was that experience like? For what reasons would God want us to give from free, grateful hearts without coercion or pressure? Have you ever given that way? If so, how was that different from giving under pressure? In verse 15, Paul exclaimed, “Thank God for his gift that words can’t describe!” What gift was he talking about? When (if ever) have you received a gift from someone that “left you speechless,” that words couldn’t fully describe? How would you compare that kind of experience with God’s freely-given gift which Paul described?



Support. At some point we are all in need of support from those around us. Even if we have a hard time receiving help, the support that we receive can fill us with a deep sense of gratitude and bring joy to those who are able to offer it.

Think of someone that you know who could use some support – that could be emotional support, financial support, support in getting something done. What might you be uniquely gifted to be able to share with them? Make a commitment to give back to them in some way and talk about the experience here.

Respond

Family Activity

Adults, gather several pennies and hide them throughout your home. Place a bowl in the center of the room. Ask your children to hunt for the pennies. (Pennies can be a choking hazard, so very young children should be supervised.) Let each child place the pennies he or she collected in the bowl. Ask, "If this was all the money our family had, what would you do with it?" Read aloud Luke 18:9-14. Ask, "What is more important—God or money? Why do you think Jesus wants us to share? How does God want us to feel when we give?" Decide where you will give the pennies. Pray for the people who will receive them and thank God for your blessings.

Lord Jesus, open my eyes to the abundance you provide around me. May my heart sing as, out of your abundance, I seek to be your physical presence to the people in my world. Amen.

Week 6



SHARE



Jesus actively shared good news

John 4:4-15

⁴ Jesus had to go through Samaria. ⁵ He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." ⁸ His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.

⁹ The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.) ¹⁰ Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water?" ¹² You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!"

In Jesus' day, Jews looked down on Samaritans, even hated them. Though the shortest route from Jerusalem to Galilee was through Samaria, most Jews going north or south would travel through Perea, east of the Jordan River, to avoid the Samaritans. Jesus did not physically *have to* go through Samaria. He purposely made a spiritual *choice* to go through Samaria. In going through Samaria, stopping and drinking from Jacob's well, he was directly defying the enmity between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus was challenging an injustice of his day.

- Today's reading is full of lessons. At its heart, it is about two important matters—1) bearing witness to God's undeniable longing for peace among God's children, and 2) water, the life-giving, soul-cleansing, peace-making, world-changing water that bubbles out from the one who made us, the inner thirst-quenching spiritual water that produces eternal life. Where in your daily

living do you see injustice? What are you doing to bear witness to God's work by deliberately going out of your way to confront the injustice you see?

[Empty response box]

- Jesus offered the Samaritan woman water that quenches thirst forever. The woman likely confused the living water Jesus offered with a natural spring of flowing water that would keep her from coming to the well so often. She at first wanted to escape the labor; Jesus wanted her to embrace the water within. Do you just want Jesus' living water to make your life easier or simpler? Or do you want living water to make you whole so that the world might see Jesus in you?

[Empty response box]

Respond

Recall. Some of the most difficult times in our lives can often be the times that we find that we are closest to God. Reflect on how you experienced God in a difficult time and how you might be able to share a word of hope with someone who is struggling.

This was a difficult time in my life _____.

How I experienced God during this time? _____

Lord Jesus, keep me from chasing convenience and an easier life. Guide me to your work, no matter how hard, that I may bear witness to your love for humanity. Make me willing to go out of my way for the sake of the world. Amen.



Jesus' concise sketch of God's big story

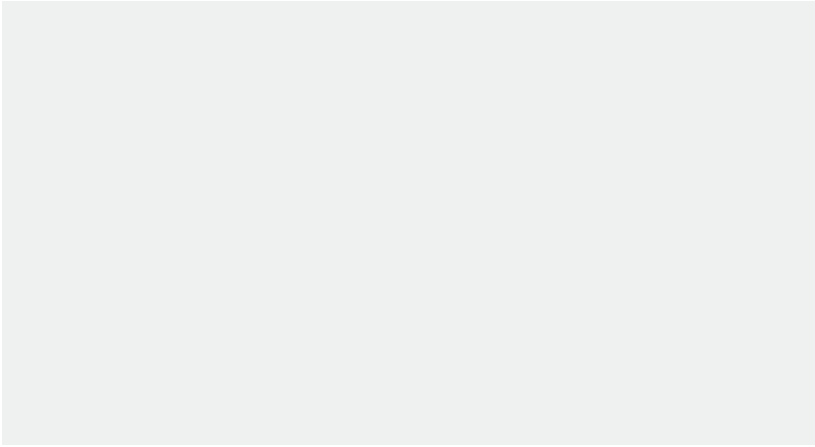
Luke 24:44-48

⁴⁴Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. ⁴⁶He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.

Jesus, with his disciples after the crucifixion and resurrection, taught them to reflect on Israel's history to find their ongoing mission. They were to preach to *all nations* the life found in his resurrection. Jesus charged the disciples to preach the story of repentance and forgiveness of sins. He opened the disciples' minds to see the big picture: that their history as a people, from Moses to the Psalms, said that in the Christ there is salvation and justice.

- Your personal story of a changed heart and life is powerful to the non-religious and nominally religious people you interact with wherever you live, work or play. You, like the disciples, are a witness to God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ. In what ways can you share your personal story of a changed heart and life with those around you?

- Jesus did not give the disciples an optional task. Rather, he commissioned them—gave them a mandate or command to be witnesses of God’s work in the world. What do you need to do in your life to more fully take on Jesus’ mission to share his hope and forgiveness with the people around you?



Invite. The Christian story is a powerful one. Someone at some point invited you to learn more about Christ, now you have an opportunity to do the same.

Respond

Who can you invite to join you for Easter?

God, keep me alert for chances to faithfully share the story of your Son’s life, death, burial and resurrection. Give me courage when afraid, confidence when unsure, passion when indifferent. May I make you proud as I share my personal story of a changed heart and life. Amen.



Parting words from the risen Savior

Acts 1:3-8

³ After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom. ⁴ While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me: ⁵ John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ⁶ As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" ⁷ Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would give his followers power to bear witness to God's work in the world. The Spirit still gives us guidance, courage, strength, alertness, and passion to share the person and work of Jesus. The mighty wind that is the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:7-8) empowers Christians to be storytellers of God's great love for the world. God calls us to radiate hope, to live with a confident expectation that God's work is real and present in the world today.

- God did not leave us on our own to radiate hope. Through the Holy Spirit, God grants us power to be living extensions of Jesus' ministry in today's world. It's often said that we have as much power from the Holy Spirit as we ask for. Are you asking for the Holy Spirit's power? In what ways, as a God-powered messenger, can you share Jesus' story with others?

- The “end of the earth” could be anywhere—your office, your favorite restaurant, your health club or your cul-de-sac. Where are the one or two places you can most effectively share your faith story with others? Which one of your friends, family members, or co-workers can join you in this mission?

Encourage. The power of the Holy Spirit is with us and often can nudge us to reach out to someone in a time of need. Sometime today, ask God to bring to mind someone you know who needs a word of encouragement. Pull out your phone at that moment and send a text of encouragement to the first person that comes to mind. You might be surprised at what a profound impact it might make to them and to you.

(Who did you text? What did you say? How did it make you feel? What was the response?)

Respond

God, give me chances to share my faith story with others. Show me where you are already at work around me so I can join you in your work. Help me remember that my power comes from the Holy Spirit. Amen



“Whenever anyone asks... be ready”

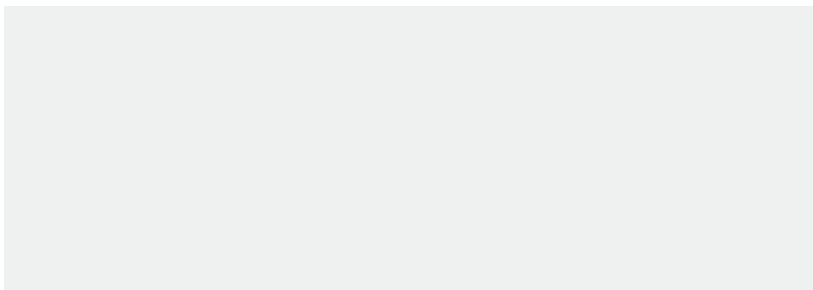
1 Peter 3:13-16

¹³ Who will harm you if you are zealous for good? ¹⁴ But happy are you, even if you suffer because of righteousness! Don't be terrified or upset by them.

¹⁵ Instead, regard Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts. Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it. ¹⁶ Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience. Act in this way so that those who malign your good lifestyle in Christ may be ashamed when they slander you.

Apologetics: the art of defending and giving evidence for the Christian faith. The writer of 1 Peter saw it as important to be ready to provide evidence for our faith, and the hope we live in, to anyone who asks. We best defend our faith and radiate hope, not in arguments or disputes, but by being able to reasonably and realistically support our faith candidly, confidently, compassionately and comprehensively.

- Reason has led us to believe our beliefs (i.e. our doctrine). That takes on realism in our lifestyle, as people see actions that back up our Christian claims. Do you think your lifestyle would back up your verbal claims of Christianity? Why or why not? Do you have a sense of the story that people tell about you?



- You may, from time to time, meet people who challenge your beliefs, with a strong air of skepticism and doubt. Most will try to be kind, but like Romans in Peter's day, some won't. The author of 1 Peter challenged readers to stay

respectful and humble in all situations. How easy or hard do you find it to remain respectful and humble when your faith is challenged? For what reasons?

Why? Think about how faith in Christ has changed your life. In essence, why do you believe?

Create an “elevator speech” for your faith – something you could share in 30 seconds or less while on an elevator with someone. Here are some questions to consider as you think about this.

1. Were you ever reluctant to believe? Did you have doubts? Write those here.
2. What happened that changed your mind? Was it an experience, a person?
3. How is your life different now?
4. How do you live out your faith – think of how you worship, grow, serve, give and share

Respond

O Lord, in my passion to defend my Christian faith, help me to be humble to all I meet. Let your loving kindness flow through me as I represent you to the world around me. Amen.



Philip: ready to share when asked

Acts 8:27-38

²⁷...Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.)

²⁸ He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it."

³⁰ Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?"

³¹ The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. ³² This was the passage of scripture he was reading: Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent so he didn't open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was taken away from him.

Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth? [Isaiah 53:7-8]

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. ³⁶ As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" *[The best manuscripts of Acts do not contain what is printed as verse ³⁷ in some translations]* ³⁸ He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him.

An Ethiopian in Jerusalem was a long way from home. Acts said he'd come to Jerusalem to worship, but how did he get his hands on a scroll to be reading on his journey home? Perhaps in Jerusalem he'd heard some of the spreading stories about Jesus. Whatever led to it, he was curious about the sacred Hebrew readings in Isaiah. His curiosity produced initial confusion. He admitted he needed help to understand what he was reading. Philip's immediate task was simple—help this curious man find the meaning of the gospel message.

- The Holy Spirit sent Philip on a mission to help guide the influential Ethiopian to understand the gospel from the prophetic words of Isaiah 53. Philip ran to the chariot eager to help the man. That example of eager obedience is inspiring. When the Holy Spirit whispers to you, how willing are you to listen? Are you eager to help others understand your faith?

- Non-religious and nominally religious people need your help to make sense out of what, for many, can be a very confusing message. When was the last time you helped someone make sense of the gospel message? Do you feel equipped to do so? If not, what could you do to feel more confident and capable?

Respond

Share. Put your faith out there. Drink out of your Resurrection coffee mug, wear a cross, or post something on social media. Pray that God would use that as an opportunity for someone to connect with you about your faith.

God, teach me how to listen closely for the Holy Spirit's whispering guidance. Help me have the courage to eagerly obey. Stir within me, Lord, a desire to better equip myself to help curious people make sense of the gospel story. Amen.



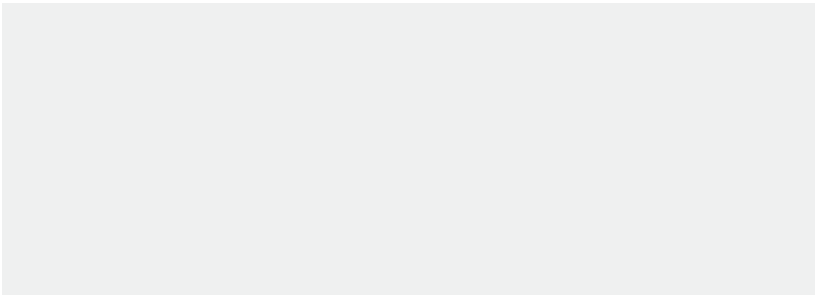
“Therefore, go...make disciples”

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

The disciples made their way to the rendezvous point in Galilee. Understanding more fully who Jesus was after his resurrection, the eleven disciples probably worshiped him with more depth than ever before. “Some doubted” likely means some were still stunned, even dumbfounded that they found themselves with Jesus—a once-dead, now alive, risen Savior. He told his disciples to “go,” which is probably better translated as you are going. As you go about the daily rhythms in your ordinary life, the Savior said, prioritize the mission of disciple making. And as you do, realize the comforting presence of Jesus is with you every day.

- To “make disciples” is to guide people to accept the claims of Christ. “Baptizing” and “teaching” are important aspects of being a disciple, but not necessarily the means to make disciples. People become disciples by coming into the community of believers and submitting to Christ as the Lord of their life. Teaching disciples means leading them toward a life of obedience to Jesus, not just intellectually teaching doctrine. * Jesus said “go.” How’s your “going,” anyway? Would you say that Christ is the Lord of your life? In what ways is your Lord leading you to make disciple-making a priority?



* *NIV Bible Commentary Volume 2*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994, page 134.

Explore. We are called to make disciples and we might all go about doing this in a different way. Consider how God might have uniquely gifted you to share. Take a spiritual gifts assessment online. Explore how God might be calling you use your gift to share about your faith.

My Spiritual Gift: _____

How have I used this gift?

How might God be calling me to use this gift?

Respond

Family Activity

How can your family find ways to share the continuous Good News that “Jesus is alive”? Gather together and invite each person to share how he or she experiences the joy and love of Jesus in their life. Ask, “How do you know Jesus loves you? Or “When do you feel the love of Jesus in your heart?” Write these thoughts down, then create a list of people who might need to experience the love of Jesus. Choose one or two ways to share Jesus’ love with others. You might share kind and encouraging words or bake cookies. Maybe you want to share a song or a scripture passage. Celebrate and share the good news of Jesus’ love all year long!

Lord Jesus, I want to glorify you with my faithful commitment to make disciples. Help me remember that you are always present with me as I live out your commission. Amen.

Week 7

LEARNING FROM JESUS ON THE CROSS

Words of worship on the cross

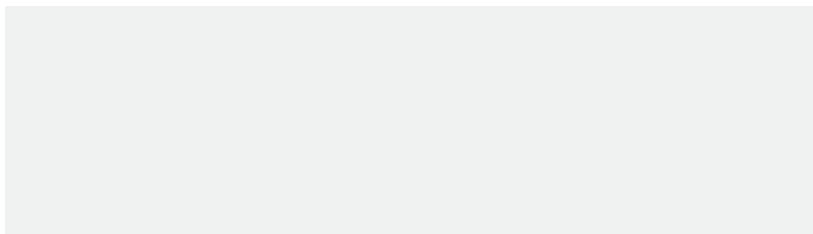
Luke 23:44-46

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness covered the whole earth until about three o'clock, ⁴⁵while the sun stopped shining. Then the curtain in the sanctuary tore down the middle. ⁴⁶Crying out in a loud voice, Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I entrust my life" [Psalm 31:5]. After he said this, he breathed for the last time.

Even on the cross, Jesus modeled the five practices that we have studied this Lenten season. There's evidence that Jewish parents in Jesus' day taught their children Psalm 31:5 as a bedtime prayer. It seems likely that Mary would have taught it to Jesus when he was a boy. According to Luke, he quoted these worshipful words of trust and gratitude—"Into your hands I entrust my life"—as a final expression of his unbreakable bond with his heavenly father.

- Crucifixion put ultimately fatal pressure on a crucified person's diaphragm. It was simply impossible to make long statements from a cross. On the cross Jesus quoted a single verse from two psalms—but in both cases he likely had the whole psalm in mind. In Psalm 31:14-15, after describing enemies who seek his life, the psalmist wrote, "I trust you, Lord! I affirm, 'You are my God. My future is in your hands....'" Imagine the inner power of that worship statement for Jesus on the cross. How can you, like Jesus, root your inner life in Scripture, so that you worship in good times and bad with deep inner trust in God?

- If you do not already have a chosen evening prayer, you might consider adopting the one Jesus prayed: “Father, into your hands I entrust my life.” What would it mean—how might it change things—to put your life fully in God’s hands, not only at scattered moments of difficulty, but every night? How would it deepen your gratitude to know your life is held safely in God’s eternally loving hands?



Forgiven. We are often our own worst critics, but God reminds us that we are forgiven. Remember a time when someone has offered grace and mercy to you, forgiveness in a beautiful way. How did their grace change you and fill you with gratitude?

Write them a letter of appreciation here.

Respond

Dear _____,

O God, like Jesus I pray, “Into your hands I entrust my life,” because I realize you can care for me better than I can care for myself. Thank you for the promise that you will never let me go.
Amen.

Words modeling growth on the cross

Luke 23:33-34

³³ When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." They drew lots as a way of dividing up his clothing.

Luke 23:47

⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what happened, he praised God, saying, "It's really true: this man was righteous."

Luke recorded Jesus' amazing prayer, asking God to forgive the soldiers who were nailing him to the cross. As far as we can tell, the soldiers, more used to curses and screams of pain, just went about their grim business. Still, Jesus' prayer (exemplifying his conduct during his hours on the cross) registered. The centurion in charge of the crucifixion had seen other convicts die, and clearly saw Jesus' inner purity.

- Rev. Adam Hamilton wrote, "More than any other world religion, Christianity teaches, preaches, veritably shouts forgiveness. Yes, some of our preachers dwell too long on guilt....a Christianity obsessed with guilt is no Christianity. Christianity is a faith whose central focus is not guilt, but grace, redemption, healing, forgiveness, and mercy." * How did Jesus' nurture his ability to forgive? In what ways have you grown in making forgiveness a transforming, freeing practice?

- Jesus had taught the kind of behavior he showed (cf. Luke 6:27-28). But we all know what a gap can sometimes exist between words and actions. In later reflection, the letter to the Hebrews suggested that even Jesus had to learn and grow (cf. Hebrews 5:7-8). If Jesus in his humanity needed to grow, clearly all of us do, too. What steps toward growth has this Lenten season inspired you to take?

* Hamilton, Adam. *Forgiveness* (p. 17). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

Respond

Transform. Each day you have committed to reading scripture and reflecting on its impact in your life. How has that practice shaped you? Write here a passage that has been transformative for you.

Dear Jesus, you gave your all to forgive, accept and love me as your child. Help me grow my capacity to give my all every day as I gratefully live out what you've done for me. Amen.

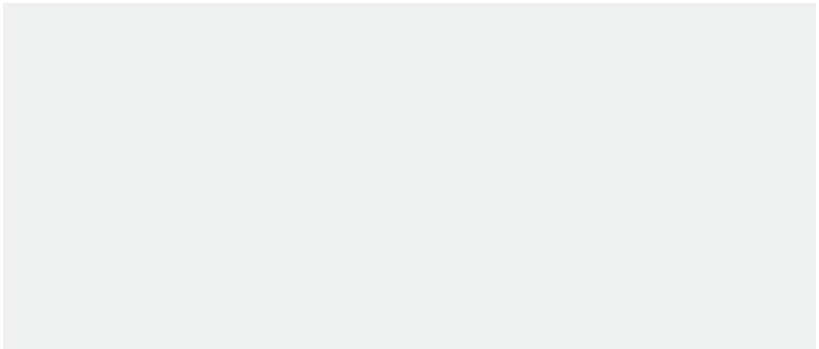
Words, action of service on the cross

John 19:25-27

²⁵Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Even Jesus did not always have what we'd call a perfect family life (cf. Mark 3:21, 31-35). John 7:5 said that his brothers didn't believe in him. But even on the cross, Jesus used some of his fading strength to serve his mother's needs. In Jesus' day a widow with no son or other male relative to protect her had few legal rights and little status. In the midst of his suffering, he provided for his mother by asking one of his most faithful followers to care for her.

- We often tell one another that we'll "be there" for each other. What price did Mary have to pay in order to "be there" as her son was crucified? How was Jesus "there" for Mary, despite the suffering he was going through? How confident are you that Jesus will be there for you when you face difficult times?



- Jesus did not "disown" his mother in Mark 3, as his loving act of service toward her from the cross showed. But he was serious when he spoke about his bond with those who do God's will. When have shared faith and

experience with God created ties for you as close as (or closer than) those you share with family members? When have spiritual “family members” served you? When have you been able to serve them?

Respond

Care. Offering care and compassion to those who are lonely and in grief can be a powerful experience of connection.

Visit a care home – among the residents there may be those who are lonely and in need of connection. They may have lost loved ones (a spouse, a child, a dear friend). They may have stories to share about their life, spend time listening to their memories.

Lord Jesus, you lived out the beauty of caring, serving and loving. Make me into a person who can serve caringly in all the relationships I'm a part of. Amen.

Words of self-giving on the cross

Matthew 27:45-46

⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark. ⁴⁶ At about three Jesus cried out with a loud shout, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani,*” which means, “My God, my God, why have you left me?” [Psalm 22:1]

Galatians 1:3-4

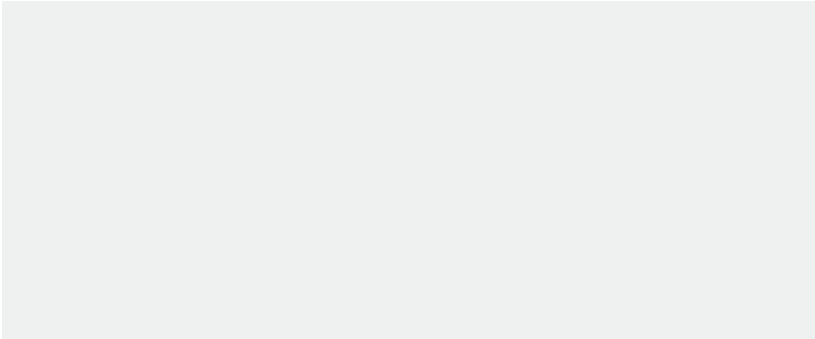
³ Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ He gave himself for our sins, so he could deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

Jesus didn't ad lib these desolate words on the cross. They were the familiar first words of Psalm 22, a longer psalm about suffering and trust. They fit what Jesus went through as he gave himself for us. Scholar John Goldingay wrote, “The psalm isn't a prophecy in the sense of a passage that says, ‘One day there will be a messiah to whom this happens.’ It's a prayer for Israelites to pray when they need to, so it is hugely encouraging because it gives them permission to acknowledge their sense of abandonment and their fears without shame.” *

- Isaiah 59:2 described our human reality: “Your misdeeds have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden his face from you.” But 2 Corinthians 5:21 said that on the cross “God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake.” How would bearing our sins, not his own, make Jesus feel God-forsaken? How can you live out your gratitude to Jesus for giving himself to reconnect you with God?

- Jesus asked, as we do, “Why?” Scholar William Barclay said, “We see Jesus plumbing the uttermost depths of the human situation, so that there might be no place we might go where he has not been before.” ** When have you felt pain so intense that you cried out to God, “Why?” How can it give you strength at times like that to know Jesus deliberately gave himself up to that experience before you, and for you?



* John Goldingay, *Psalms for Everyone, Part 1: Psalms 1–72*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013, p. 71.

** William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 2, Chapters 11–28 (Revised Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 369.

Pray. When someone is in the midst of a really challenging time, we might not know what we should do to help, but what we can always do is to pray. Giving our time to lift them in prayer is a reminder of the power of community.

Respond

5 people today that I am praying for.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Lord Jesus, sometimes I suffer and feel forsaken. It means the world to me that you, God, didn’t stand aloof, but gave yourself in suffering for me. I offer you my heart, my love, myself. Amen.

Words sharing the good news on the cross

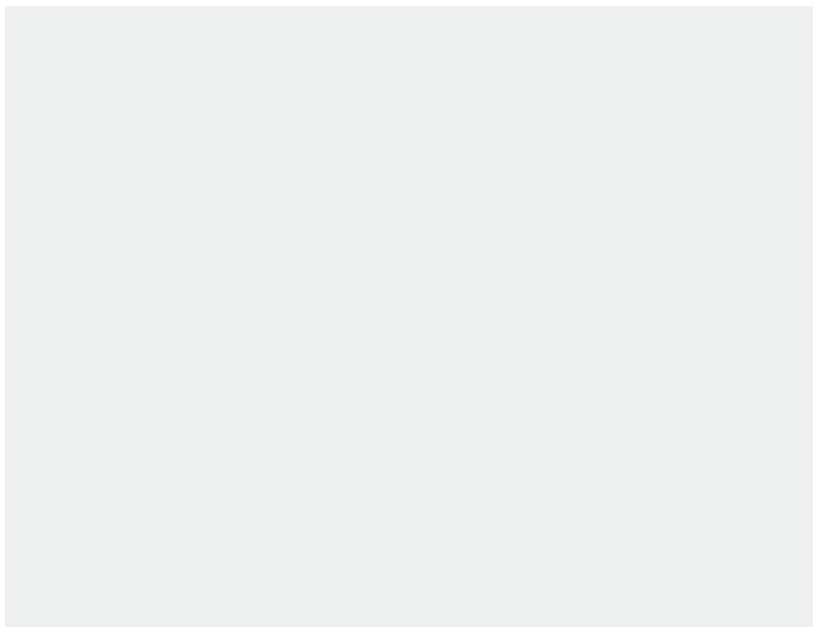
Luke 23:39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die?" ⁴¹ We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise."

Again, a cross was no place for a long sermon about grace. But even there Jesus was willing and able to share the good news of love and grace. Two men were crucified with Jesus. Luke called them "criminals." Matthew 27 used a word that could mean "rebels." Some think they were part of Barabbas' gang, since it seems he was originally to have been crucified instead of Jesus (Mark 15:7). What we know is that when one man reached out to Jesus in faith, Jesus promised him eternal life.

- Luke didn't say if the two criminals had known of Jesus, or how they decided how to act toward him. But one asked, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (which trusted that Jesus would come into his kingdom). What is the process by which you have moved (or are moving) to trust Jesus as king of the universe and of your life?

- “Good Friday,” we call this day—not because the human race crucifying Jesus was in any way “good,” but because God’s transforming love brought eternal good out of that awful act. We often use the term “deathbed conversion” to describe an insincere effort to avoid eternal judgment, but God’s grace was still there on that awful Good Friday. What does Jesus’ response to the thief dying on the cross tell you about God’s heart toward anyone who turns homeward, at any time?



Respond

Stop. In Mark 15:34, we hear that at 3 o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, three verses later we read “then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.” Set your alarm to stop today, to breathe in and out, and give thanks.

Lord Jesus, you welcomed the thief, who freely said, “We are rightly condemned.” And before your holiness, I am rightly condemned—but you welcome me, too. Thank you, my Savior and Lord. Amen.

Words of victory: "It is completed"

John 19:28-30

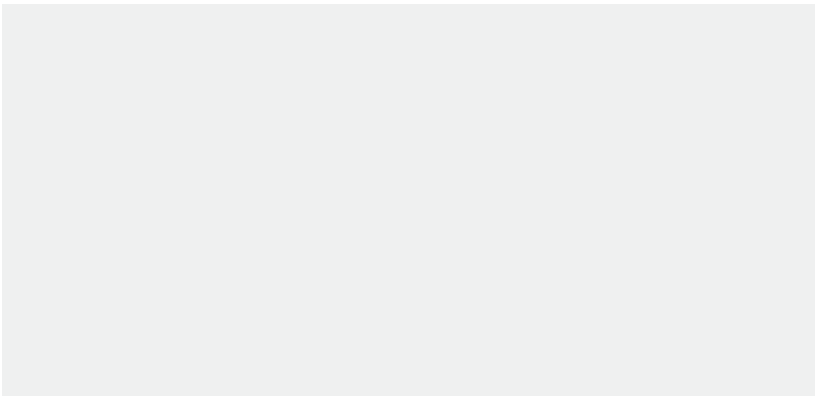
²⁸ After this, knowing that everything was already completed, in order to fulfill the scripture, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was nearby, so the soldiers soaked a sponge in it, placed it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. ³⁰ When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed." Bowing his head, he gave up his life.

Mark 15:39

³⁹ When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly God's Son."

Rev. Adam Hamilton wrote, "In John, the final words of Jesus were 'It is finished' (John 19:30 NRSV). I had often interpreted those words to mean that Christ was exhausted and defeated. But then I learned that in Greek the phrase is expressed in just one word: *tetelestai*. That word is a shout of victory announcing that a battle has been won, a mission accomplished." * Jesus' purpose in coming to earth had been accomplished. "It," all of it, was indeed "finished" or completed. At infinite cost, God's great saving work for humanity, for all of us, was finished.

- Jesus' great ordeal was over. He gave his all, physically, emotionally and spiritually. He died in peace, even triumph, knowing he had finished God's eternal plan to redeem the world. In what ways was Jesus' experience on the cross a victory? Has that victory changed your life for the better? Part of Jesus' saving work was that he faced the very worst evil and death can do and defeated them. Hebrews 2:14-15 said Jesus "set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death." In what ways does fear of death affect your life choices? How can Jesus' death and resurrection free you from that fear?



* Adam Hamilton, *John: The Gospel of Light and Life*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, p. 136.)

Surrender. What is something you need to surrender to God, something you can no longer carry on your own? How might this act of surrender give you a sense of relief in knowing that God who can make all things new can bring about something new in you?

Respond

What I surrender to God.

Family Activity

Many people were cruel to Jesus during the last week of His life on earth. He consistently responded with love and forgiveness towards the people who were hurting Him. As a family, share some of your favorite stories about Jesus. What words would you use to describe Jesus in those stories? Review the events of the Final Week together and explore Jesus' responses in them. How would you describe Jesus in those times? What qualities did Jesus faithfully display throughout His life? Choose one or two characteristics of Jesus your family can develop. What steps will your family take to grow more Christ-like? Pray and ask God to help you become more like Jesus.

Lord Jesus, on that Saturday, you rested in the tomb. But, as a great preacher once said, "Sunday's a'comin'." Bring my heart alive as I rejoice in the light of your Easter affirmation of new life.
Amen.

