

ECHOES[®]

ADULT STUDENT GUIDE

WINTER 2025-2026



ENDURING BELIEFS
OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

DAVID  COOK[®]

ECHOES[®]

ADULT STUDENT GUIDE

WINTER 2025-2026

Adult Student Guide is published quarterly by David C Cook, DavidCCook.org. © 2025 by David C Cook, 4050 Lee Vance Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80918, U.S.A. Echoes[®] and David C Cook and its related logo are registered trademarks of David C Cook. All rights reserved. ISBN 978-1-589-19145-7. Large Print ISBN 978-1-589-19328-4. Printed in South Korea. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version[®], NIV[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the *King James Version*. Lessons and/or Readings are based on the *Uniform Series International Sunday School Lessons International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching* copyright © 2022 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Digital products are subject to the End User License Agreement (EULA) found at DavidCCook.org/EULA/ and any additional terms or restrictions that may accompany the product. Digital products cannot be returned, sold, or relicensed. This product license is good for 6 months. After 6 months, you must purchase another license.

David C Cook would like to thank the following lesson contributors:

Madison Cannon, Joel Clarkson, Emily Finnell, Lee D. Hoffer, Victoria McAfee, Patricia Merritt, Rebecca Moss, Tanae Murdic, Michael Rade, Ryan Rice Sr., Chad Ryan, Carl Simmons, Denise Snyder, Ed Stucky, Joshua Timlick, Faith Waters, Randy Williams

Editors

Jason Hitchcock
Trinity Richards

Designer

Dale Johnson

Production

Sean McCoy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Lessons for Winter 2026: Enduring Beliefs of the Christian Faith

Unit 1: Our God and the Holy Scriptures

Lesson 1	Dec 7	God's Word	3
		Psalm 19:7–13; 2 Timothy 3:14–15	
Lesson 2	Dec 14	Our Heavenly Father	10
		Matthew 6:24–34	
Lesson 3	Dec 21	Christ the Savior	17
		Luke 15:3–7; Romans 5:6–10	
Lesson 4	Dec 28	The Holy Spirit	24
		Romans 8:12–17, 26–27	

Unit 2: Grace and Reconciliation

Lesson 5	Jan 4	Sin and Forgiveness	31
		1 John 1:5–2:6	
Lesson 6	Jan 11	Repentance and Faith	38
		Luke 15:11–24; Acts 2:38–39	
Lesson 7	Jan 18	Prayer and Humility	45
		Genesis 18:25–27; Luke 18:9–14; 1 John 5:14–15	
Lesson 8	Jan 25	Call and Growth	52
		Matt. 4:18–20; 16:16–18; John 21:15–18; 2 Peter 3:14–15, 18	

Unit 3: The Church and Its Teaching

Lesson 9	Feb 1	The Christian Church	59
		Mark 4:26–32; Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–18	
Lesson 10	Feb 8	Baptism and the Lord's Supper	66
		Matthew 3:13–17; 28:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29	
Lesson 11	Feb 15	The Lord's Day	73
		Exodus 20:8–11; Romans 14:4–6; Revelation 1:10	
Lesson 12	Feb 22	Stewardship and Mission	80
		Acts 1:6–8; 2 Corinthians 8:3–9	
Lesson 13	Mar 1	Recognizing Our Debt to Others	87
		Mark 12:28–34; James 2:14–17	

Breaking Records and Racial Barriers	94
ISSL Bible Study Plan 2023–2026	95
Coming Next Quarter	96

WHAT'S AHEAD

QUARTERLY PREVIEW

God is real, personal, knowable, and active in the world. We come to this realization through our encounters with the Bible and with the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit's insight, we find Jesus central to the biblical story.

Through Jesus's life and teaching, we see more of what God is like and what God intends for us. God is building a whole new world—a new creation (Rev. 21:1)—where evil is vanquished and life is eternal. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus liberates us from evil, forgives us from sin, provokes us to love, and provides us a community, awaiting the new creation.

In this quarter, here are some of the biblical principles we will study and apply to situations in our lives:

Lesson 1: God's instructions are life-giving and trustworthy.

Lesson 2: We can place radical trust in the Father's provision.

Lesson 3: Undeserving people experience God's love, through Jesus.

Lesson 4: The Spirit grants freedom and adoption as God's children.

Lesson 5: Children of God should want to live as Jesus lived.

Lesson 6: God welcomes and doesn't turn away those who ask forgiveness.

Lesson 7: Prayer shapes us to submit to God's design and purposes.

Lesson 8: Jesus invites us to follow.

Lesson 9: Christ's followers proclaim the good news of God's kingdom.

Lesson 10: Baptism and Communion point to Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Lesson 11: Honor God by organizing time according to His design.

Lesson 12: Devoting ourselves to the good of others makes us like Christ.

Lesson 13: Love in action is what God expects.

GOD'S WORD

Tevari cleared his cash register and headed for the break room. He was doing good on time. He had worked a double shift—he had taken on another employee's shift when they called in sick that morning. As Tevari was leaving, his manager asked him to stay an additional hour at the department store.

"I can't. I'm sorry, ma'am," Tevari said. "I have to make it to Bible study tonight."

One of Tevari's coworkers had overheard him mention this Bible study before. Some of the coworkers had started calling him "preacher man."

He didn't mind, though. He knew that there might be a cost to following Christ. Tevari also knew of God's many blessings and benefits. How could Tevari explain how important and wonderful the Word of God had become to him? The Bible encourages and instructs; any message from God is "full of the Spirit and life," what Job calls more important than "daily bread" (John 6:63; Job 23:12).

And still, there was so much that Tevari didn't know about the Bible and this Christian walk that he had begun four years prior, but he wanted to learn more. He was grateful to have a pastor who rightly divided the Word of God. Bible study was a time to dig into Scripture and to ask questions. And Tevari had a lot!

Tevari smiled as he backed his Jeep out of the parking space. He had just enough time to get there.

1 What is something life-giving that you have learned from Scripture?

2 What is Scripture's reputation in the wider world? What do non-Christians think that Scripture is all about?

3 What questions do you still have for God regarding Scripture?

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.

⁸ The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

⁹ The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

¹¹ Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward.

¹² Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults.

¹³ Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression.

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul.

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.

The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.

¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

¹¹ By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

¹² But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

¹³ Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me.

Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

God's Revealed Wisdom

What does the word “law” mean to you? Maybe you think of bickering legislators, the complicated instructions for filing your taxes, or the last time you got a speeding ticket. You probably don’t think of “law” as something worthy of praise—something that makes you want to sing.

But “law” is what the second half of Psalm 19 is all about. The psalmist—David, or someone composing a psalm in honor of David—begins by describing the revelation of God’s glory that rings

out from creation (vv. 1–6, before the printed text). Then the subject switches: if the heavens can declare the glory of God, the law of God is also worthy of praise and something that demonstrates God’s supreme mastery of all knowledge.

“Law” in Hebrew means the same as “instruction.” Praising God’s law means praising His wise instruction. Parallelism between several nouns—“law . . . statutes . . . precepts . . . commands” (vv. 7–8)—alerts us that the writer is speaking in broad terms about various kinds of instruction that come from God. Several words closely resemble parts of Proverbs, like the contrast between wise and simple or the reference to “fear of the LORD” in verse 9 (in Prov. 1:1–7, this is the source of wisdom). God’s revelation and instruction is the root of all insight, all sound thinking.

Imagine asking a group, “What gives joy to your heart?” (see v. 8). Not many would say, “God’s instruction to me!” In the rest of Scripture, the word for “giving joy” is used to describe heightened experiences: hearing music, enjoying a glass of wine, or hearing a kind word (Pss. 45:8; 104:15; Prov. 12:25). That kind of exuberance is what God’s wise instruction is able to do. God’s message is like precious treasure, a sweet treat, or a timely correction (vv. 10–11).

A shift comes in Psalm 19:12, when the psalmist notices that God’s perfect insight exposes inner thoughts too. Like in Psalm 139, which declares to God, “You know me. . . . You are familiar with all my ways” (vv. 1–3), the writer ask for God’s guidance to reveal any error, to forgive wrongdoing, and to keep us from willful disobedience. In the glorious light of transcendent wisdom, a heart of humble submission is the only good response to God’s perfect knowledge. It penetrates to the soul and unmask humans as creatures in need of forgiveness.

1 What is the meaning of “law” in this Psalm?

2 What are other experiences that gladden your heart? How do these compare to receiving a word from God?

3 How does it feel to be in God’s presence, certain that He knows every thought and hidden motive?

¹⁴ But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; ¹⁵ And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

God's Reliable Word

With the second reading, we move ahead in time by perhaps a thousand years. The encouragement in 2 Timothy 3:14–15 is from the apostle Paul, sent to one of his most trusted partners in ministry. Paul met Timothy when he came to Lystra (Acts 16:1–5), and he was so impressed by this man that he took him along on his missionary travels. Timothy is a named coauthor to six of Paul's letters (see 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Philem. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). He was personally involved in both sides of Paul's ministry: traveling to meet congregations and composing letters to send them.

But when Paul composes 2 Timothy, the time draws short. Paul describes suffering under what he calls “my chains” (2 Tim. 1:16). Paul sees well enough that he will soon give his life for the cause of Christ (2 Tim. 4:6). He could say in confidence, “I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). In these final days, Paul's thoughts were with his ministry partners, especially with Timothy, called “my true son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2).

Paul points to several factors that give him confidence in Timothy's endurance. For one, he has a heritage of faith in his grandmother and mother, whom Paul calls by name, and through whom Timothy had received wisdom and guidance (2 Tim. 1:3). As a second factor, Paul cites Timothy's instinct to grant to God the ultimate authority, as if God were his commanding officer or the judge of a race, ready to reward the one who runs with endurance (2 Tim. 2:4–5).

Above all, Paul reminds Timothy of the roots of his faithful study. Even “from infancy” he has been familiar with Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15).

No doubt this was from the influence of his family members, who fulfilled the call of Deuteronomy 6:6–7, making the study and discussion of God’s message a part of daily life.

When Paul refers to the “Holy Scriptures,” he has in mind the portion of the Bible that Christians call the Old Testament. Paul studied his Scriptures and was known for demonstrating the truth of the good news of Jesus from texts like Habakkuk 2:4, “The just shall live by faith” (KJV, also quoted in Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11). Paul says the Scriptures are able to “make you wise for salvation,” which means they have their source in God—who wants all people to come to salvation through faith in Jesus (1 Tim. 2:3–4).

Paul knew that he might not have the chance to encourage Timothy again, unless Timothy was able to come to him quickly (2 Tim. 4:9). In perhaps his final message to the younger man, he upholds the value of studying Scripture. He knew that God’s Word is reliable and would continue to mold Timothy into a mature leader.

1 What advantages does Timothy have in his walk with God and his growth as a leader?

2 What role do parents and caregivers play in passing on a legacy of faith?

3 What parts of the *Old Testament* help you to understand God’s salvation through Christ Jesus?



When Paul asks Timothy to come and to bring his “scrolls, especially the parchments” (2 Tim. 4:13), he probably has in mind to compose more letters, drawing from Scripture and from his own collections of notes.

© ABBPhoto/Getty Images

Time Well Spent

When I get overwhelmed with my task list, I have a trick. I add something simple that I've already done to my checklist, and then I get the pleasure of checking it off. *Ta-da*. One mountain climbed, fifteen more to go. I'll also weed out tasks that don't have a looming deadline.

I struggle to know whether tasks that I enjoy should stay on a list at all. On the one hand, scheduling time is one way to make sure that I do something; but on the other hand, I then face the temptation to set these tasks aside. I have to consciously make time for those things that are life-giving.

At least two things fall into this nebulous category: exercise and the study of Scripture. Both are so good for my soul. Training my body gives me energy, keeps the grumpiness away, and makes me feel alive. Somewhere in the middle of a workout, I think to myself, *Oh, right, I love this*. Reading the Bible and spending time with God triggers many of the same thoughts. Time spent in God's Word leaves me refreshed, at peace with God's work in and through me. I say to myself, *Why did I ever avoid this?* Spending time with my Savior reminds me that I am alive and that He has saved me into this reality.

It is those habits we most need that we find ourselves squeezing out of our lives, as we fill time with more and more. We have a God who loves us, who doesn't want us to persist in a stress-induced haze of frenzied activity. We don't need to fear that Scripture is "just one more thing to do," or something that leaves us short of time. Sometimes, what I can do is pray, *Lord, remind me of the goodness of Your instruction to me, and help me walk the path*.

1 How can studying Scripture or meditating on God's Word feel like an obstacle?

2 How can you be reminded that God's word to you is life-giving?

3 How does following God's instruction remind you of God's goodness?

A Season to Spend Time in God's Word

The month of December can feel like a whirlwind, pulling us from one obligation to another, with hardly a chance to catch a breath. You are invited to begin or recommit to time with God as your “calm within the storm.” The Daily Bible Readings are a great place to start.

Father, I believe Your Word is life to me. I commit to the reading of Scripture in the weeks ahead, and let's meet at this time and place:

Key Text

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. —2 Timothy 3:16–17 KJV

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. —2 Timothy 3:16–17 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of December 8 through December 13

- Mon.** Isaiah 49:13–17—The Father's Motherly Compassion.
- Tue.** John 4:20–24—The Father Seeks Authentic Worshipers.
- Wed.** Isaiah 40:27–31—The Father Strengthens the Powerless.
- Thu.** Isaiah 64:1–8—The Father Exacts Discipline.
- Fri.** Psalm 103:1–5, 10–14—The Father Blesses and Forgives.
- Sat.** James 1:13–18—The Father Gives Perfect Gifts.

Next Week: Matthew 6:24–34

We will talk about the radical reliance that we can place in our heavenly Father. What are some times when you are seeking satisfaction or security?

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

Alexis zipped up her three-year-old's winter jumper. "We're headed to Mrs. Williams' house."

Mrs. Williams, who lived only four blocks away, was excited to start babysitting Alexis's daughter.

"I'm retired. I'm lonely. I need something to do," Mrs. Williams had said.

When the two agreed on the pay for 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., five days a week, Alexis hugged and kissed the older woman.

"You're not taking advantage of me," she assured her. "You're not a wealthy woman, and you need to work. A little bit of extra money will be nice, and I am happy to be able to help you out."

As a single mother, Alexis was happy, even excited. But she was not surprised. God had been taking care of her all her life. When Alexis's husband divorced her, she was hurt, angry, and sad; but she was not scared. She knew who to call upon.

Alexis watched God provide again and again. So when paying day-care had become unsustainable, Alexis prayed and believed God for an economical way for her to keep working and have a safe place for her daughter to stay. "God is going to make a way for us, baby," Alexis had told her daughter. "I just know it!"

Then Alexis's aunt had told her about this wonderful woman, someone who went to her church and lived nearby.

"Let's go, baby," Alexis said, as she reached for her purse. "We've got to get to Mrs. Williams's. I know she has a good breakfast prepared for you."

1 What distractions limit your vision?

2 When has God provided for you in an unexpected way?

3 Is it getting easier or harder to train your gaze upon God? Why?

²⁴ No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

²⁵ Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? ²⁶ Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? ²⁷ Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

Who Do You Serve?

The scene is Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. He has called twelve disciples to follow Him while He heals numerous diseases and proclaims the good news: God’s kingdom has finally come (Matt. 4:23). Soon crowds of travelers come to Him, and Jesus climbs to the top of a hill, where He sits down to teach (Matt. 5:1). These are ordinary people whom Jesus is addressing, and He uses ordinary language.

He asks listeners to adopt a completely different relationship to money. Instead of looking to gain treasures of the world—which can deteriorate or be taken in an instant—Jesus speaks of “treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:19–20). The heavenly Father has good things in store for His people and will keep those heavenly treasures safe.

But Jesus isn’t making a point about the need for better banks. God really cares about the heart of His people. It is hard to be ready for God to reshape the world if we are wrapped up in maintaining our financial security. Jesus invites His listeners to an attitude of freedom—freedom from concern so that we can freely serve God. How

we operate shows the attitude of our hearts. Thus, Jesus forces the choice: be devoted to earthly security or be devoted to God.

Jesus challenges followers to consider how tightly we possess our possessions. Have these become our “master,” or do we use them to serve God (v. 24)? Are we devoted to the new thing that God is doing, or are we chasing a comfortable standard of living? When the prophet Elijah challenged Israel, he said, “If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). In the same vein, Jesus says, “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24). Matthew gives the Aramaic word for wealth, *mammon*, a personification of this unfettered pursuit for material possessions.

Jesus is not talking about things that are “extra,” what we call wants versus needs. That would be too easy! Jesus says His followers have no need to take “thought of” (KJV) or “worry about” (NIV) needs either: “your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear” (v. 25). His audience must have included people without enough food to eat or clothes to wear. It is hard not to worry about basic essentials like these!

But God gave us life. He knows how to take care of our bodies. We don’t simply wait for food or clothes to fall from the skies, although God did feed His people with bread from heaven (Ex. 16:4). But as we do prudent things to keep our needs met, we can rest in the sure knowledge that we are seen by God. His concern for us is clear, even from the example of “birds of the air” (v. 26). These creatures build homes and search for food, but they do not worry about daily tasks. Somehow, God feeds them.

Jesus asks a rhetorical question: What good does worry bring? (v. 27). It can’t make us taller (KJV), nor can it give us any more time (NIV). It gives nothing, but it robs us of joy.

1 Why does God invite us to choose “treasures in heaven” instead of worldly treasures?

2 How can possessions or *mammon* come to be our master?

3 What (if any) are the limits on what we should ask God to provide?

²⁸ And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: ²⁹ And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? ³¹ Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? ³² (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. ³³ But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. ³⁴ Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Who Do You Trust?

Jesus continues drawing analogies to the ordinary things around Him. Maybe it was spring when he was speaking, and the birds were flying overhead. Jesus might have gestured to his feet to point out the “flowers of the field” growing about (v. 28). God not only feeds the birds, which are of far less importance than humans, but He also “clothes” these flowers (v. 28). Flowers do not worry about growing; God takes care of that part. They do not weave their clothes or spin thread, which are steps to create handmade garments. Yet all around is God’s handiwork, and these flowers are clothed in more elegant garments than King Solomon, who was famously wealthy.

If the heavenly Father cares so much about transient things, He can be trusted to care for His people and to clothe them. Worry and

anxiety that God's children display over food or clothing reveals a "faith" issue (v. 30). We might think, *God is not anticipating my needs, so I will handle them*. Others may think, *While God created the universe, human needs are too hard or too minor for Him*.

To solve a faith problem, Jesus says that His followers must put priorities in order. Physical needs take second place to "[seeking] first his kingdom and his righteousness" (v. 33). In that way of life, the troubles of tomorrow take a backseat to the kingdom priorities of today (v. 34).

This is not the "don't worry" and "live your life" advice we might find on bumper stickers or in the choruses of popular music. Jesus is not criticizing foresight or planning, and He isn't making a single demand that He was not prepared to model.

Although Jesus is the Son of God, He was willing to leave heaven behind to live without a permanent home (Matt. 8:20). When tempted to put His physical needs first, He refrains from turning stones to bread and goes hungry instead (Matt. 4:3-4). When stripped of His clothing and subjected to the humiliation of the cross, Jesus chooses to save others and not Himself (Matt. 27:35, 42). In all circumstances, He expresses faith and confidence in the provision of the Father. God's kingdom is really coming and is already breaking through to our reality. Those who follow Jesus must learn to place radical trust in the Father, like Him.

1 What do the "flowers of the field" show us about worrying over what we shall wear (v. 28)?

2 When we try to handle our needs without relying on God, how does this choice affect our relationship with Him?

3 Why can we trust what Jesus says about facing hardships with confidence?

Trusting the God who Loves Us

I've been an avid pianist since childhood. When I first started learning how to play, my efforts were strained and heavy, which produced loud, plonking sounds. I was trying too hard to control the sound; I hadn't yet learned to listen to the instrument. When I grew as a musician, my teacher would say to me, "Less is more." Over time, my tense muscles relaxed, and my fingers found their places with far less effort, letting the natural beauty of the piano shine.

If there's one thing that has never helped me stop worrying, it is *being told to stop worrying*. Perhaps, like me, you read these verses and feel a pang of guilt or frustration. We try to overcome anxieties and keep our eyes fixed on heaven. But no matter how hard we try, we keep getting dragged back into life's difficulties. I have sometimes felt like I would never be strong enough to be one of the heroes of the faith, one of those special folks who masters their fears.

But that is not the heart of this text. By telling us that God knows and cares about what we need, before we realize it ourselves, Jesus anticipates that we will have worries arising in our lives. He wants us to know that God's concern isn't contingent upon our strength and fortitude. It's contingent upon God's eternal faithfulness.

This passage isn't really an admonition to overcome worries about our daily needs, perhaps through a powerful act of self-control. It is an affirmation that God's love is trustworthy. We don't need to do anything other than rest in God's love and commit ourselves to Him. His concern for us is like an adoring parent: unwavering, complete, not dependent on what we do, always ready to scoop us up when we run to Him.

**1 Does trust in God mean not having worries or cares anymore?
Why or why not?**

2 Does placing trust in God mean leaving everything to Him? Why or why not?

3 How would resting in the unwavering love and provision of God alter our life at home, work, or in community at church?

Security Comes from Heaven

It is natural to seek safety and comfort. But Jesus challenges us *not* to get too comfortable. Our security is not dependent on our savings but on the faithfulness that God shows. What might you need to surrender to the protection of God?

Father in heaven, give me freedom to trust You to meet my needs in this particular area: _____.

(Examples: my finances, my basic needs, my relationships)

Key Text

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. —Matthew 6:34 KJV

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. —Matthew 6:34 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of December 15 through December 20

- Mon.** Psalm 110—The Messiah Sits at God's Side.
- Tue.** Romans 5:1–11—Christ Died for the Ungodly.
- Wed.** John 3:14–21—Christ Offers Eternal Life.
- Thu.** John 10:9–16—Christ Cares for the Sheep.
- Fri.** Isaiah 9:3–7—Welcome the Davidic Heir.
- Sat.** Psalm 2—The Messiah Reigns Victoriously.

Next Week: Luke 15:3–7; Romans 5:6–10

We will discuss the rationale for radical trust, based in God's love. Can you name a common misunderstanding of "love" this week?

CHRIST THE SAVIOR

Michael sat listening to the choir sing, “Oh Holy Night.” He had given in and agreed to go to his coworker’s church. Sterling was a good guy. He knew Michael and his wife were separated but didn’t know the backstory. Michael’s wife had taken their two children and gone home for Christmas.

Sitting here, dressed up from head to toe, Michel projected the false image that meant so much to him—wealth and status. The truth was that the couple’s finances were messed up, and Michael had a gambling problem. After another serious offense, Michael’s wife said she couldn’t take it anymore.

Michael was a joke. A fake. And if he could just hear his wife’s words: “a miserable excuse for a husband.” Michael had told himself that he didn’t deserve his wife and family. What was wrong with him?

He wasn’t raised to be “religious.” He had been to church a few times. At first, when his coworker, Sterling, began talking to Michael about “the Lord,” he listened with a polite ear. But lately, with Michael feeling like he was in a deep hole, he had become more interested in what the man had to say. But he still felt like he was out of reach for God.

“Are you kidding me,” exclaimed Sterling. “That’s who Jesus came to seek and save—those who are lost and in need of love.”

It sounded too easy to Michael. But it also sounded too good. Maybe he would give this Lord a try.

1 Ponder when you lost something of value to you. How did you feel if you later found it?

2 How is the joy of finding something that was previously lost in any way like God’s love?

³ And he spake this parable unto them, saying, ⁴ What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? ⁵ And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. ⁷ I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Seeking the Lost

As Luke 15 opens, “tax collectors and sinners” are arriving to see Jesus, but Pharisees and teachers of the law express disgust: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (vv. 1–2). According to His reputation, instead of spending time with the finest and most reputable folks, Jesus associates with “sinners” (v. 1). He doesn’t even debate this. Instead, Jesus tells a story.

He actually tells *three* parables about something lost-then-found: a sheep, a coin, and a son. In each of them, the point is the same. The emphasis is on the joy that comes with recovery. When we read these stories, we are supposed to understand that Jesus is defending His mission to save the lost.

He asks listeners—including disciples and detractors—to imagine being the owner of a hundred sheep, but losing one. The example is finely tuned to an audience with people who tend animals (a hundred sheep is an average-sized flock for that time and place). Sheep are notoriously needy creatures, and still they wander about with no shepherd to guide them. Alone, a sheep becomes vulnerable to predators. A senseless sheep can’t find its own way.

Because of this, the shepherd of the parable leaves the herd with ninety-nine remaining sheep. Jesus doesn't say whether the sheep are in the care of more than one shepherd, but the extravagant care for a single sheep is the point.

When the shepherd finds the one lost sheep, "he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home" (vv. 5–6). Furthermore, he invites friends and neighbors to rejoice with him, after recovering one sheep. Maybe the excitement over finding a single sheep sounds over the top, but Jesus tells the meaning of the parable. All of heaven rejoices over a sinner who repents, even more than over those who have no need (v. 7).

It helps to remember that Jesus is speaking about people with a reputation as sinners. First, the parable shows that God has not given up on them. God is actually seeking them, inviting them, welcoming them to be "found" (v. 7). Second, the parable tells us something about Jesus. Here Jesus is questioned about His actions, and He uses the well-established image of God's shepherding to describe His own behavior (compare Pss. 23; 119:176; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:11–16). His audience is left to think, *If God is like a shepherd seeking the lost, who does that make Jesus?*

1 What makes the example of sheep and a shepherd compelling for Jesus' audience?

2 What makes the example of sheep and a shepherd familiar to readers of Scripture?

3 When have you demonstrated extravagant love by being willing to sacrifice for someone else?

⁶ For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. ⁸ But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. ¹⁰ For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Saving His Enemies

Today's second reading shifts from examining Jesus' words to what Paul says about Christ's astonishing love. Paul isn't describing Jesus as a good shepherd. But just like the shepherd of the parable went out of his way to rescue a powerless sheep, Paul says that humans ("the ungodly") were "powerless" to face the predatory influence of sin without Christ (Rom. 5:6).

The manner of this salvation is more specific and more costly than in the previous parable. It is through Jesus' own death that wayward humans might be saved. The shepherd who finds and rejoices at the lost sheep is also willing to give His life, to gain safety for others. And that raises the most important question in this context, *Was it something about us that made us worthy of saving, something that compelled Jesus to act?*

To answer this, Paul provides an illustration. His Roman audience will have heard of famous figures who make the ultimate sacrifice for others: the son taking the place of his father; the soldier willing to die for his comrades; or perhaps the philosopher willingly to die

for good and righteous reasons. But none of those are a pattern that Jesus follows. No historical or legendary figure would have put life on the line for “sinners” and “enemies” (vv. 8, 10). Be reasonable!

Jesus did not dispute that He ate with sinners, and now Paul makes a similar point: humans were undeserving of Christ’s loyalty and love. Jesus did not come to people who were already loving Him back and worthy to be saved. He gave everything to the unworthy and the desperate, those counting as “enemies” to God and deserving “God’s wrath” as just punishment (vv. 8–9).

In contrast to the hopelessness we had without Jesus, those who “have now been justified by his blood” have every reason to be confident in their salvation (v. 9). The logic is, if Jesus was that loving and that caring toward enemies and those who were not His people, Jesus is going to finish the job.

The language of Paul presumes a two-stage process. Right now, for those who call upon the name of Jesus and declare Him their Lord, God makes them “reconciled”—they change from being enemies to friends. But in the future, when God’s fair judgment is revealed to all—punishing sin and rewarding righteousness—at that time “we shall be saved,” not through our own doing but “through [Jesus’] life” (v. 10). Even now, He sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes on our behalf (Rom. 8:34).

1 What makes all of humanity like the sheep of Luke 15?

2 Why is Jesus’ sacrificial death unlike the sacrifices that others have made in the past?

3 Does Paul describe salvation as something that happens in the present or in the future?

Loving “Fellow Enemies”

We can only love others fully as we receive and recognize Jesus’ love for us. Today’s readings make abundantly clear that God’s love through Jesus was extended to us while we were lost and helpless—in the striking words of Romans 5:10, “God’s enemies.” God loves us, but not because we deserve His love. Period. This should not only give us a deeper understanding of God’s love for us, but also point the way forward for how we should live and love others in Christ.

In many ways, we are all still helpless sheep. Christians don’t become immune to temptation or sin. But an important change comes when we know our Shepherd and listen to His voice (John 10:14). We can call upon Him when we need rescue (which is often). And just as Jesus laid down His life for His sheep, He seeks those “not of this sheep pen” (v. 15–16). We can be His partners in that mission.

Or, we can be like the Pharisees of Luke 15, who were jealous of Christ’s time and attention. We have to guard against drawing the circle of God’s rescue as too small and giving up on those we deem unworthy, like political opponents and those who have different experiences from our own. It’s easy to demonstrate love and to share Christ when we hold things in common. It’s harder to face those who offend us and to see them as the very people that Jesus might ask us to befriend.

He met each of us in our weaknesses and faults, when we were His enemies. If He can change us, He can change anyone. So let’s ask God to help our fellow enemies who cross our path. Jesus sees and loves them.

1 When has Jesus had to pursue you and bring you back?

2 How does remembering your failures help you reach out to others?

3 What kinds of fellow enemies do you find it hardest to love?

Join the Shepherd on His Mission

Jesus pursued us long before we realized how far we had wandered from Him. The more we know and appreciate this, the more we'll want to partner with God's kingdom work.

Think of one person or group that you find hard to love while you pray:

God, since you expect me to pray for my enemies, this week I will do just that. Christ, have mercy on the people I consider enemies.

Key Text

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. —Romans 5:10 KJV

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! —Romans 5:10 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of December 22 through 27

- Mon.** Zechariah 4:1–7—The Spirit Accomplishes God's Will.
- Tue.** 1 Corinthians 12:1–13—The Spirit Bestows Gifts.
- Wed.** Isaiah 11:1–9—The Spirit Gives Wisdom and Understanding.
- Thu.** Matthew 1:18–25—The Spirit Works in Jesus's Birth.
- Fri.** Acts 7:51–60—The Spirit Reveals God's Glory.
- Sat.** Psalm 104:24, 29–35—The Spirit Creates and Renews.

Next Week: Romans 8:12–17, 26–27

We will speak about the Spirit, who confirms when we are children of God. Be listening for the tone that children use when they call their parents.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Dana was at Cassandra's house exchanging presents. The two women, who had lived on the same block for seven years, had been too busy this holiday season to exchange their gifts before Christmas.

After unwrapping and expressing thanks, Dana suggested the two go out for lunch. But Cassandra said she couldn't because today was her "Gotcha Day."

"It's the day my parents adopted me," Cassandra explained. "Every year, my family and I have a celebratory meal and time together."

"Oh no problem! That is nice. I really like that," responded Dana. "Do you mind my asking, what is it like to be adopted?"

"I was adopted at the age of two, and my parents are all I can remember," said Cassandra. "They have provided for me, taken good care of me and loved me unconditionally."

Dana thought to herself that Cassandra had hit the jackpot with her parents. She knew Mr. and Mrs. Davis to be well off. She had guessed that was how Cassandra, a single woman, had been able to buy her home in this expensive subdivision. Dana and her husband had quite a way to go on their mortgage.

Dana found herself feeling a little envious of Cassandra's parents, and wondered what it would be like to be adopted into such a picture-perfect family.

But Dana also knew that she had been adopted—she was a child of God! She was a part of the family of believers who have been saved by Christ.

1 Can you remember a moment of being chosen to be part of a team or a project? How did that feel?

2 Do you know anyone who was adopted? What are some ways families could make adopted children feel welcomed?

¹² Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. ¹³ For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

¹⁴ For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

¹⁵ For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

¹⁶ The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: ¹⁷ And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

¹² Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Led by the Spirit

Paul reminds the Roman churches that they have an “obligation,” but not to blindly follow sinful natures—which Paul simply calls “the flesh” (Rom. 8:12). Receiving salvation alters how we must evaluate desires. The “flesh” is “hostile” and incapable of obeying God (v. 7), and following it means death. But those in Christ have an obligation to live “by the Spirit,” who enables freedom and even helps to bring death or figuratively kill those activities which would naturally lead to death (v. 13). Paul wants believers to recognize sin as lifeless and empty, not what leads to a full and wholesome life.

He describes relating to God with the metaphor of *adoption*. Just like today, the Roman world of the first century had a legal category for adoption, which is when a parent accepts a child to become a part of the family. An adopted son would carry on the adopted father’s name and be eligible to inherit his estate. An adopted son had precisely the same status and responsibilities as a biological son.

According to Paul, those led by the Spirit are already children of God (v. 14). There is no extra step or supplementary action for them to do. They have joined the household of God, not as mere servants or slaves, but as children and heirs (v. 15).

Just like biological children, the adopted children of God can have intimacy with the Father, calling God “Abba” in their prayers, exactly as Jesus did (Mark 14:36). This reflects a deep and abiding relationship with the heavenly Father, a relationship marked by trust instead of fear. Just like Jesus submitted to the Father’s wishes in His prayer at Gethsemane, God’s adopted children can submit their desires to God and know that His plan is best.

The Spirit plays a role in this adoption, testifying or bearing witness to this new reality (v. 16). God’s own Spirit agrees with the prayer, and the Spirit grants a powerful inward assurance of adopted status: *we can be children in God’s family*. Just like in earthly families, where an adopted child becomes an heir and receives things from the parents, the children of God have a right to an inheritance. Paul calls them “co-heirs with Christ” (v. 17). But Paul adds important context, saying they may experience suffering in the present, even while looking forward to eternal glory (see also 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

1 What kind of “obligation” must believers follow (v. 12)? What obligation has come to an end?

2 Do you find it easy or challenging to think of yourself as “co-heir” with Jesus? Why?

3 How does the Spirit help believers in their relationship with the Father?

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

²⁷ And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

The Spirit's Intercession

The story of redemption isn't just about us as individuals; it is part of God's plan to end the corruptions of sin and death. These two powers have held all of creation captive until now (Rom. 8:19–22). We know it in our bones that something in the world is not as it should be. The ache of creation will not end until our adoption and redemption are final (Rom. 8:23).

But believers have the Spirit to aid them, even here and now (v. 26). The Spirit gives courage and strength, despite any present weakness. Some understand this reference to “weakness” to be a general limitation of human nature—like the tendency to sin—but the second part of verse 26 shows that Paul has a specific weakness in mind: our prayers.

We do not always know how best to pray, says Paul (v. 26). By saying “we,” he acknowledges his own limitation. Flaws of the fallen creation and aches of a disordered world can be so intrusive that we find ourselves at a loss for words. We might know with our heads that Jesus is king; but still we face the death of loved ones, the suffering of innocent people, or persecution for doing what is good.

Praying about these may be difficult, and our prayers may feel inadequate, but believers “ought” to pray. This is because speaking with God is necessary for a healthy relationship; He is our heavenly Father, after all! At the same time, the Spirit can intercede, or step in, to help us. The Spirit pleads with God on our behalf. Sometimes, this takes the form of “wordless groans,” when no words would be

adequate. These groans or sighs express our deepest longings and hopes, those which cannot easily be vocalized. The Spirit takes these ideas and makes them meaningful for God; God can understand inarticulate prayers.

In verse 27, Paul describes “he who searches our hearts.” Paul means the Father, who searches and knows what is in our hearts, thoughts, and motives (see Ps. 7:9; Prov. 17:3; Acts 1:24; 1 Thess. 2:4). His knowledge of our inner lives is direct, not dependent on our ability to communicate.

Since God knows our hearts, He also knows the mind of the Spirit in us. This is the only place where God is described as knowing the mind of the Spirit; but elsewhere Paul describes the inverse, that the *Spirit* knows the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:10–11). From these texts it is clear that Father and Spirit share a mutual understanding. The Father knows what the Spirit is doing; and the Spirit intercedes for believers, to support God’s will. In particular, the Spirit intercedes for “saints” (KJV) or “God’s people” (NIV). The Greek of verse 27 literally says “holy ones,” meaning those who are consecrated or dedicated to God in this way.

Believers can find comfort and encouragement, even amidst difficulties in prayer. The Spirit is a powerful intercessor, capable of praying on our behalf and directing our thoughts toward God’s will. In Gethsemane, Jesus called out “Abba, Father” in the midst of His suffering; and at the same time He submitted to the Father’s will (Mark 14:36). Like Jesus, God’s children can endure suffering (Rom. 8:18–25). There will be those times when we do not know how to pray; but the Spirit, who knows God’s will, is with us.

1 What kinds of groans or longings might we experience in the world, as it is right now?

2 How can the Spirit help us? What role does the Spirit play?

3 How can we pray at all, if we lack the words?

Eager Heirs

Recently my family has been having conversations about future inheritance, as we determine which family heirlooms will go to each child. Grandpa's guitar will go to one family member, and Grandma's china to another. But one heirloom has proven especially challenging to assign: the German schrank.

A schrank, in case your family is not blessed with one, is a massive, freestanding closet of sorts. Wherever it sits, it fills the room from wall to wall, floor to ceiling. Even though it has been in our family for generations, finding someone willing to inherit it has been difficult. No one wants to be burdened with this heavy piece of furniture for the rest of their life.

Like me, you may someday be the reluctant heir to something large and cumbersome. But we can all look forward to an inheritance that is far more enduring and valuable than anything our families may pass down.

God has adopted us as part of His family. As His children, we are even His heirs. We have an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade (1 Peter 1:4). Unlike family heirlooms that can lose value, be damaged, or become burdensome, God's inheritance lasts forever.

If we are God's children, we have received the Holy Spirit as a down payment of our eternal inheritance (Eph. 1:13). The Spirit empowers us to live in freedom from fear, sin, and death. We are free to pursue a life of righteousness, and to experience a deep, intimate relationship with our Father—even though our world remains full of disordered and troublesome things.

Our inheritance, guaranteed by the Spirit, is more than a future promise. It is a present reality that shapes our lives as God's sons and daughters. If our days are troubled and our prayers feel halting, God is with us. He knows what we need.

1 How does adoption into God's family bring you comfort and security?

2 How can knowing you're free, not a slave, change your daily life?

3 How might you live by the Spirit, rather than the flesh?

Freedom from Fear

Fear can enslave us, hindering us from fully experiencing the abundant life promised to us. But Romans 8 assures us that, through the Spirit, we are no longer slaves to fear but children of God, able to approach our Father confidently and find peace in His care.

What fears trouble you? Write down some specific fears you may be facing, and then ask God to show you how to pray.

Key Text

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. —Romans 8:16 KJV

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. —Romans 8:16 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of December 29 through January 3

- Mon.** Genesis 3:1–13—The Man and the Woman Sin.
- Tue.** Genesis 3:14–24—God Pronounces Judgment.
- Wed.** Romans 1:18–25—God's Wrath Is Revealed.
- Thu.** Mark 7:14–23—Jesus Warns against Defilement.
- Fri.** Psalm 51:1–12—A Prayer for God's Mercy.
- Sat.** Micah 6:1–8—God Demands Right Living.

Next Week: 1 John 1:5–2:6

We will look at God's way of life for those who "walk in the light." Take an opportunity to view any remaining Christmas light displays in your area.

SIN AND FORGIVENESS

Courtney had taken her lunch early. She was avoiding a group of her coworkers who called themselves the “news crew.” And by “news,” they meant gossip. Initially, Courtney felt bad about “listening in,” but told herself that it was necessary to navigate the political waters of her job. However, some of the “news” dealt with personal issues of her coworkers. Courtney couldn’t help herself from “sharing the news” with others.

Over the Christmas break, Courtney spent more time with God. She felt more and more convicted of her behavior. She cried as she prayed, “Forgive me, God. Help me, Lord, to reflect You. Help me to be a light to others and not a stumbling block.”

Courtney raised her head from her devotional when she heard her name being called out across the room. The “crew” were arranging themselves around the large table. “Aren’t you eating with us, today?” asked one of her coworkers.

“I’m studying,” Courtney said, as she raised her devotional. Courtney knew that eventually she would express her reasons for not sharing in the bulletins. She also realized that it would cost her standing among her friends. But she didn’t care.

“I want to be pleasing to you, Lord, in all that I do,” she said in her heart. It was her New Year’s resolution. “Help me, Lord, today, to live a life you would be proud of.”

1 When is a time that you have been tempted to see a person as too far gone or beyond the reach of God?

2 How could obeying God’s commandments show that we know God?

3 What does it mean to live like Jesus?

⁵ This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

Dealing with Darkness

First John is called a letter, but it is more like a sermon, one written by a wise leader who wants to guide a younger group of followers in the faith. The lofty prologue builds up to John's thesis statement in verse 5: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." As readers come to learn, the reason that John writes in this way is not because people are thinking of God as a source of darkness. Rather, they might be tempted to think that their own darkness—a metaphor for sin—can just remain hidden. The point is, drawing near to God is going to require that we honestly confront our weaknesses.

John speaks of a group who has already left the community of faith (2:19), and it is possible that he is trying to correct the faulty thinking and behaviors that led to schism. Three times, the verses condemn an attitude that minimizes the significance of sin. First, the preacher says that it is fruitless to ignore sin—pretending that sin isn't there, even if we are otherwise claiming to follow God (1:6). Likewise, coming right out and denying our sin makes the problem

worse, turning us into liars (1:8). Worse yet is a false sense of superiority by saying “we have not sinned,” which makes it seem like the Spirit’s conviction isn’t real (1:10). We best not pretend that it is *God* who is the liar, or else “his word is not in us.” Hypocrisy, denial, and self-deception are poisonous to our relationships with one another and to our walk with God.

John alternates these three condemnations with recommendations for following the truth of the gospel, what he calls “the message” (v. 5). Instead of denying sin’s seriousness by continuing to “walk in the darkness” (v. 6), we should “walk in the light, as he is in the light” (v. 7). Instead of denying our guilt (v. 8), we ought to confess our sins (v. 9). Instead of pounding our chests in confidence, we would do better to freely admit our wrongs, rather than compound them with denial.

John commends an attitude that freely confesses sin because God—in whom there is no darkness—has freely given His Son, Jesus, to remove and purify the darkness; Jesus’ blood purifies from sin (v. 7). At the same time that we become reconciled with God, we have the joy of “fellowship with one another,” as brothers and sisters who have all walked the same path. Instead of hiding ourselves and allowing darkness to drive us apart, we can be drawn to the light.

1 Why does John sum up the gospel message as “God is light” (v. 5)?

2 What attitudes toward sin does John condemn? Why?



In the Greco-Roman world, houses were constructed with few windows, and often the only source of light would be a small oil lamp. John’s readers would know all about the dangers of walking in darkness (1 John 1:6).

Diogo de Sousa Museum/Joseolgon

¹ My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:

² And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

³ And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

⁴ He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ⁵ But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. ⁶ He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

¹ My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

³ We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. ⁴ Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. ⁵ But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶ Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

Living in Light

Lest his readers confuse an emphasis on confession and forgiveness of sin with an attitude of tolerance for sin, John affectionately explains to his “dear children” that, “I write this . . . so that you will not sin” (v. 1). Even though God regards sin as forgivable, believers should still regard sin as intolerable in themselves. Better to avoid sin in the first place!

Part and parcel of what it means for Jesus to be “the light of the world” (John 8:12) is that “he is the atoning sacrifice . . . for the sins of the world” (1 John 2:2), as well as an “advocate” (v. 1). Darkness can be brought into Christ’s light because He *is* light, which both exposes and expels the dark.

If John writes “so that you will not sin,” his words should not come as a surprise: “keep his [God’s] commands” (vv. 1, 3). John isn’t debating whether we know what God expects; he assumes that, by and large, we know the difference between right and wrong. Our failures don’t usually come from lack of knowledge but from lack of execution.

For John, keeping God's commands is the real test whether we do, in fact, "know him [God]." For the one who claims to know God, but lacks the desire to keep His commands, John gives the same condemnation as before: that one "is a liar, and the truth is not in that person" (v. 4).

But for the person who claims to know God and "obeys his word" (v. 5)—John does not say that this person has the truth in them (though that is certainly implied). John goes further: in that person, "love for God is truly made complete" (v. 5). For John, Jesus' *commands* can be summed up in one *command* (singular): "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another" (1 John 3:23). Love for one another displays and fulfills our love for God. God's intention is for His love to overflow: first from God to the world, and then from the believer to other Christians.

When John recalls those who departed from the community in 1 John 2:19, he thinks of them as cutting short the chain of God's love. John isn't getting into who was right or wrong. When God's love does not have its full effect, it reveals insincerity of motives: "whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8).

The question is, how can anyone live up to the standard of God's love? John points to Jesus, and he makes Christ's example the goal. Those who wish to "[abide] in" God "ought . . . to walk, even as [Jesus] walked" (v. 6 KJV). John knows this includes serving others, considering their physical needs, and remembering their need for spiritual reconciliation.

1 Do you consider it easy or difficult to "keep [God's] commands" (v. 3)? Why?

2 What kinds of commands does John have in mind?

3 How do you think that love for one another might "complete" the love for God?

Love's Completion

"You complete me" is a popular phrase for people in love, but what does it mean? We complete a project, complete the renovations on a house, or complete a term of service. How does a person complete love?

John speaks of our desire to be with God, what he calls abiding in Him (1 John 2:6). We might want the joys of relationship, while neglecting what the relationship requires. We might want to be in community, until that sense of community threatens our cherished independence.

But when Jesus speaks to His followers in John's Gospel, He compares remaining with God to staying attached to a vine: "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Staying connected to the source of light and love is what sustains our ability to be generous to others, to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial love.

The closest I've seen to love's completion was in the relationship of my grandparents. When they were married in 1950, they were young and starry-eyed. But after many decades of shared experience, their relationship was grounded in trust. My grandfather would say with a grin, "Next month is our anniversary. I just asked, and she agreed to one more year before she leaves me." He could joke to his heart's content, but it was obvious that nothing could come between them. They had lived a wise and frugal life and could be wildly generous to individuals in their church and neighborhood.

To speak of love's completion is to point to what love for God leads us to do. It leads us in patterns of faithfulness, and it leads to sincere joy. Jesus says, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

1 What does it look like for a community to "walk in the light, as he is in the light" (1 John 1:7)?

2 What do the relationships we share with one another signal about our connection to God?

3 Where have you seen joy emerge when relationships are secure and when God is at the center?

Loving Mindfully

The text of 1 John is filled with actionable statements that are easy to memorize. Repeating and setting our minds on simple passages of Scripture can be an encouraging way to face the world and to remain connected to God.

Choose one phrase to memorize for the week ahead. Consider writing it at the top of a journal page, and use the words to guide your prayer.

“Walk in the light, as he is in the light” (1:7)

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins” (1:9)

“If anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them” (2:5)

Key Text

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

—1 John 1:8–9 KJV

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

—1 John 1:8–9 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of January 5 through January 10

- Mon.** Ezekiel 18:20–23, 27–32—Turn Away from Sin.
- Tue.** Isaiah 1:10–21—Turn Toward Righteousness.
- Wed.** Mark 2:1–12—Jesus Has Power to Forgive Sins.
- Thu.** Hebrews 11:1–10—Draw Near to God by Faith.
- Fri.** 2 Chronicles 7:12–16—Repent and Seek God’s Face.
- Sat.** Acts 2:32–39—Repent and Be Baptized.

Next Week: Luke 15:11–24; Acts 2:38–39

Have you lost anything recently? If so, notice your emotions when you are searching and how they change if that item is later found.

REPENTANCE AND FAITH

Justin checked his phone for the fourth time in about ten minutes. He was looking for a text from his son, Kenan. Justin had offered to take him out to lunch.

Justin hadn't been in his son's life since he was a newborn. But Justin contacted Kenan several months back. Justin had been an absentee father. He had traveled, partied, and did what he wanted to do. But after years of harmful repercussions, Justin had grown weary of his lifestyle. What did he have to show for it, really?

So, five months ago, when Justin moved back into town, he sought out the son who had never known him. Justin was not greeted with opened arms. He wanted the love of his son and hoped that it would not forever be out of reach. Justin knew he didn't deserve, but wanted, *needed* unconditional love. He thought maybe it could eventually come from Kenan.

Then, Justin remembered the words and prayers of his late mother. He grew up in a Christian home. Why had he left?

This morning, Justin was sitting in his childhood church. At first, he felt a little ashamed at the thought of attending. But he had been met by smiling ushers. There were numerous new people at the large church, and Justin didn't think many people recognized him. But what did that matter? He needed help. He needed the Lord.

1 Have you ever felt like there was someone outside of your ability to reach? How might God reach them?

2 What kind of emotions do we feel when we gain back something which was lost?

3 What false narratives might keep a person from turning to God and requesting forgiveness?

¹¹ And he said, A certain man had two sons: ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

¹³ And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

¹⁷ And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, ¹⁹ And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

The Shameless Son

Mom, Dad, I wish you were already dead. Most of us wouldn't dream of saying that to a parent. But that's the kind of son in Jesus' parable.

This is a son who is so anxious to be rid of his father that, instead of waiting to inherit a portion of the father's property, he asks for an immediate inheritance, what he calls "my share"—even if it means dividing the estate (Luke 15:12). Probably more shocking is that the

father grants this shameless request, at great harm to the family.

As a final slap in the face, the son leaves home (v. 13). In short order, the inheritance that took a large part of his father's life to save is spent and gone, and Jesus leaves us to guess at what He means by the son's "wild living." There is no excuse, no thoughtful defense, no framing of the situation that paints the son in a positive light. Since he finds himself in desperate need, he takes a job feeding pigs, whose food only makes him salivate (vv. 15–16).

It's beside the pigs—creatures not even raised and eaten by faithful Jews—that the man decides to try one more shameless gamble. Instead of persisting with no food and no money, he decides to return to the father (vv. 17–19). His plan is to implore his father for mercy, hoping to be given a well-paying job. It's not remorse that sends him home; it is hunger.

1 What are the different shameless actions of the son in this text?

2 How would you expect a reasonable father to respond to his son's request?



The carob tree is a flowering evergreen that is native to the Middle East. The "husks" (KJV) or "pods" (NIV) considered appetizing to the son are likely to be the seedpods that grow on it (Luke 15:16).

Photo: Chixoy

²⁰ And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

²¹ And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

²² But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: ²³ And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

...

³⁸ Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. ³⁹ For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

²⁰ “So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

...

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

The Unreasonable Father

The father of Jesus’ parable is many things, but *reasonable* is not one of them. Instead of denying the son’s request, he gives what is asked. He allows the son to squander the inheritance, but Jesus is not using this parable to give parenting advice. Rather, Jesus is building up our expectations for the moment the son comes home. Jesus sets us up to expect an awkward scene where the son is forced to beg.

But the father in the parable is the one who restores the

relationship. We are used to seeing people run for exercise, but a respectable Jewish man wearing robes would never be seen picking up the bottom of his garment to run at breakneck speed. The scene is almost comical, if it were not otherwise an overwhelming act of generous love.

The son only gets halfway through his prepared speech before the father cuts him off to start the preparations for a great feast. By clothing the son, placing a ring on his finger, and placing sandals on his feet, the father is showing the world that his son is redeemed into his family position. The ring might be a signet ring, granting authority to a son who has just shown an appalling lack of judgment, and a fattened calf would provide enough meat for a small community. The father's words proclaim the joy of a metaphorical resurrection: the son was "dead" and is now "alive again"; although he was "lost," he has been "found" (Luke 15:24). The father makes no mention of the son's shameless actions. They are as good as forgotten.

The second reading is from Acts. In response to Peter's preaching, a great crowd are baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38). Instead of robes and a signet ring, the Father in heaven stands ready to pour out the Holy Spirit, a "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14). God's reception of the lost is as unreasonable as the father's actions in the parable. The prophets say this about the Lord's mercy: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways" (Isa. 55:9).

1 In what ways does the Father in the parable reflect God and His love?

2 Do you think that the father in the parable was worried about making reasonable decisions? Why or why not?

3 What kind of inheritance do people turning to God receive in Acts 2:38–39?

Outcasts Are Invited

I still cringe when remembering my high school lunch hour. The athletes, band geeks, and theater kids were all in one room; but they were divided into different tables. At my particular school, if you didn't have a group, you were labeled a "loner" or "outcast." If one of the popular kids talked with an outcast, people would ask, *Why?*

Among the controversial things that Jesus did, He was known for eating with sinners and outcasts (Matt. 9:10; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30). The religious leaders of the day saw the world as divided between those who were walking with God and those who had already chosen a life of sin.

But the reality is, humans find it easier to spot the faults and weaknesses of others over their own. All have sinned, and we would be left sitting "alone" as an outcast from God, were it not for the relentless love of the Father. Jesus did not wait for our status to be good enough to join us at the lunch table: He expressed the radical welcome of God, assuring us that we do not have to live as unredeemable sinners.

Jesus calls the former sinners and people of the land to come and follow Him. He welcomes them to repent and believe, to transform their lives. When that happens, like the son of the parable returning home, we are counted as children of the kingdom, Christ's friends (see John 15:14–15; 1 John 3:1). The message of Christ is good news, especially for the outcast.

Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Every time I look at the cross, I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ." In Jesus' kingdom, He reaches out to every table. He welcomes all to dine with Him. Revelation 19:9 speaks of a great feast that is coming, "the wedding supper of the Lamb." As the time draws near, God doesn't turn away any who come to Him.

1 Why do you think *welcome* is expressed so often with food?

2 Why is it important for us to remember that we were once outcast, but welcomed by Jesus?

3 How can we continue to reach those who are outside of Christ with the good news of Jesus?

The Power of Sharing a Table

The focus of today's lesson has been on God's forgiveness and welcome for those who turn to Him. At the conclusion of the parable, the father decides to invite everyone to share a meal to celebrate the son who has been found.

Is there someone in your life who deserves to be celebrated? Is God inviting you to share a meal, perhaps with someone who hasn't been welcomed to dinner? What kind of doors might that open?

Key Text

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. —Luke 15:24 KJV

“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate. —Luke 15:24 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of January 12 through January 17

Mon. James 1:2–8—Praying for Wisdom.

Tue. Jeremiah 29:10–14—Praying and Seeking God.

Wed. Philippians 4:4–9—Praying with Thanksgiving.

Thu. Psalm 61—Praying for Protection.

Fri. Matthew 6:5–15—Praying as Jesus Taught.

Sat. Genesis 18:23–33—Praying for Others.

Next Week: Genesis 18:25–27; Luke 18:9–14; 1 John 5:14–15

We'll talk about opportunities to be shaped by the requests we bring to God. What is a prayer you find yourself repeating again and again?

PRAYER AND HUMILITY

Martin opened the oven door and peered in again. He had to admit, the beef-stuffed bell peppers looked and smelled great! They needed probably just ten more minutes. Elyse was due home in thirty minutes.

Martin found himself a little excited about his dinner and was pleased with himself. He usually only cooked when he felt like it, and there were many times he did not. He cleaned up when he felt like it. He paid attention to his appearance when he felt like it.

A year ago, Martin had given his heart to the Lord, a feat that Elyse had been praying for over many years. Martin had begun praying with some of the men in his church about their marriages—for God to make them strong and stronger. “You have a good wife, Martin,” one of the men had told him.

It was something that Martin had lost sight of a few years after their marriage. Elyse was a good woman. She was a godly woman. The more Martin prayed, the more he wanted to please the Lord. He found that he began wanting to please his wife, as well. Martin worked ten hours a week, providing physical therapy for residents in a nearby nursing home. The couple didn’t need his salary to live comfortably. He worked because he wanted to. “That is such a blessing!” the same man had said.

It was a blessing. He was grateful to the Lord, and to Elyse. So why hadn’t he shown it?

“Hey, babe,” Elyse said as she walked in. “What smells so great? And look at this place. Ooh, and you look good today.”

1 Does prayer always lead us to make different decisions? Why, or why not?

2 How bold can and should we be when we pray?

²⁵ That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

²⁶ And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.

²⁷ And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes.

²⁵ “Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

²⁶ The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.

A Humble Negotiator

Abraham has just hosted mysterious servants of God for a meal, which is when he first receives a promise that he and his wife will have a son (Gen. 18:1–15). That was the good part of the visit! But as the figures depart, they mention God’s intention to inspect reports of unchecked wickedness from the city of Sodom. Reports of the city’s wickedness have reached heaven, and God is sending His representatives to find out more. News of this worries Abraham, for he knows that his nephew and extended family has gone to live there (Gen. 13:12).

Abraham approaches God, armed with humility and his knowledge of God’s character. In Genesis 18:25, Abraham calls out what he knows to be true of God: above all, God is just. He is an impartial “Judge,” and He always does what is right. Abraham can say these things because he has established a relationship with God; Abraham knows God. Since the events of Genesis 12, he’s been listening to Yahweh, walking with Him, and observing that God keeps His word, despite any apparent obstacle.

Abraham knows that God is not like the false and unpredictable gods who are worshiped by surrounding people. Abraham’s God is near and has demonstrated faithfulness by entering a covenant

relationship with Abraham and his family (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:18; 17:1–8). Because of this existing relationship, Abraham feels able to approach God with prayerful confidence. He knows that God does not treat “the righteous” and “the wicked” alike, and he asks God to remain consistent with His own faithful character (Gen 18:25).

Abraham receives an immediate response in Genesis 18:26. God is willing to listen to Abraham—the man chosen to bring blessing to the earth. Abraham and his descendants must learn the just and right ways of God (Gen. 18:18–19). The Lord of heaven is not angry with Abraham’s appeal. He will continue the conversation until Abraham has secured a promise of God’s intention to spare Sodom, even if there are only ten righteous residents (Gen. 18:32). Abraham is accurate when he says that “the Judge of all the earth” will do what is right (Gen. 18:25). The text does not list the total population of Sodom, but fifty (or ten!) righteous souls would likely have been an incredibly small percentage.

God has no desire to rain down fire and brimstone. From the beginning in Genesis 1–3, death and destruction are not part of God’s intentions for the world. Neither does God take the death of human beings lightly (Gen. 9:5–6). But what God does desire is repentance and righteousness.

Maybe Abraham is a bit shocked that God engages in this negotiation at all. Abraham acknowledges his own boldness, admitting that he is nothing but “dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27). But because he knows God’s character, Abraham is ideally placed to ask for *more mercy* and *more faithfulness* from God. This is not a prayer that God ignores.

1 Why do you think that Abraham is comfortable speaking to God this way?

2 Why do you think that God is willing to spare Sodom for fifty (later, ten) righteous people?

3 Have you ever had a prayer that felt like a back-and-forth conversation with God? When?

⁹ And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

¹⁰ Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. ¹² I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

¹³ And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

...

¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: ¹⁵ And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

...

¹⁴ This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

Making Humble Prayers

Thousands of years after Abraham’s conversation, his descendants are comfortable approaching God in prayer. The problem is that, many of them lack the humility of Abraham—they no longer think of themselves as simply dust and ashes (Gen. 18:27).

So, Jesus tells a parable especially for those who are confident of their own righteousness (Luke 18:9). He uses the example of two men who go up to the temple to pray—one a Pharisee and one a tax

collector (Luke 18:10). Jesus' listeners would have immediately assumed the Pharisee is righteous. Pharisees were respected for their knowledge of Scripture and desire to display purity before God. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were considered traitors to the Jewish people. They worked for the oppressive Roman government, and the profession nearly always meant stealing from neighbors.

The Pharisee stands by himself and thanks God that he is not like those who do evil (Luke 18:11). He boasts about fasting twice a week and tithing a tenth of all he has (Luke 18:12). We are meant to understand that the Pharisee considers himself extremely righteous, since he goes beyond the requirements of the Law to display outward signs of righteousness.

The tax collector, however, stands at a distance from the place of God's presence—with his eyes lowered in prayer. He beats his breast as a sign of repentance and humbly asks for God's mercy (Luke 18:13).

Jesus concludes His parable by pointing out a reversal of expectations. The tax collector, not the Pharisee, is the righteous one. He is the one who comes before God in humility, recognizing his position as a sinner in need of grace. The Pharisee's prayer isn't shaped by a desire to know God's will. He wants to be heard and exalted before others.

This same point appears in 1 John 5. Believers can approach God in humble confidence, just like Abraham did. At the same time, we are able to acknowledge God's character when we bring requests that conform to His will (1 John 5:14). This does not mean that God replies with a yes to every request. But when we go before God, we know for certain that one request is granted: we are heard (v. 15). And the faithful God does not leave His people lacking anything to complete their mission for the kingdom.

1 Do you think that God listens to each prayer in the same way? Why or why not?

2 What does it look like to pray with humility?

3 What would you say to a friend who is frustrated that God is not answering his or her prayer?

Take It to the Lord in Prayer

One of the gifts I gave to family and friends last Christmas was a hymn calendar. Each month has a portion of an old hymn—some familiar and some lesser known. I hung mine up, and I made myself a playlist of all of the hymns so I could meditate on the lyrics throughout the year. This month's hymn is "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and I've been playing Aretha Franklin's version on repeat. My favorite part goes like this:

*O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer!*

Abraham had questions for God about the fate of Sodom. Instead of ruminating in his doubts, he humbly approached God and entered into conversation with Him. I think about how often I go through my day trying to "power my way through" in self-sufficiency. What needless pain I bear, when I fail to go to God with my questions and needs.

Everything—our questions, joys, thanksgiving, complaints, struggles, reliefs, failures, requests—all of it can be brought to Him. Like God did for Abraham, God has invited us into relationship with Him, which is incredibly humbling. The Creator of all things—the source of all wisdom and understanding—allows us to ask for help, mercy, and grace.

And He listens to us! Because of Christ's death and resurrection, our relationship with God can be restored. As 1 John 5:14 tells us, we can come before Him with *confidence*. When our prayers agree with His will, He grants those requests. The real question is, in the words of the hymn, *Do I remember what a privilege this is?*

1 What kinds of struggles or successes have you had in your daily prayer life?

2 How can we express our confidence before God, through prayer?

3 How can we express our gratitude before God, through prayer?

Conversations with God

God invites us into conversation with Him, the God who hears our prayers. It is easy to struggle with displaying boldness, confidence, and humility, even though these are all appropriate to prayer.

Which of the following characteristics feels the hardest for you to show in prayer?

Boldness in your requests

Confidence that God hears

Humility before the Creator

How might you emphasize this in your prayers in the week ahead?

Key Text

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. —Luke 18:14 KJV

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

—Luke 18:14 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of January 19 through January 24

Mon. Matthew 4:18–22—Grow by Following Jesus.

Tue. Deuteronomy 7:7–11—Grow in Love for God.

Wed. Colossians 1:3–6, 11–12—Grow in Spiritual Wisdom.

Thu. Proverbs 1:2–7—Grow in the Fear of the Lord.

Fri. Proverbs 1:8–12—Grow in Discerning Good from Evil.

Sat. Philippians 3:10–16—Keep on Growing.

Next Week: Matthew 4:18–20; 16:16–18; John 21:15–18; 2 Peter 3:14–15, 18
We will be emphasizing the growth of one of Jesus’ disciples, Peter. This week, do you notice in yourself or others any evidence of growth and maturity in faith?

CALL AND GROWTH

Monica parked in front of Verlee's house. It had been a while, but she'd made this trip before. There were times when Verlee seemed to disappear. She'd back out of plans, ignore phone calls, and stop showing up to church.

When they were younger, Monica hadn't understood why Verlee would withdraw. Monica assumed that Verlee was pretentious, that Verlee didn't put God first, and that was why she would skip church.

That was, until one Bible study night a few years back. The women in Monica's small group, including Verlee, set aside a few weeks throughout the year for each woman to share a testimony. When Verlee's night came, she shared about her lifelong struggle with anxiety and depression. She knew Christ had saved her and brought her into new life. But even many years into her walk with Christ, she still faced mental health struggles. They had never gone away, but her perspective was changed.

On that night, Monica realized that all the times Verlee had disappeared were because of these struggles. And Monica's first reaction in those times had always been of judgment. Monica was ashamed of herself.

Since then, Monica had come to the Lord in prayer, asking Him to help her learn from her mistakes. And now, Verlee had become one of her closest friends. When Verlee withdrew, Monica knew what to do.

She hops in her car, grabs some of her friend's favorite treats, and doesn't think twice about stopping by to visit.

1 What sorts of turning points have defined the direction of your life, going one way instead of another?

2 Do you think we tend to minimize our failures when we tell our faith story? Why or why not?

¹⁸ And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. ¹⁹ And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. ²⁰ And they straightway left their nets, and followed him.

...

¹⁶ And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

...

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Peter's Calling and Confession

Peter and his brother, Andrew, are fishermen. Their livelihood depends on catching as many fish as possible each time they go out on their boat. They cast large nets, made of rope and weights, into the water and draw them back, hopefully full of fish. The work is hard and, at times, unreliable. They depend on the weather, the water, and their equipment to bring in money.

Jesus is living in Capernaum and has recently begun His ministry preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 4:17). Jesus sees these fishermen at their work, and He calls for them to follow. It is a great honor to be invited to follow a religious teacher, but it is no light commitment. Peter and Andrew would need to set aside their nets, the very tools they use to make a living, in order to pursue Jesus. Following won't only mean physically walking with this person. They will also need to develop a

close relationship with Jesus and devote themselves to listening and applying His message. It is a commitment to leave every other responsibility behind and to fully invest in being a student. Still, Peter and his brother left their nets behind as they commit to following Jesus' instructions (Matt. 4:20).

Probably more than two years go by before the events of Matthew 16. With a new understanding, and as fishers of people, they see Jesus healing many who are sick (Matt. 4:23), calming the storm on the boat (Matt. 8:23–27), raising Jairus' daughter back to life (Matt. 9:18–26), and feeding thousands with a few loaves and fish (Matt. 15:29–38). Do you think the disciples knew how special Jesus was?

Jesus wanted to clarify exactly who He was, and He asked the disciples a question: “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15). Imagine the possible answers that were going through the disciples' minds: a good friend, a wise teacher, the greatest miracle-worker since Elijah. Peter, one of the first to follow, answers the question. Greater than all other answers, Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah (or Christ), the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16).

Jesus affirms this answer; He *is* the Messiah. But Jesus also affirms Peter and his faith. His clarity comes from the heavenly Father (see Matt. 17:5). And Peter is the sort of person whom God needs. Jesus is going to build His church, and Peter is going to be key to the foundation. Even the fearsome powers of evil will not overwhelm or destroy the assembly of Christ's followers (Matt. 16:18).

1 What might be the hardest thing for you to abandon to follow Jesus?

2 How would you answer if someone asked, “Who is this Jesus?”

3 Has the church that Jesus built survived the powers of evil? How do you know?

¹⁵ So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?

He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.

He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

¹⁶ He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?

He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.

He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

¹⁷ He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?

Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.

Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.

...

¹⁴ Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. ¹⁵ And account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you;

...

¹⁸ But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

...

¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. ¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.

...

¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

Peter's Charge and Challenge

The first passage from John 21 is a tender moment between Jesus and Peter. Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. During Jesus' trial, Peter had denied knowing Jesus. He ran away and was not present when Jesus faced the humiliation of the cross (Matt. 26:31; John 18:25–27). Peter probably wonders, *Does Jesus hold this against me? Will He take back His words to me?*

Peter says, “Lord . . . you know that I love you” (John 21:15–16). But when Jesus asks the question a third time, Peter is grieved. He thinks this could be the moment that Jesus is questioning his loyalty. But Jesus wants to settle something in Peter's mind. If Peter loves Jesus, then he must show it by feeding Jesus' sheep—which means being the kind of selfless leader whom Jesus calls him to be. This task is so vital that Jesus repeats it three times. Jesus warns Peter that the way is difficult, and Peter must be resolute (John 21:18).

From the epistle of 2 Peter, we catch a glimpse of where Peter's journey as a leader has gone. Peter is near the end of his life, and he looks forward to Jesus' return (2 Peter 3:14). Even though believers will struggle with sin, the goal is to be like Jesus: spotless, blameless, and peaceful. Peter doesn't want believers to lose heart if Jesus does not return soon. He consoles them that God's patience is not something to grumble about, for “[God's] patience means salvation” (v. 15). The same Jesus who gave Peter another chance is patiently waiting to welcome all who come to Him.

1 How should believers handle their stories of failure?

2 Why do you think that Jesus made the point of insisting that Peter feed His sheep?

3 What kind of emotions do you have when you think about Christ's return?

Just Like Peter

I've always felt that Peter was one of the most relatable characters in Scripture. Here is a working man who stepped out in faith. Then, he discovered that his teacher is actually God's long-awaited Messiah. Although Peter failed Jesus, Jesus loved Peter and reaffirmed his calling, inviting Peter to respond by loving and serving others in the ministry of the church. Peter served by sharing the message with thousands of people—the church's first mass preacher (Acts 2:14–41). He followed through and cared for others, witnessing the birth and growth of the early Christian movement. His final challenge is to be like Jesus, to grow in grace and the knowledge of Him.

We can learn several lessons from Peter's life. First, Jesus invites us to follow, like He did for Peter. Peter had to leave behind his previous way of life. Have you stepped out in faith to follow Jesus? It means more than thinking that Jesus is a good man, a worthy leader, or a moral teacher. It means knowing Jesus is God incarnate, the Savior.

Second, Peter shows that it is possible for the most noble of us to fail. Even those who are exceptionally dedicated to Jesus will struggle with sin, temptation, and the desire to give up. No person is without sin, and none of us has reason to brag (1 John 1:8). Instead of hiding, our task is to rededicate ourselves to following Jesus after we fail. Jesus forgave Peter, and Jesus forgives and loves His followers—even in their brokenness.

Finally, Jesus asks you to show love by serving others. This service will cost you. You'll have to give of your time, energy, and more. But each sacrifice for Jesus is meaningful, for Jesus considers our love for others to be the same as serving Him (see Matt. 25:31–46). In other words, Peter shows us that real people can have a powerful ministry for the kingdom.

1 How and when did you decide to follow Jesus?

2 When have you chosen to hide instead of coming back to Jesus?

3 What is the hardest area for you to sacrifice in order to bless someone else?

Get Real

The invitation for the week ahead is to choose one imperative (inspired by Peter's story) as a focus for prayer and action. Circle one of the statements below, and ask a partner to pray with you over this invitation.

Follow the Lord Jesus, leaving former ways of life behind.

Be honest with God and others about your weaknesses and past failures.

Reflect the love of Jesus in ministry service, until Christ returns.

Key Text

He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. —John 21:17 KJV

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." —John 21:17 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of January 26 through January 31

- Mon.** Psalm 22:22–28—A Community of Testimony and Praise.
- Tue.** Ephesians 1:15–23—A Community of Hope-Filled Heirs.
- Wed.** Matthew 16:13–20—A Community with Divine Authority.
- Thu.** Ecclesiastes 4:7–12—A Community Made Strong Together.
- Fri.** Psalm 150—A Community United in Worship.
- Sat.** Mark 4:26–32—A Community Silently Growing.

Next Week: Mark 4:26–32; Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–18

We'll continue talking about the growth of the early church. Can you name one place in your life where you've witnessed growth and development?

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Ladonna had joined the church only seven months ago. When she told the women's fellowship that she closed on her new home, the good news spread quickly.

"Well, we're going to make quick work of this move today," said Ladonna's cousin. "I've never seen so many people involved in moving a person. Why did you volunteer? You're not family or anything."

The two men were somewhat cornered off together amidst boxes, sitting on two large sturdy crates. They had stopped to help themselves to slices of pizza from one of the towers of boxes on the dining room table.

"We very much are family," said Trenton, after wiping his mouth. "We are part of the family of God. Ladonna is my sister in Christ, and I will do what I can to help her."

"Oh, okay," the young man said.

Trenton sensed respect and a softening under the young man's quip. "This world goes its own way. I'm so glad I am part of the kingdom of God," said Trenton. "I've got the Creator of the universe watching over me, taking good care of me. And I have a family of believers to live life with. We are not all perfect, but we keep working at it. Our head is Christ, and we are His body. It's a great way to live. I'm not saying it's always easy, but the Holy Spirit empowers me, and God is always with me!"

"So, my man. What do you know about the Lord?"

1 What's an object you or someone you know has repurposed?

2 Do you have a memory of a parent or mentor teaching you something about God when they weren't meaning to?

3 What's something in your home that you could make new?

²⁶ And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; ²⁷ And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. ²⁸ For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. ²⁹ But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come. ³⁰ And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: ³² But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?

³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.

³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

The Kingdom of God Grows

Mark 4 is a collection of Jesus’ parables. A parable is a story that uses an example or image from everyday life to share a deeper truth. The Gospels present parables as one of the main tools that Jesus used in teaching. Yet Mark suggests that Jesus did not intend for everyone in His audience to understand these stories. At times, when it was necessary for the success of Jesus’ ministry, He used parables to conceal truths meant only for Jesus’ closest followers (Mark 4:10–12). Some parables He unveiled to His disciples (Mark 4:33–34), but the meaning of others—like the Good Shepherd parable of John 10:11–18—became clear only after His death and resurrection.

Mark 4:26–32 has two parables about how the kingdom of God grows. They draw their imagery from farming, a primary occupation of most people in the ancient world.

The first parable, the parable of the growing seed (vv. 26–29), shows that God is the one who causes His reign to expand. Before modern scientific study, the growth of a seed into a fully-formed plant was a very mysterious process. A farmer provides all the right growing conditions, but the farmer has no direct control over the actual process of what is happening under the soil. Jesus says that the kingdom of God grows in a similarly mysterious way.

Like the farmer sowing seed on the ground (v. 26), Jesus' disciples share His good news with the world (see Mark 4:14). The disciples don't control *when* or *how* the seed grows. It happens whether they are working or sleeping, preoccupied or busy (v. 27). They see the fruit of their labors in God's time (v. 29), and it is God who makes the seed grow (compare 1 Cor. 3:7). Even in a world that is out of sync with God's design, God is growing His kingdom in ways we cannot yet see.

The second parable, the parable of the mustard seed, emphasizes the radical growth of God's kingdom. The mustard seed is tiny (v. 31); we would never expect much to come from such a small beginning. But that seed ultimately produces a plant so large that birds can rest in its shade (v. 32). The same is true of God's kingdom. It began with a single Jewish teacher and a handful of unimpressive followers in a tiny, rural backwater. Today, over two billion people glorify God and affirm that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11). This parable offers us comfort as we navigate life's challenges. Though the world can seem dark, God's reign has continued to grow, and it will one day be known throughout the whole world.

1 Who were the intended audiences of Jesus' parables?

2 What does the parable of the growing seed teach us about the growth of God's kingdom?

3 What does the parable of the mustard seed teach us about the growth of God's kingdom?

⁴ There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ One Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

...

¹¹ And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; ¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: ¹³ Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: ¹⁴ That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: ¹⁶ From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. ¹⁷ This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, ¹⁸ Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

...

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Maturing into Christ's Image

After reminding his readers of the gospel message in Ephesians 1–3, Paul begins to encourage the churches to pursue unity and maturity. Despite differences of location and heritage, they are united by what they share. The one and only Holy Spirit unites believers in “one body” (Eph. 4:4)—a metaphor that emphasizes the need to work together for the common good. Each believer enters the same faith through baptism (v. 5), shares the same hope for the future (v. 4), and serves the same Lord alongside God the Father (vv. 5–6).

Paul also points to God's work in helping believers grow and mature. God gives different ministry roles and places people in a position to help the church to grow into the “fullness of Christ” (vv. 11–13; compare 2 Cor. 3:18). By shepherding the church through adolescence, ministers protect the church against false teaching and help them to recognize anyone who wants to deceive them (v. 14). Fully mature people of God become a *body* that matches the *head*—Jesus Christ—who unites and grows the community in love (vv. 15–16).

As members of Christ's body, the collective church must reject the sinful habits that nonbelievers pursue (v. 17). Unbelievers do not participate in the life of God's people and cannot understand His ways (v. 18). Those on the outside repeat the unfortunate pattern of human hearts when they are hardened to the truth (v. 18; compare Isa. 6:9–10; 2 Cor. 3:12–16).

1 What are some of the things that unite God's people?

2 Why did God give different ministry roles?

3 Why must the church reject sinful habits of unbelievers?



Christian “churches” or “assemblies” started out much smaller than the Greek assemblies that came before. Pictured here is Pnyx Hill in Athens, where thousands of people could gather. Christian assemblies began in cramped quarters and tiny rooms, but would one day grow into the worldwide movement it is today.

Photo: Selbst

God of Growth and Small Things

The human ability to study small things has come a long way since the time of Jesus. Since the first century, we've developed optical and electron microscopes to unlock untold amounts of information. Since the Human Genome Project sequenced human DNA in the early 2000s, research possibilities have exploded into countless directions, often exploring the potential to treat diseases or improve health. Scientists have found that the alteration of a single base pair can impact the whole body. We are intricate machines indeed!

Even though we successfully study small things, that's not to say we comprehend them. Today's scientists might have more words to explain the growth of plants—words like “cellular mitosis” and “photosynthesis”—but that's not to say that humans can understand *why* the plant grows in the first place, apart from God.

The creator of all life uses images of growing things to explain the kingdom and the church. God became the master of growth before humans ever walked the earth. There can be no doubt, God uses the smallest of efforts, the most humble groups of people to form a global movement with eternal significance.

I've been to a lot of small churches in my time, but most were larger than a group of twelve disciples—the first group of Jesus' followers. It's easy to get hung up on anticipating God to multiply our numbers to reassure us of ministry success. It's a lot harder to be like the farmer, who trusts that something important is going on underneath the soil and out of sight. In the end, Jesus does not evaluate success by the size of our ministries but by the unity we share with other Christians, who join us in one Spirit and one body. Some go before us, and some will come after, but it is God who controls the growth.

1 What is the smallest church you ever attended? How did you see God using that community?

2 What is one way that you are connected to Christians in the wider world, outside your local church?

3 Where do you suspect that growth is happening outside of what you are able to see?

Small Things that We Can Do

The invitation for us all in the week ahead is to pay attention to small things. You might begin a new prayer habit, choose to get together for holy conversation with another member of your group, or even decide to germinate seeds for future planting (check local and seasonal guidance for suggestions).

God of small things, below is a small thing that I can do this week:

I will pay attention to what growth You provide!

Key Text

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

—Ephesians 4:15–16 KJV

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

—Ephesians 4:15–16 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of February 2 through February 7

Mon. Exodus 14:21–31—Saved through The Sea.

Tue. Romans 6:1–14—Baptized into a New Life.

Wed. Exodus 16:13–16, 31—God Provides Bread in the Wilderness.

Thu. John 6:28–40—Jesus Is the Bread of Life.

Fri. Genesis 14:14–20—A Blessing with Bread and Wine.

Sat. Matthew 3:13–17—Beloved Child of God.

Next Week: Matthew 3:13–17; 28:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29

We will talk about the sustaining practices of the church. Take the opportunity to investigate what your church or denomination teaches about baptism and Communion.

BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

Growing up, my brother and I were the youngest cousins by almost a decade. We had cousins who were married with children before we'd lost all of our baby teeth. So at family reunions or holidays, we sometimes felt left out. The adults sat at the big table, while my brother and I were consigned to the kids' table. It was just me, my brother, and our cousin, Jimmy.

Jimmy was closest to us in age, at sixteen, while others were in their thirties. And until he was an adult, he had to sit at the kids' table too. But he didn't pout. Jimmy colored with us; chatted with us; and when dinner was over, he'd wrestle with us in the living room. One year, he imparted upon us the greatest knowledge of all—*how to catch toads*.

He took us out to my great aunt's pond with flashlights and dark clothes and told us to stay still so that the toads wouldn't see us. He taught us to listen for the toads' croaks. Finally, we heard one. Jimmy gestured for us to surround the little toad, then close in from all sides. At the last moment, the toad leaped into the air, but Jimmy caught it and placed it in my brother's bucket. We rushed back to the house and presented our toad to the adults, who *oohed* and *ahhed*.

It's been years now, but I'll never forget how Jimmy included us. Catching toads with him made us feel like family.

1 What are some shenanigans you were involved in as a kid?

2 Do you have any memories of someone stepping up to include you?

3 What are ways that your church invites participation?

¹³ Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.

¹⁴ But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?

¹⁵ And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him.

¹⁶ And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: ¹⁷ And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

...

¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: ²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

...

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 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Jesus' Baptism

In Matthew 3:13, Jesus comes to be baptized by John alongside those confessing their sins (see Matt. 3:5–6). Jesus identifies with the repentant crowd, even though He Himself is without sin (see 1 Peter 2:22; Isa. 53:9). His request for baptism even surprises John, who knows that Jesus has greater power. John had told those gathered that one coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, not just water (Matt. 3:11).

In Matthew 3:14, John recognizes Jesus and objects, saying that Jesus should baptize *him* instead. But Jesus is firm, saying, “Let it

be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). “Righteousness” here means faithful obedience to God’s will. Jesus is doing what is right and good by identifying with the needy crowd of people, for whom He has come to live and to die.

John consents to baptizing Jesus. And the response from heaven reveals Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, the Messiah. The Holy Spirit descends like a dove and rests on Jesus (Matt. 3:16), recalling Isaiah’s words that the Spirit shall empower the Messiah (Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). At the same time, God’s voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). The words of the Father reflect Psalm 2:7, addressing the Davidic king who shall inherit the nations. As in Isaiah 42:1, the heavenly Father delights in this chosen one.

If we skip all the way to the end of the Gospel, after Jesus’ resurrection, He commissions His followers to go and make disciples of all nations, expanding the mission beyond Israel (Matt. 28:19; compare Matt. 10:5–6). And part of this disciple-making process involves baptizing “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).

Therefore, baptism identifies God’s people with Jesus. It invites them to enter the life of faith, joining with Christ in His life, death, and resurrection. It marks people who live under the banner of God’s holy name. And in Matthew 28:20, Jesus reveals that another part of the disciple-making process includes teaching His commandments. Jesus assures His followers that, as they take up this mission, He is always with them, to the very end—living up to the name Immanuel, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

1 Why did Jesus come to be baptized?

2 What does heaven’s response to Jesus’ baptism reveal?

3 What role does baptism play in the disciple-making process?

²³ For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: ²⁴ And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. ²⁵ After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, this cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. ²⁶ For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

²⁷ Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. ²⁹ For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

The Lord's Supper

The church in Corinth was making a mockery of the Lord's Supper by using it as an opportunity for gluttony and drunkenness, to the harm of the poor in the community (see 1 Cor. 11:17–22). Paul writes to correct this misconduct and remind the church of the meaning of this shared meal. Beginning in 1 Corinthians 11:23, Paul teaches what he received from Jesus, who began the Lord's Supper on the same night that He was betrayed and arrested. The Lord's Supper—also called *Communion*—illustrates the sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood, which was willingly given for the good of others. Paul is

passing on the oral tradition of Jesus' words, which found in Luke's Gospel (Luke 22:19–20).

The breaking and eating of bread is a reminder of Jesus and His *body* given for us (1 Cor. 11:24). Likewise, the drinking of the cup is a reminder of Jesus and His *blood* shed for us. His words, passed on by Paul, say, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). The new covenant fulfills the promises to God's people, given through the prophets. With the new covenant comes forgiveness of sins, the giving of God's Spirit, and the changing of hearts (see Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:26–28). Christ's sacrificial death makes all of these a reality. Thus, followers of Jesus participate in the Lord's Supper to remember what Jesus has accomplished: to "proclaim [Jesus'] death, until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Sharing in the Lord's Supper is a witness to the world that *the sacrifice of Jesus matters*.

But Paul warns those who abuse the Lord's Supper not to sin against the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27). Eating and drinking in an "unworthy manner" includes the situation described in verses 17–22: using the Supper as an opportunity for extravagant feasting, thus excluding the poor and missing the entire point. Paul encourages believers to examine themselves before participating, to avoid judgment and discipline from God (1 Cor 11:28–29, 32). This requires considering motives and conduct before "discerning the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:29, a phrase referring to the "body" of believers in attendance. When we share the Lord's Supper, we should be looking to the good of others in our community, and it certainly shouldn't be a way to flex any special status.

1 What does the Lord's Supper help us to remember?

2 How does participating in the Lord's Supper proclaim the Lord's death?

3 How were the Corinthian Christians eating and drinking in an unworthy manner?

God's Story and Mine

I sometimes feel removed from the stories of Scripture, as if I am viewing a great mountain from a far distance. I can make out the shape and scale, but I can't quite comprehend its splendor or what it's like to live in its shadow. That must belong to someone else.

Maybe it's because the stories of the Bible happened long ago: creation, covenants, cross. All are great stories, but not my story. Maybe they belong to someone else. *Jesus died for all those people*, I think, *how wonderful!* But what about me?

How quick I am to forget that, when I read the story of Scripture, I'm reading a "story" that invites me into the center. The grace of God has brought me near, and I'm a citizen of His forever kingdom—a child of His forever family. I don't just stand on the outside as an observer!

Whenever I have trouble believing this, it helps to fix my eyes on Jesus—His life, death, and resurrection. Baptism and Communion help me do this. These practices are like arrows on a map, pointing back to the mountain. Baptism and Communion point us back to Christ, back to a real invitation to be with Jesus.

When I remember my own baptism—in my case, standing on a cinder block in a baptismal pool, as a child coming of age—it reminds me that I'm a part of something new and wonderful, God's new creation and God's kingdom people, a community of faith that persists throughout the ages. And when I come to the Lord's Table alongside brothers and sisters in Christ, I remember that Jesus made it all possible for each of us. His body and blood are given freely. Now Jesus' story is my story—His death, my death and His life, my life—and the story is true!

1 Do you ever have trouble believing that you are a part of God's story?

2 What happens to followers of Jesus when they fix their gaze on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

3 Share how Communion or baptism—yours or someone else's—has strengthened your faith.

Journaling about Baptism

The invitation is to reflect on the image of baptism, either Jesus' baptism or your baptism in Him. If you have been baptized, you might start by writing about where and when, perhaps what you remember about the experience. If you've not been baptized, you might consider speaking to a leader of your church to find out more information.

Jesus, Your life, death, and resurrection are a true story for me to share.

Key Text

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

— Matthew 28:19–20 KJV

“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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

— Matthew 28:19–20 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of February 9 through February 14

- Mon.** Genesis 1:31–2:4—God Rests on the Seventh Day.
- Tue.** Hebrews 4:1–11—The Promise of Entering God's Rest.
- Wed.** Isaiah 58:8–14—Delight in the Sabbath.
- Thu.** Matthew 12:1–8—Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath.
- Fri.** Matthew 28:1–10—The Day of Resurrection.
- Sat.** Exodus 20:1, 8–11—Keep the Sabbath Day Holy.

Next Week: Exodus 20:8–11; Romans 14:4–6; Revelation 1:10

We will return to talk about another important practice: coming together for worship. Do you have any particular habits that make your Sabbath or Sunday special?

THE LORD'S DAY

Paula muted her phone. She had received eleven texts this Saturday, and it was only 9 a.m.! Seven of those texts were requests for help. Paula had gently declined and reminded her family and friends that she had started a new semester of courses, and she was swamped with readings, assignments, and deadlines.

Paula was close to completing the coursework for her Doctorate of Strategic Leadership with a concentration on Servant Leadership. She was hoping that she would be done with her courseload by the spring and could start writing her dissertation.

The Lord had given her a desire to be a servant leader by helping churches and Christian organizations excel in leadership and administration. Her work would be her for-profit business, and she already had a name for it.

But the progress had been slow. Paula had to juggle her doctorate, a full-time job, and being a single mother. Not to mention, her phone was always ringing with calls or beeping with texts.

When even when good things, requests, and ideas came along, Paula could not entangle herself with them. She kept to her priorities. The Lord was first. So she made a commitment to pursue what she felt the Lord had called her to do.

Paula looked at the clock. She would be working on coursework until about 5 p.m., then she would switch gears to preparing for a small group that she ran. Paula had to text new members to remind them about class the next day, and then she would go over her reading. There wasn't a lot of time in the day, but she was thankful for everything she could do with the time.

1 How can saying “no” to some things allow for something greater?

2 Why do you think that we tend to make ourselves so busy?

3 Why do you suppose God created us with the need for rest?

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: ¹⁰ But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Remember the Sabbath

The people of Israel heard from God at the foot of Mount Sinai. God had spoken with their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. But now, God was speaking directly to them. The commands of covenant are of absolute importance—summarizing what Israel must do as God’s chosen people. The first half of the Ten Commandments show how to honor God properly. The second half of the commands describe guardrails for treating other humans. But the command in the middle—Sabbath—bridges the two categories. The Israelites are to regularly stop their work *because of God and on behalf of others*.

The command is to “remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy” (Ex. 20:8). *Sabbath* is the Israelites’ word for Saturday, or the seventh day of the week. The first time the word “holy” is used in Scripture is in reference to Sabbath, in Genesis 2:3. God established the seventh day for rest; God is the keeper of all space and time. Since anything holy is set apart for God’s use, the Sabbath is set apart for God.

God explains that the Israelites are to work for six days, but no work is to be done on the seventh (vv. 9–10). It would be easy for the elders and patriarchal leaders not to work, but God wants rest for all—including children, servants, foreigners, and even animals.

Everyone created by God can honor the Lord and follow His example of rest.

A person who does not rest develops an unhealthy outlook on the meaning of life. One Christian definition says that people exist “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” When work becomes the most important aspect of life, people idolize possessions and productivity. The Egyptian slave-masters had ruthlessly worked the Israelites, tying human worth to the output of their hands. But God values His people for other reasons; a stoppage to work forces God’s people to be deliberately unproductive—free people—for a single day. This helps them to remember God’s good order of creation and rely on Him to provide the difference.

God does not *need* to rest; He never tires (Isa. 40:28). God could have made a six-day week, where every day is for work. But a day of rest reflects an important aspect of His character. God does not need our work. He is not desperate for us to fix everything. He is the Savior and Redeemer (Isa. 43:11). Since we are made in God’s image, we should mirror His character (Gen. 1:27). This includes taking time to rest. Resting helps people to develop a mindset of dependence upon God. Resting helps to reflect and refocus on what is important. Psalm 46:10 commands, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

1 What’s the hardest work to stop doing so that you can rest and reflect on God?

2 What special blessing has God done in your life during a time of rest?

3 Give examples of how your character changes when you are overworked.

⁴ Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

⁵ One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. ⁶ He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

...

¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.

⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

...

¹⁰ On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.

The Lord's Day

Soon after Jesus' ascension, the church was growing and becoming more diverse, as communities of Christ-followers were planted across the region of Asia Minor. When Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, he reflects about unity among believers (Rom. 14:19; 15:2, 5–7). One of the most detrimental attitudes against unity is a judgmental spirit. It is all too easy to judge another's choices as being too rigid or too relaxed.

Paul points to a real-life example: choosing to honor special days, or not. Some believers—particularly those of a Jewish background—honor special days and keep the Sabbath (compare Col. 2:16). Others are trying to treat every day as the same (Rom. 14:5). Interestingly, Paul does not agree with one side or condemn the actions of the other. That's not the point. The point is to be dedicated to Christ instead of quarreling about personal convictions. Every believer should be thoughtfully living for the Lord. He allows differences of diet or calendar observances (v. 4).

Paul asks, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?” (Rom 14:4). Paul is putting the focus where it belongs, on the fact that Jesus is the one in charge, who holds all authority in the universe (see Matt. 28:18). No one else has the authority to judge, and here *judging* means deciding matters that require individual discernment, what he calls “disputable matters” in Romans 14:1. If we try to make ourselves the ultimate judge of another, we have subverted Christ’s authority to replace it with our own. Beware!

Yet every believer has the responsibility to submit to the Lord Jesus, to give thanks to Him for all things, and to seek wisdom in all of their convictions. If we remember that we live for God, we shall find condemning one another difficult indeed! Paul says that the community of Christian faith is big enough to include some differences, and he says “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

We find another example in the text of Revelation. John is on the island of Patmos when he receives a vision from God. But notice that he says the time is “the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10). What John means by this is not the seventh day of the week, but the first.

From the New Testament and other early Christian texts, we learn that the early believers used the first day of the week—Sunday—as a day to gather for worship (see also Acts 20:7). John does not explain why Sunday is called “the Lord’s Day.” He assumes that readers already know that Jesus rested in the tomb during the Sabbath, and on the *first day* of the week, Jesus rose from the grave (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). Thus, when early Christians continue honoring the God of creation, they found Sunday a fitting day to celebrate God’s *new creation* and Christ’s authority over all things—even death itself.

1 What things divide churches today? How should believers react?

2 When have you ever seen someone unfairly condemned for a matter of individual discernment?

3 Is Paul saying that all kinds of judging are bad? Why or why not?

The Lord's Days

My son loves to use the word *actually*. He'll say things like, "Actually, bananas are not yellow. They absorb every color but yellow. Yellow is the only color they reject and reflect." When I read Revelation 1:10 and John mentions "the Lord's day," I couldn't help but hear his nine-year-old voice saying, "Actually, every day is the Lord's."

God invites us to special times of worship, but let us not forget that every moment belongs to Him. All of life is a gift from God (Isa. 42:5). But we naturally think of time as ours. A worker exclaims to his boss, "You can't tell me what to do on *my own time*." When the bell rings, students in school immediately grab their belongings and run to the door—often when the teacher is still talking. It is easy for us to think that we own our time. The Bible teaches that God rules over every day (see Luke 12:13–21).

It is convicting to ponder, *Do I honor God with all of the time He gives me?* And it could be easy to slip into a transactional mindset, thinking that we have to meet quotas to make God happy. God is not like our earthly bosses. He is not like the Egyptian taskmasters who treated the Israelites with cruelty. God is our loving Father who delights in His children (Ps. 149:4; 1 John 3:1). And believers should not honor God out of slavery, guilt, or coercion. It should flow from a heart of joyful delight (1 Sam. 12:24; Ps. 100:2).

We remember that God delights in giving rest. Psalm 23 is a beautiful picture of the Good Shepherd, giving to those in His care precisely what they need—including rest in green pastures. Following God's design allows time for everything: work, rest, weeping, laughing, and more (Eccl. 3:1–8).

1 How do you balance the different times in life, such as work and rest?

2 When is it hardest to honor God with your time?

3 If you had a day where you picked the entire schedule, what would you do? What do your choices reflect?

Deliberately Resting with God

Build a habit of having deliberate time with God by starting small, like making rest a priority this week.

Choose one particular day this week to set aside extra time for prayer or spending time with God. You might also begin every day of the week by praying these words:

Lord of all time and space, direct my day. Teach me to trust that I am valuable, even when I do nothing but spend time with You.

Key Text

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. —Exodus 20:11 KJV

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

—Exodus 20:11 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of February 16 through February 21

Mon. Malachi 3:7–12—Blessings to Those Who Give.

Tue. Exodus 36:2–7—Giving More than Enough.

Wed. Psalm 67—May God's Ways Be Known.

Thu. 2 Corinthians 9:1–6—Ready with Voluntary Gift.

Fri. 2 Corinthians 9:6–15—Bountiful Sowing and Reaping.

Sat. Matthew 28:16–20—Go and Make Disciples.

Next Week: Acts 1:6–8; 2 Corinthians 8:3–9

Since we have talked about God's control of our time, next we will discuss God's plan for our resources. This week, be asking whether God has a new door to open for you.

STEWARDSHIP AND MISSION

Kenan ended the call and reached for his seatbelt. He was headed to Willow Creek Gardens. It was a senior living community for people fifty-five and older. Every third Saturday of the month, Kenan went grocery shopping for two seniors from his church.

Both women had been using delivery services for their groceries, but Kenan overheard them talking about a bad experience. So Kenan had volunteered to do the shopping for them. That was one year ago.

“Doesn’t a young man like you have better things to do, than to shop for old women?” Sister Taylor had asked.

“Not at all! I’m happy to do it,” Kenan had told the women.

Then when Kenan said he would supplement the two women’s grocery bill with \$30 each, they had objected.

“This is something the Lord has put on my heart,” Kenan said.

Kenan persuaded them both and knew that the Lord had provided for him. More so, it seemed as if Kenan’s heart had enlarged. He knew it was because the Holy Spirit was at work in him.

Kenan had also taken the idea to his pastor as a quarterly activity for the men’s ministry. “We have other senior members who may benefit from ‘grocery day,’ and we can use some of the men’s ministry funds or raise funds to offset their groceries.”

Kenan’s pastor had been ecstatic and approved the idea.

Kenan rang the buzzer outside the big building. “Right on time,” came the voice of Sister Taylor over the intercom. “Come on in.”

1 When a person lives a life of service and generosity, what actions do they take?

2 What are some practical ways to show the goodness of God to others?

3 What does it mean to you, to be a witness to Christ?

⁶ When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

⁷ And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

⁸ But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

A Kingdom of Power

Jesus accomplished His earthly mission. He came to earth as a man and became obedient to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). Throughout His life, Jesus taught what it means to walk according to God’s design, to live as a human in the way God intends. By His death and resurrection, He has defeated sin and death—providing access for all to a restored relationship with God.

But shortly after the resurrection, Jesus’ followers are still grappling to understand the full implications of what has happened. Jesus tells His disciples to remain in Jerusalem to await the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:6, they gather around Him to ask if the time has come for Jesus to “restore the kingdom to Israel.”

The messianic hopes of Israel were based on expectations of a conquering king. They wanted someone like King David, who successfully defended the people and waged war against Israel’s enemies: solidifying borders, glorifying the name of God, and ensuring a strong and prosperous nation. God promised David a descendant, the Messiah, who would reign forever (see 2 Sam. 7:12). This is what Israel and the disciples expect when the Messiah arrives. They want to see a rerun of the glory days of Israel’s national might, under the leadership of a worthy king who would turn the Romans out and set God’s people free from foreign oppression.

And they knew that Jesus was Israel's king. Everyone was waiting for Him to take the throne, to reign like a traditional king. The disciples' question speaks to this hope. But Jesus responds in an indirect manner, acknowledging that He *will* reign as king and His throne *will* be established (v. 7). However, the Father has decided the appropriate time, and it's not for them to know. We still eagerly await the return of Jesus and establishment of His kingdom in glory. In the meantime, the ministry of Jesus continues—through His followers. Jesus comforts the disciples with the promise that the Holy Spirit is coming to grant them power to be His witnesses (v. 8).

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is active in people's lives, but usually only for specific people for specific times (for example, Joseph [Gen. 41:38]; the craftsmen of the tabernacle [Ex. 31:3], Joshua [Num. 27:18], King David [1 Sam. 16:13]). Figures of the past were filled with the Spirit to do the work of God. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Spirit comes in abundance to all believers (Acts 2:4). Everyone can imitate Christ and be His witnesses. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that believers bear witness for Christ, as the good news about Him goes from Jerusalem, into all of Judea and Samaria, and eventually to the whole world (Acts 1:8).

1 Why do you think the disciples are so curious about Jesus' role as the king of Israel?

2 How do we announce and welcome Jesus' kingdom right now, even while we wait for His return?

3 What are ways that the Spirit empowers us to be witnesses?



This is the view from the Mount of Olives, where Luke records that Jesus ascended to heaven after giving these final instructions. While this location is within East Jerusalem today, in Jesus' era it was considered outside the city, in the town of Bethany (see Luke 19:29).

© IALSI/Getty Images

³ For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; ⁴ Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. ⁵ And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. ⁶ Inasmuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also. ⁷ Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also.

⁸ I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.

⁹ For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶ So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

A Plea for Generosity

The empowering Spirit gives Jesus' followers boldness to spread the good news about salvation. This means that many people—Jews and Gentiles—soon decide to follow Jesus and are being filled with the Spirit. They begin to live Spirit-led lives, in community with one another.

In his letter of 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul, who planted many churches among the Gentiles, writes to the church in Corinth, asking for them to demonstrate generosity. Before Paul makes his dramatic and final trip back to Jerusalem, he spends about five years collecting

money from Gentiles to support the Jewish Christians back where the gospel message first began to spread, in Jerusalem.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul asks the Corinthian church to donate generously. He uses the Macedonian churches as an example—citing their abundant giving. In verse 3, Paul tells the Corinthians that the Macedonian churches gave “as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.” He says they pleaded for the privilege of serving God’s people by giving in this way. The Macedonian churches had little, but gave much. The church at Corinth probably had more since Corinth was a wealthy city. The members could also give generously, if they choose to. Paul argues that giving to the urgent needs of brothers and sisters in the faith is a privilege. It isn’t to be done grudgingly, but with great joy, knowing that generous giving is one of the ways believers become more like Christ.

In verse 7, Paul points out the many gifts the Spirit has given the Corinthian believers. They excel in faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love. But Paul wants them to excel at *giving*, which is another gift of the Spirit (Rom. 12:8).

Paul doesn’t command that the Corinthians donate generously, but he does say that this request is a test of their love (2 Cor. 8:8). Following Jesus is not only a mental agreement to a set of beliefs. It requires action, often sacrifice. He points out in verse 9 that Jesus, although He was deserving of everything (as God), became a poor human for the sake of our salvation. Jesus lived according to God’s will, and believers are meant to imitate Him (Eph. 5:1–2), to be formed into His likeness (2 Cor. 3:18).

1 Why do you think generous giving is one of the gifts of the Spirit? Is it a gift for all, or for only some?

2 Do you believe it’s easier or harder for wealthy people to show generosity?

3 Why do you think that Paul was so insistent that Gentile churches give back to the needs of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem?

A Spirit of Generosity

When I was young, my family would take summer trips to Chicago. We would go to museums, shows, shops, and tour all of the historical parts of the city. These trips were filled with fun and excitement for us as we got to see a city that had so much to offer. But we couldn't help but notice, as we walked around the city, there were many people on the streets—people who looked desperate and seemed to have no comfortable place to go. On one of these trips, my brother (only about eight), was moved with compassion for those experiencing homelessness. When we got home, he sent his piggy bank money to Pacific Garden Mission, a ministry dedicated to sharing Jesus and hope with those in need in Chicago. My brother received updates from the mission for years afterward.

As I was remembering my brother's generosity at a young age, I couldn't help but feel inadequate. At this stage in my life, I have never been more financially stable. And yet, I find myself thinking about the next stage of my financial planning, not for how I can share out of my abundance with others. My instinct is to be generous toward my current and future *self*, and it requires the work of the Holy Spirit to help me shift my thinking beyond what I want.

When Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to His people, they gained boldness to be generous toward the needs of one another. They were urgently sharing the blessings of the gospel! They allowed the Spirit to transform them.

As we continue in our own discipleship journeys, we need to continually be asking the Holy Spirit to grow this fruit in us. There might be areas where we've seen growth, and perhaps there are other areas (like generosity) where we need the Spirit to stretch us. The goal is to become more like Jesus, for He is generous in every way.

1 Do you find generosity easy or difficult? Why?

2 What are some ways that people have shown you generosity throughout your life?

3 How can you continue to grow in generosity?

Imitating a Generous God

God is generous to us, and He invites us to be generous to others, which is inseparable from the good news of Christ's kingdom. Take the time now and in the week ahead to inventory your available resources. Are there ways you can give with freedom and joy, especially to those in your community? Maybe there are local groups for whom you can commit to prayer, which is extremely valuable. Ask God to show you where and how He wants you to show His generosity to others.

Father, here are some resources and skills that I devote to You. Prompt me acts of joyful giving.

Key Text

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. —2 Corinthians 8:9 KJV

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. —2 Corinthians 8:9 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of February 23 through February 28

- Mon.** Nehemiah 4:15–23—Work Together for the Common Good.
- Tue.** Romans 15:1–17—Welcome One Another in Christ.
- Wed.** Proverbs 3:27–32—Do Good whenever You Can.
- Thu.** Ecclesiastes 5:4–8—Fulfill Your Vows.
- Fri.** Philemon 10–21—Bear One Another's Debts.
- Sat.** James 2:14–26—Provide for Others and Demonstrate Faith.

Next Week: Mark 12:28–34; James 2:14–17

We will continue to speak about generosity to others. What is the greatest financial or physical need that you notice in your community right now?

RECOGNIZING OUR DEBT TO OTHERS

Jada rolled the vacuum to the closet and set it inside. When Jada heard her name being called, she went upstairs. She found Sister Green, her daughter's Sunday school teacher, in her bedroom sitting on the two-seat sofa and in her house robe. It was 4 p.m.

"Are you sure about letting the girls stay overnight?" Sister Green asked.

"I'm absolutely sure," said Jada. "Besides, my daughter can't wait to have overnight company again!"

Jada had been coming to Sister Green's house every week for the past five months. Sometimes she cleaned. Sometimes she cooked. Sometimes she just sat and was company. Several times she took Sister Green's two daughters home to spend the night.

Her husband had died suddenly in a traffic accident. It had ripped a huge hole in Sister Green's heart. She had taken a hiatus from teaching Sunday School and seemed to be having a hard time "bouncing back," as others had put it.

Early on in praying for Sister Green, Jada felt moved to go and see her. She didn't ask. Jada just showed up. She figured if Sister Green didn't want any company, she would turn her away. She did not. The first visit, Jada just sat on the couch with her. Few words were spoken. Each time Jada returned, she could feel a closeness developing. It wasn't spoken, but Jada felt it, nonetheless.

"Jada," Sister Green said, as Jada was headed out. "I can't thank you enough for everything."

1 Who is someone who demonstrates the love of Jesus through action?

2 If someone watched your life, would they see faith in action?

²⁸ And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

²⁹ And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

³⁰ And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

³¹ And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

³² And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: ³³ And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Love God and Love Your Neighbor

The Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees had been trying to catch Jesus in His words to provide a reason for His arrest (Mark 12:13–27). In Mark 12:28, hearing the debate and impressed with Jesus’ answer, a teacher of the law poses what appears to be a sincere question:

Which commandment is most important? Ranking the weightiness of laws was a common practice among Jewish rabbis. Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Leviticus 19:18 (Mark 12:29–31). These two passages had been linked together by other rabbis because of their shared use of the word “love.” Jesus also links them, asserting that loving the one true God with your whole self and loving your neighbor as yourself (in that order) are the most important commandments. The second command flows out of the first. In other words, true love for God should result in love for one’s neighbor.

The teacher of the law is again impressed with Jesus’ answer and commends Him as correct (Mark 12:32). This makes sense given Jesus’ quotations. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 is part of the *Shema*, the central prayer of Judaism expressing the most important facets of Jewish belief: Yahweh alone is God and deserving of complete devotion. In response to Jesus, the teacher of the law asserts that love for God and love for neighbor is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33). Jesus affirms the wisdom of this response and tells the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). Presumably, what this teacher of the law still lacked was a proper recognition of Jesus, the Son of God and Messiah.

This scene put an end to the attempts to trap Jesus in His words (see Mark 12:34). Jesus’ Jewish audience would have recognized the truth of what He said, making it hard for His opponents to press Him further.

1 What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

2 How is the command to love your neighbor related to the command to love God?

3 Why did Jesus’ answer make it hard for His opponents to press Him further?

¹⁴ What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

¹⁵ If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶ And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? ¹⁷ Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Useless Faith

By James 2:14–17, James has already emphasized the importance of doing what the word of God says, not merely listening to it (James 1:22–25). Early in his letter, he seems to be correcting a form of piety that focuses on knowledge or assent to certain doctrinal beliefs but does not result in a lived-out religious ethic. For example, he calls the piety of those who consider themselves religious but do not control their tongues “worthless” (James 1:26). He forbids favoritism, especially regarding the treatment of the rich and the poor. To favor one and dishonor the other flies in the face of the scriptural command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; James 2:8–9). James wants followers of Jesus to live differently than the world, which means, among other things, being merciful to the poor (see James 2:12–13).

James is ready to get to the heart of the matter. He does this by asking a series of rhetorical questions with implied answers. This was a common technique employed by moralists of the day. James’ first question asks, “What good is it . . . if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?” (v. 14). The implied answer is, *No good!* It’s as useless as listening to God’s Word without doing what it says. James emphasizes his point with a second question: “Can such faith save them?” The implied answer is, *No!* Again, James is making the point that mere belief in right doctrine is no good if not accompanied by

obedience to God. True faith should compel believers to right action, just as true love for God should overflow into love for others.

James illustrates his point by prompting his readers to imagine someone in the faith community—a brother or sister in Christ—who doesn't have proper clothing or enough food to make it through the day (v. 15). Perhaps James still has in mind the poor from 2:1–13. Verse 16 pictures someone responding to this poor brother or sister with mere well-wishing, saying, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed.” “Go in peace” was a common Jewish blessing, so again James may be correcting a form of piety that says and believes true things but doesn't put faith into action. James asks what good this well-wishing does if not accompanied by deeds to meet the person's physical needs. In other words, what good is it to say, “Keep warm and well fed” but not take steps to clothe and feed the person? The implied answer is, *No good!* Mere well-wishing is useless.

“In the same way,” James writes in verse 17, “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Here, James makes his point emphatic. He is not saying that salvation is achieved or earned through deeds, but that true faith will be accompanied by deeds, just as Abraham's faith compelled him to offer up Isaac in obedience to God (see James 2:20–24). For the Christian, declaring that Jesus is Lord, but failing to follow Him as Lord, makes the initial declaration empty. Acts of obedience demonstrate that faith is genuine.

1 What does James think of faith that is unaccompanied by deeds, or action?

2 What is the point of James' illustration about the person who lacks clothing or food?

3 What is the relationship between faith and deeds in terms of salvation?

To Love Like Jesus

We had left the labor and delivery room and were getting settled in the postpartum wing with our new baby. It wasn't a restful place. In a hospital, the hours after a child's birth are full of interruptions. Nurses popping in to check on this and that. Friends and family eager to meet the new baby. And, of course, the little life in need of food and diapers and love. We were tired. *Really* tired. Then my phone dinged.

I checked my voicemail. It was a dear old woman from our church, just checking to see if we needed anything. She was in the hospital herself, tending to her sick husband. She had every reason in the world not to think of us at that moment, but she did. And I knew her offer to help was genuine, because we had known her our whole lives. That's the kind of person she is—a person whose love for God overflows into a love for others, a person who constantly demonstrates her love through actions, a person who is usually found wherever people are in need. She loves with a gentle, persistent love that seems almost second nature. Her faith compels her to love like Jesus. What else can she do?

I was almost embarrassed. *No, we don't need anything*, I thought. *You just take care of your husband*. But she stopped by the next day anyway. Her presence wasn't burdensome. It was like a calm in the storm. She stayed only a few minutes, enough time to encourage us, to tell us we were doing a great job, to let us know our family is precious to God and that God is with us. And then with a bright smile and a wave, she was gone.

I want to love others like that, with a love that flows out of a love for God and becomes second nature—a love that can't be mistaken for anything but sincere, because it's so clearly demonstrated through actions. I want to love like Jesus.

1 Who in your life serves as an example of Christlike love?

2 How do the people in your life know if you love them?

3 What does it mean to love like Jesus?

Find a Way to Love

Since love demonstrated through action is what God expects, your task is to make a concrete plan to demonstrate love to someone else this week. Maybe a coworker needs help with a project. Maybe a neighbor needs help with yard work. Maybe a friend needs a meal.

Pray for God to help you find a tangible way to love someone else as yourself. Keep a journal of what you do, reflecting on what it might look like to love this person like Jesus.

Key Text

To love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

—Mark 12:33 KJV

“To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

—Mark 12:33 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of March 2 through March 7

Mon. Proverbs 12:1–2, 10–14—Work and Discipline.

Tue. 1 Corinthians 6:12–20—The Temple of the Body.

Wed. 1 Corinthians 9:19–27—The Discipline of Right Choices.

Thu. Psalm 139:1–12—God Is Always with Me.

Fri. Psalm 139:13–24—Fearfully and Wonderfully Made.

Sat. 1 Timothy 4:7–12—The Superior Training in Godliness.

Next Week: Daniel 1:8–17; 1 Timothy 4:7–8

We will bring attention to our habits. What time of the day gives you the best opportunity to turn attention to God in gratitude for His provision?

Breaking Records and Racial Barriers:

By Patricia Merritt

Before Simone Biles became an all-around gold medalist, before Serena Williams ranked first in women's singles, even before Michael Jordan led his team to an NBA championship, Black athletes have risen above all obstacles and prejudice to display God-given talents on the world stage. The world of sports has been a place for athletes to break racial barriers and to achieve what no one imagined possible. Like athletes, Christians are called to show dedication, endurance, and self-sacrifice—in pursuit of a better reward than any earthly achievement.



Jesse Owens (1913–1980)

Jesse Owens (the “Buckeye Bullet”) is best known for his time-defying, world-setting and race-shattering records in track and field. In 1935, during “the greatest forty-five minutes in sports history,” Owens broke three world records and tied a fourth. The following year, he was the first American to win four gold medals in a single Olympiad—and in Berlin, no less. Owens was breaking records and displaying his incomparable talent during a time when African American athletes endured segregation and racism, at home and abroad.

What many don't know is that Owens had a profound faith in God, a faith that affected his character, fueled his heart, and propelled him to greatness. Owens lived a life of faith, love, and service.

Find the text continued at this link:



International Sunday School Lessons

Bible Study Plan

For 2023–2026

	Fall	Winter	Spring	Summer
2023– 2024	God’s Law is Love Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians	Faith that Pleases God Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Chronicles, Proverbs, Isaiah, Daniel, Habakkuk, Matthew, Luke, Romans, Hebrews	Examining Our Faith Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, 2 Corinthians, 1 Peter, Jude	Hope in the Lord Psalms, Lamentations, Acts, Romans, 2 Corinthians, Colossians, Hebrews, 1 Thessalonians, Titus, 1 John
2024– 2025	Worship in the Covenant Community Genesis, Exodus, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, Psalms, John	A King Forever and Ever Ruth, 2 Samuel, Psalms, Matthew, Luke	Costly Sacrifices Exodus, Leviticus, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Matthew, Hebrews, 1 John, Revelation	Sacred Alters and Holy Gifts Genesis, Matthew, Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 Peter
2025– 2026	Judah, From Isaiah to Exile 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel	Enduring Beliefs of the Church Exodus, Psalms, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, 2 Timothy, 1 John, Revelation	Social Teachings of the Church Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Nehemiah, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, Jonah, Gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, James	The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses Judges, 1 Samuel, Amos, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 2 Timothy, Philemon

COMING NEXT QUARTER

March 2026 – May 2026

Social Teachings of the Church

The spring quarter is an study of social issues that faithful Christians have always confronted, bringing Christ to bear on these issues for our time and place. The first unit challenges us to work together toward common ends in our homes and communities, on the basis of mutual love and respect. The second unit offers four lessons on the promise of eternal life, as well as our obligations in this life. The final unit has lessons on the our duty to society, in the context of our greater allegiance to God in Christ. We are given opportunities to fulfill vocations, to strive toward a balance of work and rest, and to worship in Spirit and in truth. The quarter concludes with a lesson that emphasizes the need to regularly assemble before the Lord God and return our thanks for all good gifts from God's hands.

Texts for study include: Deuteronomy, Nehemiah, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, Jonah, Gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, James

Lessons of this Student Guide are organized according to a thematic study of the Bible, following the International Sunday School Lessons series (ISSL). In six years, this cycle will touch on the Bible's key themes through studies of books in both Old and New Testaments.

*One day,
the child born
to Mary
would say to
His disciples...*



**EVERYTHING MUST BE FULFILLED THAT IS WRITTEN ABOUT ME
IN THE LAW OF MOSES, THE PROPHETS AND THE PSALMS.**

—LUKE 24:44



**JOIN US.
SPREAD THE GOSPEL.
CHANGE THE WORLD.**



We believe in equipping the local church with Christ-centered resources that empower believers, even in the most challenging places on earth.

We trust that God is always at work, in the power of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit, inviting people into relationship with Him.

We are committed to spreading the gospel throughout the world—across villages, cities, and nations. We trust that the Word of God will transform lives and communities by bringing light to the darkness.

As a global ministry with a 150-year legacy, David C Cook is dedicated to this mission. Each time you purchase a resource or donate, you're supporting a ministry—helping spread the gospel, disciple believers, and raise up leaders in some of the world's most underserved regions.

Your support fuels this mission.

Your partnership sends the gospel where it's needed most.



Discover more. Be the difference.
Visit DavidCCook.org/Donate

DAVID C COOK®
*A Nonprofit Ministry Equipping
the Global Church*



Adult
Student Guide
No. 5082