Matthew Devotionals-Today in the Word

Today in the Word

Devotional Illustrations

Gospel of Matthew

- **See also Matthew Commentaries 3 - Our Daily Bread Devotionals on Matthew**
- **CLICK TO GO TO CHAPTER** - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

Matthew 1

Matthew 1:1-17

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. - Genesis 12:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

When asked his opinion of the British royal family, an Englishman replied, “That's a bit like asking me what I think about the planet Neptune. It's not something to have an opinion on—it's just the way things are. The royal family links to tradition, and that's very important to us.”

Royal families have long relied on genealogy to provide legitimacy for their position. As we begin our study of the Gospel of Matthew this month, we see a similar argument in the opening verses. Far from a dry recounting of generations of fathers and sons, God reveals important information about who He is and how He works.

Three names appear at the beginning and end of this genealogy: Jesus Christ, David, and Abraham. This is an important signal—Matthew is explicitly connecting Jesus to the lines of David and Abraham. The importance of being from the line of David is clear; this was the royal line of Israel, and God had promised that David's descendants would rule forever (see 2 Samuel 7). Jesus had the legal authority to claim the throne of David.

Why mention Abraham, then? After all, Jesus' descent from David implied being in the family of Abraham. Here Matthew reveals part of the grand story of the gospel. Jesus is the answer to the promise that God made to Abraham, that all nations would be blessed through him (see Gen. 12:1-3).

Several women are also mentioned in this genealogy. It was highly unusual to mention women in public records during the first century. Indeed, the women mentioned seem unlikely candidates to boost credibility: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (Uriah's wife). Each was a non-Israelite (see Genesis 38; Joshua 2; Ruth 1; 2 Samuel 11). Yet God brought them into His people and into the line of Jesus, again foreshadowing the inclusion of both Jew and Gentile into His people of blessing.

As we shall see tomorrow, this last part of the genealogy provides significant evidence of the true nature of Jesus Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever composed a spiritual genealogy? Take some time to reflect on people who have been influential in your life spiritually. It might include parents, Sunday school teachers, or friends. How much do you know about their spiritual roots? In tracing this spiritual “family tree,” pay attention to the surprising twists and turns that reveal the working of God. Thank Him that He still chooses unlikely people and unexpected ways to reveal Himself.

Matthew 1:5-6 Ruth 4:1-22

Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. - Matthew 1:5-6

TODAY IN THE WORD

On their fiftieth wedding anniversary in 1992, Thomas and Ann Johnson recalled how they met and married. “I'd had my eye on Ann for about a year but I was nervous to ask her out. When I heard I'd be shipped out to the war, I found Ann in the library and just asked her to marry me! Turns out she liked me, we got married a week later, and here we are after fifty happy years!”

Boaz would have understood; once he found out that Ruth was willing to marry him, he wasted no time. As in all good stories, an obstacle emerged—another man who was actually a closer relative had the first opportunity to buy the land . . . and to marry Ruth. The dramatic tension builds in verses 4-6: now that Boaz and Ruth want to be together, will another relative stand in the way?

To understand the extent to which Boaz modeled faithfulness it's helpful to note that no one was obligated to take the role of kinsman-redeemer. In Leviticus 25, the provision is simply that a relative may do this. In Ruth, the nearest relative preferred not to be inconvenienced, but Boaz accepted the responsibility.

As we conclude our study, let's look at the larger picture. First, Naomi had come full circle. Through the selfless acts of loyal love by Ruth and Boaz, she was restored to fullness. Second, even in the dark days of Judges, God was working to provide Israel with what they needed—godly leadership. The child born to Ruth and Boaz became the grandfather of King David, a man after God's own heart.

Finally, God's salvation extends beyond the borders of Israel. Ruth, a Moabite, is part of the royal line. And a descendant of David reigns forever, Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate Kinsman-Redeemer. He paid the price to redeem us from sin, and God has exalted Him above every principality and power (see Phil. 2:6-11). He is our Lord, our gracious Judge and Deliverer.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Praise is an appropriate way to end our study this month. To begin, you could focus on praising Jesus as Judge, Deliverer, and Kinsman-Redeemer. You could praise God for His acts of faithfulness, provision, and mercy. You could do this in an extended prayer time, through singing, or even in focusing your thoughts and heart on what God has revealed about Himself in our study this month. As Psalm 92:1 says, “It is good to praise the Lord.”f

Matthew 1:1-17

I, Jesus . . . am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star. - Revelation 22:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Tracing family histories is a growing hobby. Today people spend thousands of dollars on special computer software, research books, and even trips to the place of their ancestors. There’s often a strong tug to feel connected to where we come from.

Genealogies were exceedingly important to the Jews. Matthew 1:1-17 provides Jesus’ genealogy on Joseph’s side. Matthew said that Jesus is “the son of David, the son of Abraham (v. 1). Many Bible scholars believe that Matthew reversed the chronological order here to present Jesus first as the Messiah, the King who will establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

We read previously this month that Jesus is the Son of David. Here He is also the Son of Abraham. God said to Abraham, “Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Gen. 22:18).

The names in Matthew’s genealogy are arranged in three groups of fourteen people each. This is a mnemonic device, arranged so that they are easy to memorize. The three sections are based on the three great stages of Jewish history: first from Abraham to David, second from David to the exile in Babylon, and the third from the Exile to the birth of Christ.

Four names stand out--customarily women’s names didn’t appear in Jewish genealogies: Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), and Bathsheba, referred to as Uriah’s wife (v. 6). If you study these women, you may wonder what some of them are doing in Christ’s genealogy! They are examples of God’s grace and forgiveness of sins.

It is important to note that Joseph was not Jesus’ actual father, but rather Mary’s husband (v. 16). Consequently, the genealogy of Mary appears in Luke 3:23–38. Her genealogy goes back to Adam and shows that Mary was also from the line of David.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Take some extra time this week to read the stories of the four women in Christ’s genealogy. Tamar can be found in Genesis 38; Rahab in Joshua 2; Ruth in the book of Ruth; and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11-12.f.

Matthew 1:1-17

Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham. - Matthew 1:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Have you ever tried to research your family background? These days, the Internet can be a helpful tool in this regard. At a Web site such as Genealogy.com, for example, you can use the “Family Finder” to search available data for information relevant to you.

Depending on what you find, the site will also help you make a basic family tree.

Our reading today of a genealogy may seem unexciting, but it has much to tell us. In this passage, Matthew traced Jesus back to Abraham and emphasized His ancestry through Joseph. (In contrast, Luke traces Jesus' physical ancestors through His mother, Mary. See Luke 3:23–37.) Matthew had in mind a mainly Jewish audience, and he wanted to assert Jesus' credentials as the Messiah. Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term, Messiah. To introduce Jesus as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" called to mind the whole tradition of messianic prophecy (v. 1). God had told Abraham that through him all nations would be blessed, and had promised David that his throne would endure forever (Gen. 12:3; 2 Sam. 7:16).

In addition, Matthew quoted or alluded to the Old Testament more than any other book in the New Testament. He used Jewish terms such as kingdom of heaven and assumed a knowledge of Jewish tradition and history. His Jewish focus, however, wasn't exclusive, as can be seen in the presence of non-Jews such as Ruth and Rahab in Jesus' genealogy. Like all the Gospels, Matthew shows Jesus as Savior of the world.

As we do a book study of Matthew this month, we will trace central threads and themes: Jesus' identity and how people responded to Him; discipleship, or living as citizens of God's kingdom; the spiritual truths found in His parables; and the character and results of true faith and wisdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we begin this month's study of Matthew, we encourage you to take some time soon to read straight through this Gospel in one sitting. Doing so will help you get more out of this month's devotionals because you'll see the big picture more clearly from start to finish.

Matthew 1:1-16 2 Samuel 7:8-16;

Jesus Christ, the son of David. - Matthew 1:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

The film "Anna and the King "presents the real-life story of Anna Leonowens, who came from India to Siam (modern Thailand) to be the governess for King Mongkut's children. In one stirring scene, Anna's courage and creativity save the King's children from certain death at the hand of a would-be usurper to the throne. The importance of these children is quite clear--they represent the future of the country.

History has other accounts of royal children being protected. In fact, the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38) represents many amazing ways that God faithfully preserved the line of the true King, including the story of King David's grandparents, Ruth and Boaz. Knowing that Jesus is the "Son of David" is essential because God's Promised Messiah had to be a descendant of David.

That's why King Herod was so threatened by the birth of Jesus; Herod was not from the line of David and he knew that he had no legitimate basis for his rule. Herod foolishly thought he could "outwit" God by killing all baby boys approximately the age of Jesus (Matt. 2:13–18). But God preserved His chosen Messiah, whom He had promised from the beginning.

One of these promises is found in our passage from 2 Samuel. King David was one of the greatest kings who ever lived. He extended the boundaries of Israel to unprecedented limits. Yet even with all his greatness, God promised that one of his descendants would be even greater (vv. 12–13). The throne of the kingdom of this promised Offspring would endure forever (v. 13). By the time of Jesus, the rabbis called this Promised One "great David's greater son."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Thrilling accounts of rescue are not limited to movie scenes and royalty..

Matthew 1:1-17; 2 Samuel 7:11-16

I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star. - Revelation 22:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

On September 6, 2006, a little boy was born in Japan. Of course many Japanese boys were born on that day, but a little boy named Hisahito made headlines around the world. After 40 years with no male heir to the throne, the world's oldest monarchy, existing for 2,600 years, received the news it longed for.

About 2,000 years ago, in a different part of the world, another baby boy was born, to a very little fanfare. This boy could also trace

His royal ancestry back thousands of years.

We've already looked at Luke's record of Jesus' genealogy. There the focus was on Jesus' humanity, tracing Jesus' lineage back to the first human, Adam. Matthew's Gospel, however, focuses on Jesus' royal line. Notice how Matthew starts with a brief summary: Jesus is the Son of David, thus establishing His rightful claim to the throne. Jesus as the son of Abraham establishes Him as a Jew and the channel through whom the blessings promised to Abraham would now flow.

Notice also that the only women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy are four Gentiles: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. This is somewhat surprising because Matthew's Gospel is generally considered by scholars to be for a Jewish audience. The inclusion of these women, however, helps to show that good news of Jesus' birth is also good news for Gentiles, whose providential involvement helped to preserve God's royal line until its culmination in the birth of Jesus.

The link to David is especially important. For several reasons the Lord forbad David from building the temple. Instead, the Lord revealed that He would build a house, or eternal dynasty, for David. Today's passage from 2 Samuel 7 contains God's promise to David. King David was without question one of the world's greatest kings. Yet God promised that one of his descendents would be even greater (vv. 12-13) and the throne of this Promised Offspring would endure forever (v. 13).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

For the past several days, we've focused on Jesus' humanity. We hope these studies have shown Jesus' deep sympathy for our human frailty. Unfortunately, many people stop here: Jesus was a good human being but nothing more. But if Jesus weren't God, His crucifixion would be a horrible, pitiful tragedy. Instead, His death atoned for our sins and opened up eternal life, because He now sits at God's right hand. It's essential to affirm both Jesus' humanity and His deity, which will be our focus from here on..

Matthew 1:16-25

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. - Isaiah 7:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Several ancient myths tell stories of a god impregnating a human woman. One of the most famous is “Leda and the Swan,” in which Zeus assumed the form of a swan in order to seduce the girl Leda. According to Greek mythology, Leda then bore Helen, the beautiful woman who ignited the Trojan War.

Some skeptics use these myths to discredit the account of the virgin birth of Jesus. Is this passage in Matthew just another ancient tale of the gods dabbling in the affairs of men? The answer is a resounding no.

As Matthew's genealogy concludes, a break in the formula occurs in verse 16. No “father of . . .” construction is used; Joseph is identified as the husband of Mary, and she alone is mentioned as the parent of Jesus. The verses that follow explain: Mary and Joseph were engaged but not yet married, and she became pregnant with Jesus by the Holy Spirit although she was a virgin. In obedience to God's directive, Joseph took his pregnant bride and fulfilled the fatherly obligation of naming this boy.

Matthew is concerned with the legal, not physical, genealogy of Jesus. Joseph was in the kingly line of David—but he was not the physical father of Jesus. But because Joseph adopted Jesus and fulfilled the Jewish requirement of naming Him, Jesus legally could claim the same genealogy, with full rights in the line of David.

Unlike the lurid tales of ancient mythology, there is no description of just how Mary became pregnant. Two points in particular differ from these myths: Mary's virginity and the role of the Holy Spirit. They are intertwined in their significance. First, the mention of the Holy Spirit recalls God's creative power (see Gen. 1:1-26). The coming of Jesus, the Messiah, is a work of the Spirit that signals the new creation of the people of God. Second, a virgin birth is a miracle, the sort of miracle associated with the work of the Holy Spirit. It was a fulfillment of Scripture and also evidence of God's continuing work through unexpected people and means to fulfill His promises.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The name Immanuel reveals the role of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father has sent the Holy Spirit to make possible “God with us” in the fully human and fully divine person of the Son. As we approach the celebration of Easter later this month, prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to use this study of Matthew's Gospel to show you more about the person and work of Jesus. You might want to record your insights in a journal or the back page of this devotional.

Matthew 1:18-21, 24-25; Luke 1:31; 2

You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. - Matthew 1:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's interesting to learn that names have been used throughout history to denote important facts such as a person's family connections or place of origin. Two examples of these kinds of names in the Bible are Simon Bar-Jona (Matt. 16:17, KJV), showing that Simon was the son of Jonah, and Mary Magdalene (Matt. 27:56), designating this woman as the Mary from Magdala, a small town in Galilee.

Many biblical names have another trait in that they are compounds of a name for God and another word. That's the case with the name Jesus, the Greek form of Joshua, made up of a shortened form of Yahweh and the word for ""save.""

This is the personal name of God's Son, given to Joseph and to Mary before Jesus was born. The angel explained to Joseph the meaning of the name Jesus, and the mission of the Child whom Mary was carrying. We've studied one of His titles, Lord, and on Sunday we'll talk about His title as ""the Christ,"" the Messiah or Anointed One of God.

The blessing for us in Jesus' name is obvious: He is our Savior sent from God. Jesus' birth fulfilled God's promise to send a Redeemer in the oldest prophecy in the Bible, Genesis 3:15. Jesus was also the promised Redeemer of Israel.

The angel's announcement to the shepherds in Luke 2:11 brings together Jesus' names and titles in a powerful way: ""Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."" No wonder an entire ""host"" of angels appeared to praise God. No Person like this had ever been born before.

Archaeological records indicate that Jesus was a common name in that day, just as Joshua is a popular name today. And in Jesus' day there were false leaders going around claiming to be the Messiah. What set Jesus apart from all the rest was that He spoke the words and did the works of the Savior (see Luke 4:14-21 and John 10:38).

Luke 2:21 records the obedience of Joseph and Mary to heaven's command for the naming of their Child and our Savior. As the songwriter said, ""The name of Jesus is so sweet, I love its music to repeat. It makes my joy full and complete, the precious name of Jesus.""

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The words of this hymn should be our song today as we get ready to celebrate God's ""indescribable gift"" to us (2 Cor. 9:15).

Does your family have specific plans to honor and worship Jesus this Christmas? You can do that by the music you play and the things you display in your home. This weekend might be a good time to have a family council and see how many ways you can think of to make sure that Jesus occupies the place He deserves in your Christmas celebration.

Matthew 1:18-19

Joseph her husband was a righteous man. - Matthew 1:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

The first scene of a famous movie depicting the life of Christ begins in silence. A woman looks straight ahead, then drops her eyes. A man stands frowning, shocked. The camera moves back, revealing her rounded, pregnant belly. He goes slowly out of the house; subdued, the woman watches him go. In town, everything seems normal—people go about their business, a group of children plays—but his world has been irrevocably changed. Overcome, he sinks to the ground, puts his head down, and closes his eyes. Then, more than three minutes into the scene, the first words are spoken by an angel.

The Christmas story is not just a series of exalted moments staffed by saints with haloes, but a gritty and down-to-earth drama in which real people faced difficult decisions about matters beyond their understanding. In today's reading, Joseph faced one such decision. From his vantage point, there were at least two problems. The first was that his fiancé Mary was pregnant. No virgin had ever carried a child before, so Joseph could be excused if he doubted her sexual purity. Although a betrothal was not quite a marriage, and they had not yet had sexual relations, they were called “husband” and “wife” and a relationship with another man would have been regarded as marital unfaithfulness. No matter how much Joseph wanted to believe Mary, she was pregnant. Humanly speaking, he knew of only one way for that to happen.

The second problem was Mary's explanation. She'd conceived by the Holy Spirit? Had she lost her mind? Why would she give such an unbelievable excuse? She must know how it sounded.

Joseph decided to “divorce her quietly” (Mt 1:19). This decision demonstrates the seriousness of the betrothal relationship and the issue of sexual purity. By Law, Mary could have been stoned to death (Deut. 22:20-24), but Joseph chose not to accuse her. Despite the perceived wrong she had done, he still cared for her feelings, honor, and well-being. Joseph was a righteous and merciful man.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Italian movie mentioned in today's illustration is a classic—The Gospel According to St. Matthew, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1964). A recently released DVD features both the black-and-white original and a newly restored color version. Critic Roger Ebert called it “one of the most effective films on a religious theme I have ever seen.” Watching this film, perhaps with friends or family, could help focus your attention on the birth and life of Christ this Christmas.

Matthew 1:20-25

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him. - Matthew 1:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

“Joseph's Song” is a lyrical effort by singer-songwriter Michael Card to peer into the soul of Jesus' earthly father: “How could it be, this baby in my arms / Sleeping now, so peacefully, / The Son of God, the angel said, / How could it be? / Lord, I know He's not my own, / Not of my flesh, not of my bone. / Still, Father, let this baby be / The son of my love. / Father, show me where I fit into this plan of yours. / How can a man be father to the Son of God? / Lord, for all my life I've been a simple carpenter. / How can I raise a king? How can I raise a king?”

Joseph responded in faith to the angel's explanation. In a dream, he learned that Mary had indeed conceived by the Holy Spirit and that the child Jesus would “save his people from their sins” and fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (vv. 21-23). He should not carry out his previous decision to divorce Mary, but rather was to keep the betrothal and marry her.

How difficult! He was to take home a woman whom others surely regarded as unfaithful. As her belly grew, their reputation would take a beating—they would be a target for the community's pity, jokes, and scorn. In addition, he was to accept the incredible explanation of conception by the Holy Spirit, an unprecedented and unique event. One wonders if they even bothered trying to tell all this to the neighbors!

Joseph, who to his credit is not recorded as expressing any doubt, obeyed. He “did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife” (v. 24). Though he then had the right to have sexual union with her, and although no command to abstain is recorded, he avoided it so that there would be no question about whether he was the father.

At some level he understood the significance of the virgin birth within the Christmas story.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In the book of Hosea, the prophet is faithful to his unfaithful wife, Gomer, as an object lesson of God's covenant faithfulness to His people. While Joseph knew from the angel's message that Mary had not committed adultery, he must also have been painfully aware that in the eyes of everyone around them, she was a “Gomer.” Take time this week to read the book of Hosea.

Matthew 1:18-21

You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. - Matthew 1:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet,” wrote Shakespeare. Yet, we all know there’s a lot to a name. Parents often take great care naming their children, perhaps naming a child after someone special or famous.

Knowing the importance of a name, our focus this month will be on the names and titles associated with the name that is above every other name--Jesus (Phil. 2:9). As we prepare to celebrate His birth, each week we will focus on a new series of names of Christ, beginning with His eternal names.

It is appropriate to start today with the name Jesus, which actually comes from the Hebrew, Yeshua or Yehoshua (translated in English as Joshua), meaning “Yahweh is salvation.” After Moses led the people from their bondage in Egypt, God used Joshua to lead His people into the Promised Land (Josh. 1:6). Although Joshua was not the savior, he provided a picture of the One to come who would lead God’s people from their bondage to sin into eternal life.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, the name Jesus (the Greek spelling of Joshua) was actually quite popular. Devout Jews were waiting expectantly for God to raise up a deliverer, perhaps naming their children Jesus with the hope that God might yet send the Promised One. But there’s one essential element in Jesus’ birth not true of any other baby named Jesus. Matthew 1:18 says that Mary “was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” In all of history, there had never been a supernatural conception such as this. This would be no ordinary child! Only this child named Jesus would “save his people from their sins” (v. 21). In fact, His saving work on

the cross became forever linked with His name--the Savior Jesus Christ.

No wonder Paul wrote that God “gave [Jesus] the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When you get to know someone, you usually start by learning that person’s name. The same is true of getting to know Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-21, 24-25; Luke 1:31; 2

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Matthew 1:22-23 Isaiah 7:13-14;

They will call him Immanuel--which means, ""God with us."" - Matthew 1:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

Let's do another one-question Bible quiz today, like the one we did on Tuesday (see the November 23 study). Which name or title of Jesus Christ was never again used in the Bible after its first mention? Once again, the answer is in today's verse.

In explaining the significance of Jesus' birth, Matthew said the people would call Jesus ""Immanuel,"" which the writer interprets for us. Matthew drew this name from Isaiah's prophecy, but it appears only once in the New Testament. If Jesus was ever called Immanuel, it is not recorded in Scripture.

But that doesn't lessen the power of this name. Matthew's purpose was not to give us an alternative name by which to call Jesus. The purpose of his quotation from Isaiah was to demonstrate that Jesus' virgin birth was the fulfillment of a prophecy made centuries

before.

You may know that Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 has generated much controversy. The problem centers on how we should understand what Isaiah was saying. His prophecy had a meaning for his own day, which was clearly not a virgin birth, and a greater meaning that Matthew explained.

It can be argued that the Hebrew word Isaiah used does not have to mean ""virgin."" But the woman the prophet was speaking about in his day could have been his future wife, with whom Isaiah later had a son (Isa. 8:1-4). In that case, she may have been a virgin at the time Isaiah 7:14 was written.

Isa 7:15-17 say this child was a ""sign"" to King Ahaz of Judah in that by the time the boy was old enough to know right and wrong, the kings of Israel and Syria, who were threatening Judah, would be driven away.

Whatever the specifics of Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew leaves no doubt about the virgin birth of Jesus. Quoting from the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, Matthew used a word that can mean only virgin.

Jesus is ""God with us."" No one else can claim that title, which makes Him unique. As you prepare your heart and home to celebrate His birth, praise God for sending His Son to live among us--and die for us.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When we did the little quiz on Tuesday (the November 23 study), we mentioned a book that contains more than 300 names for Jesus.

You may want to pick up a copy of this book for devotional use this Christmas. It's called Names of Christ, by T.C. Horton and Charles E. Hurlburt. Reading some of these names together and talking about them as a family will give your family's Christmas devotions a new perspective. Check your local bookstore for this unique book.

Matthew 1:23

Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson tells of a memorable experience he had while bringing Christmas presents to the children of prison inmates. Colson and his wife met a small boy who told them his name was Immanuel. When Colson opened his Bible to Matthew 1:23 and showed Immanuel that his name meant “God with us,” the boy jumped up excitedly and said to his mother, “Mommy, God is with us! God is with us!”

What a refreshing, exuberant response to God’s Word. We don’t see that very often, because most of us move in circles where people have been reading the Bible for years. But when its truth is fresh and new, people can’t help but be moved.

Matthew 1:18-25

- Matthew 1:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the most refreshing things about reading the Christmas story is the simplicity of it all. Our culture is so saturated in information, statistics, and so-called news that it takes a major media event to capture our attention even for a few minutes. One source says that one weekday edition of The New York Times contains more information than a seventeenth-century English person would encounter in his or her entire lifetime. of wonder at the story of Jesus’ birth. Joseph was another key participant in the divine drama of Christmas. He was a “righteous man” (v. 19), another godly Israelite whom God chose to love and raise Jesus as His earthly father.Christmas. It was an angel who assured Joseph of Mary’s purity. Later, an angel warned Joseph to escape with Jesus to Egypt to avoid King Herod’s murderous rage (Matt. 2:13). Angels told Joseph when it was safe to return to Israel (Mt 2:19-20), and to avoid Judah (Mt 2:22). first angel that visited him. All he was told was that the baby in Mary’s womb was from God and that Joseph was to give Him the name Jesus. wouldn’t be surprising if he did. But we do know that based on those two facts, Joseph responded in obedience—showing that God knew exactly what He was doing when He chose this man for his special ministry. was unfaithfulness to him. Evidently, Mary had not revealed the details of her angelic visitation to her future husband. But the angel’s visit turned Joseph’s plans completely around in one night. Jesus was twelve years old (Luke 2). Whatever the case, Joseph leaves us with another worthy example of obedience to follow as we celebrate Christmas and look ahead to a new year.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The evidence of God’s presence is all over the Christmas story. There is no mistaking the fact that Joseph, Mary, Zechariah, and Elizabeth were people who believed in and trusted God.an interesting and fruitful dinnertime or devotional time discussion. If someone were to spend Christmas with your family, what evidence would they see and hear that this is a home where Jesus is Lord

and Savior?

Matthew 1:18-25

The virgin . . . will give birth to a son, and they will call him “Immanuel”–which means, “God with us.” - Matthew 1:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

After 2,000 years, you might think there is nothing physically left from the time of Christ except archaeological artifacts. Think again!

According to English botanists, a large yew tree at Crowhurst, south of London, was already two millennia old at the birth of Christ, and celebrated its 4,000th “birthday” last year. The great tree is partly dead now, and hollow, but scientists say this is actually a survival strategy helping it endure through storms, insects, and winters. Thanks to this strategy, the exterior of the tree remains very much alive, hosting birds in its branches and sporting a leafy green coat every new spring.

Long ago, the light of the star that led the wise men to the Christ-child might have shone on this ancient tree–what an amazing thought! Even more amazing is the fact that God became man and was born as a baby. Every human being since Adam has begun life as a baby, and so did Jesus. His human family tree is important for both Jews (that’s why Matthew recorded it in the first part of his gospel) and Gentiles (and why Luke did the same in Luke 3).

The story is familiar. The baby was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit, leading to a virgin birth and fulfilling a 700-year-old prophecy (cf. Isa. 7:14). Angels explained to both Mary and Joseph what was happening and the importance of the child. Jesus would “save His people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). He was “Immanuel,” meaning “God with us,” an astounding phrase summarizing the Incarnation.

Joseph’s extreme obedience is worthy of notice. He took Mary as his wife, despite the social shame of her pregnancy. The one-year engagement period was to show the bride’s purity, so when she “failed the test,” marrying her was a huge step of faith. He delayed consummating their marriage until after Jesus was born, recognizing the sacredness of the conception. And he obeyed the angel when naming the new baby.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus Christ, Son of God and Lord of the universe, came to earth as a baby.

Matthew 1:18-25

The virgin . . . will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. - Isaiah 7:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Jewish marriage procedure in biblical times had three steps. First was the engagement, made through the parents or a professional matchmaker. Often the couple had never even met one another. The second step was the betrothal, which was absolutely binding and could only be terminated by divorce. It lasted for one year, and the couple was known as man and wife. But the relationship was not consummated until after the third step, the actual wedding ceremony and celebration.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. Joseph was a gentle and righteous person, so he decided to divorce her quietly–rather than have her stoned as he was permitted to do under Jewish law (Mt 1:19). In order to prevent a very tragic situation, an angel appeared to Joseph to make clear what was happening. The angel explained that the conception was “from the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:20).

Mary’s story would have been unbelievable to Joseph except for one fact: Joseph was a devout Jew who knew the Scriptures. He realized that God had promised a Messiah who would be born of a virgin.

The angel also said, “You are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). The name Jesus means “Savior.” Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, Jeshua, and Jehoshua--all familiar Old Testament names.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In your prayer time today, think about the name for Jesus--Immanuel, God with us.

Do you think about God being with you as you go about your day, interact with friends and family, make decisions at home and work, experience good times and bad times?

Matthew 1:18-25

TODAY IN THE WORD

Of the many artists who have depicted the birth of Jesus over the centuries, among the best is the great Dutch artist Rembrandt. His Nativity scene focuses entirely on the Child in the manger. Rembrandt achieved this focus by painting a shaft of light so that it falls on the infant Jesus in the picture. The artist included other figures, but he put them in the shadows so that Jesus alone would be the center of the attention and adoration of the viewers.

This was God the Father's desire as well. The people who surrounded Jesus at His birth were gazing into the face of an infant who was ""God with us.""

In a humble setting, Mary gave birth to God in the flesh, part of the ""mystery of godliness"" (1 Tim. 3:16) that sets our faith apart. Although Immanuel was not Jesus' name, it was His rightful title.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who gives us much detail about Joseph and his crucial role in the story of Christmas. Mary's godly character is clearly mirrored in her husband, whom Matthew calls a ""righteous man"" (Matt. 1:19). His chief concern, like that of Mary, was the honor and glory of God.

Because of this, God led Joseph every step of the way through the incredible events he was about to experience. Not only did Joseph receive a heavenly visit before Jesus was born (Mt 1:20), but he was also guided by heavenly messengers three times after the birth (Mt 2:13, 19, 22).

We might overlook Joseph, since he basically dropped out of the biblical narrative after the events of Christmas and the flight to Egypt. But we know that Joseph was a ""son of David"" (1:20), a member of the Messiah's royal line. His immediate obedience to the angel's command was key to the unfolding of the Christmas story.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As you and your family prepare to celebrate the birth of ""God with us,"" choose activities to help make your Christmas Eve memorable.

First, plan to attend any special services your church may hold. Second, fill your house with God-honoring Christmas music today. Third, don't let the day end without reading the Christmas story as a couple or a family and thanking God for His ""indescribable gift.""

Matthew 1:18-25

They will call him Immanuel--which means, ""God with us."" - Matthew 1:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

The great Dutch artist Rembrandt has painted a nativity scene that focuses entirely on the Child in the manger. Rembrandt achieved this effect by painting a shaft of light so that it fell on the infant Jesus in the manger. Other figures are included in the painting, but Rembrandt put them in the shadows so that Jesus alone would be the center of attention and adoration at the Christmas season.

This is God the Father’s desire--not just at Christmas, but every day of the year. The people who would soon surround the newborn Baby in Bethlehem would be looking into the face of the only Person who can claim the title ""God with us."" The fact that the God of creation would humble Himself to be born as a human being is part of the ""mystery of godliness"" (1 Tim. 3:16) that sets our faith apart.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who gives us much detail about Joseph and his crucial role in the story of Christmas. It’s obvious that Mary’s godly character is mirrored in her husband, whom Matthew calls a ""righteous man"" (Matt. 1:19). Joseph’s main concern, like Mary’s, was the honor and glory of God.

Because of this, God led Joseph every step of the way through the incredible events he was about to experience. Joseph was not only the benefactor of a heavenly visit before Jesus was born (Mt 1:20-21). Three times after the birth of Jesus, Joseph was also guided by heavenly messengers (Mt 1:2:13, 19, 22).

Joseph sometimes gets overlooked in the Christmas story, since he basically dropped out of the biblical narrative after the events of Christmas and the family’s flight to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. But we are reminded that Joseph was a ""son of David"" (v. 20), a member of Messiah’s royal line. And his immediate obedience to the angel’s command was key to the unfolding of the events that gave us our Savior.

When the time came for the birth of God’s son, Joseph was content to take his place in the shadows. He had an eternal perspective

that allowed him to be faithful in what God called him to do. It was from the shadows that Joseph looked into the face of God in the flesh.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As you prepare to celebrate the birth of ""God with us,"" there are several things you can do to help make your Christmas Eve memorable.

First, plan to attend any special services your church may hold. Second, choose a favorite Christmas song to play in your home today. And don't forget to read the story of Jesus' birth. Be sure to make Christmas Eve a spiritual highlight in your home.

Matthew 1:23; 28:19-20

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. - Isaiah 7:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Charles Swindoll once said that if Dan Rather had given a news broadcast in 1809, it would have focused on Napoleon's sweep across Europe with no mention of the many remarkable babies born that year, all of whom would become quite famous. For example, the outstanding British political leader William Gladstone, the American writer Edgar Allan Poe, and President Abraham Lincoln were all born in 1809.

Similarly, no Roman newsperson was likely to have picked up from the news wires the story of a baby born to poor parents in a remote region of a troubled country. But heavenly "reporters" picked up this event and "broadcast" it to all who would hear (Luke 2:14). These glorious messengers knew that the most newsworthy event in the history of the world had occurred--the Savior had been born! All of history points to and centers around this one event.

Recall that Isaiah also lived in a troubled country. As the nation of Judah faced what seemed to be its destruction (Isa. 7:1–2), God used Isaiah to give a sign of His faithfulness to Judah: a virgin would give birth to a son who would be named Immanuel, which literally means "God with us." Scholars are not quite sure of the exact nature of this prophecy's fulfillment in Isaiah's time, but there can be little doubt of its later fulfillment in Jesus.

In fact, Matthew cited this verse as he wrote, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the birth narrative of Jesus (Matt. 1:23). The virginal conception of Jesus remains a unique event in all of history. This conception enabled Jesus to be both "Son of God" and "Son of Man"--titles we will look at beginning tomorrow.

Notice how concisely the two names given to our Lord at His birth summarize His unique nature: Jesus means "God is salvation," showing His deity, and Immanuel means "God is with us," showing His humanity.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Christmas carols contain some of the most beautiful praises of our Savior's birth.

Matthew 1:1-21

Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! - Romans 11:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

If your pastor announced an upcoming sermon series on the first seventeen verses of Matthew, most of the people in your church would probably wonder what kind of preaching they were in for. The truth is, though, that if the stories of the people in this genealogy were retold, you'd have enough drama, excitement, and spiritual lessons to fill many Sunday messages.

We've read some of those stories this month. Now we're ready to trace the line of God's promise to its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Even though some of the prophecies about Christ as the King of David's line are still future, Jesus is the culmination of God's promise to send a Savior.

The genealogy of Joseph in Matthew 1 contains some familiar names, including Abraham, David, and Solomon. There are other names we hope will be familiar to you after these studies, such as Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah. The point of this list is to establish Jesus' rightful claim to the throne of David as the legal son of Joseph, who was a "son of David" (v. 20). Notice a couple of interesting things about this list.

It's obvious the Holy Spirit prompted Matthew not to skip the less attractive "branches" in Jesus' family tree. Judah, from whom the Messiah's tribe got its start and its name, was not a spiritual giant. And Judah's worst ruler, Manasseh, found his way into Matthew's record.

We pointed out earlier this month that Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba are also included, although Bathsheba's name is omitted (Mt 1:6). Tamar's son Perez by Judah was the next in line to carry on the godly seed. Rahab, the mother of Boaz, was a non-Israelite prostitute in Jericho who became a believer in God.

The accuracy of God's Word is also worth noting. Jeconiah (Mt 1:11) is another name for Jehoiachin, the king of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar took captive. God pronounced a curse on this king, decreeing that none of his offspring would sit on David's throne (Jer. 22:24-30).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God's wisdom is certainly beyond our understanding.

Matthew 1:18-25

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. - Matthew 1:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

The first Christmas card was designed by the English illustrator John Horsley in 1843 at the request of a friend. Horsleys greeting card resembled a postcard depicting a large family enjoying a Christmas celebration. The people who received the cards were so delighted with them that they began designing and sending out cards of their own, establishing a long-standing Christmas tradition.

We hope you will receive the next weeks worth of studies as our Christmas card to you, a biblical portrait of the greatest story ever told that comes with our prayers for a happy and blessed Christmas in your home. As we mentioned on September 1, we are laying aside the book of Colossians for Christmas week to review the story of Christs birth and worship Him.

But even though we wont be studying Colossians for a few days, dont let go of the books central theme, the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ. Jesus uniqueness as Gods only Son, born of a virgin, is the truth that permeates the Bibles accounts of His birth.

The events of Christmas help explain why Paul could write with confidence, In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col. 2:9).

The apostle Matthews report of Jesus birth begins and ends with the supernatural and the miraculous. Matthew simply states what Luke explains in more detail, the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Josephs reluctance to take Mary as his wife, and his desire to shield her from public humiliation, testify to his godly and tender character.

An angelic visit informed Joseph of the truth, and he obeyed God immediately. Matthew recorded two more angelic visits to Joseph, emphasizing Josephs part in the unfolding of Gods prophetic plan for the birth of His Son.

Matthews interest in Joseph is natural, given his Gospels focus on the lineage of Joseph (1:1-17). The angels greeting, Joseph son of David, is very significant. Because Joseph was a descendant of David himself, his lineage established the rightness of Jesus claim to the title Messiah, the Son of David.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The closer we get to Christmas, the more frantic some peoples lives become. Like many of us, you have probably promised yourself more than once, Next year, Christmas is going to be different. Well, next year is here and you have a full week to make your Christmas a Christ-centered, Christ-honoring holiday. One way you can do that is to pray over your gift list. Why not ask God to help you spend wisely, and choose gifts that will reflect your love for the recipients and enhance their celebration of Christs birth?

Matthew 1:18-25

And you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. - Matthew 1:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Every couple expecting a baby hears the same cliché: The baby is going to change everything. After the little one's arrival, the couple quickly learns that they spend an awful lot of time changing the baby! But the baby does change the parents' schedule, their sleep patterns, their priorities, and so much more than any advice can prepare them to handle.

For Joseph and Mary, the baby really did change everything. The history of the world has been formally divided into two sections: before their baby and after. Even before the angel came, Joseph handled the news of Mary's pregnancy with great dignity and self-control. No culture in the history of the world would lightly dismiss a fiancée becoming pregnant by someone other than her

betrothed. But in this culture, the degree of their commitment at this state surpassed the modern sense of engagement—a divorce was required to dissolve the union. Joseph had ample reason to be angry, but he had two distinct motivations, neither of which involved anger. He planned to divorce Mary because he was righteous, which shows he loved God. He planned to do so quietly to spare her shame, which shows he loved Mary.

After the angel's revelation to him in a dream, Joseph's love for Mary and his faith in God both proved genuine. Of all the hardships the Son of God would face—being born in a stable, attacked by Herod, persecuted, tortured, and executed—God ensured He had one advantage that relatively few children ever enjoy. Jesus had two godly parents who loved each other deeply. The Bible doesn't say either parent was perfect, but it clearly depicts a love that provided a wonderful family environment for rearing a child.

God entrusted His Son into the care of people who knew how to love and obey. We have seen repeatedly through Scripture just how vital those traits are in any love story—even the love story between Jesus and the world began with two loving, God-honoring parents.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Of all the things God has asked His followers to do—to give birth as a virgin, lead a million people through the middle of a sea, build a boat that can survive a global flood, invade a land inhabited by giants, and spend a week marching around a fortified city—the commands to love and obey God sound fairly easy to follow, and yet are so often ignored. They are so important. Throughout the day, ask yourself two simple questions: Am I loving? Am I obeying? Stay in regular communication with God and seek His help.

Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:68-70

TODAY IN THE WORD

Are you baking Christmas cookies? Wrapping presents? Or possibly trimming the tree? No, your calendar doesn't need adjusting. We know it isn't Christmas Day. But these classic ""Christmas texts"" are a powerful witness to the fulfillment of Isaiah's Servant prophecies in the life of Jesus.

The angel's announcement to Joseph emphasized that even at this early stage in Mary's pregnancy, the baby in her womb was already a very special Person (Isa. 49:1).

Jesus' existence did not begin with His conception by the Holy Spirit. But from the standpoint of Christ's earthly ministry, the Father set Him apart in Mary's womb to be the Savior of His people Israel--and of the world.

The salvation that Jesus came to bring to Israel was the focus of Zechariah's praise in Luke 1:67-79. Isaiah 49:5 leaves no doubt as to the Servant's purpose in bringing Israel back to the Lord. Although the nation rejected Him at His first offer of salvation, the Servant will come again to redeem His people and establish His kingdom.

Even Jesus' name was not left to human decision. The Servant Himself had said that from His birth, the Lord had made mention of His name (Isa. 49:1). This also referred to the extent to which God intended the name of His Redeemer to be proclaimed.

Also in Isaiah 49:1, the Servant called on all the distant lands to hear His proclamation of God's special blessing upon Him. This was partially fulfilled in the visit of the Magi (see September 10).

These nobles from a far land came in response to God's sign of the star of Bethlehem. Their coming stirred up Herod's court in Jerusalem and led to the chief religious teachers citing Micah's prophecy of a coming One who would be ""the shepherd of my people Israel"" (Mt. 2:6). It is also possible that this is a reference to Gentile peoples coming to faith (Isa. 49:1).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Since we are talking about Christmas here in late summer, let's enjoy a little ""Christmas spirit"" this weekend.

What's your favorite Christmas activity? Perhaps it's getting a card or gift for a loved one. Or it may include a special meal with friends or family.

Matthew 1:18-2:23

They will call him “Immanuel”–which means, “God with us.” - Matthew 1:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a fourth-century Christmas sermon, St. John Chrysostom preached:

“What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of Days has

become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He who cannot be touched, who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands. But He has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation [be] the measure of His goodness."

Amen! The Christmas story, rightly understood, should fill our hearts with praise. First, we see many Old Testament prophecies fulfilled. Isaiah had foretold the virgin birth of the Messiah (Mt 1:23; Isa. 7:14). Micah had said His birthplace would be Bethlehem (Mt 2:6; Mic. 5:2). Hosea had spoken of a time in Egypt (Mt 2:15; Hos. 11:1). Jeremiah had foreseen the horrifying violence of Herod Mt 2:18; Jer. 31:15). And various prophets had indicated the Messiah would be "despised," or in Jesus' day, the equivalent of being "called a Nazarene" (Mt 2:23; Isa. 53:3).

We also rejoice because God intervened in miraculous ways throughout the Christmas story. Jesus was born of a virgin–somehow, the Holy Spirit engineered His conception outside of the normal means (Mt 1:18). Angels, who are God's messengers, delivered several special announcements. And how did the Magi know where and when to come to find the newborn King? God was clearly at work in their knowledge, the star they followed, and the dream, warning not to tell Herod.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Never mind that it's April . . . after today's devotional, don't you feel like singing a Christmas song? Go for it!

Matthew 2

Matthew 2:1-12

It remains to be seen whether our generation will witness another transfer of power as extraordinary as the passing of Hong Kong from British to Chinese control. The final days and weeks before the July 1transferthis year were hectic and, at times, tension-filled. Hong Kong governor Christopher Patten packed his last days in office with a dizzying schedule of events and appearances, then departed the city in style on board the British royal yacht Britannia, accompanied by Prince Charles spectacular, transfer of power in the universe is still ahead. It will come when Jesus Christ returns to claim the kingdoms of this world from Satan and usher in His millennial kingdom. Then all earthly powers, and Satan himself, will be shown to be merely temporary usurpers. Even though Jesus came the first time to die as a sacrifice rather than reign as a King, His birth signaled the end of Satan's kingdom of Jerusalem into a panic (Mt 2:3). The murderous monarch wasn't about to put up with any rival, baby or adult. As we will see on Sunday, he lashed out violently in a futile attempt to do away with heaven's King. adoration that are due Jesus. No distance, inconvenience, or expense was too great a price for them to pay to see the newborn King. The time they actually arrived in Bethlehem is open to interpretation. What they did when they got there is not. They worshiped Jesus and brought Him their finest gifts (v11).in his Jerusalem palace, the Magi followed God's leading and went back home by a different route. Satan had been trying to stamp out God's promised Redeemer since the Garden of Eden—a move that was doomed to frustration. We can see Satan's human ally, Herod, sputtering with rage as he shared his master's frustration.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Some day, the baby of Bethlehem will be crowned King of kings and Lord of lords church and Lord of all those who claim Him as their Savior. Is Jesus ruling in your heart today as Lord? He will take no lesser title. The celebration of Christmas and approach of a new year is a great time for you to reaffirm your submission to the Lordship of Christ in your heart and in your home.

Matthew 2:1-2

We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. - Matthew 2:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Astronomers as well as theologians have long been fascinated by the star that the Magi followed. If it was an actual scientific event, what could it have been? Historical records and computer simulations have been used to try to help solve this mystery. One suggestion is that the "star" was a time when Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars appeared near one another in the sky, starting about 6 b.c. Another idea is that it was a supernova recorded by Chinese historians in 5 b.c. Law professor Rick Larson believes it was a conjunction of Jupiter and Venus in 2 b.c., since in the culture of that day Jupiter represented kingship and Venus represented motherhood or birth.

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what the star was. Here's what we do know: despite what our Nativity sets show us, the Magi did not

arrive on the night of Jesus' birth, but sometime later. The Magi were scholars or wise men, perhaps astronomers or astrologists. They came from the east, presumably meaning east of Palestine, so many scholars guess that the Magi came from Persia or southern Arabia. They certainly seemed unfamiliar with the local political context, particularly the infamous brutality of King Herod in response to any perceived challenge to his rule.

Whatever “his star” was, the Magi read an announcement or a story there. They knew a king had been born, and they also knew in what country it happened.

We don't know what prophecies or traditions led them to their interpretations and conclusions, but we do know that nature is a witness to the Creator (Ps. 19:1-6) and that God has set eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). No matter how it happened, we know that God had led these Magi to testify about the birth of His Son as an integral part in this story.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Though we aren't Magi being physically guided by a star, we can still look at the stars in the sky to marvel at God's magnificent creation and His creative power. If you have a telescope and weather permits, spend time looking at the night sky. As you gaze at the stars, reflect on how God directed the Magi and protected Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. If there's a planetarium nearby, you could visit a star show with a friend and then discuss the way that God used a star as part of the story of the birth of Jesus.

Matthew 2:1-12

On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. - Revelation 19:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

In The Illustrated Jesus Through the Centuries, historian Jaroslav Pelikan compiled two hundred images of Jesus from different times and cultures. The variety of images is staggering. Almost “each age created Jesus in its own image,” depicting Him in ways to fulfill cultural needs. Given this human tendency, it is worth asking, what is my mental picture of Jesus? Does it match the person revealed in Scripture?

Today we are looking at two New Testament images of Jesus as King. One is quite familiar to us--Jesus as infant King who is visited by Magi from the east. The other is perhaps less familiar–Jesus as returning Warrior-Messiah-King who judges the nations.

Both images of Jesus as King involve the insight of faith. The Magi who saw in the baby Jew a king worthy of worship were full of faith, as was John, in his vision of Jesus in full and potent monarchy. For both, faith offered a glimpse of Jesus’ true stature. When they saw Jesus, they “saw heaven standing open” (Rev. 19:11). Are we seeing Jesus with eyes of faith?

The images of kingship are distinct. Jesus’ kingship during His lifetime on earth was veiled, mocked, contested. Herod tried to kill this “king of the Jews” in His infancy, and Jesus was crucified partly for claiming to be a king (John 19:19-22). Jesus’ future kingship is unveiled, awe-inspiring, certain. To look upon this rider with blazing eyes, many crowns, and sword-like tongue is to see the power and majesty of Jesus revealed (Rev 12-15). No longer mockingly called “king of the Jews,” He bears His true title, “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS,” on His robe and body (Rev 19:16).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Advent, the preparatory season leading up to Christmas, literally means “coming.” It refers not only to this first coming of Jesus as an infant but His glorious return as triumphant king.

Matthew 2:1-12

Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We . . . have come to worship him. - Matthew 2:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bethlehem is located six miles south of Jerusalem. We previously read the prophecy, quoted from Micah 5:2, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:6).

People in the Mediterranean world, whether they were Jews or not, were hoping for a leader who would guide their nations out of submission to Rome and into a golden age of order and prosperity. And as we’ve discussed, the Jews in particular longed for the arrival of their Messiah. But they didn’t expect a tiny baby--they expected a conquering hero who would overthrow the Empire.

The Magi were priests who specialized in the study of the stars and planets. They were also skilled in philosophy, medicine, and science. They were filled with wisdom, and they would have been aware of the Old Testament prophecies regarding Jesus’ birth. Although we don’t know what brilliant star those ancient Magi saw, that heavenly brilliance spoke to them of the entry of a king into

the world. Thus, they set out to find Him.

In contrast to the Magi, King Herod was an evil man, who was insanely suspicious. If he suspected anyone to be a rival to his power, that person was promptly eliminated. He murdered his wife, her mother, and three of his sons. Augustus, the Roman Emperor, had noted that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. It is obvious how such a man would feel when news reached him that a child destined to be a king had been born.

Herod sent for the Magi and said to them, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him" . In actuality, though, Herod had no intentions of worship; he planned to kill the child.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

You may be finishing your last-minute Christmas shopping. But have you thought of what you will give to Jesus?

Matthew 2:1-12

I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me. - Proverbs 8:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

In T. S. Eliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi," one of the wise men recounts the difficult quest for the newborn king. It was winter, the villages they passed through were unfriendly and expensive, and many people thought their journey was foolish.

They persisted, however, and found the Christ-child. After their return, they realized that their journey had been spiritual as well as physical. Somehow, they had sensed Jesus' future and His mission: "This Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death." After this they didn't feel at home in their own country: "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, / But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods."

For those who encounter Christ, the journey of life is transformed. This is where pilgrimage begins. Those who seek find, and those who find are forever changed.

The journey of the Magi is an archetypal quest story. Who were they? Probably Gentile scholars from Persia or even Babylon. What were they looking for? Their information was surprisingly specific. They knew the nation (Israel), the event (a birth), and its significance (a king). How did they know? They may have had access to Jewish books. By their own testimony, they'd read the news in the stars.

The rabbis that Herod consulted gave the wise men the last piece of the puzzle–the specific destination of Bethlehem. But none went with them to see if the promise of a Messiah had indeed been fulfilled. Only these dedicated foreigners followed the star to the house where Mary, Joseph and Jesus were. Their two-year search had finally come to an end!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To find the Christ-child, the Magi in Matthew's Gospel followed a "star." What was that star? If you're curious, do some research today. Theologians and astronomers have proposed numerous theories, including a comet, a conjunction of planets, and a supernatural light. Check out sources at your local public or church library or on the Internet to reach your own conclusions. What would a scientist with a telescope have seen? Do you think the Magi were the only ones aware of the star's significance? Why or why not?

Matthew 2:1-12

They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. - Matthew 2:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Franz Gruber was distraught. It was Christmas Eve, 1818, when Gruber, the church organist in the little town of Oberndorf, Bavaria, discovered that his organ was broken. The town was snowbound, and no one in Oberndorf could fix the organ.

So Gruber asked church vicar Joseph Mohr to compose a song the congregation could sing without the organ. Early on Christmas Day, Mohr handed his new poem to Gruber, who quickly composed a melody. The people sang the song, and loved it. What Mohr gave Gruber, and what the two of them gave the world, has become a treasured Christmas gift around the world: Silent Night.

The Magi traveled a rigorous journey to give treasured gifts to Jesus when they arrived in Bethlehem sometime after His birth. These were lavish gifts, given as an act of worship by these prominent visitors from the east. The Magi's gifts gave testimony to their understanding of Christ's uniqueness.

These men stepped into the Christmas narrative for a short time and then disappeared. We don't really know how many Magi there were or where they came from. Someone has suggested that it would take more than three men to stir up all of Jerusalem. Whatever the case, they were looking for a coming King. When they saw the star of Bethlehem, they knew their expectation had been fulfilled.

The star of God ""went ahead of them"" to guide the Magi (Mt 2:9)--like the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites--until it had led them to Jesus. The irony of Matthew 2 is that foreigners announced to the leaders of Israel that their own King had been born.

The indifference of the nation is stunning. The chief priests and teachers of the law knew exactly what the Magi were talking about, but apparently made no effort to search out the truth for themselves. Even the wicked King Herod was more curious than those who should have been at the head of the line in Bethlehem, worshiping their Messiah. But the Magi got to share in the birth of the Savior. They were the first to offer Jesus gifts that represented the best they had--the same gift He wants from us today!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The day after Christmas is a good time to talk about the importance of maintaining an eternal perspective. We've talked a lot about next year, mostly in the context of the millennium bug and the problems it might bring. But God's purpose for His people in 2000 is far bigger than that. Is there an area of your Christian life or witness that God may want you to strengthen in the year ahead? Pray for insight on how to be the best you can be for His sake.

Matthew 2:1-23

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet. - Matthew 2:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

A study conducted between 1991 and 2007 asked 750 former Muslims from 30 countries why they decided to follow Jesus. For many, the role of dreams and visions was significant; 27 percent reported dreams before they decided to follow Christ, 40 percent cited dreams at the time of their conversion, and 45 percent described dreams and visions after their conversion. Often the pre-conversion dreams featured a loved one urging them to follow Jesus, and post-conversion visions gave encouragement during trials like imprisonment.

Our passage today has a mix of God speaking through dreams as well as His Word to reveal Himself. Before that, let's look at some of the main characters in this dramatic passage.

Herod the Great embodied brutality. He ruled the region under the authority of Rome, that gave him the title, "King of the Jews," although he did not come from a Jewish royal line. His duplicitous and murderous ways were on display, as he attempted to trick the Magi and then slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem. Matthew has already established that Jesus is in the royal line of David, and in this dark episode of the loss of children we also have a taste of hope of another king, the true "King of the Jews," who will rule justly (see Jer. 31:15-34).

The Magi came from the east (perhaps Persia or Arabia) to worship the new king. They were "overjoyed" to find Him (v. 10). We saw in Matthew 1 the presence of non-Israelite women as important links in the genealogy of Jesus. Here we find non-Israelites responding to Him with joy, worship, and gifts.

Finally, God speaks through both dreams and Scripture. One principle here is that God's leading will not contradict His revealed Word. He used dreams to guide Joseph in specific actions, always in harmony with Scripture. Another principle is that God requires obedience to His Word. Joseph demonstrated that he was a "righteous man" (Mt 1:19) through His immediate, unquestioning obedience.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our text today presents us with three alternative responses to the birth of Jesus: Herod heard the word about the coming shepherd of Israel, and he reacted angrily that his plans might be upset. The chief priests and teachers of the law also heard, and they decided to do nothing. The Magi heard this word, and they acted on it—they made the trip to Bethlehem where they found Jesus. When we are confronted with God's Word, how will we respond—in fury, failure, or faith?

Matthew 2:1-23

He breaks the spirit of rulers; he is feared by the kings of the earth. - Psalm 76:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Richard von Weizsaecker, former president of Germany, said of the Holocaust, "There were many ways of not burdening one's

conscience, of shunning responsibility, looking away, keeping mum. When the unspeakable truth of the Holocaust then became known at the end of the war, all too many of us claimed that they had not known anything about it or even suspected anything." The guilt of an atrocity rests on the shoulders of leaders, but the many who did nothing to stop it share in the liability.

King Herod the Great is the bad boy of today's passage, but the people he ruled deserve scrutiny as well. The desperate fear of losing power drove Herod to murder, but he wasn't alone in his apprehension.

The Magi don't appear to have come directly to Herod, but to Jerusalem in general—the text doesn't specifically say they came to Herod's palace. The Magi may have asked around Jerusalem looking for the newborn King before word got to Herod about the foreign visitors. We do know for certain that the entire city was troubled by the news of the birth of the Christ (Mt 2:3-4). But the Magi were looking in the wrong city, as the priests and scribes knew from Micah's prophecy (Micah 5:2). Then Herod acted on his own, summoning the Magi privately and covertly sending them in the hope of destroying this threat to his rule (Mt 2:8, 13).

Herod's reaction (and Jerusalem's as well) to the news of Christ's birth is brought into sharp relief by the generous worship of the foreign wise men. The people of Jerusalem doubted the Magi's astronomical claims; those who believed in the fulfillment of prophecy and the birth of Messiah were the Magi (who responded with worship) and the wicked King Herod (who reacted with violence).

Herod ordered the execution of all boys age two and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem, an attempt to hold on to power. But how many people who were "troubled" by the Magi's message must have complied with his atrocious demands?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's unlikely that any of us wield the type of power Herod of Great had, but there are at least two applications we can draw from studying his actions. First, we should never have so tight a grip on our position or our possessions that we aren't willing to surrender to the plan of God. And secondly, a "bad boy" in power will always have accomplices—don't become a partner to their wickedness through quiet cooperation in acts you know to be wrong.

Matthew 2:3-8, 13-18

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. - Matthew 20:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last summer, Israeli archaeologist Ehud Netzer of Hebrew University announced that he had found the tomb of Herod the Great at a dig south of Jerusalem. He had been searching for the tomb at the site, which was Herod's summer palace, since 1972. He and his team knew they had found what they were looking for when they unearthed an enormous staircase, built for Herod's funeral procession, and an elaborately decorated limestone sarcophagus. It had been smashed and no bones were found in it. Netzer explained that the palace had been raided by Jewish rebels in a.d. 66-72. The discovery has been hailed as a milestone in biblical and Near Eastern archaeology.

Herod, of course, played an infamous role in the Christmas story. We've seen various responses to the story thus far, including faith, doubt, amazement, praise, confusion, reflection, and rejoicing. But today we see a different type of response altogether, what might be called "hostile belief." Herod, who reigned during the years 37-4 b.c., responded to the Magi's news as if it were true and a threat to his political power (Mt 2:3). A "king" had been born? Herod cared nothing for stars and saviors—he saw only the threat of competition. This viewpoint is the Incarnation as seen through the eyes of worldly power.

The king called together Jewish religious scholars and asked where such a king would be born. They knew the Scriptures and gave him the correct answer: Bethlehem (Mt 2:4-6; Micah 5:2). Sadly, it seems they did nothing while Herod acted in "hostile belief." He lied to the wise men, making sure to meet with them secretly not only so that people wouldn't know he was taking this seriously but also to lessen the risk that someone might enlighten the visitors about his ruthless reputation. As a backup plan, he found out the exact time of the birth, which eventually led to the "slaughter of the innocents" and the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt (Mt 2:13-18).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we see throughout the Christmas story, but especially in the Gospel of Matthew, the birth of Christ fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies. If you have time for deeper or more extensive study, this is a good topic. How many prophecies does the New Testament identify as being fulfilled in the birth of Christ? In what ways were they fulfilled? How do the fulfillments compare to the original contexts of the prophecies? Can you identify any running themes? What do these fulfilled prophecies mean to you today?

Matthew 2:13-23

A Spider's Web - And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." -

TODAY IN THE WORD

A children's story tells that when Mary and Joseph became weary on their way to Egypt, they sought refuge in a cave. A spider, wishing to do something for the Christ child, spun its web across the entrance to block the wind. When Herod's soldiers passed by, they didn't bother to check the cave because the spider web was not torn. They didn't think anyone could possibly be inside. They left the holy family in peace. Some historians attribute the tradition of hanging tinsel on a Christmas tree to represent the safety provided by the spider's web in that story.

The angel of the Lord once again appeared to Joseph and told him to flee, because Herod would try to murder Jesus. Joseph instantly obeyed (Mt 2:14). Fleeing to Egypt fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called my son." This passage carries the double meaning of God's love for Israel, shown by Moses leading the exodus from Egypt, and also God's love for us by calling His Son from the relative safety of Egypt to return and fulfill His ultimate purpose of suffering and dying on the cross for our sins.

Herod wanted to be sure to eliminate this potential rival to his power, so "he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under" (Mt 2:16). Perhaps the soldiers drew a circle around Jerusalem with the radius as far south as Bethlehem and as far north as Ramah. They killed all the young boys within that territory, fulfilling the words of Jeremiah 31:15 that are quoted in Matthew 2:18.

Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, was the symbolic mother of the northern tribes of Israel. In Jeremiah 31 she is pictured crying for the exiles at Ramah, a deportation point during the Babylonian captivity. This terrible mourning had its fulfillment in Matthew 2 as the mothers in Bethlehem and the surrounding area wept as their children were brutally slain by Herod's soldiers.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Now we have seen all four prophecies dealing with locations in the birth of Christ fulfilled: born in Bethlehem, called out of Egypt, weeping in Ramah, and called a Nazarene. When originally given by the Old Testament prophets, these prophecies may have seemed strange and unreal. Yet, all were fulfilled and became real during Jesus' early childhood. Look over the previous days of December, particularly the Old Testament passages. Make a list of the other prophecies regarding Jesus that you can find.

Matthew 2:13-23

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's interesting to encounter the same two groups of people at Jesus' birth that were present at His death. That is, Herod represents the worriers while the Magi, Joseph, and Mary represent the worshipers. nervously in Jerusalem, worrying that someone might try to steal Jesus' body and raise more of an outcry (Matt. 27:62-66). In reality, they were disturbed because they knew that they had shed innocent blood. anoint Jesus' body with spices, but observed the Sabbath according to God's commandment (Luke 23:56).a worrier after the Magi came to him with the disturbing news that a new King had been born. Just as Pilate was in a position of authority and could order Jesus' grave sealed and a guard posted, so Herod had all the authority he needed to try to stamp out this invisible threat. to be killed. Through the Holy Spirit's inspiration, Luke saw the tragedy in the same light were spiritually sensitive enough to the God of Israel to receive His instruction in a dream and to obey, defying Herod's order to report back to him (Matt. 2:12).and instantly obeyed each time. We know we have truly worshiped God not just when we have offered up thanksgiving for what He has done, but when we have obeyed what He tells us to do. The worriers at the crucifixion got nowhere, and neither did Herod. Their actions only brought God's judgment upon them. But the worshipers in each case were blessed as God once again used humanly weak and insignificant vessels to confound the mighty.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

At Easter time, we usually talk about the worriers and the worshipers and encourage our readers to reaffirm their commitment to be God's worshipers. This day is made for worship, for leaving off the week's worries and fastening our minds and hearts on our great God. studies planned for next year, and we want God to use them to bless His people.

Matthew 2:13-23; Luke 2:21-24

TODAY IN THE WORD

Instant Retreat - The story is told of a great military commander who sat by an evening fire with several of his officers to discuss the day's battle. He asked the officers, ""Who did the best today on the field of battle?"" One by one, the men told of soldiers who had fought bravely and risked their lives for their comrades.

The commander heard them out, then said, ""No, I fear you are all mistaken."" He told of a soldier who, just as he raised his arm to

strike an enemy, heard the trumpet sound retreat. Instantly, he dropped his arm without striking and retreated, an act the commander called ""perfect and ready obedience to the will of his general.""

Today's reading demonstrates that Joseph and Mary obeyed God in the same spirit of promptness and submission. The story of Jesus' circumcision and Mary's purification in Luke 2 precedes the family's flight into Egypt, possibly by a number of months. But both accounts reveal Jesus' parents' perfect and ready obedience to the will and direction of God.

Apparently, Jesus was circumcised in Bethlehem on the eighth day after His birth, in obedience to the Law (Lev. 12:3). Then, in accordance with the Law, Mary remained ceremonially ""unclean"" for an additional thirty-three days. At the end of that time, she and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem to present the prescribed sacrifice (Lev. 12). Since the couple offered doves or pigeons rather than a lamb, we know that they were poor.

Joseph's obedience to the angelic warnings was much more dramatic than his obedience to the Law. Fleeing to Egypt must have been the last thing on his mind. But he and Mary did exactly that, just because God said to!

We know that more happened here in God's plan than merely the holy family's avoiding danger. Matthew tells us that the flight fulfilled God's prophetic word (Matt. 2:15; Hosea 11:1). By identifying Jesus with Israel, God was validating His Son's identity as Israel's Messiah and calling the nation to identify with Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's a second way you can make good use of these ""in between"" days so as to finish 1996 well.

If you're like most people, you probably didn't have enough time to visit with everyone during the holidays. Why not invite some of those people over for an informal time of fellowship this weekend? You might even enjoy one another's company more without the pressure of the Christmas rush.

Matthew 3

Matthew 3:1-4:11

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. - Matthew 3:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Coca-Cola is the most valuable brand name in the world, estimated to be worth $70.5 billion in 2003. Sixty-two of last year’s top 100 brand names–including eight of the top ten–were American, including Microsoft, IBM, and General Electric.

Brand names command value because consumers want to have confidence that they are getting quality for their money. They like to recognize what they’re buying and from whom. A familiar logo can prompt a customer to say, “That one!”

Jesus’ baptism served a similar purpose. By it, the Father in effect said, “That one!”–the Son of God was publicly recognized and affirmed. And in resisting the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus proved His right to such affirmation.

John the Baptist knew Jesus was coming. He prepared the way, preaching that people must repent from sin to enter the kingdom of heaven. He must have touched a spiritual nerve, for many responded to his call. He told the crowds that another would come–one more powerful, with a superior baptism, and with authority to judge (Mt 3:11–12).

Why did Jesus ask John to baptize Him? He didn’t need purification from sin, which is what the baptism normally signified. Instead, He underwent baptism to obey the Father, consecrate Himself for ministry, and publicly identify with John’s message. The other two members of the Trinity–the Father’s voice from heaven and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove–put their seal of approval on His righteous obedience (Mt 3:16–17).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Luke 4:13 says the Devil left Jesus after the wilderness temptations, but only until an “opportune time.” That is, the battle against temptation continued throughout His life.

Matthew 3:1-17

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death. - Romans 6:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

Because of the Law's strong emphasis on purity, Jews in Jesus' day often used "miqwaot," or ritual baths, which archaeologists have found both in private homes and public locations. The water in these baths had to be running–that is, they couldn't be filled by hand–and deep enough for complete bodily immersion. It seems that early Christian baptisms imitated this Jewish model.

In Jesus' day, Jews also used this baptism as a rite of initiation for Gentile converts. It signified a complete change from the former way of life. In today's reading, John baptized those who accepted his message and who wanted to repent in preparation for the coming kingdom of God. Baptizing Jews (as opposed to Gentiles) was apparently unique to his ministry.

With this in mind, what was the significance of John's baptism of Jesus? Christ didn't need to repent of sin, which was why John was reluctant to baptize Him in the first place. He did it "to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15). Jesus also viewed His baptism as an act of consecration and obedience, and God heartily approved (Mt 3:16-17).

The baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, so it also enabled John to fulfill his prophetic function as the herald and forerunner of Christ. His statement that Jesus would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit looked forward to Pentecost (Mt 3:11).

From the beginning of the Church at the day of Pentecost, believers in Christ were baptized (Acts 2:41). In Acts, baptism often immediately followed conversion (Acts 8:38; 16:33). Some biblical scholars see baptism specifically as an image of the burial–resurrection motif (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you consider yourself a follower of Christ but have never been baptized, make plans to take this step of obedience without delay. Talk to your pastor or another church leader to find out what you need to do. You may need to take a preparatory class, interview with the pastor, or write out your testimony.

Matthew 3:1-17; Genesis 8:2-12

I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. -

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many poets have likened spirits, human and divine, to birds. English poet Percy Shelley begins his ode "To a Skylark" with the claim, "Hail to thee blithe Spirit! / Bird thou never wert." John Keats imagines the nightingale as an "immortal Bird," singing to men across time and space.

John saw the Holy Spirit "descending like a dove" on Jesus in His baptism (Mt 3:16). John does not necessarily mean that the Spirit took the shape of a bird. His description addresses the Spirit's motion more than His form. Perhaps the fast dive from the open cloud, the grace of motion, an impression of white, led John to liken this lightning-quick Presence to a dove.

The dove, of course, has Old Testament significance. A dove brought Noah an olive leaf plucked from a washed world, a symbol of God's newly-made peace with man (Gen. . And doves, emblems of purity and meekness, were considered a clean bird, appropriate for temple sacrifices. Indeed, as a baby, Jesus was consecrated at the temple with the sacrifice of two doves or pigeons (Luke 2:22-24). How appropriate, then, for the Spirit to fall like a dove on Jesus, Himself peacemaker and truly pure sacrifice.

As an image of the Holy Spirit, the dove reminds us of God's quickness to move, to act. Like a bird swooping suddenly from heaven, so God's Spirit is prompt to fall and bless those who are obedient to His will, as He did at Jesus' baptism.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we begin to reflect on the images of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, ask yourself what images you have of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 3:1-17

Here is . . . my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. - Isaiah 42:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last December, media mogul Rupert Murdoch named his son, James, as the chairman and chief executive of the European and Asian divisions of News Corp. The move has been seen as signaling that James Murdoch will be the heir of Rupert Murdoch's vast media empire. The elder Murdoch described his son as "a talented and proven executive."

Our passage has a far more dramatic pronouncement from a Father about His Son. In the opening verses we meet John the Baptist,

preaching repentance in the desert and drawing great crowds. For the first time in Matthew's Gospel we encounter the Pharisees and Sadducees, characters who recur throughout the book. John the Baptist charged them with hypocrisy: it wasn't enough to undergo a ritual in order to claim a spiritual heritage. Their lives and actions needed to match their professions of repentance (Mt 3:8).

John refused to baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they would not repent. He also hesitated to baptize Jesus—because Jesus had no need to repent. He was without sin; indeed, He was the promised One who would bring in the kingdom of heaven. Why would He be baptized?

Some scholars suggest that He demonstrated His commitment to what He would call His followers to do (see Matt. 28:19). Others see His baptism as identification with humanity whom He came to save. Whatever merit these ideas might have, it's best to look at the reason Jesus Himself gave: “It is proper to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus was demonstrating obedience to God's will.

Obedience is the hallmark of the Son, as confirmed by the divine pronouncement. As in the first chapter, we see God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Here Jesus was empowered by the Spirit as He began His public ministry. God the Father declares who Jesus is: He is the Son of God, the Anointed One, the Messiah, and the promised King (see Psalm 2).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

John the Baptist announced that repentance was necessary because the kingdom of heaven was near (Mt 3:2). The world then, as now, had corrupt rulers, lifeless religions, and suffering. John did not, however, exhort his hearers to live differently and thereby change the world. Rather, he urged them to recognize that the world was being changed—the old order was being upended—and therefore they needed to repent in order to receive forgiveness and restoration. Are we willing to repent and submit to the power of Jesus?

Matthew 3:1-12

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. - Matthew 3:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Book of Common Prayer describes baptism in the following way: “Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that not be christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New Birth.” Baptism signifies both a verbal profession of faith and an inward transformation in the person baptized. It is an outward mark of an interior change. Or at least it ought to be, according to John the Baptist.

John prepared the way of the Lord by calling people to repentance (Mt 3:11). Matthew reports that people from all over the Jordan region came to him to be baptized. Why, then, does he rebuke the religious leaders who approached him, presumably for baptism?

John recognized the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ failure to repent and their focus on appearances. They came for baptism to observe a religious formality or to take out an insurance policy--“who warned you to flee?” (Mt 3:7)--not to repent. Without inward repentance, the sign of baptism is void. Urging them to produce evidence--fruit of their repentance--he warned them against relying on substitutes.

One false substitute for repentance is reliance on lineage. John says the claim to being Abraham’s children is worth nothing unless it’s accompanied by the internal orientation of Abraham (faith) and its evidence (righteous deeds). This active faith is the New Testament qualification for membership in the kingdom of God. Drawing on the Old Testament images of Israel as a tree, John implies that unless they produce fruit worthy of Abraham’s tree, they will be cut down (v. 10).

Another false substitute is reliance on the sign and not the reality. Just as the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ heritage was ineffectual without the heart and deeds of Abraham, so the sign of baptism is ineffectual without an inward rebirth.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Baptism reminds us of our forgiveness from sins and makes a public statement about our entry into the body of Christ, the church.

Remembering our baptism encourages us because it points to the reality of having had “our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22).

Matthew 3:11-17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Perhaps the most celebrated coronation in western Europe's history occurred on Christmas Day, 800 A.D.--Charlemagne was

crowned emperor of the Roman Empire by Pope Leo III. After Leo crowned Charlemagne, the crowd shouted, ""To Charles Augustus, crowned of God, great and pacific emperor of the Romans, life and victory.""

I'm not sure if the crowds shouted when John baptized Jesus, but it was definitely a turning point in Jesus' ministry. To the people of His day, Jesus was merely the son of Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth. And to many people today, He is simply a historical figure.

But those who are willing to trace the Savior's roots discover that the Bible teaches His true identity. As the second Person of the eternal Godhead, Jesus has no beginning and no end (Jn. 8:58). And even Jesus' brief earthly ministry did not simply begin at His birth, or at His baptism. In the eternal plan of God, Jesus was already the Lamb of God, ""slain from the creation of the world"" (Rev. 13:.

Jesus' ministry was prophesied extensively in the Old Testament. This month, we are considering one important set of these prophecies, Isaiah's Servant Songs, alongside the correlating New Testament passages.

The opening of the first Servant Song, as we saw earlier, reveals one vital detail of Jesus' earthly ministry (Isa. 42:1). God the Father would anoint His Son with the Holy Spirit in a very special way.

That prophecy finds its fulfillment in Jesus' baptism by John (Mt. 3:13ff.). Jesus submitted to baptism, not as an admission of sin, but to identify with the message of righteousness that John was preaching.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One of the greatest blessings available to us today through Christ's finished work is experiencing the filling of the Holy Spirit. Every believer can live a Spirit-filled life. In fact, we are commanded to be filled (Eph. 5:18). If you are a believer, you already possess the Holy Spirit. The issue in His filling is whether you are giving Him control of your life on a day-to-day basis.

Matthew 3:11-17; John 1:29-34

After the baptism that John preached . . . God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. - Acts 10:37-38

TODAY IN THE WORD

Every four years, on January 20, the President of the United States is inaugurated, taking an oath to uphold the presidential office and the Constitution. Although the outcome of the November election determines who will be president, this individual doesn't officially become President until the inauguration. The inaugural oath and ceremony mark the official beginning of what has already been determined by election.

This provides a helpful parallel to Jesus' baptism. John's baptism of Jesus didn't in any way make Jesus the Messiah or qualify Him for His office. Jesus was already the Messiah, and John's baptism marked the public beginning and divine anointing of His atoning work.

Jesus has always been and will always be the Messiah. But since He was taking on human flesh fully, He needed to identify completely with humanity. His baptism showed His total dependence upon God's Spirit and power. It was only when John understood this that he consented to baptize Jesus (Matt. 3:15).

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus relied upon the Spirit before His public ministry began. But the Gospel accounts don't record any significant ministry or miraculous activity in Jesus' life prior to Spirit's descent and the public declaration of His divine sonship. Jesus' baptism showed that He willingly chose to depend on God's Spirit, even to the point of death. Recall how Isaiah predicted that God's promised Servant would be completely led by His Spirit, promises fulfilled in Jesus' life.

Notice that John's water baptism was inferior to the baptism that Jesus would perform with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). There is a connection between John's baptism of Jesus and Pentecost (see Acts 2). At the first event, God showed His pleasure with His Son by sending His Holy Spirit. At the second event, God showed His pleasure with His Son's spiritual body—the church—by sending the Holy Spirit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If Jesus, eternally God, humbled Himself to live fully dependent upon God's Spirit, how much more should the same be true for us, His followers? The Holy Spirit confirmed Jesus' ministry during His baptism. Have you ever embarked on a ministry project in your own strength and power without seeking the guidance of the Spirit? When we are following His call and living obediently to His commands, the Spirit will indeed confirm that our ministry is well-pleasing to Him.

Matthew 3:11-17

I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. - John 1:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the biblical account of creation, the three persons of the Trinity each play a distinct role. God (presumably the Father) spoke the light into existence (Gen. 1:3), and the Son was the very Word by which the world came to be (John 1:1-5). The Spirit of God hovered over the waters that had yet to take shape—even at the dawn of time, the movement of the Holy Spirit was best described with a word that expressed the flight of a bird on the wing (Gen. 1:2; cf. Deut. 32:11).

The description in today's passage can be found in all four Gospels (Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:32), and once again it includes the image of a bird—a dove, specifically—and the manifestation of all three persons of the Trinity. The Spirit descended on the Son, and the Father spoke His approval (v. 17). The scene of that rare display of the eternal majesty of the Trinity converging in an earth-bound setting tells us something about the importance of what was about to take place.

John spoke correctly when he professed his need to be baptized by Jesus (v. 13), but his baptism of his Lord was distinct from the baptism of repentance he performed for his followers or the baptism Christ was to bestow upon those who would inherit the Spirit (v. 11). Without sin, Jesus had nothing for which to repent. And He certainly didn't need to become His own disciple. The purpose must have been unique, and Jesus' words confirm that.

John was to baptize Jesus "to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). The text doesn't go into further detail than that, but the subsequent display by the Trinity revealed a perfect collaboration of the Son's obedience, the Spirit's assistance, and the Father's approval. The harmony fulfilled the righteous character of God in a public ceremony proclaiming Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Led and filled by the Spirit, Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1). We associate the image of a dove with peace and hope—fitting, since Jesus assuredly received it as He faced this trial at the outset of His ministry.

APPLY THE WORD

The dove may stand as a symbol of peace, but it is also a strong bird with incredible endurance and precise direction—again, it's an apt portrait of the Holy Spirit. Depending on the Spirit is no sign of weakness! Today's passage shows the Son of God being ministered to by a man, showing obedience to the Father, and receiving assistance from the Spirit. We should never feel too proud to yield to the Spirit's guidance or accept help from others.

Matthew 4

Matthew 4:1-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Somewhere in the history of organized sports, a coaching staff tried out a new theory. These coaches reasoned that taking their teams away the night before a big game and putting the athletes up in a hotel gave them a competitive advantage. They felt that this cloistering would remove the athletes from the distractions of everyday life and allow the team to focus more thoroughly on the game ahead. For decades, this has been a common practice among both college and professional teams.

Jesus knew the value of concentrating on the task at hand, and He prepared for His contest with Satan as no person has ever prepared before or since. Forty days alone in the desert not only removed Jesus from every human contact that would demand His attention; by fasting, Jesus even said ""no"" to normal human needs in order to prepare Himself for the devil's looming temptations.

The temptation of our Lord allows us a glimpse at a level of spiritual warfare we would otherwise know nothing about. The Bible says that Jesus was tempted in the same ways we are tempted (Heb. 4:15), but we will never experience the intensity of the trial Jesus faced.

For example, we are often tempted to sell out in our worship, but Satan has never offered us all the kingdoms of the world in return for our homage (Matt. 4:8-9). Jesus' final temptation was another attempt by Satan to gain what he has always wanted: to be worshiped as God (Isa. 14:12-15).

Today's text reveals a fact you have probably experienced if you have been a believer for very long. When you decided to worship God, you became embroiled in the struggle of the ages: the cosmic contest between God and Satan for the hearts and minds of mankind.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you being tempted to worship power, position, pleasure, possessions, or anything at all other than God?

Congratulations, you are normal! In fact, if you never feel tempted, you may want to check your spiritual pulse. The isse for believers is not whether we will be tempted, but how we will handle the temptations that are sure to come. Before dealing with the devil, Jesus spent forty days and nights worshiping the Father through fasting, prayer, and solitude.

Matthew 4:1-11

Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. - Matthew 4:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

How's Your Navigation System? - Recent research has found that Caribbean spiny lobsters have an amazing ability to navigate. When dropped in strange waters more than twenty miles from their original locations, they invariably head for home, typically a coral reef.

How do they do it? By magnetism–the lobsters somehow use the earth's magnetic field to orient and guide themselves. Though scientists are unclear exactly how the process works, the results are clear. These lobsters measure up with spawning salmon and homing pigeons as some of the top navigators in the animal kingdom!

Caribbean spiny lobsters navigate by magnetism; we navigate by God's Word. Jesus modeled this truth in today's reading. In His spiritual life, He resisted temptation, just as we do, and He used God's Word to guide Him past Satan's lies (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12).

Specifically, Jesus cited three quotations from Deuteronomy, a book of sermons by Moses that shows the heart of the Law. Against the temptation of physical hunger or weakness, He asserted faith in true provision (Mt 4:4). Against the temptation of popularity or presumption on divine care, He asserted the responsibility of true obedience (Mt 4:7)–in the process, correcting the Devil's attempted manipulation of verses from Psalms. And against the temptation of compromise or idolatry, He asserted the necessity of true worship (Mt 4:10).

On this special occasion, the Spirit led Jesus alone into the wilderness to be tested, or proven, as Messiah (v. 1). Though in Greek they are the same, our English word tested is better than tempted in this context, for we know that while God gives tests and trials, He does not tempt us to sin (see James 1:13–15).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Since Scripture is the best weapon for fighting temptation, our suggested application today is to read more of it! Choose one of these books of the Bible–Colossians, Hebrews, or Revelation. Then look for Christ in it.

Matthew 4:1-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Somewhere in the history of organized sports, a coaching staff tried out a new theory. These coaches reasoned that taking their teams away the night before a big game and putting the athletes up in a hotel gave them a competitive advantage. They felt that this cloistering would remove the athletes from the distractions of everyday life and allow the team to focus more thoroughly on the game ahead. For decades, this has been a common practice among both college and professional teams. Jesus knew the value of concentrating on the task at hand, and He prepared for His contest with Satan as no person has ever prepared before or since. Forty days alone in the desert not only removed Jesus from every human contact or since. Forty days alone in the desert not only removed Jesus from every human contact that would demand His attention; by fasting, Jesus even said "no" to normal human needs in order to prepare Himself for the devil's looming temptations. The temptation of our Lord allows us a glimpse at a level of spiritual warfare we would otherwise know nothing about. The Bible says that Jesus was tempted in the same ways we are tempted (Heb. 4:15), but we will never experience the intensity of the trial Jesus faced.

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Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus answered, “It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’ ” - Luke 4:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Recent studies claim that the average child has seen over 30,000 TV ads by first grade. Think of it! Thousands of different “cool” products and hundreds of messages about what’s “needed” for happiness. Advertising is probably the most powerful form of temptation that we face today, often presenting attractive objects for worship, although we rarely think of it this way.

Our Lord Himself faced the temptation to worship something, or someone, other than God. Jesus’ full deity and full humanity didn’t mean that it was somehow easy for Him to resist temptations; because of the severity of the trials He faced, it was much harder.

Matthew says that Jesus was in the desert being tempted by the Devil. If the details of this account like the forty days and the wilderness sound familiar, that’s because Jesus’ temptation likely parallels Israel’s own wilderness temptation. Recall that while the people wandered in the wilderness, they stopped trusting the Lord and fashioned a golden calf idol (see Dec. 6). Jesus’ temptation showed that He was able to do what Israel had failed to do.

Notice that Satan invited Jesus to abuse His divine power for His own ends. We know that Jesus could have easily turned stone into bread, just as He fed over five thousand (John 6). But Jesus’ food was to do the Father’s will (John 4:34), so He turned to God’s Word first (v. 4; cf. Deut. 8:3), even after fasting forty days.

Second, Satan invited Jesus to presume upon His unique relationship with the Father. Satan correctly quoted Psalm 91:11–12, but out of context. Jesus knew Scripture’s true intent and replied with Deuteronomy 6:16, which forbade testing God. This was exactly what the Israelites had done in the wilderness.

Finally, Satan invited Jesus to receive all earthly authority, but at the terrible price of worshiping him. It’s interesting that at exactly this point, Jesus commanded Satan to flee. To worship anyone other than the Lord God was complete blasphemy.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The account of Jesus’ temptation gives us several lessons for worship. First, we worship Jesus because He resisted the Enemy’s temptation. Because He followed the Father’s will, He wasn’t deterred from the cross, where sin was finally dealt with. Second, we worship Jesus because He is the model for how we face temptation. In this account, we see Jesus turning to God’s Word and trusting the Father. This passage teaches once again the only One worthy of our worship is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 4:1-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal told of a man living in Taiwan who claims the title of governor of Fukien Province. The problem is that Fukien, which is on the Chinese mainland, already has a governor who rules the affairs of its 27 million citizens. The other man's claim goes back to 1949, when the Nationalists fled China for Taiwan (then known as Formosa) after their defeat by the Chinese Communists.

The bottom line is that this Taiwanese man's claim to rule Fukien Province is essentially worthless. He has an office and a staff and carries on as if he were governor. But he has no real authority to rule at all.

Satan has also been carrying on as if he were a legitimate ruler. But at the temptation of Christ Satan's claims were proven to be false, and he was exposed as a temporary usurper.

The analogy doesn't hold at every point, of course. Unlike the ""governor"" in today's illustration, Satan does have real power. And at least for now, the kingdoms of the unbelieving world do lie in the devil's lap. But one day Jesus Christ will return as Ruler of all.

The temptation of Christ is an example of spiritual warfare without parallel. We can only read the text and watch awestruck as Jesus engages Satan in face-to-face battle. We do not believe that it was even possible for the sinless Son of God to yield to Satan's offers.

For that we can be eternally grateful! Whereas Adam and Eve had fallen to the serpent's temptation, there in the desert Jesus refused the temptation to bypass the cross. He also refused to go outside of the Father's will for His physical needs of food and protection.

We will never be tested to the same degree or with the same effects as Jesus was tested. But because He experienced temptation, He is sympathetic to us in our need (Heb. 4:14-16). And we can imitate Jesus' example by drawing on God's Word to refute and defeat Satan.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you want to turn today into an extraordinary Monday, consider the benefits available to you because Jesus endured and triumphed over temptation.

Matthew 4:1-11

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. - Matthew 6:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Milton’s epic poem Paradise Lost tells the story of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. When he wrote the companion volume, Paradise Regained, the story of course featured Christ, the second Adam. But the poem does not tell the story of Christ’s redemptive death and resurrection, as one might expect. Instead, it dramatizes His temptation by Satan in the wilderness.

In Milton’s view, Christ’s victory in this event perfectly paralleled the Fall. Though our first parents succumbed to Satan’s temptation, Jesus did not. Because of His perfect obedience, the doors of heaven are open for all who believe.

Today’s account wasn’t the only time Jesus faced temptation, but it was a defining moment. He’d just been baptized by John, affirmed by His Father and the Spirit, and was about to embark on public ministry.

At this time, Jesus was “led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil” (v. 1). This shows us that temptation is not a sign we’re out of God’s will--quite the opposite. If we were off the path we’d already be where Satan wanted us. Since temptation was part of Jesus’ earthly journey, we can surely expect it to be part of ours.

With what did Satan tempt Christ? First, with physical need. He was hungry, and Satan suggested He make bread from stones. Second, with personal glory. If He jumped from the Temple, He would step into the sandals of the kind of Messiah everyone was expecting. And third, with immediate power. Satan offered Him all the kingdoms of this world.

How did our Lord respond? In all three cases, with quotations from Deuteronomy. Against the first temptation, He implied that God’s power is not to be used for selfish ends. Against the second, He pointed out that God’s promises can’t be abused for personal gain. To Satan’s third attempt, He proclaimed that God alone is worthy of worship. Compromise was out of the question. Sub-mission to God’s plan and timing was everything (cf. James 4:7).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus resisted temptation by quoting God’s Word. We can do the same!

Matthew 4:1-11

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name. - Psalm 29:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

President Lyndon Johnson once grew agitated during a lunchtime prayer given by his press secretary, Bill Moyers. Unable to hear, President Johnson loudly interrupted, “Speak up, Bill! I can't hear a thing!” Before resuming his prayer, Moyers responded, “Mr. President, I wasn't addressing you.”

Johnson wasn't the first, nor will he be the last, to ascribe to himself that which truly belongs to God. Satan, the author of the bad-boy mentality, made it his mission to steal attention from God and feed his obsession to be worshiped. Satan blatantly displayed his greed for glory when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. The specific temptations listed in the Gospel of Matthew walk us through the stages of Satan's own wickedness, a circuit of self-centeredness that can be so appealing and so deadly to us all.

Satan's first tactic was to tempt Christ to focus on His own needs and wants instead of His God-given mission. What an easy trap to fall into when masked by something as innocent as meeting basic needs for survival! But the test wasn't really about bread or survival. Satan wanted Jesus to use His supernatural power to gratify His own desires, a routine practice for Satan and a form of

self-worship.

Satan then tried to persuade Christ to doubt God, but he disguised the motivation of doubt as an expression of faith: cast yourself toward the ground if You are the Son of God. There was no “if” in Jesus' mind, so no test was necessary. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:16, a reference to Israel's quarrelsome demands for water in Exodus 17. The question the Israelites had asked was, “Is the Lord among us or not” (Ex. 17:7). Their demand for proof was the product of doubt. Again, to doubt God is to esteem your own understanding above His Word, a dangerous expression of self-worth.

Finally, Satan tempted Jesus to worship him, a ploy that only could work on someone who had fallen for the first two temptations. This last plea revealed the depth of Satan's wicked delusions.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We all run the risk of making Satan's mistake, and if we're not careful, it can become a lifestyle. Examine your service, your trust, and your worship. Who is the beneficiary of your efforts? Do you rest assured in the Lord's promises, or are you repeatedly asking God to prove Himself? Finally, whom do you worship in your heart? The answers begin and end with worship. When you praise God for all He is and does, serving and trusting in Him follow.

Matthew 4:1-25

Fear the Lord your God, serve him only. - Deuteronomy 6:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1 Samuel 16, young David was chosen as king. He was designated by God, anointed by Samuel, and he received the Spirit (1 Sam. 16:11-13). He was set for life, right? Not exactly—the following chapters describe David fleeing for his life from Saul and the Philistines, battling the Amalekites, and waiting for years before he finally took the throne over Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-3).

Jesus had been announced publicly by God the Father as the Son. The presence of the Holy Spirit was confirmation of His identity. And yet the very next episode presented in Matthew's Gospel recounts Jesus being tempted by Satan. Divine pronouncements are not vaccines against trials and tribulations.

Again, the role of the Trinity is interesting. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (v. 1). While it was the Devil who tempted Jesus, this entire event was under the divine supervision of God. Israel had wandered in the desert for forty years, which God described as a test of their faith—a test that they largely failed (see Deut. 8:2-5). Now Jesus endured testing, and He remained faithful.

The placement of the temptation of Jesus is important, located between the encounter with God the Father and the Spirit and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry of preaching and healing. The core of the temptations turns on the issue of who Jesus is: God had declared Him the Son, but would He be obedient to the Father? The Devil challenged Him to prove Himself; his question, “If you are the Son of God . . .” is reminiscent of his question to Eve, “Did God really say . . .” (vv. 3, 6; Gen. 3:1). Satan delights to challenge our understanding of who God is and what He requires of us.

Unlike Adam and Eve or Israel—or any of us confronted with temptation—Jesus responded with steadfast patience and confidence in God's faithfulness. He was hungry, but He would wait to be fed in God's time. He would fulfill all the prophecies about the Messiah and would one day receive the adoration and worship of all the nations, but in God's time (Phil. 2:9-11).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When Jesus called His disciples, they were busy at their jobs—minding their own business, we might say—when Jesus disrupted their lives forever. Everything from their businesses to their families changed when they followed Jesus to be “fishers of men.” God often interrupts “normal” life with His call; we've seen the examples of Mary and Joseph. When He calls us, will we allow our lives to be disrupted in order to follow Him? Are we willing to give up reputation, comfort, income, and relatives in our obedience to Jesus?

Matthew 4:12-17

The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in . . . the shadow of death, a light has dawned. - i

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a famous Greek myth, the god Zeus banned any other god from giving aid to mankind. Prometheus had pity on humanity, however, and gave them fire and other gifts of civilization. But he also gave mankind the so-called “gift” of ignorance of their mortality. Otherwise how could any human be happy, knowing that nothing would truly last? The ancient Greeks probably thought Prometheus did the Greeks a favor. Would this kind of ignorance be a blessing?

This month we seek to open our hearts to God’s command to repent. Seeing our failures and foibles should give us pause. Every sin emphasizes our own incompleteness and indeed, our own mortality. This recognition, however, should ultimately not lead to despair, but to joy.

We saw yesterday that in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus began His preaching ministry with a call to repent. This call is preceded by a quote from Isaiah 9:2: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light” (Matt. 4:16). For all humanity, who dwell in the “shadow of death,” this recognition of mortality is the beginning of good news. We begin to see that we need rescue from this condition of death (see Rom. 7:24).

This becomes clearer as we look at the context from the passage Jesus quotes. Isaiah 9 rings with hope and joy, but this hope does not come in a vacuum. In the preceding chapter the prophet warns of the coming destruction of Israel by the dreaded Assyrians. The chapter concludes saying, “Then they will look to the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness (Isa. 8:22). Only after establishing the reality of their dark predicament does Isaiah proclaim, “The people in darkness have seen a great light” (9:2).

God will send rescue, but only when we see Him, and not ourselves, in the midst of our pain. As scholar Kallistos Ware put it, “To repent is to look, not downward at my own shortcomings, but upward at God’s love. It is to see not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I can yet become.”

APPLY THE WORD

The apostle Paul stands as wonderful example of a Christ-centered reflection on his past. His lament in Romans 7:24 quickly transitions: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). For Paul, dwelling on his deeds—past or present, good or bad—distracted him from seeing God’s love. God wants us to experience this same freedom from obsessive focus on self. Let us hope to imitate Paul, as he followed Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1).

Matthew 4:12-22

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pastor A. B. Simpson had a dream one night. He saw himself sitting in a large auditorium with other Christians. On the stage were people from around the world, silently wringing their hands in anguish.

The dream helped spur Simpson to act on his burning desire to reach the world for Christ. Unable to go to the mission field himself, Simpson worked tirelessly to recruit missionaries. In 1883, he founded a missionary-training college in New York which was attended by founders of the Sudan Interior Mission and Africa Inland Mission. Simpson also founded the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a great missionary-sending body.

Simpson's ministry, and that of every missions-minded believer before and since, reflects the heart of a Savior who came to give His life for a lost world (Matt. 20:28).

Following His baptism and wilderness temptation, Jesus established His ministry headquarters in the Galilean town of Capernaum. There He began proclaiming, ""Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"" (Matt. 4:17).

Although He eventually gave the Great Commission to His disciples (Matt. 28:19-20), Jesus' own ministry was localized. He founded a ""missionary-training school"" with twelve students, including Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus' school had no buildings or textbooks, but He had a definite curriculum to teach. He wanted to impart to His students the gospel, and His very life.

Jesus taught His disciples on many occasions, including His last moments on earth (Acts 1). But he chose one special time early in His ministry to outline for the Twelve--and for us--what it means to be His disciple. That teaching in Matthew 5-7 has become known as the Sermon on the Mount, our subject of study for this month.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Welcome to 1997!

One of the great things about a new year is the chance it offers us to start fresh, to carry out a new commitment made to Christ or to renew one that's already established.

Matthew 4:12-22

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” - Matthew 4:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

In recent years, the letters “WWJD?”–meaning “What Would Jesus Do?”–have been spotted on bracelets, music CDs, bumper stickers, and countless other pieces of merchandise. Last fall, a Christian environmental group scored nationwide publicity by changing the last word. “What Would Jesus Drive?” became the headline catch-phrase for their attacks on gas-guzzling SUVs.

As over hyped and over marketed as the “WWJD?” slogan has become, the basic question remains valuable: What would Jesus do? Many are ready to say He would support their particular cause, but what does the Bible say?

This is our focus question and topic for November’s devotional study. Following Christ means considering what He would say and do as we go through our lives. To truly answer the “WWJD?” question, we must look at Scripture, setting aside our stereotypes and preconceived notions. Since we want to increase in Christlikeness–that is, in becoming like Him or imitating Him–how can we grow daily as His committed disciples?

Our study will explore biblical answers to this question from a relational perspective. Following five days of introduction, there are three main sections: (1) Jesus’ relationship with His Father; (2) His relationship with His disciples and friends; and (3) His relationship with the world. These parallel our own spheres of inner spiritual life, life within the church, and life in the world, our interactions with nonbelievers.

We begin by emphasizing that our call to discipleship is not optional or only for “super-Christians.” In the same way Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John in today’s reading, He calls every one of us to follow Him. One dictionary definition of “follow” that challenges us is “to engage in as a way of life.” If we do, we will attract others to trust and follow Him as well, becoming “fishers of men” (Mt 4:19).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One way to your personal growth as a disciple of Christ this month may be reading one or all of the four Gospels. Many of our readings during this study will be drawn from them, but you’ll benefit even more by reading at least one from start to finish.

Matthew 4:12-25

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. - Matthew 4:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

How should the kingdom of heaven change the purpose of life? Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards and president of Yale University, had an answer that remains relevant today .

The Christian’s plans will

> “be concerted in such a manner, as to embrace, and promote eternal purposes. They will be the plans of an immortal being, destined to act with immortal beings in a boundless field of existence: the plans of a dutiful and faithful subject of the infinite Ruler; of a child, warmed with perpetual and filial piety to his divine Parent; of a brother, finally united to the household which is named after Christ; of a redeemed, sanctified, returning prodigal, brought back with infinite compassion, and infinite expense, to the house of his father, and welcomed with exquisite joy by the family of the first-born. To glorify God, to bless his fellow-creatures, and to be blessed by both, will be the combined and perfect end for which he lives.”

When Jesus called His first disciples, this was the life to which He called them. And it is still the life to which He calls us as well.

His public commissioning and private testing done, Jesus began His public ministry. He began by preaching the same message as John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt 4:17).

“Kingdom of heaven” is a Jewish phrase found only in Matthew. We can define it as the “rule or reign of God,” as when we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). At present this “kingdom” is spiritual, found in believers’ hearts, but we know that when Christ returns His kingdom will come in every sense of the word.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In today’s reading, Jesus called His first disciples to leave their fishing careers and follow Him. What is He calling you to do? Leave your family and serve Him overseas? Change jobs in midlife? Share the gospel more boldly with your neighbor? Volunteer to fill a ministry need at your church?

Matthew 4:16 – “The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light”

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pastor Gardner Taylor was preaching one Sunday evening when the lights in his small, Depression-era church in Louisiana suddenly flickered and went out. Taylor stood quietly in the darkness, not knowing what to do or say. Finally, an older deacon in the congregation called out, ""Preach on, preacher, we can still see Jesus in the dark."" Gardner Taylor has been doing just that ever since: proclaiming the light of the Word of God amid the darkness. (**See full devotional Matthew 12:14-21**)

Matthew 4:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

“God helps those who help themselves,” said Benjamin Franklin. Not a professing Christian, Franklin did write prolifically on themes of virtue and self-improvement. He had made it his personal aim to strive for “moral perfection.” To that end, he made lifetime resolutions toward frugality, honesty, industry, and charity.

Benjamin Franklin did bring important moral teachings to his generation, lessons from which we can still learn today. What's unfortunate is that many would place the person of Jesus Christ alongside such figures as Benjamin Franklin. They would attribute to Jesus important moral teachings, such as “Turn the other cheek,” and “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But they would fail to understand that He came to do more than to inspire our sense of good morals. They might think that following Franklin's resolutions would yield the same result as following Christ.

Jesus' first sermon is no spiritual self-help text. Here He identified Himself clearly with the teachings of the Old Testament, and the context of His ministry launch was unmistakably “religious.” After His baptism and temptation, He preached His first sermon in the synagogue, using an important text from Isaiah. The text has both moral and spiritual implications. “Good news to the poor,” “liberty to the captives,” “sight of the blind,” and “liberty [for] the oppressed” are not exclusively spiritual claims. Jesus was no doubt claiming good news for the spiritually destitute, blind, and oppressed, but He was also declaring an earthly dimension to His ministry objectives. He would, in tangible ways, bring hope to those most oppressed in society. His preoccupation was not private morality but spiritual and physical healing for the hurting.

What's notably absent in this first sermon is any mention of moral commands. What is fundamental to the gospel is not moral effort but an encounter with Jesus Christ. So Jesus' sermon declared His own divine identity: as One sent from God, One with divine purpose and authority, One upon whom the Spirit of God rests.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our key verse from Matthew reminds us of the first word of the Christian journey: “Repent.” When we share the gospel with nonbelievers, we must be careful not to address first what we perceive to be their moral shortcomings. It isn't as if a person has to first obey the moral teachings of Christ to become a believer. No, the first step is repentance. That simply means confessing one's sinfulness and need for Christ's forgiveness and righteousness.

Matthew 4:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

In her book, Getting Involved with God, Ellen Davis recounts the story of a friend diagnosed with a brain tumor. They prayed fervently for her healing—and God answered. Only the healing was not for the brain tumor; her friend died fifteen months after her diagnosis. But she was healed from her crippling anxiety and sadness that had characterized most of her life. Sometimes God's answers appear different from the questions we have asked.

Our reading for today examines what happens when God doesn't seem to live up to the expectations we've set for Him. The Jews of Jesus' day had clearly defined hopes for the Messiah, and so long as Jesus fulfilled these, they embraced Him and His message. As Jesus began to preach and teach and heal all throughout the region of Galilee, their adulation swelled. Their hopes of deliverance and redemption were embodied in this master teacher and miracle worker (v. 15).

Imagine their shock and disdain for His provocative words at the end of today's reading. They had cast the hopes of the Jewish nation on Him, but He seemed to be implying that the Gentiles, not the Jews, would enjoy God's favor. What had been worship turned into murderous rage. The expectations were shattered, and they determined to destroy the man responsible.

We know from other passages of Scripture that Jesus wasn't denying that He had indeed come for the people of Israel (Luke 13:34). But it was also true that the misshapen expectations the Jews held of the Messiah and His kingdom would prevent many of them from embracing them. The Jews wanted a king. They wanted a winning team. They didn't expect a crucified Jewish Messiah and a call to repentance. So, they rejected Jesus.

We can be just as dense when it comes to understanding God's kingdom. We each have our own pet expectations of Christ and what He should do for us. Because the concept of “kingdom” shapes what we pray for and how we expect God to answer, understanding it biblically is fundamental to our prayer lives.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Lord's Prayer calls us to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” That means that our first priority in terms of what we want and seek through prayer is the accomplishment of God's purposes. But do we really understand what God's kingdom would look like? Look back to verses 18 and 19 of today's reading. Write down some specific things, based on these verses, that would be evidence of God's kingdom being present.

Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9-13; 28:19-20

‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. - Matthew 9:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Some have called the Bible, “God's Instruction Manual.” By that, they mean that it's here we find all the knowledge that we need. True, the Bible is an inexhaustible source of wisdom, both the Old and New Testaments. The notion of the Bible as “instruction manual,” however, can reduce the richness of Scripture to just life principles. The Bible is more accurately described as a narrative. It is the story of a personal God working actively in the lives of men and women. The names of individuals and families (even the genealogies!) of the Bible aren't incidental, but central to the gospel story.

Our stories from Matthew today show how people matter to God. We find Simon and his brother, Andrew, fishing on the Sea of Galilee. We meet James and John, the sons of Zebedee, in the boat with their father, preparing their nets. Behind the tax collector's booth sat Matthew. Each of these men seems to us very ordinary, yet the stories themselves are intimate and personal. We encounter these men, busy at work in the course of a normal day, not as pawns in God's story, but real human beings with names and families and jobs.

In Matthew 9, Jesus shared a meal with His disciples at Matthew's house, and Matthew's house was soon overrun by curious friends and colleagues. These men weren't normally well received by the ruling religious right of their day. They were despised as Jewish traitors, regarded as corrupt sell-outs. But interestingly enough, they felt comfortable enough to join Jesus for dinner. They didn't sense the rejection they faced elsewhere. Here, with Jesus, was a place where they were respected and valued.

Jesus reproved those who criticized Him for keeping company with sinners. The Pharisees preferred religious rules and regulations. To them, Jesus insisted, “I desire mercy.” Mercy is not abstract; it is particular and personal. He turns our attention, not to what we do as much as whom we love. In essence, He underscores the centrality of relationship in the gospel.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The gospel call is clearly set forth in Matthew 28: “Go and make disciples.” As people of the gospel, our lives should look like Jesus' ministry. Our calling is to get to know sinners, learn their names, care about their lives, and in the context of that relationship, reveal to them Who is Jesus Christ. The programs and evangelistic events of churches or other organizations shouldn't supplant the kind of loving relationships that we as believers must establish with an unbelieving world.

Matthew 4:18-25

Come, follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men. - Matthew 4:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

A Barefoot Gospel - In the early twentieth century, Sundar Singh was famous as the “apostle with the bleeding feet.” Dressed in a thin yellow robe, he trekked through India and Tibet spreading the gospel–without shoes, hence his nickname. His robe imitated the dress of a Hindu “sadhu,” a person living an ascetic life who spent his time begging on the roads or meditating alone.

Sundar’s dress reflected different motives. As he said, “I am not worthy to follow in the steps of my Lord, but, like Him, I want no home, no possessions. Like Him I will belong to the road, sharing the suffering of my people, eating with those who will give me shelter, and telling all men of the love of God.”

Like the disciples in today’s reading, Sundar Singh was called to be a “fisher of men.” This is a second metaphor–in addition to yesterday’s harvest image–used by Christ to describe missions or witnessing.

The context is the calling of the first disciples: Peter, John, Andrew, and James. As a master teacher, Jesus used a figure of speech

that would be especially familiar to these professional fishermen. Their goal was to catch fish–to know their habits, schedules, and feeding preferences in order to lure them into nets, and to persevere at it every day until they were successful. Jesus wanted them to turn that kind of skill and dedication to the task of “catching” people!

But the results wouldn’t be instantaneous. They had to first choose to follow Christ, which involved leaving behind their livelihood (Mt 4:20, 22). There’d be a time when they’d return to fishing, but this was still a huge step of obedient faith. In Luke’s account, Jesus encouraged them with a miraculously large catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11) to show that He would care for their needs.

Once they took this step, Jesus shaped them into “fishers of men” (Mt 4:19). He took responsibility for the project–what they had to do was simply follow, surrendering themselves to His work in their lives. “Lesson 1” focused on His love and power, as seen in His healing miracles throughout Galilee (Mt 4:23-25).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When Jesus used the metaphor of fishing in today’s verse, He had in mind the commercial method--casting out nets--used by those who fished for a living at that time. Today in the United States, fishing is mostly a recreational sport done with a rod and reel, but the analogy still holds true.

Matthew 4:18-20; Luke 5:1-11

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” - Matthew 4:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Author Frederick Buechner wrote of the man who became the apostle Peter: “A rock isn’t the prettiest thing in creation or the fanciest, or the smartest, and if it gets rolling in the wrong direction, watch out, but there’s no nonsense about a rock, and once it settles down, it’s pretty much there to stay. There’s not a lot you can do to change a rock or crack it or get under its skin. . . . So Jesus called [Peter] the Rock, and it stuck with him the rest of his life.”

That truly describes Simon the fisherman from Galilee, who underwent a radical transformation when he met Jesus. Like others whom God claimed for His service, Simon received a new name during his first encounter with the Lord. On

the day Andrew brought his brother Simon to meet the Messiah, Jesus gave Simon the name Peter, or “rock” (John 1:40-42). As Frederick Buechner indicates, however, it would be a while before Peter the rock started rolling the right way.

We begin this month by reviewing the events that helped to shape Peter, because his New Testament letters are the focus of our study this month. By the time he wrote First and Second Peter, he had long since become the settled, rock-solid leader in the church that Jesus called and trained him to be.

Peter wrote his two epistles to communicate a God-given message for the church in his day. And because First and Second Peter are the inspired Word of God (2 Peter 1:19-21), their message remains vital for God’s people today.

Peter and Andrew were acquainted with Jesus from the start--when He called them to leave their fishing business and follow Him--and their obedience is quite remarkable.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Let’s begin this month where Peter began with Jesus.

Peter’s first recorded words to Jesus were an objection, followed by obedience to Jesus’ word (Luke 5:5).

Matthew 4:23-5:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dwight L. Moody's fame as an evangelist is well-documented. For more than 25 years, Moody preached to huge crowds on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. When it came to founding a school that would train others to follow in his footsteps, Moody enlisted the help of gifted individuals such as Emma Dryer and R.A. Torrey. In the century since, graduates of Moody Bible Institute have preached God's Word literally around the world!

Jesus also drew huge crowds wherever He went. Who wouldn't flock to Someone who could heal the sick! Jesus' ministry of compassion attracted large crowds from every corner of Israel and from the Gentile territory of the Decapolis (meaning ""ten cities,"" Mt 4:25).

But Jesus' priority in ministry was not to heal and work miracles. He had come to teach and preach the good news of the kingdom

(Mt 4:23), calling people to repentance and faith.

The background to the Sermon on the Mount reveals this contrast between the popular reaction to Jesus and the concern that was uppermost in His heart. Clearly, the crowds who followed Him were motivated by the healings.

Their needs were very real (Mt 4:24), but these people had a deeper illness--one we all have. They were lost in sin, scattered like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). Jesus felt deep compassion for them, and called together His disciples to equip them with what lost people need most of all: His words of life.

One issue we need to mention here is Jesus' offer of the kingdom to Israel (Matt. 4:17). This was a legitimate offer. Had the nation repented and received Jesus as Messiah, He would have established His kingdom at His first coming. Instead, the nation rejected Christ, and the fullness of His kingdom, as God no doubt had planned all along, awaits His Second Coming.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many have claimed to keep the ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount while rejecting the Lord of the Sermon.

But Jesus' teaching is not just an ethical path to follow to win God's favor, any more than a person can earn salvation by trying to keep the Ten Command-ments. Besides, no one can keep God's law perfectly. The Sermon on the Mount is for followers of Christ, those who have been saved by God's grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9).

Matthew 4:23-25 Isaiah 61:1-3

He has sent me . . . to bestow on them . . . a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. - Isaiah 61:1, 3

TODAY IN THE WORD

The statistics are staggering: 42 million people worldwide are infected with the HIV/AIDS virus, 30 million of which live in sub-Saharan Africa. One third of those infected are between 15 and 24 years old. In Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Swaziland, one in three people has HIV/AIDS. The situation seems hopeless, but caring believers are making a difference. Mission organizations and churches are ministering to tens of thousands of orphaned children, assisting relatives who care for them and establishing safe, well-run orphanages. New doors for the gospel are opening up as health-care workers “go to young people . . . and initiate conversations about AIDS that lead naturally to the gospel,” says Dr. Paul Hudson with SIM (Serving in Mission) International.

HIV/AIDS make many people uncomfortable, and they would prefer to ignore it. In Jesus' day, leprosy also made people uncomfortable, but rather than shy away from the afflicted, Jesus healed them and had compassion on them. In the process, many came to saving faith in Him.

This aspect of Jesus' ministry was anticipated in Isaiah 61. Here we see the promised ministry of the Lord's Spirit-filled Servant. Isaiah uses beautiful language and imagery to show God's compassionate heart for the downtrodden and oppressed!

In Jesus, we see Isaiah's prophecies lived out. Today's passage from Matthew provides a summary of Jesus' early ministry in Galilee, but it's representative of His entire public ministry. Although there were other miracle workers in Jesus' day (usually in it for personal gain), what sets Jesus' healing ministry apart is His concern for both the body and the spirit of individuals. In Mt 4:23 we see that He preached the good news and healed every disease and sickness. The desperate condition of many people living in the first century is evident in the large crowds following Jesus wherever He went, driven by the universal human desire for wholeness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can learn much from the balance between preaching the good news and meeting peoples' physical needs in Jesus' ministry. Recall from the November issue of Today in the Word that we have been created as both physical and spiritual beings. Thus an effective ministry must consider both aspects of humanity. If you're interested in finding out more about Christian response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, we recommend SIM Windows of HOPE for AIDS (www.SIM.org).

Matthew 5

Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus said, “ My kingdom is not of this world. ” - John 18:36

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bob and Tina Muzikowski founded Chicago Hope Academy in Chicago's Near West Side. For their children, attending the neighborhood high school, where freshmen girls were reportedly raped in the school bathroom as an “orientation,” was not an option. In this environment of violence they decided to start a school with the middle name of Hope.

Hope makes sense when you're hurting. Hope feels best when you're wounded. Hope is born out of suffering. The kingdom of heaven, as we see in the Beatitudes, is all about hope.

God's kingdom appeals most to those hungry for hope. Some interpreters have argued that here Jesus commands all of His followers to become poor, to mourn, and to be persecuted. But Jesus isn't emphasizing that poor people are somehow morally superior. The phrase “poor in spirit” exhorts all of us, whether wealthy or poverty-stricken, to recognize that we cannot find or enter the kingdom of God on our own merits. Apart from God's work and His resources, we are spiritually bankrupt. Those who recognize this, and depend on God, will be in a position to inherit eternal life.

In the kingdom of God, we aren't guaranteed a pain-free life. For all the blessings promised to believers in this passage, many are reserved for the future. Praying “Your kingdom come, your will be done,” means embracing a willingness to accept the “nows” as well as the “not yets” of the Christian life. Now there is much to enjoy of God and His presence in our lives. Now it is possible, through the Spirit of Jesus Christ indwelling His people, to be part of God's work here on earth. God is calling us to seek His justice and righteousness for today.

But not yet will all that is wrong be made right. Not yet can we fully enjoy God and fully enjoy His rule in our lives and in the world. Our prayers work within this tension: we seek all the good that God is willing to bring now, and we keep hope for what is yet to come.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Some have distorted the claims of Jesus Christ, promising that believers will enjoy vast material blessings today as well as spiritual blessings forever. God isn't promising to deliver us from all that is difficult or uncomfortable or confusing about this life. In fact, those disappointments and wounds—those results of living in a fallen world—inspire us to long for the new heavens and earth when God's kingdom will be fully revealed. With the apostle John in the final words of Revelation, we cry out “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Matthew 5:3-6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Leonard Bernstein, the late conductor of the New York Philharmonic orchestra, was once asked to name the most difficult instrument to play. Without hesitation, he replied, ""The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm--that's a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.""

A spirit of genuine humility, or what Jesus called meekness in today's text (Mt 5:5), has been a rare quality in every age. Most of us are taught from childhood that being ""second fiddle"" isn't quite good enough. The lesser place, the back seat, or the supporting role is not a sought-after position.

But in God's kingdom, humility is one of the spiritual qualities that leads to genuine blessedness or happiness. We call these early verses of Matthew 5, which list such traits, the Beatitudes (taken from the Latin word for ""blessed""). We will examine this famous passage this weekend as we consider Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As we will discover, the values of Jesus' kingdom are radically opposed to the values of the world.

Humility is the proper response of those who recognize that they are ""poor in spirit"" (Mt 5:3). Poverty of spirit is a prerequisite for God's blessing. What does this phrase mean? It refers to a heart-attitude of empty-handedness, of coming before the Lord without one plea. Even after we have experienced God's grace in salvation, being poor in spirit still suits us, for we can do nothing apart from Christ (John 15:5).

The second Beatitude, mourning, complements the first (Mt 5:4). People who see their spiritual poverty are most inclined to mourn over their sins and failures. How much more blessed it is to experience ""godly sorrow"" (2 Cor. 7:10) over our sins and find forgiveness than to ignore them and feel eternal sorrow at God's judgment!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Most of us enjoy our food. When we're hungry, no one has to tell us how to find the kitchen.

In Mt 5:6 of today's text, Jesus borrows the physical imagery of food and drink to picture the way God wants us to approach our spiritual life. We have the Savior's guarantee that if we seek Him with a gnawing hunger and a burning thirst, we will be filled.

Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. - Matthew 5:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to tradition, apostles and brothers Peter and Andrew died similar martyrs' deaths. In both cases, their enemies intended to crucify them on a Roman cross, but both asked their captors to change its shape out of deference to the Cross of their Lord. They felt unworthy to die in the same way that He had. So they turned Peter's cross upside down, while Andrew's they altered to be X-shaped. Today, both the upside-down cross and the X-shaped “St. Andrew's Cross” (called a “saltire” and sometimes referred to as the “Burgundy Cross”) are historical symbols of Christian humility.

“If anyone would come after me,” Jesus said, “he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Our devotional topic for this first month of 2008 is humility and simplicity, two intertwined virtues that are essential for everyday discipleship. They are also prominent among the Beatitudes in our passage today. These “Blessed are” statements could easily be translated as “Happy are”—but not happiness in a merely emotional sense. Instead, spiritual happiness is the joy and contentment of redeemed people.

Humility and simplicity appear at least four times in today's reading. First, “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3) is a metaphor for humility or lack of pride. People who are poor in spirit know their need for God and plead for His grace in their lives. In response, He gives them the kingdom of heaven as a gift.

Second, “meek” (Mt 5:5), also translated “gentle” (NASB), indicates humility before God as well as the resulting humility in relations with others. God blesses them with a rich inheritance. Third, “pure in heart” (Mt 5:8), which literally means “clean” or “uncorrupted,” includes simplicity, wholeheartedness, and a pure dedication to the Lord. Such people will be overjoyed to receive their reward, which is to see Him! Finally, enduring persecution (Mt 5:10-12) also requires humility. Standing firm under insults, slander, and suffering cannot be done in pride.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

A good way to begin 2008 would be with an earnest prayer to develop more fully the virtues of humility and simplicity in your life. You might already have made such a resolution, but New Year's resolutions tend to be try-your-best and grit-your-teeth affairs, whereas spiritual qualities cannot be achieved through merely human effort. Taking the need for grace as your starting point, pray for the Lord to do whatever it takes in your life this year to give you a spirit of humility and simplicity.

Matthew 5:1-3

Yet I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay. - Psalm 40:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

In Poor Richard’s Almanac Benjamin Franklin observed, “Poverty often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue.” Jesus, though, said that poverty can be a path to blessing–if it is the right kind of poverty. Material poverty in itself is not a blessing. The author of Proverbs asked God to give him “neither poverty nor riches” (Pr 30:8). Nor are the poor inherently more (or less) virtuous than the rich.

This month we will look at the Sermon on the Mount, an extended sermon by Jesus recorded in Matthew 5–7. As we’ll see, Jesus turns many of the preconceived notions of how to relate to others and to God on their head. These words, surely challenging to Jesus’ hearers, are no less challenging and encouraging to us today. We will be studying these “Jesus Rules” to see how our lives can line up more closely with what He requires.

Jesus opened the Sermon on the Mount with a series of declarations beginning with the phrase “Blessed are . . .” These have been called the Beatitudes, a description taken from the Latin word for blessed. In this opening Beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon the “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3). He uses the metaphor of poverty to help us understand the spiritual precondition for God’s blessing. But what did He mean when He spoke of poverty of spirit?

Throughout the Bible the term spirit refers to a person’s inmost being (Pr 20:27; cf. 1 Cor. 2:11). Poverty of spirit has to do with our sense of self. It is the awareness that, where God is concerned, we suffer from a deficit of righteousness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When Jesus enters the believer’s life He brings with Him an entirely new system of accounting. This is something the apostle Paul acknowledged when he compared his old way of life with new life in Christ and observed, “Whatever was to my profit I now consider

loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7).

As you reflect on the work of Christ and all that it has brought to you, how many things can you identify that God has added to your "account" through the work of Christ?

Matthew 5:4-6

The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace. - Psalm 37:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

A few years ago a controversial book challenged church leaders to think like marketers instead of pastors when carrying out their ministry. The author, with a background in marketing, believed the church should use the same tools secular companies use to identify the needs and interests of their customers.

The character traits in the Sermon on the Mount, however, might cause us to question such an approach. At first glance, they do not seem very marketable. It is unlikely that mourning, meekness, and hunger are high on anyone's list of "felt needs!" On the other hand, while Jesus was no Madison Avenue marketer, He clearly motivated those who heard His message. He promised that each of these characteristics would bring a corresponding blessing in the kingdom of God.

The connection between present character and future blessing in the Sermon on the Mount underscores a basic difference between Christ's value system and ours. We tend to be interested in immediate gratification. Jesus emphasizes that true happiness is found in ultimate gratification. We would be content with whatever pleases us in the here and now. Christ has provided something that will satisfy us for all eternity. The lifestyle described in the Sermon on the Mount is lived in the present, but its ultimate rewards are reserved for the future.

Some have seen the traits in the Sermon on the Mount as a kind of heavenly "to do" list that must be fulfilled by those who wish to go to heaven. But the attributes described in these verses cannot be developed by purely human effort. Nor do we ordinarily see mourning, meekness, or hunger and thirst as desirable things. These characteristics are supernatural and are viewed as desirable only by those who recognize that they are the marks of someone whose old life has been exchanged for new life in Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The opening beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount point to areas of need. Make a list of the areas in your life that need to be "filled" with the life of Christ. Use the language of the passage to express your desire in these areas.

Matthew 5:7-9

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. - John 1:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Author Gunther Grass once declared, "I don't know about God. . . . The only things I know are what I see, hear, feel and smell." He's not alone in this sentiment. One of the greatest challenges facing the believer today is the daunting task of introducing an invisible God to a world that wants to believe only in what it can "see, hear, feel and smell."

In such an age we're tempted to be envious of the first disciples. They had the advantage of seeing God in the flesh, as they observed Jesus' life and listened to His teaching.

The apostle John described their experience in this way: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched–this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1 John 1:1-2).

Yet it was to these same disciples that Christ first made the promises of the three Beatitudes in Matthew 5:7–9. Together these Beatitudes assure those who have been transformed by the grace of Christ that they will "see" God. This is not a literal vision so much as an experience rooted in the forgiveness that comes through faith in Christ. This experience will be ultimately fulfilled in our receiving our full inheritance as children of God. It's marked by the work of the Holy Spirit who "fits" us for a relationship with God by changing us into the image of Christ.

Jesus promised these blessings to His disciples, but it is clear that they are not the only ones who benefit from them. Even those of us who have not yet seen Jesus in His bodily form can have this inheritance. Anyone who comes to know God through faith in Christ can show others what God is like by a transformed life.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

There is a sense in which those who follow Christ live in future and the present at the same time.

Matthew 5:10-16

When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it. - 1 Corinthians 4:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

The magazine Christianity Today once quoted an Amish church leader who noted, “Prosperity has often been fatal to Christianity, but persecution never.” Jesus also urged His disciples to consider persecution a blessing. It is important to note, however, that He had a particular kind of suffering in mind. It was persecution “because of righteousness.” Another kind of suffering may look like persecution, but it springs from a different source. This kind of suffering comes as a result of doing wrong (1 Peter 2:19–20).

If others call us obnoxious or unpleasant, we should not automatically assume that we are suffering for the sake of righteousness. It may be that we actually are obnoxious or unpleasant. The kind of suffering that Jesus characterized as “blessed” in the Sermon on the Mount does not come to us because of our personalities. This persecution comes as a result of our association with Jesus Christ.

This raises an important question for us: if persecution results in blessing, should we actively seek it? Jesus does not command us to seek persecution, but He does tell us to rejoice when it comes. If our lives genuinely reflect the righteousness of Christ and we are fulfilling our role as salt and light in the world, we will encounter opposition. Jesus warned that faithfully following Him may strain our most cherished personal relationships (Matt. 10:34-36). Likewise, the apostle Paul noted that those who live a godly life through Christ will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12).

In these verses Jesus describes rejoicing as more of a choice than an emotion. When Jesus commands us to rejoice in persecution He does not mean that we should enjoy it. No normal person would. We rejoice in persecution not because of how it feels, but because of what it says about us. Its presence indicates that our lives reflect Christ in a way that prompts others to treat us the way they would have treated Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you being poorly treated or slandered by others because of your commitment to Jesus Christ?

Write down some of the things people have said about you and prayerfully examine them. Are you suffering because others have seen evidence of Christ in your life, or rather is their criticism of you deserved?

Matthew 5:14-16

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. - Matthew 5:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the most famous missionary doctors ever, Wilfred Grenfell, spent his life serving people in Labrador. Saved at a D. L. Moody revival meeting in England, he first ministered on a “mercy ship” among North Sea fishermen.

When he started his work, Grenfell was overwhelmed by the physical and spiritual poverty of the people. In addition to his medical activities, he tried to make a difference economically by helping to start cooperatives and small businesses, and by opposing the exploitative practices of local merchants. Although accused of seeking financial gain, he actually lost money. At his best, Wilfred Grenfell lived out the principle at the heart of today’s reading: Your actions should be a witness to the gospel.

While some believers are called specifically to full-time ministry or foreign places, we are all “missionaries” since we’re all responsible to share the gospel. One purpose for this month is to give you a vision for world missions, but another is to give you a vision for reaching your neighbor.

In today’s reading, Jesus uses familiar images and common sense to teach spiritual truth. One picture is a city on a hill. Its light is obvious, clearly seen from far away. A second picture is a lamp in a house. People light it for a purpose, which would be defeated by the strange action of covering it.

“In the same way” (Mt 5:16) means that our actions are analogous to these two images. They are obvious to those around us--we can’t hide them. And the purpose of our actions should be to bring God’s light into spiritual darkness. We should act so that outsiders “see [our] good deeds and praise [our] Father in heaven.” Or as Peter said, “Live such good lives among the pagans that . . . they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To help you apply today’s devotion, here’s a classic prayer by early German Pietist Johann Arndt:

Matthew 5:17-20

I hate and abhor falsehood but I love your law. - Psalm 119:163

TODAY IN THE WORD

It is not unusual for some teachers to grade on a curve when they give an especially difficult exam. This practice adjusts the grading scale to the performance of the students rather than grading the students’ performance based upon an established scale. Of course, the fear of every student who is graded this way is that someone in the class will “break” the curve by answering most of the questions correctly!

Some who misunderstand the Bible’s theology of grace believe that God uses a similar approach when it comes to judging human behavior. They are convinced that the only requirement in order to be declared righteous in God’s sight is to “do one’s best.” While they admit that they are not perfect, they take comfort in the knowledge that they are not as bad as others.

Jesus reveals the error of such thinking in this passage by pointing out that He had come to “fulfill” the Law and the Prophets rather than abolish them (Mt 5:17). The terms Law and Prophets refer to the entire Old Testament. Jesus did not lower God’s standard; He upheld it and warned that those who set it aside would be “called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:19).

Ironically, the religious leaders of Christ’s day wrongly believed that they were living by God’s standard. They took pride in their own righteousness and viewed with contempt all those who fell short of that standard. In reality, they had modified God’s law to fit their performance and had added their own traditions to it. One of Jesus’ goals in this section of the Sermon on the Mount was to correct the standard to reflect God’s scale.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Use a concordance to learn how the term law is used in the New Testament. What do you discover about the nature of God’s law? Why do the Scriptures speak of the “curse” of the law? Why are Christians no longer under the curse? Why should God expect those who are no longer “under the law” to reflect the righteousness that is revealed in the law? You may find as a result of your study that you have modified God’s standard in your own way. If so, ask God for forgiveness, and rejoice in the freedom of His grading scale.

Matthew 5:7-9

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his book, The Fall of Fortresses, Elmer Bendiner tells the story of an unusual flight he took as part of a B-17 bomber crew during World War II. On a raid over Germany, the plane was hit in the fuel tank by anti-aircraft fire. But despite a direct hit, the tank did not explode and the crew returned safely.

Later, eleven unexploded shells were taken from the fuel tank. They were sent to be defused, and it was discovered that all but one of the shells was empty. That one shell contained a small note written in Czech: ""This is all we can do for you now.""

No one knows if that anonymous, peace-loving Czech worker was motivated by the Beatitudes, but when he or she ""sowed"" blank shells, the bomber crew certainly ""harvested"" peace! This action was not only a small attempt to help end World War II, but it brought great personal peace to each man on that B-17 who might otherwise have perished.

This was also an act of mercy, another ""habit of the heart"" that should mark us as children of God and those who seek the happiness only He can give (Mt 5:7).

The mercy Jesus is talking about flows from a pure heart , one that is in right relationship with God. Spiritual purity is holiness, an absolute necessity for those who want to see God: ""Without holiness no one will see the Lord"" (Heb. 12:14).

As the apostle James tells us in today's verse, the righteousness that Jesus wants to permeate the citizens of His kingdom grows best in the soil of peace. This does not mean, of course, that we can only grow spiritually when everything is calm. God sends trials our way to perfect us (James 1:2-4).

Jesus' idea of peace has several dimensions. We know He is pleased when we as believers live in unity with one another. We are also urged to pray for peace in society (1 Tim. 2:1-4) so that the gospel will not be hindered.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's illustration reminds us that there are many circumstances affecting peace that are beyond our control.

Matthew 5:10-12

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to one report, the end of Germany's famous ""Red Baron,"" Manfred von Richthofen, came because he pursued an Allied airplane ""too long, too far, and too low into enemy territory.""

On April 21, 1918, von Richthofen, the celebrated World War I pilot who was responsible for shooting down 80 enemy aircraft, began chasing a British plane that was trying to escape the battle. As the Red Baron pursued his quarry behind Allied lines, gunfire from either machine-gun nests on the ground or another British pilot who had come to help killed von Richthofen.

Anyone deep in enemy territory in wartime can expect to get shot at and perhaps shot down. Since that is essentially the case with Christians living in the world (see John 17:15-16; Romans 12:2), we should not be surprised by persecution (Phil. 1:29). Persecution has been the constant companion of God's people since the days of the prophets.

For most of us, Jesus' final Beatitude seems out of place with the whole idea of being ""happy"" or ""blessed."" We can't imagine anything joyous about suffering. But this is clearly important to Jesus, since He spends far more time elaborating on the blessedness--and the certainty--of persecution than on any other Beatitude.

Persecution has not been the common experience of the majority of believers in the Western world, so we are on largely unfamiliar ground here. But when His people endure suffering and ill treatment for His name's sake, Jesus clearly describes the right response--rejoicing--as well as the future reward (Matt. 5:12).

The happiness Jesus promises is tied to suffering ""because of righteousness"" and ""because of me"" (vv. 10-11). The apostle Peter distinguished between suffering for our own wrongdoing and suffering for Christ (1 Peter 4:12ff.)

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus guaranteed us we will have trouble in this world (John 16:33). It's simply bound to happen if we follow Him.

Matthew 5:13-16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Father Maximilian Kolbe is remembered by Holocaust survivors as an extraordinary man whose imprisonment and brutal treatment by the Nazis did not dim the light of Christ in his eyes. Kolbe encouraged other prisoners to hope and to sing songs of praise. ""He made us see that our souls were not dead,"" recalled one prisoner. Kolbe's countenance was so serene and his eyes so penetrating that the Nazi guards would tell him, ""Look at the ground, not at us!"" Kolbe died after offering to take the place of a condemned prisoner.

The imagery of salt and light is so familiar and even comfortable to us that we can forget how radically our obedience to Jesus can set us apart from the world. Salt is most effective on meat that would otherwise spoil. Light is most needed when the darkness is the deepest.

Today's text draws a sharp line between the kingdom of heaven and the domain of Satan. The system that rules this world (see Eph. 6:12) produces nothing but decay and darkness. We as believers carry the antidote: the life and light of Christ.

The preservative properties of salt are well known. In a culture that had no other way to preserve meat, salt took on great importance. Jesus' comment about salt losing its saltiness (Mt 5:13) reflects the fact that the salt used in His day was often laced with impurities, leaving a residue that was then used on roads and roofs to harden clay and prevent cracks.

The ""salt of the earth"" metaphor is followed up with a parallel image, ""light of the world"" (Mt 5:14). The useless salt is compared to a light that is hidden under a bowl rather than allowed to shine (Mt 5:15). Jesus' point is unmistakable: we as His disciples cannot preserve and enlighten a hurting world unless we follow Him in purity and obedience.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The start of the new year's first full work week is a perfect time to evaluate how well you're functioning as salt and light to those around you.

Matthew 5:13-16

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. - Matthew 5:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

We're familiar with several uses of salt—it flavors food, melts ice, and relieves a sore throat. You might know that it can be used to preserve meat, smother a grease fire, and clean a kitchen cutting board. But did you know it can help soothe a bee sting, kill poison ivy, and keep windows free of frost? It can also be used for a number of specialty cleaning jobs. You can even use it to test for rotten eggs: Put two teaspoons of salt in a cup of water, then drop in the suspect egg. A rotten one floats, but a fresh one sinks.

Obviously, salt is a versatile and highly useful substance! For about the next two weeks, we'll be studying what Scripture says about a healthy church's activities and responsibilities, both general and specific. The first of these is to be salt and light to the world. The metaphor of “salt” (v. 13) seems to have been used mainly to suggest salt's properties of flavoring and pre-serving, especially once we know that the phrase “loses its saltiness” is elsewhere translated “has lost its taste” (ESV). This might include the relationship the church should have with the general culture, but the emphasis is on the uselessness of not being salt—that is, the uselessness of being a Christian who does not actually follow Christ. Christianity without discipleship is an absurd and empty phenomenon.

The metaphor of “light” (Mt 5:14-16) has mainly to do with witness and righteousness. Light helps those walking in darkness see the truth (Isa. 9:2). It also represents goodness and holiness as opposed to “deeds of darkness” (John 3:19). Again, there is an emphasis on the uselessness of not giving light—a hidden lamp is of no use to anyone. What we should be doing is shining our light everywhere we can, meaning that part of our business as Christians is to do good deeds for the glory of God (Eph. 2:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The church must always remember that we are a spiritual institution, not a cultural one, even though we exist in particular times and places. That means that the church is to be distinctive—salt and light—not simply carried along in the stream of “what everyone else is doing.” Could you, and your church, be described as doing the works of Christ that make you distinctive in the world? What “good deeds” are you doing that would bring glory to your Father in heaven?

Matthew 5:17-20

The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. - Romans 7:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

We are told that the main library at one of America's large state universities is sinking at the rate of one inch per year. The reason for the problem is that when engineers designed the building, they failed to take into account the weight of all the books that would occupy its shelves.

Spiritually speaking, that's similar to what happened to the system that Israel's religious leaders had built in the years before Jesus' coming. Adding to God's law, these leaders had developed a complex system of laws and rules, many of which regulated outward behavior but had little impact on the inner life.

This was not the system Jesus came to fulfill by His sinless life. When He said He had come to the fulfill the Old Testament, He was referring to the ""holy, righteous, and good"" commands of God, which had the power to justify the person who could keep them perfectly. No one could, however--until Jesus came. He lived the perfect righteousness that God's law requires, which qualified Jesus to be our Savior.

What about all the regulations and additions the Pharisees and teachers of the law taught and defended so passionately? Jesus once said of this system and the ones who perpetuated it, ""They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders"" (Matt. 23:4). Jesus came to set people free from that burden. But He did not come to push aside or ignore God's righteous requirements.

Paul reminds us that the problem is not God's commandments, but our sinful response to God's holy demands (Rom. 7:7-12).

Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees might lead us to think He saw nothing good in them. But as one Bible teacher pointed out, the problem was not that the Pharisees were not good.

Instead, they were not good enough. Their rules could make people outwardly good, but could not satisfy the law's demand for absolute righteousness. That's why Jesus said anyone who hoped to enter God's kingdom would have to possess a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees. In the final analysis, only Jesus could meet this requirement.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many people are trying to please God by their good behavior. But the gap between us and Him can't be closed by our own works.

Do you believe you are going to reach heaven on your good record? If so, it's possible that you have never come face-to-face with your sin and its consequences (Rom. 3:9-10, 23; 6:23). If you have any doubt at all about your salvation, talk with your pastor or a Christian friend. And if your relationship with Christ is secure, you may want to talk with your family and make sure each member knows the Lord.

Matthew 5:14-16 Philippians 2:12-18

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. - Matthew 5:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Anyone who has ventured into an underground cave knows what the phrase “pitch black” means. Without any source of light, one cannot see even a hand in front of the face. Yet, the moment a match is struck or a flashlight turned on, that underground world is instantly illuminated and darkness is dispelled. Light always overpowers the darkness and brings with it the ability to see clearly again.

Light's power to dispel darkness and bring clarity is reflected in both of today's readings. First, in Philippians, we are again exhorted to Christian obedience and purity, remembering that it is “God who works in you” (Mt 5:13). And again, this call to holiness is grounded in our identity as “children of God” (Mt 5:15). But notice the subtle shift in emphasis. The call to obedience is not merely for our own benefit, but also for the benefit of others. We are to “shine like stars in the universe” (Mt 5:15). Not only have we, through Christ, been brought “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9), but we must also reflect that lifegiving light to the world. This, says Scripture, is our “holding out the word of life” (Mt 5:16). As children of God and children of light, we are called to bring that light to others.

Likewise, in the reading from Matthew 5, Jesus declared: “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). And what is the purpose of light? Certainly not, as Jesus says, to hide it under a bowl. Rather, we “put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house” (Mt 5:15). The proper use of light is to make it available for the benefit of all.

Our good deeds, to which we are called as children of God, are not for hiding away, but neither are they for a self-glorifying show. Lest we think that being a child of God benefits only ourselves, God's Word reminds us that our lives, like shining lights, must be directed toward the benefit of others and the glory of our Father in heaven.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How often do you feel ashamed of your Christian lifestyle? For those who struggle with a Christian witness, today's passages call us to reflect on the responsibilities we have to the world as God's children. Not everyone is called to publicly preach the gospel to everyone we meet. But we are all called to let our lives speak the “word of life” to a darkened world. Consider ways your life can shine forth as light, and ask God for the boldness to live so today.

Matthew 5:17-18

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Chicago Fire Department is finally abandoning its telegraph system. The system is so old that visiting Japanese fire officials thought they were being shown a museum piece when they viewed the telegraph on a tour of a Chicago fire station. But the telegraph has reliably linked Chicago's fire dispatchers with the city's fire stations for over a century. The system is being replaced by a multimillion-dollar computerized dispatching center.

When lives and property are in jeopardy, every dot and dash of a fire department's Morse code message carries importance. That's even more true of the smallest strokes and portions of a Hebrew letter in the Word of God, which will never pass away.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus affirmed the complete inspiration and authority of the Old Testament as He explained the relationship of His kingdom to the Mosaic Law.

Matthew 5:17-20 holds an important key to our understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. In today's text, Jesus refuted the idea that He was teaching a rival system to the Law of Moses, which the Pharisees and their cohorts claimed to safeguard.

Instead, Jesus was absolutely faithful to the Law. He came in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy to keep the Law perfectly--something no mere human being couldever accomplish!

By their traditions, the Pharisees had twisted and even nullified the true meaning and intent of the Law. Jesus exposed the superficiality of their teachings and reaffirmed the truth that God is more interested in the condition of our hearts than in the ""correctness"" of our behavior.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

No one who understands God's law could claim to obey it fully. Without Jesus, this fact would leave us guilty before a holy God. Trying to keep God's commands on our own is a futile exercise that ends in condemnation (see James 2:10). But because of Jesus, we are justified freely by God's grace (Rom. 3:24).

Matthew 5:1-48

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. - Matthew 5:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

In history, salt has carried many meanings. One superstition held that spilled salt brought bad luck. Others believed that every grain of spilled salt represents a tear to be shed in future troubles.

On the other hand, salt was a symbol of friendship to the ancient Greeks, who welcomed visitors with a pinch of salt in their right hands. In some cultures, salt was so valuable that it was part of laborers' wages. And of course in modern times we are quite familiar with its properties as a seasoning and a preservative. It is perhaps these last few meanings that Jesus had in mind when He said, "You are the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13).

The famous Sermon on the Mount teaches how followers of Christ's kingdom ought to live. Matthew 5, verses 1–16, give an overview, then Mt 5:17–48 go into specifics. The initial overview lists qualities and actions that God will bless, including being poor in spirit (an attitude of humility and trust), hungering for righteousness, showing mercy, making peace, and being persecuted for the sake of godliness. The metaphors of salt and light are the climax of these Beatitudes, and the bottom line is that our obedient good deeds are all for the glory of God (Mt 5:16).

The rest of the chapter consists of six mini-sermons that go into more detail about kingdom living. Though the principles given here contrast with legalistic traditions, it's important to point out that Jesus was not opposing the Law–in fact, He said He came to fulfill it. Rather, He was probing its moral and spiritual essence in order to arrive at higher, harder truths (Mt 5:17–20, 48).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One of the many challenging commands in today's reading is to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). Are you doing this?

Matthew 5:19-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Wall Street Journal reports that a debate is raging in the auto industry over the best way for workers to take breaks. Should all workers in a plant go on break at the same time, thereby shutting down the production line? Or should one worker at a time go on break, with ""tag"" workers replacing those on break? Analysts estimate that keeping the production line moving could add as much as $100 million to a large plant's annual profits.

An argument about how to take a coffee break sounds like the type of issue the Pharisees could have debated for weeks. These respected leaders of Israel prided themselves on their scrupulous obedience to the many regulations their ancestors had added to the Law of Moses.

But this prideful obedience was at the heart of the Pharisees' problem. They focused on external rules--what Jesus called the ""outside of the cup and dish"" (Luke 11:39). In so doing, they failed to keep their hearts (the inside of the cup) clean. In addition to transgressing the core of God's Law themselves, they had also led others astray (see Matt. 23:13).

The Pharisees' obedience to God extended only to matters that could be seen and measured and touched. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus set the record straight. Anyone who wants to enter His kingdom will need a righteousness that reaches all the way to the heart!

Jesus makes this contrast in an interesting way in today's verses. The person who fails to keep one of God's commands is not necessarily excluded from the kingdom, although his place in the kingdom will be less glorious than the one who ""practices and teaches these commands"" (v. 19).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When it comes to practicing religion, many people like lists of rules to keep and actions to avoid.

That desire is not hard to understand. It's much easier to follow a list than to face the true condition of the heart before God. But even people who have experienced God's forgiveness and grace can fall into the trap of legalism themselves--or try to make other people conform.

Matthew 5:21-22

TODAY IN THE WORD

How do top corporate executives relieve stress? A recent survey by a temporary-help agency yielded several surprising results. One way is by throwing plates against the wall! Other unusual methods for venting anger and frustration included singing opera while being kept on hold on the telephone, fiddling with children's ""Silly Putty"" during meetings, and playing hockey in the company parking lot.

Some of these stress-relieving techniques may bring a chuckle, but there's nothing funny about pent-up anger. Anger is a dangerous human reaction, as Jesus explains in today's verses. This is the first of six contrasts Jesus makes between the popular teaching of the day and the true intent of God's law.

The point here is not that all stress relief is bad. Plate-throwing and other activities may be destructive, but there's nothing wrong with exercising or taking a walk to let off steam. These, however, offer only temporary relief. Jesus went straight to the true core of the problem of anger--the human heart.

The Pharisees taught that murder is a violation of God's law. So far, so good, since ""do not murder"" is the sixth commandment. But these prideful men were unwilling to look inward and deal with hateful, murderous attitudes in their own hearts; the desire of many in this group to see Jesus put to death is proof of that! Their hearts, if not their outward actions, disobeyed God's law.

Jesus' teaching went beyond the act of murder to expose the anger of heart that causes a person to turn to violence. Before Cain murdered Abel, the Scripture records that ""Cain was very angry"" (Gen. 4:5). God challenged Cain's anger and warned him that sin was ready to take control of him (Ge 4:6-7).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Ephesians 4:26 is one of those familiar verses that is sometimes easier to quote than to practice.

But Jesus' warning, added to Paul's exhortation, makes it critical that we deal decisively with anger. That makes today a time for heart-searching.

Matthew 5:23-26

TODAY IN THE WORD

When D. L. Moody was four years old, his father died, leaving a large, impoverished family. The eldest son ran away from home, but each night his mother put a light in the window, hoping for his return.

Mr. Moody recalled that when his older brother did come home, he was barely recognizable behind a heavy beard. It was only as he began to cry that Mrs. Moody realized it was her son and invited him in. ""No, mother,"" he said, ""I will not come in until I hear first that you have forgiven me."" Mrs. Moody threw her arms around her son and brought him indoors.

Moody's older brother was clearly in the wrong and he knew it, which made his mother's gift of forgiveness and reconciliation a special one. We as believers have the gift of re-conciliation to offer others, and Jesus urges us to give it freely.

In fact, Jesus commands us to initiate reconciliation whether we are in the right or in the wrong. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus doesn't define who is the guilty party or who is responsible for the broken relationship. The point is not to assign blame, but to make the situation right.

The same is true in the courtroom scene Jesus outlined in Mt 5:25-26. He didn't say the person being taken to court will definitely be found guilty, although that seems to be the likely outcome if the case goes to trial. It doesn't matter who's right or who's wrong--again, the point is to ""settle matters quickly.""

Taking the first step in re-conciliation is our responsibility as believers. When we fail to do so, we often try to justify ourselves by saying something like, ""I'm not mad at her, she's mad at me. It's her problem. She needs to deal with it.""

But Jesus turns that kind of logic upside-down. God wants us to do everything we can to remove barriers and offenses between us and other Christians. Otherwise, our acts of worship are hollow to Him. That ought to be motivation enough to seek peace!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Let's admit it. These are tough commands to follow.

Why? Be-cause it's difficult for us to set aside the issue of blame. When we feel we are innocent, most of us want justice. It's only when we are in the wrong that we want mercy

Matthew 5:27-32

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his provocative book, Reclaiming Surrendered Ground, author and biblical counselor Jim Logan debunks the myth that ""private"" sexual habits such as pornography are basically harmless because no one else is involved. Many men who use pornography buy into this false and dangerous argument. Logan cites Scripture and examples from his counseling ministry which show that practicing sexual lust leads to spiritual bondage which can have devastating effects on a person's marriage and family relationships.

Jesus knew the inner damage that lust can do. He knows the workings of the human heart because He is God (see Psalm 139). In the Sermon on the Mount, He warns us strongly of the dangers of lust and of how seriously God views it. Although some have taken the language of verses 29-30 literally, self-mutilation is not at all the point here. After all, as many Bible teachers have noted, a blind person can still lust in his heart. Rather, Jesus is expressing the serious nature and consequences of lust.

The Savior's strong language in these verses highlights and emphasizes the deadly nature of sin. Untreated, sin leads to hell, as we saw yesterday. Since that is the case, we are wise to do whatever it takes to avoid sin and obey God.

Since marriage is the most intimate bond on earth, it naturally suffers or sustains the greatest damage from lust. So although verse 31 begins another thought on Jesus' part, it's appropriate that we include these verses in today's study.

The Jewish leaders' attitude toward marriage clearly revealed the true condition of their hearts. Whereas Jesus affirmed the permanence and sanctity of marriage, they took a lighter view. One school of thought permitted divorce for the flimsiest of reasons, and some believed that it was acceptable under almost any circumstances (Matt. 19:3). Current law made it easy for a husband to get rid of his wife.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jim Logan says lust is an addictive sin that often causes its victims to go to great lengths to satisfy their desires.

Matthew 5:33-37

TODAY IN THE WORD

On his first voyage west in 1492, Christopher Columbus knew that his crew felt uneasy about sailing into unknown waters for an unknown period of time. So he kept two logs for the journey. In the first, he recorded the distances traveled as he calculated them. In the second log, he deliberately entered shorter distances so his crew would think they were closer to home than they actually were.

This deception had an ironic twist, however. As it turns out, the phony mileage figures Columbus entered to soothe his nervous crew were more accurate than his ""real"" calculations. His ""lies"" had been closer to the mark than his ""truth""!

Deception usually has unexpected and harmful results. It's always better to let your word be your word. This exhortation from the lips of Jesus is incredibly practical in our world of agents, multi-year contracts, performance clauses, labor agreements and international treaties. Whether on the personal, corporate or national level, we haven't left much room for people to live by their individual integrity.

Some people believe Jesus is forbidding any oath, even legal oaths. But His prohibition seems to focus instead on our personal conversation and actions. When we follow every promise or declaration with a flurry of guarantees that we are telling the truth, our words become suspect. After all, if we are as good as our word, what need is there for additional guarantees?

Jesus underscores the binding nature of oaths made to God as a backdrop against which to contrast the flippant oaths people make in everyday talk. He also likely had in mind the ""clever way"" the Pharisees and Jewish legal experts had of excusing themselves from their promises (see Mark 7:9-13).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We often hear people speak nostalgically about the days when a person's word or a handshake were as good as a written contract.

For God's people, of course, this kind of clear-eyed integrity is how we are to live today. How is your IQ, your ""Integrity Quotient,"" lately? Do your family, friends and co-workers know they can count on you to stand by your promises?

Matthew 5:38-42

TODAY IN THE WORD

Russian Czar Peter the Great was fascinated with the study and practice of medicine. So when one of the czar's valets asked the monarch to pull his wife's tooth, Peter grabbed his dental instruments and followed the valet to his apartment. There Peter pulled the woman's tooth, ignoring her cries of protest. Only several days later did Peter learn that the woman had never had a toothache at all. The painful extraction was her husband's revenge for a domestic quarrel. Talk about ""tooth for tooth""!

Despite the Old Testament ""law of retaliation"" cited by Jesus in today's text, the czar's vengeful servant was not following Scripture when he had his wife's tooth pulled as ""payment"" for their argument. In fact, the principle was designed to prevent just such personal vengeance-taking.

The phrase ""eye for eye, and tooth for tooth"" receives a lot of bad press in the secular world today. Opponents of Christianity quote it as an example of God's harshness. They forget that this punishment was not for personal retribution or revenge, but was to be administered by the authorities with strict adherence to justice.

This law was merciful and just because it limited punishment to the severity of the crime. In theory, our legal system is also built upon this principle.

By contrast, human revenge is almost never just. If you doubt that, spend some time around a local elementary school and watch students interact on the playground. One insult or unkind word prompts many more. One punch brings a flurry of blows in return. We're raising a violent generation, which makes the Sermon on the Mount more timely than ever.

There is a specific cultural background to Mt 5:40-41. Jewish law in Jesus' day forbade taking a person's outer cloak, which the poor used as their bed. And it is well-known that occupying Roman soldiers could compel a Jew to carry their military pack for one mile.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Admittedly, it's difficult to let go of our rights in cases of personal insult, injury or injustice. Everything in our human nature cries out for justice--or even revenge. But Jesus goes further than simply telling us not to retaliate. We are to return good for evil. The goal is to win people through love (Rom. 12:19-21).

Matthew 5:43-48

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. - Matthew 5:48

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent study at Dartmouth College confirmed children's tendency to imitate their parents. Presented with a pretend store full of miniature groceries, children were allowed to buy whatever they wanted and use it in their playtime. Not surprisingly, the study demonstrated that children were three to four times more likely to “buy” and “use” cigarettes and alcohol if their parents were regular smokers and drinkers. The conclusion was obvious: children watch and imitate their parents closely.

As children of God, Scripture calls us also to watch and to imitate our heavenly Father. Jesus' words call us to the unnatural action of loving our personal enemies. But Jesus does not simply issue a command; He also explains why: “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (v. 45). How does loving our enemies identify us as children of God? Such action imitates the Father's own demonstrations of love and goodness to the world. Just as He provides sun and rain to both “the evil and the good . . . the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45), so His children are called to demonstrate such love and beneficence to all, even those we may call “enemies.” Our very identity as children of God entails this higher call: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Although this verse is often taken out of context to imply that Christians will be in a perpetual state of sinless perfection, the Greek word for “perfect” (teleios) means more than an abstract state of perfection. Rather, something is teleios (perfect) when it fulfills the purpose for which it has been made. And what is the purpose of humankind? Genesis 1:26 tells us that we are made to be like God, in His image. In context then, Jesus suggests that the loving character of God is to be ful-filled (“perfected”) in each and every one of His children. We are “perfect” like our Father when we love those around us with our conduct, demonstrating our Father's own love in action. May it be said of us: "Like Parent, like child."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Scripture boldly calls us to love our enemies. But there is more here than just conjuring up fuzzy sentiments and warm feelings.

Jesus calls us specifically to pray for our enemies (Mt 5:44). That's the first step in actively loving someone, to come before the Father and pray for their good. Choose someone today (such as a belligerent neighbor, a persecuting co-worker, or a scoffing relative) whom you have trouble loving. Then ask for your Father's strength to imitate Him by loving that person in prayer and in tangible action.

Matthew 5:43-48

TODAY IN THE WORD

Napoleon's triumphant attitude toward his enemies had softened by the time his French forces defeated the Russians at the Battle of Borodino. Losses on both sides were heavy. As Napoleon walked the battlefield the next day, taking a count of the dead, he heard a cry of pain from a fallen soldier and ordered a stretcher. One of his aides pointed out that the wounded man was a Russian, but Napoleon retorted, ""After a victory there are no enemies, only men.""

Treating a wounded enemy is commendable, but Jesus would have us go one step further and prevent the battle if possible. Today's text is a clear statement of God's merciful love to the undeserving. From His standpoint, that includes all of us! If God took revenge, no one would be left standing.

Notice that Jesus didn't say loving our enemies would be easy. One of the proofs we are made in the image of God is our sense of justice. Because of our sinfulness, our ideas of justice are easily thrown off balance, but there is still something within us that cries out for justice. No one likes being wronged.

Still, if we are to obey God, we must love our enemies. Jesus' point is that God in His mercy sends rain and other blessings to both good and bad people. Therefore, our job as Christians is not to try to decide who does or does not deserve our mercy. By loving our enemies, we reflect the love of God expressed in Christ's death for sinners.

All of us are familiar with the ""selective kindness"" Jesus described in Mt 5:46-47. Many people in our world live by, ""You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."" While this attitude may win people social or business advancement, Jesus isn't impressed. Citizens of His kingdom are to live by other rules.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Being nice to those who are nice to us is so easy that Jesus says even unbelievers can pull it off. God's people are called to live by a higher standard. Forgiving and praying for those who mistreat us is an unmistakable mark of those who claim to follow Jesus.

Matthew 5:21-22

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. - Exodus 20:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

When author and pianist Oscar Levant was called to appear before the draft board, he was asked by the examiner whether or not he thought he could kill. “I don’t know about strangers,” Levant replied. “But friends, yes.”

Levant’s answer harmonizes with the teaching in today’s passage. Jesus’ words indicate that not everyone who commits murder uses a gun. In the vast majority of cases, anger and contempt are the weapons of choice. Jesus warned that anyone who is angry with his brother is as guilty as the one who murders.

These are troubling words. His listeners would have agreed that all who commit murder deserve judgment. Few of them, however, would have seen themselves as being in such a danger. According to Jesus’ definition of murder, the weapon is the tongue and its arsenal is the human heart (Mt 5:22).

By pointing to the heart as the source of murder, Jesus not only condemned His listeners but everyone else as well. Who hasn’t been angry with someone else at some point? In this passage, Scripture does not seem to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate anger. The apostle Paul clarifies this distinction in Ephesians 4:26-27 when he says, “ 'In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” Even Paul’s distinction carries with it a warning that legitimate anger must be dealt with quickly.

Anger is a normal human emotion. But human anger is also affected by sin, and left to itself anger will always fall short of God’s standard. Just feeling angry is not necessarily a sin–but unless it is resolved, human anger will eventually degenerate into sin.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Write out James 1:19-20 on a three-by-five card: “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to

speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

Keep it in your purse or wallet. When you feel angry, take it out and read it to yourself. Use this time as an opportunity to “slow” your response and to ask God for the grace to react in a way that brings about “the righteous life that God desires.”

Matthew 5:23-24; Romans 14:19-21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Writer Shannon Woodward relates this recent experience in a bookstore. A little boy came running into the store and rushed up to his father who was calmly browsing the children's books. The boy had a request to make, but before he could finish, his father exploded and angrily told him to go back to the family van. A few minutes later an older girl came into the store and tried to talk to the father. But in a voice that turned every head in the store, he screamed at her to go outside and stay put. As the girl left red-faced, the man calmly resumed his browsing.

Woodward watched sadly, amazed at the way this father erupted with anger and then browsed as if nothing had happened. Such scenes are painful to witness, yet if we are honest with ourselves we would admit this is often the way we approach our worship of God.

We may come into God's presence, ready to worship Him, yet we come knowing that things are not right ""outside,"" where family or friends are feeling the effects of our disrupted relationships with them.

God wants us to remove this hindrance before we bring Him our praise and our gifts--a necessary step of preparation for worship that Jesus addressed in the Sermon on the Mount. Today's text in Romans 14 declares the importance of remaining at peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ (v. 19).

Applying this to our worship, Jesus turned the situation around from what we might expect (Matt. 5). The problem here is not what others have done to offend us, but what we might have done to cause offense to a brother or a sister.

Why did Jesus state the case this way? Probably because we are a lot quicker to forget our own offenses than we are to forget the offenses other people commit against us. The altar Jesus was talking about was located in the inner portion of the temple, where solemn worship took place (v. 23).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's lesson is one of those that basically suggests its own application.

You may not know of anything between you and a fellow believer. If that's the case, the Holy Spirit can confirm that in your heart.

Matthew 5:23-26

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. - Hebrews 12:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

The cousin of French king Louis XV had the habit of ordering his coachman to try to run over any monks he saw walking in the road. This dangerous amusement was permitted to go unchecked, and it eventually led to a deadly consequence. One day the king’s cousin passed a man who was repairing a road and shot him–just for the sport of seeing the man fall. When the crime was brought to the king’s attention, he pardoned his cousin but with this warning: “Let it be understood: I will similarly pardon anyone who shoots you.”

Jesus does more than describe the nature of anger. He diagnoses its root and warns of its ultimate consequences. Anger is what we feel when we believe that we have been wronged by someone. It springs from resentment over an offense and contempt for the individual. It results in an adversarial relationship that has the potential to disrupt fellowship and worship alike.

In His teaching on this subject Jesus offered two important principles for dealing with anger. The first principle is initiative. In this passage the focus is primarily on the one who has offended someone else. We might have expected Jesus to focus primarily on the offended party, since they are the most likely to feel anger towards another. Instead, in these verses it is the offender who initiates the process of reconciliation. Elsewhere Jesus urges the offended party to make the first move (Matt. 18:15). Both share an obligation to work for resolution when there has been a conflict. Ideally, the two would meet en route to one another and settle their differences “on the way.”

Jesus’ second principle is urgency. How important is it to deal with anger? Reconciliation is so important that it takes priority over everything else. It even takes precedence over worship. God would rather see us resolve our differences than receive our offerings.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you know someone who is angry with you? Is there someone who has offended you? How can you take the initiative in each case to reconcile with that person? Before attempting to reconcile, take some time to think through your strategy. For example, reconciliation may be better attempted face to face rather than over the phone. You may even want to write out what you will say in advance. There is no way to guarantee how the other person will respond, but you can be certain of God's help as you "make every effort."

Matthew 5:27-30

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. - Luke 11:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

Moshe Dayan, the former Israeli minister of defense and foreign minister, was blind in one eye and wore an eye patch. An officer once stopped him for speeding. "I have only one eye," Dayan complained to the officer. "What do you want me to watch–the speedometer or the road?"

What we choose to look at matters. Jesus' warning in today's passage provides a sobering reminder that how we choose to look is equally important. Although sin is often expressed through our actions, it is rooted in attitude of the heart. Once our definition of sin is expanded to include motives as well as actions, we realize that we can commit sin even before we take any action. People who commit adultery merely ratify by their deeds the sin they've already committed in their hearts.

Jesus' expansive definition in this passage does more than expose new categories of sin. Ultimately it reveals both our vulnerability and our responsibility. If sin begins in the heart, so that the lustful look offends God as much as the act of adultery, both our danger and our guilt are far greater than most of us imagine. If we apply Jesus' standard to our thoughts and motives, it will not be very long before we cry out along with the prophet Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). We will soon discover that our only hope lies in God's forgiveness through Christ.

Jesus' warning implies that, while there is a remedy, it is not an "easy" one. The disturbing language of self-mutilation in this passage is not meant to be taken literally. It is hyperbolic language, intended to emphasize the urgency of avoiding sin. Those who truly understand sin's seriousness will do "whatever it takes" to deal with it. But what does it take?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus mentions the potential that we have to sin with certain members of our bodies. Think of ways that you can use parts of your body either for sin or for righteousness. For example, the same tongue that can be used in a sinful way to slander someone can also be used to share the gospel with them or to praise God (cf. James 3:. Think of other members of your body and identify one way that they can be used to sin and at least one alternative way that same member could be used to promote righteousness.

Matthew 5:31-32

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. - Mark 7:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

W. C. Fields, the comedian, film actor, and known agnostic, surprised one of his friends who found him thumbing through a Bible while on his deathbed. Amazed, his friend asked what he was doing. Fields replied, "I'm looking for a loophole."

The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a similar approach to God's law. New Testament scholars have noted that the Pharisees recognized their own oral tradition from Jewish teachers as a supreme authority in addition to the written Scriptures. In practice they often relied more on oral tradition than on the explicit teaching of Scripture. At one point, Jesus criticized them by saying, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9).

One example of this tendency was in their approach to divorce. In Matthew 5:31-32 Jesus criticized the religious leaders for being more interested in the "paperwork" of the divorce proceeding than in God's original design for marriage. They taught that as long as a certificate of divorce had been issued, the divorce was legitimate. Jesus warned that human tradition did not have the authority to nullify God's standard. Divorce and subsequent remarriage, when the grounds fell outside the parameters set by God, resulted in adultery no matter what formalities were used to validate the union.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What was true of society in Jesus' day is still true today. What is legal isn't necessarily right. Christians must answer to a higher

authority than human custom or civil code. God alone has the ultimate authority to define what is right and wrong.

Matthew 5:33-37

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. - Exodus 20:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Every January people make resolutions for the coming year. They promise themselves that they will eat better, exercise more, or work less. By February, slightly more than half of those promises have already been broken. By May, most people have long since forgotten their resolutions. A promise easily made is often all too quickly forgotten.

This is also true with promises made to God. The Scriptures warn against the practice of making hasty vows to God. Proverbs 20:25 declares, “It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.” Similarly, the book of Ecclesiastes urges his readers to be on guard when in God’s presence. The author warns, “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few” (Eccl. 5:2). God takes our words seriously and holds us to the promises we make, whether they are made to Him or to others.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day, on the other hand, had a different view of the promises they made. They ranked oaths by the objects upon which they were sworn. An oath sworn by God’s name was considered to be binding; one sworn by heaven or by earth was not binding. An oath sworn by the city of Jerusalem was binding only if the person making it was facing Jerusalem when it was uttered. Casual oaths were also frequently made using God’s name. In practical terms, this kind of “swearing” violated the commandment against misusing the Lord’s name (cf. Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

John Calvin called the tongue “the messenger of the heart.” This is especially true of promises we make, whether they are made to man or to God. Whether or not we follow through with our promises indicates what is in our heart.

Matthew 5:38-42

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. - Romans 12:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

A woman came to Ibn Saud, the first king of Saudi Arabia, seeking revenge against the man who had killed her husband. The man had fallen out of a palm tree while gathering dates and had landed on the woman’s husband. The king tried to persuade her to accept monetary compensation instead, knowing that she had no way of supporting herself. The woman refused and demanded the man’s life in return for her husband’s. “It is your right to exact compensation, and it is also your right to ask for this man’s life,” the king declared. “But it is my right to decree how he shall die.” The king then ordered that the man be tied to the foot of a palm tree and the woman climb up and cast herself down upon the man. After a long pause, the king offered, “Or perhaps you would prefer after all to take the money?” The widow reconsidered and chose to take the money instead.

This story underscores the trouble with vengeance. It often destroys those who seek it as much as it hurts those upon whom it is exacted. During the New Testament era, the saying, “eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” epitomized the spirit of revenge. Drawn from the Law of Moses, this phrase was part of the legal code intended to set limits on revenge (cf. Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). Far from being a license for vengeance, it was originally intended to set limits upon those who had a right to seek justice for a wrong they had suffered at the hands of another. It stipulated that the punishment should not go beyond the crime.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When we “entrust ourselves to him who judges justly,” we show the world what God’s grace looks like. We are not condoning the sin of those who insult or exploit us, nor are we denying that their actions deserve punishment. We are simply leaving our case (and theirs) in the hands of God. Use a concordance and look up the words vengeance and revenge. What promises does God make to those who have a just cause for seeking revenge? What happens when they take matters in to their own hands?

Matthew 5:43-48

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. - Proverbs 25:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

G. K. Chesterton, British essayist and author of the Father Brown mystery novels, has challenged and encouraged generations of believers through his keen observations of the Christian faith. Chesterton once declared, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.” In fact, the Christian life cannot be lived merely by determined effort. It requires the transforming grace of Christ.

Few commands of Jesus reveal more the “supernatural” character of the Christian life than Jesus’ command to love our enemies. The Old Testament law had commanded God’s people to love their neighbors (Lev. 19:18). Jesus’ contemporaries had added the additional stipulation “and hate your enemy” to this command. They defined “neighbor” so narrowly that it excluded those they disapproved of or those with whom they differed. Jesus, on the other hand, had a much broader definition. In His view, a neighbor is anyone who has a need we can meet (cf. Luke 10:30-37). In today’s passage, Jesus goes a step further and commands His disciples to love their enemies.

Our natural tendency includes loving our friends. But just loving the people who love us back doesn’t distinguish us from unbelievers. That’s the problem. Such love is only human. On the other hand, when we love our enemies, we show that we have been given a capacity to exercise divine love. This is the way God loves, because He cares for the evil and the good (Matt. 5:45).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Who are the “enemies” God has called you to love? G. K. Chesterton wryly observed, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.”

Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-28

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. - Luke 6:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Even from upstairs, Mildred could hear the commotion. The ministry offices were usually quiet at this time in the afternoon, so the man shouting downstairs sounded especially loud. As Mildred listened, she realized that this man was very angry and violent. As she crept down the stairs, she saw a man wielding a baseball bat cursing her fellow workers.

For a few minutes, she watched in horrified silence. Then quietly, yet deliberately, Mildred walked straight towards the man, put her arms around him, and started praying for him. At first, he was so stunned, he didn’t know what to do. Then he began to cry. Finally, he looked at her and said, “I just had to know if anybody really loved me.”

Today’s passages may not have been in Mildred’s mind when she acted as she did, but they no doubt filled her heart. Loving our enemies doesn’t come naturally. Jesus was well aware of that. Conventional wisdom during Jesus’ day said that enemies were to be hated, or at least avoided. Even in our day, some children are taught from a very early age to hate other groups of people. Thus, Jesus’ command, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you,” was–and still is–radical.

This command involves going beyond natural affection. It’s easy to love those who are nice to us. This command also urges us to go beyond “what everyone else is doing.” Notice that Jesus followed this command with a reason–so that we might become children of our Father in heaven (v. 45). In other words, we love our enemies so that we might act in accordance with our true nature as children of God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Praying for our enemies has a way of protecting our own hearts at the same time from hardening. Something releases inside when we bring our persecutors before the Lord in prayer. There are many examples of this throughout the church’s history, but two especially inspiring accounts involve Corrie ten Boom, who prayed for her Nazi captors, and Ruby Bridges, who prayed for those who hated her because of her skin color. Books or videos about either one can be found in your library or bookstore.

Matthew 5:33-37 James 5:12;

Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned. - James 5:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the 18th century, when commerce was developing very fast, merchants had no need for written documents to complete a business deal. Big money transactions were made just on the basis of the parties' 'word of honor' and a handshake.

When nowadays we listen to public figures toss words around, it becomes clear that in the 1990s, words can mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean. A simple 'yes' or 'no' is not enough. We need contracts signed in the presence of lawyers, notarized

documents, oaths in courts. And even all this may not be a guarantee of complete truthfulness of words and intent. People break contracts, renege on their agreements, and commit perjuries.

Yes, the world has become more complex and our lives more hectic at the end of the 20th century. We do things differently now. But there are some principles of God's Kingdom that don't change for the followers of Jesus no matter when they live.

Can you imagine the apostle James engaging in deliberate doublespeak to cloud his true intent? Neither can we! This straight-talking spokesman for God had no tolerance for false words of any kind, especially those that were cloaked in the guise of a solemn oath.

That's what today's reading is all about. People in James' day had developed an elaborate system of oath-taking to avoid invoking God's name, which would make the pledge binding. They would swear by almost anything else to leave themselves a hole through which they could wriggle and not keep their word.

The Bible does not disapprove of making oaths. God 'swore by Himself' when He made His covenant with Abraham (Heb. 6:13). In a world of liars, people are often asked to swear to the truthfulness of their words.

But the apostle's point, which echoed perfectly the teaching of Jesus, was that for God's people a simple yes or no should do the job. The intent behind our words should be so transparent we don't need to call heaven and earth to witness that we're telling the truth. Keep it simple, James says, or expect God's judgment. He doesn't tolerate liars.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's an exercise in truth-telling that you can do with the family or a group of friends this weekend.

Sit down together and brainstorm a list of situations in which people are asked to take vows or swear to the truthfulness of information (for example, a wedding, a courtroom, applying for a license or other legal document). Talk about the consequences a person might suffer for lying in these cases, and then discuss God's demand for honesty on the part of His people.

Matthew 5:33-37

Matthew 5:33-37

A first-grader was reprimanded by his teacher for calling other children names on the playground. “But those aren’t bad words!” he protested. “Bad words are what Mommy says when she’s driving the car!” Swearing seems far more prevalent than a few generations ago; now even in casual conversation it isn’t unusual to hear words that would have been unacceptable in the past.

Matthew 5:44

General Robert E. Lee was riding through a battlefield when a wounded Union soldier, lying nearby, began to curse and revile the Confederate leader. Very deliberately, Lee dismounted, walked toward the stranger, and knelt beside him. The man ceased his torrent of abuse, and Lee said,

> “Son, I am very sorry you are hurt. I pray that you will recover soon.”

Matthew 5:44

In the fall of 1987 an Iraqi fighter jet attacked the USS Stark and killed 37 American sailors. The event received worldwide news coverage, but going almost unnoticed was the response of the widow of one of the slain men. She sent a letter to the Iraqi pilot, forgiving him for his act. She also included an Arabic New Testament with the words, “Father, forgive them” underlined.

Matthew 5:1-48

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. - Matthew 5:48

TODAY IN THE WORD

An article in the New York Times painted a dark picture of perfectionists as people plagued by self-critical depression, practicing zealous control of others, or prone to such extreme people-pleasing behaviors that they were at risk for suicide or eating disorders. Our closing verse in Matthew 5 tells us to be perfect—does Jesus call us to this sort of perfectionism?

To answer this, we must wrestle with the first part of the Sermon on the Mount. First, note that Jesus addresses these words to His disciples (Mt 5:2). Others might have been present, but the text clearly identifies that the followers of Jesus—those who have just left their ordinary lives for an extraordinary calling—are the audience. Jesus calls disciples; then He teaches discipleship.

Second, Jesus speaks these words in a context of grace. The Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12) identify blessings for those whom the world declares miserable. It is not coincidental that the preceding verses recount His ministry of healing physical bodies (Mt 4:23-24). The kingdom inaugurated by Jesus cannot be obtained through physical or moral perfection—it is only through accepting the reality of who He is and what He has come to do. He is the ultimate model of what it means to mourn, be meek, merciful, and persecuted for righteousness (see Isa. 61:1-3).

Third, Jesus explains His relationship to the Torah, the Law given by God to Moses. He is not overturning the Law; rather, He is showing that it can be fulfilled only in Him (Mt 5:17). Spiritual life is not keeping a list of do's and don'ts. This mentality will lead to perfectionism. Only by accepting Jesus can we hope to be capable of resisting lust and anger. Only by following His example can we be children of God who show love to our enemies.

This, then, is what it means to “be perfect”: God the Father has declared Jesus His Son with whom He was pleased. If we are to please the Father, we must be like His Son, which is only possible through faith in Christ and His grace.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you have felt burdened by a notion of being spiritually “perfect,” take comfort in the grace from today's passage. God extends blessing to those who hunger for righteousness, those who accept Jesus as the Son of God and follow Him. This is not a cheap grace; following Jesus requires that we adjust our priorities, pride, and maybe even our possessions. And more is at stake than just our own spirituality: we also are a witness to the world of the grace of God through Jesus (vv. 13-16).

Matthew 6

Matthew 6:1-4

Be careful not to do your ""acts of righteousness"" before men, to be seen by them. - Matthew 6:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Larry Burkett says Jesus' teaching in today's verses emphasizes that ""those who have a problem with pride need to give in a modest and humble way."" But, Burkett adds, ""This doesn't mean that

all giving must be done entirely in secret; it just means that we're not to draw attention to ourselves when we give.""

Burkett has pinpointed the heart of the issue. Jesus wasn't forbidding His people to give a donation in honor or memory of a family member or friend. Nor was He saying every gift we put in the offering plate has to be marked ""Anonymous."" What matters is the motive with which we give.

The context helps our understanding. In the latter verses of Matthew 5, Jesus had just taught about the superior righteousness required of His followers. Superior to what? To the righteousness of the Pharisees (5:20), who placed much emphasis on the outward act.

Then Jesus applied this teaching in the areas of giving, praying, and fasting (Mt 6:1-18). Each of these was a way the Pharisees practiced their ""acts of righteousness,"" except that there was a flaw. The Pharisees' acts were often done with great flair to be seen and applauded by others.

Jesus wanted His followers to go as far as necessary in the other direction, even to the ""right hand, left hand"" extreme if that was needed. Why? Because anything less than giving with the motive to honor God will bring no reward from Him.

So the question is, from whom do we want applause and recognition for our giving? If our desire is public acclaim, we may get it--but that's all we'll get.

But if our motive is to honor God and bring glory to His name, then the name on the check or on the plaque outside the classroom or other facility won't detract from the blessing.

In this same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, ""Let your light shine before men"" (Matt. 5:16). If giving is a good work, and it is when done properly, then this seems to negate the idea of private, anonymous giving. But keep reading, because the purpose of shining our light is that people will praise--not us, but our ""Father in heaven."" That's the kind of service He rewards.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We've put much emphasis on finances and giving this month, because this is such a large part of our overall stewardship.

But we have also tried to point out that this ministry is not a one-way street. Jesus taught us that we can freely ask our Father for our daily needs when we are living in tune with His will (Matt. 6:11). And to believers who had faithfully supported him, Paul wrote, ""My God will meet all your needs"" (Phil. 4:19). Be encouraged today to know that God does not overlook your faithfulness in serving Him.

Matthew 6:1-4

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done. - Proverbs 19:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Thomas Carlyle, the British historian, had an interesting way of providing financial help to Leigh Hunt, a friend who was notoriously bad with money. A visitor to Carlyle's home noticed two gold coins lying on the mantel. When he pressed Carlyle to tell him why they were there, the historian finally explained, "The fact is, Leigh Hunt likes better to find them there than that I should give them to him." By giving to his friend in this way, Carlyle modeled Jesus' teaching in today's passage.

Some of the religious people in Jesus' day were intentionally public in their acts of charity. They announced their giving "with trumpets" (Mt 6:2). Some Bible scholars and historians believe that this should be taken literally. They suggest that when giving alms to the poor the wealthy employed servants who went before them and blew a trumpet to attract the attention of the crowd.

The heart of Jesus' command was as concerned with motive as with method. Those Jesus condemns doubly perverted their acts of righteousness because they ignored both the functional and the spiritual purpose of giving. The functional purpose of giving meets the needs of the poor. Those who gave in order to be seen weren't really interested in the needs of those who received their gift. The spiritual purpose of giving glorifies God. Those who gave in order to be seen were more interested in bringing glory to themselves.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What might be some creative ways for you to give in secret? You might purchase groceries for someone in need and leave them on their doorstep or send a gift of cash in an unsigned card. Remember that our giving does not have to be limited to money. We can also give our time and energy. You might help an elderly person by doing their yard work at a time when you know they are not at home.

Matthew 6:1-34

Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. - Matthew 6:32-33

TODAY IN THE WORD

Julius Caesar adopted his great-nephew, Octavian, as his own son. Better known as Caesar Augustus, Octavian himself adopted his stepson, Tiberius. This adoption made Tiberius the heir to become the next Roman emperor, a position he held from 14 to 37 AD (during the life of Christ). People in the first century would have known these famous examples of receiving titles and privileges by virtue of being adopted by a famous father.

Jesus emphasized the connection between relationship and righteousness that comes from the Father to followers of Christ. Notice in today's passage how many times the word Father appears. The exhortations in this passage cannot be separated from our relationship to our Father. And we receive benefits far greater than the wealth and power of a Roman emperor.

The first verses in this chapter seem to contradict Matthew 5:13-16 where we are told not to hide our light, so that others will see our good deeds. Here Jesus addresses three spiritual actions—giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting—and says they should be done in secret. How do we make sense of this? Note that Jesus does not say that we should abandon giving to the poor, prayer, or fasting. The activity itself is important, but even more important is the right heart or intention. We are to do the right deeds for the right reason: because we are the children of God and we want to please Him. This is the heart of righteousness.

The second half of this chapter addresses our priorities. Our urge to accumulate stuff in order to feel secure and our urge to pursue treasure in order to feel worthy make no sense in light of who our Father is. He is the one who provided manna each day for His people in the wilderness. Now He instructs us to ask only for our daily bread (Mt 6:11). He wants to free us from the tyranny of worry by trusting Him. Here is where righteousness gets at the heart of who we are, and we see that it is impossible apart from a relationship with our Father.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As you reflect on the passage today, prayerfully ask the Lord to help you see any ways where your pursuit of righteousness is hampered. Do you do the right actions in order to be thought of as a “good person”? Do you feel trapped by worldly priorities of stuff, status, and security instead of trust and righteousness? Ask God for a renewed sense of your relationship to Him as Father so that you can be free to seek His kingdom first and receive His blessings of peace, mercy, and trust.

Matthew 6:1-4

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story is told of two brothers who owned a farm and divided the income. One brother had a large family, while the other was single. One night the single farmer, knowing his brother was struggling to raise his family, bought a box of things for the family and set off for their house, planning to leave the box secretly. That same night the married farmer, knowing his single brother did not have the joys of a family, set out for his house with a box of homemade goodies to leave secretly. The brothers met each other on their errands and embraced in tears.

These brothers acted out of love for each other. Their purpose was not to give their gifts publicly in order to impress others. In today's reading, Jesus had in mind just such motives for righteous behavior.

In Matthew 6, Jesus changed His direction as He continued the greatest sermon ever preached. He had been showing how current teaching about God's law differed from its true intent. Now He turned His attention to other areas of Christian discipleship, beginning with the issue of motivation. Although He does not refer to the Law in chapter 6, He continues showing differences between merely human standards and God's righteousness.

Mt 6:1 establishes the basic principle that there are two ways to live, two audiences we can attempt to impress. We can perform our ""acts of righteousness"" to enhance our ego and reputation with the people around us. Or we can do our service for God's eyes, to please and glorify Him.

These two ways or choices become very evident in the area of giving. To ""announce it with trumpets"" (Mt 6:2) may refer to the proclamation of public fasts. At such times, prayers would be said in the streets, and it was thought that giving to the needy would help ensure answers to these prayers. Such an event would be perfect for someone performing good deeds for human applause.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Last month, we encouraged our Today in the Word family to review 1996 giving habits and make any needed adjustments.

Matthew 6:5-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

How important is prayer? The Kneeling Christian, an anonymously-written devotional classic, says: ""Prayer is our highest privilege, our gravest responsibility, and greatest power God has put into our hands. Prayer, real prayer, is the noblest, the sublimest, the most stupendous act that any creature of God can perform.""

And Charles Spurgeon once advised:

> We should pray when we are in a praying mood, for it would be sinful to neglect so fair an opportunity. We should pray when we are not in a proper mood, for it would be dangerous to remain in so unhealthy a condition.

Prayer is the second ""act of righteousness"" Jesus addresses in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Along with giving to the poor and fasting, prayer was one of the three chief acts of piety for Jews. But the hypocrites of Jesus' day had turned prayer into another empty performance. Jesus is no doubt thinking here of the Pharisees and Jewish legal experts, whom He flatly called hypocrites in Matthew 23:13.

What was wrong with the way they prayed? The problem was not with the posture, but in the heart. As with giving, those who pray merely to score points with people do not impress God. The Pharisee in the parable of Luke 18:9-14 demonstrates this type of prayer.

In contrast, the true disciple of Jesus seeks to pray in secret (Matt. 6:6)--that is, for God's delight and glory alone. Jesus was not forbidding public prayers. After all, the early church prayed together constantly (see Acts 12:12). Jesus' concern here is the attitude with which we come to God.

What about the length of our prayers? Again, Jesus is not telling us to make our requests to Him in twenty-five words or less. The offense here (Mt 6:7) is meaningless babble, the repetition of words with no thought or feeling, mouthed in the mistaken belief that

they have some magical effect on God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Prayer is for believers of all ages and maturity levels. Even young children can learn to pray effectively.

If you have children or teenagers at home, why not help them toward practicing the joy and discipline of prayer? Too many families give up on devotions because of a lack of time or of confidence in knowing what to do.

Matthew 6:5-8

The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous. - Proverbs 15:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Writing about prayer, J. C. Ryle noted, “Words without heart are as utterly useless to our souls as the drumbeating of the poor heathen before their idols.” His criticism is echoed by Jesus in today’s passage, which warns of the danger of praying “like the hypocrites” (Mt 6:5).

Prayer is a conversation with God. But conversation consists of more than merely uttering words. Some conversations are really lectures or monologues masquerading as discussion. The speaker is primarily interested in the sound of his own voice. Others are performances, geared to entertain, impress, or intimidate those within hearing range. Some conversations are exercises in manipulation, designed to punch the right buttons and compel a response from the listener. But none of these is true conversation, because the speaker has no real interest in the listener.

In the same way, some prayers are like lectures, designed to instruct God. They are one-sided conversations, with little interest in God’s perspective on what is being said. Other prayers are performances, staged for the benefit of those within earshot. Prayer can also be an attempt to manipulate God. According to Jesus, pagans approached prayer this way, believing the sheer volume of words would move God to respond. They reduce prayer to the level of an incantation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Schedule a time when you can spend at least half an hour in prayer that focuses on God. Plan ahead so that you will be alone and uninterrupted. You may want to divide the time into segments that concentrate on a different aspect of His character. You may also want to write some of your thoughts in advance and collect several passages of Scripture that you can pray back to God. Remember, though, that you are not trying to impress God with your eloquence but rather to express yourself from the heart.

Matthew 6:5-8

It's Not "Magic" - ""The first thing the Lord teaches His disciples is that they must have a secret place for prayer,"" writes Andrew Murray in With Christ in the School of Prayer. ""Everyone must have some solitary spot ...to be alone with God. Every teacher must have a schoolroom. We have learned to know and accept Jesus as our only Teacher in the school of prayer.""

Once again, Murray has given us a helpful picture of prayer. In effect, every prayer we pray is in a ""secret place,"" because prayers come from the heart. And it is in our hearts that God meets us, and listens. It is in our hearts that God begins to teach us--our schoolroom--what He requires of us in offering our prayers: sincerity of heart. In this very schoolroom, the lessons of prayer are applied to our lives. For, because our Father know what is in our hearts, what flows out of our mouths when we pray will show the state of our hearts.

To God, a simple prayer in the privacy of our hearts is much more desirable than a flamboyant prayer prayed for the ears of those around us. The secrecy of prayer stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of hypocrites, for whom prayer was a public demonstration of piety (see Luke 18:11-12). Because their hearts were filled with pride, it was revealed when they prayed.

The secret to the power of prayer we have been talking about is the Father who sees into our hearts and rewards us in keeping with our sincerity. As we have said before, there is nothing magical about prayer. It is a communication and communion between two living spirits: our spirit and our God, who is spirit (John 4:24). There is also nothing mystical or magical about words spoken in prayer. The idea that a certain formula of words automatically achieves the desired effect, even apart from the spiritual standing of the person praying, may be one of the greatest misconceptions about prayer. This makes prayer seem like a ""vending machine:"" put in the right combination of words, and the desired request comes out. Jesus turns our thinking in the opposite direction. It's not that God doesn't want to hear our prayers. But since He knows our needs, He is more interested in the heart attitude with which we ask than He is in the exact wording we use.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One of the age-old dilemmas of prayer is this: if God knows our needs even before we ask, why are we to ask? One reason is that asking develops dependence. God wants us to ask for our daily needs (Matt. 6:11). Asking also generates gratitude when the Father meets our needs. In addition, asking helps us to clarify our thinking and gives the Holy Spirit a chance to help turn our desires toward God's will. Bring your needs to the Lord today in your private prayer place.

Matthew 6:5-13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Generations of American schoolchildren have recited the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of their school day. Many have also memorized and delivered famous speeches such as Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

We don't really expect second- or third-graders to understand fully the importance of the words they are saying. But that's all right, because as they grow, the meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance and the suffering that gave rise to the Gettysburg Address will become clearer to them. The same thing is often true of prayer. A brand new believer may only know how to recite a prayer he or she learned in childhood--for instance, ""Now I lay me down to sleep...."" That's fine, but as that believer grows in Christ his or her prayer life should grow from mere memorization to deep understanding.

Since prayer is one of the most basic elements in our worship, we cannot do better than to echo the request of the disciple who said to Jesus, ""Lord, teach us to pray"" (Luke 11:1).

Jesus' reply to that request is the Lord's Prayer, which should really be called the Disciples' Prayer. Jesus prefaced the prayer with two crucial warnings:

1) Do not pray with pretense, to be seen and admired by others; and

2) Do not reduce prayer to a flurry of meaningless words that come from the tongue but not the heart.

In other words, prayer is neither a public show nor a magic wand we wave to have our needs met. Instead, prayer should be the heartfelt communion between a loving Father and His grateful child. No matter how many times we read it, this classic prayer never loses its power. It begins where all worship must begin, with humble acknowledgment of God's majesty and adoration of His holy name. That's what it means to ""hallow"" God's name. We set apart God's name as holy because it represents all that He is (Matt. 6:9).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The true ""Lord's Prayer"" is in John 17, when Jesus poured out His heart to God just hours before going to the cross.

Matthew 6:5-15

His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. - Matthew 5:1–2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Martin Luther once said that prayer is the true calling of all Christians. Deep down, most of us would agree, but we'd also have to admit that often we don't know how to pray. Even Jesus' disciples faced this problem. Indeed, the apostle Paul himself acknowledged that sometimes believers just don't know what to pray for (Rom. 8:26).

Today's teaching on prayer is part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Within this long teaching, Matthew 6:1–18 address the three pillars of Jewish piety: prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Jesus counters the hypocritical practices that were common at the time. He stresses the same basic point in each section: expressions of faith are to be seen by God and not to impress others.

That's why Jesus began today's passage by telling His disciples to avoid being like those who prayed for show. Instead, Jesus encouraged His disciples to draw away from the spotlight so that only their Father in heaven could hear their prayers. Of course, Jesus didn't intend that believers never pray publicly! Rather, He pointed out that we need to pay attention to our motives when we pray, and we may be especially tempted to impress others when we are praying out loud.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's always encouraging to remind ourselves that our Father cares more about our heart in prayer than our actual words!.

Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-4

Lord, teach us to pray. - Luke 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.–Matthew 6:9–13

It’s hardly surprising that the most remarkable prayer in history was uttered by Jesus! Countless believers have contemplated this prayer, written about it, and even put it to music.

To begin, “Our Father,” shows that this prayer is rooted in community and in relationship. The unbelievable privilege of calling God “Father” still requires that His glory and His holy name be completely honored (Mt 6:9). Mt 6:10 asks that the Kingdom of God, having entered human history in Jesus’ incarnation, continue its saving work until it is ultimately consummated on earth–when all creation will conform to God’s perfect will.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Did you notice that Jesus said that this prayer was “how” we were to pray, not simply “what” we were to pray? (Matt. 6:9). Of course, it is a great blessing to recite this prayer and if you haven’t already memorized it, now is a great time to do so. Yet we miss a lot if we stop there.

There are many ways to use this prayer as an example. Begin by meditating on what each line means and what the “core” of each petition is. For example, “hallowed be your name” means that God’s name should be treated as holy. Ask God to show you ways you might have dishonored His name, such as using it in vain.

Similarly, reflect on what it means to trust God for daily bread–the popularity of large freezers can make this more difficult! So you might pray that the Lord would reveal your daily dependence on Him or reflect on your freedom to bring even the most basic requests to Him. You could also pray for those without daily bread.

Matthew 6:7-8, 25-34

Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. - Matthew 6:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

A 2004 study of fertility patients revealed some interesting results. When women receiving fertility treatments worried about the outcome, they were less likely to conceive than those who didn't. Long before any scientific studies were undertaken, Jesus taught that worry has no place in the perspective of His followers.

Christians have the antidote for worry. It isn't the power of positive thinking. It isn't a mind-numbing form of meditation. It is the power of personal supplication before the Creator of the universe. Do not worry, Jesus commands us. But this only makes sense in the context of prayer.

It is an affront to God when we worry, because we are essentially claiming that God cannot provide for us. It means that we've lost sight of everything He has already given us. We worry about clothes and food, but we forget about life and the body, both blessings from God. We're not only forgetful of what God has already given us, but also of our value to Him. We mistrust Him and doubt His character, namely that He wants to provide for His children and that He can and will. This was the tragic sin of the Exodus generation of the Israelites (cf. Ps. 78).

God knows what we need, and some would argue that this pulls the rug out from under prayer. Why pray if God already knows what we need? This view assumes that prayer must be about informing God of something He didn't already know; this view clearly misunderstands the nature and character of God. Rather, we must pray because it is the way to actively trust God. Without prayer, we are tempted by sinful self-reliance—believing that anything we need or want we can get for ourselves—or worry, wondering who will get the job done.

We've spent the last several days piecing together a grand picture of God's kingdom purposes. However big God and His plans are, we do not matter less to God. “Give us this day our daily bread” serves to remind us of that.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God makes His followers an irresistible offer: Take care of my business, and I'll take care of yours (v. 33). It requires obedient faith to use time, money, and energy for God's kingdom when such resources seem scarce and the needs great. But like the widow of Zarephath who fed the prophet of Elijah and saw the provision of God (cf. 1 Kings 17), we, too, can spend ourselves for God and see that He supplies and rewards such generosity (cf. 2 Cor. 9).

Matthew 6:9-13

Lord, teach us to pray. - Luke 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his classic work, With Christ in the School of Prayer, Andrew Murray writes: ""The place and power of prayer in the Christian life is too little understood. As long as we view prayer simply as the means of maintaining our own Christian lives, we will not fully understand what it is really supposed to be. But when we learn to regard it as the highest part of the work entrusted to us...we will see that there is nothing we need to study and practice more than the art of praying.""

Murray's century-old insights remain very timely for us. What a great introduction to our topic this month: the power of prayer! You would probably be hard-pressed to find a sincere Christian who doesn't want a powerful prayer life. We all do.

But Murray reminds us that a process precedes the power. There is nothing magical or mysterious about prayer. It is a spiritual discipline, a process of learning and growing.

Jesus' disciples wanted powerful prayer lives. And they went to the right source. Luke doesn't say Jesus was holding a teaching session on prayer, or even that the disciples were praying with Him. All we know is that as Jesus was praying one day, the disciples were watching and listening, and they wanted a prayer life like His.

Jesus' response to the request was a prayer that should really be called ""The Disciple's Prayer."" Matthew records that Jesus prefaced the prayer with instructions, and we'll consider these verses later on. For today, we'll consider Jesus' answer to the disciples' request.

This prayer is a basic outline of the concerns that should be on our hearts as we approach God. The order of the concerns is all-important. Prayer that honors God and moves Him to action is prayer that focuses first on Him (Matt. 6:9-10). Our first task is to uphold and enhance His name and to desire His will and His kingdom.

Only then are we ready to bring our needs to God (Mt 6:11). We don't have to do so reluctantly, since our Father urges us to make our needs known. The prayer for forgiveness and deliverance from temptation (Mt 6:12-13) reminds us to keep our relationships with others up to date and our eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb. 12:2).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Whether a believer is a veteran ""prayer warrior"" or a beginner, God always has something to teach him or her about prayer. Let's try an experiment today. Take a few minutes to think about and write out your greatest need when it comes to knowing how to pray--not the requests you may be praying for, but the one thing you feel you need to learn, or relearn, about prayer. Keep your card handy this month, and let's see what God does.

Matthew 6:9-13 Psalm 103:13-18

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. - Psalm 103:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

After a devastating 1989 earthquake in Armenia, a father rushed to his son's school, only to find the building destroyed. Going to the area where his son's classroom was, the man began digging through the rubble with his hands. Other parents tried to convince him it was no use. Officials tried to make him leave, fearing fires and explosions. But the father kept digging alone, and after forty hours found his son and thirteen other children still alive. ""I told the other kids not to worry,"" the boy told his father. ""If you were alive, you'd save me.""

That's a great example of a father's love for his child. God has revealed Himself to us as our Father, a name that suggests protection, love, provision, and discipline (see Heb. 12:4-6). The psalmist says that God knows us intimately. He does not scold us for our humanness, but at the same time He requires obedience from us--just like the wise, loving fathers many of us knew as children.

And for those of us whose human fathers were not what they should have been, the fact that God invites us to call Him ""Abba,"" or ""Daddy"" (Rom. 8:16), holds special meaning. No child of God will ever be rejected, abandoned, or orphaned.

That Armenian father's hands were surely bloodied after forty hours of digging. His sacrificial love reminds us of the cost God paid to bring us to Himself. He had to turn away from His Son's agony on the cross in order to save us and make us His children.

Jesus, as the eternal Son in perfect fellowship with His Father, taught us to pray, ""Our Father in heaven"" (Matt. 6:9). This prayer

reminds us of the awesome majesty of our heavenly Father, who is worthy of our adoration and praise.

God is the Giver of every good thing (James 1:17), including our daily bread. And just as disobedient children need to have fellowship with their father restored, we need to come to our Father in confession and repentance, and receive His forgiveness. Our Father is also our Protector and Deliverer from ""the evil one."" You can rest in your strong Father's care today!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Let's declare today an unofficial father's day by reaching out to a dad who deserves a word of blessing and encouragement.

We'd like to suggest that you write a note to a father you know. Your own father, or another dad in your family circle, would certainly be a good place to start. But don't forget about your spiritual father, if you have one, or a dad in your church, neighborhood, or workplace. You could also share a note with an unsaved dad you know.

Matthew 6:9-10

Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you. - Psalm 9:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

D. L. Moody once observed, “I’d rather be able to pray than be a great preacher; Jesus Christ never taught his disciples how to preach, but only how to pray.” Jesus’ starting point when instructing His disciples in this area was noteworthy. He began with a focus on God’s name. The first petition in Christ’s model prayer was a request that God’s name would be “hallowed.”

To hallow something means to set it apart as holy. Jesus’ petition that God’s name be made holy is not surprising, since this is also the focus of one of the foundational commands in God’s law. The third commandment warned against the danger of misusing God’s name (Ex. 20:7). Throughout the Bible the name of God is synonymous with His character and His authority. When Moses asked to “see” God’s glory, the answer was a revelation of His name and attributes (Ex. 34:5–7).

God’s name is also associated with the behavior of His people. When those who say they are believers dishonor God by their behavior, they cause others to hold God’s name in contempt (Rom. 2:23–24). We hallow God’s name by living in a way that brings glory to Him. We also hallow His name by telling others what God has done for us. The Scriptures speak of “exalting” or “boasting” in the name of God (Psalm 34:1–3).

Those who respect God’s name also have a regard for His will. It is not surprising, then, that the petition that God’s name be hallowed is followed by requests that deal with God’s kingdom and will. God’s kingdom and His will are related.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Take a few moments today to think about ways that you can “hallow” God’s name. Make a list of areas in your life, and next to each one write out how you can demonstrate that God rules over your life. Then write one specific thing you can do to see that God’s will is done in that area. For example, in the area of work you might write: “I can show that God rules over my life by controlling the way I use my tongue. To see that God’s will is done, I will look for an opportunity to encourage others with my words.”

Matthew 6:9-13

This then is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” - Matthew 6:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Two anonymous sayings summarize well an all-too-common view of God. The first observes, “Some people treat God like they do a lawyer; they go to Him only when they are in trouble.” The second notes, “Most men forget God all day and ask Him to remember them at night.”

For many people, God is often like a great beneficent figure who only matters when there is a problem in life to be solved. The prayer Jesus taught His disciples, however, gives a different, more intimate picture of our God. The prayer opens by addressing God as “Our Father in heaven” (v. 9), indicating both a profound intimacy with a heavenly Father concerned for His children and an exalted God high and holy in character. If this is the fatherly God to whom we pray, what does Jesus' prayer teach us?

Note first that the initial portion of the prayer is entirely about God, not us. There is a concern for God's name to be “hallowed,” that is, to be treated with respect (Mt 6:9). We are instructed to pray that “your kingdom come” and “your will be done” (Mt 6:10), petitions for God's rule to be established over creation and for His purposes to prevail on earth. The first half of the prayer is entirely about God's glory and honor.

Only then do we turn to our own individual requests. We are encouraged to pray for “daily bread” because God recognizes and cares for our material needs (Mt 6:11). We then turn to a request for forgiveness of our “debts” (Mt 6:12), the Aramaic term for sin; our relationship with the Father requires such forgiveness. Finally, we beseech our Father for protection from future sin (i.e. “temptation”) and for deliverance from sin when we find ourselves tempted. The emphasis here is on our utter dependence on God for His help in all of life.

This concludes Jesus' prayer model, but don't miss the underlying foundation: we approach God as our Father. Only on the basis of such intimacy can we ever come to Him with our requests.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Although Jesus warns against self-glorifying or rambling prayer (Matt. 6:5-8), there is a place for fixed models of prayer, and it has been the longstanding practice of the church to recite the Lord's Prayer as part of our devotion to the Father. On this last Sunday in Advent, as you prepare for this week's celebration of Christ's birth, make that ancient Christian tradition yours today by praying the Lord's Prayer, remembering that all your requests and petitions are brought before our God who is also our Father.

Matthew 6:9-13

TODAY IN THE WORD

A shepherd boy tending his sheep one Sunday morning heard church bells ringing in the village. Thinking he would like to talk with God, the boy began repeating the alphabet. A man passing by overheard the shepherd reciting his ""prayer"" and asked what he was doing. ""Well, sir,"" explained the boy, ""I don't know any prayers. But I figured if I said all the letters I knew, God could put them together and know what I need and want.""

What an unusual approach! And what faith was shown by that untutored shepherd in his heavenly Father. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He wanted them to come to God with the same attitude of love and trust. We call His model prayer ""The Lord's Prayer,"" but perhaps we should call it ""The Disciples' Prayer.""

This classic prayer covers a lot of ground in only a few words. One thing that becomes clear is that God's priorities in prayer are often not the same as our priorities.

For instance, Jesus teaches us to begin our prayers by acknowledging to whom we are praying. Praying in the name of God is not just a ""code"" we use to ""crack heaven's vaults."" Instead, we are to approach God with reverence and holy fear, holding His name in the highest esteem. We shouldn't burst into His presence like a breathless child, making our demands before running off.

Not only does Jesus want us to put God's name above our own needs, He also teaches us to seek God's kingdom and God's will before anything else. The Sermon on the Mount is for ""kingdom people,"" those who know and serve the King. As His subjects, our highest concern ought to be the growth of His kingdom and the accomplishment of His will.

But the Lord's Prayer doesn't stop there. We are also urged to pray for our daily material needs, for forgiveness of sin, and for deliverance from the temptations of the evil one.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you find it hard to pray for very long without going straight to your mental or written list of prayer requests? If so, spend some time making a different list this weekend. Using a Bible concordance, look up what the Bible says about God's name, will and kingdom and note a few of the passages you find.

Matthew 6:9-15

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. - Matthew 6:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Commenting on verse 12 in today’s reading, Richard J. Foster says in Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home: “We are forgiven as we forgive. . . . If our hearts are so narrow as to see only how others have hurt and offended us, we cannot see how we have offended God and so find no need to seek forgiveness. If we are always calculating in our hearts how much this one or that one has violated our rights, by the very nature of things we will not be able to pray this prayer. . . . Forgiveness means that the power of love that holds us together is greater than the power of the offense that separates us.”

In our study of forgiveness, we move now from our pursuit of God’s forgiveness to forgiveness of others, that is, from the vertical dimension of our relationship with God to the horizontal dimension of our relationships with others. These two can’t really be

separated, as today's verse makes clear.

In the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, it's significant that both seeking and offering forgiveness are highlighted. These are seen as daily realities in our spiritual lives, as basic as the need for food and the struggle against temptation. We mention our debts as we ask for our daily bread. "Debts" means moral debts, that is, the price we owe for sin (Mt 6:12).

The parallelism here is sobering: We ask God to forgive us in accordance with how we have offered forgiveness to others. While it's true that we're to forgive as we've been forgiven (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13), that's not what it says here. This prayer goes in the other direction--we pray to be forgiven ourselves as we've forgiven others (cf. Matt. 7:2).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Lord's Prayer may be so familiar to you that it's difficult to focus on the specific words. To remedy this, why not include it in your personal prayer time every day for a week?

Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4

One of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." - Luke 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

O thou by whom we come to God, The Life, the Truth, the Way! / The path of prayer thyself hast trod; Lord, teach us how to pray!

James Montgomery (1771–1854) penned these words expressing the simple truth that Jesus is the only way to the Father, and that the way is "the path of prayer." Centuries earlier, the disciples discovered this same truth.

Today's passage in Matthew and the parallel account in Luke record the prayer known either as the "Lord's Prayer" or the "Our Father." Most likely this is the most prayed and most translated prayer in the world!

Notice first how many times the word "us" appears, and also note the opening words "Our Father." This reminds us that, as believers, we're no longer isolated, but we're part of God's family. This prayer reminds us who God is–our Father in heaven. Even though we're part of His family, His ways aren't like our ways! It's His kingdom, and His will–not ours–that's to be carried out.

These points are important to keep in mind, because they remind us that when we pray, we aren't to begin with what we need, but with who God is. It's not that our needs are unimportant (as the rest of prayer makes clear), but our needs must be seen in light of the One to whom we're praying.

The second part of this prayer may be summarized in one word: provision. In that time, bread was an indispensable part of life–praying for daily bread meant praying for everything required for day-to-day living. The fact that forgiveness is listed next suggests that being forgiven and forgiving others is also essential for our daily well-being. Finally, we are urged to pray for spiritual protection from the temptation that surrounds us and from the Evil One who seeks to destroy us.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Because the Lord's prayer is so compact and comprehensive, many people have found it useful to pray one part of it each day of the week.

Matthew 6:10 John 15:9-17

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. - Matthew 6:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

After issues plagued her bathrooms, Mrs. Kim finally called a plumber. As the truck approached, she noticed the message: "Family-owned and operated since 1935." The father-son team worked quickly with remarkable competence. Steve explained that his grandfather and father had both been plumbers, and that his son, Robert, was apprenticing with him now to learn the family business: "Like my father and grandfather before him, I want to pass down the necessary skills and character for my son to fulfill our mission." In today's reading, Jesus invites us to apprentice with Him in His Father's mission.

Observe the parallels between the Father's relationship with Jesus and Jesus' relationship with His disciples. First, Jesus loves His disciples just as the Father has loved Him (Jn 15: 9). God's love is the cornerstone of today's passage. In love, the Father sent Jesus into the world "that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). Second, Jesus' obedience was the result of a life lived in the Father's love. We also make Jesus' love our dwelling place when we obey (Jn 15:10). Jesus highlights one particular command. He indicates His sacrificial death as the kind of love for others He intends (vv. 12-13). God's love is not only life giving, it also produces complete joy. Everything originates with Jesus before we experience it: love, obedience, and joy.

Third, everything Jesus has learned from His Father, He has passed down to us (Jn 15:16). Jesus fulfills His Father's mission, and He calls us to join it, too (cf. John 5:17). Jesus declares: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21). We remain in God's love as we participate in this incarnational mission as God's sent ones.

Jesus clarifies the context of our relationship with Him and the Father. We are not slaves, obliged to submit to the Father's rules. We are friends, joyfully joining His work of redemption in the world. We know we are friends because we are made privy to the Father's business, and God has purposed us to bear fruit in His kingdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus promises: "Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (Jn 15:16). The context for answered prayer is God's mission. The Father answers prayers that accord with and are focused upon pursuit and fulfillment of His work. Prayers that are motivated by selfishness are not aligned with the will of God; we should not interpret this verse as a magic word to get whatever we want. Rather, praying in Jesus' name recognizes His authority over our lives and our desire to live out our calling as His followers.

Matthew 6:11-13

Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. - Proverbs 30:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view." R. A. Torrey called prayer "the key that unlocks all the storehouses of God's infinite grace and power." In our passage today, Jesus' model prayer reveals that God's heart is moved by prayers for earthly matters as well as heavenly concerns. Jesus taught His disciples to pray for daily bread.

In the Greek text this phrase is literally "bread for the coming day." This petition reflects God's sensitivity to our most basic needs. The psalmist recognized this and declared that God "provides food for those who fear him" (Psalm 111:4). This is not just true of man. God also provides food for all His creation (Psalm 147:9). In our culture of fast food and refrigerators we may not appreciate the immediacy of Jesus' third petition. But reading and studying this prayer reminds us that it is God who meets our most basic needs.

Our needs are not limited to the material realm. One of our most fundamental needs is to be forgiven and to learn how to forgive others. Jesus linked these two in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer when He compared forgiveness to the canceling of a debt. This request drives home our obligation to forgive others, for it links the degree of God's forgiveness to our own forgiveness of others. In essence this request states, "Forgive us to the degree that we forgive others." In a sense, it teaches us to forgive others, not merely for their sake, but for our own.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Lord's Prayer is remarkably comprehensive. In our lives, we will find ourselves particularly sensitive to each of these needs that Jesus mentions. Today, your thoughts may be troubled by financial worries or by concerns about a broken relationship. You may be struggling with a particular temptation. Which of the areas of life mentioned in today's reading–daily bread, forgiveness and forgiving others, or spiritual protection–is pressing in your life today? Make it the focus of extended prayer time with God. When you are finished, close your time by praying the Lord's Prayer aloud.

Matthew 6:13, 4:1-11

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. - Matthew 6:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost tells the story of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. When he wrote the companion volume, Paradise Regained, the story of course featured Christ, the second Adam. But the poem does not tell the story of Christ's redemptive death and resurrection, as one might expect. Instead, it dramatizes His temptation by Satan in the wilderness.

In Milton's view, Christ's victory in this event perfectly paralleled the Fall. Though our first parents succumbed to Satan's temptation, Jesus did not. Because of His perfect obedience, the doors of heaven are open for all who believe.

Today's account wasn't the only time Jesus faced temptation, but it was a defining moment. He'd just been baptized by John, affirmed by His Father and the Spirit, and was about to embark on public ministry.

At this time, Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Mt 4:1). This shows us that temptation is not a

sign we're out of God's will--quite the opposite. If we were off the path we'd already be where Satan wanted us. Since temptation was part of Jesus' earthly journey, we can surely expect it to be part of ours.

With what did Satan tempt Christ? First, with physical need. He was hungry, and Satan suggested He make bread from stones. Second, with personal glory. If He jumped from the Temple, He would step into the sandals of the kind of Messiah everyone was expecting. And third, with immediate power. Satan offered Him all the kingdoms of this world.

How did our Lord respond? In all three cases, with quotations from Deuteronomy. Against the first temptation, He implied that God's power is not to be used for selfish ends. Against the second, He pointed out that God's promises can't be abused for personal gain. To Satan's third attempt, He proclaimed that God alone is worthy of worship. Compromise was out of the question. Sub-mission to God's plan and timing was everything (cf. James 4:7).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus resisted temptation by quoting God's Word. We can do the same!

Matthew 6:14-15

Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? - Matthew 18:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

While Michelangelo was painting his fresco of the last judgment, the papal master of ceremonies badgered him repeatedly for a sneak preview of the work. The artist kept putting him off until he could no longer tolerate the man's pestering and finally agreed to show him the work. Upon examining the work, the official was horrified to discover that the great artist had included him in the fresco, painting his likeness as one of the damned being tormented by the demons in hell.

Michelangelo did in his painting what we do in principle when we refuse to forgive. We take upon ourselves a prerogative that belongs to God alone. When Jesus linked God's forgiveness of us to our forgiveness of others, He was not implying that our actions merit God's grace. We do not earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. The opposite is true. We forgive others because God has already forgiven us. A determination to hold on to bitterness suggests that we know little of God's grace toward us, and perhaps we haven't even truly experienced it.

We shouldn't think, though, that forgiveness is painless. True forgiveness can take place only after there has been a full accounting of the "debt" that others owe. It is not forgiveness when we merely minimize the offense. Accurately taking stock of the degree to which someone has offended us is painful.

Nor should we think that forgiveness is easy. Ultimately, only God's grace can enable us to cancel the debt of another. Our ability to forgive begins with a recognition of how much God has forgiven us and is carried out through the power of His Holy Spirit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Is there someone that you're having trouble forgiving? Take a piece of paper and write the reason why it's difficult for you to forgive. Read what you have written aloud to God and tell Him of your commitment to forgive that person. When you are finished, tear up the paper as a symbol of your determination to forgive the one who has hurt you. Remember that a decision to forgive does not necessarily mean that the hurt you feel will automatically disappear. You may need to remind yourself repeatedly that you have decided to cancel the debt owed to you by this person.

Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-35

Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. - Colossians 3:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Christ Jesus, you did not come to earth to judge the world but so that through you, the Risen Lord, every human being might be saved and reconciled. And when the love that forgives burns with a Gospel flame, the heart, even when beset by trials, can begin to live again. –Taizé, Prayer for Each Day

Clearly God takes forgiveness of sin quite seriously! If He was willing to send His Son to die on the cross, we can be certain that we should also take seriously His command to be forgiving of one another. Indeed, Scripture teaches that an unwillingness to forgive and show compassion on our part hinders our own ability to receive forgiveness from the Lord (Matt. 6:14) and hinders our prayers (1 Peter 3:7). "Hostility and an unforgiving spirit are acids which destroy our capacity to worship and pray," writes Bingham Hunter.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When a person is deeply wronged, forgiveness can be difficult. Here are a few steps that may help on the journey to forgiveness and healing. First, acknowledge that sin is evil, and allow yourself to grieve. Second, look to the cross as the place where all sin has been dealt with. Finally, remember all that Jesus has forgiven you and pray for release through forgiveness for the transgressions committed against you.

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” says Romans 15:5–6.

Matthew 6:14-15

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Wall Street Journal reported that one of the longest civil cases in memory was settled last year by a secret agreement. The case, a libel suit involving a Philadelphia prosecutor and the city's leading newspaper, spanned more than 25 years and two separate trials. The incident that was the subject of the newspaper story happened in 1963, although the article itself was published in 1973. The first trial was held in 1983, and the second in 1990. None of the principals in the case are at the same jobs today; in fact, one of the key figures died in 1989.

One has to wonder if a simple plea for, and the granting of, forgiveness would have made this ordeal unnecessary. Unfortunately, we live in a society in which lawsuits, complaints and damages are more eagerly sought (and often more easily given) than forgiveness. But when animosity and bitterness take root in our lives, the results are always destructive.

Jesus' warning in Mt 6:15 is a disturbing one, and we should take it seriously. But it's important to read this in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, which we already know is addressed to believers. Jesus is not dealing with the forgiveness that leads to salvation. His concern is our fellowship with the Father, not our eternal standing before Him.

Animosity and bitterness between believers stems from a failure to forgive. Such attitudes break our intimate fellowship with God because they grieve the Holy Spirit, who is sensitive to sin (see Eph. 4:30-31).

The apostle John puts it in unmistakable terms: ""Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen"" (1 John 4:20). John must have been paying attention on the mountain that day!

Today's verses echo the request made in the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus taught us to ask forgiveness of God in the same measure as we forgive others (Matt. 6:12).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you ever overwhelmed by the forgiveness of God?

The Psalmist asked, ""If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"" (Ps. 130:3). Thanks to the grace of God, we can stand before Him because no charge can be against us (Rom. 8:33).

Matthew 6:16-18

TODAY IN THE WORD

""Hide the fugitive, and do not betray the refugee."" This was the slogan adopted by Rudy and Betty de Vries, who lived in Holland during World War II under Nazi occupation. These names probably aren't familiar to most, but they are dear to the hundreds of Jews whose lives they saved.

Rudy and Betty were ordinary people--owners of a butcher shop--but God had an extraordinary job for them. Not a day went by when they didn't secretly ship meat to starving Jews, hide them, or acquire counterfeit coupons for them.

They never received any medals, and they are not widely known. And this is how they prefer it--they did not do their work for the recognition of people, but out of their love for Christ.

That's the way it is with our worship. It may be done in public and often is. It can be a witness to others and often is. But worship is not intended to be a public spectacle. It has an entirely different purpose.

Jesus taught His disciples this important truth in relation to several elements of worship. We have talked about giving and prayer (Matt. 6:1-15). A third aspect of worship that is less common in most circles today is fasting, abstaining from food for a certain period to give undivided attention to spiritual matters.

Neither Jesus nor the New Testament writers gave strict regulations concerning fasting, since it was to be practiced as a matter of

personal conscience. Jesus' concern was that we not fast--or give and pray, for that matter--in a hypocritical way to win points with people (Mt 6:16).

You may have heard more about fasting than usual in recent months. Several prominent Christian leaders and national ministries are calling on believers to fast for revival and to express national repentance. When done for the purposes of concentrated prayer and waiting before God, fasting can be a powerful form of true worship.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It may seem odd that we are talking about fasting only two days before Thanksgiving!

We all know the world's common perception of Thanksgiving: stuff yourself until you can't move and then play couch potato in front of the television through an afternoon and evening of football games. We hope your holiday will take a different turn!

Matthew 6:16-18

TODAY IN THE WORD

What does the Bible teach about fasting? Reflecting on Matthew 6:16-18 and other passages, Richard Foster comments in Celebration of Discipline:

""It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive. To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion…Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained…Fasting reminds us that we are sustained by 'every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matt. 4:4)…Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God. Fasting is feasting!""

Fasting, like praying and giving, is a legitimate spiritual discipline to be practiced in private between a Christian and the Lord. How often we practice it is not prescribed, because that too is between the believer and Christ. When we desire to seek God's face more than we want dinner, that will be the proper time to fast.

But as with other disciplines, fasting opens the door to showmanship rather than spirituality. In Jesus' day the Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). While fasting, they went about with somber faces and disheveled appearances so that everyone would see (and praise) their piety.

Why did Jesus scorn this custom? Because He could see their hearts and their true motives. He also knew that fasting had been abused by the Jewish people in the past (see Isaiah 58:1-7).

What about fasting for us today? The issue is the same as it has been throughout this section (Matt. 6:1-18). How you fast depends on whom you want to impress. If your fast is for your spiritual benefit and God's glory, no one else needs to applaud your commitment.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Moody Press author Tony Evans says, ""Until you have fasted and prayed about an issue, you haven't really prayed yet."" He has a point. We want to encourage you today to reflect on the value of fasting as a means of seeking God's favor, and on the reward fasting can bring (v. 18). If you have never fasted, you might want to begin by setting aside one meal for prayer.

Matthew 6:19-21; Luke 18:18-30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Tony Evans describes the irony of the person who spends his or her life striving to achieve success in this world: ""You always wanted to look your best, you got it. The undertaker will make you look sharp. You always wanted to ride in a big limousine, you got it. You always wanted to stop traffic, to make people sit up and take notice of you. You got it. You'll be the center of the parade on the way to the graveyard. People will step aside for you. People will take their hats off to you and say nice things about you."" That pretty well sums up the tragedy of a life that disregards heaven. Today we are returning to the first half of this month's theme. We will spend this final week of March focusing on what we have in heaven and on what Jesus accomplished in heaven through His death and resurrection.

Mt 6:19-21 of Matthew 6 are so familiar that we can easily miss their radical impact. Jesus is saying that if heaven is going to be our eternal home, we had better spend our time on earth preparing for it. Someone has said that when it comes to your money, you can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead by investing it in the things of God.

The story of the rich young ruler shows us this truth in action. From an accounting standpoint, Jesus' advice to him does not

compute very well: ""Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me"" (Luke 18:22).

This man's problem wasn't that he had money. His problem was that his money had him. So he traded the eternal treasure of heaven for the rusty, moth-eaten trinkets of earth; and Jesus watched him walk away.

Earlier this month we considered some of the wonders of heaven. One of the most wondrous things must be this: that Jesus would die not only to save us and prepare us a home with Him, but also to reward us for the smallest act we do for heaven's glory and benefit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We may read the story of the rich young ruler and say to ourselves, ""I would never do that.""

Matthew 6:19-21.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Political developments this year in Russia reminded the world that the Communist Party is not dead. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union raised Western hopes for democracy in Russia, but seventy-four years of Communist rule left deep impressions that are not easily erased. Part of Communism's long-term impact can be credited to the fact that prior to 1991, the Communist Party's annual propaganda budget was about five billion dollars!

Give Party leaders credit: they knew where to invest their money to achieve the result they wanted. They were investing their treasures in building an earthly kingdom. When you don't believe in God and have no concern for eternity, what else do you have to spend your money on?

Christians can easily get caught up in competing within the realm of earthly value systems, in being overly concerned with the temporary things of earth. In these few verses, Jesus turns the world's value system on its head—and puts things in proper perspective!

Notice that Jesus' emphasis is on what's best for us from the standpoint of eternity. The treasure we store up when we give to the Lord is reserved in heaven under our name. This is a far cry from the common misconception among unbelievers that all the church wants is our money. God does want our money for His work, it's true. But that's not all He wants; neither does He ask for all of it.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's a fun and revealing exercise that can open your eyes to the financial temptations around you—and give your children a wonderful lesson in "spiritual economics."

For the next few days keep a notepad handy so you can jot down advertisements you hear or read that make you feel as though you're out of step unless you buy a certain product or possess a certain item. You shouldn't have any trouble collecting examples!

Matthew 6:19-21. Job 31:24-28;

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a recent magazine editorial, author Timothy C. Morgan comments on a new book about gambling by saying the book "spells out how the pervasive worship of Lady Luck... alters our perspective on life." Morgan concludes: "There is a theological dimension [to gambling]—God is not mocked: what we sow, we reap. Unless we address the spiritual issues underlying gambling, America's next generation may perish, having no vision, but only a daydream." Morgan's choice of the word "worship" to describe America's obsession with gambling was not accidental. From a biblical perspective, there is a direct connection between greed and idolatry. This connection is stated explicitly in today's verse.

Idolatry is the worship of false gods. Worship is an expression of awe, trust, dependence and confidence, directed toward the object of our faith. Whether we are obsessed with gambling or with pursuing a higher-income job or with excessive shopping, we are demonstrating this connection.

Jesus cautions us not to trust in riches. "Trust" is a word usually used in terms of worship. Yet here Jesus relates it to greed: we are not to worship our money. It is a matter of idolatry because to trust in riches is to make them the object of worship instead of God.

Job's protest of his innocence is revealing. Putting his trust in gold or gloating over his wealth would have constituted unfaithfulness to "God on high" (Job 31:28). Such an act would have been as blameworthy as worshiping the sun or moon like the pagans around him (vv. 26-27).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When do you say “Enough”? Most people don’t say it at all. Greed is easy to spot in others but tough to pinpoint in ourselves. Here’s a brief self-test that may help focus the issue. Jot down the How do we know when we have crossed the line into greed? This is another of those issues of the heart that each of us has to answer before the Lord. Here are two biblical principles.

The first, illustrated in the episode of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-29), is this: when the choice is between the will of God and money, our decision reflects our true heart attitude. A second principle is illustrated by Job: everything we have, including life itself, belongs to God, and He can take it whenever He chooses. Whether you hold your possessions in an open hand or with a clenched fist also helps to reveal your heart.

Matthew 6:19-21

If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. - Matthew 19:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Where do you store your treasure? Do you keep it in a piggy bank or in a vault? Do you bury it in a hole in the back yard? The answer may depend upon who you are and what you value. A child may be inclined to put treasures in a piggy bank or just keep them in his pocket, especially if that treasure is a pet frog! A dog likes to bury his treasures, usually bones, in the back yard. Most of us, because we prefer the security of a vault, keep our treasure in the bank.

In today’s passage Jesus tells us of an even safer place and urges us to keep our treasures there. He also encourages us to concentrate our efforts on a certain kind of wealth. We find success by storing treasures in heaven. The problem with earthly treasures is that they are subject to decay and theft. Our investments diminish in value and our possessions break. That new car that seemed to give us so much pleasure yesterday just seems like a vehicle today. But the treasures we store in heaven are different. They do not lose their value and cannot decay (Mt 6:20). They are kept for us and will provide lasting pleasure throughout eternity.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you wanted to keep track of your earthly wealth, you would probably look at your bank statement. It would tell you how many deposits you had made in the past month and give you your current balance. What does your earthly bank statement tell you about what your heavenly bank statement might look like? Can you see practical ways that you have chosen to lay up treasures in heaven? Take a few moments to pray and ask God to show you how you can make investments in His kingdom this week.

Matthew 6:19-24

What "Dazzles" You? -John Wesley said,

> ""If your eye is single, God is in all your thoughts. If you are constantly aiming at Him who is invisible, if it is your intention in all things small and great to please God and do the will of Him who sent you into the world, then the promise will certainly take place: 'Your whole body will be full of light.’ Your whole soul will be filled with the light of heaven--with the glory of the Lord resting upon you.""

Wesley was describing what it means to have your eyes focused on God. He understood the importance of Jesus’ teaching that we should keep our eyes, our full attention set on God so we aren’t distracted by the world around us. The Lord’s word of caution is good preparation for us as we turn our thoughts and our study toward the story of His birth. We’ll begin a four-day series on the Christmas story tomorrow.

If you’ve ever been dazzled by the show the world can put on, you know how hard it is sometimes to keep your focus on the things of God. The world puts on one of its best shows during the holidays, and if we’re not careful we can become dazzled by the glitter and start wanting all the stuff we can’t afford and don’t need.

It’s easy to get out of balance during the holidays. But it’s obvious from today’s reading that keeping a guard on our desires is a year-round project. This is not a traditional Christmas text, but maybe it should be a required reading for us as we make our Christmas plans.

Jesus’ familiar words in Mt 6:21 have a particularly significant application for us at Christmas. If we are pouring too much of our ""treasure"" into the commercial event that happens alongside the celebration of Christ’s birth, that’s where our hearts will be. The important principle the Savior was teaching is that the things on which we spend our money (and we could add, our time and talents) are the things we will grow to love.

This is not a plea for God’s people to be grinches or Scrooges who throw cold water on everyone’s holiday. We believe it’s possible to please God, even in the way we do our Christmas shopping (1Cor. 10:31). He makes all the gifts and activities meaningful.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One way you can store up heavenly treasures during Christmas is by setting aside special time to worship the Lord this season.

We’ll spend the next four days reading the story of the angels’ visitations to Mary and Joseph, and the birth of Jesus. Why not plan to study these devotionals with your family or friends? Take turns reading the Scripture and try to recapture the drama of the events.

Matthew 6:19-24

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. - Matthew 6:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dr. Joseph Stowell tells of an airline flight he once made into Newark, New Jersey. He writes,

> ""I looked out the window, and there standing in the harbor was the Statue of Liberty. Only this time she was shrouded with scaffolding. Scurrying around the scaffolding were welders, polishers and repairers. This grand lady had no capacity to care for herself. I know Christians who've become accustomed to living by the scaffolding. If my walk with God is not carefully maintained, there is that subtle drift to hollowness, where my Christianity becomes a heartless habit, often moving into hypocrisy.""

Preventing our service for Him from becoming a ""heartless habit"" was high on Jesus' priority list. That's why He taught us to guard our motives in giving, as we learned yesterday. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord continued to show us how to keep our focus right when it comes to keeping the material and the spiritual in proper balance.

That brings us to the passage for today, a classic on the subject of our money and our motives. Some Christians get defensive when the pastor announces a sermon on money. They say to themselves, ""Oh no, here we go again. He's going to make us feel guilty for not giving more, and tell us we shouldn't be spending our money on material things.""

But that kind of thinking misses the point. The Bible is not out to kill our joy and plunder our checkbooks. Jesus did us a favor by giving us the truth on the way things are.

In these tremendous verses, the Savior spares us from the futility of wasting all our energy and commitment on that which will eventually be destroyed. Not only that, but by warning us against the ""deceitfulness of wealth"" (Mark 4:19), Jesus points us to a better way--laying up eternal treasure in heaven, where nothing can touch it.

We're back on the issue of motives. If our desire is to have everything our eyes see, then we're going to have problems because we will wind up being mastered by our money.

But if our heart's motive is to bless God and His work with the money He has entrusted to us, then investing in eternity will be a delight and not just a duty for us.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Every time we come to Matthew 6:21, we need to notice again that Jesus says our heart follows our treasure, not vice versa.

This isn't just an interesting fact to put in our notebooks. It's a serious reminder for us to be very careful how we use our finances, since we will come to love what we spend our money on. Do you know where the bulk of your ""treasure"" is going these days? That's a question worth thinking about--and it might be a good topic for conversation over family dinner.

Matthew 6:19-24

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. - Matthew 6:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Wesley said, ""If your eye is single, God is in all your thoughts. If you are constantly aiming at Him who is invisible, if it is your intention in all things small and great to please God and do the will of Him who sent you into the world, then the promise will certainly take place: 'Your whole body will be full of light.’ Your whole soul will be filled with the light of heaven--with the glory of the Lord resting upon you.""

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Matthew 6:19-24

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. - Matthew 6:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus told a pair of short parables that speak to the heart of this month's study on stewardship. In the first, a man found a treasure in a field, then went and sold all he had in order to buy the field and obtain the treasure. In the second, a merchant found a perfect pearl, and he also went and sold all he had to buy it. The main lesson of both stories is the surpassing value of the kingdom of heaven. Good stewardship begins with knowing how to value what is truly valuable. Good stewardship begins by understanding that the things of this world are worthless compared to the things of God.

This is the mindset with which we approach our month's topic: We conduct our stewardship beneath the wings of the One who is worth immeasurably more than everything we are stewarding. Jesus also reminded us of this truth in the Sermon on the Mount. Our real treasure is not of this world. Earthly goods are temporary and always at risk; heavenly treasures last forever and cannot be stolen. Simple logic tells us which one is more worth pursuing and storing up. The principle is to prize what is greatest and to invest our energy and effort to acquire what really matters (Mt 6:19-21).

A second metaphor repeats this central idea. The "eye" is what we use to see and evaluate and choose the treasures on which we set our hearts. If we discern and strive for right priorities, we see clearly and walk in the light (Mt 6:22-23). Put God first, and everything else follows (Mt 6:24).

Stewardship concerns not only money, which is often how we think of it, but also other resources such as time and energy, and other matters for which we bear responsibility, including relationships and the created world. This month we will study how to handle the people, things, and resources placed in our care or within our circle of influence as followers of Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To begin this month's study, let's pray for godly change. Whether you feel mature or hopeless about various areas of stewardship, ask Him to use His Word to stimulate fresh growth and development in this area of your spiritual life over the next thirty days. God delights to have His Holy Spirit produce godly fruit in our lives, and He honors our prayers that we grow in ways that glorify Him.

Matthew 6:22-24

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you." - Hebrews 13:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

A man came to Jean Agassiz, the Swiss naturalist, and attempted to persuade him to deliver a lecture to the organization he represented. Agassiz flatly refused because he felt his time would be better spent doing research and writing. The visitor, however, refused to leave and continued to pester Agassiz, noting that his organization would be willing to pay a large sum of money. The offer held no incentive for the naturalist. “That’s no inducement to me,” Agassiz told him, “I can’t afford to waste my time making money.” Agassiz understood that money makes a poor master.

Today’s passage warns of the danger of greed and the impossibility of serving God and money at the same time. Jesus compared the eye to a lamp in order to illustrate the danger of greed and the importance of generosity, “If your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Mt 6:23).

In Jewish culture the phrase “evil eye” described a stingy person. Gifts from such a person always have strings attached. That is why Proverbs 23:6 warns, “Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. 'Eat and drink,’ he says to you, but his heart is not with you.” Ironically, greedy, stingy people don’t realize that true poverty is their destiny (Pr 28:22).

Jesus’ warning is most sobering of all. He cautions that one who loves money cannot love God at the same. These two masters are mutually exclusive.

At its root the problem described in these verses is one of devotion. The choice entails the decision whether to serve God or money (Matt. 6:24). In the original text, the term that we have translated money in English is mammon, an Aramaic word that meant wealth or property. It may be money or the things we can get with money that capture our affections. But either way, it will lead us away from service to God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Whenever we choose to invest ourselves--whether it is our time, energy, or money–we are choosing a “master.” Jesus admonishes us to choose carefully, since as we see in our passage we can’t serve more than one master.

Matthew 6:25-34; Philippians 4:6-7

With thanksgiving, present your requests to God. - Philippians 4:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to a February 13, 2009, New York Times article, a recent study of 46,000 workers showed that health care costs were 147 percent higher for those who were stressed or depressed than for workers who were not. Other recent studies suggest that stress should be considered a health threat, along with smoking or lack of exercise. We know that anxiety can make it harder to concentrate or sleep, but studies show that it also increases the risk for certain illnesses, such as high blood pressure.

Today's passage from Matthew addresses the problem of anxiety head on. These verses continue Jesus' teaching about possessions. In Matthew 6:19-24, Jesus warns against seeking treasures on earth. Today's passage presents another aspect of Jesus' teaching on possessions. While Matthew 6:19-24 focuses on the preoccupation with wealth and what we might hope to have, Matthew 6:25-34 concerns worry about what we don't have.

A helpful starting place for this discussion is to note the difference between needs and wants. This passage assures us that God cares about our needs and provides for them, although perhaps in ways that differ from our expectations. For example, we may receive kids' clothes from a relative whose children have out-grown these clothes, or we may decide that last year's styles still look pretty good, rather than purchasing new items. We may also consider those who have less than we have and decide that we can part with some items from our closet. Sometimes having fewer things even makes us feel less anxious!

The key point in this passage is that we aren't to worry about what we don't have because our heavenly Father already knows what we need. He will provide what we need, which may shift our focus away from what we want. Regardless, being anxious doesn't help —in fact, it hurts us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's readings offer helpful correctives to worry and anxiety. Matthew 6 assures us that the Lord will meet our needs, even if in a manner or timing that surprises us. Philippians 4 teaches us to pray and give thanks . . . for everything. Sometimes it's possible to pray in such a way that actually increases our anxiety, because we remain focused on what we need. But when we pray with thanksgiving, we're reminded of what God has already provided and have encouragement that He will provide again.

Matthew 6:25-33

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. - James 1:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

D. L. Moody told how his mother shared the family's dinner with people in need even though the Moody family lived in desperate poverty. Moody's father had died, leaving his widow with nine children to raise. Despite this, no hungry person was turned away from the Moody farmhouse. ""Mother just sliced the bread a little thinner"" is the way Moody described mealtimes.

God faithfully provided for Betsey Moody and her children even when the bill collectors came to the front door. The Moody family is among generations of God's people who can testify that their heavenly Father has cared for them. These familiar verses are prefaced by Jesus' command not to worry about life's necessities--a wasted effort anyway, and especially foolish in light of God's promise.

But the larger context of Jesus' teaching is also important if we are to appreciate these promises fully. The first word of Mt 6:25, ""therefore,"" makes it obvious that Jesus linked these verses with what He had just taught.

Go back about six verses and you'll read more words that will probably sound familiar. Speaking of our attitude toward finances, Jesus taught us to use our money for spiritual gain rather than to fall in love with it and the things it can buy. He knew that our devotion to money would lead to becoming enslaved to it, just as our devotion to God leads us to serve Him as our Master.

That's the message the Lord was communicating. Mt 6:25-33 are evidence verifying that when we make God our master instead of our checkbook, He assumes responsibility for our daily needs. And since He is the God of all creation, nothing we really need escapes His notice. God is infinitely able, and faithful, to meet any need we could ever have.

So all of us have two choices. We can either try to do everything ourselves, spending our time amassing as much as we can and then trying to hold on to it. Or, we can abandon the chase for the gold and commit our lives to our faithful Lord, trusting Him for our needs.

Since we only have one life to invest, and eternity after that, it makes sense to invest in eternity.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's reading follows a pattern we have seen often this month. God shows Himself faithful to those who obey and serve Him.

Mt 6:33 contains God's requirement. Since He has committed Himself to provide for us, it is only reasonable that we should commit ourselves to Him. There is no question that God will be faithful to you in the new week ahead. Will your response to Him match His care? A look at your schedule for the next seven days might give you a good reading on your commitment.

Matthew 6:25-33 is one of those Scripture portions that every Christian needs periodically to read and to digest. Jesus assured us that our Father, the same God who fed Elijah, knows and cares about our daily needs. What He asks of us in return is our undivided devotion. Can you say that God is first in your affections and your decisions? Tell Him so today, and thank Him for His provisions!

Matthew 6:25-34

Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. - Matthew 6:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

The late cartoonist Rube Goldberg was famous for his hilarious drawings of incredibly complicated machines designed to do simple jobs. Goldberg's creations were so popular that an annual competition is held in his name to design a complicated machine that does a simple job. The 1998 Goldberg contest winners were a group of engineering students at the University of Texas who invented a device that requires forty steps to shut off an alarm clock.

It's fun to make things complicated when first prize in a contest is at stake. But in real life, there's a great deal to be said for keeping things simple. That's true in stewardship, and no Bible passage illustrates this better than the closing verses of Matthew 6. The focus of our stewardship is the key. Everything else is details.

The good news is that Jesus has simplified the issue for us. If we are pursuing our relationship with God and living for His kingdom, much of what we tend to worry about will get pushed to the background--where they belong.

Jesus was not saying that food, clothing, and other necessities are unimportant. Exactly the opposite. God knows we need these things because that's the way He made us. And He has taken upon Himself the responsibility to provide these for us, if we will let go

of our fretting about them and seek God with all our being. Even the plants and animals are witnesses that God knows how to take care of His creatures.

Today we could add many other things to the basic list Jesus gave in these verses. But the principle is the same. We're going to spend our lives following something or someone. To run after anything or anyone but God is to act like people who don't even know Him.

When you think about it, who can do a better job of supplying our need--God or ourselves? The answer is obvious. God has promised to take care of these things if we will make Him our priority, which doesn't sound unreasonable at all. In fact, nothing else is reasonable but committing ourselves to Christ (see Rom. 12:1)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Mt 6:33 is so often quoted that it's easy to forget Jesus had another word of counsel for us in Mt 6:34.

This is the logical conclusion of God's promise to meet our needs--what can we hope to gain by taking things back into our hands through worry? Worry is pointless, even sinful. This is an especially good word for Father's Day. Dad, you have a great deal of responsibility, but you also have a Lord who is bigger than your biggest worry. Why not trade your worries for His peace today, and enjoy the good things God has given you?

Matthew 6:19-34

Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. - Matthew 6:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to 1 Kings 10:14, King Solomon received 666 talents of gold annually, which calculates to about 23 metric tons. At today’s prices, that amounts to an income, just in gold, of about $300 million a year. His throne was inlaid with ivory and outlaid with gold. The interior of the temple he built was completely covered in pure gold. His palace was constructed out of fine cedar beams and a precision-cut, high-grade stone foundation. He employed thousands of men for seven years to build the temple, and it took thirteen years to build his marvelous palace.

According to today’s verse, however, God outdid him in seven days without spending a penny. In Ecclesiastes, we’ve studied verse after verse of conclusions that everything under the sun is meaningless; enjoy what God’s given because it won’t last. Jesus goes one step further, essentially concluding that worrying about such things is a waste of time–the richest, most resourceful man in all the world can’t compete with lilies or grass (Mt 6:28–30)! So let’s set our mind on higher things (Mt 6:33).

Looking back to the beginning of today’s passage, we see that Jesus gets at the heart of the issue with the question, “Where is your treasure?” Earthly treasures fade away, but heavenly treasures never diminish (Mt 6:19, 20). It’s really a matter of having your heart in the right place (Mt 6:21).

The illustration of the eye as a lamp is an excellent test for determining where your heart is. What do your eyes seek after? Do you tend to scan for a flashy new car or a bigger, nicer house that tempts you toward envy? Or are you constantly looking for new opportunities to serve God and deliver compassion? Those are telltale signs of who your master is, God or Money. Verse 24 says that you can’t serve both.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What do your eyes say about you? When you see others, you might be tempted to look first at the material things like their clothes, their car, or their home. But that kind of first look tends to tempt us either to judge or to envy.

Matthew 6:25-33

I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it. - Psalm 81:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

We live in a fast-paced, worry-filled world. Numerous concerns fill our minds every day: travel accidents, paying the bills, getting fired, sending kids to college, or growing old. A quick online search for books on anxiety or worry produced nearly 300,000 results! And recent estimates suggest that roughly twenty-five million Americans suffer from some form of anxiety disorder every year. No doubt we live in an age of extreme stress.

Given our stress-filled culture, it is easy to think that we are the first to experience the pressures of life. A closer look at Jesus' words suggests that we are not alone. Even Jesus' disciples knew about anxieties, and Jesus explicitly commands us not to worry about

what we will eat or drink or wear (Mt 6:25). He then suggests that we look at two comparisons: the birds of the air and the flowers of the field (Mt 6:26-31). Both, says Jesus, receive what they need from God. The bottom line: if God cares for things like birds and flowers, how much more will He care for us?

Yet more is going on here than just forcing ourselves to have a positive outlook on life. Twice Jesus identifies the source of a faithful, worry-free attitude: understanding God as “your heavenly Father” (Mt 6:26, 32). The unbeliever, too, wrestles with anxiety over the needs of life, but the fundamental difference is in the God we worship. The unbeliever takes his needs to impersonal and ultimately powerless gods. We, however, take our concerns to a God who, according to Jesus, is also “your heavenly Father who knows” those needs (Mt 6:32).

Only when we see God as our all-knowing Father who provides for our needs can we then complete Jesus' command to seek God's “kingdom and His righteousness” (v. 33). The knowledge of God first as “your heavenly Father” enables us to live our lives in response to that knowledge. Life is filled with worries and very real anxieties, but Scripture calls us to counter those worries by embracing God as the heavenly Father that He is.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How wonderfully refreshing to have a heavenly Father who knows our needs and promises to meet them! But let's not forget our greatest need of all, met already in the sending of Christ: forgiveness and reconciliation with the true God. Today, on this second Sunday in Advent, reflect on that fulfillment of our greatest need. Praise God today for His love for you, even as you use this season to prepare yourself for Christ's return one day to fulfill God's promise of full communion with us.

Matthew 6:31-34

TODAY IN THE WORD

Has dramatic new evidence been uncovered that worry may be productive after all? At least one person thinks so. He offered this observation: ""Most of the things I worry about never happen anyway, so it must be working!""

That old line reflects our attempts to downplay and make light of our human tendency to worry, but Jesus isn't content to leave us in a fretful state. Worry is decidedly counter-productive to spiritual growth. We could even say worry is un-Christian.

That conclusion seems justified based on the Lord's distinction between how pagans act and the way God's children should behave. Pagans worry about and ""run after"" the stuff of daily life like food and clothing. Does that mean we as Christians should neglect our basic needs? Hardly. The Father's knowledge of our needs is the most comforting thing Jesus could have said about the necessities of life. We can lay that concern to rest.

So if we're not to chase after these things, what should we pursue? Jesus makes our life's purpose clear. God wants us to pursue Him. He wants us to be as hungry for Him and for holy living as we are for the bread we eat each day.

How do we know when we have come to this stage of spiritual maturity? We will stop being obsessed about the small stuff: money, food, clothes and shelter. While these things may not seem small to us, especially when they are in short supply, the needs of daily life are no problem to a God who cares for all of creation every day.

Matthew 6:33 is such a familiar verse that we forget it is not Jesus' last word on this subject. His concluding admonition is this, ""Do not worry about tomorrow"" (Mt 6:34).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe offers a helpful alternative to excessive concern over material things. Instead of worrying about food, drink and clothing, we should be concerned about feeding the inner person (Eph. 3:16; 1 Pet. 3:4); we need to drink deeply of the ""living water"" Jesus offers (John 7:37-39); and we should make sure our spiritual garments are in order (Col. 3:7-14).

Matthew 6:25-30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Recent studies on the U.S. labor force have detected a ""lost"" group of workers--more than one million men in the prime working ages of 25-55. They are lost to the labor force because they are neither employed nor actively looking for work.

One expert says these men are discouraged by the bleak prospects of finding a new job. One 49-year-old man says, ""It's an employer's market. I would probably be the last one on the list they would hire.""

It doesn't take much imagination to picture a husband and father who has been let go by his company sitting at home, fretting over

the future. There are also plenty of employed people who worry every day! Worry is a disease that is common in our culture.

Although we have divided up Matthew 6 for the purpose of these studies, you should read Mt 6:19-34 as one unit. Today's text begins with the word ""therefore""--a signal that Jesus is about to apply the principles He has just taught. This includes some of the most practical teaching on worry in all of Scripture.

When we read Mt 6:25-30 and then step back to look at the big picture, at least two things come into focus. The first is the futility of worry. The second is Jesus' admonition not to store up earthly treasure alone (Mt 6:19). We are clearly told not to knock ourselves out to meet needs that God has already promised to provide.

Jesus is not trying to make us feel guilty. Rather, He is trying to free us from the burden of worry. Most of us carry the burden of worry voluntarily, even though it does nothing but weigh us down and wear us out.

Jesus reminds us of the sinfulness of worry. His question in Mt 6:30 stings our souls because we can hear Him asking it of us. When we contrast our own worry to the promise of God's provision, we see how worry becomes sinful.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What are you worried about today? Go ahead and write down your worries. Include all the details that make the situation troublesome.

Matthew 6:25-34.

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TODAY IN THE WORD

When George Carmack and his wife, Kate, found gold in the Klondike in 1896, the great Canadian Gold Rush was on. Since the site was just across the border from Alaska, thousands sailed to Alaska to make the overland trip, often suffering great hardships. Mining towns sprang up overnight. Eggs were a dollar apiece, and a plate of ham and eggs cost ten dollars. A few people struck it rich in the great Gold Rush. But the majority went home disappointed, for a very good reason. The gold ran out.

This teaches us a simple and timeless lesson. When your source runs out, you’re finished! When God is your Source, though, you don’t have to worry. In case you’re wondering why we didn’t say more yesterday about God’s ability and His promise to supply our needs, that’s our subject for today.

It’s impossible to achieve a well-rounded biblical view of finances without considering this great passage. The promise Jesus made here would be startling were it not so well-known. But don’t let its familiarity lull you.

The all-knowing, all-powerful Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God in human flesh, signed His Father’s name to this promise to meet the needs of His children. In other words, when Jesus makes a promise, He has the wherewithal to make it good!

But notice Jesus’ own application of this truth. The issue is not whether God’s supply will give out, but whether we will respond properly to God’s goodness. Jesus doesn’t say, “Recline and do nothing, and God will pay your bills.” Neither is this an invitation to bring God our wish-list.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The fact that God is our Provider means we are pilgrims making a journey, not prospectors sifting for a few nuggets.

It helps to remind ourselves of this from time to time. Why not do so this weekend? Jot the words “Seek Me First” and today’s reference on a card. Then tape it to the mirror, set it on the

Matthew 6:25-34

Are You A Sleeper or a Worrier? - You’ve probably seen television commercials of a couple in bed, with one person sleeping like a baby and the other staring into the dark, wide-eyed with worry. This basic scene has been used to advertise numerous products. Often the pitch is for a financial service that has the ability to replace worry with a feeling of security. In fact, commercials like this often end in the same bedroom. The former worrier, now using the advertised product, is sleeping like a baby--maybe even with a smile.

Do you identify with the sleeper or the worrier when you see such a commercial? Many marriages include one partner of each variety. Some of the differences are due to temperament and personality type. Some people have an easier time trusting than others. A marriage partner’s makeup doesn’t negate the fact that one of the qualities a couple needs to develop is confident trust in God.

We usually read Jesus' familiar words about worry and trust and apply them individually. But think about the way a married couple might deal with the Savior's warning against worry and His invitation to trust our Father.

When two people blend their lives together in such an intimate way, each partner cannot help but be deeply affected by the other's attitudes. That's why a married couple needs to work hard to help each other grow in faith. The trust in God that a couple develops together can mean the difference between peace and panic when it comes to paying the bills and putting food on the table, let alone dealing with a severe crisis.

But the faith Jesus was describing is even more than the absence of worry over our next meal or mortgage payment. Faith cannot exist in a spiritual vacuum. The Lord commanded believers to put these temporary things behind us and live for God's benefit and glory.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The prophet Amos asked, "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (3:3).

Matthew 6:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a sermon entitled "Pressing Into the Kingdom of God," American Puritan theologian and pastor Jonathan Edwards preached on the value of the kingdom.

"It is that the kingdom of heaven should be thus sought, because of the great excellency of it. We are willing to seek earthly things, of trifling value, with great diligence, and through much difficulty; it therefore certainly becomes us to seek that with great earnestness which is of infinitely greater worth and excellence. And how well may God expect and require it of us, that we should seek it in such a manner, in order to our obtaining it!"

That's the central point of today's somewhat difficult parable. An estate manager, accused of wrongdoing, sees that he's probably going to lose his job. He decides to use his remaining time in power to make friends. He knows people will be grateful for lowered debts, and since he's on the way out he has nothing to lose. After he's fired, they'll be happy to give him a helping hand.

Speaking to His disciples, Jesus demonstrated a keen knowledge of human nature and behavior. We like to look out for #1! Is He commending dishonesty or selfishness? Not at all! This is an analogy. For example: An athlete wins a gold medal, and we read that she's been training for years. Do we want to join her sport? Probably not. Do we want her dedication to excellence? Absolutely!

Similarly, we want to imitate the manager's shrewdness, but not his methods or purposes. Just as the manager was clever in worldly affairs, so we should be wise in kingdom affairs. Just as the manager was clever in using his resources for selfish gain, so we should be wise in using them for eternal gain (Mt 6: 9-10). We should pursue God's will with the same energy that the manager had in pursuing his own benefit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Review your budget and finances in light of today's devotional. Are you using your resources with "kingdom shrewdness"? Would God be pleased about your priorities and spending?

If you're not sure, obtain a financial workbook (such as one by Larry Burkett) through a Christian bookstore and take a hard look at where your money goes and why. Depending on what you find, you might seek out an accountability partner to help correct bad habits or wrongdoing. Godly accountability in this, as in any area, can lead to true spiritual growth.

Matthew 6:1-34

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. - Matthew 6:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

"Which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span?" Jesus asked rhetorically (v. 27, NASB). Maybe not, but some people in China are trying to add a "cubit" to their height's span, anyway. They check into a hospital, where a doctor cuts leg bones in two, puts on a brace, and waits for new bone tissue to grow in the gap. Called the Ilizarov procedure, it is painful and dangerous.

Why do they do it? In highly competitive urban China, tallness is an important advantage in getting good jobs and spouses. Newspaper employment and personal ads even list height requirements!

Jesus warned against this things-of-earth attitude in today’s reading. In this second installment of the Sermon on the Mount, He continued to describe kingdom living and exhort us to seek heavenly treasures.

The passage begins with three examples of true godliness (Mt 6:1–18). First, generosity to the poor should be done quietly. If it is done publicly–that is, for human recognition–God will not reward it. Second, true prayer includes the basic elements in Jesus’ model prayer, especially including forgiveness. Again, this spiritual practice is contrasted to the “prayers” offered by show-offs and hypocrites. And third, fasting should likewise be done with sincerity and humility.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you wish, try to memorize Matthew 6:19–21 by the end of the day: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Matthew 7

Matthew 7:1-6

TODAY IN THE WORD

A Glare and A Growl -Bob Gibson was a fiercely competitive all-star pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals in the 1960s-70s. His glare alone could freeze a batter. Broadcaster Tim McCarver likes to tell of the time when as a young catcher for the Cardinals, he went to the mound for a conference with the pitcher. Before he could even open his mouth, Gibson fixed him with a withering glare and growled, ""What do you know about pitching? Get out of here!"" So much for ""high level conferences"" on the pitcher's mound! But the point is worth making. If you are going to try and counsel someone else, you'd better check yourself first. That's the spirit behind Jesus' famous prohibition against hypocritical judgment in today's text.

Actually, this passage is famous because it's often used incorrectly to silence objection against sin or wrongdoing. But a simple reading of the text shows that Jesus is not forbidding all sorts of judgment. He is focusing on the hypocrisy of the one doing the judging (see Rom. 2:1).

Jesus' reference to hypocrisy takes us back to Matthew 6, where He dealt with hypocrisy in worship. Matthew 7:1-12 is part of this same line of thought Jesus began in Mt 6:1. He is teaching us about worship (Mt 6:1-18), wealth (Mt 6:19-34), and our walk (Mt 7:1-12). The emphasis in each is the way His true disciples should act.

Jesus wants us to avoid judging another person's motives. We can't see into our brother's heart, so we have no right to judge inner motives. Paul agrees. Romans 14 is a classic treatment of our need to accept fellow believers without passing self-righteous judgment on their convictions.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

There are two ways to misuse Jesus' warning about care in judgment.

The first is to ignore it and pass judgment on the motives of anyone and everyone who comes within range. The other mistake is to feel that we must be perfect ourselves before we can exhort or correct an erring fellow believer.

Matthew 7:7-11

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine . . . be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus! -Ephesians 3:20-21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Think of the legendary grandfather who loves to play pranks on his grandchildren. What seems to be a piece of candy turns out to be a frightening explosion when unwrapped. What looks like a friendly handshake turns out to be an electric shock. What appears as an invitation to his favorite chair becomes an embarrassing experience with a whoopie cushion! Perhaps the occasional prank is funny, but if used repeatedly, grandchildren will learn not to trust their grandfather. They learn what kind of man he is.

Do we know what kind of God we pray to? Is He a deceptive God who gives only tricks? Is He a hard-hearted God who gives begrudgingly? Or is He a loving God who gives more than we can ever ask? Today's passage answers the question: God is a Father who gives “good gifts to those who ask him” (Mt 7:11). God is generous in giving; He also gives what is good for us.

We can look to human parents as examples. If a son is hungry, a father does not hand his boy a stone or snake (Mt 7:9-10), things that may appear as answers to the request but in reality are only deceptions. The point is clear: God is no prankster who delights in fooling us; rather, He is a generous Father who gives us what we need. If even sinful humans know how to provide generously for their children's requests, how much more will our heavenly Father lavish upon us all our needs (Mt 7:11)? Knowing, then, what kind of God we petition brings new light to the first verses of the passage: ask, seek, knock (Mt 7:7-8)—all ancient metaphors for prayer. If God is a generous Father, then we can take our needs to Him and ask. We can seek Him, confident that He will provide for us. Persistence in prayer on our part is done not in desperation toward a stingy or deceptive God, but in hopeful anticipation that our heavenly Father knows our needs and will generously provide the best for His children.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How often do we approach God as either a begrudging or trickster God, sure that He will not hear us or afraid of His response? Jesus' words today rebuke us for such an attitude in prayer, and also call us toward a better relationship with God as our heavenly Father. Spend time in prayer today asking forgiveness for any wrong attitudes toward God you may have held. Then bring your needs before Him with joyful confidence as His beloved child for whom He delights to provide.

Matthew 7:7-11

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. - Matthew 7:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Here's a final thought from Larry Burkett on what it takes to be a successful and faithful steward. ""God is looking for Christians who don't give up easily. Too many Christians live by the 'open-door' doctrine: if the door is open, it must be God; if it's closed, God must not want us to go in. If that were so, God's Word wouldn't direct us to knock on doors....Good stewards of God's blessings don't give up and can't be turned from God's will.""

Matthew 7:7 is quoted a great deal, just as we have done today. Jesus said these words during the Sermon on the Mount, in which He taught what it means for us to live as kingdom people. In other words, the promise of God's answer to our prayers isn't just a blank check we can use for anything. The preparation for answered prayer is conformity to the principles of kingdom living Jesus taught in Matthew 5-7.

But the reality that gives power to our obedience is the character of God. He is a good and loving Father who knows His children's needs and is delighted to meet them. Jesus said, ""Your heavenly Father knows that you need them"" (Matt. 6:32), referring to the necessities of life.

Some Christians get nervous when passages like this are taught, because it starts to sound like we can demand things from God, and He is then obligated to supply them. But the teaching that says, ""Demand your miracle from God today"" has a problem we could call isolation.

That is, we usually get in trouble when we isolate one part of a massive amount of material and build our entire theology on it, ignoring any passages that don't fit into our system. The Bible has much to say about prayer, both in terms of promises and prohibitions.

There's no question that this is a great promise to people whose heart's desire is to be faithful and pleasing to God (see Ps. 37:4). As we said earlier, if God has our hearts, He can trust us with His blessings. Let's conclude our study on stewardship with this encouraging assurance from Jesus that when we pray, our Father is listening!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The late Vance Havner put it so well: ""We carry checks on the bank of heaven and never cash them at the window of prayer.""

Havner certainly wasn't advocating the ""name it, claim it"" mentality that is so popular today. It's just that he understood the value of persistent prayer. How about you? If your heart's desire is to please God and be the best manager possible, you have every right to keep asking, seeking, and knocking when it comes to the spiritual, material, and physical needs of yourself and others.

Matthew 7:1-29

The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer. - Psalm 6:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor during the Nazi regime, was executed for opposing Hitler, just weeks before his concentration

camp was liberated by the Allies. His book, Cost of Discipleship, continues to inspire believers. He made these comments about our passage today: “Disciples live completely out of the bond connecting them with Jesus Christ. Their righteousness depends only on that bond and never apart from it.”

Yesterday we saw how our pursuit of righteousness is connected to our relationship with the Father. Today that theme continues. The opening verses warn against judging. Often this is misused to say that we can never declare something right or wrong, or that we are not to exercise our reason. Neither of these is accurate; the Greek phrase implies trying to play God to exercise condemnation. Attempting to declare anyone outside the bounds of God's mercy is inappropriate for followers of Jesus who know that they have received boundless mercy and should be filled with mercy toward others (Mt 5:7).

Jesus returns to the source of our encouragement in the path of discipleship in verses 7-11. The point here is not that God forces us to be persistent before He will respond. Rather, we can have confidence about the character of our Father so that we can ask, seek, and knock and expect that He will respond with love and generosity.

The “golden rule” is the epitome of Jesus' teaching on discipleship, and again it connects righteousness with relationship (Mt 7:2). This is not abstract ethics, nor is it rooted in ourselves—the emphasis is not on our notions of how we want to be treated. It is rooted in the Law and Prophets, that is, Scripture. And we understand Scripture through Jesus (Mt 5:17). To know how to treat others, we must know Jesus and His Word.

The sermon concludes with reminders that we cannot separate our profession from our practice. Jesus calls us to follow Him into relationship with the Father through the power of the Spirit. How will we respond?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The final verses of this chapter tell us that the crowds were amazed at these words; they recognized the authority of Jesus. But we know that many in the crowd would later turn against Jesus. He does not ask for our admiration or amazement—He requires our love and obedience.

Pray for the spiritual focus and encouragement to be a doer of the Word and not only a hearer of this call to discipleship (James 1:22-25).

Matthew 7:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Writing in the July, 1991 issue of Today in the Word, Moody president Dr. Joseph Stowell said, “I have a feeling D. L. Moody must have liked the Gospel of Mark. It’s a book of action, with almost everything happening right after something else happened. Mark’s favorite term to describe the ministry of Jesus was a little word that can be variously translated 'immediately,' 'at once,' or 'as soon as.' That sounds like Mr. Moody, whose favorite phrase when pursuing a project for Christ’s kingdom was 'push it.' ”

Mr. Moody would have liked Bartimaeus, too. This man may have been a blind roadside beggar who occupied one of the lowest rungs on Israel’s social ladder. But Bartimaeus knew what he needed from Jesus and he wouldn’t be silenced until he got it. His persistence is remarkable considering that everyone around him did their best to shut him up and keep him from interrupting Jesus. This story is also interesting because by this time Jesus was on a determined course to Jerusalem to face His impending death on the cross (Mark 10:32–34). But even with His own rejection and unspeakable suffering weighing on His mind, Jesus took the time to love and heal a poor blind man.

Bartimaeus was not only persistent in calling for Jesus’ help, but in one very important way he saw things more clearly than many people in Israel who had not lost their eyesight. His shout, “Jesus, Son of David” (v. 47), was an acknowledgment of the Savior as Israel’s Messiah, a statement of faith that relatively few Israelites were willing to make. Jesus made no attempt to silence the beggar or deny that He deserved this messianic title. Obviously, God had opened Bartimaeus’s spiritual eyes, and he had genuine faith.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you been praying persistently and consistently to God for a particular burden or request?

Matthew 7:7-11; Hebrews 5:7-10

During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. -

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sometimes kids ask the most profound questions! Recently at a Vacation Bible School, the volunteer leader read Mark 1:35, which

says that Jesus got up early and went off by Himself to pray. Immediately, a cute (and precocious) four-year-old hand shot up. When the leader called on the little preschooler, she asked, “How come Jesus had to pray if He was God?”

Have you ever stopped to wonder why Jesus prayed during His incarnation? Didn’t He know everything already? Didn’t He already have everything He needed for ministry? This is an important question, and not just for four-year olds!

The key to understanding Jesus’ prayer life–our focus for this month–is to consider His unique position as the Second Person of the Trinity. Jesus alone is both fully God and fully human. And it’s because of His authentic humanity that we can understand why Jesus prayed during His time on earth. Jesus wasn’t just going through the motions . . . He prayed because His humanity required it!

We know that Jesus was willing to take on human flesh so He could pay the ultimate price for sinful humanity. Becoming human also meant that He was utterly dependent upon the Father. Today’s passage from Hebrews 5 gives us insight into how fervently Jesus prayed during His incarnation.

There’s another reason why Jesus prayed. By praying Himself, Jesus not only showed that prayer is vital, but He also demonstrated to His disciples how to pray. Throughout this month, we’ll look at Jesus’ recorded prayers and how He modeled prayer.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Confident prayer is often misunderstood. Faced with unanswered prayer, we think we didn’t pray enough, or in the right way, or with enough confidence.

Matthew 7:7-11

Everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. - Matthew 7:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

A creative would-be buyer in Kentucky went to a car lot recently with a fistful of coupons and high expectations. It seems that the car company ran a $250-off coupon in a free local shoppers' guide. But the company left off the most important copy: the disclaimer reading ""one per customer."" So an enterprising man clipped coupons from 140 guides and brought them to the dealership, hoping to drive away in a $35 car. His hopes were dashed when the printing error was pointed out.

Most people would read a story like this and say, ""That's impossible. How could this man expect a car dealer to give him an expensive car just for showing up and asking?""

In this case, the point is well taken. Most businesses could not operate like this--at least not for very long. But it's fair to ask if this isn't something like the kind of normally-impossible expectation Jesus wants us to bring to our prayers.

One thing is beyond dispute. In this teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spared no words in urging us to pray diligently, persistently, and expectantly.

In fact, the location of these verses in the Sermon on the Mount may hold the key to their understanding. Jesus opened the Sermon by commending those who acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy. Then He gave a model prayer, the Lord's Prayer, to show His disciples how to pray for His kingdom and its concerns.

Now in Matthew 7, Jesus tells His followers how to receive the ""good gifts"" He wants to give to those who put His kingdom first: righteousness, purity, humility, mercy, forgiveness, deliverance, and the other spiritual blessings named in the Sermon.

We are usually taught to apply the ""ask, seek, and knock"" formula to our own prayer requests and needs, and this certainly applies to that passage. Also, the Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray for our daily bread, and Jesus said that our earthly needs would be supplied if we would pursue His kingdom.

However, it's fascinating to think that Jesus may be calling us to ask for something more--for the traits of discipleship that make it possible for us to put His kingdom and His glory first.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When it comes to the true, spiritual riches of His kingdom (Luke 16:11), Jesus is ready to give us as much as our faith can handle.

Take another look at the list of God's good gifts above. Or better yet, spend a few extra minutes today in Matthew 5-7, noting the spiritual trait that you most desire God to develop in your life right now. Then ask Him for it--and ask with high expectations!

Matthew 7:7-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Derrick Redmond hobbled toward the finish line in tremendous pain. As the 1992 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles drew to a close, British distance runner Derrick Redmond was leading the race. Suddenly, his hamstring muscle snapped and he fell to the track. As he got back up and limped toward the finish line, a figure came out of the stands and put his arm around Derrick's waist. It was his father, Jim. Together, father and son made their way to the finish line, well out of the race but the true winners that day. What a great picture of perseverance. We all admire the person who refuses to give up in the face of great odds or even pain. And we would all love to be that kind of stay-with-it person. But the truth is that we often get weak, stumble, and need the Lord to come alongside us.

When it comes to the Christian race, prayer seems to be the discipline that causes most of us the most problems. Jesus knew how hard it would be for His disciples to watch and pray for ""one hour,"" so He took the occasion of His first public teaching to encourage His followers to pray.

Our prayer problems usually come in one of two areas. Either we become discouraged and weary and give up too soon, or worse, we somehow become convinced that our prayers are not doing any good. Today's text speaks to both problems. There's no mistaking Jesus' message: prayer pays off.

Far from being futile, prayer is the most powerful weapon we have in our Christian arsenal. Why? Because in prayer, we are in direct communion and communication with God.

Jesus also makes it clear that persistent prayer is the kind that gets heaven's attention. It's hard to ignore someone who won't stop pounding on the door.

Today's text is an incredible prayer promise, as is today's verse. How do we balance Jesus' unvarnished promises with the reality that we don't get everything we pray for?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Maybe you feel like Derrick Redmond hobbling down that track when it comes to your prayer life.

If that's the case, the key is not to stay down. The Father is waiting to help you through the Holy Spirit, who always stands ready to intercede for you. Don't quit yet on that important prayer need. Ask the Lord for the strength to pray one more day--then do the same tomorrow.

Matthew 7:9-11 Psalm 130

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. - Hebrews 13:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jesus, Love of all loving, your compassion is without limit. We are thirsting for you, the one who tells us: “Why be afraid? Have no fear; I am here.”–Taizé,Prayer for Each Day

Several years ago a popular book addressed a difficult topic: why bad things happen to good people. This haunting question can thwart prayer because we can’t understand why God lets people, including ourselves, suffer. This question of suffering is profound and can only be briefly touched upon in today’s lesson.

We can start by acknowledging that we live in a fallen world filled with evil and sin. Because we live in the world, we are impacted by evil, even when there’s no direct connection between this evil and sin in our own lives. Yet evil in the world is a constant reminder of the overwhelming need for the cross.

And the cross is where we acknowledge the redemptive hand of God, which brings forth His good purposes from circumstances intended for evil. God doesn’t makes evil good, but He can redeem evil for His good.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How then do we pray in the face of suffering? First, we humbly confess that we may never know why certain events happen.

Then, we begin focusing on God’s goodness and mercy. This is not to glibly praise God for the evil at hand or to deny our pain, but to look beyond the difficulty to our loving Heavenly Father. Today’s reading from Matthew teaches about our Father’s goodness.

Instead of focusing on why, consider asking what?–“what might God be doing here?”–or where?–“where is God in the midst of this?” Ultimately this last question will lead us to the cross and our gracious Savior who was willing to pay the price for all sin.

Finally, we need to feel freedom to come before the Lord honestly in our pain. Sometimes tears are the only prayer we can offer up, and our Lord understands those times of hurt and pain. He will hear our prayer of tears. Look at the following prayer or the reading from Psalm 130 as the basis of your own prayer before God.

Matthew 7:9-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Author Louisa May Alcott grew up in a generous home, even though her parents had little to spare. A friend once said that meals in the Alcott home, which were meager at best, were often reduced from three to two a day when there was another family in need.

Louisa learned her lesson well. One time when she was still a young girl, Louisa gathered together a group of hungry, ragged children and ran to the family pantry to find food for them.

The Alcott family knew how to give good gifts to others, even if it meant going hungry themselves. While today's society can tend toward selfishness, we still see many examples of selfless and sacrificial giving. In today's passage, we realize that if we as sinful human beings can give like that, imagine the generosity our perfect Heavenly Father lavishes on us.

Jesus is talking about prayer at this point in the Sermon on the Mount. He is encouraging His disciples to be bold and persistent in prayer, much like the man in His parable who doesn't stop pounding on his friend's door until he gets what he needs (Luke 11:5-8). In Luke's Gospel, in fact, this story precedes Jesus' admonition to ask, seek and knock.

Jesus assumes the best in human relationships when he tells how a hungry child's request for food is met by his loving father. A trusting child doesn't need his father to give him a useless stone, or worse, a harmful snake. He expects only the best from his dad.

Do you see the word-picture Jesus is drawing? As our loving Father, God will give us only what we need, never anything that would hurt us. He never needs to repent for any of His gifts (Rom. 11:29).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Author Philip Yancey has referred to pain as the gift nobody wants.

Sadly, many times we feel that way about God's gifts. While we may not ask for a hard-to-handle gift such as pain, sometimes our wise and loving Father sends one our way.

Matthew 7:12; Romans 13:8-10

TODAY IN THE WORD

A group of city officials and reporters gathered at a Chicago railroad station one day in 1953 to meet Dr. Albert Schweitzer, famed missionary doctor and Nobel Peace Prize winner.

As Schweitzer emerged from the train, cameras flashed and officials surged forward with hands extended. Schweitzer thanked them politely, then asked to be excused. He went to an elderly woman who was struggling with two suitcases, picked them up, and with a smile escorted the woman to her bus. Then he returned to his reception with the apology, ""Sorry to have kept you waiting.""

Dr. Schweitzer showed what it means to love another person as oneself. His simple gesture was a living example of the ""golden rule."" He treated that elderly woman as if she was his own mother--doing for another what he would want done for himself.

Generations of American schoolchildren grew up memorizing the golden rule. While today some may not be familiar with its biblical moorings, in today's passage Jesus set it firmly in the context of God's revealed Word in the Old Testament.

The last part of this great verse, while not often quoted, is key to this principle. Elsewhere Jesus summed up ""the Law and the Prophets"" by pointing to our love for God and love for our neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40).

Here, He focuses on the second half of that concept, saying this rule sums up all that the Old Testament teaches about how we are to treat others. His teaching takes Matthew 7:12 out of the realm of a nice, warm thought and moves it into the realm of a divine command.

Once again, the apostle Paul perfectly reflects the teaching of his Lord. He goes so far as to say that loving others, which is really the heart of the golden rule, is a ""debt"" we owe. He also says it fulfills the Law.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Simple, daily kindnesses that used to be so common and mean so much have fallen on hard times these days.

Matthew 7:12

The commandments . . . are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” - Romans 13:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

A few years ago it was popular to wear wristbands with the initials WWJD imprinted on them. The initials stood for the question, “What would Jesus do?” These wristbands were intended to help the wearer formulate a Christlike response in everyday situations. Some complained that the slogan was trite. Others suggested that it ought to ask, “What would Jesus have me do?” More recently some Christians who, for environmental reasons, opposed the use of sport utility vehicles amended the slogan to say, “What would Jesus drive?” In the ensuing controversy conservative columnist George Will wryly observed that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on a donkey: “a fuel-guzzling and high-pollution conveyance.”

While people debate these two questions, we see in our passage today that Jesus taught His disciples that their daily behavior ought to be guided by a different question. He urged them to ask: “What would I want the other person to do to me?” (Mt 7:12). According to Jesus, this simple question summed up the essence of the Law and the Prophets. In saying this Jesus reveals an important truth about the nature of holiness. Holiness is not merely how we relate to God–it’s also how we treat other people. To be holy, we simply need to ask, “How would I want to be treated in this situation?” The standard is simple; the implementation is difficult. Only those who have already experienced the transforming power of the gospel can apply this “golden rule” to their behavior. Only God can enable us to live by this standard.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In his book Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis observed that every person has an innate sense of God’s law. He called this the “Rule of Fair Play” and observed it most often when people say things like, “How would you like it if someone did the same to you?”

Matthew 7:13-14

TODAY IN THE WORD

There is a new terror on the streets today: umbrellas.

Giant umbrellas are creating minor havoc on narrow sidewalks. According to a recent report, umbrella manufacturers are bulking up their product, increasing the diameter of umbrellas until they are big enough to pose ""protocol and right-of-way"" problems on narrow sidewalks. People trying to walk down a narrow road find themselves getting poked, prodded and jabbed, to say nothing of getting their hats knocked off. We've all experienced walking against the crowd down a busy sidewalk. Making your way past people, shopping bags and heavy winter coats can be frustrating.

In the physical as well as the spiritual realm: the more narrow the road--or sidewalk--the more roadblocks you're likely to encounter. In today's lesson we are reminded that when you take the narrow way, you're more likely to face obstacles.

Like the ""golden rule,"" the ""straight and narrow way"" is so well known that it has become a part of our language. And like the ""golden rule,"" it has lost a lot of its original clout. But Jesus spoke frankly of the choices we must make.

The two roads we read of today are the first in a series of couplets with which Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount. In the next verses, we will examine what Jesus has to say about two religious professions, two trees, and two builders.

The challenge for Jesus' original hearers, and for us, is to make sure we are on the right side of this ""continental divide."" On one side is the broad road, the way of self-indulgence and pleasure. When we follow the wide path, we meet with little if any resistance. It's easier to walk with the crowd than against it. But what the crowd does not realize is that this road leads to ""destruction""--a biblical term for hell.

The narrow road is the way of Christ. This road requires self-denial and carrying our cross. The only gate to this road is Christ Himself.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you know someone who is traveling the broad road that leads to eternal destruction?

Matthew 7:15-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Woodrow Wilson was president of Princeton University, he was asked to address a group of concerned parents. Opening the

meeting, he said: ""I get many letters from you parents about your children. You want to know why we people up here at Princeton can't make more out of them and do more for them...The reason is that they are your sons, reared in your homes, blood of your blood, bone of your bone. They have absorbed the ideals of your homes. You have formed and fashioned them. They are your sons. In those malleable, moldable years of their lives you have forever left your imprint upon them.""

Ouch! The truth must have stung those Princeton parents. Although Wilson said he was not trying to be rude, he cautioned his audience that they may be shocked by the truth of why their kids turned out the way they did.

What Woodrow Wilson did was give those people the upscale, Ivy League version of an old saying, ""You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."" Jesus gives us the original, biblical version in today's passage.

Jesus weaves together two images, one from the pasture and one from the orchard. Wolves may be able to disguise themselves as sheep and mingle with the flock, but not at feeding time. Then you can tell the difference because real sheep eat grass. Wolves eat sheep. The same is true at harvest time. If a tree is bad, you'll know it when good fruit is due to appear. Bad trees can't generate good fruit.

This is why Jesus gives His people permission to be ""fruit inspectors."" We may be prohibited from judging other people's inward motives, especially if our motive in judgment is hypocritical. But there is no prohibition against measuring professing Christians by what their lives produce.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Testing our own fruit is a healthy and necessary exercise.

What fruit should we see in our lives if we are truly trying to live for Christ? The fruit of the Spirit is the first thing that comes to mind (Gal. 5:22-23). Then there is ""the fruit of [our] lips,"" praise and worship to God (Heb. 13:15). Holy living is another (Rom. 6:22), as are the good works we are urged to do (Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:10).

Matthew 7:15-23

By their fruit you will recognize them. - Matthew 7:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the middle of winter, it’s not easy to tell the difference between a healthy tree and a dead one. Beneath a blanket of snow, it’s only natural for trees to stand hauntingly without leaves or fruit. But time will reveal a tree’s status. In the heat of the summer or the reddish rainbow of fall, a dead tree will stand in stark contrast from the colorful life of healthy, fruitful vegetation. It is precisely this trait to which Jesus refers in His warning about false prophets.

This is the second day of our study of trees as symbols of judgment.

False prophets, those who pretend to speak God’s truth but whose own interests are paramount, can initially be disguised. Clothing is the metaphor here; they can dress up like sheep, when “inwardly” they are wolves. But Jesus urges His listeners to look beyond appearances to results, to look beyond clothing to fruit.

Why fruit? Fruit is a long-term result. Fruit makes visible the hidden things. Fruit grows out of a tree’s diet, soil, air, light, and water. Fruit cannot be faked. If a tree lacks water, it will not produce fruit. Or in Jesus’ image, if a tree is a thorn bush, it will not produce grapes, nor will thistles produce figs. Look for the fruit, He admonishes, then you can name the tree. Don’t believe the name “prophet” until you see the evidence. Indeed, Jesus Himself repeatedly invited people to believe in Him on the basis of His miracles, His “fruit” (John 10:37–38).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God calls believers to bear spiritual fruit. Inside and out we are to be “well-dressed” by the Spirit.

Matthew 7:21-23

TODAY IN THE WORD

Shop in any supermarket and you'll find that it is getting more and more popular to be a fake. Artificial sweeteners like aspartame and saccharine have taken the place of real sugar. Lunch meats, from salami to bologna, are now being made from turkey. There are dairy substitutes for everything from cream to cheese. And a new substance called ""olestra"" has suddenly taken the place of fat. But we don't always welcome these substitutions. Any newly engaged young woman would be devastated to discover that the glimmering rock on her finger was not a diamond, but a cubic zirconium.

Jesus has the ability to recognize fakes. He wants us to be certain that our lives and our faith are the real things, not empty substitutions.

In today's passage, He emphasizes that many people will call Him Lord, but not all of these people will enter the kingdom of heaven. Why? He explained that many people can ""talk the talk"" when it comes to religious profession. They can even claim to have done some pretty remarkable deeds in Christ's name. In fact, many people who have settled for religion in place of salvation are capable of significant service, and no doubt many others are helped through their efforts.

But deeds of any kind are no substitute for repentance from sin and faith in Christ. They never have been (Eph. 2:8-9). Even when others assume that these beliefs are the real thing, and applaud their example, approval on its own means nothing.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can fool ourselves, too, if we're not careful. Yesterday, we encouraged you to test the fruitfulness of your Christian life against a biblical list of qualities God wants to see us develop. This subject is important enough for another day of consideration.

Matthew 7:1-29

Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. - Matthew 7:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Concerning the narrow way, John Wesley preached:

> “Narrow indeed is the way of poverty of spirit; the way of holy mourning; the way of meekness; and that of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Narrow is the way of mercifulness; of love unfeigned; the way of purity of heart; of doing good unto all men; and of gladly suffering evil, all manner of evil, for righteousness’ sake. . . . How thinly [such people] are scattered over the earth, whose souls are enlarged to love all mankind; and who love God with all their strength, who have given Him their hearts, and desire nothing else in earth or heaven!”

This final section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is like a picture gallery of the Christian life. The “eye picture” reminds us to act with charity and humility. To judge a brother’s “sawdust” when we ourselves have a “plank” is hypocritical. This is not an absolute prohibition against exercising judgment, but rather a condemnation of smug self-righteousness. After all, when we have dealt with our own sin, we should help our brother or sister with theirs (Mt 7:5; cf. 1 Cor. 5:12; 6:2–4). God is the true Judge–we are to help one another on the way toward holiness.

The “family picture” shows the essence of true faith: God is a loving Father who gives good gifts to His children. It is on this basis and within this trusting relationship that we go to Him in prayer. Prayer is not calling on a genie-in-a-bottle, but a persistent habit of the faithful soul.

We discussed the “narrow way picture” above; it similarly deals with spiritual truth and discernment. How can we know the truth? It’s as simple as judging a tree by its fruit. God’s kingdom is not primarily about miracles, but rather obedience to His will.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today’s reading provides many pictures for study and meditation#150;eyes with sawdust or planks in them, pearls before pigs, a father giving gifts to his children, a narrow gate and road, trees bearing fruit, wolves, and buildings with rock or sand foundations.

Matthew 7:15-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Woodrow Wilson was president of Princeton University, he was asked to address a group of concerned parents. Opening the meeting, he said: ""I get many letters from you parents about your children. You want to know why we people up here at Princeton can't make more out of them and do more for them...The reason is that they are your sons, reared in your homes, blood of your blood, bone of your bone. They have absorbed the ideals of your homes. You have formed and fashioned them. They are your sons. In those malleable, moldable years of their lives you have forever left your imprint upon them.""

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TODAY ALONG THE WAY

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Matthew 7:24-27

TODAY IN THE WORD

In Book I of his allegorical work of Christian pilgrimage, The Faerie Queene, poet Edmund Spenser has his hero, the Red Cross Knight, encounter a series of challenges and obstacles to faith. In one episode, the Knight visits the House of Pride. At first, the House appears to be grand and beautiful--a shining gold castle with flags waving crisply from the towers. The Red Cross Knight is welcomed and served a fine meal.

But all is not as it seems. The ""gold"" turns out to be painted on, and peeling off at that. The impressive appearance is only a facade, since the city is largely made up of rotting buildings. Ugly dungeons lie beneath the castle. Most telling, the whole place is built upon a foundation of sand.

Spenser draws this allegorical detail directly from the parable in today's reading. While the two houses in Jesus' story may appear the same at first glance, one is firmly founded on the rock while the other is unstably built on sand.

What the Savior says here is a perfect ending to this great sermon. The tone and general theme of the entire message has been that mere outward works, or the right words, are no substitute for true righteousness.

It is only the person who ""hears these words of Jesus and puts them into practice"" (v. 24) who is wise in God's eyes. Jesus' half-brother, the apostle James, said the same thing in memorable terms (James 1:22-25).

In the case of these two houses, they appeared to be the same. No one could tell the difference as they sat on their foundations. The two men may even have used identical building materials.

But the foundations of the two houses were radically different. The first was built on the ""rock,"" Jesus Christ Himself (1 Cor. 10:4). Once the storm hit, the true character of these homes was revealed.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As you read this today, it may be that a storm is battering your spiritual house.

Fierce storms are always frightening, but if your life is built on the rock, Jesus assures you that He will not let you be swept away. Today, claim the wonderful promise of God's Word that He will not allow more to come upon you than you are able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13).

Matthew 7:28-29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Although Mark Twain was no churchman, the great author once attended a service and congratulated the pastor on his message. But he couldn't resist a jab.

""I welcomed [the sermon] as an old friend,"" Twain told the pastor. ""I have a book at home containing every word of it.""

The pastor bristled at the suggestion that he had parroted someone else's thoughts and words. But Twain persisted, so the pastor asked to see the book. The next day Twain sent him an unabridged dictionary. We're not told how the pastor responded to Twain's

humor.

While Twain may have been technically right in his assertion, we know, of course, that his charge had no merit. The Pharisees probably would have appreciated Twain's cleverness. They liked to have all of their bases covered.

For any issue that came up, they could be sure there was something on it in the writings of their tradition. Their philosophy was that the best surprise was no surprise. They weren't out to amaze anyone, and they seldom did.

But wherever He went, Jesus provoked amazement among the people of Israel. They listened with astonishment to His teachings, and there can be no doubt that the Sermon on the Mount is an astonishing message.

Given the religious teachings these people were accustomed to, we can understand why their eyes widened and their mouths dropped in shock when they heard Jesus say, ""You have heard that it was said...But I say to you."" They were used to the Pharisees and other authorities, who were largely content to quote from their tradition.

In doing what He did, Jesus not only claimed to overrule the Jews' religious tradition. He claimed to do so on no other authority but His own. This was surprising because He had no religious credentials as far as the recognized authorities were concerned. No wonder the Pharisees considered Him a menace.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Read Matthew 8 and you'll see that Jesus went from teaching with authority to demonstrating His power by His works.

That's really where we need to pick up after finishing the Sermon on the Mount. We don't have miracle-working power as Jesus did, but we are commanded to go in His name and to demonstrate His love, grace and power to the world.

Matthew 8

Matthew 8:1-9:34

How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? - Matthew 9:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

A new contact lens helps blind people see. Developed by Dr. Perry Rosenthal, the Boston Scleral Lens sits only on the white of the eye, protecting the cornea with a layer of fluid. People who cannot see due to corneal damage can wear them and lead normal lives.

Individual lenses are custom-made to fit individual eyes, and cost about $7,500. Unfortunately, insurance companies have so far refused to pay for them, but Dr. Rosenthal turns no one away. He hopes to open clinics around the country to help as many as possible.

Helping blind people see is what the Messiah came to do as well (see Isa. 42:6–7). In today’s reading, we see clearly who Jesus was. He was powerful–healing a leper and others, calming a storm, and even raising a dead girl to life. He was compassionate. He demonstrated divine authority–acknowledged even by demons–to heal, resurrect, and forgive. He called disciples to follow Him and abandon everything for which they had previously lived. He was and is and will be the Bridegroom of His people (Mt 9:15).

In this passage, we can also see how people should respond to Christ. Faith is central. Jesus commended the Roman centurion for his faith, and He healed two blind men in accordance with their faith (8:10; 9:29). Merely to recognize Jesus is not the same as saving faith: as we see, even demons recognized Him. True faith responds to His power and goodness with love and obedience. Matthew himself was a good example in this regard.

By contrast, the people who owned the pigs cared nothing for spiritual life. The Messiah had just shown His power, and all they could think about was financial gain and loss. The blasphemous Pharisees actually accused Him of using Satan’s power. And even the disciples were admonished for having only “little faith” (Mt 8:26).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

After he came to Christ, Matthew held a banquet in his home to introduce Jesus to all his friends. You can do the same! An evangelistic dinner might be just what your friends and neighbors need to come face-to-face with the Savior.

Matthew 8:1-9:8

All things were created by him and for him. - Colossians 1:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Vince Lombardi, head coach of the Green Bay Packers from 1959 through 1967, became a legend for his work ethic and winning record. He demanded that his players follow a strict regimen, not only on the field but also off the field. One story goes that he required players to be in bed with the lights off by 11:00 pm—and would occasionally check on them and impose fines if they were even one minute late. His players followed Lombardi's rules because they respected his authority and his goals.

The theme of authority connects our passage today with the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 7:29). We read that Jesus taught with authority; now we see how He acted with authority.

The healings in this passage reveal the nature of faith. The man with leprosy and the centurion both recognized that Jesus had the ability and authority to heal. Their faith was not just a dose of positive thinking; it was accepting the truth of who Jesus said He was. They are examples of “Ask and it will be given to you” (Mt 7:7).

Jesus also demonstrated His authority over nature. Here the small faith of the disciples is contrasted with the great faith of the centurion. Jesus had already assured His followers of God's care for them and even used illustrations from nature to encourage them not to worry (Mt 6:25-34).

The account of the healing of the demon-possessed shows Jesus' authority over demons and evil spirits. This story also has a link to the sermon in the previous chapter: when the villagers ask Jesus to leave, He complied. Jesus did not force Himself on those who chose to value a herd of pigs rather than the One— the Son of God—who could deliver a crazed maniac (see Mt 7:6).

In the final story in our passage, Jesus healed the paralyzed man to confirm His authority to heal souls as well as bodies (Mt 9:2-7). This illustrates another principle from the Sermon on the Mount: driving out demons and miracles of healing should serve the purpose of testifying to the saving reality of Christ (Mt 7:15-23).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Since Matthew 5, Jesus has been showing His followers what discipleship means—the righteousness that comes from a relationship with God. To read the reflections of other Christians on discipleship, consider the classic book The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Another excellent contemporary resource is True Discipleship by John Koessler. The insights, challenges, and encouragement in these books will help you follow the way of our Savior. Both are available in bookstores or online.

Matthew 8:5-13

Without faith it is impossible to please God. - Hebrews 11:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

D. L. Moody became so well known that people would approach him with plans to capitalize on his fame–usually to their own benefit far more than Mr. Moody’s. The great evangelist wasn’t interested in the schemes, and one day Mr. Moody dealt with one such visitor by lying down on a couch and falling sound asleep as the man explained his grand idea to make Moody and himself rich. The visitor at least had enough courtesy not to awaken his sleeping host.

Well-known people often find that others try to use them for personal benefit. At various points in Jesus’ ministry, He could have ridden a huge wave of popularity and become a political force if only He had been willing to be a “bread” King who gave the crowds what they wanted (see John 6:14–15). But Jesus wasn’t interested in winning popularity, or granting the wishes of people who pretended to be interested in His work.

The human tendency to use other people for our own gain is one reason that the centurion in today’s story stands out from the crowd. He had Jesus’ full attention as the Savior came back to Capernaum, the city that Jesus had made His ministry headquarters. But this Roman officer, part of a hated occupying army stationed in Israel, wasn’t interested in using Jesus’ power for his personal gain. He simply cared about finding help and healing for his sick servant.

This man revealed a sincere humility in expressing his unworthiness to make this request, and an amazing grasp of who Jesus was by asking Him simply to heal his servant with a word. Luke’s version of this story gives us an important clue into this soldier’s character. The Jews who knew him were impressed with this Roman soldier, and they told Jesus that he was worthy of this miracle, “because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue” (Luke 7:5).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week leading to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning.

Matthew 8:5-13

According to your faith will it be done to you. - Matthew 9:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Word of God makes an amazing statement in 2 Chronicles 16:9. "The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." God is looking for faithful people He can bless!

Jesus found some people like that during His ministry, but He didn't always find them in the expected places. As the recipients of God's promise of a Messiah and Redeemer, Israel should have been the land where Jesus found people of great faith when He came as Messiah. But the Lord often encountered rock-hard unbelief in Israel.

That's why Jesus was amazed when He saw the deep faith of Gentiles like the Roman centurion with a sick servant. This soldier was a member of the occupying army, the most despised group in Israel. The Jews generally looked at Gentiles as pagans who had no place at the table of God's blessing.

God often used the actions of non-Jews to teach His people a lesson and rebuke their unbelief. Here was a Gentile who was not supposed to have any knowledge of or interest in Israel's Messiah, much less have His attention. But the centurion came to Jesus in genuine faith and humility, apparently believing that all he needed to do was simply mention his need to Jesus.

That was all it took, but it was what the man said in reply to Jesus that astonished the Lord. This soldier was so conscious of Jesus' Person, and so confident of His power, that he boldly asked Jesus just to speak the word right there without actually seeing his servant.

In verse 10 we learn that there were people following Jesus with whom He shared His astonished thoughts. The fact that such great faith had come from a hated Roman instead of from Israel was not lost on the listeners. But just to be sure they didn't miss the message, Jesus taught them that becoming part of His kingdom was a matter of faith, not a birthright.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Only two things amazed Jesus during His ministry: great faith, and the lack of faith (Mark 6:6).

Matthew 8:18-22

Palmer Chinchen, author of True Religion, tells of the time when he went whitewater rafting down the Zambezi River. As he and his brothers were preparing to make their way down the watery roller coaster, the guide gave them some very helpful advice: "When—not if—the raft flips, stay in the rough water. You'll be tempted to swim toward the stagnant water at the edge of the banks. Don't do it, because it is in the stagnant water that the crocs wait for you. They are large and hungry. So when the raft flips, stay in the rough water."

In everyday life, stagnancy can kill your spirit. When Jesus was calling people to follow Him, He wanted disciples who would resist the urge and temptation to swim and live in "stagnant waters."

Jesus outlined his expectations for rough-water discipleship: sacrifice and total allegiance (Matthew 8:18-20). He made sure that a would-be follower knew that being His disciple was not going to be comfortable and easy (Matthew 8:20). If he followed Jesus, Jesus informed him that his ministry would lead to rough waters. If this man wanted to be a disciple, he was committing himself to experience waves of suffering and even death. Jesus was telling him to stay in the rough waters of discipleship and out of the stagnant waters of ease, for the stagnant waters would lead to spiritual death and defeat (Matthew 8:22).

Jesus is still looking for followers who will commit to swimming and living in the rough waters of sacrificial discipleship. He doesn't need us in the comfortable pews of our churches; He needs us paddling toward the rough waters—pouring our lives into people. What will it look like for you to follow Him there? — Marvin Williams - Our Daily Journey June 15, 2014

Read Luke 14:25-33 and consider what Jesus said will be required of His true disciples.

When are you tempted to head toward the stagnant waters of life? What's one thing you can do today in the rough waters of living for Jesus?

Matthew 8:23-9:7

God was pleased . . . through [Christ] to reconcile to himself all things. - Colossians 1:19, 20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Eastern religions make a clear distinction between the spiritual and physical realms. In Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, spirituality requires detachment from the illusory physical realm. The soul's ambition is to be liberated from all that is material and elevated to a higher spiritual plane.

Christianity has an integrated worldview. God has created both the heavens and the earth, the invisible and the visible, the spiritual as well as the earthly. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus addresses both the physical and the spiritual realms. He is Master over both dimensions. He cares about bodies, and He cares about souls. We have three stories from our reading today that demonstrate this and teach us important concerns of the gospel.

The first story, that of Jesus calming the wind and the waves, shows us that when Jesus' power is displayed visibly on earth, our faith grows. This miraculous silencing of the storm certainly astonished the disciples. “What kind of man is this?” (v. 27). No doubt events like these over the time of Jesus' ministry—miracles of healing, feeding the crowds, and raising the dead—convinced them of Jesus' deity. And today, Jesus, by His Spirit, continues to invade the physical realm as a means of revealing His power and inspiring our faith.

The second story, that of the two demon-possessed men, shows us that the physical and the spiritual are not separate realms but interconnected realities. Their spiritual affliction affected not just their souls, but also their bodies. In delivering them from the demons, Jesus not only restored them spiritually but gave them an opportunity to become whole persons again.

The third story shows us that Jesus' first concern is to restore people to God. When the paralytic was brought to Him, He deliberately chose to forgive his sins before healing his legs. But after beginning with the spiritual needs, He then showed His care for the physical needs.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

An unfortunate split took place in churches at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some churches abandoned the gospel of spiritual redemption in favor of the “social gospel,” a kind of social activism. Other churches faithfully preached personal evangelism but neglected to address important physical needs. As our reading today demonstrates, the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to both. Think of ways in which you can minister both spiritually and materially to a nonbeliever in your life.

Matthew 9

Matthew 9:9-13

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick....For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. - Matthew 9:12-13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Crazy Moody - Not everyone understands a passion for souls. Again, the early ministry of MBI founder Dwight L. Moody is a good example. It is generally agreed that Moody could have used his boundless energy and people skills to make a fortune in the business world of his day. That was once his goal, before the Lord completely gained control of his heart.

Moody gave up a promising career in sales to work with the poorest of the poor, the inhabitants of Chicago's tenements and the urchins who ran the city's streets and alleys. At one point, Moody's Sunday school class contained some of the toughest street kids in Chicago. Moody's critics scoffed at his motives and called him ""Crazy Moody,"" but he pressed on.

Jesus had His critics too, generally the Pharisees who detested the way that Jesus' ministry broke their taboos and crossed over established religious and social boundaries. But Jesus pressed on with His work, because He had a band of apostles to assemble and spiritually sick people to reach.

Evidently, Matthew understood immediately. At dinner that night his house was filled with other tax collectors and a group of people called ""sinners"" (Mt 9:0).

We know that the tax collectors generally had a bad reputation, much of it well-deserved. No Pharisee would want to eat with such a person, because the Pharisees considered them to be among the ""sick"" who needed a doctor.

The sinners may have been people who did not follow all the regulations of the Pharisees, making them ceremonially unclean to these legalists. But this group probably also included people with unsavory reputations, such as prostitutes.

Whatever the exact makeup of Matthew's dinner party, they were the right people for Jesus, because sinners were exactly the people He came to save.

The Pharisees were offended by the scene, complaining to the disciples about Jesus' choice of companions. They valued ""sacrifice,"" or strict adherence to the law. But they failed when it came to ""mercy,"" or compassion for those in need.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

These days, people often refer to leaving our ""comfort zones"" to reach out to people who need Christ. Matthew definitely left his comfort zone. He had a change of occupation and a completely new spiritual direction, all at the same time. Only you know whether you need to leave the safety of your comfortable, familiar environment to impact someone's life for Christ. Why not go to that lost neighbor, or call that acquaintance, you've been meaning to contact in hopes of building a relationship? God will give you all the strength you need if you'll step out in faith.

Matthew 9:9-38

I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. - Hosea 6:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Saul was king over Israel and had just destroyed the Amalekites . . . well, most of the Amalekites—he spared the king and some of the best cattle. The prophet Samuel, through the direction of the Lord, confronted Saul: he had disobeyed the express commands of God to destroy everything. To make it worse, Saul then lied to Samuel, first claiming that he had obeyed and then asserting that the cattle were for sacrifices. Samuel gave him the verdict of God: “To obey is better than sacrifice . . . the Lord has rejected you as king” (1 Sam. 15: 22-23).

In our reading, the Pharisees objected to Jesus sharing hospitality with tax collectors. The Pharisees desired to keep themselves ritually pure, and they could not understand how Jesus had so little concern for this rigorous path. Jesus responded, “Learn what this means: ”˜I desire mercy, not sacrifice'” (v. 13). This call to mercy has been a repeated theme in God's dealings with His people (see key verse; Ps. 40:6-8, Matt. 5:7). The Pharisees thought they could separate religious practice from relationship with God.

Mercy requires us to realize our own need for God's healing. If we think that we are just fine in our attempts to be “good people,” we will not realize our need of the Great Physician. We cannot be merciful—this key distinctive of followers of Jesus—if we do not acknowledge our need of God's mercy.

As you might have noticed, Matthew's sequence of events here does not match the other Gospels. Some have attacked this to undermine the credibility of the Bible, but they misrepresent Matthew's goal: he is organizing the material in a thematic and theological way. The account of the healing of the hemorrhaging woman is one example; in contrast to the Pharisees' obsession about ritual purity seen just a few verses earlier, Jesus extends healing mercy to restore a woman physically and spiritually. The other accounts of healing further illustrate Jesus' authority and those who had faith that He was who He said He was.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Pharisees, who serve as bookends for this passage, did not dispute that Jesus had raised the dead, healed the sick, and cast out demons—they disputed what it meant. Rather than seeing Jesus' authority demonstrated in these examples of mercy, they attributed divine power to demons. Jesus had pointed them to the truth in verse 13, but they refused to “go and learn.” What a sober warning for us! May we heed Jesus' instruction to study Scripture to know how to be His followers.

Matthew 9:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Beginnings can be difficult for most of us. For example, our culture is permeated with anecdotes about first days on a new job. Search “first day of work” on the Internet and most results include anecdotes about unexpected tasks or bad bosses. Of the millions of options, though, probably none say, “On my first day of work I was shown my office and told to sleep.” Such an experience would go against all of our expectations.

Yesterday we found a similar unexpected twist when we noticed that in Genesis 1 days begin at night instead of the morning. Unpacking this seeming flip-flop of our expectations can help us understand God’s love for us and our need for Him.

Thanks to electricity, we can be active 24 hours a day. But before artificial light, after sundown it was simply dark. Activity needed to cease. What could one do except sleep? Sleep should remind us of our finitude. Our bodies weaken and must “shut down.” Without sleep we would die, and yet sleep itself foreshadows death.

We can make no new beginning with God unless we see that all we can bring is our tired and broken self to Him. Jesus' words to the Pharisees in Matthew 9:11-13 must have been hard for them to hear. As religious leaders in Israel, they believed they brought something valuable to the table. Not so, says Jesus. And until they saw this, He would remain irrelevant and even threatening to them.

Repentance does involve a kind of death. We must kill any grand notions we harbor about ourselves. We often think this is too hard, but who among us, when we are tired, would not want sleep? This is all God asks of us when we approach Him, for He "desires mercy, not sacrifice."

God knows our weakness, and He will not ask for more than we can give. Christ's words in Matthew no doubt seemed harsh to His audience, but they are imbued with love and compassion. He is the boss who wants you to start the day with a nap.

APPLY THE WORD

None of us enjoy failure, yet it is inevitable. The test is in what we do with failure. God offers forgiveness to those who fail. Author Shirley Carter Hughson once wrote to a friend, "All He asks is that we repent, and then go straight forward trusting in His love." Let us pray for this contrite spirit, one that will not hide our sin from ourselves or God. He waits for us this day with open arms and loving forgiveness.

Matthew 9:35-38

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. - Matthew 9:38

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his book, With Christ in the School of Prayer, Andrew Murray (see May 1 study) offers this insight concerning Jesus' prayer request to the disciples: "

> The Lord frequently taught His disciples that they must pray and how they should pray. But He seldom taught them what to pray. This He left to their sense of need and the leading of the Spirit. But in the above Scripture he expressly directs them to remember…the need to prepare and send laborers for the work.

Murray is right in noting that Jesus did not give us many specifics to pray for. So when the Savior does tell us to pray for something, we need to pay close attention.

Today's verse is important for a number of reasons. Once is that it reveals the heart of Jesus. The context was one of intense ministry on Jesus' part (v. 35). Crowds surged toward Him on this occasion, as they did wherever He went. Jesus not only ministered to their physical and spiritual needs, He also looked on the people with the eyes and heart of the Good Shepherd.

The Lord's heart went out to the lost sheep He saw all around Him. But His statement to the disciples is interesting because it isn't what we would expect in this situation. Our first impulse would have been to tell the disciples, ""Look at this crowd. Get out there and start sharing the gospel and ministering to these people's needs.""

Of course, Jesus did tell us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. But here He emphasized the indispensable place of prayer in the work of evangelism.

This is the secret, and the mystery, to this text. For reasons we may not fully understand, the all-powerful God of the universe chooses to link the fulfillment of His will to the prayers of His people.

This fact should both excite and humble us. It means we can partner with God in the work of winning souls and expect to see our prayers answered. But it also means we must pray.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We know we should be praying for a world of lost people and for the workers needed to reap the harvest.

How can we cultivate the kind of intense burden for souls that Jesus felt? One answer is in today's text. Jesus was moved by the sight of people in desperate spiritual need, and He saw them as individuals, not as a crowd. Let's ask God today to help us see people in need the way He sees them..

Matthew 9:35-38

Ask the Lord of the harvest...to send out workers into his harvest field. - Matthew 9:38

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a letter to a friend just weeks before his death, Dwight L. Moody wrote, ""What a joy to be in the harvest field and have a hand in God's work!"" Another time he said, ""I would rather save one soul from death than have a monument of solid gold reaching from my grave to the heavens.""

No one could question that D. L. Moody was passionate about people and the gospel, which is the main theme of the book A Passion for Souls, from which the above quotes were taken.

This excellent new biography of Moody, by historian Lyle Dorsett, documents Moody's multi-faceted work: as a world-renowned evangelist, an educator, and an equipper of young people. D .L. Moody inspired countless numbers of men and women to enter God's service.

We thank the Lord for the godly legacy we have been given from the founder of Moody Bible Institute. This month, we want to be challenged and inspired by the lives of people such as D. L. Moody--heroes of the faith, both well-known and obscure, whose passion for souls has marked both the church and the world.

Along the way, we will pray that God would give each of us the same passion for souls that motivated others to serve Him so effectively. And we rejoice in the good news that God is still using people such as us to win the lost, leaving a mark for Him on our world.

This passage in Matthew reminds us why having a passion for souls is so important. Jesus' command to pray for workers in God's harvest fields is a call to every generation of believers.

The context of today's verse is crucial. Notice first the way Jesus freely ministered to the people around Him. We can't heal diseases the way He did, but we can minister to people's needs as we show them Jesus' love.

We can also try to see people as they really are, just as Jesus did. He looked at their hearts (Eph. 1:18) and perceived their spiritual need. There was no shortage of hurting people in Jesus' day, and the fact that the harvest is still plentiful tells us there will always be people who need Christ.

We have Jesus' example and command, a world full of souls ripe for spiritual harvest, and a Lord who is ready and willing to send out workers in response to prayer. The only shortage is the number of willing workers.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How do we cultivate a passion for souls? For some of us, it comes when we first see people in their true spiritual condition and realize how desperately they need Christ. Others are moved when they realize that God is calling them to help bring in His harvest. Still others ""catch"" a passion for souls from fellow believers. Wherever you are today, why not begin this month by asking God to open the eyes of your heart in a new way?

Matthew 9:35-10:42

How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? - Romans 10:14-15

TODAY IN THE WORD

Out of Turkey's population of 70 million, only about 3,500 are Protestant Christians. Turkey, an officially secular country, has tried to curb religious violence. Yet nearly a year ago, three Christian men—two Turks and one German—were executed at their publishing house that printed Bibles. The killers released statements that they wanted to protect Turkey from Christian influence.

As our passage indicates, suffering and death might be the price required for following Jesus—even so, we can have great comfort and not fear.

We begin with Jesus' compassion for the needs around Him. He exhorted the disciples to pray for more workers—and they became the answer to that prayer as Jesus commissioned them to carry out His ministry. They were charged with representing Christ; they were to preach, heal the sick, and cast out demons—activities of Jesus that the Gospel has just recounted (Mt 10:7-8). We don't know the backgrounds of all the disciples, but this was hardly an impressive group with a former tax collector and fishermen! What mattered was not their credentials but their call from Jesus.

The disciples were instructed to minister in Israel. Matthew has already shown that some Gentiles were open to the person and work of Jesus, but here the Gospel makes clear that God had not forgotten Israel. Jesus embodied the fulfillment of God's promises, and God's faithfulness to His covenant people meant that the message of Jesus would go out to them. The disciples were to travel light; just as their authority came from the call of Jesus, so also would their provisions come from trusting God, not from their stockpiles of stuff.

Jesus does not promise an easy road. But His followers need not fear: the Spirit will assist them (Mt 10:20), they serve a God with more authority than earthly rulers (10:28), and they are valuable to and loved by the Father (Mt 10:31; cf. Mt 6:25-34).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How are you involved in spreading the message of Jesus? You might financially support missionaries or faithfully witness to your neighbors and loved ones. Several mission organizations offer short-term mission projects (such as serving in hospitality ministries or on construction or prayer teams) for young people through retirees. If you feel the Spirit calling you to go to the harvest field, inquire with mission boards supported by your church or visit www.ywam.org or www.missionfinder.org/retirees.

Matthew 9:35-38

The Secret of Peanuts - Snoopy as the Red Baron . . . Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown . . . Linus and his blanket . . . Peppermint Patty asking Marcie to stop calling her “Sir”. . . Schroeder playing Beethoven on his toy piano . . . this was the world of Peanuts, the popular cartoon by Charles Schulz. Peanuts ran for nearly fifty years, until Schulz died of cancer little more than a year ago. He created an unforgettable gallery of characters who resonated with people around the globe. When he died, his comic strip was being published in 2,600 newspapers in 75 countries, with 355 million readers. What was the secret of Peanuts? Empathy. Readers recognized characters, themes, feelings, and problems common to everyone. Schulz understood human nature, and he drew his strip with kind, wry humor and compassion. Compassion was Christ’s secret as well (cf. Matt. 15:32). We might define it as kindness, empathy, or pity, but in any case it involved showing love to people in their unique situations.

Matthew 9:35-38

The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. - Matthew 9:37

TODAY IN THE WORD

Gautama Siddharta, the founder of Buddhism, was born to a royal family about 528 B.C., the same time period as the prophet Daniel.

The religion expanded from India throughout China and elsewhere, and today plays a dominant role in Asian life and culture. Buddhism influences at least one billion people, is the state religion in five Asian countries, and is the majority religion in four more. There are 1.6 million Buddhists in the United States.

Buddhism has proved quite resistant to the gospel. Buddhist countries are mostly less than 1 percent Protestant, and there are three thousand unreached Buddhist people groups in East Asia. Many Buddhists have mixed and blended various other religions, making Christ’s claims to be the only Way difficult to accept. Buddhism is also linked to Asian cultural pride and identity, making it even more difficult to embrace Christianity.

Workers are needed for these fields! In today’s passage, Jesus used a farmer’s field and harvest workers as a metaphor for missions.

Jesus made these statements in Matthew just prior to sending out the disciples for independent ministry among the Jews. In an immediate sense, they were the workers the Father sends. Like their Teacher, they would combine the good news of the kingdom with miracles of healing (Mt 9:35).

Jesus’ motive was compassion (Mt 9:36). In the towns He was visiting, the people seemed helpless and confused, like sheep without a shepherd. They did indeed lack a shepherd, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14), which led to Jesus’ call for workers. His gentle response is instructive: Are we motivated by compassion for the lost?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you’ve been a reader of Today in the Word for any length of time, you know we’re big fans of hymnbooks! If you don’t already, we urge you to include one in your personal devotional time.

Matthew 9:35-38

Ask the Lord of the harvest . . . to send out workers into his harvest field. - Luke 10:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

It’s easy to feel discouraged when we hear about events in places like Iran, Iraq, and North Africa. That’s why it’s important to look behind the headlines. Missionaries in several Islamic countries have seen a growing interest in the gospel. In some places, entire villages have turned out to hear about Jesus. There are often more evangelistic opportunities than there are Christian workers.

This is very encouraging because sometimes we may feel like people in the United States aren't open to the gospel. But like recent missionary reports, today's passage challenges us to think differently. This passage briefly summarizes Jesus' ministry; the details are recorded in Matthew Mt 9:18–34. Mt 9:36 brings us to the very heart of our Lord: when He saw the staggering physical, emotional, and spiritual needs around Him, He was filled with tender compassion. The Greek word for "compassion" indicates a response that's felt in the very depth of one's being. Like a good shepherd who cares for his vulnerable sheep, Jesus' heart went out to the helpless and hopeless.

This is indeed a wonderful insight into our Lord's heart, but there's another remarkable element in today's account. Upon seeing the needs around Him, notice that Jesus didn't pray that God would immediately meet all those needs, or even that He would enable Jesus to meet all of them. Instead, Jesus prayed that God would raise up more workers to join in the Lord's work! That's pretty amazing. Jesus deliberately chose to minister to the crowds by involving others to assist Him!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever looked at a world map and imagined people groups like fields waiting to be harvested? Many of us only have to look at our own neighborhoods to find ripe harvest fields. Like a farmer anxious to harvest precious crops, take some time to pray for more workers to labor in the Lord's fields. You can also inform your prayers by finding out about mission agencies your church supports or by visiting www.missionaries.org. Who knows . . . you may be the laborer whom the Lord is raising up!

Matthew 9:35-10:42

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. - Matthew 9:38

TODAY IN THE WORD

When former French Open champion Michael Chang retired from tennis last year, he had no thoughts of taking it easy. Instead, he plans to devote his time to Christian ministry.

"I've been able to spread the gospel with a tennis racket in my hand," he told Christian Reader. "Ministry doesn't really change. It just won't be out there on the court. . . . People will forget great victories, great shots, and great matches. But when you're able to touch and impact a person's life for Christ, that stays with them their whole lifetime and beyond."

Michael Chang is on a mission–just like the disciples. In today's reading, Jesus commissioned the Twelve to go and do as He had been doing. It was a "warm-up" for the rest of their lives! Though for this mission He sent them only to the Jews, they would eventually go to the whole world (Mt 10:5–6, 18).

What can we learn from this passage about life in Christ's service? First, Jesus has sent us. He has authorized and empowered us to go. We should minister in a spirit of compassion, as He did (9:36). We should have spiritual eyes to see the "harvest," and ears to hear when He tells us where it is. Our first response to a needy world should be prayer, asking Him to send more workers.

Second, faith is at the core of this kind of discipleship. The Twelve were not to pack supplies, but to trust God to provide through His people. Their love for Christ was to be so strong that all else would be as nothing–family must be "hated" and one's own life must be surrendered. Faith also believes that God will judge those who reject His message.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's reading should impress upon us the biblical imperative of missions and evangelism. Are you aware of specific local and overseas missionaries supported by your church? Are you involved in praying for and giving to them and their work?

Matthew 10

Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19

Go and make disciples of all nations. - Matthew 28:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

When evangelist Dwight L. Moody preached a series of messages in a London church in 1874, the event transformed the life and ministry of a young pastor in the audience. F. B. Meyer was a godly leader who had shown great promise; but after Moody's visit, Meyer began a number of outreaches to the lost and needy in his area. Meyer also found time to write, and Christian libraries today

still carry his life-changing devotional writings.

Moody's influence on F. B. Meyer is a great example of the ministry of making disciples--or mentoring, to use a word that is popular today. Although Moody's direct input into Meyer's life was relatively brief, it was profound and lasting.

It's not accidental that relationships like these produce spiritual fruit. That's the way God designed the body of Christ to work. Jesus set the pattern for making disciples when He chose twelve ordinary Israelites ""that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach"" (Mark 3:14).

These men were designated as apostles, a term that refers to someone sent with a special message. One Bible teacher defines the word apostle as ""delegate,"" and it seems to fit.

No one was ever called, commissioned, or delegated to deliver a more important message than the twelve apostles. Jesus kept them at His side during His ministry on earth, that they might learn to love and serve the way He did. Then He sent them out to proclaim the gospel of salvation and to help establish His church.

The apostles of Jesus have a lot to teach us, because they are a lot like us. We will get to know these intriguing men a little better this month as we see how Jesus trained them for service.

It's true that in some ways the apostles had a spiritual authority and power we don't possess. This month, we'll talk about the unique elements of their calling and ministry. But they were not ""super saints"" to be put on a pedestal. They were saints like us--and today's verse reminds us that we share in their commission to preach the gospel and to make disciples.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The great thing about discipleship is that it is not limited by time and space. This means we can still learn valuable lessons from D.L. Moody, F.B. Meyer . . . Peter, James, John, and the other apostles of Jesus! How is your TQ, your ""teachability quotient,"" today? Ask God to give you an open heart this month. And why not plan to devote a few extra minutes of the long July days to studying God's Word with us?

Matthew 10:1-20

Freely you have received, freely give. - Matthew 10:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

In Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, J. I. Packer observed:

> “The Christian is sent into the world as God’s herald and Christ’s ambassador, to broadcast [the gospel] as widely as he can. This is both his duty (because God commands it, and love to our neighbour requires it) and his privilege (because it is a great thing to speak for God, and to take our neighbour the remedy–the only remedy–that can save him from the terrors of spiritual death). Our job, then, is to go to our fellow-men and tell them the gospel of Christ, and try by every means to make it clear to them; to remove as best we can any difficulties that they may find in it, to impress them with its seriousness, and to urge them to respond to it. This is our abiding responsibility; it is a basic part of our Christian calling.”

So, then, the Christian life is not only about ourselves, or even only about ourselves and the church. One of the joys of the journey is to invite others to join us!

In today’s reading, Jesus sent out His twelve disciples as part of their training program and His ministry plan. Divine authority was delegated to them, so that they could do miraculous healings and cast out demons. At this time, they were to go only to the Jews, though after His Ascension they would be sent to all nations (Matt. 28:19–20). Since Jesus Himself interacted with Gentiles many times in the Gospels, these instructions probably indicated that the disciples weren’t yet ready to cross cultural barriers.

What did they preach? “The kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt 10:7). With the advent of the Son, a new chapter had opened in salvation history.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do the unbelievers in your life–in your job, in your neighborhood, or elsewhere–know about the journey you’re on? Can they hear in your words and see in your actions that this world is not your true home? If not, why not?

Matthew 10:5-20

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. - Matthew 11:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Hardly a month goes by without hearing about someone winning an amazing lottery jackpot. Sometimes the winner was on the brink of financial ruin when the winning ticket suddenly changed everything. Like a fairy tale, the lottery seems to epitomize the “rags to riches” story. The story of Giovanni Francesco Bernadone, better known as Francis of Assisi, presents one of history’s greatest “from riches to rags” stories. Born into a wealthy family, Francis expected to become a Crusader and win fame and adventure. When war broke out with a neighboring city, Francis eagerly joined the battle, hoping to return a war hero. Instead, he spent a year as a prisoner of war and returned home unsure of his future. A long illness that nearly cost Francis his life also helped to redirect his thinking. One day while praying in a local church, Francis felt as if Jesus were speaking Matthew 11:28 directly to him, calling him to a life of service for Him. Some time later Francis heard Matthew 10 while at church. In the words of Jesus to His disciples, Francis heard his own call–a life of simplicity and radical obedience to the gospel. In fact, Francis used this passage (especially Matt. 10:7-10) as the basis for what would become a worldwide movement.

In this passage, Jesus sent His disciples out into the surrounding country to preach the kingdom of God, the good news of God’s salvation. The disciples were instructed to minister to the downtrodden. They were also instructed to remain utterly dependent upon the Lord for all their provisions (Mt 10:9-10). Ministering in this way was risky--those who resisted God’s ways would present severe obstacles for Jesus’ disciples. But their peace came from the Holy Spirit, who would speak through them at the time of trial (Mt 10:20).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today’s passage from Matthew is a powerful reminder to reach out to the downtrodden in our own lives

Matthew 10:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story of disciple-making we told yesterday has another chapter.

The impact that Dwight L. Moody had on British pastor and author F. B. Meyer was repeated in the next generation when a young Englishman heard Meyer speak on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life.

Oswald Chambers yearned to be in active ministry, and God honored his commitment. He traveled to America and as far as Japan, speaking on the dynamic Christian life. Although Chambers died at the age of forty-three, his sermons and thoughts were compiled to form My Utmost for His Highest, one of the most influential devotional books in the English language.

Is there any doubt that, as it has been said, people are God's method? The ministry of discipleship is first and foremost a transfer from heart to heart and life to life. That doesn't necessarily mean the disciple and the disciple-maker must have personal contact, although that's what we normally think of when we hear the word disciple.

Jesus certainly used the principle of personal contact with His original disciples, the group of men who came to be called the Twelve. The Gospels say that Jesus hand-picked these men to be with Him and to preach the gospel. The choice came after a full night of prayer on Jesus' part (Luke 6:12-13).

Today's reading is a classic example of the apostles' ministry. Jesus sent them out armed with His message and with His power and authority over disease, demons, and the devil himself. They called the people to repentance and faith in Christ as Israel's Messiah, and relieved suffering as a testimony to the truth of their message.

According to Matthew 10:5-6, Jesus sent the disciples to ""the lost sheep of Israel,"" emphasizing His presentation to Israel as its Messiah and King. This aspect of the disciples' ministry was unique to that time when Jesus was on earth, but we also are called to share the gospel and to meet needs as they did.

The Twelve faithfully carried out this early preaching assignment. Through their ministry, Peter and his companions helped make the name of Jesus well known.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Making the name of Jesus well known is a pretty good one-sentence description of what a disciple does. Each of us can tell others about Jesus. You don't have to be raised in a Christian home or have years of experience in the faith to be a witness. As we will see later this month, Andrew simply found Jesus and brought his brother Simon to meet the Messiah. Do you know someone who needs to know Jesus? Today, consider ways that you can introduce that person to our Savior.

Matthew 11

Matthew 11:1-19

Wisdom is proved right by her actions. - Matthew 11:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

An Apt "Apology"- In his autobiography, educator Elton Trueblood wrote the following words about reading C. S. Lewis:

> “What Lewis and a few others made me face was the hard fact that if Christ was only a Teacher, then He was a false one, since, in His teaching, He claimed to be more. . . . If Christ was not in a unique sense 'the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15), as the early Christians believed, then He was certainly the arch impostor and charlatan of history. . . . What I saw in 1943, and have seen ever since, is that the Good Teacher conception is one option which Christ does not allow us to take. We can reject Him; we can accept Him on His terms; we cannot, with intellectual honesty, impose our own terms.”

Apologetics–using arguments to defend Christianity–helped Trueblood recognize Christ’s true identity. When John the Baptist wondered about this same issue, Jesus gave him a straightforward answer. He pointed first to the miracles as evidence of God’s power, and specific proofs of His Messiahship (Mt 11:4–5). Why? Because–and this was His second point–these miracles fulfilled messianic prophecies such as Isaiah 35:5–6 and Isa 61:1.

Why did John doubt? Perhaps because he was in Herod’s prison for standing for righteousness; as in many of the psalms, it may have appeared to him that the wicked were winning. Or perhaps John felt like the Messiah had come, but with results he had not expected. Perhaps he just wanted some confirmation. In any case, Jesus affirmed him as the “Elijah” who had indeed prepared the way (Mt 11:14; cf. Mal. 3:1).

John was a spiritual superstar, but every follower of Christ can live by the same faith and obedience (Mt 11:10-11). And like him, we can expect persecution. That’s the meaning of Mt 11:12: The Greek phrase translated “forcefully advancing” should be taken in a passive sense, meaning “enduring attacks.”

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In today’s reading, Jesus effectively answered John the Baptist’s doubts. Are you ready to do the same–to give answers to the skeptics in your life (1 Peter 3:15–16)?

Matthew 11:1-11; Mark 6:14-29

TODAY IN THE WORD

One hundred seventy-five years ago, a trader named William Becknell and his men left Franklin, Missouri, to forge an 800-mile trail across prairies, plains and deserts to New Mexico in search of riches. Becknell illegally entered Spanish-owned Santa Fe, where the Spanish soldiers eagerly bought his inexpensive goods and sent him back for more. Becknell's route became the legendary Santa Fe Trail of Western lore.

John the Baptist blazed a trail, too, but his purpose was far different. He was the messenger of the Messiah (Mark 1:2), the forerunner of Jesus, who prepared the hearts of Israel for the Savior's ministry.

John's ministry was even more brief than that of Jesus, to whom he was related through Mary and Elizabeth. We sometimes forget that John's impending birth was the other birth announced at Christmas (Luke 1:5ff.). Luke's well-known statement that the angel appeared to Mary ""in the sixth month"" (Lk 1:26) is a reference to Elizabeth's pregnancy with John. From God's standpoint, no one had a better beginning than John the Baptist. Today, let's talk about how he finished.

John was so powerful and fearless in his prophetic ministry that the incident recorded in Matthew 11 seems out of character. Surely John knew the details of his birth and of the birth of Jesus. He himself had baptized the Lord.

So why did John slip into temporary doubt about Jesus' identity? Perhaps because he was human. He had been arrested by Herod Antipas for exposing Herod's sin, and we know that Herod would soon order John beheaded.

In the uncertainty of his circumstances, John's heart may have wavered momentarily. Ordinarily, ending one's life on a note of doubt does not qualify as a good finish. But notice how gently Jesus dealt with John's disciples (Matt. 11:4-6) as well as His commendation of John (Mt 11:7-11).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Since we all wrestle with doubt from time to time, it's worth noting how John dealt with doubt.

Most importantly, John sought an answer to his doubt rather than jettisoning his faith because of one area of uncertainty. In other words, John was willing to doubt his doubts; and he received definite reassurance from the Lord.

Matthew 11:1-30

My yoke is easy and my burden is light. - Matthew 11:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Former missionary Gracia Burnham's memoir, In the Presence of My Enemies, recounts her experience as a hostage (along with her husband and others) of a Muslim extremist group in the Philippines. She dedicated the book to those who faithfully prayed for them, and has noted that during the yearlong ordeal she would often feel her own prayers to be worthless. One faithful pray-er also admitted to his own questions: “How long is this going to drag on? How long will I have to pray for God to work? Do these prayers mean anything?”

Gracia Burnham and those who prayed for her are not the only ones who have gone through suffering and wondered where God is and if it's worth it to keep hanging on. Our passage today opens the third major section of the book of Matthew, and we find John the Baptist in prison. This did not seem to be how things should work out for the one preparing the way for the Messiah! If the kingdom was here, why was he in prison? John instructed his followers to ask Jesus the honest question: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Mt 11:3).

John's question, Jesus' answer, and the Pharisees' response (which we'll see tomorrow) alert us that the kingdom might not take the form that we envision. Referencing the accounts in earlier chapters, Jesus assured John that the kingdom was indeed here. He also encouraged John to remain steadfast (Mt 11:6; cf. Mt 5:3-12).

Mt 11:25-26 offer a glimpse of the personal relationship between Jesus and the Father. In this brief snippet of a prayer, Jesus praised God for who He is—Lord of heavens and earth—and for how He works. Jesus then explained a facet of the relationship within the Trinity: the Father and Son are completely known by each other, a phrase that implies both a oneness and also their distinct Personhood. Perhaps most shocking is that Jesus offers a way for others to know the Father. The Son provides a way for others to become the children of God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The closing verses of our passage have comforted countless believers through times of trial. Hearing the testimony of others can also be helpful; Gracia Burnham's follow-up book To Fly Again details her trust in the Lord after losing her husband. Most of all, soaking ourselves in the Word of God helps prepare us for the times when we might feel like John the Baptist in prison. Consider Psalm 77, which captures the cry of anguish in hard times and the comfort of remembering God's faithfulness to His promises..

Matthew 11:20-12:50

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. - Matthew 11:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Willie Aames, who stars as the title character in the Bibleman videos and live performances, initially started acting in order to boost his self-esteem. He appeared in such television programs as Gunsmoke and Eight Is Enough and made millions of dollars. He tried big houses, fast cars, touring with a rock band, drugs, marriage, and a twelve-step program, but he still felt empty.

Later, after he had lost nearly everything, his girlfriend invited him to church. Listening to the people there, he thought: “I’ve had everything in the world–except hope. That is what I need.” That day he and his girlfriend accepted Jesus as Savior! On that day, he said, Jesus “forgave me, accepted me, and healed my broken life.”

Like many of the people in Matthew, Willie Aames responded in faith to the person of Christ. When we trust in Jesus, we not only take up our cross and prepare to suffer; at the same time, paradoxically, we find rest and peace for our souls (Mt 11:28–30).

What do we see about Jesus in today’s passage? He had an intimate, obedient relationship with His Father (Mt 11:7). He was Lord of creation, including the Sabbath. He had God’s power and authority to heal, as He did for the man with the shriveled hand. He showed compassion and patience. He knew the thoughts and intentions of His enemies, and acted wisely to foil them. He fulfilled Old Testament prophecy (Mt 12:17–21).

What about unbelievers? He condemned towns where He performed miracles because they had not repented. Revelation made the

Jews doubly responsible–knowing the Law and the Prophets, they should have recognized God at work (11:20–24). The Pharisees not only did not believe–they actively opposed Him and plotted to kill Him. They were guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit–that is,unbelief–against which Jesus warned (Mt 12:30–32).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have a blessed Resurrection Sunday! This is the perfect time to rest and celebrate the great salvation Christ has won!

Matthew 11:1-26

I praise you, Father...you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. - Matthew 11:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his book Orthodoxy, G. K. Chesterton explains that he loves fairy tales (“entirely reasonable things,” he assures us), partly because of one basic law of the universe they teach: Joy is conditional. Cinderella, for example, can have the time of her life if only she will be back by midnight. Pinocchio can be a real boy only if he will not lie, and so on.

Matthew 11 teaches us that God’s grace is free, but not without conditions. As the chapter begins, Jesus assured people of the validity of John’s message (v. 10), but the problem for His audience was not lack of evidence. Verse 17 indicates that the people maintained an aloof detachment from events they witnessed. John the Baptist and Jesus had brought their messages, but their hearers missed the point (vv. 18-19). All they had witnessed should have led them to repentance.

Many of us grew up with an image of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” but He minced no words here. Jesus comparedthe Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon favorably with the Jewish cities of Bethsaida and Chorazin (vv. 21-22). Sodom, a city that did not recognize the presence of God’s messengers, will be better off than Capernaum (v. 23), a city who had an even greater witness. Only after these judgments and warnings does Christ then begin to speak of blessings. And, curiously enough, these blessings go to the “little children” (v. 25) who can receive the revelation of God the Son.

Fairy tales do possess a bit of magic, for when children read them, they never question the world portrayed. They never think to ask, “Why must Cinderella be back at midnight? Why not 12:30?” This passage shows that Jesus wants this same attitude from us. Great rewards await us. But if we mimic Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, if we stay aloof “adults” in the face of the gospel, we will lose everything. “Then He began to denounce the towns . . . because they did not repent” (v. 20).

APPLY THE WORD

Repentance is the key, or condition, of God’s blessings. Many may fear what God has for them, and perhaps this is why they, like the audience in chapter 11, assume an aloof posture. But the wise know that nothing matters without repentance. We cannot work our way into God’s blessings; like children who bring their boo-boos in order to receive the biggest band-aid in the house, we bring our repentance before God knowing that He will heal us.

Matthew 11:25-30; Luke 10:17-24

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. - Psalm 107:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Professor Margaret Magdalen writes the following about the prayer life of Jesus: “His work was an offering of prayer. His healing ministry was a way of praying . . . He Himself was the way, the truth and the life, and every encounter, every relationship, became prayer.” For the next week and a half, we’ll look at specific prayers uttered by Jesus, and as we do so, we’ll see that indeed Jesus’ very life was prayer. We begin today with Jesus’ prayer of praise for God’s perfect wisdom.

The prayer recorded in today’s passages comes after the early ministry of Jesus’ disciples. Luke 10 records Jesus sending out 72 disciples and their eager report back to Him about their “short-term mission.” Specifically, these disciples marveled that demons had submitted to them because of the name of Jesus (Mt 11:17). Both Matthew’s and Luke’s account of this event record that Jesus rejoiced and thanked the Father for a much different reason.

Luke 10:18 tells us that because all authority had been given to Jesus, and He gave this authority to His disciples, Satan’s power had been broken. But it’s not the destruction of evil that brought Jesus joy as much as the fact that His followers would spend eternity in heaven! The disciples rejoiced that they had power over the enemy, but Jesus rejoiced because great spiritual truths had been revealed to those who were as powerless as babies (Mt 11:24).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Author Brian J. Dodd writes, “Thanksgiving is essential to prayer, since all that we are, all that we have and all that we receive comes from our gracious God.”

Matthew 11:25-30

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. - Matthew 11:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the beloved Charles Dickens’ story, A Christmas Carol, the miser Ebeneezer Scrooge worked his longsuffering employee Bob Cratchit to the breaking point. He provided only minimal heat, expected Cratchit to work on holidays, and constantly exuded an air of criticism and suspicion. No one would want to work for a a boss like Scrooge!

In our passage today, we see a portrait of a very different sort. Jesus, the Son of God and Lord of all, promises rest and ease. He is gentle and humble. He cares about our situation.

In the early verses of our reading, Jesus is praying to the Father. The context of this passage revolves around revealing heavenly wisdom to those who are like children (Mt 11:25). The description of Jesus that follows runs contrary to the way the world views power and leadership--you don’t often hear moguls, dictators, or superstars described as gentle.

First, Jesus’ gentleness is connected to His invitation to come to Him (Mt 11:28). He invites those who are weary and burdened, not only those who are powerful and strong. Then He promises rest to the heavy-hearted. Our gentle Savior is not like Scrooge, trying to squeeze every drop of our potential for His own gain. He cares deeply about our well-being.

Second, we should not confuse Jesus’ gentleness with being soft or wishy-washy. Jesus is still our Master and Lord. He still provides a yoke for us (v. 30). But unlike any other master we could follow, only He cares for our souls and provides a burden we can manage. He is our Master, but Jesus will never treat us with abuse.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Every day we are surrounded by weary, burdened, and hurting people. How can you demonstrate gentleness to people around you?

Matthew 11:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

A spokesman for the Australian Search and Rescue said he was amazed that a couple survived after their boat was smashed against rocks in a storm. The man and his wife sent out a distress signal at 2:30 a.m. as the storm pushed their boat toward the rocks. When the boat crashed, the couple swam to a rock, climbed up on it, and held on. A helicopter spotted the pair about 7:00 a.m. and pulled them to safety.

Here's an illustration of a valuable spiritual principle: when you're in trouble, cling to the Rock. No one who reached out to Jesus for safety and protection was ever turned away, because our Lord has a passion for souls that sent Him to the cross.

Your Bible may note that today's passage in the oldest surviving manuscripts of the Gospel of John. But it's just like Jesus to have compassion on a repentant sinner.

The facts of the case against this woman were apparently clear. She had committed a grievous sin. But the men who brought her were violating the Mosaic law, because the law specified that both of the guilty parties in adultery were to be put to death (Lev. 20:10).

It's obvious that the woman's accusers were not interested in justice. She was simply a pawn in their plan to catch Jesus in what they thought was an impossible situation. Verse 6 says they were using their question against Jesus. They were using the woman, too.

There has been much speculation about what Jesus was writing on the ground. But this action may have been a means Jesus used to cause the men involved to think about what they were doing and why.

If Jesus was deliberately trying to create an awkward silence, it was very effective. As He bent down again and started writing, the men were left to contemplate this challenge: either pick up a stone, or admit their own sinfulness and leave. The older ones left first, probably because they were most aware of their sin.

The woman had sinned, and Jesus didn't overlook that. But she was repentant, and He forgave her.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Maybe you feel like you're in a storm right now and need a safe place to cling to until the storm is over.

If so, bring your need to Jesus today. Cling to the Rock. He has promised rest for those who seek Him. Trade your worry and fatigue for His peace. And if your need is salvation, Jesus is the only Refuge from God's judgment. Don't let another day go by without settling the issue of your standing before God. Jesus is waiting for you to admit your sin and seek His forgiveness.

A Heavy Load - John T. Faris once told the story of a man who was carrying a heavy basket. Because of the heavy load, the man's son offered to help. The father cut a large stick and placed it through the handle of the basket so that his end was very short, while his son's end was three or four times as long. Each took hold of the stick and the basket was carried easily—with the father bearing the bulk of the load.

Matthew 11:25-30

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. - Matthew 11:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Several verses of the classic hymn, "Trust and Obey," highlight the pleasant restfulness of abiding in Christ: "Not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies, but His smile quickly drives it away; Not a doubt nor a fear, not a sigh nor a tear can abide while we trust and obey. But we never can prove the delights of His love until all on the altar we lay; for the favor He shows and the joy He bestows are for them who will trust and obey. Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at His feet, or we'll walk by His side in the way; what He says we will do, where He sends we will go; never fear, only trust and obey."

Faith in Jesus brings the blessing of rest. Today's reading shows us yesterday's truth from a New Testament perspective. We may be more used to talking about running our race, taking up our cross, or similar images of effort and endurance, but we also need to remember the easy yoke and the light burden.

How can we obtain rest in Christ? We must come to Him in faith. We must submit to Him, implying both obedience and contentment. And we must learn from Him, imitating Him and following in His footsteps.

What is it about Jesus that gives rest? In His relationships with others, He was "gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29). In contrast to the ways that the Pharisees used their power and authority, Jesus came as a servant. For people who trust and obey Him, He's an easy person to follow (cf. Mark 6:31; 1 John 5:3–4).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you wish today, take some time to sit at Jesus' feet in "listening prayer." In the famous episode with Mary and Martha, Jesus' followers learned that while busy hospitality is a good thing, quiet listening to Him is better (Luke 10:38–42). At that moment, Jesus expected nothing of Mary except that she sit at His feet and give heed to His words.

Matthew 11:27-30

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. - Matthew 11:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Those with children know that mealtime can be an adventure, with new foods sometimes creating a great crisis. For many young ones, the unknown must by definition be horrible. It may take all the patience, bribes, or threats in a parent's bag of tricks just to have one bite even attempted. Finally, the child obeys. The dreaded vegetable or casserole turns out not to be so bad after all. The anticipation and dread turn out to be far worse than the experience itself. Reality, once feared, now becomes pleasant once actually tried.

Yesterday we saw Jesus issue some of the sternest words in the Gospels. Those who reject His message face a fearful judgment (Matt. 11:21-24). But He follows this stern message with some of the most delightful words in the Gospels in verse 30. We often think of God like a tyrannical coach: playing for Him will be misery, but at least it's better than being His enemy. Jesus explodes this insidious lie.

Life for many Jews at the time of Christ must have seemed burdensome. They experienced Roman occupation, with all the spiritual failure that implied. But this did not compare to the burden imposed by many religious leaders. While scholars debate the exact nature of Pharisaical teaching, a clue comes in Jesus's own words in Luke 11:46: "You load people down with burdens they can hardly carry." Clearly God had been made into a taskmaster, and following Him was turned into assuming dreadful duties.

As we saw yesterday, Jesus spoke the harsh words of verses 20 through 24 to people who stood by, perhaps out of fear, clinically evaluating Him. His message in verses 28 through 30 show us that His judgments are meant not to scare us into abandoning personal happiness, but to lift the burden of living life on our own terms. He welcomes us to His rest. His yoke is so much lighter than the ones we give ourselves.

APPLY THE WORD

In his classic Mere Christianity C. S. Lewis writes, “The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand our whole self . . . to Christ. But that is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead.” Repentance will not always be easy. But Scripture tells us that keeping the burden of guilt makes us far more miserable. The glory of the gospel is that God promises so much more than we could ever make for ourselves.

Matthew 11:28-30

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls. - Matthew 11:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Not a 50-50 Split! - One day a father was watching his young son try to move a rock they found in a field. The little guy strained with every muscle he had, but he couldn’t budge the rock. At one point his father said to him, ""Son, you’re not using all the strength you have to move that rock.""

""Yes, I am, daddy,"" the boy said. Dad watched for a few more minutes as his son wrestled with the rock. Then he said, ""Son, you’re not using all the strength you have to move that rock."" Once again the frustrated boy protested that he was using all his strength. ""No, son, you aren’t, because you haven’t asked me to help you.""

That’s what we often do in our relationship with God. Jesus’ invitation is for those struggling with the burdens of sin to exchange those tiring loads for His yoke of salvation and discipleship. But His words have an important application for us as the year winds down.

Let’s not make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is talking about a fifty-fifty deal in which He does His part and we do ours. That’s not the Christian life. God supplies all the strength and the resources necessary to live for Him. All we provide are willing hands and hearts.

But it’s clear that following Jesus does involve a partnership in which we are yoked together with Him, like the oxen of biblical times.

To stay with the analogy, it doesn’t make sense for us to try and pull the load by ourselves when we are joined with the Son of God who offers to take our load. It’s foolish, in fact, because we’ll wind up overburdened and worn out.

There’s another reason we need to learn how to accept Jesus’ invitation. The burdens we wind up carrying on our own are not always the ones God wants us to have. Jesus used the same basic word for burden in Mt 11:28, 30, inviting us to exchange our own wearisome burden for His, which is ""light"" by comparison. Christ’s burden is the challenge of being His disciple (the word ""learn"" in Mt 11:29 is the verb form of the word for disciple).

What an invitation for the new year! Let’s put aside the burdens that weigh us down, and partner with Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Wouldn’t it be great to use all the spiritual strength available to us as we head into the new millennium? To do that, we have to quit trying to carry around a load of burdens on our own. For most of us, the hardest place to trust God is the area in which we think we are the strongest and most capable of doing the job ourselves. What is that area for you? Are you willing to give up control and learn what Christ wants you to do? Talk to Him about it.

Matthew 12

Matthew 12:1-14

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. - Hosea 6:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story is told about an upscale, conservative church during the heyday of the hippies. One Sunday morning, about halfway

through the service, a young man entered the church, barefoot and wearing a tie-dye T-shirt. Because the church was crowded, the visitor couldn't find a seat and the ushers had already seated themselves. Finally, the young man walked straight down the main aisle and sat on the floor in front of the preacher. As one of the ushers made his way to the young man, an uncomfortable silence settled over the church. Most people thought the usher would ask the young man to leave--but much to everyone's surprise, the elderly man sat down beside him. No one ever forgot this simple act of kindness.

Following the rules would have seemed easy or convenient, but a rigid devotion to convention could have crushed the young man and shut a door for ministry. The Pharisees were an extreme example of this rigidity. It's important to note that Matthew 12 follows Jesus' well-known encouragement: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). This weariness concerned excessive demands of the law arising from human traditions. It's likely that Jesus used this Sabbath situation to illustrate His merciful invitation.

The Pharisees were good at getting the "letter of the law," and they knew that work was forbidden on the Sabbath (e.g., Ex. 31:13-14). Gleaning wheat was considered to be work. By calling Jesus' disciples to task (v. 2), the Pharisees were really challenging Jesus'authority.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We might summarize Jesus' teaching as follows: "The law's intent takes precedence over its rituals." In other words, the Sabbath was meant to provide time to worship God. The prohibition against work was intended to further this goal. Clearly working to heal someone on the Sabbath didn't violate this intent.

Matthew 12:1-21 Isaiah 42:1-9

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. - Matthew 20:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many early American folk songs describe what life is like when you are poor--and in the case of spirituals, when you are a slave. As one spiritual puts it, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, Nobody knows but Jesus." These songs give us a sense of despair of those conditions.

Isaiah 42 is one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah, named so because here God describes someone who is His Servant and pleases Him (Isa 42:1). As we think about the birth of our Lord, we can learn much from this passage about His coming to earth.

First, how do we know who this Servant is in Isaiah 42? We find the answer in Matthew 12. The Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus, so He left that place and continued to heal the sick. Then Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1–4 to confirm that Jesus is indeed the Servant in whom God delights.

Second, don't you find it striking that the Son of God, the Lord of the universe, would choose to be described as a Servant? As we ponder our response to the birth of Christ, it's appropriate to remember that we should have the same attitude and willingness to be a servant (cf. Phil. 2:5–8).

Isaiah 42 describes Jesus as both gentle and just. The word justice is mentioned three times in four verses. Although the perfectly just rule of Christ over all the earth is still to come, we can and should value and promote justice as His followers. And we can have confidence that He will one day return to rule with perfect, faithful justice (Isa. 42:4).

The Lord of justice is also our gentle Savior who promises to be patient with the downtrodden--"the bruised reeds" (v. 3). Our culture promotes survival of the fittest, instructing us to "Clear out the dead weight!" and "Step or be stepped on!" But Jesus gently cares for us when we are desperately hurting, when we are like candles struggling to stay lit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God calls Jesus "My chosen one in whom I delight" (v. 1). What a special honor that is! Wouldn't we, too, like to hear God say that of us?

Matthew 12:1-50

In his name the nations will put their hope. - Matthew 12:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 2005, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez announced that he was expelling New Tribes Mission from his country. Accusing them of violating Venezuelan sovereignty, acting as spies for the U.S. government, and exploiting indigenous people, Chavez decried the

missionaries as tools of U.S. imperialism. These charges, which nearly all observers agree were false, were interpreted as Chavez's policy of provoking the United States.

When those in power feel threatened, they often react harshly. We see this in our passage today, that describes an escalation in the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

In the concluding verses of Matthew 11 Jesus said that His yoke is easy. To illustrate this, we next find a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees over how to interpret the Law. When the Pharisees accused Jesus and His disciples of violating the Sabbath, Jesus responded with scriptural arguments and again directed them to the principle of mercy (Mt 12:7).

To further illustrate mercy, Jesus proceeded to heal a man in response to a challenge from the Pharisees. The shriveled hand here is significant—this was not a medical emergency (which the Pharisees considered acceptable for healing on the Sabbath) and the man could have been healed the next day. By healing him then, Jesus was directly challenging the Pharisees' notion of what it meant to please God. They thought that imposing a strict set of rules on behavior was the path to righteousness. Jesus also affirmed the value of God's Law, but He said the heart of pleasing God was mercy. As “Lord of the Sabbath,” Jesus had authority over the Law to reveal its correct interpretation (Mt 12:8).

The Pharisees alleged that Jesus used demonic power. Jesus responded that logically this was a ludicrous argument. His power flowed from the Spirit and revealed His identity as the Messiah and Son of God. It is dangerous to attribute the work of the Spirit to Satan, and those who persist in a willful lack of acknowledgment of the Spirit's work cannot find salvation (Mt 12:30-32; Isa. 63:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus had a strong message about the importance of our words (Mt 12:33-37; cf. Mt 5:22-26, 33-37; 7:4-5, 21-22). Our acknowledgment of who He is results in specific actions of showing mercy, praying, loving our enemies, and sharing the truth with others. The discipline of our words is part of what it means to follow Jesus (cf. James 3:1-12). Controlling our speech is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit. Pray that your heart will be filled with the fruit of the Spirit, so that your speech will reflect the mercy of Jesus.

Matthew 12:14-21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pastor Gardner Taylor was preaching one Sunday evening when the lights in his small, Depression-era church in Louisiana suddenly flickered and went out. Taylor stood quietly in the darkness, not knowing what to do or say. Finally, an older deacon in the congregation called out, ""Preach on, preacher, we can still see Jesus in the dark."" Gardner Taylor has been doing just that ever since: proclaiming the light of the Word of God amid the darkness.

Today's text reminds us that things haven't changed since the days of Jesus Himself. Those who want to see Him--that is, believe in and follow Him--will not be blinded by the darkness. But those who refuse to trust in God's chosen Servant will continue to stumble in the dark.

This latter condition describes the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Because Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and lack of concern for God's people (Mt. 12:1-13), these men went into a murderous rage, plotting the Lord's death.

But Jesus continued healing those in need, warning them not to reveal who He was. To explain Jesus' compassion, and His public silence, Matthew quoted Isaiah 42:1-4, the opening verses of Isaiah's first Servant Song. There is no question here that Jesus is the direct fulfillment of God's prophetic words.

Notice the contrast between the Pharisees' attitude toward Jesus and that of God the Father's. Though these earthly leaders rejected Jesus, He was the chosen Servant of God. Ultimately, God's vote was the only one that counted.

Isaiah's picture of the Servant as One who rejects public outcry (Mt. 12:19) fits well with Jesus' warning (Mt. 12:16). If word went out of His healing power, crowds bent on a miracle would come, distracted from Jesus' real message of sin and salvation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When it comes to the claims of Jesus Christ, there are some people who don't want to see the truth.

Even though we cannot know for sure who will or won't respond, we can and must pray for these people. And at the same time, we can ask God to lead us to people who are genuinely searching for spiritual reality

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7; Matthew 12:34-37

When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. - Proverbs 10:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

What In Your "Library"? - Estimates vary as to the number of words an average person speaks in a day. But whichever number you take, it's a great deal. One researcher says 30 words per day is a good average, enough to fill a small book. In a lifetime, that's a library full of words--good and bad. And it's a library we probably wouldn't want someone else to read too extensively.

Our speech isn't a subject we often hear mentioned in connection with stewardship, but we think it belongs in this month's study. The gift of speech is one of God's greatest blessings to us and, as in other areas of life, we are accountable for how we use our words.

The sad irony of human speech is captured by James when he wrote, ""With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing"" (James 3:9-10).

Solomon has some wise words for us about our words. The context of his caution is worship, which highlights the power of speech to bless or to curse a life. The ""sacrifice of fools"" (Eccl. 5:1) is a hasty, thoughtless vow made to God, rashly stated to impress God or others. When we're in God's presence, listening before talking is good advice.

The Bible doesn't urge us to be sparing with our words just for the sake of silence. As the verse quoted in Ecclesiastes 5 reveals, the more we say the more likely we are to make a mistake. That's just human nature, because we are sinful, imperfect people using a tool--the tongue--that has also been tainted by sin.

Another reason the Word advises us to be thoughtful stewards of our words is that, according to Jesus, we will have to face them someday. The Savior's warning in Matthew 12 is enough to make even the most glib talker swallow once before firing off the next sentence.

In fact, the context of these verses shows that Jesus issued this caution after some Pharisees had committed the unpardonable sin by blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

Given all this, someone might think the safest course is not to say anything at all. That's impossible, of course, and it wouldn't solve the problem anyway (Mt 12:34).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

""Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,"" Jesus said in Mt 12:34.

So while we need to set a guard on our tongues, the Bible also tells us, ""Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life"" (Prov. 4:23). This would be a good verse to write out on a card and set on your desk or the family dinner table, or stick to your refrigerator. Also, why not commit it to memory? Make it a family project, and determine to keep your ""wellspring"" clean so your words will bless God and others

Matthew 12:33-37 James 1:26-27

For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. - Matthew 12:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

In My Fair Lady, the musical adaptation of George Bernard Shaw’s play Pygmalion, main character Eliza Doolittle sings in response to declarations of love by her suitor, “Don’t talk of love lasting through time, make me no undying vow–show me now!”

In our culture of the sarcastic one-liner and the quick retort, it’s easy to think that matching our words with deeds isn’t really that important. But James shows us otherwise and points out the spiritual significance of this very issue.

We saw yesterday that James warned us about the possibility of deceiving ourselves. Simply listening to God’s Word does not make us right before God. We must also obey. Today’s verses give us a concrete example of that obedience: the connection between our words and deeds.

So far, James has set up contrasts between the path to life and the path to death, worldly wealth and spiritual riches, and control by sinful desires and God’s desires. Again, we see two opposing illustrations of James’s point.

First, we have someone who imagines himself to be a good, religious person. But his own desires control him, manifested in his lack of control over what he says (Mt 12:26). In verse 19 we had the illustration of anger controlling someone; now we see the tongue controlling someone. This indicates that God’s desires are not the focus and pursuit of this individual, and he is sadly mistaken if he believes that God is pleased with him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Tomorrow we will gather with other believers in church, where we will likely sing hymns and songs of praise to God. We will join in prayers that bless the name of the Lord. This is appropriate and fitting for our corporate worship of God. But worship doesn't end there–it extends to every moment of every day. Our worship includes controlling our tongues with our family and coworkers. It includes meeting the needs of those around us. This is the life of worship that pleases God and indicates that we are truly seeking His desires.

Matthew 12:38-45

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . . he was buried . . . he was raised on the third day. - 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

TODAY IN THE WORD

Most people know about Jonah and the "whale," even if they don't know that this story is in the Bible. It certainly is a memorable event—even making its way into Walt Disney's Pinocchio! Yet as we saw yesterday, Scripture records this event because of something beyond the fact that Jonah spent some time in the belly of a big fish.

Jesus' own reference to Jonah forces us to consider the significance of this event. Jonah's "fish tale" showed him God's deliverance and forgiveness for his rebellious attempt to flee. The sign of Jonah was that God providentially rescued His prophet so that His intended mission might be carried out. Moreover, Jonah's presence in Nineveh was a sign of God's judgment. Similarly, Jesus was a sign to those rejecting Him that God's judgment was also upon them. The Ninevites further illustrated what true repentance looked like.

The context of Matthew 12 is important. The Pharisees had just questioned Jesus about the source of His miracles (Matt 12:22-37). Then they demanded to see a sign. Keep in mind that they had already seen many signs of Jesus' deity, so they were really trying to trap Him. By pointing to Jonah, Jesus drew a parallel between Jonah's time in the fish's belly and His own upcoming time "in the heart of the earth." Just as Jonah was rescued from the fish, so too, God would deliver His Son from death on the third day.

Jesus then went on to make two more points. The Ninevites would condemn the generation that Jesus addressed because they had repented with only Jonah's one-sentence prophecy (Jonah 3:4). But those listening to Jesus had heard someone greater than any prophet, and still they refused to believe. The same is true with the Queen of the South, the Queen of Sheba. She heard Solomon's wisdom and believed in the Lord (1 Kings 10; see Dec. 15). But now one greater than Solomon was present, and this generation still refused to believe. It was shocking to see two examples of Gentiles who believed, whereas the Jews in Jesus' day would not.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It may seem curious that teaching about evil spirits follows Jesus' discussion of the sign of Jonah. But Jesus was showing the Pharisees that they were in danger of great evil by rejecting Him. When they ascribed His power to Satan, they opened themselves up to a terrible fate.

That's a sobering thought. When people hear about Jesus and deliberately reject the truth, they turn themselves over to the Evil One. This shows us once again that rejection of Jesus is never neutral; it has horrific, eternal consequences.

Matthew 12:46-50

Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

- Matthew 12:50

TODAY IN THE WORD

You Ticket Has Already Been Paid For - Last summer an interesting newspaper report said that scalpers were making illegal profit by selling White House tour passes to tourists for as much as $50 each. The tickets are given out free each morning by the National Park Service, and each person who stands in line is allowed as many as four tickets. This means that visitors who don't receive tickets but want to tour the White House are often at the mercy of scalpers with tickets to spare--for a hefty price.

This situation is a good illustration of something that often happens in the spiritual realm. Admission into God's family isn't something that just anyone can buy. It's actually free to anyone who receives Jesus Christ by faith and trusts Him for the forgiveness of sin. But in Jesus' own day the religious leaders of Israel, particularly the Pharisees, thought they held all the admission tickets into the kingdom. Anyone who wanted to enter had to meet their price.

But Jesus set the record straight the day He pointed to His disciples and declared them to be part of God's true family. With Jesus,

spiritual relationship takes precedence over human relationships--even those of one's immediate family.

Jesus wasn't being cruel or rude to His family. He was simply making clear the boundaries of genuine discipleship. As the Son of God, He has every right to decide who will be admitted into His Father's family. The good news for the Twelve, and for us, is that membership in the family of God is not dependent on meeting manmade requirements.

This close relationship with the Lord is one of the benefits of being Jesus' disciples. We are not simply His students; we are family to Him.

The author of Hebrews explained this further when he wrote, ""Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers"" (Heb. 2:11). No spiritual ""scalper"" can put a price tag on that!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Everyone knows there are benefits that come with being a member of a family.

That's true for us as disciples of Jesus Christ, as well. The apostles who walked the earth with Jesus benefited from His comfort when they were afraid, His correction when they strayed, and His wise counsel when they needed direction. Because Jesus is the same today, these blessings are yours as well. Which of these speak to your need today? Don't hesitate to approach the Savior, your ""older Brother,"" to ask for the resources you need.

Matthew 13

Matthew 13:1-52

The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you. - Mt 13:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1926, music by Antonio Vivaldi was discovered in the archives of an Italian monastery. Inspired, scholars began to search for more. Vivaldi had been popular in his day, but had fallen into obscurity. Almost all of his music had been lost.

A second trove of Vivaldi’s music was subsequently found in the collection of two brothers who were unaware of what they had. Included was The Four Seasons, one of the first compositions to feature a solo violin. Though it sat in an attic for over two centuries, today The Four Seasons is considered one of the most popular classical pieces in the world.

A treasure found in an attic–it sounds like one of today’s parables! A parable is a picture or story illustrating a spiritual truth. The two themes that dominate the parables in today’s reading are the kingdom of heaven and the nature of true faith. We’ll focus on the second of these.

In the parable of the sower, a person of true faith (the seed in good soil) hears, understands, and obeys the gospel (Mt 13:23). This is contrasted with people who don’t understand (the seed by the path), those who have no firm foundation of faith (the seed in rocky soil), and those for whom “faith” is not life’s first priority (the seed choked by thorns).

True and false faith may appear similar for a period of time, as we learn in the parables of the weeds and the net. False faith is a work of the enemy, Satan. But through the test of time, the truth will be known. Another feature of faith is that it may start small, but its effects grow and spread enormously (Mt 13:31–33; cf. Mt 17:20).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Find and read to a child in your life a modern retelling of one or more of the parables in today’s chapter. A well-told version of the pearl of great price, for example, may capture a child’s imagination with a truth of God’s kingdom. If the book has vivid, well-drawn illustrations, all the better. Be sure to use your voice and body language to make the story come alive for the child.

Matthew 13:1-58

I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things. - Psalm 78:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

We might associate treasure-hunting with movies or deep-sea divers searching for ancient shipwrecks. But the quest for lost treasure appeals to many people, from those who enjoy a weekend with a metal detector to those who devote their lives to pursuing

the big cache. One full-time treasure seeker said, “You have to give up everything for this life—job, bank account, retirement plan, friends, and maybe family. It's hard and dirty and dangerous. For me, though, it's the only thing I can do—I love it.”

This sentiment captures the right perspective of the kingdom, which Jesus revealed in His parables. The placement of these parables is no accident. They follow the events of Mt 11 and Mt 12 as part of the theme of the revelation of and response to the kingdom.

The Parable of the Sower addresses the question of why more people don't believe (cf. Mt 11:20-24; 12:14). Jesus explained that opportunity does not equal response. The news about the arrival of the kingdom in the person of the Messiah was available to all; some were interested, but their concern for wealth distracted them, some lost heart when opposition arose, and others rejected the message completely. This was not the end of the story—those who heard and understood would be part of the amazing growth of the kingdom.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and of Yeast also contain the truth that the kingdom will begin small, and yet this beginning has great power that will be revealed. The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and of the Pearl indicate the all-surpassing value of the kingdom. Life in the kingdom might be dangerous and difficult and require us to give up much, but it's the only thing to do for those seeking first God's righteousness.

The Parables of the Weeds and the Net encourage us to be patient for God's timing. Followers of Christ are still in the world. But the time will come when those who rejected the message of Jesus will be destroyed, and the righteous “will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Several parables use the agricultural metaphor of planting. As a visual reminder of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, consider planting flowers, vegetables, or trees. If you live in a warm climate you might start planting in the next few weeks; in a cold climate, you might prefer an indoor herb garden or potted plants. As you watch your plants grow, use God's natural creation to reflect on His spiritual work of building the kingdom through those who spread the message of who Jesus is and what He has done.

Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. - Matthew 13:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's Obvious! - In Edgar Allan Poe’s story, “The Purloined Letter,” Paris’s chief of police faces a puzzle. An important letter has been stolen by a government official and is being used for political blackmail. He knows the identity of the thief, but because of the sensitive nature of the letter, he cannot arrest him. Instead, the police comb through the government official’s apartment, but fail to find the letter despite an exhaustive search.

The police were looking in all the clever hiding places. But the thief, assuming his apartment would be searched, had adopted the simple strategy of hiding the letter out in the open. Its (eventually discovered) location was obvious!

The letter thief baffled the police by hiding his secret in plain sight. In a sense, Jesus did the same with His parables, hiding spiritual truths in plain sight. He used stories both to reveal and to conceal.

Why would Jesus want to conceal truth? His purpose was to hide it from those unwilling to hear it, that is, those who were spiritually dull or resistant. This fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy concerning spiritual deafness and blindness (Mt 13:14-15; Isa. 6:9-10). Such people did not deserve and would not be given the “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11).

Though parables are puzzles to the hard-hearted, they reveal truth to those who are spiritually perceptive or responsive. Such people have been chosen by God. Only He can give this kind of knowledge, only He can reveal the meanings of spiritual mysteries (cf. Eph. 3:3-6). That’s why Jesus would teach the crowds as much as they were able to handle, then instruct His disciples privately. We are blessed (Mt 13:16)!

Jesus’ use of parables fulfilled another prophecy (v. 35; Ps. 78:2). In fact, these stories make up about one third of His recorded teaching. Most lists have thirty to forty different parables, depending on how they are defined and counted. They are found nowhere else in the New Testament, strong evidence for their authenticity. They may even have been unique in Judaism at that time--although many rabbinic parables have been collected, none date back to the time of Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To help yourself understand more about Jesus’ teaching methods in using parables, brainstorm ways in which stories are capable of

teaching or communicating truth. For example, one way might be by presenting a virtuous character whom readers can imitate. How many other ways can you think of?

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. - Matthew 13:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

If you visit the campus of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and enter the main lobby in Crowell Hall, behind the receptionist you'll see a beautiful stained glass window. The window depicts a sower going out to sow, reflecting both Jesus' parable and the core purpose of a Moody education.

The parable of the sower provides an overview of the second part of our study. For about a week, we'll consider parables emphasizing different responses to the kingdom.

In this parable, it seems likely that, as was the case two days ago, the sower is the Son of Man and the soils stand for the hearts of people, especially given the mixture of results from the seeds sown. However, neither are explicitly identified in Jesus' interpretation (vv. 18-23). Instead, He focused on four main responses to the gospel or His Word.

First, some seeds fall by the path and are eaten by birds. These people do not understand the gospel and have no response whatsoever. The devil is allowed to "snatch away" the truth from their hearts.

Second, some seeds fall into rocky places with shallow soil. They spring up quickly, but lack good roots. Thus, they wither quickly. These people have a quick, joyful response to the gospel, but soon fall away during hardship or persecution. The verb "fall away" literally means "to be offended" or "to be repelled"--the gospel sounded good, but when they understand its full implications, they decide against it.

Third, some seeds fall among thorns, where their growth is choked off. The response of these people to the gospel is stifled by temporal concerns. As they're consumed and satisfied by the material goods and pleasures of this life, they reject the good news of eternal life. Theologically, none of these first three groups ever became true believers in Christ. Their reaction wasn't saving faith.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus indicated that the results of the different seeds illustrate the responses of different hearts to the good news of the kingdom. Thus, today might be a good time for a "heart check"!

Matthew 13:11, 2Samuel 12:1-14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Czech reformer Jan Hus was first and foremost a pastor. To help his congregation understand spiritual truths, Hus displayed posters featuring contrasting pairs of pictures on the church's walls. For example, in one picture the pope was presented sitting on a throne, regally dressed, having his feet kissed by monks; in the opposite picture, Jesus was shown washing the feet of the disciples, in sharp contrast to the pope's pride.

Vivid pictures would endure in the hearts and imaginations of his congregation. Jesus used parables, our topic this month, for similar reasons--His stories create pictures in our minds. He told them in order to teach truth in an accessible, memorable way.

A parable is a short narrative focused on a spiritual truth. It can be in the form of an extended metaphor or simile; longer ones might have allegorical elements. Others present examples for imitation, while some use contrast for highlighting. Like most figurative language, parables operate at two levels: the literal, which includes characters, setting, and action; and the figurative, where the intended meanings are found.

To introduce parables, we've chosen an Old Testament parable to demonstrate what they are and do. Most of us are probably familiar with the circumstances. David had committed adultery and murder. Now a prophet came with a message: God was displeased.

Nathan told a straightforward and memorable story about two men and a lamb. It's also universal–people everywhere would judge the injustice similarly to David (Mt 13:5-6).

Notice the story's effects on David. First, he's drawn in. If he'd felt guilty and been inclined not to listen, the story disarmed him. Second, the story engaged his imagination. He understood and responded passionately because he could picture the situation. And third, the story required his moral and spiritual discernment. He had to judge the case. As it turned out, he condemned himself (vv. 7-

9)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you “stolen any lambs” lately? In light of today’s parable, it makes sense for our application to focus on confession of sin.

Matthew 13:31-33

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough. - Matthew 13:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

How Does Your Garden Grow? - “What would you plant in the garden of life?” asks a popularly circulated e-mail message. First, the writer would plant five rows of peas: preparedness, promptness, perseverance, politeness, and prayer. Second, he would plant three rows of squash: squash gossip, squash criticism, and squash indifference. Third, he would plant three rows of lettuce: let us be faithful, let us be loyal, and let us love one another. Since we reap what we sow, cultivating these traits will have good results in our lives.

Like a seed, God’s kingdom is characterized by growth. We find this quality highlighted in today’s reading.

The first parable compares the kingdom to a mustard seed, the tiniest known at that time in that part of the world. When planted, however, it grows into a tree reaching a height of 10-15 feet. That birds perch there shows its size, as well as connoting restfulness or “home” and suggesting the all-embracing nature of the kingdom. Jesus was probably alluding to a passage in Ezekiel which also uses bird and tree imagery to describe the Messiah and His kingdom (Ezek. 17:22-24).

As in yesterday’s parables, we see the element of the unexpected. Who could guess such a large tree would grow from such a small seed? The juxtaposition is startling, and the power of the figure of speech is in the contrast. Despite the small, apparently unimpressive beginnings of the kingdom, it will grow to be something dominant and even majestic.

The second parable depicts a woman mixing yeast into her bread dough. Elsewhere, yeast is used to symbolize sin (see Matt. 16:6), but not here. In context, it symbolizes the inevitable, permeating growth or advance of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom will grow as surely and completely as yeast spreads through dough. Once again, the picture is memorable because of the strong contrast between a bit of yeast and a large amount of flour.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

On Independence Day, Americans celebrate the decision to declare liberty from England. Though the Revolutionary War loomed, the victory would come.

Matthew 13:24-34

Small Beginnings - When Laura Price, a roaring twenties flapper, converted to Christianity at a Keswick Conference one summer, she had no idea what she was getting herself into. She simply gave herself to Jesus, and her lifestyle turned around. A few years later she was married to Carl Woll and en route to Kenya as one of the first Gospel Furthering Fellowship missionaries. She spent the bulk of her adult life living in Kenya, singing, ministering, and sharing the love of Jesus for African people in Swahili. Big things have small beginnings. The parable of the mustard seed is a parable of big things with small beginnings. What the seed is and what it becomes do not resemble each other. The seed is buried, hidden, and apparently inconsequential; but it grows into a tree. As in the parallel parable of the yeast, nothing appears to be happening, but in hidden places roots delve and bread expands. These parables illustrate the spiritual principle of slow and hidden growth.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. - Matthew 13:41

TODAY IN THE WORD

Do the "Weeds" Shock You? - One day, nurseryman John Chapman slung a bag of apple seeds over his shoulder and headed west. His mission? To plant apple trees everywhere he could.

Known as “Johnny Appleseed,” Chapman became an American folk hero. Tradition says he walked barefoot, planting apple trees for fifty years in five different states. Animals were reputed to be his closest friends, and he spent most nights under the stars. He carried neither knife nor gun and harmed no living thing.

As the legend goes, near the end of his life Johnny fell asleep in a small orchard. In his dream, he walked up a rainbow and threw out a handful of apple seeds. Those that stuck in the sky became stars, and those that fell grew into apple trees.

When Johnny planted apple seeds, no one was surprised to see apple trees grow. But when the master in today's parable plants wheat, the servants are shocked to see weeds as well, planted by an enemy.

The enemy's actions are no surprise to the farmer. He allows the weeds and the wheat to grow side by side because he's reluctant to risk harming the wheat. But at the harvest, the two will be separated, with the weeds to be burned.

Jesus' private explanation clarified the meaning of the story. He sowed the seed when His advent inaugurated the kingdom. The field is the world. Wheat symbolizes believers, and weeds unbelievers. The devil tries to work against God and His kingdom. For now, the two "realms" co-exist, but at the end of this age, divine judgment will separate them for eternity.

How is the kingdom described here? When the time is ripe, God's judgment will define it. Even now, good and bad trees can be known by their fruit (Matt. 7:17-20). At present, God's grace allows both wheat and weeds to grow simultaneously. But one day, no matter what the "weeds" think, a final reckoning will come, a final judgment, and a final destiny (Mt 13:42). Ultimately, there is no place in God's holy kingdom for "everything that causes sin and all who do evil" (Mt 13:41).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As you continue to explore the parables, we'd like to recommend a book that may help you. Words of Life,by Leland Ryken, has a particularly insightful chapter on parables. You can obtain a copy of this book at a local bookstore.

Matthew 13:44-46

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. - Matthew 13:44

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last summer, Frank Wallis of Arkansas found an unexpected treasure. One day, he purchased four rolls of the gold-colored, one-dollar coins featuring Sacagawea, the Native American woman who guided Lewis and Clark on their westward journey. On one of the coins, however, he found the face of George Washington. The back of the coin was right, but the front side belonged on a quarter. Called a "double-denomination mule error," it's thought to be the first such error in the history of the U.S. Mint. Articles speculated that the coin was worth $100,000.

The men in today's parables also found unexpected treasures. Their stories begin with a phrase we'll see frequently: "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Throughout this week, we'll examine parables that describe the kingdom. Today's two stories emphasize its value.

The first parable compares the kingdom to "treasure hidden in a field" (Mt 13:44). It was immensely valuable, but it had been hidden--just as the exact nature of Christ's first coming had been hidden (Col. 1:25-27). We don't know if the man was searching for it or came across it accidentally, but in either case, he couldn't take credit. That is, the treasure was valuable in itself, not because of his efforts or discovery.

Full of joy, the man sold all he owned and bought the field, including the rights to the treasure. The sum of his possessions was less valuable than what he'd found, and his life was transformed forever!

The second parable speaks of "a merchant looking for fine pearls" (Mt 13:45). Here we know that the man was actively searching, but the main point is the same. To obtain the pearl, he had to abandon everything acquired in the past. The kingdom's value transcends all!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The kingdom is a "treasure" that transforms lives! How can we go on keeping it to ourselves?

Matthew 13:44-46

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! - 2 Corinthians 9:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jesus' story about a treasure in a field in today's reading is not imaginative fiction. In the past, people really did bury treasures in hiding places like this. There were, after all, no bank vaults until recently! In the summer of 2009, an amateur treasure hunter found one such hiding place. Using a metal detector in a farmer's field in central England, Terry Herbert "discovered the largest Anglo-

Saxon hoard of gold artifacts ever found in Britain." Due to their historical and archaeological value, the more than 1,500 gold and silver items he found, which date from the seventh century, are the property of the state and were put on temporary display at Birmingham Museum. Herbert and the landowner, however, did share in their value, which runs into the millions of dollars.

Imagine how you would feel if you had just discovered such a treasure! That's the feeling Jesus conveyed through the two brief parables of the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great price. Both are similes for the "kingdom of heaven," and the point of both comparisons is its incalculable value and present hiddenness. As with Jesus Himself, whose deity was clear only to those with eyes to see, His kingdom is here but presently hidden from those who can't or won't see it.

For us, the application is that we must value Christ and His kingdom above all, which means we must sacrifice everything for its sake. Our discipleship, our commitment to following Jesus, must be complete in every area. We can hold nothing back, because that would imply that something else is of greater value. Since that's false, we must pursue what is supremely valuable with every ounce of time, energy, money, and other resources that we have.

Elsewhere, Jesus put the cost of discipleship in equally strong terms. It's like carrying a cross to an execution; like an intense, long-term construction or military project; like dying; or like being reborn (Luke 14:26-32; John 3:3-8; 12:24-25). Wholeheartedness with our financial resources is an important dimension of this kind of discipleship.

APPLY THE WORD

What part does handling money play in your own discipleship? Would your checkbook ledger testify to wholehearted stewardship and generosity in your pursuit of the kingdom of heaven? Whether God has put one, three, or five, "talents" into your keeping, His greatest wish is that you would multiply these resources for eternal purposes. He longs to welcome you one day with the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:21).

Matthew 13:45-46

Treasure Hunter - About 15 years ago an Australian treasure-hunter was using a metal detector to scout for small gold nuggets in one of that country's old mining areas. On a whim, he moved his search into the local school yard, where something set his machine off. Digging down, he was thrilled to discover what he thought was a nugget the size of a marble. As he tried to dig it out, however, he found it was at least the size of a man's thumb. As he continued digging, the nugget "grew" larger and larger, until at last the man pulled a 67-pound nugget out of the hole he had made. The treasure-hunter later sold for more than $1 million the famous "Hand of Faith" gold nugget!

The Miner - Blacksmith John Leavitt hoped to strike it rich. In 1878, he arrived in Lake Valley, New Mexico, and purchased a lease on a small mine shaft in the side of a hill. Two days later, he broke through into one of the most fabulous silver discoveries the world has ever seen. Nicknamed "The Bridal Chamber," Leavitt's find was a cavern virtually lined with solid silver. Eventually, the chamber yielded 2.5 million ounces of silver, at the time bringing $1.11 an ounce!

Pearl of Asia - A hundred years after it was buried with Manchu emperor Ch'ien Lung in 1799, the fabled "Pearl of Asia" was stolen by grave robbers. The fabulous pearl had been found by Persian divers, and purchased by the emperor Sha Jahan for his wife Mumtaz, for whom he also built the Taj Mahal and the Pear Mosque. About a century later the pearl was listed among the treasure of Ch'ien Lung. After it was stolen from the emperor's tomb, the pearl disappeared from sight for eighteen years before turning up in Hong Kong. There is was used as security for a large loan that later defaulted. The pearl was then sold in Paris to an unidentified buyer for an undisclosed price. Since the 1940s, the location of the "Pearl of Asia" has been unknown; and its value is unassessed in today's dollars.

Matthew 13:47-50

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. - Matthew 25:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

Earlier this year off the coast of northern Japan, some fishermen had a very good day. They landed a gigantic bluefin tuna, weighing 444 pounds. Because such fish are prized for sushi, they sold the tuna at auction at the biggest fish market in Tokyo. It brought in 20 million yen, or $173,600--that's about $391 per pound!

Sushi or sashimi made from raw bluefin tuna can cost upwards of $100 per plate. That's probably what motivated the anonymous bidder to pay so much for a single fish.

Today's parable links fishing to God's judgment. A net is lowered into the water and catches all kinds of fish. This is similar to yesterday's parable where wheat and weeds grew together in the kingdom. In today's parable, when the net is full--that is, when

Christ returns at the end of the age--separation or judgment will take place. Just as fish are sorted into baskets based on whether they're good for food, righteous and wicked people will be separated (Mt 13:49) based on their response to Christ (see July 13).

Again we see that God's judgment in His time, will distinguish His kingdom. A similar scene is given in Matthew 25:31-46, which depicts judgment as a separation of sheep from goats. What's the standard? Righteous-ness which leads to service for Christ (Matt. 25:40). As always, actions show the heart (James 2:14-18).

The wicked will be cast into a "fiery furnace"--basically the same idea as the "lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14)--where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:50). This is a favorite expression of Matthew's, used to portray exclusion from the kingdom. "Weeping" indicates sorrow, grief, and suffering, and "gnashing" adds a feeling of extreme regret, anger, or pain. Unbelievers will be "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power" (2 Thess. 1:5-10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's devotional suggests a topic on which you might like to do further Bible study: God's judgment. While not easy, this is an important issue.

Matthew 13:16-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12

Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. - Matthew 13:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Corrie ten Boom left a legacy as the heroine of The Hiding Place, who helped her father and her sister Betsie hide Jews from the Nazis in their home in Holland during World War II. Betsie died in the Ravensbruck concentration camp where she and Corrie were imprisoned before Corrie was released on a clerical error. Corrie ten Boom, who lived to be ninety-one and touched millions of lives around the world, once said she wished Betsie could have lived to see the way God used their horrible suffering to reach so many people for Christ.

Aside from their circumstances, the ten Boom sisters help to illustrate the relationship between the Old Testament prophets and believers on this side of the cross. Peter said that those who spoke prophetically of the Messiah's ministry longed to know the "glories that would follow" the sufferings of the Messiah (1 Pet. 1:11).

Isaiah and the other prophets recorded God's Word so that we could sit down every day and read all about the Messiah's person and work. We benefit today from what theologians call the progress of revelation--a blessing we can't afford to take lightly.

Jesus put things in a little different light in Matthew 13 when He contrasted the disciples' blessing with the spiritual dullness and lack of understanding on the part of those who refuse to believe. In other words, we're not only blessed to have the whole revelation of God. We need to respond to the truth we have.

Maybe you never stopped to consider that you know things about Jesus Christ that a person like Jeremiah or Isaiah would have given anything to know. When you hear the message about Christ clearly and faithfully taught, you're hearing truth that some of the most righteous people in the Old Testament never heard.

We're privileged, to say the least. Where the prophets saw only glimpses of Messiah's coming, we enjoy the benefits of Christ's first coming as we eagerly await His return!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When we realize the treasure we have in Scripture, we understand why it's so important to make sure that we pass God's truth along to our children and grandchildren.

You may be in the process of raising your own children, or offering support and help to parents as a grandparent, relative, or friend. Whatever opportunity you have to help teach God's Word to the next generation, be encouraged to know that your efforts are very important, and will make a lasting difference.

Matthew 13:51-52

Do not snatch the word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws. - Psalm 119:43

TODAY IN THE WORD

Imagine that you've just received a piece of good news. Your son called to tell you he's getting married. Your boss awarded you a raise and a promotion. A professor gave you an A+. You've become a grandparent for the first time.

What will you do next? Go on quietly about your business? Smile to yourself over your little secret? Not likely! You've got to tell someone the good news! You need to call friends, relatives, family members, whoever will listen! When something good happens, we want to share it with others. This is the attitude we should take toward the good news of the kingdom.

What have we learned this month about the kingdom? We've seen the love, sovereignty, grace, and mercy of the King. We've highlighted qualities befitting us as citizens of the kingdom, including humility and obedience. We've celebrated the incredible value of this treasure we have. We've come to understand that Christ will judge justly.

We've gained insights into Jesus' teaching methods. With stories, He connected with His hearers' imaginations and made His lessons memorable. He used figures of speech such as metaphor, contrast, and hyperbole. He was a master teacher!

What should we do with all we've learned? This final mini-parable shows us. A man joyfully brings treasures out of his storeroom to show to others. In the same way, we should testify to the biblical truths we understand, not hoarding them for "private enjoyment," but displaying them freely. If we do so, the lost will be evangelized and the Body edified.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To review and crystallize what you've learned through this month's study, write out several "principles of the kingdom" found in the parables of Jesus such as humility. This is an important exercise, so we advise you to thumb back through as many of the devotional readings and Scripture passages as possible. Be sure your principles are grounded solidly in God's Word!

Matthew 13:53-14:36

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. - John 6:35

TODAY IN THE WORD

What is true faith? Evangelist D. L. Moody once said:"We cannot dictate to God. The prayer of faith is not to make myself believe that just the very thing I ask will be done and done in just my way . . . but a trust in God's power to do what I ask and a trust in His love that if He does not do it it is because it is better not to have it done and to leave the decision with Him."

In today's reading, Jesus' miracles followed up on yesterday's parables. These miracles essentially continue to explain the nature of true faith. What can we learn?

Initially, we see that true faith is a necessary condition for miracles (Mt 13:58). The people of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, thought they knew Him, and familiarity had bred contempt. They saw for themselves His miraculous powers and heard His wise teaching, but their amazement did not spur them to faith. Instead, they pridefully took offense and rejected Him.

True faith, by contrast, makes us willing to sacrifice our very lives in the cause of righteousness. John the Baptist provides a good model. He had condemned the public immorality of Herod's brother, then thanks to an angry woman and Herod's careless promise he paid the ultimate price. No doubt he died strong in his faith in Jesus' Messiahship.

True faith also understands that Jesus is the all-sufficient Provider, as we see in the feeding of the five thousand. And He didn't just provide a light snack; there were twelve basketfuls left over! Spiritually, too, Jesus is not stingy: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's an exercise to help you apply today's reading. Think through the past week. In what situations or actions did you show true faith? In what ways did you fulfill the characteristics of faith given in today's devotional? How and why did you do so, and with what results?

Matthew 14

Matthew 14:1-36

He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. - Job 9:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Shakespeare used the literary technique of foreshadowing, in which something hints at a future development in the plot. After meeting Romeo, Juliet says: "Go ask his name. If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed." At first, the lines reveal

only a girl's passionate interest in the availability of a boy she has met. But they foreshadow the tragic end of the young couple.

Matthew's Gospel also employs literary techniques like foreshadowing, and today's passage has several themes that we'll see in later chapters. The opening verses recount the fate of John the Baptist. John challenged Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great from Matthew 2) for his immoral marriage to his sister-in-law. This denunciation led to John's imprisonment and then execution. What happened to John foreshadows the fate awaiting Jesus as one who boldly proclaimed truth (see Matt. 27:11-26).

We also see the contrast between Herod, who considered himself “king” of the Jews, and Jesus, the Son of David. Herod was insecure; he feared John, Herodias, the people, and his dinner guests. Jesus demonstrated His authority and compassion by miraculously providing for the needs of those who followed Him. The miracle of feeding the five thousand echoes God's provision of manna for His people in the wilderness (cf. Exodus 16) and foreshadows God's provision of the body and blood of His Son for His people (see Matt. 26:26-29).

At several points Matthew has noted the small faith of the disciples. As their boat was tossed on the waves, we get a status update. Their mix of fear and faith was exemplified by Peter as he stepped out of the boat: first faith, then fear, and again faith as he called out to Jesus. Jesus' walking on the water had great importance—the disciples would have known that such a feat had been mentioned in Scripture as an action of God (see Job 9:8; Ps. 77:19; Hab. 3:15). This prompted their confession of worship. In Matthew 8:27 they had asked what sort of man this was. Now they had the answer.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Muslims revere Jesus as a great prophet, and Jehovah's Witnesses assert that Jesus was the first creation of God. Others think Jesus was a nice guy, but He never claimed to be God. The deity of Jesus is a crucial foundation for our faith. From our study in Matthew so far, can you outline scriptural support for our belief? Beginning in Matthew 1, this Gospel has provided evidence that Jesus is God the Son. Take some time this weekend to list verses and accounts that demonstrate who Jesus is

Matthew 14:13-36 Psalm 98;

He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. - Job 9:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

At this point in December you're probably getting tired of the Christmas music that seems to have been playing everywhere for the past month! Is it really reasonable to expect that a human soul can endure “Jingle Bells” or “Here Comes Santa Claus” several times a day for weeks on end? But don't let this barrage keep you from appreciating the many wonderful songs that celebrate this Advent season. Consider, for example, the classic “Joy to the World! The Lord has come; Let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare him room, And heaven and nature sing.”

The famed English hymn writer Isaac Watts based this carol on Psalm 98. It's not known what occasion in Israel's history prompted this psalm, but it's clear that the psalmist celebrates God's great faithfulness and victory. The first three verses celebrate the marvelous truth that God's faithfulness to His people reveals His saving power to the entire world (Ps 98:3). Based on God's enduring goodness, the psalmist exhorts the entire world to worship God (Ps 98:4-6). The psalm concludes by praising the Lord for His coming judgment.

The idea of the created world joining in the worship of the Lord (Ps 98:7-8) might seem a bit odd to us, but it reminds us that the Lord is the rightful ruler over all creation. It's fitting for all the created order to praise Him as well as to obey Him, as today's passage from Matthew shows.

The story of Jesus walking on the water follows the account of Jesus feeding the 5,000 (Matt. 14:13-21). Both events show that Jesus is God because only God has complete control over the created world. Only God can transform five loaves and two fish into enough food for well over ten thousand people (factoring in women and children; see Mt 14:21). Only God can calm the waves and walk on water. Only God can heal countless people (Mt 14:36).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passage from Matthew also shows that Jesus cares deeply for hungry, fearful, disease-stricken people. It's easy during Christmas to think that everything has to be perfect, including ourselves. But maybe you're hungering for something more, or feeling fearful and overwhelmed by your circumstances, or battling some physical ailment. This Advent, let's remember that Jesus came not for the well, but the sick (Luke 5:31). Even during this season, He invites us to come to Him just as we are—hungry, fearful, and sick.

Matthew 14:15-36

Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid. - Matthew 14:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

This month we have read about some amazing tests of faith that God required His people to undergo. Often these tests demanded years, even decades, of unfaltering trust in God as He worked out His plan and will for His people.

But there were other times when God put faithful people to the test almost immediately after teaching them a lesson of faith. Jesus used this teaching method more than once with His disciples, including today’s reading in Matthew.

The context of this faith lesson is so incredible that we are tempted to wonder how in the world the disciples--and especially Peter--could forget so quickly what they had just seen. Before getting into the boat and heading across the Sea of Galilee, the Twelve watched Jesus miraculously feed at least five thousand hungry people. They even helped serve the food that kept coming from Jesus’ hands (Mt 14:19).

When the crowd had been fed, Jesus put the disciples into the boat with plans to spend some time in prayer and join them on the way. It’s important that Matthew said the goal was to reach “the other side” of the lake (Mt 14:22). In other words, Jesus made it clear that His plan was not to have the disciples sink and drown in the middle of the lake, even though a bad storm hit.

When Jesus came to them walking on the water, Peter asked for a faith test by his request to walk to Jesus. The lesson of his brief success and his sinking is hard to miss. As long as you keep your eyes on Jesus, you’re fine. But take your eyes off Jesus and look around at your circumstances, and you’re in trouble.

If we had been there, we would probably have been sitting in the boat saying, “Hey, Peter did pretty well. He almost made it to Jesus. That’s a lot more faith than I have.”

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Isn’t it encouraging that Jesus didn’t rebuke Peter for crying out to Him at the time of trouble?.

Matthew 14:22-33

Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. - Matthew 14:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

If you have ever tried to tread water, you know how much effort it takes to stay in one place. Now scientists have confirmed this fact by testing not swimmers, but birds. Special gauges implanted in the wings of black-billed magpies revealed that it took twice as much energy for the birds to hover than for them to fly normally.

It's hard for people to hover spiritually, too. We want to keep flying, but sometimes God wants us to pause long enough to learn a lesson. High-flying disciples aren't much good if they never stop to look and listen to the Lord.

Jesus wanted the Twelve to ""hover"" occasionally, but it wasn't easy to get their full attention. So one memorable night, He put them in a situation where they had no choice but to stop, look, and finally listen to what He was teaching them. In fact, the disciples were not only hovering in that boat on the stormy Sea of Galilee, they were losing ground as the waves battered them.

This famous incident followed immediately after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus went to a mountain to pray while the Twelve started rowing for the far shore of Galilee. The storm hit, and it hit hard. Matthew doesn't say the disciples were afraid because of the storm. They must have been edgy, though, because the sight of Jesus walking toward them filled them with terror.

It would make a nice, neat story if it ended with Jesus' words of comfort. But then we would miss the great lesson Peter learned. When he took his eyes off Jesus, Peter's faith blew away with the wind and his fear returned. But we should credit the apostle for knowing where to get help. ""Lord, save me!"" (Mt 14:30) has to be the shortest prayer in the Bible--and the most effective!

Jesus' rebuke of Peter, and the miracle of the sea becoming calm, reinforced the lesson the Twelve should have learned from the miraculous feeding just hours earlier. Jesus is firmly in control of every circumstance. Therefore, His disciples have no reason to doubt or to be afraid.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Notice that after Jesus came on board, the boat arrived at its original destination.

In other words, Jesus didn't send the Twelve out on the lake so they could drown in the middle. He had something better in mind for them all the time. But they didn't find that out until they were forced to wait for Him to show up.

If you're in the middle of a storm today, maybe it's time to stop, look, and listen. And if things are calm for you right now, share this lesson with a friend who's battling high winds

Matthew 14:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

Experts say that noise pollution is getting worse. In some major U.S. cities, noise levels have risen sixfold in the past fifteen years. American ears are bombarded by noise from airplanes, traffic, leaf blowers, TVs, and radios. Maybe it's because we're surrounded by so much noise that we find it difficult to appreciate solitude. But getting away alone with God is essential for our spiritual health. Today's passage shows that Jesus Himself had to withdraw from the hustle and bustle to sit quietly before His Father.

Recall from our study on September 17 that Luke says that it was Jesus' custom to withdraw and pray by Himself (cf. Matt. 14:13; Luke 5:16; 9:18). Today's passage gives us a good insight into this practice.

One thing that becomes quite clear from Mark is that Jesus was very involved in people's lives. When He sought solitude it wasn't because He was selfish or antisocial. Mark says that the whole town of Capernaum was gathered outside Jesus' door (vv. 32-34)! And there's no indication that He turned anyone away. Other passages record that Jesus was pressed in by large crowds (e.g., Matt. 13:2; Mark 5:31). Yet Mt 14:35 in our passage today shows that Jesus maintained balance by going off to a quiet place where He could be alone with the Father in prayer.

Quiet times in prayer were absolutely essential for Jesus to maintain focus, to fellowship with the Father, and to do His will. This is key. Notice that when Simon Peter and others came looking for Jesus (v. 36), they wanted Him to return to Capernaum to heal more people. But Jesus refused and told them that it was time to move on. If we don't see that Jesus' time alone with God helped Him to discern that the Father was sending Him further into Galilee, Jesus' refusal might seem harsh. Instead it's an indication of His complete submission to the Father's will.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Andrew Murray wrote that "prayer in Christ on earth and in us cannot be two different things." If Jesus needed to retreat for prayer, we also need to do the same. Why not plan a private prayer retreat? Is there a park nearby where you can be free from worry and distraction? Consider making a date with the Lord to spend time in prayer. You may consider choosing a time when the rest of the family will not be at home and you can have a "mini retreat" inside..

Matthew 15

Matthew 15:1-39

Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand." - Matthew 15:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

H. W. Fowler, collaborator with the Pocket Oxford Dictionary (1924), said this about repetition: "The writers who have most need of repetition, and are most justified in using it, are those whose chief business it is to appeal not to the reader's emotions, but to his understanding; for, in spite of the term "˜rhetorical', the object ordinarily is not impressiveness for impressiveness' sake, but emphasis for the sake of clearness."

Matthew has these goals in our passage: understanding and clarity. Each account in this chapter echoes an earlier event. As careful readers, we know this cannot be an accident. In the first episode, the Pharisees accuse Jesus and His disciples. Ritual handwashing was only required of the priests (which most Pharisees were not), but the Pharisees adopted this practice anyway. They thought the more they sought purity through these rituals, the more they would please God.

Jesus had no patience for righteousness that ignored the heart of God and His Word in order to gratify self (Mt 15:5). The Pharisees argued that eating with clean hands would keep them pure. Jesus said that purity came from the heart (cf. Mt 5:8). It's important to note that both Jesus and the Pharisees were seeking greater purity for the people of God. But the Pharisees had missed the core of the Law they so eagerly sought to enforce: it was mercy, not sacrifice, that God wanted. The Law was to be evidence of the love between Him and His people. The Pharisees wanted to give their tradition more authority than Jesus, not recognizing that He was the one who fulfilled the Law.

The healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter recalls the healing of the centurion's servant. Again, a non-Israelite recognizes who

Jesus is and asks Him to act as Messiah. Jesus initially resisted—He had come as God's covenant promise to Israel. The woman steadfastly asserted that as Messiah the blessing of Jesus could overflow to those outside the people of Israel, and in response to this faith Jesus healed her daughter.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today is Palm Sunday; we'll study the events of this day next week. We are entering the time the church has historically called Holy Week in preparation of celebrating Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Our reading today calls for us to reflect on what we have seen so far about the identity, authority, and compassion of Jesus. It urges us to respond in faith, not rejection. Spend time today in prayer and reflection on what Scripture reveals to us about Jesus, and ask for faith that accepts His agenda for the kingdom.

Matthew 15:29-39; 16:5-12

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. - Matthew 7:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

The death of President Franklin Roosevelt in April 1945 suddenly

thrust his vice president, Harry Truman, into a difficult position. He would be the person to lead U.S. negotiations with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin as Germany was defeated and World War II was brought to a close. British leader Winston Churchill was shocked that Roosevelt had not allowed Truman to become involved in the great wartime conferences and decisions up to that time. The result was that, according to one historian, Truman undertook his enormous responsibility ill-prepared and naive.

When it came to receiving ""hands-on"" experience, the disciples of Jesus had no reason to fear that they would be left out and ill-prepared for ministry. Jesus' method of making disciples included plenty of real-life training for the Twelve.

As He faced five thousand hungry people (see the July 6 study), Jesus had placed the responsibility of feeding the crowd directly on the disciples. They immediately discovered their inability to meet the need and set out to find a solution. Eventually, they came back to Jesus--which is where they needed to be all the time.

A very similar thing happened on this occasion. The crowd was a little smaller, but the miracle Jesus performed was just as big. This part of the story is straightforward; but it's the follow-up discussion that we need to focus on today.

After the feeding, the Pharisees and Sadducees challenged Jesus to prove Himself by performing a miracle on demand (Mt 16:1- 4). Jesus condemned their unbelief and then got into a boat with the Twelve.

The conversation on that boat ride is as important for us as it was for the disciples. When Jesus mentioned yeast, they immediately thought of their failure to pack bread for the trip. He had to remind them that providing bread was no problem for Him. The real struggle was spiritual.

In other words, the Lord was telling the disciples to get their minds off their stomachs and start paying attention to what was spiritually happening around them. Their problem was not an empty lunch box, but rather a lack of spiritual awareness that could cause them to fall prey to false teachers.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's pretty typical for us to think of our physical needs first when God wants to equip us for spiritual warfare.

Jesus taught the disciples that their heavenly Father already had their physical needs well under control. What He wants to see from His children is a priority commitment to the concerns of His kingdom. Today, we suggest you take a brief ""refresher course"" on these issues by reading Matthew 6:25-34. Then pray that God will help you to put Him first this week.

Matthew 15:1-9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Inge Kraus doesn't know who she really is; she only knows that people call her by that name. She was just four years old in April, 1945, when Russian troops attacked Konigsberg, the capital of what was then East Prussia. Inge remembers a strong man lifting her onto a wagon filled with people as Soviet artillery rained down upon the city she knew as home. She survived but was separated from her family and placed in an orphanage in Germany. Inge recently attended a gathering of war exiles from her city, tearfully hoping that someone might recognize her--but to no avail.

Most of us would agree that losing touch with family and losing one's identity is tragic. But as the story of Inge Kraus illustrates, life

does go on even after you have forgotten who you are and whose you are.

The same is true when it comes to worship. It's possible to carry on with all the ceremonies and symbols of worship, even after the true meaning of the outward rituals has been forgotten or ignored. The people in today's story are a picture of this lesson.

The Pharisees and legal experts who approached Jesus that day were definitely concerned about the outward trappings of worshiping God. They had burdened down the Law of Moses with so many manmade traditions that breaking one didn't cause a lot of concern.

Like tombs painted with a fresh coat of whitewash, Israel's religious leaders were for the most part men whose hearts were far from God. Even though they led the nation in worship, their efforts were in vain from God's standpoint--their words and acts of devotion were merely skin-deep.

It's not surprising, then, that these men asked the wrong question. Jesus answered with a classic example of the way these leaders betrayed the hypocrisy of their hearts (Mt 15:3). A man could declare a sum of money as a gift to God, relieving him of his responsibility toward his parents in the eyes of the current tradition. His vow could then be nullified in a number of ways (Mt 15:5-6).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How can we help ensure that our worship does not deteriorate into an outward formality?

One way is to remember that we come to worship not just to keep an appointment, but to meet a Person. Keeping our eyes and hearts fixed on Jesus and making Him the focus of our worship will help keep us from being distracted by the people and things around us.

Matthew 15:1-16:20

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. - Matthew 16:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Two years ago, antiquarian book expert John Sibbald discovered a first edition of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice at a “car boot sale” in England. It sold for £40,000.

Last year, he did it again. Examining books taken from an Edinburgh warehouse, he found another of the rare first editions of this classic novel. To make two such finds within a twelve-month period of time was an astonishing accomplishment!

To recognize these books for what they are, Sibbald needed knowledge and experience. To see Jesus for who he is, Peter needed the eyes of faith. His famous confession provides the crescendo to a pair of contrasts found in today’s reading.

In the first contrast, the Jewish leaders looked bad next to a Gentile woman. The Phari-sees were spiritually dull. They didn’t recognize or acknowledge the Messiah. They honored tradition above Scripture, using it even to disregard one of the Ten Commandments (Mt 15:3–6). Their concern for outward ritual over true holiness made them first-class hypocrites!

A Canaanite woman, on the other hand, asked for her daughter to be healed from demon possession. Even though the good news of the kingdom was for Jews first, she showed trust that God’s love reached to all people. Jesus commended her “great faith” and granted her request (Mt 15:24–28).

In the second contrast, the Pharisees again lost out, this time in comparison with Peter. They demanded a sign–an ironic request considering it follows the story of the feeding of the four thousand, not to mention all the other miracles in Matthew (see Mt 15:31). Jesus condemned their blindness and answered their request with the sign of Jonah. This is usually interpreted as foreshadowing His resurrection, since Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish (cf. Matt. 12:39–40). But since Jonah had called the Ninevites to repent in the face of judgment, this may also be a call to the Pharisees to repent.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Music can be a soul-stirring complement to words. A particular example is the 1992 album, The Book of Kells, by the group, Iona. The Book of Kells (named after a famous illuminated Gospel manuscript) features songs and instrumental pieces exploring the life of Christ as revealed in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. A line from the album reminds us, “Nations shall rise and nations shall fall / But nothing shall stand in the way of the Word.”

Matthew 16

Matthew 16:1-28

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. - Matthew 16:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many people approach God thinking that seeing is believing—"If only God would appear in front of me and tell me that He exists, then I'd believe in Him!" Our text today reveals the foolishness of this idea, and demonstrates that when it comes to Jesus, the opposite is true: believing is seeing.

The Pharisees and Sadducees challenged Jesus by asking for a sign (Mt 16:1). Jesus had been healing the sick, freeing the demon- possessed, and providing food for multitudes. What additional sign could these religious leaders want? Their question revealed their spiritual blindness. They had seen Jesus do miracles, but they did not believe His power stemmed from His identity as the Messiah. They did not believe, and therefore could not see.

Jesus warned His disciples against the corrupt teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Again the small faith of the disciples is rather humorously noted (Mt 16:8). It was certainly better than no faith, but even they still struggled to hear with spiritual ears.

We then come to the climax of this section of Matthew's Gospel and a turning point in the story. Several times the question of who Jesus is has been asked (Mt 11:2; 12:22; 13:55; 14:1-2). Now the disciples, again exemplified by Peter, are prepared to answer. Others assert that perhaps Jesus is another prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah. This is partly right—but partly right isn't enough when it comes to understanding who Jesus is. He is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). The reader has known this since Mt 1, and now through their belief the disciples see the revelation of God in the person of Jesus (v. 17; cf. 1:1, 18).

After the disciples recognized and affirmed the identity of Jesus, He began to teach them about His mission that lay ahead: He would go to Jerusalem and be killed, and on the third day He would be resurrected. If they continued to follow Him, they could expect suffering and even death. The cost of discipleship is very high. But the reward of discipleship is even higher—pleasing God and sharing in His kingdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When Peter heard Jesus announce His death, he protested (apparently missing the announcement of the resurrection!) and was rebuked by Jesus. Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce notes, “None are more formidable instruments of temptation than well-meaning friends who care more for our comfort than for our character.” Do we support our loved ones in following the way of Jesus? Or do we question or critique them? We are encouraged to support others and remain faithful ourselves in pursuit of the reward of discipleship.

Matthew 16:13-20

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. - Matthew 16:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Standing Lamb -In 1432 the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck produced his well-known masterpiece called ""Adoration of the Lamb."" Christ is portrayed in the painting as the Lamb of God, with blood pouring from His wounds. Worshipers are gathered all around Him. Yet the Lamb is not lying on the altar near death, but standing tall and straight, alive in triumph and splendor.

Over the centuries, many artists, sculptors, authors, and others have created magnificent portraits of Jesus Christ. Yet no one has ever drawn a more compelling or accurate picture of Jesus than the portrait the apostle Peter drew with just ten simple words.

In a secluded region about twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee, the words Peter uttered revealed that the disciples had been wrestling with the question Jesus had asked them: ""Who do people say the Son of Man is?"" (Mt 16:13).

This was an all-important question, especially in light of the authority that Jesus would confer on the disciples and the knowledge He would reveal about His approaching death (see tomorrow's study). If the disciples were going to minister in Jesus' name and follow Him to the cross, they must be convinced of His identity.

Other people had various ideas about Jesus' identity. But He wanted to know where the disciples stood on the issue. Peter rose to the occasion with his great confession. Jesus responded with a blessing for Peter and a promise that the church would be built on the rock of Peter's confession.

Then came the tremendous promise of kingdom authority to the Twelve, symbolized by the keys Jesus would give them. The book of Acts tells how Peter himself used the keys to open the kingdom of heaven to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and to

Gentiles in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10).

Clearly, the apostles had authority we do not possess--an authority that ended when the last of the Twelve died. But in one important sense, we as Jesus' disciples can open the kingdom of heaven to people when we tell them about the Son of God. When we know in whom we believe, we have a message to tell!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Every day, our lives are painting a portrait of Jesus to other people. Let's think about the picture we are giving others of Him.

One important example is our speech, an area where we stumble often (James 3:9-12). Are our words representing Christ and His love to those around us? Think back over the past week and see if you can recall words of encouragement to a friend, an expression of appreciation to a roommate or a family member, or a sincere compliment to a co-worker for work well done. How do you rate on the speech test?

Matthew 16:13-20

On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. - Matthew 16:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

A wedding ceremony normally begins with what is called the Declaration of Intent. Before the exchanging of vows and rings, the bride and the groom declare their intent to be loyal and faithful to one another. The “I wills” of intent sound the prelude to the “I dos” of the marriage covenant.

Our reading from today reveals Christ's declaration of intent regarding His bride: “I will build my church.” Like a loving husband, His tone exudes a gently possessive quality. My church. Scripture compares the church to many things—a bride, a body, a flock, a family, and a building—but our study this month will focus primarily on the church as the body and bride of Christ. As the body of Christ, we are the hands and feet of Jesus to one another and to the world. As the bride of Christ, we reserve our devotion and faithfulness for Christ alone.

One can imagine how we, humanly speaking, might approach such an immense undertaking as “building the church”— indeed, the way that some do approach this calling. We would focus on the money and manpower needed for the job. But as we can expect, God's plan is different. He's looking not for organizational strategies but for faith.

Peter's confession of faith in verse 16 is the rock upon which Christ will build His church. The world will misunderstand who Jesus is and why He came (Mt 16:14), but the church cannot and must not falter on the identity of Christ. The most fundamental question that the church must answer is this: “Who do you say I am?” (Mt 16:13).

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). Peter's response of faith is the declaration of the entire church, from the Apostles until today. The church is built upon this faith in a God who reveals Himself to His people through His Son (Mt 16:17). Despite different denominations, worship styles, and doctrinal points that get emphasized, all Christians share this foundation of faith in Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This common faith has been expressed from the earliest centuries of the church to today through the Apostles' Creed. “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.” This creed serves to remind us of the foundation of our existence as a faith community, a people drawn together by a God in whom we believe. If you don't know the Apostles' Creed, find a copy and learn it!

Matthew 16:13-19

I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. - Matthew 16:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

It seems that there is a new emphasis on building a strong spiritual legacy in the church, which is a welcome addition to the spiritual landscape of the nineties. In the midst of morally uncertain times, it is encouraging to see attention being paid to what will be passed on to future generations. Yet no trend toward laying good foundations, however promising, could compare to the foundation of the church which Jesus Himself put into place.

Jesus did not only leave us the model of His earthly life and ministry, as well as the most priceless spiritual legacy possible in the salvation He purchased for us. He also laid the foundation for the church--a new body of people comprised of all those who have put

their trust in Him.

In fact, Jesus places so much value on the church that His love for it is the model of a husband's love for his wife (Eph. 5:25). Jesus ""gave himself up"" for His church.

Jesus' announcement of His plan to build the church shows that this unique body of people was not a last-minute plan devised in heaven. Building the church was not just a good idea--it was the expression of God's eternal, perfect will. The church is built on the rock of Jesus Christ, and it is built to withstand all the assaults of the enemy.

This familiar passage in Matthew 16 isn't just reassuring because of the Lord's purpose and promises of protection and authority. There is personal comfort and blessing for us in the knowledge that we were on Jesus' heart and mind long before He went to the cross to save us. He even prayed specifically for us in His great prayer in the upper room (John 17:20-24).

As heirs of the wonderful legacy Jesus has left us, we should greatly value the church. Throughout this month, we will focus on the church, examining its facets like we would a gem of exceedingly great value.

We particularly want to explore a metaphor often used in Scripture for the church, that of the human body. We are the body of which Jesus is the head--a truth that has powerful implications for the way we should live each day.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We've been finding some great encouragement this week from the pages of Micah's prophecy. The church is definitely a valuable gem--although an imperfect one in the days before Christ returns for us.

Since every member of Christ's body is still a ""work in progress,"" the Bible reminds us of our need to love and forgive each other the way Jesus has loved and forgiven us.

Are you at odds with another member of the body of Christ? Why not resolve to settle the issue? If nothing else, it will make your devotional life this month much more enjoyable and meaningful! And since the body is interconnected (as we will see later on), when another believer is hurting, it's not doing you any good either..

Matthew 16:13-20 Micah 5:2

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. - Matthew 16:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Some things aren’t what they appear to be! In 1867 Secretary of State William H. Seward purchased Alaska for $ 7.2 million--about $12 per square mile! At the time, the deal was called “Seward’s Folly” and Alaska was dubbed “Seward’s Icebox.” Then, in 1880, gold was discovered. During the 1930s, drought-weary Midwesterners began to farm Alaska’s fertile soil. By the 1970s, oil was flowing through the Alaska Pipeline. Some things aren’t what they appear to be!

Jews living in Palestine at the time of Jesus’ birth certainly weren’t expecting their deliverer, or messiah, to be born in a feeding trough for cattle! Everyone knew that God’s messiah would come in power, conquering the Romans, reestablishing the throne of David, and restoring the temple! Yet, contrary to expectations, the promised Messiah was born in the lowliest circumstances.

These mistaken notions made it impossible for Jesus to openly claim this title, even though He alone was the promised Messiah. Jesus didn’t want people to settle for a liberator from Rome when He knew that what they really needed was a liberator from their sin.

But Jesus didn’t have to call Himself the Messiah--His birth and life revealed both the true nature of the Messiah and that He was the Messiah. When Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, He associated it with His own coming (Matt. 12:28). As Jesus taught, healed, and performed miracles, people began to recognize that He was the Christ (John 4:29). (Christ is Greek for Messiah; cf. John 4:25.)

Even more significantly, when people identified Jesus as the Messiah, He never corrected them. Indeed, Jesus blessed Peter when he realized that Jesus was the Christ (Matt. 16:17). At Jesus’ trial, He never denied that He was the Christ (Mark 14:61–62).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many in Jesus’ day were so sure that they knew how the Messiah would come that they overlooked Jesus.

Matthew 16:13-20

You are the Christ, the son of the living God. - Matthew 16:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the mysteries of the Messiah was the way He revealed, and yet sought to conceal, His identity during His time on earth. We can see both of these elements in today's reading.

Matthew 16:16 is one of the most famous statements in the New Testament. Peter got it absolutely right in terms of Jesus' identity, and the Lord blessed him for it. But at the same "retreat" in the northern part of Israel, Jesus warned the disciples not to tell anyone He was the Messiah (Mt 16:20).

He also told people on several occasions to keep quiet about what He had done (Matt. 8:4; Mk. 1:44). And when demons identified Jesus as "the Holy One of God," He ordered them to be quiet (Mk. 1:24-25). What was going on here?

The difference between Peter's confession and these other incidents goes back to God's purpose in sending the Messiah. There's no doubt that Jesus came the first time to present Himself to Israel as its promised Messiah, Savior, and King. But God also knew that His Son would be denied, despised, and crucified by a nation deadened to spiritual truth through sin and years of empty religious tradition.

So Jesus chose not to expose Himself unnecessarily to the ridicule, unbelief, and misconceptions of people with hardened hearts. His words and miraculous works were enough to show anyone who was paying attention that He was the Christ of God. But to those who didn't have spiritual ears to hear, Jesus' parables hid the truth (Mk. 4:11-12).

This is why Jesus refused to acknowledge His identity to the crowds who were looking for the wrong kind of Messiah. It would be like giving what is sacred to dogs, or throwing His pearls before pigs (Matt. 7:6). Their attitude was, "Show us a good trick, a miracle, and we'll believe." Jesus knew better.

But to those who believed in Him, Jesus gladly revealed who He is. Peter's confession became the rock on which the church was built, and Peter was given authority to open the kingdom to both Jews and Gentiles--which he did at Pentecost in Acts 2 and at the house of Cornelius in Acts 10. Anyone who is willing to believe the truth about Christ will find it.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's an important principle from Jesus: "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own" (Jn. 7:17).

In God's program, obedience always comes before insight. This principle holds true for believers too. The growth of our spiritual understanding will be determined by our commitment to obey the truth we know. Today, why not clear away any obstacles that may be keeping you from obeying God?

Matthew 16:13-23

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. - Matthew 16:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last year, the centuries-old city gate of Seoul, South Korea, was destroyed by fire. The 600-year-old Namdaemun, or "Great South Gate," had been a prime tourist attraction, national landmark, and symbol of Korea, regarded in much the same way as the Statue of Liberty is by Americans. Despite the best efforts of more than one hundred firefighters, the wooden structure burned to the ground on the night of February 11, 2008. The cause of the fire was unclear, but the country's Cultural Heritage Administration promised to spend three years and $21 million to rebuild the historic gate.

Thankfully, the foundation of the church cannot be destroyed in such a way. We've identified Scripture and the Resurrection as two of its foundational truths—another is the leadership of the Apostles. Some interpret today's reading as an appointment of Peter as the preeminent Apostle, but the original Greek language indicates a bit of wordplay instead. When Jesus said, "You are Peter," the word is petros, meaning "small stone"; when He said, "upon this rock," the word is petra, meaning "bedrock" (Mt 16:18). He was telling Peter that the church needed a better foundation than a man who confessed the Lord one moment (Mt 16:16-17) and tried to deter Him from the Cross the next (Mt 16:21-23). Christ Himself would be the bedrock or cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6-8), not Peter, even though the Apostles did have an important role to play.

What then are the "keys"? They are symbols of authority and power. They might be held by the one wielding the power, as when Jesus holds the keys (Rev. 1:18), or they might be held by a messenger, as when angels (Rev. 20:1) or persons (Matt. 16:19) are given keys. The point in this case is that Jesus held authority and power over hell and death, which He would soon prove by His death and resurrection. This is the powerful message entrusted to the church!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We will examine the topic of church leadership in more detail later this month (March 21-26). In the meantime, we encourage you to follow up on today's devotional by doing additional study about a particular biblical leader. You might choose Peter, John, or Paul from the New Testament, or such figures as Deborah, David, or Daniel from the Old Testament. Consider the quality of this leader's faith, how he or she lived it out in action, and what set this person apart as a servant of God.

Matthew 16:13-28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Someone has said that the closest most people will ever get to perfection is when they write their own resumés!

Perhaps that's why author Rudyard Kipling once said, ""I never made a mistake in my life, at least, never one that I couldn't explain away afterward.""

Simon Peter certainly wasn't perfect, but he was called to follow the Lord. When Jesus Christ put His hand on Peter's life, the fisherman left his home in Capernaum to become Jesus' disciple. Today's text gives us a glimpse into both the potential and the problems with which Peter started his new career.

First, the potential. Peter's confession of Jesus as ""the Christ, the Son of the living God"" (Mt 16:16) was a high-water mark in his time with the Lord.

Look at the praise and the promise this confession brought from Jesus. He pronounced Peter to be blessed, or happy, because God the Father had revealed this truth to him. Peter could never have figured it out on his own.

Jesus also promised that He would build His church despite the opposition of Satan. Peter's statement pointed to Christ Jesus Himself as the ""chief cornerstone"" of the church, with Peter and the other apostles and the prophets forming the foundation (Eph. 2:20).

Jesus also gave Peter the ""keys of the kingdom"" (Matt. 16:19), which Peter would later use to open the doors of the church to the Jews (Acts 2) and to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

Clearly, Peter was in line for an honored position among the disciples and in the formation of the church. But then we come to a problem. Soon after this incident, how could Peter turn around and take Satan's side against Jesus?

Peter didn't know that when he rebuked Jesus, he was siding with the devil. Peter let his overzealous nature take over when he heard Jesus talk about His death. Jesus had to pull Peter up short with a stinging rebuke.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Actually, we shouldn't be too surprised at Peter's quick verbal turnabout.

The apostle James reminds us that the same tongue can be used to bless God or to injure others (3:9-10). The sinfulness of human nature is on constant display in the way people use their tongues to shred others.

Matthew 16:21-28

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. - Matthew 16:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

Could he trust God’s Word? That was the question facing Billy Graham in 1949. A close friend and fellow preacher had decided he could not, and had renounced his Christian faith. “If I was not exactly doubtful,” Graham said later, “I was certainly disturbed.”

On a moonlit walk late one night, he knelt and cried out, “Father, I am going to accept this as thy Word–by faith! I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be your inspired Word.”

How pivotal was this moment? “A major bridge had been crossed. In my heart and mind, I knew a spiritual battle in my soul had been fought and won.” Soon after, Graham preached at the Los Angeles crusade that started him on a road to prominence as one of the most effective evangelists of the twentieth century.

Faith in God’s Word is essential to true discipleship. It may surprise you to learn that Christ, too, lived by trusting God’s words. Jesus knew His Father’s plan that He would be betrayed, crucified, and resurrected (Matt. 17:22–23). But He had not yet experienced these events, and so He walked by faith that God’s words would surely come to pass. He trusted the plan and power of God

completely. In fact, His perfect knowledge of His Father's character led to perfect faith.

Jesus' faith was so strong that He persevered in explaining God's plan to His disciples, despite their slowness or unwillingness to understand. Why did He respond so forcefully when Peter contradicted Him (Mt 16:23)? By denying God's truthfulness, Peter had attacked Jesus' faith and His relationship with His Father. Calling God a liar is very serious slander.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The challenging spiritual truths found in today's Scripture reading definitely deserve more reflection! Spend some extra time today meditating on the paradox of finding life by losing it, or on the symbolism of taking up your cross to follow Jesus, or perhaps on another phrase from the passage.

Matthew 16:21-28 Daniel 7:13-14;

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. - Mark 10:45

TODAY IN THE WORD

Here's a short Bible quiz for you today. Of all the names and titles of Jesus Christ in the Bible (Names of Christ by T.C. Horton and Charles E. Hurlburt lists more than 300!), do you know which name Jesus used most often for Himself? Hint: the answer is in today's verse!

Jesus called Himself the Son of Man dozens of times in the Gospels. In fact, with just one exception whenever this name is used in the New Testament, Jesus is either speaking Himself, or His words are being quoted or reported (the exception is in Acts 7:56).

Why did Jesus choose this name? Some Bible teachers suggest that this unusual name had a startling effect on people, catching them off guard and causing them to pay attention to Him.

There's no doubt that Son of Man was not a name people heard every day. But there's more to it. Daniel saw ""one like a son of man"" coming to God to receive power and glory and ""everlasting dominion"" (Da 7:13). This is a powerful prophetic picture of Jesus receiving the kingdoms of this world from His Father--which required the Son's suffering and death.

Jesus used the name Son of Man, then, in connection with His humanity. It spoke of Jesus' earthly life and mission, particularly His death on the cross. Just after Peter confessed Jesus as the Son of God (Matt. 16:16), Jesus began teaching the disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem and suffer death. He spoke about His ministry as Son of Man.

The miracle of Christianity is that God became a man so He could live and die as a man to save the human race. As the Son of God, Jesus knew the eternal joys and glory of heaven. But it is as the Son of Man that He identifies with us in our humanness.

Without Jesus' incarnation, His coming in human flesh, we would be hopelessly lost in our sins. The writer of Hebrews says He took on flesh and blood like ours so that He might destroy the works of the devil and free us from our slavery (Heb. 2:14-18). The Son of Man was like us, and tempted like us--except that He had no sin (Heb. 4:15).

The beauty of this name is that because Jesus became the Son of Man, we can approach Him in confidence (Heb. 4:16), knowing that He understands us completely.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What an incredible Savior we have. As the Son of Man, Jesus can identify with us because He lived as a human being, suffering every kind of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual pain. As our Brother, Jesus has compassion for us. But as the Son of God, He can do more than just say, ""I know how you feel."" Jesus can do something about our needs! Let's thank God today for Jesus' unique ministry to us and for us.

Matthew 16:21-17:13

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. - Matthew 16:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law, he dwelt there in God's presence for forty days and forty nights. As a result, when he descended to deliver the Law to the people, his face was radiant with the reflected glory of God. The Israelites were afraid to approach him at first, but then Aaron and the leaders came and listened to what God had told him. After that, Moses wore a veil over his face to avoid frightening them (Ex. 34:28–35).

In today's reading, we see Jesus' face glowing with the His glory as the Son of God, revealed in the Transfiguration. Just as Peter's

confession was a clear human affirmation of Christ's identity, so the Trans-figuration was a direct divine affirmation of Jesus as the Son of God (Mt 17:5).

The disciples expected a conquering Messiah; instead, Jesus gave them His first prediction of His suffering, death, and resurrection (Mt 16:21). This was so difficult to wrap their minds around that even Peter–who had just got his confession right–this time got it completely wrong. Earlier he had declared Jesus to be the Son of God, but now denying Jesus' God-given redemptive mission made him at that moment a tool of Satan (Mt 16:23).

Jesus next explained what it truly means to be His disciple (Mt 16:24–27). Discipleship requires self-denial and suffering. It's not about self-fulfillment, "personal growth," or one's own glory. It means we must not pursue merely earthly goals, but instead live with our soul's eternal destiny in view. The Son of God will reward such disciples according to what they have done.

Matthew 16:24-27 Esther 5:9-10

Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. - Matthew 16:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

What Are You Spending Your Life On? -Nate Saint, one of the five missionaries martyred in Ecuador in 1956, said this about a Christian's call to sacrifice his life for Christ: "People who do not know the Lord ask why in the world we waste our lives as missionaries. They forget that they too are expending their lives . . . and when the bubble has burst, they will have nothing of eternal significance to show for the years they have wasted."

Haman's "bubble" is delicately fragile in today's reading. At the beginning of verse nine, he was flying high, reveling in his own self-importance. As the king's right-hand man, he could do anything he wished. He's powerful and prominent. The queen even invited him to her own personal banquet. No one but the king himself shared such honor! Haman rushed home to brag of all this to his friends and family.

His mood changed as he approached the king's gate. While everyone else had risen to honor him, one man didn't budge or even cower in Haman's presence. Despite the pressure from other royal officials, despite his impending fate doomed by Haman's edict, Mordecai remained unafraid and unwavering. He would not honor Haman.

Haman couldn't stand the thought of this one man's refusal to obey him. Like a bubble, the more an ego swells the more fragile it becomes. By this point, Haman's ego was so inflated—and fragile—that Mordecai's action drowned out the applause of the crowd.

Those who live like Haman, in deliberate pursuit of self-importance, will live perpetually on Haman's emotional roller coaster. Soaring high when honored, bottoming out when not, Haman and all those like him will forever be enslaved to the whims of others. They can never have the security of joy and peace that Jesus promises us in His kingdom.

Today's key verse assures us that the only way to secure one's life is to lose it. In part, this means giving up the desire for personal acclaim, something Haman couldn't bring himself to do. In God's kingdom, only one road leads to personal fulfillment, and that is the road of denying self and following Christ (Matt. 16:24).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Beyond the sadness that funerals bring for the loved ones we've lost, they compel us to consider what will be said of us after we've died. Like Haman and Xerxes, will it be said that you lived for the kingdom of self, always striving for more and yet never satisfied? Or will your story, like Esther's, be told and retold as an example for generations to come? One kingdom will never be shaken, even by death itself (cf. Heb. 12:28). How are you living for God's eternal kingdom?

Matthew 17

Matthew 17:1-13

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. - Matthew 17:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

An Awesome Sight - The legendary missionary-explorer David Livingstone was the first European to see Africa's great Victoria Falls, the world's largest waterfalls. Christian History magazine quoted from Livingstone's description of the awesome sight: ""Five columns of smoke [i.e., mist] arose....The whole scene was extremely beautiful...scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by

angels in their flight.""

It's hard for us to imagine the scene Livingstone witnessed when he first came upon the mighty waterfalls. He had to borrow heavenly imagery in his attempt to convey the effect the experience had made on him.

In much the same way, the Gospel writers drew on the loftiest language they could think of to describe a scene so dazzling that no earthly experience can compare. Jesus was transfigured in the presence of Peter, James, and John. Something of His eternal nature was revealed as these three disciples saw a preview of Jesus' future glory.

Mark said that Jesus' clothes became dazzling, ""whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them"" (Mark 9:3). Add to this the appearance of Moses and Elijah and the voice of God speaking from heaven, and the disciples were so overwhelmed they fell on their faces.

For the disciples, the Transfiguration was an unforgettable testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ and the truth of His claims. God knew these men would need this heavenly witness in future days. When Jesus was gone, they would be called to bear witness for Him in the face of suffering and persecution.

It's hard to blame Peter for wanting to stay on this mountain of glory--especially when, as we will see tomorrow, the real world with all its problems waited below.

Years later, Peter drew on the Transfiguration to verify the truth of the message the apostles preached (2 Pet. 1:16-18). This event had to be especially reassuring for him, coming just a few days after Jesus' stinging rebuke (Matt. 16:23, 17:1). As Jesus' disciples, if we learn and grow from His rebukes, we too will be all the more ready to share in His glory.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Every parent knows that rebuke is a painful but necessary part of discipline. The joy comes in the reassurance of love that needs to follow. If you are a parent, does your discipline reflect this balance of correction and affirmation? Too much of either one without the other can leave children either frustrated and uptight or lacking in proper boundaries. Let's pray today for God's help in dealing with children the way He deals with us, balancing firm correction with reassuring love. And if you're not a parent, is there someone in your life who needs a word either of correction or affirmation right now? Ask God to help you meet that need in a way pleasing to Him.

Matthew 17:1-27

We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father . . . when we were with him on the sacred mountain. - 2 Peter 1:16-18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many books and movies have plots in which the true identity of a character is revealed in a surprise ending. The Gospel of Matthew has approached the true identity of Jesus a bit differently. It is stated at the very beginning, but as we read through the book we are given more information and implications of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, the son of the living God.

Yesterday's passage contained Peter's declaration of who Jesus was. In today's reading, we have another statement from God the Father about His beloved Son: “With him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Mt 17:5). The presence of Moses and Elijah represented the Law and Prophets, signifying that Jesus was the fulfillment of Scripture. Surely this divine pronouncement would confirm the faith of the disciples!

Jesus instructed Peter, James, and John not to recount this episode until after the resurrection. The disciples again appear to miss the promised resurrection and instead focus on whether this was in fact the kingdom of God. They knew from Scripture that Elijah was supposed to come first, and Jesus confirmed that in fact prophecy had been fulfilled in John the Baptist. God was keeping His promises—but it didn't look the way that anyone had expected.

The great confession by the disciples in Mt 16 now gives way to their inability to do what Jesus had commanded (Mt 16:16; see Mt 10). Jesus diagnosed their problem as a lack of faith. This is not a critique of their personal power; faith depends on keeping their eyes focused on Jesus (cf. Mt 14:30). It wasn't a lack of skill but a failure to rely on Jesus' true identity and the resulting power that comes through the Spirit.

Again Jesus predicted His death and resurrection, and again the disciples reacted with grief. They still had not learned how to see and hear with spiritual eyes and ears.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One theologian said, “All people are created in the imago dei—the image of God. All believers are called to the imitatio Christi—the

imitation of Christ." The Transfiguration of Jesus points us forward to the time when all believers in Christ will be clothed in radiant white (cf. 1 John 3:2; Rev. 7:9). Since we know the end of our story, how will we live in the meantime? Will we fix our eyes on Jesus and live in faith, or will we focus on the failures and limitations of this world?

Matthew 17:1-9

TODAY IN THE WORD

During the 1964 Presidential campaign, Republican candidate Barry Goldwater displayed a knack for saying the wrong thing to the wrong audience. In the middle of a speech to farmers, he said a decline in price supports for farm goods would be good for them. He also told senior citizens that Social Security should be voluntary; later he attacked public electrical power in an area transformed by a power project.

We know that the apostle Peter also had a talent for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. On a high mountain one day, as Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John, Peter made what must have seemed to him a clever suggestion. But as recorded in Matthew 16:23, he suffered another divine rebuke.

As background for our study of 1-2 Peter, we have been looking at several key incidents from Peter's time with Christ. The transfiguration was crucial to Christ's work on earth because it was a direct revelation of His deity.

That revelation was also important to Peter and his companions as a testimony to the Lord's heavenly origin and the truth of His claims. Peter later referred to this moment as proof that he and the other apostles were not fabricating their witness about Christ (see 2 Pet. 1:16-18).

In the middle of this incredible event Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus.

The sight was too much for Peter. He was so enthralled with the glory of the moment and of the amazing visitors that he wanted to stay put on the mountain. So he offered to build temporary shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah--with the clear implication that he, James and John would be glad to stick around too!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This side of heaven, we will never be in God's presence the way Peter was on that mountain. But when we come to God in prayer, His presence with us is just as real. And He wants to speak to us as surely as He wants to hear from us.

Matthew 17:14-18:9

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 18:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his essay, "A Bible Fit for Children," English professor Alan Jacobs asked his students what it means to "become like children. They responded that children are innocent and have a simple faith and a sense of wonder. "But," commented Jacobs, "Jesus Himself employed none of these concepts."

Instead, he explained, Jesus was referring to the low social status of children.

"After all, in most societies children do not have the full rights and privileges of adults; they are not free agents, they are under the authority of their elders. One can readily see how accepting for oneself such a status would be congruent with Jesus' insistence that the first shall be last and the last first."

If we're going to understand true greatness in God's kingdom, we're going to have to dispense with romantic notions and pay close attention to God's Word. Today's reading provides several important clues about how to be great in the kingdom of heaven.

The first way is to live by faith. Genuine faith, even if it is as small as a mustard seed, can cast out demons and move mountains. That is to say, if faith is placed in the right Person–God–nothing inside God's will is impossible (17:20). After giving this promise, Jesus kept His disciples from misconceptions about power by again predicting His death and resurrection. Against all human expectations, they were to put their faith in a suffering Messiah.

Another road to greatness in God's kingdom is to live in freedom. Jesus did not owe the temple tax. There was no duty to be done, no obedience required, in this situation. But freedom in Christ means the freedom not to put self first, so Jesus told Peter to pay it. He did not bow to the legalists, but simply avoided giving offense by working a rather humorous miracle.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In what ways can you choose a servant's position? Perhaps your church has some behind-the-scenes ministries where you could serve. Or maybe you could assist some elderly people with necessary but unglamorous tasks like house cleaning or yard work.

Matthew 17:14-20

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief! - Mark 9:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

Disappointing Wages - The Great Depression of the 1930s forced large numbers of people to take drastic measures. Thousands of hungry, unemployed individuals and families took to the rails and highways of America in a desperate search for work--only to find that in many cases, employers were as destitute as they were. One man spent a day unloading coal, only to discover to his dismay that his wages were two tomatoes. Another man worked for a farmer all day and was handed fifteen cents. He gave it back, figuring the farmer was in worse shape than he was.

When two impoverished people try to make something happen financially, the result is likely to be disappointing. We could say the same thing about the spiritual realm. Today's text illustrates this principle.

Matthew simply notes that Jesus, Peter, James, and John encountered a crowd as they came down from the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. While Jesus and the three disciples were gone, the remaining disciples got into an argument with some teachers of the law over their inability to cure a demon-possessed boy (Mark 9:14).

Here was a classic case of the impoverished trying to help the impoverished. Nothing happened when the disciples tried to cast out the demon, because their faith ""account"" was seriously tapped out (Matt. 17:20). According to Mark, the boy's father also lacked faith at first, although he did cry out in the words of today's verse when Jesus challenged him. And the religious experts obviously had nothing to add to the discussion. So Jesus took matters into His own hands and healed the boy.

Imagine the disciples' frustration and embarrassment at being powerless in the face of this boy's need. They had been commissioned and empowered by Jesus to deal with situations just like this. Why did they fail?

""Because you have so little faith,"" Jesus said (Mt 17:20). Maybe the disciples took the situation too lightly, assuming that the power resided in them and all they had to do was snap their fingers. If that was their thinking, Jesus quickly corrected it.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In the midst of this massive poverty of faith, Jesus made one of the most astounding faith promises in all the Bible!

Read the last part of Mt 17:20 again. Our faith, lined up with God's will and drawing on His power, can move mountains! Although some people use promises like this to teach a gospel of health, wealth, and prosperity, let's not make the opposite mistake of discounting what Jesus actually said. Does your heart long for greater faith, even mountain-moving faith? Echoing the prayer of today's verse may be a good place to start.

Matthew 17:14-20; 21:21-22

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. - Hebrews 11:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command. . . . Amen.–The Book of Common Prayer

Many misconceptions surround the relationship between prayer and faith. Sometimes well-intentioned people exhort us–perhaps even quoting Matthew 21:22–that with enough faith, our prayers will be answered. So when confronted by unanswered prayer, we often feel guilty or discouraged by our apparent lack of faith.

To begin with, it's important to be clear about the object of our faith, which Scripture makes plain can only be Jesus. Indeed, the context in Matthew 21 stresses Jesus' authority in prayer. Thus it is not our ability to believe or faith in faith itself that counts. Actually, any time we pray expresses faith in God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Bible does tell us that faith as small as a mustard seed is all that is needed to do great things (Matt. 17:20). Because a mustard seed is so tiny, it seems that Jesus wasn't emphasizing the amount of faith required as much as the object of faith–Mt 17:19 suggests that the disciples were putting their faith in themselves, not God.

Yet, this passage does show us that even a tiny amount of faith in God can open the door to great things. As we have said before, faith and prayer are ultimately about a relationship–a relationship with One for whom nothing is impossible. Even so, we may still cry out with the man who exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Think about prayer and belief in your own life. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any ways in which you may have shifted the focus of your faith away from the Lord Jesus Christ. Also ask for discernment when dealing with the many false notions about faith that are currently popular in our culture--expressions such as “if you believe it, you can achieve it” or “just have faith!”

Matthew 17:24-27; Romans 13:1-8.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Booker T. Washington once told of meeting a former slave from Virginia who had made a contract with his master to buy his freedom. The agreement included permission for the slave to work where and for whom he pleased. He went to Ohio to secure better wages and was there when the Emanci-pation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln. The slave was free from any further obligation to his former master—yet he went back to Virginia and paid the man every dollar remaining on the agreement, with interest.

Why? Because, he told Washington, he had given his word.

This kind of personal fiscal integrity sounds strange to our ears in the 1990s. Many of us never thought it would become a novel idea for a person to pay the obligations he had undertaken, even if it meant real sacrifice. But that seems to be the trend in our society. As Christians, we are definitely called to buck that trend. Romans 13:7-8 is a wonderful principle to build into the foundation of your financial dealings.

We should note that there is disagreement over Paul’s meaning here. Did Paul mean we should never go into debt at any time for anything under any circumstances? Or is Paul simply exhorting us to pay our bills faithfully and not get overextended?

The New International Version captures the idea in the original language by rendering the phrase, “Let no debt remain outstanding.” Christians should not fail to pay their bills, for that would be failing to act in love. Actually, not to go into debt at all isn’t a bad idea either!

Now to taxes. Those who want to mimic the “Freemen” and declare the government illegal will get no comfort from Jesus or from Paul.

As the Son of God, Jesus could have been the ultimate tax protestor! But He told Peter to pay the temple tax so that they would not cause needless offense. And He later held a Roman coin in His hand and said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Matt. 22:21).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Someone once said that when people say, “It’s not the money, it’s the principle of the thing”—it’s usually the money! But it really is the principle that’s important to God.

Matthew 18

Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-15

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. - Matthew 19:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Few people in his day had a greater passion for the salvation and training of children than Dwight Moody. As his involvement in ministry grew during his early years in Chicago, Moody found himself increasingly drawn to the poorest children of Chicago, who were not being reached by more conventional methods and Sunday schools. Moody ventured boldly into the worst district of Chicago, called ""the Sands,"" where children lived in degrading conditions. He befriended these neglected children, rented a vacant saloon, and soon had a Sunday class going--often amid fighting, screaming, and boisterous laughter.

D. L. Moody took seriously Jesus' command concerning the importance of bringing children to Himself. Children may be overlooked when the conversation turns to the ""heavy"" issues of theology and spiritual matters. But in Matthew 18 Jesus punctuated a question from an adult, ""Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"", by placing a child in the middle of the circle of disciples.

The Savior then insisted that child-like humility and faith are prerequisites for salvation.

Although this scene can easily be sentimentalized, this was not just a touch of emotion on Jesus' part. He identified Himself with the children in terms of how they were treated. Clearly, His kingdom is wide open to believing children. Jesus also issued a dire warning to anyone who causes a child to fall away spiritually.

Evidently some unnamed disciples didn't completely understand the message, since a short time later they tried to ""shoo"" away some parents who wanted Jesus to pray for their children. These followers may have been trying to save Jesus some time. Or they may have considered the children an annoyance.

Whatever the reason for the disciples' rebuke, Jesus again set the record straight. Today's verse contains both an invitation and a warning. Jesus invited us to bring children to Himself, and urged us to remove anything that might keep them from coming to Him--including neglect and indifference on the part of adults.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you want encouragement in your ministry to children, we recommend a reading of Lyle Dorsett's book, A Passion for Souls, the life of D. L. Moody, from which we are drawing this month.

If you are already helping to evangelize and disciple children, keep up the good work. If you are not currently involved in a ministry to children and young people, we encourage you to talk with the leaders at your church. You don't have to be a parent, or even married, to touch young lives for the Lord. Ask God to lead you as you consider the possibilities

Matthew 18:1-35

I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. - Ezekiel 34:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

The church was attracting more visitors, the new worship team sounded almost professional, and giving was starting to increase. The pastor had one concern, though: a woman with Down Syndrome had started to attend church, and she sat near the front and worshiped in a way that could only be described as exuberant. He and his staff decided to tell her that she needed to sit in the back so she wouldn't disturb others. Hurt and confused, the woman left the church, never to return.

Our passage instructs the people of Christ never to dismiss “the least of these” in an effort to improve our image or self-importance. The themes of this chapter are humility and forgiveness—and the way that these qualities impact relationships.

The disciples finally understood that Jesus was introducing the kingdom of heaven, but they were confused about what that meant. They asked who would be the greatest (Mt 18:1). Jesus explained how wrong their perspective was: only those who recognize their vulnerable neediness will have the humility that characterizes those in His kingdom (Mt 18:4).

In the context of humility and sacrificial love, Jesus outlined how to handle the inevitable sin that will come among people. We might be tempted to think that humility and love would mean that we should just overlook the sins of others—but failure to confront sin means that we condone it. Allowing our brothers and sisters to continue in sin is the opposite of love.

Confrontation requires humility and forgiveness. We should not imagine that this is easy, either to confront or to be confronted. But Jesus next tells us what we must remember: how much we have been forgiven. The Unmerciful Servant had been forgiven a debt of millions of dollars, and then held the one who owed him a few dollars in prison. When we are tempted to demand our rights, we must remember our true place in the kingdom: lost sheep that have been rescued and forgiven by our merciful, great God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our Lord compared His followers to little children, and He also demonstrated His love and concern for children (Mt 18:5-6). This love and concern should characterize us as well. The world has no shortage of children who need the sacrificial love of God's people. Pray about how you can tangibly show this love: does your church need more Sunday school teachers? Could you support a child through Compassion International? Perhaps you could serve as prayer warrior for children in your family or neighborhood.

Matthew 18:10-14

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. - Luke 19:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

The top-grossing film in the United States in 1990 was an improbable tale of a boy who found himself in a reversal of the typical “young hero lost in the world” adventure. Instead of running away like Pinocchio or suffering from amnesia like Anastasia, Kevin

McCallister finds himself abandoned in the place he knows best. Upon realizing his absence, his mother spends the entire film scrambling to reunite with her son who had been left sadly (and comically) Home Alone.

Regardless of the circumstances, loving parents will do anything to find a child who is lost or separated from them. In today's reading, Jesus compared that love and longing to a shepherd searching for a lost sheep. The specific relationship of which He spoke was the Father's love for "these little ones," the children he had gathered around Him as He discussed the kingdom of heaven (see v. 2).

Speaking of searching for lost things, as you read you may find yourself searching for verse 11. Most ancient manuscripts do not include the verse sometimes included there (probably erroneously), a transcription of Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

But the "lost" Jesus referred to in this case is probably more an example of a young child being led astray than a wayward believer or a prodigal son equivalent from recent studies—although God's love for anyone of any age would be exceedingly great. The point here is that the Father would rejoice greatly specifically for a young child brought to the knowledge of Him.

It's possible that "the other ninety-nine" refers to those already secure in their faith. God has a special happiness reserved for those at a fragile age of impressionability (vv. 13-14). Jesus also mentioned an interesting point about angels—some commentators believe that He indicates that children have angels watching over them (v. 10). Though other scholars aren't sure that this points to some notion of guardian angels for children, the larger point of God's deep love and care for children is clear. If our Father devotes such concern for little ones, we certainly should value young people as well.

APPLY THE WORD

Much attention and resources in church planning are devoted to adult ministries and outreach, which are crucial to the Great Commission. But after reading of the special love God has for young children, we should also desire to bring boys and girls to faith and to foster their spiritual development. Consider supporting the children's ministries of your church, whether by volunteering your time to teach, make snacks, or even pray for the children involved.

Matthew 18:10-35

If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. - Matthew 6:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

On an August day twenty-six years ago, Darryl Stingley was a wide receiver with a bright future. That day, during an exhibition football game, safety Jack Tatum tackled Stingley hard, paralyzing him.

How did Stingley respond? He forgave. And as the years have past, he's kept a spirit of forgiveness. Last year, when he read in the newspaper that Tatum had lost part of a leg due to complications from diabetes, he said, "Maybe the natural reaction is to think he got what was coming to him, but I don't accept human nature as our real nature. Human nature teaches us to hate. God teaches us to love. . . . Now life and God have taught me to have compassion."

For us, as followers of Christ, forgiveness must be part of our spiritual lives. That's one of the central lessons in today's reading. We see in today's passage that we serve a God who has a special heart for children (Mt 18:5, 10). Their guardian angels always have access to His throne. We also serve a God who wants His people to live in unity (Mt 18:15–20). Jesus here set down a procedure for confronting other believers about sin (cf. 1 Cor. 5) and promised to be present in even the smallest gatherings of His followers.

Most of all, we serve a God who mercifully forgives and requires us to do the same. Peter had given what he thought was a generous answer to his own question. Forgiving seven times went well beyond the rabbis' rule of forgiving three times–but Jesus said not to count or keep track at all. To illustrate, He told a parable revealing that whatever "debt" someone owes us, it's nothing compared to the "debt" we owe God. The servant had requested more time, but the king went beyond that request to give the gift of total forgiveness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Has someone sinned against you? Are you holding on to a grudge? Whether it's for something big or small, let it go–ask God for the grace and strength to forgive. Do whatever it takes to let that person know about your decision to forgive, and that you've done so because of and through God's much greater forgiving love.

Matthew 18:15-20

For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. - Matthew 18:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Seminary professor Duane Elmer once gathered a group of international students and asked them how reconciliation and forgiveness were done in their cultures. Several themes emerged: A mediator helped resolve conflict and restore the relationship while being fair to both sides. Extended families got involved; problems were not seen as merely individualistic. And there was often a feast or party to celebrate the reconciliation and signify genuine forgiveness.

We could learn a lot from these examples! Dealing with conflict in the church is never easy, but today's reading shows us how to do it. We are the body of Christ, but we are still in the process of sanctification. Until the day of glorification and perfection in Him arrives, there will be the need to deal with sin and conflict among believers.

A four-step process is outlined. First, talk to the sinner one-on-one (Mt 18:15). Try to show him how he's sinned, privately and quietly. If you succeed, a situation has been nipped in the bud. Second, talk to the sinner with witnesses present (Mt 18:16). As a matter of integrity, involve others who can help you try to persuade the person to listen to reason. Third, “tell it to the church” (Mt 18:17). If the sinner remains unrepentant, a public announcement of some kind must be made. This alerts the congregation to the backslidden state of their brother and puts more pressure on him to let go of his pride. And fourth, “treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” The sinner's relationship with the church is cut off—this is not a cessation of civility or kindness. But the person has renounced Christian discipleship and can no longer be counted among the members of the church.

Every step in this process provides opportunities to repent within relationships of loving and just accountability. The goal is to restore sinners to fellowship (Gal. 6:1) in a gentle spirit of “there but for the grace of God go I.”

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The source for today's illustration is Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility, by Duane Elmer (InterVarsity Press, 2006). It is organized into three sections—Basic Perspectives, Process (virtues of servanthood), and Challenges (temptations against servanthood)—and culminates in a chapter dedicated to the Old Testament example of Joseph. One missions leader said, “This book should be required reading for every Christian seeking to serve cross-culturally.”

Matthew 18:21-35

If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. - Matthew 6:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Until the late eighteenth century, jails were not primarily used for punishment, but to hold those awaiting trial or sentencing (to death or exile), and to hold debtors, people unable to fulfill their financial obligations. Almost the only recourse was to hope some friend or relative would take pity and give enough money to secure freedom.

The first servant in today’s parable deserved to be thrown into debtors’ prison. He owed the king millions of dollars! His promise to “pay back everything” is empty--he has no hope of repaying the money. Mercifully, the king cancels the debt. By law, he could have sold the family into slavery to recover some of the money, but he foregoes his right and gives the servant a new lease on life.

This is just like God. As sinners, we owe a penalty of death, which God could justly execute. Instead, He’s provided forgiveness through the sacrifice of His Son. Whoever believes on Him receives life, a result of God’s tremendous mercy (John. 5:24; Rom. 6:23).

So how does this servant respond? He finds a fellow servant who owes him a few dollars and demands payment. Even though the man asks for clemency with the same words he himself had used, the unmerciful servant doesn’t listen, and has the other servant thrown into prison.

Because the first servant received forgiveness, we expect him to act mercifully, especially given the relative size of the two debts. That he doesn’t is called “irony”--an unexpected contrast that heightens the impact of the story. Since his actions contradict our expectations, our response is clarified and strengthened. The king’s final judgment on the wicked servant satisfies our desire for justice in the narrative.

The basis for our forgiveness of others is God’s forgiveness of us (cf. Matt. 6:12). That’s the ultimate answer to Peter’s question (Mt 18:21)--we should forgive not three times (the rabbis’ position), nor seven (Peter’s suggestion), but figuratively, “seventy times seven,” or an infinite number. What’s at stake? Our very fellowship with God (Mt 18:35; cf. Matt. 6:14; James 2:13)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Is there someone to whom you need to extend forgiveness today?

Take to heart the main lesson of today's devotional by personalizing the parable. Re-read it, inserting God's name for the king's, your own for the first servant's, and the name of the person you have not yet forgiven in place of the second servant's.

Matthew 18:21-35

I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. . . forgive your brother from your heart. -

TODAY IN THE WORD

In The Training of the Twelve, A. B. Bruce commented on Peter's question in today's reading:

"To be so earnest about the duty of forgiving, and even to think of practicing the duty so often as seven times towards the same offender, betrayed the true child of the kingdom; for none but the graciously-minded are exercised in that fashion. But to imagine that pardon repeated just so many times would exhaust obligation and amount to something magnanimous and divine, was very simple. Poor Peter, in his ingenuous attempt at the magnanimous, was like a child standing on tiptoe to make himself as tall as his father, or climbing to the top of a hillock to get near the skies."

There are no limits to genuine forgiveness--God's love is infinite. We're looking at the parable of the unmerciful servant twice this month (see October 25) from two different angles. Our point today follows from Peter's question. Since the Jewish rabbis said to forgive three times, his question may have been showing off, in which case Jesus' response humbled him. Or, as Bruce concluded above, Peter may have really been trying to grasp Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. In this case, he was shown how far short his understanding of God's love fell.

How many times should we forgive? "Seventy-seven times" (or "seventy times seven," NASB) is a figurative number to show that true forgiveness doesn't keep score (see Gen. 4:24 for a contrast). From the point of view in the parable, it makes no difference if the debt is millions or only a few dollars. Forgiveness wipes the slate clean. In fact, in view of the Bibles descriptions of forgiveness as "remembering no more," we might say that every act of forgiveness is a "first time."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In today's parable, Jesus clearly instructed His disciples about the unrelenting nature of forgiveness: true forgiveness knows no bounds.

Matthew 18:21-35

Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? -

TODAY IN THE WORD

Imagine that you're in bankruptcy court. The mortgage payments and credit card debts grew too large to handle. The medical bills overwhelmed you. Your insurance didn't cover a car accident in which you were at fault. You were barely scraping by as it was. Now you're going under and must file for bankruptcy. You walk into the courtroom to face your doom. How do you feel?

The judge, however, listens to your plea for mercy and absolves you of all outstanding debts. You walk out of the courtroom owing not even a penny to anyone. How do you feel now? That's a taste of how the first servant felt in today's parable when forgiven by the king.

We're looking again at the parable of the unmerciful servant (see also October 22). The king in this parable exemplified many of the principles of forgiveness we've been discussing this month. He had nothing to gain by canceling the debt--he showed pure generosity and mercy. The servant owed the equivalent of millions of dollars, with no way to repay.

Additionally, the king was just. The debt was real and couldn't be ignored. It needed to be settled, and the only one with the power to "balance the books" was the king. He was also just in that he expected the forgiven servant to act in accordance with the mercy he had received (cf. Matt. 5:7; Luke 7:40-43). He expected the servant to forgive as he'd been forgiven. When he instead had his fellow servant thrown into jail, he showed his true character and earned the king's righteous wrath.

Not to forgive a fellow believer shows incredible arrogance. God has forgiven us millions, so to speak, and by comparison, we need to forgive others only a few dollars. To fail to do so is "wicked" (Mt 18:32).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Meditate today on the forgiveness principles highlighted in the devotional, in particular, on the principles of imitation and identity. Write out your thoughts in your spiritual journal or diary. Can you restate these truths in your own words? What is your response to them? What should it be? How might your attitudes and actions change as a result?

Matthew 19

Matthew 19:1-9

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his book Death of a Marriage, best-selling novelist Pat Conroy writes of the agony of divorce. Speaking from personal experience he confesses:

“Each divorce is the death of a small civilization. Two people declare war on each other, and their screams and tears infect their entire world with the bacilli of their pain. The greatest fury comes from the wound where love once issued forth.

“I find it hard to believe how many people now get divorced, how many submit to such extraordinary pain. For there are no clean divorces. Divorces should be conducted in surgical wards.”

Despite riveting testimonies like this one, couples continue to part. Even among believers, the statistics are startling. In such times, we are wise to reflect on the words of Christ in Matthew 19.

Rival religious leaders had approached Jesus and asked His opinion on one of the most controversial issues of their day: “When is it lawful to divorce?” One camp asserted that men might divorce their wives for almost any reason; the other faction allowed for divorce only if the wife was immoral.

Jesus sidestepped the petty debate over technicalities. He went back to God’s original design and purpose for marriage: to join a male and a female together in an inseparable bond (vv. 4-6). Specifically, two separate individuals would leave their families of origin and come together to form an entirely new entity. “They are no longer two but one” (v. 6). This explains why husbands and wives were never meant to separate, and also explains the tremendous pain felt when divorce occurs.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How do you treat the other members of your family? Today, take a moment to consider ’’A popular Christian speaker once quipped: “My wife and I have never even thought of divorce—homicide maybe, but not divorce.” Behind this wisecrack is a profound truth, one we should cling to and instill in our children: Marriage is for keeps!

Our children and our neighbors need to see us face difficulties and struggles with an unshakable commitment to stick together. They need to see us keep our promise to remain married “until death.” If you are suffering the pain of a failed marriage, you need to know that God loves and accepts you. Like any sin, divorce is forgivable. However, since divorce often causes wounds that last for a lifetime, you also need to cling to God and trust Him for the grace you need to keep going.

Matthew 19:1-30

Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. - Matthew 19:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Columnist George Will summarized the state of marriage in America: “More than 40 percent of America’s first marriages end in divorce. Cohabitation by unmarried heterosexual couples has risen rapidly from 523,000 in 1970 to 4.9 million today. Procreation outside of marriage . . . has lost much of its stigma now that 33 percent of births--including about 60 percent of births to women younger than 25–occur to unmarried mothers.”

Jesus’ teaching on marriage has never been more necessary than now! His main points in today’s reading illustrate that practical teaching still has its focus on the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus had a high view of marriage, but He also praised those who choose singleness for the sake of the kingdom. God had instituted marriage from creation–divorce was never the plan. The Law allowed for it because of human hardness of heart, but divorce wasn’t God’s will. The standard is high, and those who enter into marriage should do so with this understanding (Mt 19:10–11). Others, Jesus said, “have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (v. 12; cf. 1 Cor. 7).

We see here again that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the childlike, that is, those who are humble, submissive, and obedient, both to God and to others (cf. Matt. 18:1–4).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here’s a thought exercise you might wish to do today: Make a brief list of what you consider your most valuable material possessions or financial assets. Then put a line through the top three. Imagine they’re gone–lost to fire, thieves, or what have you. How would you feel? What would you do?

Matthew 19:1-30

Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. - Matthew 19:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dr. Jekyll thought he could isolate his darker impulses in another personality, Mr. Hyde. Though at first the doctor enjoyed the freedom from a moral conscience when he was Mr. Hyde, he found over time that he could no longer control when Mr. Hyde would take over, nor could he transform back to Dr. Jekyll at will. Eventually, what he thought he controlled took over completely, leading to his destruction.

Yesterday we saw that humility and forgiveness have implications for our relationships in God's kingdom. Today we'll see that being a follower of Jesus impacts marriage, children, and wealth. When we try to cling to our priorities and possessions, they control us and lead to destruction.

Before His teaching about possessions, the Pharisees asked Jesus a trick question about divorce. He went back to God's good creation to define God's plan for marriage (Mt 19:4-6). Marriage is not only about two individuals—it is an illustration of the relationship between God and His people. While the presence of sin disrupts marriages, we should not confuse this with God's plan (Mt 19:8). Marriage is not required of everyone in order to participate in the kingdom: both married and single people have a calling to glorify God (Mt 19:12).

Next, Jesus actively demonstrated His love for children. The disciples were unhappy that children had been brought to Jesus. But He never considered Himself too busy or too important for those who had no power, no wealth, nothing to offer that the world considered valuable. In blessing these children, Jesus gave an example of kingdom priorities (Mt 19:14).

This lesson about priorities continues in the account of the rich young man. He came to Jesus to find out how to get salvation, but he wasn't prepared to do what Jesus told him: sell his possessions (to be free to love God) and give them to the poor (to be free to love his neighbor). He thought he had wealth, but in fact it controlled him. He was unwilling to let go of priorities and possessions to follow Jesus.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus called the rich young man to freedom and the reward of discipleship (vv. 28-30). The young man could never truly be free to obey God until he loved Him above everything else. Many of us, whether wealthy or not by the world's standards, find that we trust our possessions more than God. Review Matthew 6:24-34, and prayerfully commit your whole heart to serving God. He might require you to sacrifice some income, time, or things—but the reward of following Christ is incomparable!

Matthew 19:1-12

Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. - Matthew 19:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Taking the Blows - Some years ago a professional ice hockey goalie came up with a unique way to decorate his mask. Every time his mask took a blow that otherwise might have cut open his face or head, he painted a set of black stitches on the spot where the puck hit. Soon the mask was covered with these painted reminders of its invaluable protection to the goalie.

This vividly illustrates the protection that a couple can enjoy when their marriage is solidly anchored by faith in Christ and commitment to each other. Getting married doesn’t keep a husband and wife from taking the hard shots of life, but a strong marriage can help absorb the blows. That’s one of the blessings God grants to the people in a growing, lifelong marriage commitment.

Certainly, then, anything that threatens this union is contrary to God’s plan. Divorce is at the top of this list. Jesus affirmed both the permanence of marriage and the devastation of divorce when some Pharisees tried to trap Him (Matt. 19).

These teachers treated marriage and divorce as nothing more than pawns to try to snare Jesus. Their only concern was the debate of the day, which was how many legitimate reasons a person could use to divorce his wife. One group of rabbis said any excuse would do, while the other group said divorce was permitted only in cases of one partner’s unfaithfulness.

Of course, Jesus knew what His enemies were trying to do. So instead of choosing sides and inviting attacks, He redirected the issue where it belonged--God's original plans for marriage. The one-flesh nature of marriage was never meant to be torn apart, any more than a human body was meant to be divided.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today, we continue to pray for people going through the pain of divorce. We can also be grateful for some signs that our society is taking this problem seriously.

Matthew 19:13-22

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! - 1 John 3:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

A popular children's hymn goes as follows: "Jesus loves the little children/ All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white/ They are precious in His sight!" Contrast this with William Penn's observation, "Men are generally more careful of their horses and dogs than of their children."

Unfortunately, the disciples tended to resemble Penn's remark! In Jesus' day, children weren't considered citizens, although it's likely they were well-loved in many families. In religious matters, most people didn't think children were capable of independent thinking. These attitudes help explain why the disciples rebuked those who brought their children to Jesus (Mt 19:13).

Yet this account helps us understand some of Jesus' attitudes toward prayer and how He modeled it for His disciples. The passage doesn't give direct teaching on prayer, nor does it record a specific prayer uttered by Jesus. Instead, it shows us that all human beings, especially those who might be overlooked, are invited to pray.

Although laying on hands was a known practice for blessing, Mark adds the tender comment that Jesus "took the children in his arms" (Mark 10:16). This action shows us at least two things about how Jesus prayed for people. First, Jesus' prayer was personal. He didn't stand far off and offer some blanket blessing for a large group. We get the impression that He took each child in His arms and prayed a special blessing for that child. Second, Jesus touched people as He prayed for them. Earlier in Matthew, we learn that Jesus touched a man with leprosy as He healed him (Matt. 8:3).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Although there are certainly times when touching another person isn't appropriate, in our culture we're generally too hesitant to touch others. But touch can be a powerful blessing, especially with prayer. Consider what it would mean to gently place your hand on the shoulder of a grieving brother or sister as you pray for them. Or the comfort your Bible study or Sunday school class could give when you lay hands on an individual who needs prayer. What a simple way that we can follow the example of Jesus.

Matthew 19:16-26.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Experts in the stock market are savvy economic sages who use hard numbers and cold logic to make decisions, right? Not according to another group of experts in what is called "behavioral economics," the study of how people deal with money and finance.

The conclusion of a recent conference was that people are more emotional than rational in many of the economic decisions they make. Smart investors sometimes make dumb decisions, the experts say, because they have an aversion to risk that has little to do with the numbers.

It's encouraging to see science attempting to catch up with the Scriptures! God's Word has been telling us for centuries that money is an emotional issue. Jesus was the original expert in "behavioral economics."

The story of the rich young man illustrates this fact and confirms the findings of that high-powered conference. But this account holds lessons far beyond just the economic. The man who approached Jesus that day also had an aversion to economic risk. He was economically secure; and, being prudent and cautious, he wanted to see to his spiritual security. So he came to Jesus with an excellent question: "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" (Mt 19:16).

If we had been standing there beside Jesus and had heard this question, we would have assumed that the man was sincere. And perhaps in his own mind, he was. Jesus didn't accuse him of having hidden motives for asking. He simply looked into the man's heart and saw that he was spoiled by his riches. They had become a huge obstacle to salvation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Removing obstacles to faith and offering our readers an opportunity to know Christ are part of the purpose behind Today in the Word.

Matthew 19:16-30

Sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. - Matthew 19:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Countless children and adults have learned the alternate meaning to the famous “eye of the needle” restriction barring the rich from the kingdom of God. The most infamous suggested explanation of this phrase (Mt 19:24) is that a narrow gate into Jerusalem was known as The Needle’s Eye. After dark, that smaller gateway was the only possible entrance to the city, forcing a camel to unload its cargo and enter on its knees. (Camels the world over laugh at this suggestion.) The biggest problem with this explanation? No such gate existed in Jesus’ day.

Perhaps the problem that led to the manufacture of such a story is the apparent finality and exclusivity of the statement, which is hyperbole. Jesus made His point clearly at first (“It is hard”) and then added emphasis to accentuate the difficulty. The disciples stumbled over this metaphor as well, but notice that Jesus clarified by saying that with God, this seemingly impossible act was possible.

Embracing the kingdom is difficult for the wealthy, but possible through the grace of God. The rich often fail to seize the kingdom because their arms are full of useless possessions. It’s likely that this passage sends us scrambling for an alternate interpretation because we struggle with letting go of what we have.

The rich young man had done a good job of keeping the letter of the law. Where he struggled was the spirit of the law. Loving God with all we are demands that we surrender all we have. Does that mean that the rich must give away all their possessions to allow their entrance to heaven? Not at all. Everyone ultimately surrenders all they own when they die. The choice the rich young man faced was how he would value his possessions now, in the moment.

To truly enter God’s kingdom, the rich man should have recognized the temporary nature of his earthly wealth and instead sought the treasure in heaven that lasts forever. He could have experienced the power of kingdom living on earth, but he had a modest kingdom of his own with which he was unwilling to part.

APPLY THE WORD

Are you willing to sacrifice possessions or relationships for the cause of Christ? If anything overrules your allegiance to the Father, it will challenge your obedience to His will. It is no easy task to fully release attachments that we have spent our whole lives developing a fondness for. Spend time today expressing your love for God’s spiritual provision in your life and ask for opportunities to stockpile heavenly treasures.

Matthew 20

Matthew 20:1-16

The last will be first, and the first will be last. - Matthew 20:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Today’s parable is a difficult one. We live in a society where this landowner’s behavior would make headlines: “Workers Vow to Fight Unjust Hiring Practices.” The first group of workers might get together and picket the vineyard. They might try to negotiate a better package of pay and benefits for themselves. After all, they have “rights”!

Something strikes us as not quite equitable about the wage scale in this vineyard. How can it be “fair” to pay the Johnny-come-latelies as much as those who’ve toiled all day? What does Jesus mean by telling this strange story?

A question to start with is: What does He not mean? Answering this question is also a key issue in interpretation. This parable is not about economic justice, or even about spiritual rewards.

Instead, its main point is the sovereignty of God. This is as important as His love, which we’ve seen highlighted these past few days.

Just as the vineyard owner has every right to pay every worker a full day's wages if he wishes, so God has every right to run His kingdom as He pleases, to carry out His plan of salvation as He sees fit. God is the ruler of the universe, and there are no constraints on His actions. We have no right to question Him (cf. Isa. 45:5-11).

But God's grace and generosity are still an important part of this parable. No worker is treated unjustly. The owner keeps all the promises he's made. The "inequity" is that most of the workers get more than they deserve! Indeed, the last wave seems to get hired not because the owner needs more workers, but just to give them employment.

The first workers are self-centered and envious. They demand what they perceive as their "just reward," though their understanding of justice is inaccurate. In both the older brother in yesterday's parable and these workers today, Jesus probably symbolized the Jewish religious leaders who opposed Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As you probably know, we occasionally like to suggest topics for additional Bible study, in hopes that Today in the Word can be a springboard for you. Today, we're proposing "eternal rewards" as an excellent choice for such a study. What rewards does Scripture mention? How are they earned? What are godly motivations regarding rewards?

Matthew 20:1-34

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. - Matthew 20:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Eta Linnemann had a position that few achieved and many envied as a theology professor in a German university. Yet for all her academic acclaim, Eta felt something was missing. At the invitation of her students, she attended an evangelical prayer meeting and committed her life to Christ. She then resigned her position at the university and went to Indonesia to teach in a Bible college as a missionary. She found true fulfillment in her work of service rather than in what the world considered success.

Our passage today builds on the closing verse of Mt 19:30 "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." Jesus then offered a parable to illustrate this kingdom reality. The focus here is on the landowner, who continues hiring workers throughout the day. There's no indication that he needs more laborers; rather, he hires out of generosity. Those hired first find that they receive what was promised but have no priority over those hired last. God's great goodness and abundance cannot be measured according to human standards.

The prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection that follows might seem randomly placed, but it illustrates the reversal of first and last in the kingdom. Jesus will be crucified, which appears as "last" to the world. But He will be raised to life, a victory over sin and death—the "firstfruits" of the resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15:20).

Right after this prediction, the disciples revealed their continued misunderstanding about the nature of the kingdom. Their concern for status contradicted Jesus' emphasis on servanthood. Here is the climax of the instructions from Jesus to His followers: leadership in the kingdom is defined by servanthood, and we know how to be a servant through the example of Jesus.

Concluding this chapter, two blind men addressed Jesus as the Messiah (Mt 20:30) and requested healing. These blind men saw more than the spiritually blind crowd (Mt 20:31).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today is Good Friday, the traditional Christian observance of the crucifixion of our Lord. Spend some extra time with Mt 20:17-28, pondering the sacrifice of Jesus. Reflect on how His example makes it possible for us to live sacrificial lives. We should beware of hastily asserting that we can drink from His cup (Mt 20:22). But we know that He will strengthen us for the work He has called us to do—works of mercy, humility, and compassion that bring glory to God our Father.

Matthew 20:1-34

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. - Matthew 20:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

In Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis wrote, "If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed."

In today's reading, Jesus revisited the topic of humility and greatness in the kingdom of heaven. To begin, He reminded us that He's

the King, not us. If we need a reason to be humble, all we need to remember is that He's the sovereign of the universe! This lesson comes through loud and clear in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. To grumble and grab for our "rights" is to forget whose vineyard it is. The owner has every right to do as he likes–who then can complain about his promise keeping and generosity? When we do, it shows our pride.

Another key point here is the familiar phrase, "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (Mt 20:16). God does not order things the way we would or for the reasons we would. Jesus predicted that He would be betrayed, condemned, beaten, mocked, and executed. In the eyes of the world, He would be a loser–but in God's eyes, He would be the ultimate winner. His resurrection would be the greatest victory in history!

In short, servanthood is part of the road to greatness in God's kingdom. Jesus had already taught much on this topic, but apparently the disciples had not tuned in. They were preoccupied with jockeying for position and power. They should have known how ironic their request was–to ask to be "first" meant they wanted to be "last" from an earthly perspective. Jesus clarified that being a leader in His kingdom meant that they would, like Him, suffer for righteousness' sake.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Almost all of us find ourselves in some sort of leadership position, whether at church, at work, or in your home.

Matthew 21

Matthew 21:1-22

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! - Matthew 21:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

In G. K. Chesterton's poem, "The Donkey," the animal describes its own ridiculous appearance and negative associations. But in the final stanza, it tells its secret: "For I also had my hour; / One far fierce hour and sweet: / There was a shout about my ears, / And palms before my feet."

That "hour" was the Triumphal Entry, and in the poem we discover this familiar story through new eyes.

Our reading today introduces us to the start of Passion Week. In this single episode we see who Jesus is and how we should respond to Him. Riding a donkey showed His humility and gentleness, as well as His royalty and mission of peacemaking. In doing so, He fulfilled yet another messianic prophecy (Mt 21:5; cf. Zech. 9:9). The people spread cloaks and branches on the road, signifying respect and honor, and they acclaimed Him with a messianic title, "Son of David." Their call, "Hosanna," basically meant "Save us!"

In a similar way, the temple cleansing incident revealed Jesus' priorities and passions. He shared God's heart for the nations, so the way the temple's court of the Gentiles had been turned into a profiteering bazaar angered Him. He treated the spirit of greed in a place of prayer as blasphemy. He condemned the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders, but showed compassion for those who needed healing. Everything He did was to the praise and glory of God. The praise of children could silence God's enemies (Mt 21:16; cf. Ps. 8:2)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The final verse of today's reading contains an amazing promise and an amazing challenge (v. 22). "If you believe" implies strong faith, which in turn implies perfect submission to the object of faith. That is, to pray on the basis of this promise requires our wills to be totally in line with God's will.

Matthew 21:12-17

My house will be called a house of prayer. - Matthew 21:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Are You Hard of Hearing? - One hearing expert says our world is blaring with so much noise that virtually seventy-five percent of high school seniors have already begun to lose their ability to hear high-pitched sounds. In fact, exposure to extremely high noise levels can begin causing permanent damage to the ear in as little as fifteen seconds. The key is to protect the ears at appropriate times by using earplugs or earmuffs.

By and large, the people of Jesus' day who should have led His procession into Jerusalem, hailing Him as Messiah, had grown progressively hard of hearing. Their problem was spiritual, of course, not physical.

We're talking about people such as ""the chief priests and the teachers of the law"" (Mt 21:15) who had set themselves against Jesus from the very beginning of His ministry. These men, along with the Pharisees, were the guardians of Israel's religious life and worship. They, of all people, should have recognized their Messiah and bowed in worship before Him.

Instead, they had turned a deaf ear to Jesus. And the nation's spiritual life showed the effects of their ""hearing loss.""

The temple area had become a marketplace to take advantage of the crowds that thronged Jerusalem during the Passover celebration. Animals to be used in the sacrifices were put up for sale. Moneychangers changed ordinary coins into special shekels that were acceptable as offerings.

The people had allowed the noise of commerce to drown out the voice of God, so that Jesus could no longer tolerate seeing God's house turned into a ""den of robbers."" He cleansed the temple in an unforgettable display of zeal for His Father's honor.

Even though the merchants and the religious leaders felt the lash of Jesus' anger, those who were blind and lame came to Him and found healing. And the children joyfully shouted His praises, using the Messianic title ""Son of David.""

But the leaders tuned out these praises. They heard the children, to be sure. But because these men had allowed themselves to become spiritually deaf, all they could think about was silencing Jesus' youthful witnesses.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many people were startled by our Lord's intolerance of sin and spiritual callousness among those who should have known better.

Maybe what we need today is a little more holy intolerance for things that are clearly wrong. One result of living in a culture such as ours is that it can dull our spiritual hearing and deaden our sensitivity to sin. With that in mind, why not take inventory today and see if there has been any complacency in areas such as your personal convictions, habits, or work practices? If anything comes to light, be prepared to cleanse your temple..

Matthew 21:1-46

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. - Psalm 118:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

In an article last November, a Washington Post columnist observed the problem with governing by public opinion polls: “The trouble is that public opinion is often ignorant, confused and contradictory; and so the policies it produces are often ignorant, confused and contradictory.” The fickle crowd is nothing new. In Matthew 20 the crowd rebuked the blind men for calling Jesus the Son of David. In today's text the crowd called out hosannas. And the opinion of the crowd will change again before Matthew's Gospel concludes.

Jesus entered Jerusalem and made a public claim through His actions to be the messianic King. This prompted the query: “Who is this?” (Mt 21:10). The answer to this question dictated the action that follows in the story. While the crowd had sung hosannas and welcomed Him, they didn't grasp His identity. They decided He was a prophet (Mt 21:11). This was only partly right: Jesus is prophet, but also Messiah, and king—and ultimately God the Son.

Because of who He is, Jesus went to the center of the worship of God, the temple, to set it in order. Those who preyed on the poor were driven out. He healed the blind and lame, making it possible for them to join in worship (see Lev. 21:17-20). He was praised by children, who confessed the truth missed by powerful leaders. Instead of rejoicing in these marvelous works, the chief priests reacted with indignation.

Their lack of concern for the unhindered worship of God led to their spiritual barrenness. The cursed fig tree was a picture of their so-called religious piety. The fault of the tree—lack of fruit—led to its punishment (Mt 21:19). So too for those who claim to obey God and yet do not bear fruit in keeping with repentance (see Mt 3:8).

The religious leaders directly questioned Jesus' authority, and He responded with a series of parables as an indictment of their unbelief. There is one way of righteousness: repentance and seeking God (Mt 21:32). Those who do not produce this fruit will have no part in God's kingdom (Mt 21:43).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The image of the capstone is important for understanding who Jesus is and who we are as His followers. If you have time for additional study and reflection this Easter weekend, read the following passages: Psalm 118:22-23; Acts 4:11; and 1 Peter 2:4-12.

Consider what we learn about Jesus from these verses. How does 1 Peter use this image to instruct us in being the people of God? May we, like the little children, “declare the praises” of our Savior who brought us from darkness to light (1 Peter 2:9).

Matthew 21:12-22; Mark 11:12-26

I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. - Matthew 18:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1836, George Müller opened an orphanage in Bristol, England. Believing that God alone would provide for these children, Müller resolved to rely on God. Over the next 57 years, thousands of children were cared for in Müller’s orphanages. It’s easy to conclude that Müller was some kind of “super” Christian, but W. Bingham Hunter writes in his book The God Who Hears that “George Müller regarded his life as a demonstration of what God might do through the prayers of an ordinary Christian.”

The faith of “ordinary” believers was what Jesus had in mind when he used the fig tree as an object lesson on prayer. Matthew and Mark connect this teaching with Jesus’ Triumphal Entry and cleansing of the Temple. The picture of Jesus overturning tables and driving out greedy merchants has captivated artists, but Jesus’ anger was less about greed than about forsaken prayer. Quoting Isaiah 56:7, Jesus reminded his listeners that the Temple was supposed to be “a house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11:17).

Jesus then used a fig tree to teach a powerful lesson. Just as a fig tree should produce fruit, so too the Temple should have been producing the fruit of prayer, faith, and healing instead of being filled with greed and cruelty. The chief priests and teachers of the law were actually indignant because of the wonderful things that Jesus was doing, including healing the blind and lame (Matt. 21:15)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today’s passages also suggest another element to fruitful prayer: praying with other believers. In the original Greek, the “you” mentioned in Matthew 21:22 and Mark 11:24 is plural. Jesus was addressing a group of His disciples (Matt. 21:20), and it seems likely that He intended them to pray together. There seems to be something about corporate prayer that keeps our focus on the Father’s will and tempers selfishness. If you aren’t already joining with others in prayer, today’s passages provide encouragement to do so!.

Matthew 21:18-22

If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. - John 15:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Not Living Up to the Claims - Visitors to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, are often shocked when they first see Manger Square. Despite its name and associations with the night of our Savior's birth, tourists discover that Manger Square is merely an asphalt parking lot packed with tour buses. One tourist remembers her surprise when she first saw the square more than a decade ago: ""I had this image from my childhood of a cozy little inn."" Bethlehem's Manger Square isn't the first tourist location to turn out differently than the promises and claims in the brochure.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, Israel had all the outward appearances of a spiritually vital nation. But it was not living up to its claims--it had failed to produce the kind of true righteousness and faith that would have embraced, rather than rejected, God's Messiah.

Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, an unusual event in this last week of His life, seems to have been a parable of Israel's disappointing fruitlessness. The tree had leaves on it, which means it should have had figs for Jesus to eat, since leaves and fruit usually appear together on these trees.

But Jesus found the tree barren and pronounced a curse on it. Matthew says the tree withered immediately.

The tree represented barren, fruitless religion that produced nothing of lasting value. In contrast, Jesus' teaching on prayer shows the power of believing prayer (as opposed to a profession of faith that promises a lot but delivers little).

Some Bible teachers believe that Jesus wasn't denouncing the entire nation but those who practiced hypocrisy, such as the moneychangers and merchants He had just driven out of the temple.

Whatever the case, the lesson for us is the same. Jesus' teaching on the importance of bearing fruit (John 15) reminds us that simply going through the rituals of religion does not please God. We need to make sure that the life of Christ is flowing through us so that we become productive.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If Jesus were to examine our lives over the past week for signs of spiritual life and fruitfulness, what would He find?

That's an examination you can make today. As you think back over the past week, can you point to fruitful times of fellowship with God in His Word and in prayer? Are there other signs you can see that indicate your Christian life is on track? Be encouraged by the evidence you see and determine to strengthen areas where the signs of life are not so strong.

Matthew 21:23-22:14

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. - Matthew 21:42

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent survey by the Barna Research Group found that 76 percent of Americans believe in heaven, and nearly the same number believe in hell. Only five percent said there was no life after death. But while 64 percent believe they will go to heaven after they die, only one half of one percent think they are headed for hell.

That seems optimistic! Yet it’s in line with our human desire to believe only the best about ourselves. In today’s parables, Jesus tried to strip away self-deception and show us that our eternal destiny is determined by how we respond to Him.

During Passion Week, He gave the Pharisees and other religious leaders one more chance to receive Him. Instead, just as they had in the past, they questioned His authority. In response, Jesus told several parables to test and expose their unbelief. In the parable of the two sons, we see that obedient actions are what count. By this standard, the sinners who responded to John the Baptist’s message will enter heaven before the Pharisees (Mt 21:31–32). What a blow to their pride!

In the parable of the tenants, we see specifically that how we treat the Son of God is what matters. Instead of giving the owner his due, the tenants tried using violence to take over the vineyard for themselves. In both of these parables, Jesus had the leaders themselves discern the right and wrong of the situation, and in effect they condemned themselves! Here, the consequences of rejecting Christ loom even larger–the vineyard will be taken away and given to others (Mt 21:43).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Choose one of the parables from the reading and plan to set aside some time for additional Bible study. If you’re not sure which one to pursue, we encourage you to explore more deeply the parable of the wedding banquet..

Matthew 21:28-32

Parking Lots Into Plazas -

Not everyone who says to me, ""Lord, Lord,"" will enter the kingdom...only he who does the will of my Father. - Matthew 7:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

The status of Manger Square in Bethlehem is about to change, according to a recent news story. The square is getting a makeover that planners hope will be finished by the year 2000, when four million visitors are expected to flock to Bethlehem to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Jesus' birth. The asphalt parking lot will be replaced with patterned tiles, and the square will be lined with trees and fountains in an effort to turn the tourist site into a beautiful attraction.

In a way, we could say that Manger Square is like the first son in the parable we read about today. Just as the square is to be transformed from an unattractive parking lot into a beautiful plaza, so this son's change of heart transformed the ugliness of his refusal into the delight of his obedience.

We have already seen how during Holy Week, Jesus had repeated confrontations with the Jewish leaders who refused to believe His claims and sought to put Him to death. But nowhere does He apply His teaching more directly to those in religious authority than in this short parable.

Since Jesus interprets the story Himself, we don't have to guess at His meaning. The two sons represented two classes of people. The first son stood for the group of people classified as ""sinners"" by the society of that day: tax collectors, prostitutes, and the like.

The second son represented the religious leaders to whom Jesus spoke. The point of the parable is unmistakable. Those who refused God outwardly by their actions, but said yes to Him inwardly, were in a better position before God than those who said yes to Him outwardly, yet refused to do His will inwardly (Mt 21:32).

In fact, one commentator suggests that Jesus was even more blunt than saying that sinners were entering the kingdom ahead of these religious authorities. This Bible teacher says the phrase ""ahead of you"" should be translated ""instead of you.""

His point is well made, because Jesus said these religious leaders needed to repent and believe in Him. The fact that they failed to do so suggests they missed out on God's kingdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This is a powerful and straightforward story, but then Jesus never minced words.

Because the lesson of the parable is so crucial, why not plan to make this story the subject of a family devotional time this week? If you have young children, you can teach them the importance of the sons' actions, not just their words. Older children (as well as we adults) can grapple with the important issue of outward piety versus inward reality in one's spiritual life.

Matthew 21:28-32

The Lord detests the way of the wicked but he loves those who pursue righteousness. - Proverbs 15:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

When John the Baptist began preaching his message of repentance, the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected his teaching, but sinners heeded John’s exhortations to righteousness. Tax collectors came for baptism, and asked how to mend their dishonest ways, as did soldiers and prostitutes (Mt 21:2). Even when they saw such spiritual transformations, however, the Jewish leaders still did not accept or believe John’s message.

Jesus’ parable focused on the contrast between two sons. One says he will not do as his father asks, but later changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard as requested. The other son agrees, but in fact doesn’t do it.

Jesus had begun this parable by asking, “What do you think?” He wanted His hearers to think about, interpret, and respond to the story. Afterwards, He pressed them again: “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” (Mt 21:31). This was not a difficult question, and they immediately got it right: the first son.

The focus is obedience. Actions speak louder than words. Actions prove the heart. Obedience is made up of actions, not intentions or words. This is not to say that words are unimportant (cf. Luke 6:45), but whereas the first son spoke rebelliously or ungraciously, then changed his actions, the second son spoke nicely, but didn’t follow through or obey. His words didn’t match his deeds.

What lesson did Jesus draw? When John the Baptist proclaimed the kingdom, the lower classes of society were like the first son. Their initial response was negative, but in fact they did answer the call and the message transformed their lives. By contrast, the chief priests and elders--who had just questioned Jesus about His authority (Mt 21:23-27)--were like the second son. They said the right words, they knew all the religious clichés, but their actions demonstrated their rejection of the kingdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you made a promise to the Lord or to another person that you’ve not kept? We don’t want to be like that second son! Ask the Spirit to bring to mind any unfulfilled promise you’ve made recently.

If you can think of such a promise, today’s application is clear--fulfill it! Be a man or woman of your word and do what you said you would do (if it is still possible to do so).

Matthew 22

Matthew 22:1-14

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. - Matthew 22:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a sermon, D. L. Moody linked missions and the gospel with the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.

“It is an invitation to this feast that I bring you. The invitations are going out now to every corner of the earth. There is not one here who is not invited. For eighteen hundred years God’s messengers have been crossing over valley and mountain, over desert and sea, from end to end of the earth, inviting men and women to the Gospel feast. What an honor for worms of the dust! When man prepares a feast, there is a great rush to see who will get the best place. But God prepares His feast, and the chairs would all be empty if His disciples did not go out and compel them to come in.”

Matthew's parable has some similarities and differences with Luke's version (yesterday). The basic setting is the same, a banquet, though here the occasion is more specific: A king prepares a wedding banquet for his son.

The response of the invited guests is the same; they make excuses and go about their business. In this account, the king makes a second attempt to summon them, which heightens their refusal to come. That Jesus was referring to the Jewish rejection of Him is more obvious in Matthew–this parable immediately follows that of the tenants. The punishment may be a specific reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Mt 22:7).

The same plan unfolds: others (Gentiles) are invited. But whereas Luke's version stops there, Matthew's continues. Among the new guests, one man is found unready for the feast, because he's not wearing wedding clothes. Most commentators presume that the king made available, along with impromptu invitations, the appropriate garments. Thus, for the guest not to be wearing them was an insult to the host, a refusal to honor the occasion.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Second Coming of Christ is a pillar of our faith and cause for great rejoicing. You might plan a "hymn sing" on this glorious theme for your family, friends, or small group–it will encourage you to look forward to rejoicing in the kingdom!

Matthew 22:1-46

Love your neighbor as yourself. - Matthew 22:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

Even in our more casual culture, some rules of etiquette seem clear—like not bringing an uninvited puppy to a wedding dinner. Yet one couple did just that, and their exuberant puppy, Dude, proceeded to eat the hors d'oeuvres and stain the white linens. The outraged hostess of the reception has not spoken to the couple in the five years since the incident.

The stakes for inappropriate conduct at the wedding in today's parable were higher than prematurely gobbled hors d'oeuvres. Those who rejected the initial invitations and killed the messengers of the king were destroyed (Mt 22:7). Those who accepted the invitation to the feast were still required to have appropriate garments, or they would be cast out (Mt 22:13). Jesus indicted anyone who would presume to be part of God's kingdom without the garments of righteousness.

A series of confrontations followed as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians tried to trap Jesus. The attempt to position Him as either a supporter of Rome or a political insurrectionist failed—Jesus' kingdom transcends political loyalties (Mt 22:21).

The Sadducees tried to use an extreme example to trap Jesus on marriage and resurrection. He rebuked their shallow knowledge of both Scripture and the power of God (Mt 22:29). Their trap revealed their limited understanding of the God they claimed to serve, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They thought they were the children of Abraham, not realizing that this identity made no sense if God abandoned His people when they died (Mt 22:32).

The final trap concerned the greatest commandment. Jesus connected the great exhortation that was at the heart of Jewish identity —to love God with one's entire being—with the command to love one's neighbor (see Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). As the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, Jesus embodies what it means to keep these commandments.

Next Jesus turned to challenge the Pharisees. He revealed their incomplete understanding of Scripture and the identity of the Messiah—His own identity. They did not grasp that the Son of David was also the Son of God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

"Alleluia" rings out in churches across the world on this Easter, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection! This resurrection is promised by and is possible through the power of God (Mt 22:29). We live in this resurrection power when we follow Jesus, loving God and our neighbor. Leviticus 19:18 appears three times in Matthew (Mt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39). How does each instance inform us about loving our neighbor? May the resurrection motivate us to be people of God whose way of living reflects the life possible through Jesus.

Matthew 22:15-46

No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. - Matthew 22:46

TODAY IN THE WORD

George Whitefield, the famous colonial revivalist, once preached on the question, "What do you think about the Christ?"

> “[N]umbers that are called after the name of Christ, and I fear, many that pretend to preach Him, are so far advanced in the blasphemous chair, as openly to deny His being really, truly, and properly God. . . . of Christ be not properly God, our faith is vain, we are yet in our sins: for no created being, though of the highest order, could possibly merit anything at God’s hands; it was our Lord’s divinity, that alone qualified Him to take away the sins of the world.”

How people respond to Christ is life’s most important issue, whether they are Phari-sees, colonial Americans, or modern suburbanites. Today, we read the final dialogues between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders.

The first dialogue started with flattery from the Pharisees, followed by their trick question about paying taxes. Jesus had eluded the Pharisees so many times–and they had lost so much face–that they sent their followers, along with some Herodians (their political enemies!). But Jesus taught that we should submit to the proper authorities in our lives.

Next came the Sadducees with a question about marriage. The question was absurd in itself; they showed their mocking attitude because they themselves didn’t even believe in resurrection. Jesus responded that resurrection is a biblical truth. A lack of belief in it reveals that they didn’t know the Scriptures or God (Mt 22:29). His indictment struck at the core of their prideful self-conception!

The Pharisees tried once more, this time asking a meaningful question about the greatest commandment. Jesus’ answer summarized the spirit of the Law: to love God and one’s neighbor is the basic spiritual duty of every worshiper (cf. Deut. 6:5). Here, “love” is agape love–that is, not a feeling of affection, but a chosen, sacrificial devotion.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Pharisees and other religious leaders had the chance to ask Jesus anything they liked. Unfortunately, they squandered their opportunities with trick questions and hostile motives.

Matthew 22:34-40 James 2:8-11

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. - Leviticus 19:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Four-year-old Chris eagerly waited for his neighbor Will to come over to play. He arranged all his favorite toys in front of the door and announced to his mother that he was going to share all these toys with Will. When Will arrived and began to play with Chris’s favorite fire truck, though, Chris shouted, “No! Mine!” and hit his friend. After he was disciplined, his mother asked, “I thought you were going to share your toys! What happened?” “I didn’t know he was actually going to play with them!” Chris wailed.

As Chris discovered, it’s easier to talk about sharing and loving our neighbor than to actually put it into practice. In our passage today, James emphasizes that if our actions don’t match our words, those pious sounding phrases are actually worthless.

We’ve seen that judging by outward appearances is really judging with evil thoughts (James 2:4), and we end up passing judgment on people whom God loves (James 2:5). This judging is a clear violation of a scriptural command, and therefore it’s a failure to live according to God’s Word (James 1:22–25).

James continues to examine our obedience to the commands of Scripture and the desires of God. The command to love one’s neighbor is one of the two commands that Jesus lists as fulfilling the entire Law (Matt. 22:34–40). James makes clear that when we show favoritism, we fail to love our neighbor. And if we fail to love, we are sinning against God.

When we mix religious talk with the practice of favoritism, we are really practicing an empty, worthless, self-deceptive religion (James 1:26). Even if we think we are obedient on every other count, we are still failing to live wisely in a way that demonstrates our faith (James 2:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Certainly we must practice compassion with those in our own congregations who need our help. It’s also appropriate for us to care for other believers around the world who face dire poverty.

Matthew 22:34-40

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. - Matthew 22:37

TODAY IN THE WORD

Children Have a Way... - Pastor Charles Lowery tells of the time he took his small daughter to a store to pick out a surprise she had

earned. Lowery says, 'I guess I was a little too restless because she turned to me and said, 'Daddy, are we in a hurry again?' I realized she probably thought her name was Hurry instead of Kasey because I was always saying 'hurry' to her. So this time I said, 'No, Kasey, we aren't in a hurry. Take as much time as you want.' ' Lowery went on to say that watching his daughter make one of her first choices in life was one of his best experiences.

Children have a way of helping us understand what our priorities are. We've all heard the old saying that when it comes to life, the main thing is keeping the main thing the main thing. That's a good way of putting it. When everything is sifted out, a life that really counts for Christ can be defined by priorities.

Jesus Himself helped us prioritize our lives when He summarized the Old Testament's requirements in two commandments, given in response to the probing questions of His enemies. It will take us the rest of our lives, and all of eternity, to learn what it means to love God with every part of our being.

But one thing is obvious. Devotion like this doesn't leave a lot of room for competing loyalties or for oversized worries about what the future may bring. We can love God the way He wants us to love Him because our future is safely in His hands. And no one can harm us there (Jn 10:29).

The second commandment to love others is a theme we have encountered several times this month. The Savior also gave us the clearest possible measuring stick by which we can tell whether our love for others is what it should be. Our determination to care for other people should match the care we take of ourselves. Jesus was not teaching self-love, merely recognizing its reality.

If we're busy loving God and others, we'll be in the best possible position to deal with any problems that might come.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Obeying Jesus' commands requires an eternal perspective. But as we suggested at the beginning of the month, this doesn't happen when we're moving too fast to notice the needs of the people around us or even to be aware of God's presence. One way you can slow down the pace today is to give God five minutes of uninterrupted silence in His presence, when you do nothing but listen. Then, listen to someone you love in the same manner. You should come away with a memorable experience.

Matthew 23

Matthew 23:1-39

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. - Matthew 23:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Amazing Vision - Scientists have recently uncovered one of the secrets of the brittle star (a relative of the starfish). Its ability to flee from ocean predators, hunt, and change colors from day to night–despite having no eyes–had long puzzled researchers. As it turns out, the brittle star (or serpent star) is itself one enormous eye.

The species of brittle star in question has a skeleton made up of calcite crystals that function like an eye. The crystals give visual information that allows the creature to “see” and respond to its environment. One scientist called them “nearly perfect microlenses.”

Though it appears blind, in fact the brittle star can see with an eye that modern technology cannot match. By contrast, the Pharisees, though they appeared to be the spiritual seers of Israel, were in fact blind guides. As we saw in yesterday’s reading, they rejected Christ and lost many public debates with Him. In today’s reading, Jesus delivered a summary condemnation of how badly they had failed.

The first seven verses give an overview. The Pharisees didn’t practice what they preached. They were hypocrites. They were proud. They pursued human recognition and praise.

The following verses provide an instructive contrast. The preeminence of God as Father and of Jesus as the Master Teacher revealed the values and pursuits of the Pharisees as empty. As we’ve seen in the “first shall be last and the last first” verses, humility is the real test of greatness in God’s kingdom–a truth that the Pharisees neither understood nor practiced.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

After reading Jesus’ fourth woe today (Mt 23:23–24), you might want to double-check your attitude to stewardship. Do your thoughts and actions reflect the truth that all you have belongs to God? Do you honor Him with the “firstfruits” of your earnings? Do you give

generously and cheerfully? Are you open to the Spirit's leading in this area?

Matthew 23:1-39

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness. - Isaiah 5:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sally's parents sent her to church, though they stayed home. Told that she should go because it was good for her, it didn't take long before Sally decided that if her parents didn't need to go to church, she didn't either. "Do as I say, not as I do" rarely succeeds in producing the desired results.

Our reading for today reveals Jesus' unwavering concern for righteousness. The Pharisees received condemnation because what they taught didn't match how they lived. This contrasted with Jesus, who exemplified everything He expected from His followers (see Matthew 10-11). The Pharisees didn't understand the core principle of God's kingdom: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt 23:12).

Some readers find these statements by Jesus troubling. How can this be love and compassion? But throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' teaching has emphasized that love requires truth-telling, and compassion cannot allow sin to remain unrebuked (cf. Mt 18:15-18). Jesus was revealing truth to the Pharisees, and also providing a warning for His followers.

The seven "woes" pronounced by Jesus reveal the extent of the hypocrisy and spiritual blindness of the religious leaders. They didn't recognize that in Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is here, and they tried to block others from entering (Mt 23:13). They obsessed over the smaller details of ritual purity while neglecting the core issues of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Mt 23:23). They were characterized by greed, vanity, and self-indulgence.

Jesus was the embodiment of the prophetic warnings that God had sent before, and the religious leaders received Jesus in the same way they treated God's messengers before Him: they conspired to kill Him (Mt 23:34). Jesus lamented the stubborn rejection of Jerusalem, but He left the temple with a note of hope: one day they will recognize Him as the Messiah (Mt 23:39; cf. Ps. 118:26; Phil. 2:9-11).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As Christians, we can find God's mercy in these "woes," for they challenge us to evaluate whether we practice what we preach. Do we fall prey to hypocrisy, religious show, or self-exaltation? Or are we characterized by obedience to God, concern for others, and humility? On this first day after Easter, pray that the church of Jesus Christ will resist the temptation of the Pharisees and instead live in the light of God's kingdom truth.

Matthew 23:13-39 Jeremiah 23:1-11

I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak . . . I will shepherd the flock with justice. - Ezekiel 34:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Greedy Leaders - A few years ago, the country watched with shocked disbelief as the huge corporation Enron seemed to crumble overnight. But as details emerged indicating how company executives had deceived their shareholders and employees, shock turned to anger. When people on the street were interviewed, there was widespread disgust that a handful of people could be so greedy and unfeeling to wipe out the financial security of so many faithful employees.

Leaders have obligations toward those whom they manage. This is true in the corporate world, and it's no less true for spiritual leaders. Two days ago we saw Jeremiah's deep outrage against the false prophets who had misled God's people. Recall how he cried out that his heart was broken within him (Jer 23:9). We're looking at part of this same prophecy again, but from a slightly different perspective today, focusing on the Lord's promise concerning the One who would lead His people with perfect justice.

First, however, let's look at similar outrage expressed by our Lord Jesus over Jerusalem's leaders in His day. Matthew 23 lists seven "woes," or denunciations, directed at leaders who failed to lead justly. Even a quick read over this list shows how angry Jesus was when teachers and spiritual leaders crushed the people under unnecessary burdens and deadly hypocrisy. We also see that wicked leaders change very little over time. Just as Jerusalem's leaders sought to kill Jeremiah, whom God had sent to them, so too, the religious leaders of Jesus' day crucified the One whom God had sent to them. In Matthew 23:37–39, we find a lament on the lips of Jesus that sounds much like something we could have heard from Jeremiah.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As Jeremiah and Jesus observed leadership that had gone bad, they both responded with outrage and sorrow–outrage for those

who led unjustly and sorrow for those who had been deceived.

Matthew 23:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

G. K. Chesterton burst onto the church scene in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when liberalism was smothering the flames of faith in his native Great Britain and elsewhere. As a writer, critic, and lecturer, Chesterton helped break open a world of smug liberalism and dead orthodoxy. Writer Dorothy Sayers described him as a “beneficent bomb, [who] blew out of the Church a quantity of stained glass of a very poor period and let in gusts of fresh air, in which the dead leaves of doctrine danced.”

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Following Jesus and adopting His priorities means we must be ready to serve even when it is inconvenient, messy, and costly.

Matthew 23:23-32

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. - Matthew 5:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

What had the Pharisees and other religious leaders done to deserve the harsh condemnations Jesus delivered in today’s reading?

They had rejected His teachings, questioned His authority, and ignored His miracles. They were jealous of His reputation among the populace. They had tried to trap and embarrass Him with theological debates and trick questions. They were plotting against His life. Blinded by their own desires and conceit, they spurned the prophesied Messiah, God’s Son.

Jesus’ “seven woes”–our passage covers the last four–exposed the rottenness at the core of the Pharisees’ spiritual lives. The zeal for God’s glory includes a love for righteousness, and thus we see Jesus’ loathing of sin found in the acerbic words of these verses. Politeness may be fine in most situations, but there comes a time when a thing must be called by its proper name.

What exactly did Christ hate? Hypocrisy, self-centeredness, self-indulgence, pride, legalism, greed, rejection of God’s Word, ignorance of true worship, and neglect of spiritual virtue, among other sins.

Jesus used a variety of colorful images to show His disgust. The leaders were like dirty dishes or whitewashed tombs, clean on the outside but filthy and corrupt on the inside. In those days, tombs were sometimes whitewashed to make them more visible, so that no one would accidentally step on one and become ritually unclean. Furthermore, the Pharisees strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel, a humorous piece of irony that means they fussed with details but missed the big picture. In fact, they often did strain their drinking water through a cloth to avoid accidentally swallowing a gnat, listed as unclean in the Law.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today, here are several open-ended questions for reflection and action.

Matthew 24

Matthew 24:9-14

It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. - Philippians 1:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Prior to 1949, Shanghai had been a prime base for missions in China. But following the Communist victory, the number of churches in the city was reduced from 235 to 15 by 1958. During the Cultural Revolution, the last few churches were closed, Bibles were burned, and pastors were dragged away to labor camps. The number of believers at that time was less than forty thousand.

Yet the gospel did not die out. Many kept the faith, praying and worshiping in their homes. When the churches reopened in the 1980s, Christians packed them. Since then, there has been astonishing growth–today there are at least 120,000 believers in Shanghai’s official churches, with many more in unregistered house groups. Despite persecution, the church is alive and well!

We should expect persecution and suffering to be part of taking the gospel to the world, and even of sharing the gospel with our neighbors. Christ’s words and the whole New Testament warn us that this will be so.

Jesus' discourse found in Matthew 24-25 is not exactly an advertisement for following Him! He told His disciples to expect hatred, persecution, and martyrdom (cf. Matt. 10:17-23; John 15:18-25). Under these conditions, many who profess to be Christians will fall away, even betraying and hating one another. False prophets will try to deceive, wickedness will increase, and spiritual love will grow cold.

What are we to do? Stand firm (v. 13)! Perseverance is a sign of salvation, not a condition for it. That is, "will be saved" in this verse doesn't indicate that we must do something more in order to be saved. Rather, it looks forward in time to the sure completion of Christ's redemptive work in us (Phil. 1:6). God Himself causes us to stand firm (2 Cor. 1:21-22), though the phrase is most often found as a command for us to obey (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:58).

APPLY THE WORD

Suffering is a deep and difficult topic to address, and in today's and tomorrow's devotionals we can focus on only a few relevant truths.

Therefore, we suggest that you explore this theme in additional Bible study. Which stories, psalms, and expository passages address the question of suffering? What are the main principles? With what attitudes should believers face different kinds of suffering? What might be the spiritual reasons?

Matthew 24:1-51

You must also be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. - Matthew 24:44

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1831, Baptist preacher William Miller declared that Jesus would return between 1843 and 1844. Thousands of people from a variety of denominations gathered around Miller in eager expectation of "The Blessed Hope." With the date finally set at October 22, 1844, over 100,000 people stayed up all night waiting for Christ to return. As the morning of October 23 dawned, hope was exchanged for disillusionment. The date became known as the Great Disappointment.

Is this what Jesus meant in His repeated exhortations to watchfulness? In our readings for today and tomorrow, we'll see that Jesus explained how we should respond to His prophecies about the end of the age.

After Jesus left the temple, He predicted that this glorious structure—the heart of the worship of God—would be destroyed (Mt 24:2). The disciples understandably wanted more information. In response to their questions of what and when, though, Jesus warned them not to be deceived by false teaching. They needed to stand firm (Mt 24:13). He told them that great hardship lay ahead, and yet hope was also present: the gospel will be preached in the whole world, and they have the unfailing word of Jesus that He will return (Mt 24:14, 30).

Jesus then clarified that the point of this warning is not to determine the timing of His return; rather, He provided this information so that the disciples could be watchful and prepared. Indeed, Jesus was calling them to wait. This waiting is only possible in light of hope—if Jesus' word is not sure and if He is not returning, then we should all act like the wicked servant (Mt 24:49). But Jesus assured us that the Master will return, and the fate of the hypocrites will come to those who are not prepared.

Jesus knew that waiting can be a challenging assignment. So He instructed His followers to guard against deception and remain watchful even in the face of persecution, because we have the hope of His coming in glory.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our impatient society doesn't value the discipline of waiting. We prefer to multitask, be sleep-deprived, and fill our appointment books in order to feel busy and therefore important. Jesus' words in this chapter can help reorient us to the ultimate priorities of believers: seeing our lives in light of the reality and hope that He is coming again. As we'll see tomorrow, this waiting watchfulness is not passive, but it does require us to live with a different sense of time than does the rest of the world.

Matthew 24:1-25:13

Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. - Matthew 24:42

TODAY IN THE WORD

A surprise publishing phenomenon of the past decade has been the success of the bestselling Left Behind novels. Publishers Weekly called them "the most successful Christian fiction series ever." ABC News said the books are "fun and engaging, with fast-paced plotting, global drama, regular cliffhanger endings, and what has to be the quintessential villain: Satan himself."

Authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins want the stories to reach a mainstream audience with biblical truth. Even one secular reviewer could see that “the characters are constructed to cause readers to identify with them in their search for meaning and, in time, faith.”

The millions of Left Behind readers who want to know the fate of the world should also have a look at Matthew 24. What does the “end of the age” mean here? Some interpret this phrase generally, as indicating things taking place in the period between Christ’s First and Second Comings. Others interpret it more specifically, as mostly referring to events during the Tribulation or before the Second Coming.

At first, Jesus prophesied the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70), but as the chapter progresses He spoke more and more of the “end times” in our future. What will happen then? False messiahs, wars, and natural disasters will signal the end is near. Believers will be persecuted and some who seemed to believe will fall away. The right response is to stand firm and keep preaching the gospel (vv. 13–14).

The “abomination that causes desolation” (v. 15) is also prophesied in Daniel 9:27 and elsewhere. This specific event will usher in a time of more intense suffering and disasters, and is often dated at the middle of the Tribulation. This was historically prefigured by Antiochus Epiphanes, who put an altar to Zeus in the temple in 168 b.c. (cf. 2 Thess. 2:4).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you knew Jesus would return tomorrow, how would your life change today?

Matthew 24:24 Jude 17-23

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sometimes pithy little sayings contain a lot of truth. Here’s just one example: “Forewarned is forearmed.” When we know about a situation in advance, we’re able to prepare for it properly. This seems to be what Jude meant when he wrote “remember what the apostles of our Lord Christ foretold” (Jude 17). The presence of the ungodly individuals who were infiltrating the church to which Jude was writing had already been predicted, therefore this congregation should not be caught off guard.

The exact quotation of Jude 18 is not found elsewhere in the New Testament, although 2 Peter 3:3 is very close: “In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.” We also have the words of our Lord quoted in today’s verse, as well as a similar idea expressed by the apostle Paul (Acts 20:29–30; cf. 1 Tim. 4:1–3 and 2 Tim. 3:1–5). There were many warnings that godless individuals would appear in the midst of churches with the intent of deceiving and leading people astray. And Jude’s purpose in calling these words to remembrance is to warn believers again about these godless ones.

Notice that the quote used by Jude calls these people “scoffers.” Instead of upholding the truth, these false teachers mock and twist it. Most likely, these individuals were mocking God’s moral requirements. Remember, these people followed their base instincts, not acting according to the Spirit.

So what should believers do in the presence of such individuals? Jude offers some very practical advice. First, we are to build ourselves up in “the most holy faith” (Jude 20). Recall that “the faith” refers to the core beliefs of Christianity. Here Jude is saying that we need to be grounded in these essential doctrines.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here’s a way to build yourself up in “the most holy faith.” Most churches have a doctrinal statement outlining essential tenets of the Christian faith. This week, locate a copy of your church’s doctrinal statement and take some time to read through each point. Do you understand the nature of each point, and why it’s essential for the faith? For example, one point may be that Jesus is both fully human and fully God. Look up any Scripture verses that might be listed in support of each point.

Matthew 24:36-51

Continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. - 1 John 2:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

The first rule for a job interview: be on time! First impressions count, and what is your future employer to think if you arrive late? Best-case scenario, he'll figure that you may have gotten lost. Even still, he'll wish you had driven the route the day before and verified your directions. Worst-case scenario, he'll consider you lazy. Either way, you certainly can't count on getting hired.

Our passage today illuminates how the church needs to be ready for Jesus' second coming. Will He find us prepared, like the wise and faithful servant (Mt 24:45, 46)? Or will we resemble the wicked and foolish servant who failed to expect His master's return (Mt

24:48-50)?

The church of Jesus Christ can make herself ready for His return in three different ways. First, we should prepare for His coming just as Noah did (Mt 24:37). Noah believed God when He said that He would flood the earth. He obeyed God by building an ark. For a period of many, many years, he woke up every day with a future reality as his compass. The flood is coming; I've got to be ready. Are our lives characterized by that kind of urgency? Are we fulfilling our individual callings? Are we warning our lost friends and neighbors about eternal punishment apart from Christ?

Second, the church can be ready by keeping watch. The entire chapter of Matthew 24 describes the events that foreshadow the coming of Christ. Are we looking at today's events with an eternal perspective? We don't know when Christ will come (Mt 24:36, 42), but we can and should be watchful.

Finally, we can be ready by choosing obedience rather than sin in our daily lives (Mt 24:44). We don't know when to expect Christ. Will He come and find us shamefully disgracing His name and neglecting our responsibilities (Mt 24:49)? Or will He find us faithfully and wisely executing His business?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Consider the faithful example of Noah. He spent many years building the ark. He didn't get preoccupied with the stuff of life so much that he forgot what God had called him to do. In fact, his calling became the very stuff of his life. He also didn't allow himself to be influenced by the wickedness of his generation (cf. Gen. 6). Are you, like Noah, faithfully working for God day by day? Are you, like Noah, walking with God rather than the crowd?

Matthew 25

Matthew 25:1-46

Well done, good and faithful servant! - Matthew 25:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

The poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote these lines inspired by today's passage: “No light had we: for that we do repent: / And, learning this, the bridegroom will relent. / ”˜Too late, too late! Ye cannot enter now.' / No light, so late! And dark and chill the night! / Oh let us in, that we may find the light! / ”˜Too late, too late! Ye cannot enter now'.”

Today's reading is a continuation of Jesus' instruction to His disciples that we began yesterday in Matthew 24. The Parable of the Ten Virgins illustrates the command to keep watch. All ten of the women expected the bridegroom to come. But only five were prepared for the experience of waiting. When the bridegroom appeared, the foolish women were unprepared and unable to enter the wedding banquet.

The Parable of the Talents further develops what it means to be engaged in watchful waiting. It doesn't mean sitting around, staring at the sky, doing nothing. Instead, it means using what God has given us for His glory. Like the servants in the parable, we don't know how long we have to be profitable with our gifts from God. We do know that He expects us to be busy about His work.

This parable also reveals something about the nature of God. A talent was a large sum of money, easily a year's wage. Our God dispenses gifts generously and trusts us with great resources. Yet there is no question about who truly owns these talents. We should not think that the gifts from God become our possessions, or that the glory should be directed anywhere other than God.

The final section of this chapter provides more insight into the content and consequences of watchful waiting. As the King separates the righteous from the unrighteous, He comments on whether their lives exemplify humility and mercy. Those who claim to know Him but have no evidence of His kingdom in their lives receive everlasting punishment. The righteous will have the joy of the wedding banquet, a share in the master's happiness, and eternal life (vv. 10, 23, 46).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Throughout this Gospel, Jesus has identified righteousness with lives of humility, mercy, and justice. It is not simply doing good deeds—the Pharisees gave alms to the poor. True righteousness is only possible through a desire to love and serve God, to seek His kingdom at the expense of our own glory. As we wait for Christ to return, what “talent” has God given you to use for Him? Are you engaged in watchful waiting, preparing to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”?

Matthew 25:14-30

TODAY IN THE WORD

""Atheism turns out to be too simple,"" wrote C. S. Lewis in Mere Christianity. ""If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that is has no meaning: Just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. 'Dark' would be without meaning.""

Lewis makes a great point. It takes the light of heaven to make sense of the darkness of hell. At the end of Jesus' parable of the three servants, the master of the worthless slave commands him to be thrown ""outside, into the darkness"" (Mt 25:30).

Jesus used the image of darkness (""outer darkness,"" KJV) for hell three times in the Gospel of Matthew (see also Matt. 8:12 and Mt 22:13). Since, as we have already seen, hell is also pictured in Scripture as a burning lake of fire, some assume that darkness is a metaphor for the utter isolation and loneliness of hell.

Whether metaphor or literal reality, the use of darkness to describe hell conveys a powerful truth. If you have ever been in a large cavern when the guide turned off the lights, you have a sense of the total isolation that complete darkness brings.

A person who is utterly alone needs companionship more than anything else. Mental health professionals call this sense of abandonment ""cosmic loneliness"" and give it serious attention.

Jesus' picture of hell suggests that part of its suffering is total, eternal isolation from God and man--a sense of utter hopelessness that will cause great ""weeping and gnashing of teeth"" (Mt 25:30).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If it has been a while since you thanked the Lord for shining the light of the gospel into your heart, a lesson like today's should correct that oversight!

Think of what God did for us in salvation. Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, God has transferred us from the kingdom of darkness into His glorious kingdom of light, where He has a wonderful inheritance reserved for us (Col. 1:12-13).

Matthew 25:14-30

Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master’s happiness! - Matthew 25:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Are You Counting Stones? - What pursuits do you consider worthy of your time? A British physics professor spent thirty-five years counting pebbles.

Dr. Malcolm Cornwall of the University of Sussex, along with some of his students, spent that long counting the stones on Brighton beach. They didn’t count each one, but used a mathematical theory called the “order of magnitude” to reach the final total: 100 billion. The professor said it would take one person about 2,500 years to count them all by hand.

He now intends to count how many gallons of water are in the English Channel.

We’ll leave it up to God to decide the worth of these projects! Ultimately, God will decide the worth of everything we do--including how we spend our time, money, and energy.

The well-known parable of the talents is another of the servant parables we read yesterday. The truths of accountability and reward are emphasized again, though the unexpected return of the master is not.

Each of three servants is given money according to his demonstrated ability. Understanding that they are only stewards, and that the resources still belong to the master, what do they do with what they’re given? Two of them go out and put the money to work. Perhaps they invest it or go into business--at any rate, they do something, and multiply their capital. But one servant does nothing at all.

When the master returns, he rewards the first two servants with even more authority and responsibility. But the third servant is severely punished and thrown out of the house. Why had he done nothing? He claims he was afraid, but the master calls him wicked and lazy.

We, too, are stewards, and will one day give God an account of what we’ve been doing with His resources. Are we making use of His gifts for His glory? If yes, we’ll hear the same as the first two servants: “Enter into the joy of your master!” (Mt 25:21, 23, NASB).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In light of the principle of accountability found in today's parable, begin a one-week project to track your use of time. Don't make extensive notes, just jot down activities briefly, such as "Job," "Household tasks," "Watching TV," or "Church service." At the end of the week, total up the time spent in different categories. Do any of your findings surprise you?

Matthew 25:14-46

Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. - Matthew 25:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

The picture of God as a Shepherd is found throughout the Bible. Jacob blessed Joseph in the name of "the God who has been my shepherd all my life" (Gen. 48:15). David, too, called the Lord "my shepherd," and added, "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters" (Ps. 23:1–4). God referred to Himself in the same terms: "As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep . . . I will shepherd the flock with justice" (Ezek. 34:11–16).

To divide sheep from goats is the work of a shepherd, and spiritually speaking, it will be the work of the Good Shepherd (see John 10:1–18). The second story in today's reading is probably a parable, though some have tried to match it with a specific judgment. Its main point is that we will be held accountable for our actions–the ones listed here are practical and measurable. In the judgment scene, we discover that righteous people did these things out of love, with no ulterior motives. Their good deeds weren't done to earn "merit points," but simply revealed their true spiritual condition. By contrast, the unrighteous people were unaware they had missed the boat, but were still judged for their sins of omission. To show love for our brothers and sisters is the same as showing love for Jesus Himself (Mt 25:40)!

The earlier parable of the talents also teaches us to live as people who must one day give an account to our Master. As in the parable of the virgins, He will certainly return and we must keep watch. We must be good stewards of the resources God has given us, including time, money, energy, abilities, and opportunities, using all for the glory of God. A true disciple cannot be spiritually lazy or indifferent, or act based on fear, as the third servant did.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you feeling up for a creative project today? If so, we suggest you do your best to illustrate one of the two stories in today's reading. You might paint a watercolor of a key scene, draw a short comic book of a complete story, or create a montage of images and scenes from a story using, for example, color photos cut out from magazines.

Matthew 25:31-46

TODAY IN THE WORD

Are Baby Boomers in denial?

The leading edge of the post-World War II ""Baby Boom"" generation turned 50 last year, but they're not about to acknowledge it. Boomers battle aging with body lotions, hair coloring, cosmetics and vitamins. They flock to health clubs and follow ""miracle diets."" They read self-help books by the tens of millions. Meanwhile, many have experienced their first serious illnesses, including high blood pressure and heart disease.

Whether Boomers want to acknowledge it or not, they are aging. Mortality is a reality of human experience that simply won't go away. Like it or not, so is the question of eternal destiny. When it comes to the topic of heaven and hell, many would simply rather not think about hell.

Although the world doesn't want to face it, and as uncomfortable as it makes many believers, the existence of hell is part of the revelation of God. We need to know the truth concerning hell as part of our commitment to the ""whole will of God"" (Acts 20:27).

Most of the objections to hell center around the argument that a good and loving God would not create a place as horrible as hell or send people there for eternity. The unstated part of this argument is that most people are ""ordinary folks"" trying to do their best and don't really deserve eternal judgment.

We will deal with these objections and ideas over the next few days, then finish up the month by returning to the topic of heaven and our future there.

Today's text describes a judgment that we believe will occur at the end of the Tribulation. In the middle of this discourse, Jesus

reveals the fact of the existence of hell: ""the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"" (Matt. 25:41).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The gospel has to be bad news--sin--before it can be good news--salvation. This is certainly true when it comes to the subject of hell. Some gospel presentations skirt the issue because people don't like to hear that they are judged and condemned to hell unless they turn to Christ.

Matthew 25:31-46

Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. - Matthew 25:40

TODAY IN THE WORD

The "Nourishing" Ministry - About once a week, Jane Pigue of Greenwood, Missouri, swings into high gear and bakes 25 to 30 loaves of fresh, homemade bread. The next day, she delivers it to needy people in the Kansas City area–people suffering from cancer or other health problems, or people going through a crisis or down time in their lives. She sometimes takes the bread to a local mission or church food pantry.

Jane bakes bread as a way of expressing Jesus' love to others. "How can I do anything less, when Jesus gave His all for us?" she said. "I just let Him work through me." Her goal: "Do all the good I can, for all the people I can, for as long as I can."

Jane's bread ministry pleases Christ, as we know from today's reading. While we are not certain whether this passage describes a specific future judgment or is a parable of sorts, the lesson remains the same: We must show brotherly love and kindness, especially to those in God's family. The parable of the talents that opens Matthew 25 teaches us to work for God's glory, and these verses give extra motivation!

What makes the difference between the favored sheep and the condemned goats? Their actions. While we know salvation is not earned by merit, these verses highlight the key truth that trees are known by their fruit (Matt. 7:15–27). Specific acts of compassion are mentioned, including providing food and clothing, showing hospitality, and visiting prisoners and sick people (cf. Isa. 58:6–9). Jesus' many healing miracles are a good place to see His own compassion in action.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Were you convicted by anything on Jesus' list in today's reading? Then act on it! These verses contain their own applications: giving food and clothes to the poor, visiting prisoners, and other ministries of compassion.

Matthew 25:31-46

The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory . . . and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. - Matthew 16:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the town of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, just across the U.S. border from Laredo, Texas, the murder rate has skyrocketed recently. Nearly all the murders are drug-related. Townspeople feel powerless to do anything because many officials are either controlled by drug lords or are too fearful to execute justice. Even where officials try to render justice, there is only one Person who will render judgment with perfect justice, and that is Jesus Christ at the final judgment.

As we conclude looking at Jesus' teaching on the kingdom, it's fitting to consider what He said about the final events at the end of history. Today's parable likens groups of people to sheep and goats. Both groups are evaluated according to their response to Jesus.

The parable opens with a vision of Jesus in exalted glory. As the nations gather before Him, He renders judgment. This affirms that Jesus is God, because the role of final judgment belongs to God alone.

There's much debate about whether this parable refers to treatment of the poor and needy in general or messengers of the gospel in particular. Although Jesus was deeply concerned about the disadvantaged, the connection between the least of these brothers and Jesus Himself (Mt 25:40) suggests that He has in mind servants of the kingdom. We clearly know from the book of Acts that sharing the gospel led to physical deprivation and imprisonment. Later church history confirms the suffering that accompanied those who brought the gospel to the ends of the earth or even to their own people.

This parable teaches several important truths about the kingdom: first, physical hardship is part of our calling as gospel messengers. Second, people's response to the gospel has eternal consequences. Those who receive the gospel and its messengers enjoy a heavenly inheritance; those who reject the gospel and its messengers receive eternal damnation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Bible's teaching on the final judgment isn't popular in a time that condones just about any belief or behavior. This passage forces us to reconsider our commitment to the gospel and willingness to suffer for it. If you do not yet know Jesus as your Savior, this passage shows that there are eternal consequences for rejecting Him.

Matthew 26

Matthew 26:1-35

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. - Matthew 26:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Making History - During the 2002 World Series, fans voted on the top ten moments in baseball history. According to the balloting, the winner was the day in 1995 when Cal Ripken Jr., broke Lou Gehrig's "iron horse" record for consecutive games played. It was followed by the 1974 game in which Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth's record for career home runs. In third place was the day Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, becoming the first African-American player in the big leagues in 1947.

These and other great players made history with their unforgettable actions and achievements. Unfortunately, there are other ways to make history as well, as Judas proved in today's reading. Though one of Jesus' inner circle, he chose to betray the Lord. To do so, he went to the religious leaders, who had already rejected Jesus and were plotting to have Him arrested and killed.

In contrast to their hate, we read of the love and honor showed by Mary, the sister of Lazarus (v. 7; cf. John 12:1–11). She anointed Christ's head and feet with a jar of very expensive perfume. When the disciples "piously" complained that the money could have been given to the poor, Jesus replied that she had anointed Him for His coming burial. Her act was spiritually beautiful and would forever be connected with the preaching of the gospel (Mt 26:12–13).

Judas and Mary show us two extremes, so we may feel more of a connection with Peter. He would fail the Lord, at the crucial moment denying he even knew Him. But we serve a merciful God, who gives repentant sinners many second chances. Peter would grieve his actions and Jesus would forgive him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many American denominations observe communion on the first Sunday of every month. That's next Sunday, so if this is your church's practice, prepare your heart by rereading and praying over Matthew 26:17–30 every day this week.

Matthew 26:1-30

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. - Matthew 26:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Two months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites were unhappy with Moses and Aaron: "You have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." The Lord responded to His people, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you." They were instructed to gather as much as they needed, so that they would know "that I am the Lord your God" from His gracious abundance (see Exodus 16). Jesus provided an abundance of food that fed over 5,000 people. In today's passage, we see echoes from these demonstrations of provision and abundance as Jesus announces the Lord's Supper for His people for all time.

In the opening verses, Jesus again announced His impending crucifixion, and the scene shifts to the religious leaders plotting against Him. Interestingly, they said that they didn't want to have Him killed during the Passover—yet Jesus was in fact killed then. Passover recalled the time when the blood of a spotless lamb saved the Israelites; now Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, would shed His blood to save the whole world (Exodus 12). The religious leaders thought they were executing a sneaky plan, but in fact they could not even control the timing of Jesus' death.

The next verses draw a comparison between an unnamed woman and Judas. She was serving Jesus; Judas was betraying Him. She was unselfish and lavish in her act of worship. Judas was selfish and greedy, willing to accept the small sum of thirty pieces of silver in order to turn over Jesus to His enemies.

As we read the account of the Lord's Supper, it might be tempting to skim the words heard often in our own celebrations of Communion. To gain a wider perspective on this event, read these verses again and then read Matthew 14:13-21. Note the same

verbs in both passages: “took,” “gave thanks,” “broke,” “gave.” There Jesus provided physical food to satisfy physical hunger—here He offers Himself as the spiritual food that ends spiritual hunger. Jesus Himself is the ultimate example of God's gracious, abundant provision.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Before your church observes the Lord's Supper again, prepare your heart by reading verses 17 through 30. Even today, you can praise Him for His gracious, abundant provision of forgiveness that makes fellowship with Him and His people possible. Consider also how you might follow the example of the woman in verse 6 with an extravagant gift of worship. Others might not understand, but if the Holy Spirit directs you to do “a beautiful thing,” you can be sure that God will be delighted and glorified by your sacrifice.

Matthew 26:31-75

May this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. - Matthew 26:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Calvin said this about our passage: “Peter's fall . . . brilliantly mirrors our own infirmity. His repentance in turn is a memorable demonstration for us of God's goodness and mercy. The story of one man contains teaching of general, and indeed prime, benefit for the whole Church; it teaches those who stand to take care and caution; it encourages the fallen to trust in pardon.”

Peter's bold declaration and then dismal denials provide bookends for our passage today. This is not the finest hour for the disciples. Even when Jesus predicted that they would all fall away, they protested vigorously, with Peter announcing that he would never disown Jesus (v. 35). In the very next scene we see failure: charged with watching and praying with Jesus in Gethsemane, Peter (and the other disciples) promptly fell asleep.

As Judas betrayed Jesus to the religious leaders, the disciples leapt into action, thinking no doubt that now they could demonstrate their devotion to Jesus. They did not understand that this was not Jesus' time of struggle—they had slept through that. They also mistakenly thought that violence was necessary, not realizing that their God had the power of the universe at His disposal (Mt 26:52-53).

The trial before the religious leaders is packed with irony. They searched for false witnesses to obtain the verdict they wanted; they finally found two witnesses who actually told the truth about Jesus, though they had not grasped His meaning (Mt 26:61). Jesus declared that He was the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who will reign with the Father (Mt 26:64; cf. Dan. 7:13). The religious leaders understood the full weight of Jesus' assertion, and charged Him with blasphemy for claiming to be God. They seemed not to consider the other option: that Jesus was telling the truth.

Peter had followed Jesus, remaining in the safety of the crowd, but that was as far as his bravery went. When asked if he was with Jesus, he vehemently denied even knowing Him. As the rooster crowed and he remembered Jesus' words, Peter wept.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The mystery of the Incarnation is on display in Gethsemane: in His deity, Jesus knew the torment that lay ahead; in His humanity, He had no desire to go through it. His soul-wrenching prayers to the Father here give us an example of how to struggle without sin. Jesus was honest—no false piety or martyrdom here. He was also submissive to the will of His Father, trusting that God would see Him through even the darkest hours in all of created time.

Matthew 26:17-20, 26-30

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. - Matthew 26:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

A Meal to Remember - Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom, whose testimony for Christ became known around the world, once said that her strongest memories of home were of evenings around the family's oval dinner table. After the dishes were cleared, Scripture passages were read in a number of different languages, including Dutch, French, German, English, Hebrew, and Greek. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, derived strength from God's Word. Years later, that language training also allowed the ten Boom sisters to share the gospel with many different women when they were arrested by the Nazis for hiding Jews.

No scene from human life can do full justice to the picture of our Lord reclining around the table with His disciples, serving them the Last Supper. Just as those evenings around the ten Boom table were a time of worship and preparation, so it was that night when Jesus was betrayed.

This Passover meal became the occasion when Jesus inaugurated the new covenant by His blood--the culmination of God's plan for

salvation based on the death of Christ. For Jesus Himself, the Last Supper was a time of preparation before He offered the perfect sacrifice of His own blood.

The Last Supper was also a meal of preparation for the disciples. They did not understand everything Jesus was telling them that night. But He was teaching them the significance of His death and giving them the basis on which they would soon go out and begin preaching the gospel.

In a week filled with holy moments, this has to be one of the most moving and important for every believer. Jesus knew the kind of violent death that awaited Him: His blood would be literally ""poured out"" on the Cross. But Jesus' pain and suffering becomes salvation for us when His blood is applied to wash away our sins.

No wonder Paul called the cup which we hold at Communion ""the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks"" (1 Cor. 10:16)! Jesus offered us His body and blood, symbolized by the bread and ""the fruit of the vine,"" as nourishment for our spiritual hunger. When we receive Him as Savior, we are welcome at His table.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The apostle Paul, as he wrote concerning the memorial service we know as Communion, commanded us to examine ourselves so we would eat and drink in a manner worthy of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:28-29).

Self-examination before the Lord is also appropriate on a normal weekday as we go about our work and family activities. Today, we urge you to let the Holy Spirit search your heart for anything that is not pleasing to God, being ready to confess whatever He brings to your attention (1 John 1:9).

Matthew 26:17-30; Revelation 19:6-10

Do this . . . in remembrance of me. - 1 Corinthians 11:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

For many people, the ideal Thanksgiving looks a lot like the Norman Rockwell painting, “Freedom from Want,” which appeared on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in 1943. This famous painting depicts a grandmother in a bright, white apron placing a large turkey before a grandfather in his Sunday best, who stands ready to carve the roasted bird. Happy faces surround a bounteous table, eager for the meal to begin. What an endearing image of a Thanksgiving feast!

The disciples anticipated a special meal when they made preparations for the Passover meal described in today's passage. The Passover setting is important because it recalls the Exodus (God's previous act of deliverance), and anticipates Jesus' death and resurrection, which would be God's supreme and final act of deliverance.

This Passover meal began similarly to many previous meals. It soon became apparent, however, that this was not a normal gathering. Jesus' statement that one of the disciples would betray Him sounded a sorrowful, confusing note. As Jesus fulfilled the role of the household head and gave thanks for the various elements of the meal, tension and fear resurfaced when He began to reinterpret the traditional Passover symbols in terms of His own sacrificial death (Mt 26:26-28). Jesus' claim that He would not drink the fruit of the vine again until the disciples were in the Father's kingdom (Mt 26:29) troubled and perplexed the disciples.

We know that Jesus commanded His followers to celebrate communion, or the Lord's Supper, as a way of remembering His sacrificial death. And Jesus' final meal with His disciples not only looked back to the first Passover, it also looked forward to a future meal, the joyous marriage feast of the Lamb. Today's passage from Revelation sets the stage for this heavenly celebration that will be beyond anything we could ever imagine.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Perhaps for you, Thanksgiving, or any other holiday meal, is far from the seemingly perfect Norman Rockwell painting. Maybe these are times of tension or loneliness instead of joyous celebration. If so, you can be thankful that there will be no disappointment or pain at that final heavenly celebration with our risen Lord. In the meantime, if you are facing Thanksgiving alone, consider volunteering to serve at a local rescue mission, rejoicing in the ability to share with others because of the certainty of your own future.

Matthew 26:36-46

Not as I will, but as you will. - Matthew 26:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

There's a famous painting entitled "The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane," in which the artist, Heinrich Hofmann, depicts Jesus on His knees in prayer with His hands clasped and stretched out before Him. The darkness of the painting is broken only by a halo of light around Jesus' head and a heavenly light above. Interestingly, Hofmann chose not to paint the garden. It almost looks like Jesus is in a desert instead. In this way Hofmann captured something of the agony that Jesus endured during this long night of prayer.

For the past four days, we have looked at Jesus' eloquent prayer in John 17. Today's prayer contrasts greatly with that long prayer. Today's prayer is short and agonized. (This same prayer is also recorded in Mark 14:32–42.) In it, we see the depths of Jesus' humanity. Realizing the horrors that await Him, Jesus took several disciples to a secluded place for prayer. He sought their support because He was sorrowed to the point of death (Matt. 26:38).

Both Matthew and Mark record that Jesus prayed the same thing three times. Acknowledging God's power to do anything, Jesus prayed that the cup of God's wrath (referring to the Cross) might be taken from Him. But notice that He immediately followed this prayer with a prayer of obedience: "Not as I will, but as you will" (Mt 26:39).

You may recall from our study on September 15 that Jesus prayed a similar prayer just before His last Passover meal with His disciples. These prayers might be disturbing until we remember that Jesus, as human, was the only perfect human. In His humanity, Jesus felt the full terror of what lay ahead of Him. And in His humanity, He chose to be obedient to the Father.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Consider taking some time this week to really picture what Jesus went through in Gethsemane as He prayed. Think about His intense agony and His unbelievable obedience.

Matthew 26:36-46

TODAY IN THE WORD

Police believe they have finally nabbed the cat burglar who was looting mansions up and down the East Coast. Like his fictional Hollywood counterpart, the man would dress all in black and slip undetected into homes where the family and servants were asleep. He knew what he wanted, taking priceless antiques, sterling silver, and other expensive articles--including a $1000 ice cream scoop.

We've seen some pretty spectacular examples of Satan on the attack this month, both in the Old Testament and in the ministry of Jesus. But we need to remember that he does not always launch a frontal attack. Sometimes he comes as quietly as a cat burglar, stealing away our spiritual vigor when we are lulled into thinking we are safe.

That's the picture we have before us in today's text. The dozing disciples were the victims of temptation, not just of fatigue. Jesus felt an intense need for their companionship--not because He was afraid, but because He was engaged in intense spiritual warfare just a few yards away.

What an ironic scene. There were two battles going on, and Satan was one out of two. He definitely lost his struggle to get Jesus to shrink back from the Cross. But the devil found success in lulling Jesus' disciples into spiritual lethargy. On this occasion, they never did get their act together and pray (Mt 26:45).

What can happen when Satan tempts us to doze off spiritually? He can work a lot of mischief in the absence of our watchful prayer. Lack of alertness can even lead to spiritual defection, which happened that very night to Jesus' disciples (see Matt. 26:31).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One piece of mischief Satan can do after tempting us to doze off spiritually is load us with guilt when we wake up and realize that the ""cat burglar"" has struck.

Perhaps you are weighed down today by the memory of a spiritual failure. You may even have confessed the incident repeatedly and gained assurance of God's forgiveness, only to find that the enemy still taunts you with the memory.

Matthew 26:36-46

The Intersection of the Cross - Francis of Assisi, famous for his simple lifestyle and love of nature, also loved the Cross. He saw the two beams as an intersection between vertical and horizontal, that is to say, between divine and human, for there had hung the crucified Christ. Standing before a cross, he prayed:

> "All-highest, glorious God, cast your light into the darkness of my heart. Give me right faith, firm hope, perfect charity and profound humility, with wisdom and perception, O Lord, so that I may do what is truly your holy will.

Amen.”

Facing the Cross, Jesus also prayed to submit His will to His Father’s (cf. John 4:34).

Matthew 26:36-46

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. - Matthew 26:41

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's Just Dirt - Since the days of Jesus, at least two church groups have gone to the site of Gethsemane seeking the exact spot on which Jesus prayed. Each of these groups built a wall around the area where they believe Jesus prayed, but an expert on biblical geography says that both locations are incorrect. He maintains that the location is an area higher up on the Mount of Olives, in a more secluded part of the garden.

It's understandable that believers would want to see the place where Jesus prayed in agony to His Father. Certainly the site would be holy. But there is nothing magical about the plot of dirt where Jesus fell on His face agonizing in prayer. Even if we could stand on the very spot, we would be no less vulnerable to the temptation Jesus warned us about.

The Garden of Gethsemane was a place of stark contrasts during the week of Jesus' death and resurrection. Here, Jesus triumphed completely over the enemy's temptation to bypass the Cross. In fact, it was impossible for Jesus to yield. Gethsemane was not a test to see if Jesus would fail. It was to prove that He could not fail.

And yet, just a few yards away were Jesus' friends Peter, James, and John. They failed once again as completely as Jesus had triumphed. He obeyed His Father's will and accepted the Cross. They could not even obey Jesus' simple request that they stay alert and pray for an hour.

Jesus prayed three times, which is surprisingly similar to the three times He defeated Satan in His wilderness temptation (Matt. 4:1-11). And three times the Savior came and found the disciples sleeping.

All four participants in this dramatic moment were facing temptation. Jesus overcame, while Peter, James, and John were overcome. They wanted to obey. Luke says they were ""exhausted from sorrow"" (Luke 22:45). But the three disciples badly underestimated the weakness of the flesh.

This is a lesson we cannot afford to miss. Because our enemy knows where we are vulnerable, he is always ready to take advantage of us. But we have the same spiritual resources available to us that Jesus used to emerge victorious in the garden.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's one way you can emerge from this week victorious over the temptations Satan may place in your path.

The method is simple. Jot down the two or three areas where you know you are most vulnerable to temptation, and put these at the top of your prayer list for the week. Ask God to keep you alert, to help you keep watch for the enemy. And if you don't know where you're most vulnerable to temptation, maybe it's time for a self-evaluation.

Matthew 26:47-56

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. - Isaiah 53:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

It must have been easy for Jesus to see the crowd coming with its many torches burning. He was on a hillside; and the crowd was below, winding its way through the Kidron Valley. The hour of His betrayal and arrest was near, and He urged the sleepy disciples to rouse themselves.

The scene described in today's text offers a number of clear contrasts, just as we have seen throughout our study of Holy Week. A large contingent of soldiers--probably several hundred--came heavily armed to seize a man who had been readily available every day in the temple (v. 55). And yet, as the soldiers moved forward to do their deed, an angelic army of overwhelming superiority simply watched from heaven.

Some contrasts we have come to expect. Here was Jesus accepting God's will for Him, while His disciples ran off and hid. In perhaps the greatest contrast of all, the people holding all the lights in that dark garden were actually the ones in darkness--terrible spiritual darkness that allowed them to crucify the Lord of glory.

When Judas gave Jesus the kiss of betrayal, he tarnished a sign of affection, a humble greeting that dated back to the earliest days.

In Psalm 2:12, we find the psalmist urging all nations to ""kiss the Son"" in homage and submission. This was the only kiss Jesus deserved to receive. But God allowed His Son to be handed over to sinners that the Scriptures might be fulfilled (Matt. 26:54).

The apostle John recorded one incredible instance in the arrest of Jesus, which he no doubt witnessed himself. When Jesus announced ""I am He,"" the soldiers drew back and fell to the ground under the power of God (John 18:6). They stayed there only a moment, but God had left another unmistakable witness to His Son.

Peter tried to defend Jesus, but by now the fisherman was floundering around like a fish out of water. Then, after his ill-advised strike, Peter joined the others in deserting Jesus.

Picture the sinless Lord, tied up and led away ""like a lamb to the slaughter"" (Isa. 53:7). Knowing that He did this for us, what can we do but worship, love, and serve Him?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's hard to think that Jesus would be ridiculed and beaten throughout a hellish night of mock trials and then led away to be crucified.

But the Scriptures do not hesitate to describe our Lord's sufferings on our behalf. It is necessary for us to understand the horror of sin and the awful price God paid to save us. Try to find time today to read Isaiah 53 prayerfully; and then spend some time in quiet, grateful worship, confession, and praise for God's great sacrifice for us.

Matthew 26:47-50; 27:1-5; Acts 1:15-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

In December, 1995, the Reader's Digest reported the results of an ""honesty experiment"" conducted by its editors. Wallets containing a name, local address and phone number, family pictures and other common items, as well as $50 in cash were dropped at various locations all across America. Ten wallets were ""lost"" in each location, including large and medium-sized cities, suburbs and small towns. Would the finders make an effort to locate the owners and return the wallets intact? Overall, two of every three wallets were returned.

It would be pleasant to go through our study this month without considering the man Judas, whom John says flatly was a thief; he actually took money from the disciples' money bag (John 12:6). No wallet would have been safe in Judas' hands. Indeed, the very mention of his name seems out of place in this season of bright lights and festivities. Judas would be an unwelcome guest at any Christmas party.

But our commitment to teach ""all the counsel of God"" (Acts 20:27, KJV) means we must deal with everything recorded in Scripture, including ugliness and wickedness. Judas certainly fits into those categories. Jesus Himself called Judas ""a devil"" and ""the one doomed to destruction"" (John 6:70; 17:12).

But there was no mistake made in the selection of Judas to be one of the Twelve. Jesus' reference to the fulfillment of Scripture (John 17:12) and Peter's word in the upper room (Acts 1:20) point to something greater in Judas' case than his own evil.

In the unfolding of God's sovereign will, Judas' terrible end was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. There is much we don't understand here, but let's not miss what we do know: Judas was a greedy person who allowed his love of silver to blind and corrupt him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Who really wants to be compared to Judas? Nonetheless, we can learn from his life. Perhaps the most important lesson is one that emerges from the interplay of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in Judas' life. The outworking of God's plan did not relieve Judas of responsibility for his actions. His decisions had consequences.

Matthew 26:47-56

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TODAY IN THE WORD

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TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's hard to think that Jesus would be ridiculed and beaten throughout a hellish night of mock trials and then led away to be crucified.

Matthew 26:36-27:26

They all answered, “Crucify him!” - Matthew 27:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

Painful Truth - A recent report found the United States to be “a cold and uncaring place to die, offering little relief from pain or even sympathy to people in their last weeks and months.” Few Americans die at home, although 70 percent say they would like to. Few hospitals offer hospice or palliative care, designed to make dying patients more comfortable. One in four nursing home residents experiences ongoing, unmanaged pain.

Jesus certainly knew the suffering of a lonely death, and what it means to be abandoned by everybody. But, despite the physical pain, unjust trials, and abandonment by his friends, His actions model for us the way of perfect obedience.

In Gethsemane, Jesus submitted to His Father’s will. This was not a simple matter, but involved strong emotions and intense prayer. Jesus knew exactly what was coming, and in obedience He stepped forward to fulfill God’s Word. He was secure enough in His own and His Father’s power not to use it for short-term relief.

During the trials, Jesus remained quiet, calm, and self-possessed. He did not respond to the leaders’ false accusations because He knew they had already made up their minds, but He did answer truthfully the only meaningful question they asked (Mt 26:63–64). To accomplish our redemption, He endured injustice, spite, mockery, and physical torture.

Unfortunately, there were also the negative examples around Jesus, and we can learn from them too. The disciples were too sleepy to pray with Him, and deserted Him when He was arrested. Peter vehemently denied Him. Judas betrayed Him, then committed suicide. The Jewish leaders encouraged lies and cruelty to get their revenge. Pilate ignored both his own observations and his wife’s dream, tried to wash his hands of responsibility, and turned Jesus over to the crowd, who had been easily swayed to become a bloodthirsty mob.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

With your family or small group, plan a special time of worship centered around Christ’s death and resurrection. We’re a bit past Easter, but don’t worry about that. To rejoice in our salvation is always in season!

Matthew 26:57-67

In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. - Matthew 26:64

TODAY IN THE WORD

From the time MBI graduates John and Betty Stam were executed in China by communist troops in 1934, more than twenty Moody alumni have given their lives in service to Jesus Christ. These martyrs include Lt. George Fox, a chaplain who gave his life jacket to a young sailor after their ship had been torpedoed by a German submarine during World War II. Chaplain Fox and three other chaplains on board, who also gave up their life jackets, were posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Most recently, last year Bonnie Witherall–a missionary nurse serving in Lebanon–was shot and killed out of anger at Christian presence in her community.

These courageous men and women were willing to serve Christ in the face of danger, and even to death, out of gratitude for what Jesus did for them on the cross. We are going to study several of the most crucial events in the week before the Savior's crucifixion. The first of Jesus' several trials held throughout the night after He was arrested in Gethsemane took place at the home of Israel's high priest.

Under Jewish law, two witnesses had to be ready to give testimony against the accused, and their testimonies had to agree. The trumped-up charges against Jesus were immediately obvious when even this basic requirement of justice could not be met. Finally, two men said that they remembered Jesus saying He would destroy and rebuild the temple in three days (v. 61).

Even that wasn't really accurate. Jesus had said to the Jews who demanded a miraculous sign from Him, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). But He was speaking of His death and resurrection.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We must understand these final days of Jesus on earth, culminating in His death and resurrection, if we want

Matthew 26:57-68

TODAY IN THE WORD

Counting the Cost - When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Jewish refugees poured into Lithuania. A large group went to the Japanese Consulate, where they found a sympathetic diplomat named Chiune Sugihara.

Against his government's orders, Sugihara issued exit visas for an estimated 6 Jews, writing them by hand almost nonstop for a month until the Soviets closed the embassy. His ""reward"" was eighteen months in a Soviet prison camp with his family after the war, and dismissal from his post when he returned to Japan. For years he lived in obscurity, feeling disgraced. But in 1985, Sugihara was honored by the Israeli government for his heroic efforts.

Stories of such sacrifice move us, as they should. People who rescue others at great cost to themselves deserve our respect. Chiune Sugihara's ultimate reward was being contacted years later by some of the Jewish people whose lives he had saved.

Jesus Christ paid the greatest price of all time to save others. The cost to Himself, and to God the Father, was so infinitely high that it will take us eternity to grasp its scope.

In unforgettable words and images, the Servant Song in Isaiah 52-53 tells us that the Servant did not suffer for Himself but for others. Not for those who blessed and honored Him for His sacrifice, but for those who despised, rejected, and mistreated Him--for all of us whose sins nailed Him to the Cross.

This scene in Matthew from Jesus' trial before the Jewish council and high priest gives us a glimpse into the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. A good deal of the ""punishment"" and the ""wounds"" laid on the Servant (Isa. 53:5) came at this beating by the soldiers after Jesus answered Caiaphas truthfully under oath (Mt. 26:63-64).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In response to the high priest's question, Jesus declared the truth of His future exaltation and glorious return.

Jesus' answer inflamed Caiaphas' hatred, but it should infuse us with hope. Here are three reasons for that hope: 1. Because Jesus is reigning in heaven, He has the power to answer prayer (Jn. 16:24); 2. Because Jesus is our High Priest (as we saw yesterday), we can approach our Lord with our needs; and 3. Because Jesus triumphed over death and is now at the Father's right hand, nothing we do for Him and in His name is ever wasted (1 Cor. 15:57-58).

Matthew 26:57-66

In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. - Matthew 26:64

TODAY IN THE WORD

One thing we learn in Scripture is that the reaction of people to Jesus the Messiah ran the gamut from humble worship to furious violence.

Consider the prophets who revealed so many details of the Messiah's person and ministry. They were clearly in awe of this Mighty One who would perfectly fulfill God's law, redeem Israel, and become the Savior of all mankind.

Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah must have been puzzled at times as they wrote about things far in the future which no one had ever witnessed. Peter even indicates that these servants longed to look ahead and see the unfolding of their prophecies (see tomorrow's study). The prophets were faithful to record every detail of the revelations they were given under the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

The people of Israel in Jesus' day were an interesting mixture. The passages we have read over the past few days show people reacting to Jesus with everything from open ridicule to hesitant faith.

Israel's religious leaders were another story. They did little more than yawn when they found out that the "King of the Jews" had been born in the unimportant village of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1-6). But that indifference quickly escalated to hostility when Jesus presented Himself as Israel's Messiah-King.

Their full fury fell on the Lord at the trials that preceded His crucifixion. Jesus' trial before the high priest Caiaphas wasn't even good legal procedure. The witnesses had no evidence against Christ, so they blatantly lied.

But here's the interesting thing. After guarding His identity from unbelievers, Jesus readily confessed to the high priest that He was the Messiah.

Jesus was just hours from His death. There was no reason to be concerned about the nation reacting to Him in the wrong way. It was more important that the high priest and those on the Jewish council understand exactly who it was they were condemning to death. They were crucifying God's Messiah and Son!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If we're honest, we'll have to admit that sometimes our response to the Lord ranges from worship and obedience to indifference.

But our commitment at Today in the Word is to help you follow the Lord in loving, obedient, and growing fellowship. Why not find time today for a short "retreat" with your Lord, a time where you can worship and adore Him?

Matthew 27

Matthew 27:1-44

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. - Isaiah 53:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

At the end of yesterday's passage Peter was weeping bitterly after his denial of Jesus. This is the last time in Matthew's Gospel that he appears by name, though his presence is implied in Matthew 28:16. Thankfully we have John's Gospel that records the restoration of Peter by Jesus (see John 21).

Our passage today opens with the contrast between Peter and Judas. Judas also felt remorse over his actions once he saw that Jesus was condemned (v. 3). He even took action in response to his guilt, attempting to return the money. But Judas confessed to the wrong people—the religious leaders didn't have the power of forgiveness that Judas needed. Sadly, even his regret didn't open his eyes to who Jesus really was.

The religious leaders demonstrated their spiritual blindness again in their encounter with Judas. They had no compunction about conspiring to murder someone, yet they were perplexed about what to do with the returned money. They continued to use God's law to keep up an appearance of righteousness, not to actually change their lives. They still refused to pursue mercy, humility, and justice out of love for God.

As the governor appointed by Rome, Pilate's greatest concern was keeping order, not enforcing justice. He understood that the religious leaders were jealous and felt threatened (Mt 27:18). He didn't understand that a political solution could never work, and his political methods could not release him from responsibility (Mt 27:17, 24). Jesus refused to grovel before him because Pilate had nothing—no power, no authority—that Jesus wanted. Unlike the wise men, Pilate refused to heed the truth about Jesus sent in a

dream (Mt 27:19).

The description of the torture of Jesus should still chill us in its brutality. The mocking insults are particularly tragic because they reveal such blindness: for Jesus to trust God and save others, He had to stay on the cross, not come down (Mt 27:42-43). He was the King of the Jews, the Son of God, bringing salvation—just not in the way that anyone expected.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Read or sing through the hymn, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”: “What thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain: / mine, mine was the transgression, but thine, the deadly pain. / Lo, here I fall, my Savior! ”˜Tis I deserve thy place; / look on me with thy favor, vouchsafe to me thy grace. / What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest Friend, / for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end? / O make me thine forever! And should I fainting be, / Lord, let me never never outlive my love to thee!”

Matthew 27:3-10; Acts 1:10-15

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. - Matthew 27:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Today we look at Judas, one of the more heart-rending characters in Scripture. Author Dorothy Sayers, in her play, The Man Born to be King, speculates that Judas “means to be faithful—and he will be faithful—to the light which he sees so brilliantly. What he sees is the true light—only he does not see it directly, but only its reflection in the mirror of his own brain; and in the end that mirror will twist and distort the reflection.” Sometimes we don’t acknowledge the fact that we really serve our own idea of reality.

Because we know the end of the story, we begin reading the Gospels with Judas as the villain. But we must remember that Judas gave up a great deal to follow Jesus, just like the other disciples. He stuck with Him when others left (John 6:60-71). He must have had many gifts and the trust of the other disciples to serve as treasurer. To see Judas with no good qualities reveals only what we hope for, because that would make his betrayal easier to explain.

The problem of Judas does not get easier if we look at Judas’s reaction to events. He “was seized with remorse” (Mt 27:3) and even returned the money he received. He knew that he betrayed “innocent blood” (Mt 27:4). This certainly looks like repentance. Why was he condemned?

Despite all appearances, Judas did not repent. This makes sense only when we remember that repentance is not about our sin, but God’s grace. Judas’s death evidences his failure. While suicide has many possible motives, one can be a kind of narcissism. Judas could not escape his shame and misery because his world was not big enough to let God in. Judas’s actions echo two Old Testament passages (Mt 27:9-10). Matthew first cites Jeremiah 32:6-9, where the prophet bought a field on the eve of exile. The Zechariah passage (Zech. 11:12-13) prophesies an ultimate rejection of the Good Shepherd. One can see why Matthew uses these texts. Judas had much promise, but rejected the One who could have truly saved him.

APPLY THE WORD

In the myth of Narcissus, the nymph Echo truly loved Narcissus, but he disdained her. She is, after all, not himself. Judas’s failure to see God’s love in the midst of his sin doomed him to a prison of his own making. We ourselves may never repent unless we realize that no sin is beyond God’s forgiveness, and none of us is beyond Christ’s redemption. Nothing this day should keep us from the throne of grace.

Matthew 27:27-66

When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two. - Matthew 27:50–51

TODAY IN THE WORD

A Remarkable Comeback - In 1963, only about four hundred breeding pairs of bald eagles could be found in the lower 48 states. But today, after a remarkable comeback, bald eagle pairs number more than five thousand–including those in Alaska and Canada, nearly ten thousand. They’ve recently been spotted building nests in Minneapolis, Florida, and Washington, D.C. Said one scientist: “The bald eagle is cited as one of the greatest success stories in endangered species recovery.” One reason we smile at this good news is because the bald eagle is a symbol of America. We associate the fierce, proud head of this large bird with our nation’s history and character. In a similar way, the Cross is the symbol of our faith, a powerful reminder of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice.

Today’s reading features a large cast for this central drama of history. The Jewish leaders continued to attack Jesus, insulting even His relationship with His Father. The disciples, having run away, were conspicuous by their absence. The Roman soldiers went

beyond their orders, torturing and mocking Jesus sadistically and “crowning” Him with thorns. The passersby jeered at Him as He hung on the cross–as if dying weren’t enough–and even the two criminals executed with Him joined in (vv. 39–44).

A few bright rays shine forth from several supporting characters: Simon of Cyrene (modern Libya), plucked from the crowd to carry the Cross, apparently had his life changed forever, since his sons Rufus and Alexander became believers (cf. Mark 15:21; Rom. 16:13). A Roman centurion responded in faith (v. 54). Joseph of Arimathea revealed his “secret discipleship” by claiming Jesus’ body. And several women remained faithful witnesses of all this when no one else did (vv. 55-56).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you have visual reminders of “taking up your cross daily”? We encourage you to make the Cross a concrete, meaningful part of your life through such means as wearing jewelry or displaying paintings in your home. While it is true that these things can be overdone or trivialized, that’s no reason to abandon them altogether. By considering carefully where and how images of the Cross appear in your life, you can remind yourself of Christ’s awe-inspiring sacrifice and recapture the power of this symbol.

Matthew 27:32-54

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. - 1 John 4:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

In The Heart of the Cross, Philip Graham Ryken reflects on the meaning of the Crucifixion:

“When Jesus said, 'It is finished,' He was announcing that He had done His job, that He had completed His task and finished His project. What He had finished was suffering for sin. The suffering of Jesus Christ was not tragic suffering. It was saving suffering. Before Jesus died on the cross, humanity was in bondage to sin. We were sold as slaves to sin, and we deserved to die in captivity. A price needed to be paid to redeem us, to buy us back from sin and death. But the price of redemption was a perfect sacrifice, a price we could not pay... Christ died for us, offering Himself as a sinless sacrifice, buying back our freedom by paying sin’s price.”

Jesus Christ was God’s perfect sacrifice of atonement. As you read the Crucifixion account again on this Good Friday, we hope, in light of this month’s focus on sacrifice, that it speaks to you with renewed power and depth.

We see in Matthew’s narrative exactly the same scene as was prophesied in yesterday’s reading from Isaiah. A Lamb is led to the slaughter. He’s an innocent victim, misunderstood by those witnessing the event. Yet He goes willingly, knowing that His punishment brings peace between God and man.

Jesus’ public execution was humiliating and painful in the extreme. The insults heaped on Him struck even at His relationship with His Father (Mt. 27:43). Thieves dying with Him felt themselves superior. Although all this suffering was intense, the most painful moment Jesus experienced was surely His separation from His Father (v. 46). Yet in the end, He gave up His spirit willingly (v. 50; cf. Jn. 10:17-18).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Is there a Good Friday service at your church ? We know that Friday is the end of a busy week of work or study for you, and that “going to church” may not be high on your list of relaxing activities. But don’t think of this as a duty--think of it as love. Your Savior, out of love for you, suffered and died. Your whole life, everything you are and do, is based on that. This time of worship can increase your love for your Savior.

Matthew 27:45-60

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? - Matthew 27:46

TODAY IN THE WORD

On the Cross, Jesus saw to the needs of His earthly mother even as He was being separated from His eternal Father.

In His third saying, Jesus took care of Mary's needs. Almost certainly a widow by this time, Mary needed someone to care for her. Jesus entrusted that duty to His beloved apostle, John, who readily accepted it.

This is a very tender scene. A sword must have pierced Mary's soul (Luke 2:35) as she watched her Son suffer such terrible agony. But His love for her must have been a great comfort.

The relationship between Jesus and Mary had been put on a different basis when He began His ministry. He had addressed her as ""Dear woman"" back at the wedding in Cana (John 2:4). It was a term of respect and affection, but it also signaled that their relationship would become more than mother and child. Mary would now need to come to Jesus as a sinner in need of a Savior.

In contrast, Jesus' relationship with His heavenly Father was of an entirely different kind. As we consider the fourth saying from the Cross, we find eternal God calling out to eternal God.

We cannot possibly understand all that happened in those awful moments when God the Father turned away from His beloved Son. Matthew notes that the three-hour, supernatural darkness was just starting to lift when Jesus cried out the words for which no audible reply came from heaven.

No one has ever been as alone or as deserted as Jesus was on the Cross. In those hours of darkness, God the Father placed the sins of all the world on His Son. Then God had to turn His back on the Son. Jesus suffered the pain of separation from God so that we who believe in Him would never have to know that agony.

Why did Jesus cry out loud? Because He wanted the people standing at the Cross, and all of us, to know that He had borne the punishment for sin. The bystanders, largely a group of unbelievers, mocked His supposed call for Elijah (Mt 27:46-47).

But we have a different choice today. Instead of mocking, we can believe.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Because Jesus endured separation from God in an hour of darkness, we never have to fear the darkness--or anything else on earth.

But if we're honest, we would all have to admit that there are times when fear grips us and refuses to let go. What are your fears today? Can the things you fear ever separate you from God's love and care? Since we know that nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:39), let God free you from your fears. Bring them to the Cross, and thank the Lord that Jesus paid the penalty to set you free.

Matthew 27:45-66

He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death. - Hebrews 2:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many consider the attempt to cover up a scandal to be worse than the original problem. Whether it is a child's lie to avoid responsibility for breaking a prized vase, or bribes paid to victims to keep them quiet in clergy-abuse cases, or breaking the law to keep a political scandal under wraps, the cover up reveals how far people will go to avoid facing the truth.

The cover up attempted by the religious leaders begins at the end of our passage and continues into Mt 28. Before we examine the cover up, we must first see the scandal from the beginning: the Son of God is hanging on a Roman cross, being executed. The most dreadful part of this scene is the silence of God. Twice before He has affirmed Jesus as His Son (Mt 3:17; 17:5). Now as Jesus cries out a question that shakes us in its torment, no answer comes back (Mt 27:46; cf. Psalm 22). Far worse than being abandoned by the disciples is the separation from God. Jesus endured this ultimate agony so that we would never have to experience it.

Matthew includes examples of faithfulness in this account. The mother of Zebedee's sons once asked for power for her sons and was told that she had no idea what she asked; now she saw what was happening to Jesus and still remained with a group of women followers. Joseph of Arimathea risked his reputation and gave up his symbol of status in order to care for the body of Jesus.

The religious leaders thought the crucifixion would repudiate Jesus' claims; they didn't know that in fact this would validate them. They remembered (seemingly unlike the disciples) that Jesus had predicted His resurrection. They even took the prophecy seriously. But they thought that they could overcome the resurrection in the same way that they thought they had destroyed Jesus' life—through military might. They requested the most powerful force available, a Roman guard, ignorant of the far greater power of God (Mt 27:65-66).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you have some additional time for Bible study and prayer, here are some passages to help enlarge your understanding of what Jesus did on the cross: Isaiah 53; Hebrews 2; and Philippians 2:1-8. You might choose some of these verses to memorize, or to keep on notecards to review throughout the coming week. Ask the Lord for the faith to follow like the women at the cross and the courage to serve and sacrifice like Joseph of Arimathea.

Matthew 27:45-60 John 19:25-27;

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? - Matthew 27:46

TODAY IN THE WORD

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TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Because Jesus endured separation from God in an hour of darkness, we never have to fear the darkness--or anything else on earth.

Matthew 27:45-56; Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? - Psalm 22:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sometimes a poet captures an entire nation's heart. For many, Robert Frost expresses the American spirit. Others point to Walt Whitman as the quintessential American voice. For ancient Israel, King David gave voice to their praise, fears, and faith. In Psalm 22, David consoled himself in the face of profound terror by recalling God's past faithfulness. Even when he felt utterly forsaken, he took refuge in God's character.

Centuries later, this lament became a prayer on the lips of our dying Savior. Although David didn't know that he was writing prophetically, Psalm 22 perfectly articulated Jesus' experience on the Cross. Utterly forsaken and mocked, Jesus cried out with the haunting question, "Why?" Yet as Pastor Brian Morgan says, "In his darkest hour, Jesus follows the practice of his whole life: He prays to His Father."

Matthew tells us that three hours after Jesus was placed on the cross, He cried this lament in Aramaic (Mt 27:46). A cry that came from the very core of His soul! This was the cry of One completely cut off from God . . . cut off from all goodness, all mercy, all hope.

As we read this probing cry, we have to ask ourselves, "Why would God forsake Jesus? Why would the Father forsake His beloved Son?" We must ask ourselves this question, because it was for our sake that the Father did this. 2Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The Father's abandonment of His Son must have been wrenching.

Those standing nearby mistakenly thought that Jesus was crying out to Elijah, since first-century Jews believed that Elijah would precede the Messiah's coming. But more than mistaken, these bystanders were unwilling to really hear Jesus' question. They taunted Jesus to see if Elijah really would come (Mt 27:49).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes Christians think it isn't spiritual to lament. But David realized his need to cry out to God, and so did our Lord Jesus.

Matthew 28

Matthew 28:1-10

TODAY IN THE WORD

How "Fit" Are You? - If you've been to many garage sales featuring ""gently used"" exercise bikes and other fitness equipment for sale, the following statistics won't surprise you. According to recent studies, only twenty-two percent of American adults get enough exercise to produce any lasting health benefits. And apparently our children aren't doing any better. A study at Columbia Children's Hospital in Ohio revealed that today's children are heavier and have significantly higher cholesterol levels than children did fifteen years ago. Unless something changes, according to one of the researchers, three out of every eight American children will eventually die of heart disease.

Those are sobering numbers, and they suggest a question for us to think about in this closing study on worship. What kind of results would be generated if the Holy Spirit were to measure the ""fitness"" level of our worship?

We hope the numbers would be positive. But whatever the case, we want to leave you with the encouraging reminder that worship is a choice of the will, as well as a response of the emotions. This means no power on earth or in hell can keep you from worshiping the Lord.

Mary Magdalene and the other women who met Jesus at His empty tomb are a great example of this. They were wholehearted

worshipers of Jesus. The dramatic moment recorded in Matthew 28 was, of course, not the first expression of their commitment to Christ. They had believed and followed Him for some time.

They were also obedient worshipers. We know from Luke 23:56 that on the Saturday Jesus lay in the tomb, they obeyed God's command and observed the Sabbath.

In addition, those faithful women were willing worshipers. They chose to follow Jesus. They came to the tomb that morning of their own accord, not knowing what they would find. And when they saw the resurrected Christ, they readily fell at his feet and worshiped Him (v. 9).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's a brief self-evaluation you can take today to help measure your worship ""fitness."" You might rate yourself from 1 to 10 on each of these questions.

1. Think about the priority that worship has in your life. Is it only nice, or a necessity?

2. How about the practice of worship? Is it part of your daily routine, or only a once-a-week occurrence?

3. Consider the product of your worship. Do you see measurable spiritual growth that can be attributed at least in part to the quality of your worship?

Matthew 28:1-10

Since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. - Romans 6:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Past headlines for April 22 have seen a number of interesting and significant events. In 1918, Germany’s ace World War I pilot, Manfred von Richthofen, better known as the “Red Baron,” was killed in battle. In 1971, ruthless Haitian dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier died, passing power to his son, “Baby Doc.” In 1972, two British citizens completed the first-ever rowboat crossing of the Pacific Ocean, rowing 8,000 miles before landing in Australia. And in 1994, former President Richard Nixon, one of the most controversial American politicians of the twentieth century, died of a stroke at the age of 81.

Looking at “this day in history” gives us some historical perspective. But no day in history has been more significant than the one covered in today’s Scripture reading. Resurrection Sunday (tomorrow) carried the most momentous “headlines” the world has ever seen!

Jesus’ resurrection should have been expected. He had said He would return to life on several occasions (Mt. 28:6). The women to whom the news was first given felt fear and joy...but more importantly, they obeyed the angel’s instructions to inform the disciples. Jesus met them in this act of obedience (Mt. 28:9), as He does all who trust and obey. The women fell down before Him in worship, clasping His feet, overwhelmed by His power and presence.

Not one of the Old Testa-ment sacrificial animals had ever come back to life. But Christ, the perfect, voluntary sacrifice, not only laid down His life, but also took it up again (Jn. 10:17-18). As today’s verse points out, the resurrection broke the power of death once and for all. This is the foundation of our faith (1 Cor. 15:3-8, 12-23).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Scripture memorization is an excellent discipline for internalizing God’s truth. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Matthew 28:1-10

TODAY IN THE WORD

One evening during the Easter season of 1874, pastor, author and composer Robert Lowry was having his devotions when the familiar words of the angel's announcement at Jesus' tomb struck him in a fresh, new way. As Lowry pondered these verses, a creative response stirred within him. He went to the pump organ in the parlor of his home, and soon both the words and music of a new hymn were on paper. The hymn was published the next year--and today, Lowry's beloved Easter anthem ""Christ Arose"" is still stirring the hearts of God's people.

Whenever heaven has an announcement to make concerning Jesus, we know that we are in for an incredible blessing and benefit.

For instance, the angel's announcement at Jesus' birth revealed perhaps the best news of all: our need for a Savior had been met (Luke 2:11).

Then at Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven announced that God the Father was pleased with His Son. That is important because it also meant the Father would be pleased with the Son's death for sinners on Calvary.

When Jesus hung on the cross, heaven made another very crucial announcement, this one without words. As Jesus yielded His spirit to the Father and died, the sky grew dark and the heavy veil in the Jerusalem temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Luke 23:44-45). The message was that the way to God is now open!

Then we come to the angel's announcement on Easter Sunday morning. Jesus' resurrection proved that God is perfectly satisfied with His Son's death (Rom. 4:25). The result is salvation for us!

As we join believers in many nations today in remembering our Lord's death and resurrection, we have yet one more heavenly announcement to look forward to--the Second Coming!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus' last words on the cross are the heart of the gospel's good news: ""It is finished"" (John 19:30). That is, the debt of sin has been fully paid. Could it be that you are still carrying the debt of your sin on your own shoulders today? If so, Easter can be the day of your salvation! Simply come to God and admit your sin (Rom 3:23). Ask Him to forgive you and to exchange your sins for the righteousness of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:21).

Matthew 28:1-15

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. - Matthew 28:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Empty Tomb - Second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr wrote a book in which he defended the faith against the arguments of “Trypho, a Jew.” In his Dialogue, Justin accused,

> “[Y]ou have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver, whom we crucified, but His disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where He was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that He has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.”

A century after Jesus’ death and resurrection, it appears that the lie manufactured by the Pharisees was still in circulation (Mt. 28:14). The religious leaders had remembered Jesus’ prophecy of resurrection and asked for every precaution to be taken so that the body would not be stolen. The power of Rome sealed the tomb, but it wasn’t enough!

Following the Resurrection, the Jewish leaders bribed the Roman guards to spread the lie. The soldiers, who could have been severely punished for their negligence, probably reported to the Jews out of fear. To believe that the same disciples who had fled somehow gained the courage to commit a serious crime made no sense, not to mention that sleeping soldiers could not have witnessed the crime . . . but people believe what they wish.

The first witnesses to the Resurrection were the women who had remained faithful. To the news, “He has risen,” they responded with holy fear. They rejoiced because their Master was alive. They obeyed the angel’s instructions, hurrying to share the good news with the remaining eleven disciples. When Jesus Himself appeared to encourage them, they bowed at His feet in worship and humility (Mt. 28:8–10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Quick quiz: What is the running theme throughout this year in Today in the Word? “God’s Wisdom for Real Life.” That’s one reason we’ve entitled this study of Matthew, “Wisdom of Jesus’ Kingdom.”

Matthew 28:1-20

Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. - Matthew 28:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1792, at the age of 31, William Carey published his book, An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens. Carey argued that Matthew 28:18-20 still obligates Christians to spread the gospel. This view wasn't popular at the time; Carey was reportedly told, “Young man, when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid

or mine!” Carey remained steadfast in his commitment, and sailed for India the following year. His impact was so great that he is now known as the “father of modern missions.”

An angel appeared at the beginning of the story in Matthew, and now an angel appears again with the most magnificent news ever delivered: “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said” (v. 6). God has raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus' words are true. He can be trusted, followed, and worshiped. Even two thousand years later, this announcement should inspire us to joy and obedience and worship.

Some have tried to argue that Jesus' resurrection is a nice idea - He lives on in our hearts, or He's alive because we remember Him. Scripture denounces such a notion— Jesus' resurrection was a physical event that occurred at a particular place and time. He was touched by the women. He walked and ate. If His resurrection is simply a trick of our imagination, then we have no hope that anything He said was true, and no hope for our own future (see 1 Cor. 15:12-58).

The religious leaders took their cover up a step further, bribing the guards and concocting a story that people believed even though it made no sense—how could the guards know the disciples stole the body if they were asleep? When confronted with the most dramatic evidence for the truth, some still preferred to embrace a lie.

Matthew's Gospel closes with a beautiful summary of the entire book: Jesus has all authority; therefore we should make disciples as He has taught us, and because of His resurrection He will be with us always.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Every reader is invited into the story at the end of Matthew 28. One commentator has called these concluding verses, “the table of contents placed at the end.” Jesus has demonstrated His authority over every element, including death. He has taught us what it means to be a disciple. And He has promised to be with us. Now how will we respond? Will we make ever more ridiculous excuses to avoid the truth? Or will we follow and obey with hearts full of love and gratitude?

Matthew 28:16-20 (See also Matthew 10:1-4 above)

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. - Matthew 28:18-19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jesus' commission to His disciples is a good place to end this month's study. The Lord's life was given over to seeking and saving the lost, and making disciples. We are called and equipped to do the same.

This is also a good day to draw a final illustration from the life of D. L. Moody. No matter which way we measure Mr. Moody's life, the results are extraordinary. He was consumed with a passion for souls, both in evangelism and in training people for ministry. He was a renowned evangelist and a world figure. Moody also founded four schools and personally trained countless people in ministry. We honor Dwight L. Moody's lasting contributions to the cause of Christ in this centennial year of his death (Moody died December 22, 1899).

Like Moody, we can make Christ's commission the passion of our lives, regardless of our occupation, training, or interests. Jesus' authority for ministry has no contingencies attached to it. In other words, it is not dependent on our faith or lack of it, or our willingness. God the Father has conferred total authority on Jesus, period.

If it has been a while since you have read these verses, notice that even here, weeks after Jesus' resurrection and appearances to the disciples, Matthew says that some still doubted whether it was He (Mt. 28:17).

But interestingly, Jesus did not address or even acknowledge this doubt, the way He had done earlier with Thomas. There was a larger agenda on God's mind--and whoever the doubter or doubters may have been, all eleven of the apostles got the message.

Jesus closed with the promise of His abiding presence, the secret to making use of the promised authority. Within days of this scene, Jesus ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9-11), and the promised Holy Spirit came at Pentecost (Acts 2). This transaction turned the disciples from fearful followers into powerful witnesses whose passion for souls was unstoppable.

Before finishing today, we need to say again that God can do the same for us. His authority and His will have not changed. The only variable is our response to Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus has told us to go and minister in His authority, which encompasses everything in heaven and earth.

That's all the authority you will ever need! As you look back over the month, has the Lord put something on your heart--a desire to

serve in some area, a special burden for someone--that you may feel is too challenging for you? If you are convinced it is God's will for you, then draw on the authority He has made available to His disciples. Thank Him that in His strength you can do anything (Phil. 4:13), and then go for it!

Matthew 28:16-20

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. - Matthew 28:18–19

TODAY IN THE WORD

A nomadic herder in the deserts of Africa recently told a missionary, “When you can put your church on the back of a camel, then I will think that Christianity is meant for us Somalis. We only see you Christians praying once a week inside a special building.” The missionary was deeply challenged by the herder’s statement, and later said, “This motivates me every day to look for ways to show the relevance of Jesus Christ to people who aren’t used to living in settled communities.”

That missionary has the right idea. Jesus did not commission us to make other people into clones of ourselves, but into His disciples. Jesus Christ loves all the people of the world and has sent His followers into every corner of the earth with the gospel of salvation. And so today, dedicated missionaries live a nomadic lifestyle in order to reach nomads with the love of Christ. Why would these missionaries try to “put their church on the back of a camel?” Because they take the Great Commission very seriously.

The heart of Jesus’ instruction, and the only command in these verses, is to “make disciples.” We accomplish this as we go to where the people are, baptize them following Jesus’ example as they are won to Him, and teach them the truths of His Word. Every Christian is included in the Savior’s call, since all of us owe Him an unpayable debt of love, and we should share that love with others who don’t know Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many of us can identify with the doubters. Maybe that’s because doubt comes so naturally to us.

Matthew 28:16-20

Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. - Matthew 28:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last Words - Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, died last July of pulmonary fibrosis, a progressive lung disease. Some of his last words are inspiring:

> “Rejoice with me because I am no longer in this earthly tent. I am in the presence of the living God, satisfied at the deepest core of my being. . . . You are a child of the God of the universe. Surrender to Him. Become His slave. I can assure you, after more than 50 years of experience, there is no greater adventure than following Him. He cares for you. Take Him at His Word.”

Last words reveal a person’s character and priorities (cp Paul's last words in 2Ti 4:1-3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)–the ways by and reasons for which he lived his life. So we should pay close attention to the last words spoken on earth by our Lord Jesus, found at the end of today’s reading.

Before His Ascension, Jesus entrusted to His disciples the command and legacy we know as the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18–20). Its foundation is the authority and presence of Christ. God gave Him all authority, which He demonstrated in His victory over death and sin. To have Him always by our side is a tremendous encouragement and perhaps the ultimate fulfillment of His name, “Immanuel–God with us.”

Because Jesus has all authority, we can and must do what He said: go and make disciples. “Go” implies that movement or change of some sort is required–we think of Abraham and his journey of faith. “Make disciples” means we’re not trying to score mere converts, but to grow and cultivate lifelong followers of Christ. This reminds us that salvation is a holistic process–beginning with justification against the death penalty of sin, continuing with sanctification or progress toward Christ-likeness, and finishing with glorification, the climax of God’s redemptive work.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Before we move on to next month’s study of Ecclesiastes, let’s make sure that the lessons from Matthew have sunk in. Matthew is a Gospel–a message of “good news.” The good news is that Jesus came to save sinners from death, offering us instead the gift of eternal life (John 3:16).

More Last Words - As professor of vocal physiology at Boston University, Alexander Graham Bell had many deaf students. One of them was a young woman named Mabel Hubbard, who later became his wife. The Bells lived happily together for 45 years. In 1922, as Bell lay dying after a long illness, Mabel whispered to him, “Don’t leave me.” Unable to speak, Bell traced with his fingers the sign for ***no***. With this last silent message, the inventor of the telephone took his final leave of his beloved wife.

Matthew 28:16-20

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy. - Jude 24

TODAY IN THE WORD

Amy Carmichael’s life seems to have been directed by a series of specific verses from the Bible. We can see how Scripture influenced her life since she had the habit of noting in her Bible the lesson learned and the date it occurred. When her father died when she was 18, her mother frequently quoted Nahum 1:7: “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him.” This strengthened Amy’s already deep faith.

A few years later, as Amy was involved in evangelism and preparing for missionary work, a sermon based on Jude 24 riveted her attention. This verse was to become in many ways a life verse. Soon after this, Amy was eating with several others who had also heard the same sermon. When some of them began to complain about the food, Amy was convicted with the thought: “What does it matter about mutton chops? O Lord, we know that Thou art able to keep us from falling.” (Jude 1:24KJV) Amy recorded September 23, 1886 as the “mutton-chop, keep-us-from-falling” day in her Bible next to Jude 24KJV.

But the verse that had perhaps the greatest influence on Amy Carmichael was Matthew 28:19-20, the Great Commission. For Amy, this pivotal passage crystallized into a two-word command: Go ye! Like the disciples waiting to be sent out, Amy understood that these two verses were God’s call for her life. In 1893, at age twenty-five, Amy heeded the call “Go ye,” by going Japan. Once she set forth, she never turned back.

She eventually established the Dohnavur Fellowship in southern India, which ministered to young children rescued from temple prostitution and to young widows who otherwise would be killed following their husbands’ deaths.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One of the best biographies of Amy Carmichael, A Chance to Die, was written by someone who was no stranger to missions herself. Elisabeth Elliot and her husband, Jim Elliot, began their life together as missionaries in Ecuador. In 1956, her husband was martyred while ministering to the Auca Indians. We recommend either Carmichael’s biography, or the one that Elliot wrote about her husband, Shadow of the Almighty. Both are inspiring examples of what it means to follow the Lord and to live life completely for Him.

Matthew 28:16-20

Go and make disciples of all nations. - Matthew 28:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last year, during its annual World Christian Week, Calvary Bible Church of Neenah, Wisconsin, decided to try something different. Historically a white community, the area has recently become home to Hispanics, Kurds, and Hmong as well. CBC decided to organize a “Fiesta Familiar” (family fiesta) to reach out to the Hispanic community.

The fiesta included music, food, games for children, information on social services, Christian literature, and an evangelistic talk entitled Jesus Is the Only Way–all in Spanish, all for free. Also helping to organize the event were Jorge Aguilar and Luis Asibinac, originally of Guatemala and leaders of the local Christian Latin Ministry. The event was a success!

As the illustrations in this month’s devotions make clear, there are many ways to obey the Great Commission, to fulfill our task of making disciples of all nations. Discipleship is the focus in Matthew’s version of the Great Commission, the one most familiar to many of us.

Jesus’ command here has one action: “make disciples” (Mt. 28:19). In Greek, “go” is not a separate action, but part of this main action. To make disciples is more than merely making converts. “Converts” have trusted Christ, whereas “disciples” are actively following Him and growing in their faith. In other words, the task of missions does not end at the point of salvation.

What are other features of Christ’s command? We are to base our obedience to this command upon the authority of God (Mt. 28:18–19). Our target is nothing less than “all nations,” or all people groups. Two key results that should flow from our mission activity are baptism–a symbol of spiritual rebirth (cf. Rom. 6:3–4)–and the teaching of the Word (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15). The purpose of

teaching is to spur obedience and Christlikeness (cf. John 14:15).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How can your church reach the surrounding community for Christ? You might be able to do something like the “Fiesta Familiar” described in today’s illustration.

Matthew 28:16-20

Go and make disciples of all nations. - Matthew 28:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf was a committed promoter of missionary work during the eighteenth century. Born a nobleman, he was inspired by German Pietists, as well as a painting of Christ wearing the crown of thorns, to a life of Christian service. The painting contained an inscription, “All this I did for you, what are you doing for me?” which resonated deeply with the young count. He helped to found the Moravian church, used his money and prestige for Christian causes, and mobilized missionaries to go to people such as the Native Americans and places such as the West Indies.

Fulfilling the Great Commission is another core responsibility of the church. In all likelihood Jesus taught the Great Commission repeatedly in various forms in the days between His Resurrection and Ascension (see Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:8). In all the versions, the main idea is the same: Preach the gospel to all nations, and teach those who believe to follow Christ. We call these inseparable activities “evangelism,” “missions,” and “discipleship.” As in the days of the early church, they are to be done on the basis of Christ's authority (Mt. 28:18).

In today's reading, the Great Commission revolves around four verbs (vv. 19-20). “Go” involves movement, specifically, to follow wherever God leads even if we do not understand or agree (cf. Heb. 11:8). “Make disciples” implies that the goal of witnessing is not just to count converts but to train committed and obedient followers. “Baptizing” is a way of indicating that commitment, a solemn ceremony performed in the name of the entire Trinity. “Teaching” shows again the centrality of the Word to the whole endeavor.

Just as the Great Commission began with Christ's authority, it ends with His presence and by implication, His enabling power. Best of all, “to the very end of the age” means the promise is for us too!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Most churches have missionaries and missions programs that they support—are you familiar with the missions activity of your church? Perhaps you could “adopt” one or more missionary families and keep up with their ministry, birthdays, and family events through letters or e-mails. Or maybe you could volunteer to help sort food or clothing to donate to needy families. If your church has an evangelism team, they would certainly welcome additional prayer support. There's a way for all of us to be involved in missions!

Matthew 28:18-20

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. - 2 Corinthians 13:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

The movie Star Wars follows the adventures of young Luke Skywalker, who rescues the beautiful princess Leia and saves the galaxy from the evil Darth Vader. In the process, the aged Obi Wan Kenobi instructs Luke in the ways of “the Force”—a power that mysteriously guides and protects Luke as he battles evil. Throughout this movie, the defenders of good encourage one another with the benediction, “May the Force be with you.”

Unlike the impersonal Force, the Holy Spirit is a Person who intimately lives within believers. Yet for many Christians, the Holy Spirit seems more like the nebulous Force of Star Wars than the third Person of the Trinity. This false thinking impacts the way that we relate to the Holy Spirit and understand His ministry. We can never appreciate God's great gift of the Holy Spirit if we think of Him as some impersonal force or power!

Many Christians have a hard time understanding the Holy Spirit, so this month we'll explore what the Bible teaches us about Him and His ministry. We begin by stressing that the Holy Spirit is completely equal with the Father and the Son, as our passage from Matthew affirms. Before His ascension, Jesus charged His disciples to make new disciples. Then He instructed them to baptize and teach new converts. Baptizing in “the name of” signified the allegiance of the converts to the triune God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It's clear from this command that the Holy Spirit is an equal member of the Godhead. This same truth is expressed in Paul's

benediction to the Corinthians, our verse for today. It may be helpful to think of the three members of the triune God in this way: 1 x 1 x 1 = 1. Each member of the Trinity is one person and together they comprise the one God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Describing the Holy Spirit as the third member of the Trinity helps to understand His ministry. The Father sends His Son to pay for our sin; then the Holy Spirit makes Jesus Christ's atoning work effective within us. In his book, The Holy Spirit, Billy Graham writes, “If we wish to . . . live victoriously, we need this two-sided gift God has offered us: first, the work of the Son of God for us; second, the work of the Spirit of God in us.”