



# Blessed to Be a Blessing

## Lenten Study

### Day 1

---

**Read: Luke 14:25-35**

#### Introduction

Lent seems like a good time to think about the meaning of Christian discipleship and to look at various aspects of it, so that's what we will do over the next 40 days. According to the *New Believer's Bible*, "Many people do not realize that Jesus has disciples in this day and age. While every disciple is a believer, not every believer is a disciple. A disciple is someone who has made a wholehearted commitment to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord. In one sense, you might call discipleship 'radical Christian living.' When you truly make a commitment to be Christ's disciple, you will be living the Christian life as it was meant to be lived. Anything short of discipleship is settling for less than God desires."

In our Bible passage for today Jesus teaches about discipleship. There are several aspects of it that he makes very clear. The first is that Jesus is to have priority (over family, for instance) in our lives. The second is that we are to bear whatever burdens of discipleship might be required of us (the cross) in following Jesus. The third is that we are to count the cost of following him before we begin the journey so we won't be easily discouraged and turn back to our old way of life. The fourth is that we are to be salt to the world, flavoring others with God's love rather than being blended into the mix of worldliness about us.

In *The Workbook on Abiding in Christ*, Maxie Dunnam says this: "We talk and act as though 'discipleship' is a special vocation to which some Christians are called, while the masses may live as Christians without this 'deeper level' of commitment and devotion." And Dallas Willard has said that most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have not yet decided to follow Christ. The call of Christ is to follow. Following him is not optional for Christians. Disciples follow the call.

*R&D As we start this journey together, what does Christian discipleship mean to you? Do you consider yourself a disciple? Why or why not?*

*Prayer: Lord God, help me to become the person You are counting on me to be.*

### Day 2

---

**Read: Romans 12:9-18**

#### Love and Service

The Bible, particularly the New Testament, has much to say about love. The world also talks about love a great deal, though often in a different sense from the Bible's interpretation of the word. The word "love" has become so commonplace in our vocabulary that it is easy to confuse its real meaning with the meaning which the world gives it. Yet, no word—no concept—is so basic to the lives of Christians. Love is what Christ came to show us.

Therefore, as we begin to look at ourselves and at Christian discipleship, let us consider Paul's definition of love. Instead of the more familiar passage (1 Corinthians 13) in which Paul writes poetically of love, our reading for today gives us a practical, almost "nuts and bolts" view of love.

Paul makes clear what love is and what it is not. Verse 9 means that love must be sincere. Every good thing has its false imitations, and love is no exception. And few things weaken Christian ministry more greatly than token good will disguised as love. Paul, in verses 10-12, gives us some practical ways to demonstrate sincere love. First, it must have its foundation in real affection and not simply be the performance of a duty. Second, it must express itself in a genuine desire to see the best in others, "in honor, preferring (giving place to) one another." Third, it must show itself in generous giving and warm hospitality.

Rejoice together and weep together. Paul says the Christian community will be strengthened through prayer, grow in a spirit of hope and patience, and show forth love. What demands this love places on us! These are tests of discipleship.

*R&D The Bible makes it clear that Christ values highly the small acts of kindness which we show one another. Often, it is the most insignificant thing we do for another person that is a turning point in that person's life, a time when we unselfishly show God's love to one who is in more desperate need than we might know.*

Prayer: *Lord, make me ever mindful of the needs of others.*

---

### Day 3

---

**Read: 2 Corinthians 4:1-6**

#### **The Light of Joy**

We have reflected on Paul's definition of love. Christian love is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) along with joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. Let's consider the other fruit of the Spirit, beginning with joy.

The world views joy as akin to happiness. The Christian disciple knows joy has a deeper meaning. The Christian can be filled with joy at a moment of great unhappiness because joy is an inner quality dependent on a right relationship with God. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding us, we are assured of God's presence within us. A person's initial encounter with God can be a moment of great joy that overflows and is recognized by others immediately. The ongoing joy of the Christian disciple is greater, more subtle. Yet, at any moment, that joy may shine forth in its true light: the Light of Christ in the life of the disciple.

Paul had that joy amid the greatest of toils and tribulations in fulfilling his commission to spread the Gospel. He makes it clear that he has no selfish reasons for preaching the Gospel. He has been commissioned by God to declare the truth, and that is what he is going to do in spite of the odds against him. Some will reject the message because they are blinded by the god of this world—Satan. The supernatural powers of evil, although subordinate to God, are real. Those who follow the ways of evil find it very difficult to see the Light of Christ that Paul reveals.

Verse 6 is a reference to Genesis 1:3, "And God said, 'Let there be light.'" In the first creation, God's command brought light into the world. In re-creation through Christ, light comes to the heart of the individual. Paul had experienced his own heavenly vision of the Light of Christ on the Road to Damascus, and the Light of Christ has shined forth from the faces of Christ's servants down through the centuries. That is the joy of discipleship.

R&D *In what ways do you see the Light of Christ in other Christians and in yourself?*

Prayer: *"This little light, I'm gonna let it shine."*

---

#### Day 4

---

**Read: Luke 12:22-34**

##### Consider the Lilies

Peace is another fruit of the Spirit. It should be a characteristic of the Christian disciple. The world regards peace as freedom from hostility or strife, something you have because nothing bad is happening, or affecting you. It is the fortunate absence of something unpleasant. Christian peace is something else altogether. It is the absence of anxiety; this peace results when we see situations and circumstances from God's point of view. The disciple can be at peace in the middle of hostility or strife.

In our reading for today, Jesus tells us to put aside anxious thoughts, that we may be filled with his peace. Jesus deals with the issue of worrying about our future needs. Anxiety can paralyze us. It can drain our energy and prevent us from making the right decisions and doing the right things.

Jesus is not encouraging his followers to be thoughtless or to fail to carry out their responsibilities to others and to themselves. Insurance, investments, and savings can be proper means of Christian stewardship. Jesus wishes to lead us away from that worry that concentrates on material things and makes them the primary focus of our attention. Anxiety reveals a basic lack of faith in God who knows what we need. He will take care of us, if we look first to Him and second to our material needs.

We are being told to put our priorities in order. Our first priority should be the kingdom of God. As our first concern, we should bring ourselves and everyone else into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that he may be Lord of our lives. If that is truly our goal, our hearts will be fixed on him. If we are ready and willing to do the will of God, we can be sure that He will make us able by providing for our material needs. We must realize, however, that God's estimate of our requirements may be much less than our own.

R&D *In what way or ways are you not at peace? What can you do about that?*

Prayer: *My intended focus, Lord, is on the kingdom of God; grant me Your peace.*

---

#### Day 5

---

**Read: James 5:7-11**

##### Patience

Another fruit of the Spirit is patience. Patience is truly hard for us to attain, particularly in the activist, instant-everything world in which we live. The shape of our whole society is mounted to do battle against waiting. The only thing the world seems willing to wait for is death.

It is easy to believe, then, that patience comes as a result of God's grace. It must be the work of the Spirit within us, because it is so foreign to our human nature. James gives us a biblical viewpoint on patience. The early church looked to the Second Coming of the Lord as only a brief time away. James urged his brethren to be patient until then. He used a homespun illustra-

tion to make his point: the farmer can do nothing to speed the maturing of his crop; he must wait patiently for the rains.

James knew the problems that the church was encountering. As it grew, as it lived in community, as it faced a hostile world, tempers flared and voices grumbled. These people lived in the freshness of the new kingdom rung in by Jesus' death and resurrection so few years before. They saw the possibility of perfection, but their humanity hung on them like a pall. While they waited, they must grow in faith. They must not blame one another for the problems that surrounded them.

James cautioned them not to break the commandment that forbade them to judge one another (Matthew 7:1). He warned them that judgment by Him who is fit to judge would be the consequence. Having warned them, James then gave good examples for Christians disciples to follow. The prophets were particularly long-suffering. They endured patiently. Is it too much to expect us to be patient in our relatively peaceful existence?

*R&D It has been said that we should never pray for patience unless we are prepared to receive what God might send to teach us patience. How are you doing on the patience issue?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to slow down and smell the roses.*

---

## Day 6

---

**Read: Luke 19:1-10**

### **Making Our Faith Personal**

Another fruit of the Spirit is kindness. "Kindness denotes excellence of character in the sense of a due regard for the fragile nature of human personality and for human need" (*The New Bible Commentary: Revised*). Kindness carries with it a keen sensitivity to the needs of others, and a desire to meet those needs.

In our reading for today we get a good picture of how Jesus put kindness into practice. Jesus reached out to Zaccheus. Jesus' sensitivity was so great that he could understand what it meant for a small, wealthy man, chief of the publicans, to climb up a sycamore tree just to see him pass by.

It was Jesus who spoke. He called Zaccheus by name and invited himself to Zaccheus' house. By climbing that tree Zaccheus had gone as far as he could to humble himself. Jesus acknowledged that act and brought it to fulfillment. All that was necessary to bring Zaccheus to the point of repentance and the beginning of a new life was the openness and acceptance of our Lord.

Being sensitive to others is essential for effective Christian discipleship. It is of primary importance to live a life of openness to the needs and feelings, thoughts and aspirations of those around us. We should be able to respond to the unspoken request, to see below the surface of events, to sense the feelings behind the things that are said. We desperately need to listen, with our ears and all of the sensitivity God gives us, and to bring reality to what the other person does not have the ability to ask or pray for. Jesus did that for Zaccheus and completely turned his life around.

*R&D Does this teaching give you a new perspective on kindness? In what ways might you begin to allow this fruit of the Spirit to blossom more productively in your life?*

Prayer: *Lord, please help me to be more sensitive and responsive to the needs of others.*

---

## Day 7

---

**Read: Matthew 12:22-37**

### Choosing Sides

At this point it may be helpful to pause in our study of the fruit of the Spirit and look at some other basics of discipleship.

In our reading, the Spirit of God was on Jesus, and he was able to cast demons out of those who were possessed, as well as to perform various healing miracles. Jesus brought to the world a new age in which God's Holy Spirit showed forth in power. That is why John the Baptist told of the coming baptism of the Spirit (Matthew 3:11). Jesus demonstrated the power of the Spirit through the working of miracles.

The Pharisees attacked Jesus by arguing that the Spirit of God through which Jesus acted was in fact Beelzebub, the prince of demons. In so doing, the Pharisees blasphemed against the Holy Spirit. God will forgive those who do not recognize Jesus as the Son of God if they eventually come to him. But those who see the miracles and say they are the work of Satan will not be forgiven because that is open hostility toward God, a reprobate state of mind.

In a parable, Jesus pointed out that Satan was being bound and was powerless. That Jesus could cast out demons while Satan was helpless shows that God is active in the world and has the power to overcome Satan.

Words are more than sounds. They are an outward reflection of inward attitudes. They are evidence of attitudes of life just as the quality of fruit is evidence of the quality of the tree on which it grows. Therefore, in judging the world, God will judge us according to the words that reflect the attitude of our hearts. What we say surely indicates what we are. Jesus is laying his position on the line. Those who hear him must choose; they are either for him or they are against him. Christian discipleship is a serious calling!

R&D *In what dramatic ways have you seen the Holy Spirit at work? In what more subtle ways?*

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit, and let your light enkindle the fire of love in our hearts.*

---

## Day 8

---

**Read: Matthew 7:7-11**

### The Peanut Prayer

Prayer is as essential as any ingredient in the life of the Christian disciple. It is our lifeline to God. There is no doubt that God wants us to pray. We may ask, then, if God really answers our prayers. Yes, He always does, though not always in the exact way in which we ask. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, prayed for years for her son's conversion. When she learned that he was leaving for Rome, she prayed that God would stop him from leaving her. Augustine left, but he was converted. In a familiar Bible story, the mother of James and John begged Jesus to grant her sons positions of honor on either side of him in the kingdom. Jesus did not grant her request, but James was one of the first persons to die for his Lord, and John remained a beloved leader of the church. God indeed honored them in due time. On the other hand, the penitent thief who was crucified with Jesus received immediately all that he asked.

Is there a pattern? We can be sure that God answers our prayers because Jesus has promised that He does. God never gives a stone to one who asks for bread. The key is to ask for bread, to seek that which God would have us pray for in accordance with His will.

The famous scientist George Washington Carver, a great man of prayer, went out into the woods one morning to pray for wisdom. Dr. Carver said, “Lord, why did you make the world?” The reply was, “Little man, that’s too big for you. Ask something smaller.” Then Carver said, “Lord, why did you make man?” And, again the answer came back, “Little man, that’s still too big for you. Ask for something smaller.” Dr. Carver thought for some time, and then he asked, “Lord, why did you make the peanut?” “That’s just your size,” came the reply. And Carver went, as a man of prayer and a man of God, into his laboratory and discovered 153 uses for the peanut.

*R&D How is your prayer life? What could make it better?*

*Prayer: As the disciples asked, Lord, teach us to pray.*

---

## Day 9

---

**Read: Romans 10:11-21**

### **Blessed Are the Feet**

The Christian disciple has been commissioned by the Lord to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and across the street. Some people are specifically called to work in the mission field, at home or abroad. Others are given the gift of evangelism by God and have a burning desire to lead others to a commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior of their lives. All of us should know how to tell others what the Lord has done in our lives, who Jesus Christ is and what he did for all mankind, and how to pray with another to receive Christ. We should be sowing seeds of God’s love in all that we do, that people may be led to the Lord. God works with us, through us, and in us in a multitude of ways to fulfill His purposes, if we are open to His leading.

In our passage of Scripture, Paul makes it clear that salvation is available for all races of mankind. First, quoting from Isaiah, he demonstrates that the message had been given to the Jews. Then using Deuteronomy 32:21 and Isaiah 65:1 as his authority, he shows that God’s salvation is offered even to the Gentiles.

Paul is speaking of the joy of sharing the good news of God’s love and forgiveness. He is so filled with the joy of proclaiming Jesus Christ that he is heartbroken over those who, for one reason or another, cannot hear the message. There are many people who could know better if they really wanted to, as Paul makes clear in this passage.

There are many more, however, who do not know, and “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” The joy of carrying that good news is not limited to a few carefully chosen people. The “gospel of peace” is to be spread by each Christian, and God gives us opportunities to do so in ways that are natural to us. It’s what disciples do.

*R&D In what ways does God use you to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to others? What more could you be doing? \**

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to discover the gifts that I have to do what I can to lead others to you.*

## Day 10

---

**Read: John 10:11-18, 27**

### Hearing

We Christians learn many things as we grow in discipleship. One of the most important is the ability to distinguish between the Lord's guidance and the challenges of the world. We learn to recognize the still, small voice of the Lord after we have walked closely with him day by day. We come into an intimate relationship with the Good Shepherd through worship, prayer, Bible study, and by bringing people into contact with the Christian life. The closer we are to him, the more clearly we understand his subtle guidance. The more obediently we follow him, the easier it is to hear and understand him.

The reverse, of course, is true. If, because of our own selfish desires, we are insensitive to the Lord's guidance, it becomes more and more difficult to hear his voice.

Jesus' description of himself as the Good Shepherd is of critical importance. Unlike the hired hand who flees in time of danger, Jesus is the Shepherd who is prepared to die to protect his flock. In doing so, he accomplishes the will of his Father. To those with "ears to hear," Jesus clearly reveals his role as the Messiah.

Moreover, Jesus distinguishes between the flocks of sheep who know his voice. In verse 16, "this sheep pen" refers to the Jews and the "other sheep" to the Gentiles. Jesus envisions those of his own who will come from the Gentiles as well as from the Jewish people. It is not which flock we are a part of that is important; it is hearing and following the Shepherd.

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me" (v.27). What a privilege we disciples have to be in this kind of relationship with the Good Shepherd!

*R&D In what ways does the Good Shepherd communicate with you?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to be sensitive and attuned to your words to me that I may know the Father's will in all that I do.*

## Day 11

---

**Read: Romans 8:18-30**

### Hope in Sacrifice

Christian disciples occupy paradoxical roles. On the one hand, we are the adopted sons of the King, the brothers and sisters of Jesus himself. On the other hand, we are here to serve others. In the affluent world in which we live, it is possible to overlook the servanthood to which we as Christians are called. Suffering for the sake of others may be discussed in theory, but we see precious little of it in practice. Yet, we are not fulfilling our calling as Christ's disciples until we are ready to lay down our lives for others.

Why should Christians be willing to sacrifice and suffer for others? Because our hope is not in the rewards of the world. We are inheritors of a greater kingdom, and we live in the vibrant hope of that life to come. Paul talks about this hope in our reading for today. It is a passage about hope. All of life is a call toward something we do not yet see. We know that a new life is possible for us, not only here on earth, but also on the other side of the eternal life which Christians possess. The center of that possibility, the reason for that hope, is Jesus.

Through Christ, fear and suffering and frustration are being transformed, changed in such a manner that they have no victory over us. As we grow in our understanding of Jesus, who he is

and what he has done for us, our fears fall into the background, our pain is not as great, and our frustrations do not control our lives.

It is Jesus within us who gives us hope. His Spirit prays within us even when we do not know what we should pray. God knows each of us personally and calls us according to His purposes, so that the things of our life work together for good. As we sacrifice ourselves in obedience to God, His purposes are fulfilled in us. We see only glimpses of His glory now compared to what we will understand and experience when we are fully in the presence of God.

*R&D How is God using you in service to others?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, may I see you in the face of those in need.*

---

## Day 12

**Read: Luke 18:18-22**

### Treasure

Sacrifice is a relative thing. It can involve real suffering or it can be the simple pain of obedience, giving up something we want or yielding to an inconvenience. The key to the meaning of our actions is what those actions reveal of our heart. Our heart and our “treasure” are likely to be in the same place.

What will we not give up for the sake of our Lord? That is not a question we deal with one time and then forget. We face it every day; there is always something more we have not yielded. We’re thankful that every time we give up some of our own private territory for the Lord’s sake, we grow in His grace. He always gives us more than we give Him, though what He gives may be of a different nature than what we yield. Unfortunately, not everyone yields.

The story of the rich young ruler is one of the saddest in the Bible. He was a man with much potential who obviously had been touched by what he saw in Jesus. He wanted what Jesus had to give, eternal life, but in the end he was not willing to pay the price.

The fact that the man had great wealth was not the only problem. Jesus did not tell every rich man he encountered to sell his possessions. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were wealthy, but we have no evidence that Jesus required them to do as he commanded the rich young ruler. The fact was that this young man’s wealth was standing in the way of his faith. For him it was a burden he could not afford to carry. God deals with each of us in His own way according to our special needs and problems. The command He gives one person may be very different from what He tells another. “Follow me” applies to us all, but “sell everything you have” was a special command to the rich young ruler.

*R&D How would you feel about going through you checkbook and financial records with God?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to store up treasures in heaven.*

---

## Day 13

**Read: Luke 10:25-37**

### Sacrificing for Others

When our loved ones face difficult challenges, we want to do what we can to help or rescue them. That is a natural desire experienced by non-Christians as well as Christians. However,



the Christian disciple is called to go beyond this and be willing to make sacrifices for someone he may not like or for someone he may not even know.

I have often wondered if I would be willing to jump in front of a speeding car to push another person to safety. Could I perform other acts of self-sacrifice in dangerous situations? The Lord has guided me to a realization that few of us have opportunities for heroic self-sacrifice. But if, in the routine of our daily lives, we look about us, we will see many opportunities to sacrifice for others. We often have the opportunity, for instance, to give thought and prayer, and—when guided by the Lord—the action that seems to be called for in those situations. The crux of the matter is the desire of our hearts. Are we willing to be Christ’s disciples in mundane ways as well as in dramatic, life-risking moments that will probably never occur?

Jesus gave us guidance in this matter by way of our reading for today. We are not to rationalize our way out of opportunities to serve that God places in our path as the priest and Levite did. We are to act as the Samaritan did. And remember, we can assume that the man in need of help was a Jew—someone who, to the Samaritan, was almost like an enemy. Yet, look at the sacrificial steps the Samaritan took. He not only put aside his own agenda to care for the man, he personally bandaged his wounds, put him on his donkey and carried him to an inn, cared for him further there, and then left money for the innkeeper to care for the man, promising to come back and pay any other amount that might have been needed. To us, as Christian disciples, Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

*R&D In what recent incident were you able to act sacrificially for someone else?*

*Prayer: Give me, O Lord, a heart desire to reach out to others in need.*

---

## Day 14

**Read: Acts 10:1-23**

### Confrontation

In previous studies in this series, we have considered the ways the Lord speaks to us and the various ways we yield ourselves to Him. An essential part of discipleship is being disciplined by the Lord. Sometimes the Lord speaks to us “loudly and clearly” as He confronts us in no uncertain terms because our condition, our attitudes, and perhaps our prejudices make it otherwise difficult for us to hear Him.

He spoke this way to Peter in our reading for today. Peter had been conditioned by his background and prejudices to regard the Gentiles as unclean. It was easy for him to understand the command to preach to the Gentiles, but it was difficult for him to treat them as equals. A confrontation was necessary if God’s purpose was to be fulfilled.

God is ever working to bring His plans to fruition. Cornelius longed to come into closer relationship with the Lord; and, through God’s intervention, he was prompted to send to Peter for help. At the same time, through a vision, God was preparing Peter. Peter was confronted with what he understood to be unclean, yet God told him to kill and eat. Peter protested that he could not eat what to him was unclean and common. The Lord spoke to him again, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (v.15b).

Peter had to come to understand half of the picture when the messengers from Cornelius arrived to request that he return with them to Caesarea. Peter had already realized the significance of his rooftop vision; and, when he heard what God had said to Cornelius, all the pieces fell together (see Acts 10:24-48). Cornelius and his family were baptized and welcomed into the

greater family of the Lord. Peter might well have missed a gentle, quiet nudge from the Lord. Confrontation and confirmation were what he needed, and he got both.

*R&D Recall an instance in which the Lord has had to confront you in order to get your attention.*

*Prayer: Lord, help me not to be blinded by prejudice; but, when I am, awaken me to Your will.*

---

### Day 15

---

**Read: Acts 3:1-10**

#### **In the Name of Jesus**

The Christian disciple exercises the authority he has been given by the Lord he serves. There is power in the name of Jesus to combat Satan and to bring healing and reconciliation to the world. We are ambassadors, emissaries, of the King. We are Christ in the world today—his feet, his arms, his voice.

As good ambassadors, we should understand this authority and function within its bounds. We should understand the diversity of situations we may face; we should be aware of the variety of gifts we have to bring God’s healing grace to those situations. We perhaps use intercessory prayer as a last resort, when it should come first. If our child is ill, we should get medical help. But the first thing we should do is to pray for healing.

During his ministry, Jesus healed people and performed a variety of miraculous acts. He spoke with authority, and things happened. Furthermore, he told his followers that they would do greater works than his (John 14:12). In our Scripture passage, Peter and John healed a crippled man “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” “Name” here represents the authority of Jesus’ disciples to continue the wondrous works which he had begun.

Jesus had proclaimed the kingdom of God, God’s authority over human life. In him the kingdom had become flesh. The apostles shared in the authority of Jesus (Luke 9:1) during his time on earth, and their work in Acts was a continuation of that which began in the name of Jesus before his ascension.

In a sense, Chapter 29 of Acts is being written now. Today we are called to speak and act in the name of Jesus so that the world may be healed. Only as the Church lives in the name of Jesus will it have the authority to be what it is called to be.

*R&D Wherein do you see the Church, and individual Christian disciples, effectively functioning in the name of Jesus today?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, make us instruments of your healing power.*

---

### Day 16

---

**Read: Ephesians 4:17-24**

#### **Holiness, Not Happiness Alone**

Many Christian disciples do not want to be thought of as holy. “Holy Joe” is usually understood to be a good person who is so heavenly-minded that he is of no earthly good. Rather than separating himself from the world in a cocoon of superficial piety, the Christian disciple must be willing to get his hands dirty in the work of the world. That does not mean that God wants us to walk with one foot in heaven and one in hell as we try to be “one of the gang.” He

calls us to a true holiness through a purging and sanctifying process which day by day sharpens us into the likeness of Christ.

Paul, in our reading for today, asks his followers to give up the old pagan ways. The pagan does not understand the very purpose of life and is therefore condemned to a life of ignorance, of separation from God, of blindness of heart. Insensitive to feelings, the pagan gives his life to vice, stopping at nothing to satisfy his evil desires. His lack of purpose locks him in.

By way of contrast, Paul then talks about the Christian life. The Christian thinks and acts from the truth that is in Jesus Christ. We were created in the image of God, but it is only in Christ that we can see the image of God that God intended us to see. To “know Christ” means a great deal more than acquiring knowledge about him. It is allowing that knowledge to change our lives, enrich our minds, move our hearts, and guide our wills. It is putting off the old self (our former nature) and turning our back on those thoughts and deeds that were a part of that old nature. We become a new person in Christ, new in mind and spirit. Paul does not say that this is an easy process, but it is the one to which disciples are called. When we allow Christ to become a living truth within us, he becomes our life. Holiness becomes not so much an ideal to work toward, but a second nature to our life in Christ.

*R&D Reflect on the changes that you see in your own life as a result of coming to know Christ.*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to know you better day by day, and ask you to guide my way.*

---

## Day 17

**Read: Matthew 18:21-35**

### Dealing with Resentment

Forgiveness is like patience; we need a lot of grace to perfect either of them. There are multitudes of Christians who do not realize that in their unforgiving, resentful attitudes they are sinning. Christian disciples should forgive quickly. Not only does God expect us to be forgiving, we cannot minister effectively in Christ’s name if we are burdened with resentments. Peter raised the question about forgiveness in our reading for today, and Jesus dealt clearly with the issue.

Despite his human failings, Peter was the chief of the apostles, and when he spoke there was always some important lesson to be learned. He asked if it was sufficient to forgive a person “seven times.” He was willing to be generous, to have an attitude of forgiveness, but there were limits to his forgiveness. Jesus said that we are to forgive a person “seventy times seven.” We should forgive always with no strings attached. We are to forgive as often as necessary, as often as there is anything to forgive. Peter was thinking of the sinfulness of the person who did wrong; Jesus thought of the sinfulness of the person who failed to forgive.

To illustrate his point, Jesus told a parable. A man of power and position forgave his servant an extremely large debt when the servant begged for mercy. After he had been forgiven, however, the servant refused to forgive a much smaller debt owed to him by another and suffered the consequences. The parable is to illustrate that God’s continual forgiveness and mercy are reason enough for us to show mercy and forgiveness to others. If we cannot see forgiveness in that positive light, the parable gives us an alternative: we can expect severe judgment for our lack of forgiveness. For the Christian disciple, lack of forgiveness is an oxymoron.

*R&D It’s Lent: do a little self-examination on the issue of forgiveness.*

Prayer: *Forgive me, Lord, as I forgive others.*

---

## Day 18

---

**Read: John 13:12-17**

### Goodness

In the first part of our Lenten series on discipleship, we considered five of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23. In the following studies, we will look at the remaining fruit: goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Goodness, as seen by Paul, is concerned with ideal character: righteousness softened by love. That sounds like a definition of Jesus; therefore it is difficult to find a Bible passage or a story to illustrate goodness adequately. William Barclay says that the supreme message of the New Testament is not that Jesus is like God, but that God is like Jesus. We must look at the New Testament in its entirety to see a complete picture of goodness.

But there is a Gospel story that goes to the heart of Jesus' character and tells us something of goodness. It is found in our reading for today. When he washed the disciples' feet, Jesus demonstrated the nature of his royal identity and, at the same time, gave his disciples an example to follow. It was not enough for the twelve to recognize Jesus as the Master; they must express their love for him in their love for others. It is so with every Christian disciple. As Jesus was in perfect obedience to his Father, we should be in obedience to Christ. We are not called simply to think out our faith, but to manifest goodness.

How do we put goodness into practice? Sometimes it will mean speaking for Jesus in answer to someone's particular need. At other times it will mean acting for Jesus when speaking won't help. Always it will mean living for Jesus; our lives are the clearest evidence of our faith.

If we call ourselves Christians, let us in our generation be Christ to our neighbor and to all around us. Through the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, we can.

R&D *Think of an example of Christian goodness shown to you recently.*

Prayer: *May we humble ourselves before each other, Lord, as you humbled yourself before those you loved.*

---

## Day 19

---

**Read: Acts 9:19b-31**

### Barnabas

Faithfulness is the fruit of the Spirit which we will consider next. To Paul, the term apparently meant fidelity to other human beings. In our studies thus far we have seen instances of fidelity, but here we are to focus on a particular characteristic. How is the Christian disciple to regard other people, and to what extent should we vouch for another, even when it means difficulty for ourselves?

Today's reading illustrates the fidelity of Barnabas to Paul. To the apostles in Jerusalem, Paul was a notorious character. It was in Jerusalem that Paul had persecuted Christians, and it was difficult for the apostles to believe he was now one of them. It was natural for them to suspect that he was a secret agent who would use his new information to wreak greater havoc upon the church. Barnabas, however, was willing to take the risk. He not only defended Paul, he brought him into the midst of the apostles. He told them of Paul's experience on the Damascus road and his conversion to Christianity. He told them that Paul had preached boldly in the name

of Jesus, that he had faced death for his faith. It was only then that the apostles accepted Paul and put him to work among them.

Barnabas' actions tell us something about his character. He believed the best of others. In that regard, he followed the example of our Lord. Jesus often chose unpopular people for his associates. Barnabas also showed that he was forgiving. It would have been easy to resent Paul for the harm he had done the church, and Barnabas undoubtedly knew people who had suffered at Paul's hands. But, again, he followed the example of our Lord who forgave "seventy times seven."

We can thank God for Barnabas and the part he played in bringing Paul into the company of the apostles. Perhaps the rich blessing of Paul would have been lost had it not been for the faithfulness of Barnabas.

*R&D What other biblical examples of faithfulness can you recall? What do these people tell us about how God wants us to be faithful?*

*Prayer: Dear Lord, Lent is a good time for me to be testing the fruit of the Spirit in myself. Help me to look honestly at myself that I may see how I can bear better fruit for You.*

---

## Day 20

**Read: Luke 18:15-17**

### Reaching Out in Compassion

Gentleness, another fruit of the spirit, should be manifested in the life of a Christian disciple. In its purest form, as seen by Paul, gentleness reflects submission to God's will as well as consideration for others. To keep a proper balance between obedience to God and compassion for other people sounds very much like "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Gentleness is what God expects of us as we fulfill this commandment.

In our brief passage of Scripture, we see that women had brought their children to Jesus that he might touch them. In trying to understand the reaction of the disciples, it is important to remember that not only children but women themselves were relatively insignificant in the Jewish world of Jesus' time. It was a bold step for the women to come into Jesus' presence, and bolder still for them to bring their children to him.

The disciples scolded them for their presumption and tried to drive them away. It would be interesting to know exactly what they said. Did they argue that the Master was too busy, or didn't have the time, or that he had better things to do than be sentimental over a few children? The disciples may have felt the need to protect Jesus from those who sought him constantly, or they may have reflected the Jewish prejudices of the day against women and children. The result was the same: they were being exclusive. In their action they were not so unlike the Pharisees. They were separating themselves from others.

As individual Christians, and as Christ's Church, we must be extremely careful not to be exclusive, not to separate ourselves and our Lord from those who are seeking and those who are in need. Jesus showed us his gentleness. He not only accepted the children and loved them, but he used them as an example for us all. It is God's will that we have compassion for our fellows, even little fellows.

R&D *In what way or ways might we Christians be acting in an exclusive manner in our day, perhaps subconsciously?*

Prayer: *Lord, make us conscious of the needs of others.*

---

## Day 21

---

**Read: 1 Corinthians 6:13b-20**

### Temples of the Holy Spirit

Self-control is the last fruit of the Spirit we will consider here. It is manifested in an ability to restrain our carnal impulses. It is a characteristic we desperately need in the hedonistic world in which we live today. It is often said that the “new morality” is really the old immorality; and that is, unfortunately, true. Recently I was discussing premarital counseling with a clergyman who began his remarks by saying, “When I counsel a couple who are ready to be married and who are not already living together....” We live in a world more and more bereft of the sense of moral responsibility.

Even Christians make the serious mistake of assuming that the world’s ways are more “practical” (and therefore acceptable) than God’s ways as they are defined in the Bible. But what seems practical in the short run can be disastrously impractical in the long run. We can see but a short distance ahead; God foresees the whole story.

Paul’s real concern in our Bible passage was with sexual purity. He did not consider the body in its physical sense alone. To him, the body included the entire personality. A person who understands sexuality only as the satisfaction of physical appetites has a narrow view, indeed. In Paul’s day, the world saw the needs and actions of the body as irrelevant to the spiritual life. It is much the same today. Paul opposed this view. To him, the body was not a temporary shelter for the soul; it was to be renewed in a form worthy of a place in the kingdom of God. It is a temple (dwelling place) of the Holy Spirit within us. Fornication breaks the union between Christ and the Christian and desecrates the temple.

Self-control as a fruit of the Spirit is God-control of our lives, and that should affect the Christian disciple in more ways than sexuality alone.

R&D *How, as a Christian disciple, do you cope with cultural changes that run contrary to God’s will as we know it through Scripture?*

Prayer: *Lord, when tempted, help me to remember that my body is a temple of Your Holy Spirit.*

---

## Day 22

---

**Read: John 7:37-52**

### Let It Flow

Today’s reading seems to be a strange statement from Christ and produces very mixed reactions from people who heard him. When Jesus spoke these words, it was the last day of the Feast of the Tabernacles, a major event in the Jewish year. On the first seven days of the Feast, water from the pool of Siloam was carried to the Temple in remembrance of God’s gift of water from the rock in Moses’ time. On the eighth day, to recall Israel’s entrance into the land of springs of water, the water was not taken to the Temple. The prophet Zechariah had foretold a day when living waters from Jerusalem would bring life to all around, and at the Feast of Tabernacles there was a high degree of expectation that the prophecy would be fulfilled.

Jesus says, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” Jesus is saying that the prophecy was being fulfilled in him; that not only will everyone who comes to him to drink be filled with the living water, but that person will also become a fountain from which others may drink.

In this Lenten series we have considered all of the fruit of the Spirit listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. As we grow in discipleship, we should manifest these fruit in our lives. However, it is important to realize that the fruit are not things we do, but rather something that should be welling up within us like living water and flowing from us for the benefit of others. It is not that, as Christians, we decide that we must be gentle then grit our teeth and go forth to be gentle. By listing the fruit, Paul does not give us a command, but a checklist. We can check the list; and, if God’s grace is not being manifested in our lives, we will know that something is wrong. We will know that something has clogged the channel between God and us, because His grace is not flowing through us to the world.

*R&D How is the living water flowing in your life today?*

*Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, and flow through Christ’s Church and Christ’s disciples that the world may see your love manifested to all.*

---

### Day 23

---

**Read: Psalm 121**

#### Assurance

We are not immune from the pressures of the world even though we are disciples of Christ. Although by God’s grace we have strength and guidance that non-Christians lack, we still have our share of problems. We can become discouraged and feel defeated. During periods of depression and doubt, many Christians find great comfort in the psalms. Their honesty—sometimes raw honesty—teaches us to be straightforward in our approach to God. Yet, the psalms also demonstrate a great reverence for God and a deep sense of worship. But most of all in the psalms we find the assurance of God’s love and protection.

Reading between the lines of Psalm 121, we sense a feeling of uncertainty, but still the writer puts his trust in God. A perilous journey seems to lie before him, and yet he looks to the Lord for the strength and guidance he will need. Perhaps the goal of his pilgrimage is in the mountains, perhaps even Mt. Zion, the mount of God. But he knows he will be protected, and help will come from God. The God of Israel can be counted on. He has proven Himself throughout the history of His chosen people. The promise of “neither slumber nor sleep” underlines the certainty of the claim. The Keeper of Israel protects the traveler from his adversaries night and day. Finally, the protection is from “all harm,” from every kind of trouble throughout life forever. That is quite an insurance policy.

Years ago I was feeling discouraged and unappreciated toward the end of an arduous trip. It was early morning and the reading in *The Journey* for the day was Psalm 121. I was sitting on the balcony of a motel room at the airport from which I would be flying home later in the day. With beautiful mountains in the background, this psalm took on a whole new meaning. As I lifted my eyes to the hills, great comfort came to me from the Lord.

R&D *Recall an instance in which the reading of psalms has brought you comfort, joy, or assurance of God's love.*

Prayer: *Lord, You watch over our coming and going both now and forevermore. We are grateful and we praise Your name.*

---

## Day 24

---

**Read: Psalm 6:1-7**

### The "Absence" of God

There is an expression often used among Christians, "If God seems to be far away from you, guess who moved!" In fact, there *are* times when our own sinfulness and disobedience to God create a separation between Him and us. But there are also times when God seems to withdraw Himself from us for a period of time. Those who have written on "the dark night of the soul" believe that God does this for our own good that we may grow spiritually from being dependent upon feelings to being solely dependent upon Him.

Psalm 6:1-7 presents a classic example of the pain of separation from God. The writer (assumed to have been King David) senses rebuke from God, and begs for mercy. He wants God to return to him with His unfailing love. His pillow is wet with weeping; he drenches his bed with his tears.

If our relationship with God is primary to us, and we have experienced the sort of separation from God described by the psalmist, we can undoubtedly feel the psalmists' pain and anguish. Those are times we would rather forget; and, if we are sensing separation at the present time, we want to do all we can to re-establish our relationship with God. How?

In "What to Do When the Sugar Runs Out," David Sumner recommends the following:

- (1) Learn to appreciate silence and recognize that you don't have to say anything or do anything when you want to be with God. (See Ecclesiastes 3:7, Habakkuk 2:20, Zephaniah 1:7, Zechariah 2:13).
- (2) In your times of reflection and meditation, recall what God has already done for you and realize that He will never abandon you.
- (3) Find a soul friend, someone with whom you can be honest and openly share your feelings and doubts.
- (4) Keep on living the Christian life. Don't use your emptiness or discouragement as an excuse to fall into temptation.
- (5) Wait patiently on the Lord. Don't succumb to the temptation that filling your life with religious activities will help you feel closer to God.

R&D *When was the last time you felt separated from God? How did you deal with it? What happened?*

Prayer: *In times of doubt, Holy God, please give me the reassurance of Your love and mercy.*

---

## Day 25

---

**Read: Nehemiah 7:73b—8:12**

### Opening Holy Scripture

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The study of the Bible is essential for the Christian dis-



ciple. We know God through worship, prayer, the teachings of the Church, through fellowship with other Christians, by doing God's work in the world, and in many other ways. However, we best know God through daily contact with Holy Scripture. By studying the Bible day-by-day and letting God speak to us through His Living Word, we come, more and more, to have the mind of Christ.

At a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Bible Reading Fellowship years ago we were facing a major decision. Before we went into the discussion of it, the Board Chairman suggested that we look at the reading for that day, which happened to be our reading for today. It was as though the reading and the commentary were gifts from God because they so strongly stressed the importance of the Bible. It made our decision-making easier and with greater assurance of what we were doing.

Even without this illustration, today's reading is full of meaning. Nehemiah, the sixteenth book of the Bible, continues the history of the Jewish people written in First and Second Chronicles and in Ezra. Nehemiah, the political leader for whom the book was named, shared with Ezra, the priest, the credit. It was a time for reconstruction of Jerusalem and the renewal of faith after the return from exile in Babylon, and the passage tells that the Law of Moses was read to the Israelites for the first time. Their reaction was intriguing. They rejoiced when they heard of the Law and understood it, but as they heard it they were convicted of their sin. Scripture, like a two-edged sword, cuts both ways. We rejoice as we hear God speak to us, and we grieve because our lives do not measure up to His love. It's all part of the life of discipleship.

*R&D Recall a time when the Lord answered your needs through Scripture, or confronted you with a change you would need to make.*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that in our day we can find the Bible that best meets our needs and speaks both to our mind and our heart.*

---

## Day 26

**Read: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

### Healing Amid Pain

Christian disciples are not immune to suffering. God changes attitudes far more than He changes circumstances. All suffer, but we hope that His grace will sustain us so that, in the midst of our pain, we will have victory.

There is good and bad news about the suffering, trials, and tribulations which Christians face. The bad news is that suffering hurts. There is no way to escape that, and only the person in pain knows how bad it is. The good news is that God will teach us in this school of life, and our pain and problems can authenticate our ministry. We can help others when we have experienced the pain which they bear.

False apostles had been boasting of their spiritual experiences, and Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians in our reading for today that he has had his own share of them. He begins by telling of spiritual experiences of his own. His being caught up "to the third heaven" apparently was a unique awareness of the presence of God that Paul experienced some time after he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus. The primary point of this passage, however, is that Paul does not wish to be admired because of his spiritual experiences. He wants the Corinthians to know that he, like them, must suffer weaknesses. His "thorn in the flesh" may well have been a disease or disorder resulting from the hardships of his journeys.

Despite Paul's fervent prayers, his illness was not removed. God gave him something greater: sufficient grace with which to bear his suffering. From a human point of view, Paul wished to be rid of his pain. From a spiritual point of view, he welcomed it, for through it he understood that it is in our weakness that God's strength is made perfect. It was a constant reminder to Paul that what we are able to accomplish is through God and not because of our own strength. Paul's own pain also helped him identify with sufferers to whom he ministered.

*R&D To what extent have you learned that it is in your weakness that God's strength is made manifest? Think of an example.*

*Prayer: Lord, You know my weaknesses and I know Your strength; help me to yield myself to You that Your strength may be reflected in my discipleship.*

---

## Day 27

---

**Read: Luke 19:28-40; 23:21**

### Maintaining Balance

It is easy to be deceived, and many things appear to be different from the way they really are. What is "politically correct" today may be very incorrect tomorrow. How are we Christians able to maintain our balance? How can we stand firm on the foundation of our faith in a world of shifting sands? We are only human, and subject to the temptations, distractions, and fears that face everyone. And it is so easy to rationalize our thoughts and actions.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was the climax of a long journey, and was the beginning of the greatest drama the world has ever experienced. Jesus rode the donkey in what appeared to be a deliberate enactment of the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9-10 that tells of a king who would enter the city on a donkey rather than a warhorse or chariot, one who comes to rule in peace. Jesus' disciples and others hailed his triumphal entry. But the scene quickly changed. Jesus was not the kind of Messiah the people wanted, and they rejected him. In a few days "Hosanna" became "Crucify him!" The disciples moved from joy into paralyzing fear.

That truth is that Christian disciples have feet of clay; and, if they do not become aware of their fallibility and do all they can to protect against the wiles of Satan, too often they will turn their backs on Christ as surely as did the fickle crowd in Jerusalem. Well-respected Christians have seriously impaired their effectiveness in numerous ways. Would-be Christian disciples are certainly not immune to such behavior; in fact, we are especially subject to Satan's ire and had better be especially wary of his wily ways.

We must be careful to check our motives, to insure that we are truly following Christ and not our own selfish desires. We will make mistakes; after all, we are only human. The important thing is that, in our heart of hearts, our first priority is to love God.

*R&D Time for another reminder that we are in Lent and self-examination is called for.*

*Prayer: Mold us, Lord, of sterner stuff; help us to be strong. Structurally, is clay enough to move these feet along?*

## Day 28

---

**Read: Ephesians 3:1-13**

### **Holy Boldness**

Christian disciples are called to boldness in the Lord. This may mean taking a dramatic and unpopular stand on a vital issue. It can also mean simply speaking a word of faith when it would be easier to remain silent.

In my life as a Christian I have been called more often to make simple statements of allegiance to Christ than to take dramatic and unpopular stands. Many times every day we have opportunities to speak a word of hope to a spiritually starving world. Often it would be easier to remain silent, but Christ calls us to speak up with holy boldness.

Paul had many occasions to be bold. Today's passage is a digression from the subject Paul has been pursuing. He mentions the Gentiles and is drawn off the track to speak of his commission to them. Paul wrote these words in difficult circumstances. He was in prison, probably chained night and day to a Roman soldier. Still, in appalling captivity, he was free.

Circumstances would not prevent him from carrying out his commission to the Gentiles. We can imagine that he preached to those men who were chained to him. By this very letter we know that he wrote in that place about his faith. He did not despair; his faith burned brightly within him.

The heart of this passage is "the mystery," the divinely revealed truth that the Gentiles were to be the fellow heirs with the Jews in "the unsearchable riches of Christ." In a time of great difficulty and danger, Paul communicated that message with holy boldness.

We, in our day, don't face the challenges Paul did. But, unless we live a life of holy boldness, including speaking for Christ in the situations and circumstances that face us, how will a needy world know the unsearchable riches of Christ?

*R&D Reflect on a time when you have had an opportunity to be bold for the Lord.*

*Prayer: Lord, give me the opportunity today to show Your love to someone in need.*

## Day 29

---

**Read: 2 Peter 1:1-17**

### **Diligence and Wisdom**

Some Christian disciples have become spiritual butterflies, flitting from one church to another, from one conference to another, and between a multitude of books and devotional methods. They are not wise in their selection of spiritual disciplines; they are not diligent in the things they undertake. God gave us minds that He expects us to use well. He has provided a number of ways in which we may know and serve Him. He wants us to seek His will wisely and follow it persistently as we grow in discipleship.

An abundance of God's wisdom is available to us in Holy Scripture. Peter wrote as a correction to Christians who were being misled by certain beliefs popular in his day. We find truth, Peter wrote, through knowledge found in Jesus Christ who, while living a human life, gave us insight into God Himself. He gave us "very great and precious promises" by which we become partakers of the divine nature.

Peter leads us, one by one, through the steps we are to take before we can partake of divine nature. *Faith*, belief in God, is the cornerstone which must result in goodness. *Goodness* is the quality of character and attitude in Jesus Christ. In turn, we must have *knowledge* of the mind

of Christ, and living out this knowledge requires *self-control* (temperance). That will necessitate *perseverance* (steadfastness, patience), the determination to stand fast with Jesus until the end. *Godliness*, recognition of our dependence upon God, is important and must be shown in *brotherly kindness*, the care and concern that should exist between Christian brothers and sisters and be a witness to the world around us. Finally, there is *love*, the highest quality of the Christian life. As he takes us through these steps, Peter demands of us diligence so that the wisdom we seek and the truth that is revealed to us may be deep and rich. These are good guidelines for disciples in our day and forever.

R&D *How are you doing on this checklist Peter gives us?*

Prayer: *Lord, being a Christian disciple is simple, but not easy. Help us to grow in character that we may ultimately reflect Your love.*

---

### Day 30

---

**Read: Psalm 98**

#### Marvelous Things

For years I had a plaque on the wall behind my desk saying “God is subtle.” Another old saying goes, “God is a gentleman; He never forces Himself on anyone.”

The disciple of Christ learns to see God working in the world. I have seen and have experienced a number of miracles. I know, however, that a disbeliever could look at those miracles and, to his own satisfaction, disprove them all. Most of the time, God works His miracles “naturally,” but behind the natural phenomena, the follower of Christ can see the supernatural pattern of God’s action. The disbeliever will not, or cannot, see God’s subtle movements in the lives of His people.

Many of the psalms are affirmations of God’s work in the world. Our psalm for today, a great song of praise, anticipates the coming of the Lord to rule His people. An echo of God’s promise in Isaiah 49:6 is found here: “I will also make you (Israel) a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” God’s salvation is worldwide. Shout for joy, the people are urged; consider the saving acts of God. There is cause for praise and thanksgiving; the Lord is King.

It is easy to join in the worship of this psalm. We are reminded that, by “His right hand, and His holy arm,” God does marvelous (miraculous, supernatural) things. He is faithful to His promises and to His people. He is in control. We will see God performing miracles in our lives when we praise Him for His bountiful goodness and trust Him to continue to work His will in the world. Sometimes God’s purposes are carried out in logical, everyday events; at other times there may be one unusual “coincidence” after another. Christian disciples can see God at work.

R&D *Reflect on miracles or “God-incidents” you have experienced.*

Prayer: *Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things.*

## Day 31

---

**Read: Matthew 17:14-21**

### Spiritually Alert

The Christian disciple is not always “on the mountain top” of joy and trust in God’s marvelous presence. He comes down to face the reality of his own failure. Overawed by our perceptions of what God is doing in the world, we “leave it all to Him” and fail to hear what He is asking us to do. We neglect, among other things, the hard work of prayer.

Peter, James, and John went “to the mountaintop” and witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-13). Our reading for today tells what happened when they came down the mountain. The three disciples moved from seclusion to public ministry. Jesus frequently withdrew from the crowds for periods of spiritual nourishment, but he always returned to use his spiritual power for teaching and healing the people.

From the glory of the mountaintop, Jesus and the three disciples returned to “the real world.” It was a world of sickness, faithlessness, and approaching death. Jesus’ apparent impatience is easy to understand when we consider the disciples’ meager progress. After months of intensive teaching and training, their lack of faith had hindered their healing power.

This is a situation with which I can identify. For eleven years I led an international prayer organization, but too many times my wife had to remind me to pray about situations I faced in that ministry! I was reminded earlier today of the fact that we acknowledge that, as Christian disciples, we have the Holy Spirit within us but perhaps think of that in a passive rather than an active way. As Christ’s people in the world today we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be doing what Christ would do. That means praying with faith and “putting feet on our prayers” to follow through as the Lord would have us do. It means being spiritually alert.

*R&D To what extent is the Holy Spirit active in your life to bring about God’s purposes in the world?*

*Prayer: Please, Lord, give me the faith of that mustard seed to move mountains for You.*

## Day 32

---

**Read: Exodus 4:10-17**

### Drawing Lines

Christian disciples are often guilty of drawing lines of resistance to tasks the Lord asks us to undertake. There is always something that is “going too far” or “expecting too much.”

One cool summer evening I was sitting on a porch at a religious center chatting with several people who were experiencing new freedom in their faith. Sitting with us was an older clergyman who seemed to the rest of us to be a bit stuffy. One by one, we related our experiences of prayer or worship, and each tried to demonstrate that he was spiritually “further out” than the person before him. At the end of each story, the old clergyman would grunt and say, “I can accept that.” The time came, however (as it was bound to come), when he groaned, “That’s it! That’s where I draw the line.”

In our reading for today Moses had drawn his lines of resistance all over the place, giving one excuse after another for not doing what God was asking him to do. Finally, he used as an excuse his inability to speak effectively.

Perhaps one element of Moses’ greatness was his determination to be honest with God, even if it meant arguing with his Creator. But his lack of eloquence was his weakest argument.

“Who made your mouth?” God asked pointedly. Moses used lack of ability as an excuse before the All-powerful who never fails to empower His children for the work He asks them to do. Moses’ lack of trust in that power roused God’s holy displeasure, yet He gave Aaron to Moses to be his mouthpiece and helper.

God won’t let us off the hook; He always gives us the help we need to do His will. We Christian disciples should be comforted by the old saying: “God and I are a majority of one.”

*R&D When was the last time God showed you that you could do something He wanted you to do? What was the result?*

*Prayer: Lord, make my excuses into pleas for Your help.*

---

### Day 33

**Read: Deuteronomy 18:9-14**

#### **Secularizing the Faith**

Disciples of Christ must be wary of the ways of the world that seem harmless but which may have tragic results. A friend of mine, a devoted Christian and a gifted artist, was asked by a large company to design a series of astrological symbols. She did, with some reservations; but later, when they asked her to design fortune-telling cards, she refused.

Many people who call themselves Christians study their horoscopes, wear astrological signs, and engage in secular fads, which basically are contrary to the Christian faith. Even “slight deviations” from Christian standards can eventually lead to tragic consequences. In his newspaper column, evangelist Billy Graham commented once on this passage from Deuteronomy. In answer to a person who had asked under what sign of the zodiac Jesus was born, Dr. Graham pointed out that the Bible clearly condemns astrology.

The Jewish people, surrounded by pagan beliefs and practices, were cautioned repeatedly to avoid the secularization of their faith. They were specifically forbidden to engage in any form of divination. Citing Isaiah 47:13 and Jeremiah 10:2, Dr. Graham noted that the prophets denounced astrology. Christian disciples, too, know that it is God who is in control, and it is only to Him that they should look for guidance. Astrology denies that God is in control. Belief in the influence of the stars can lead to a belief in witchcraft, and from that an individual can fall under the influence of Satan.

God speaks to us through the Bible, through prayers, and through the Church. We have no need of other devices. God reveals to us as much of the future as we need to know, and He guides us day by day. If people spent as much time reading the Bible as they do occupying themselves with worldly fads, their lives would be enriched immeasurably.

*R&D What do you say to a person who asks you under which sign you were born?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that I was born under the sign of the cross.*

## Day 34

---

**Read: Luke 11:37-42**

### The Joy of Giving

Generosity is an essential characteristic of Christian discipleship. In considering all of the needs that exist in the world, we should give first to the work of the Church in the world, and Scripture sets the tithe (10%) as our standard.

Looking at several Bible passages may help us to see the complete picture of Christian giving. In 1 Peter 4:10 we see that how we use the gifts entrusted to our care is the measure of our stewardship. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 shows us that, like any other steward, a Christian disciple should be faithful. But those things over which Christians have been given stewardship are greater than the things of the world. Disciples are called to a greater faithfulness. We shall have to account for all that we have and all that we are.

From our reading for today we see that tithing is an act of obedience. Long before Moses, God expected the Jews to tithe, and He expects it of us today. It is, for the people of God, the minimum offering to God. Down through the ages many Christians have given more than a tithe, and some have shared all that they possess with others.

In 1 Chronicles 29:10-17 David the king acknowledged God's goodness to His people. Everything had come from God, and all they offered back to Him was His also. "For everything in heaven and earth is yours." In this passage we see the joy of giving freely.

We are called to be faithful stewards of the gifts of God, to account to Him for what He has entrusted to us. Tithing is the base upon which we build our giving, and giving freely bears the fruit of joy. Many well-intentioned Christians have never discovered the joy of giving. They give to the Church as a duty. Yet it has been my experience and the experience of so many others that, when we see what we have as belonging to God, it is a joy to give it away.

*R&D What has been your experience with tithing and with joyous giving? What might God be saying to you about this matter this Lent?*

*Prayer: Lord, thank You for the joy of giving to others what You have so generously given to me.*

## Day 35

---

**Read: 1 Peter 3:15**

### A Great Commission

All Christian disciples are under the Great Commission to go forth into the world proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Matthew 28:19-20). Some Christians are called to be evangelists, while others find it difficult to lead people to accept the Lord. But not all of us are expected to be preachers and exhorters. What is more important is for us all to be able to speak naturally about our faith in Christ and pray with people whose hearts are ready to receive him. We are "seed sowers" whom God can use to open people's eyes to the Light of Christ.

Originally, the Epistle that includes our verse for today spoke to Christians living in a hostile and suspicious world. If we are honest, we must admit that we live in that kind of world today. Every disciple should know the reason for the hope that is in us through Christ. It is important that we testify to our faith. That means being able to tell what we were like before we met Christ, what he has done for us, and what our life has been since he became our Lord and Savior. Being able to explain who Christ is and what his death on the cross meant to the world is also a part of our witness.

Too many Christians fail to examine, even for themselves, the reasons for their faith and what it really means to them. When they do, they are able to explain their faith to others intelligently and naturally. Peter did not tell us to win people to Christ by argument. Rather, he told Christians to avail themselves of opportunities to explain Christ to others. Furthermore, our statement of belief, Peter said, should not be belligerent as those whose vociferous arguments betray their own doubts. The unbeliever can sniff out a phony Christian as expertly as a bloodhound. Our attitude should be one of “gentleness and respect.” God uses people in many different ways to bring other people to Christ, and we should want to be used in the way that works best for us.

*R&D When was the last time you had an opportunity to share your faith with another? In what way were you able to do this? What effect do you believe it had?*

*Prayer: Use me, Lord God, that I might bring the Light of Christ into the lives of others.*

---

### Day 36

---

**Read: James 1:1-8**

#### Christian Maturity

As we have studied Christian discipleship together, it is to be hoped that we have moved toward a more mature relationship with God. Too often we judge one person to be more “spiritual” than another when what we really see is a person who is more spiritually mature. As in every process of maturing, growth occurs as a result of time and the effect of the experiences encountered during that time. An apple matures because of the length of time it is on the tree and the effects of weather during that time.

Although a space of time is essential, the effects of experience are perhaps vastly more important to the maturing process. This is particularly true with individuals. A baby cannot be mature physically or mentally; he has not been around long enough. But some young people can be more mature than their elders because of what they have learned from the experiences they have had.

James would have us understand that Christian disciples should accept standards that are much higher than those of the world about us, and we are bound to face trials and temptations. However, the trials can be occasions for rejoicing (Matthew 5:11-12). There is joy in Christian endurance, for in suffering patiently we share the joy of Christ who “for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). The faith and endurance with which we meet and overcome our trials mature us. James lists the qualities which lead to maturity. Perseverance comes from testing our faith. If we lack wisdom, we should pray for it. We must be single-minded—no half-heartedness or half-measures for the Christian disciple. These are good guidelines for us today as we seek maturity in Christ.

*R&D Reflect on the process of maturing spiritually in your life. Where do you believe you are in this process? Why?*

*Prayer: Lord, thank You that I’m not what I used to be, but help me to become what You want me to be.*



## Day 37

---

**Read: Acts 6:8-15**

### Reactions

The way we react is a test of our maturity as Christian disciples. For good reasons or bad, Christians and non-Christians alike can control their actions. It is more difficult to control their reactions. To control our actions, all we must do is to decide to act in a certain way, or to refrain from acting in that way. To control our reactions, our immediate response to what someone does to us, is not as easy. The only way we can control our reactions is to locate within ourselves the problem that brings forth the bad response. By God's grace we may overcome the problem and change our negative reactions to good ones.

Stephen was a classic example of a man who reacted in a godly manner. He was filled with grace and power. Grace is both God's favor and a virtuous personality. Power was evident in Stephen. Through him, the early Church had become a threat to Judaism's religion and life. What had appeared to be merely a sect was gaining more and more followers, some of whom were Jewish priests.

God's Holy Spirit worked mightily in Stephen. He was so effective in debate and revolutionary in his arguments that he was brought to trial on two counts: blaspheming against God for prophesying the overthrow of the Temple, and rebellion against Moses for contending that the Law had been replaced by Christ. Young Stephen was brought before the High Council of the land, charged by false witnesses; and what was Stephen's reaction? His face was as "the face of an angel." The grace and power integral to Stephen's very being produced positive reactions from him. His strength was in the Lord. And that's the formula for us in trying to develop godly reactions: growing in a relationship with the Lord who is our strength.

*R&D Consider the ways you react to certain people and situations, particularly those in which you are disappointed with yourself. Try to find the seed of negative reactions within yourself and ask for God's healing power.*

*Prayer: Help me to be a more positive person among those with whom I live and move and have my being.*

## Day 38

---

**Read: Luke 22:39-46**

### Whose Will?

The Lord has a right to expect obedience from us. In the crises of our lives, God puts us to tests of faith. We have two chances to pass the tests. First, we say, "Yes, Father," and do what He has asked us to do. The second chance comes when we have failed to say yes. Even then, we can learn from our failure to do His will; we ask His forgiveness and determine to be obedient at the next opportunity.

The first chance is better than the second. Jesus was always obedient to the Father the first time. In this powerful passage we see the cost of Jesus' discipleship. We see human nature at its very best. He desired to escape, but he was willing to stand firm. Jesus' calmness during his trial and execution was the result of the battle he fought and won in the garden. He knew the trap was closing around him and the disciples, and he cautioned them to pray for strength; but, exhausted and at the hour of night when resistance is low, they fell asleep.

Jesus prayed alone. It was a confident prayer: God was “Father.” The coming sacrifice weighed heavily on Jesus, but he was able to say, “Not my will, but yours be done.” An angel appeared to him and strengthened him. The test was passed, and he went on to victory. William Barclay has said that “Jesus is the one person who never disappoints those who set their hopes upon him. He is the one person in whom the dream always comes true.”

Jesus always obeyed his Father’s will. If we’re honest, we have to admit that sometimes we do not. It is always best for the Christian disciple to do the Father’s will, but we can be very grateful to God that He is willing to forgive us and always gives us a second chance.

*R&D As Lent draws to an end, here is another opportunity to do some self-examination on whether we have been doing God’s will; and, if not, to repent.*

*Prayer: Father, forgive.*

---

## Day 39

---

**Read: Psalm 32**

### Receiving God’s Forgiveness

Many Christians who have learned to forgive those who have done them wrong have never been able to accept the Lord’s forgiveness of their own sins. They carry their guilt about with them like dirty laundry, adding one remembered sin to another until they are burdened with guilt and their Christian witness becomes a dull and joyless thing. They have missed the heart of the Good News that “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.”

Our freedom lies in the fact that we can go to God, confess our sins to Him, and be completely absolved. God forgives our sins and forgets them; they are as far from His mind as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). God has always been willing to forgive those who truly repent.

Psalm 32 was the favorite psalm of Augustine of Hippo, the great sinner who became a great saint. The psalm is a song of gratitude, but its primary subject is penitence. Verses 3-5 tell us of the psalmist’s misery when he lived in sin, and he describes his condition in terms of physical illness. Pardon and healing come with the confession of his iniquity. When the godly have experienced forgiveness and learned its lessons, they will pass unharmed through days of trouble. The psalmist begs his listeners to heed his words, and the song ends with his invitation to share in the joy of forgiven sinners.

God forgives our sins including those we have borne for years without repentance. And there is no freedom like that which comes when we know that He has forgiven us and will remember our sins no more. Lent is the ideal time for penitence, not only for those sins we find ourselves guilty of recently, but any that are still hanging there from the past.

*R&D Take time to reflect on anything for which you believe you have not been forgiven and offer it to the Lord. And then have faith that God has forgiven you and reject any attempts of Satan to try to bring the guilt back.*

*Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you took upon yourself the sins of the whole world so that I can be forgiven of mine.*

Read: Philippians 1:19-30

### A Philosophy of Death

A look at death and eternal life concludes our study of Christian discipleship and seems appropriate for the day before Easter Sunday. What to most non-Christians is the ultimate disaster is for Christian disciples the doorway to a glorious future—resurrection with our Lord Jesus Christ. Death, however traumatic it may be physically, is a continuation of “The Way,” the joys about which we have received only hints. Death is graduation from the School of Life.

A disciple must have a philosophy of death. Too many Christians have a mistaken idea of death because they have never fully understood life in Christ. They focus on the good things that will be their reward for the bad things they have borne on earth. Paul did not share this point of view. He saw a larger picture.

The letter to the Philippians is a letter of joy. The words “joy” and “rejoice” appear sixteen times in the Epistle, yet it was written in suffering. Joy then has a greater meaning than “happiness.” Here we talk of the joy of abiding in Christ. To Paul, neither life nor death was the issue. If he died, he would have the joy of the greater presence of Christ. If he lived, he would be of further service to those Christ had given to him. He wanted only to stand firm in Christ and be of service regardless of the consequences.

Paul encouraged the Philippians, too, to stand firm. His message to them is a message to us: “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (v.27). In doing so we will indeed face challenges; but, as disciples of Christ, we also have the joy of living in the fullness of the Holy Spirit and growing in our relationship with Christ every day. Jesus calls us to the abundant life (John 10:10); but we can nonetheless have a philosophy of death, knowing, like Paul, that it is only then that we will be in the greater presence of our Lord. “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

R&D *What is your philosophy of life, your philosophy of death?*

Prayer: *For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

*by Harry C. Griffith*

Copyright © 2014 by the Bible Reading Fellowship  
PO Box 380, Winter Park, FL 32790

This study is reprinted from *The Journey*, a publication of the Bible Reading Fellowship. For more information about our publications, please visit our website [www.biblereading.org](http://www.biblereading.org).