

An Adventure in Discipleship

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Bible Reading Fellowship

Published by the Bible Reading Fellowship
PO Box 380
Winter Park, Florida 32790-0380
www.biblereading.org

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Session 1

Ephesians 1:18-23; John 14:12, 16, 20, 23; Galatians 2:20

Living in the Power and Presence of God

Over a century ago a man named Charles Sheldon wrote a book entitled *In His Steps*. It has been one of the most popular books ever written. In it, the pastor of a church challenged his congregation to pledge themselves for one year to do nothing without first asking, “What would Jesus do?”

But another well-known Christian writer said that asking ourselves “What would Jesus do?” when suddenly in the face of an important situation simply is not the way to fully live as Jesus lived.

There are three ways we can look at our relationship with Jesus. A first way would be *admiration*. We admire Jesus for who he is and for all that he has done for us. There are probably a lot of non-Christians who admire Jesus. Admiration doesn’t require anything more than a pleasant thought. The second way of looking at our relationship with Jesus would be *imitation*. That is what Charles Sheldon called for in his book. As you face a situation in life, look at it from the point of view of what you believe Jesus would do, and do it. Imitate Jesus.

Let’s look beyond admiration and imitation to *incarnation*. It’s not something we pledge to for a year, or whatever. It becomes Christ’s life in us. When we were baptized we received the Holy Spirit, Christ came to live within us by his Spirit. The problem is that we haven’t fully accepted what has been given to us by God, and we haven’t been in touch with how He wants us to live *all the time*, not just when we see ourselves facing something and try to decide what Jesus would do.

To fully understand this, we have to move beyond accepting Christ as our Savior. God wants to take us another step, to move into a deeper relationship with the Lord, a process of discipleship through which God makes us into the people He wants us to be. We’re all at different places along that process. But, for now, wherever we are in our relationship with God, He wants to be changing us from within. Through His Holy Spirit, He wants to be guiding us in all we do, all we say and all we think...that we may live in the power and presence of God all the time. That is what discipleship is all about.

Question: Are you experiencing change in your life as you grow in Christ?

Session 2

Psalm 37:3-7a; Philippians 4:4-7

Committing Ourselves into the Lord's Hands

A “starting point” in maintaining a personal relationship with God is, of course, to commit our lives into His care first thing each day. A simple prayer such as “Lord, I commit myself into Your hands this day, body, mind and spirit,” prayed soon after awaking each morning can accomplish this. What is better than to make this connection as early in the day as possible? It certainly gets things off to the right start.

David, who is credited with writing Psalm 37, encourages us to delight in the Lord and to commit everything into His care. To delight in someone involves taking great pleasure in their company and joy in their presence. This type of relationship is one that grows as our contact with, and knowledge of, the other grows. In the relationship with God, this growth process leads to our better understanding His love of us, and that is reason for delight.

Committing ourselves (v.5 of the psalm) implies putting complete trust in the one to whom we make the commitment. In the case of commitment to the Lord it means entrusting all we have to God: our family and loved ones, possessions, vocation, and the circumstances of our life. We give these to Him for His protection and His guidance in how we are to live. God can take a lot better care of us than we can ourselves. He just wants us to wait patiently (v. 7a) for Him to work out the details.

The Philippians passage is filled with the joy of prayer. “The Lord is near,” verse 5 reminds us. In everything, Paul encourages us to present our requests to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving. By doing so, he says we need not be anxious about anything. This is how we find the peace that passes understanding and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

What Paul has given us is a perfect prescription for morning prayers. There is no better way to start the day than by coming near to God with our prayers. We have committed the day into the Lord's hands and, in our next session, we will look at putting on the whole armor of God. Now is the time to get down to the specifics of our petitions, our intercessions, and our listening to God for His guidance, His answers to our prayers. What better time to seek God's will concerning the day ahead of us than at the break of dawn or as soon as we can?

We can fight anxiety and find peace in our morning prayers. There is something special about making our concerns and needs known to God early in the day. Of course, God knows what is on our hearts, but He longs to hear us express those needs in a way that shows that we are relying on

Him for guidance and direction. It is a common experience that those who lay their trials and tribulations before God in prayer, have seen Him speak to those situations in a multitude of ways. Sometimes it is to show us that what seemed so serious was not worth worrying about. Other times He has inspired us with solutions to our problems. At still other times it was a matter of getting our priorities in place. And, of course, sometimes there is the caution to simply wait on Him.

God gives us the opportunity to place our day in His hands by coming to Him with our morning prayers. It is the best way to start the day.

Question: Are you committing your life into the Lord's hands each day?

Session 3

Ephesians 6:10-17

Putting on the Whole Armor of God

As we face the day in the presence of the Lord, another good starting point is protecting ourselves spiritually. There are Christians who seem not to believe in Satan, about whom Paul is speaking in our reading for today. Yes, they would say, there is evil in the world, but they really think it is just people sinning. They surely believe in supernatural good; otherwise, how could they believe in Jesus? But they disbelieve supernatural evil. This isn't the place to argue the point; except to say that Paul faced the spiritual forces of evil in his day and we will in ours.

The important thing is that all Christians do well to put on the whole armor of God each morning. Not only can it protect us from the evil one but it can also help us deal with the other negative challenges that will face us during the day. Paul first mentions the belt of truth. Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). As Christians, we are to go forth into the day encircled by this truth. Then he tells us to put on the breastplate of righteousness. Here we are not talking about self-righteousness, but being in a right relationship with God; not something of our own doing, but wholly because of His love for us. We are also to have our feet fitted with the gospel of peace. In the midst of the most trying times, Christians can be "well shod" with the peace that passes all understanding and ready to share the gospel of grace with all with whom we come into contact.

The shield of faith is what we need to stand against the challenges of the day, whether it is the "flaming arrows of the evil one" (v. 16), being verbally attacked by someone who disagrees with us, or just the disappointments that may come our way. By putting our faith in Jesus as our shield, we can cope with whatever is sent against us. The helmet of salva-

tion protects our minds from doubting Jesus' saving work in our lives. Finally, we have the only offensive weapon mentioned by Paul, the sword of the Spirit, God's word written. When we are tempted, we have Scripture to rely on and can use it just as Jesus did when he was tempted (Luke 4:1-12).

Thus, by putting on the "whole armor of God," we can take with us God's protection of us toward the day ahead.

When praying to put on the armor, you may find it helpful to do so in the order in which you would dress. In other words, you might want to start with the helmet of salvation, follow with the breastplate of righteousness, then the belt of truth, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith.

Also, it is important to remember that these pieces of armor are gifts from God. We don't earn our own salvation, or become righteous by our own "worthy" acts. Our own "truth" is probably not worth much; it is God's truth with which we equip ourselves. Thus, as we put on the whole armor of God, it should not be in the spirit of standing in our own self-importance before God but in humbly thanking Him for providing us this protection through His gracious goodness and loving kindness.

Question: Are you equipping yourself for the challenges you face in life?

Session 4

Numbers 6:22-27

Praying Blessings on Others

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." This ancient blessing of God's people in the Old Testament (Numbers 6:24-26) has also become very popular among Christians. Particularly significant is the reference to God's "face." The face of God is the source of light. While turning His face away from someone would be a sign of God's displeasure, His turning His face (and His countenance, which means the same thing) toward someone is a sign of God's pleasure in the company of the one on whom it shines. Likewise, the "peace" of God as used in this passage means the very best for that person in this life and the life to come.

The complete passage (Numbers 6:22-27) contains the instructions God gave Moses concerning how the sons of Aaron (the Jewish priesthood) were to bless the people. Thereby, God's *name* would be on the Israelites, and God would bless them. The blessing that the Lord commanded

the priests to use on behalf of the people assured them of God's favor and protection, mercy and compassion, approval and peace.

As Christians, it is our responsibility to encourage a deep love of God within our homes. It is especially important to be able to convey to our children that which is primary in our lives, namely our love of God. One of the simplest and most effective ways to help our children know and love God is to pray a blessing on them daily with the laying on of hands. This gives them a regular and concrete encounter with God's power and protection.

If we have children in the home, each night before bedtime is an opportunity to lay hands on their heads and pray the blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, adding the child's name and any special ways in which we want that child blessed at that time. If the child is having trouble sleeping, facing an exam at school, of whatever, seeking God's blessing in that particular matter is an appropriate addition to the prayer.

Yet, even if our children are grown and far away from us, we can still pray a blessing on them and all of our loved ones each day.

Needless to say, the same blessing should be said for our spouse and the other members of our family (defining "family" as broadly as seems right to us). What better way to get the day off to a great start—in addition to the other recommendations we have already looked at—than to ask God to bless our loved ones?

Isn't this the sort of thing Jesus would do? If we are his disciples living in the power and presence of God, we exercise both authority (Jesus' authority) and responsibility (our discipleship) when we pray God's blessing on others. We are standing in Jesus' place when we do so.

Question: Do you bless others?

Session 5

Matthew 3:1-10

Self-examination, Confession and Repentance

If spiritual growth—living in the power and presence of God—is to be on a firm foundation, it requires a healthy root system. In the above passage of Scripture, when John the Baptist saw Pharisees and Sadducees coming to see what he was doing, he told them to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." There is little need to be growing in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ unless our faith is rooted in repentance. Unless we know that we are, by nature, sinful creatures in need of God's grace and forgiveness, we won't be motivated to grow.

John the Baptist set the framework for preaching the kingdom of God (later followed by Jesus and Peter): "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repentance is a turning away from evil and a turning toward God.

There are two particularly wonderful things about repentance. The first is that the door to repentance is always open; no case is hopeless, no person is beyond its call. The second is that, with sincere repentance, God not only forgives, He forgets! (Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34b).

Repentance gets us headed in the right direction and gives us a new start. It provides a root system on which the fruit of spiritual growth can depend.

It is best to keep short accounts with God; that is, to be quick to see our sins and to confess them immediately. Self-examination, confession and repentance should be an ongoing process in our lives. Many people, particularly at the end of the day, are in the habit of reviewing the day and what has happened that revealed our failures to be God's person in the situations in which He has placed us, confessing our sin and seeking His forgiveness.

Find it, confess it, turn from it.

Question: Are you regularly confessing sin in your life and accepting God's forgiveness?

Session 6

Equipped and Ready: Servant Leadership

If we have influence on any other person, we are a leader. As Christians, the question before us is how to lead like Jesus. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus told his disciples that he did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life for others. That is what we are to be and do.

It takes faith to be Christ to the world around us. The secret we have going for us is the Holy Spirit within us to guide and direct our lives, but we have to have faith that Jesus is in control, that he knows what is going on in the situation. Luke 5:1-11 is the story of Jesus telling Simon Peter to cast his nets in a certain place, something that seemed nonsensical to Peter. He was a fisherman by profession; what did Jesus know about fishing? Yet, he took the leap of faith and the miraculous catch happened. This is a pattern for our life of discipleship.

For the world to be brought to Christ, there is a lot to be done. Jesus wants to do this work in and through each of us (Matthew 11:28-29; John 15:5; John 15:7; John 14:15-18).

Genesis 12:1-5 tells of God's call to Abram (later, Abraham) to be the father of the nation Israel. God would bless him, and he and his family would be a blessing (something we have considered earlier in this series). Those of us who are fathers are expected to lead like Jesus in our family. The family leader's example determines how family members treat people of all ages and conditions; how they view success, failure, and adversity; how they solve problems; and how they communicate love and self-worth.

As our focus moves from family into the wider community, the model of leadership might be Nehemiah, one of the greatest leaders in the Bible. (See Nehemiah 2:11-18, as an example). Community leadership requires love to be spoken in truth and courage with good will and tolerance. These principles apply to those leadership roles God has for us in our work, neighborhood, and faith communities.

The disciple is to have the heart of a servant leader. Paul spells this out wonderfully well in Philippians 2:1-4. It is the difference between being a *driven* person and a *called* person. Called people...believe everything is on loan. They believe their relationships are on loan; they know that we have no guarantee we will see those we love tomorrow. Called people also believe their possessions are on loan and are to be held lightly, to be enjoyed and shared with an open hand. Rather than protecting what they own, called leaders act as good stewards of what has been loaned to them by God.

Having said all of that, God is not looking for leaders; He is looking for servants who will let Him lead.

Question: Are you leading as Christ would lead?

Session 7

1 John 5:13-15; Matthew 14:22-23a

A Life of Prayer

Prayer is our opportunity to be in intimate communion with God. It is also the way to seek guidance from Him in all aspects of our lives. Thus, it is essential to try to understand what God is saying to us through prayer. Feeling inclined to move in a certain direction—or uneasiness in doing so—as a result of serious prayer can be guidance from the Lord. A caution is in order, however. A church bulletin once contained these words: “God never closes one door on life without opening another, but usually we stare so long at the one He’s closed we don’t see the one He’s opened for us.”

The key to guidance from the Lord in prayer is being in a serious and continuing prayer relationship with God. Some Christians wait until they are in trouble and then start praying *Help!* prayers. Although God wants us to seek Him when we need His guidance, it will be hard to understand what He has to say to us unless we have been in communion with Him on other things as well. No relationship will become meaningful until both parties have spent a good of time together. That is just as true concerning the relationship with God as it is in human relationships.

In the above passage from the First Letter of John, the point is that, to be effective in prayer, we need to seek God's will rather than our own concerning the matter before us. If we align our prayers with His will, we can be confident of results. If we have established a prayer relationship with God and are praying to be in His will, we are on the right course to get the guidance we need.

Many people find it helpful to pray daily by way of a method that is commonly called "the five facets of prayer." This involves beginning with Adoration (Praise), then going to Thanksgiving, next to Confession, then Intercession and finally Petition, in this manner:

- (1) Adoration/Praise. This is praising God, loving Him for who He is, and is the ideal way to begin prayer. The Bible, especially the psalms, can be helpful in praising God.
- (2) Thanksgiving. Here we thank God for all He does for us, for our family and friends, for faith in Him, for good health, a happy home, the work He gives us to do, and whatever else we have to be grateful for.
- (3) Confession. We ask God to forgive us for anything we have done that we shouldn't have done, or have failed to do that we should have done.
- (4) Intercession. This is our opportunity to pray for others, especially our loved ones and people in any kind of need.
- (5) Petition. Finally, we pray for ourselves, that we may be in God's will and that our life may be spent as He would have us spend it. We especially ask for God's help and guidance in specific situations we are facing.

Question: Do you pray regularly?

Session 8

Hebrews 4:12-13; Luke 24:13-27; Luke 1:1-4

God's Word Written

The only Jesus we can know is the one revealed to us in the Bible, through both the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is our guidebook for living, although it is so much more as well.

The brief reading from Hebrews goes right to the core of the nature of Scripture. The Bible is not simply a compilation of information about God or just a way of communicating His thoughts; it is living, life changing and dynamic in its effect upon the receptive reader. Like a surgeon's scalpel, "it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow." It reveals who we really are. It reaches deep within our being. It discovers what is in us, good and evil. It "judges our thoughts and attitudes" and calls for decision.

The ancient Psalms proclaim the top importance of Scripture (see, for instance, Psalms 19 and 119). And, in 2 Timothy 3:14-16, Paul reminds his young friend that he has been guided by Scripture from infancy and that he needs to continue to learn what God will teach him through Scripture. "All Scripture," Paul says, "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" so that we can be equipped for every good work God has for us.

It is God's word written (Scripture) that tells us about the Word of God (Jesus). In the Luke 24 passage above, two people who had been followers of Christ are heading home following the crucifixion. The hoped-for Messiah has been killed. The one they thought would bring in the kingdom has died like a criminal.

The stranger who comes along beside them takes his two new companions through the one Bible study all Christians would give anything to have attended. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (v. 27). Jesus, in the walk to Emmaus, was able to show how God's plan had been carried out down through the centuries, as told in Scripture, leading to his birth and death. Although it would take a while for Jesus' followers to understand it, his death on the cross was the ultimate victory over evil and contained in it the promise of eternal life for all believers.

Concerning the third Bible passage above, Luke the Physician was the first historian of the Christian Church. He was not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life and ministry, but he was concerned that the eyewitness accounts be accurately preserved. Luke was a medical doctor. He therefore knew how essential it was to be thorough and accurate. He would have reached proper conclusions about what should be included in his account

and what should be left out. We can have confidence in Luke's account of the life of Jesus.

Question: Are you reading the Bible regularly?

Session 9

Living the Story (Ministry and Service)

"For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...." 1 Corinthians 12:13

All Christians are called by God to participate in the ministry of Christ. All ministry is his ministry. That which we call "our ministry" is, more accurately, our role in his ministry.

When Paul outlined the gifts for ministry in Romans 12:1-8, he was talking about the gifts that God provides to all Christians to do His work in the world. As Christ's people, we need to know our gifts and put them into operation so that Christ's ministry may be made known in a world desperately in need of the benefit of those gifts.

According to a useful definition, the ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be (i.e., to have ministry as an attitude of life); to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world according to the gifts given them (i.e., using our spiritual gifts, we are to engage in the work of bringing people into relationship with God through our vocation and in any other ways available to us); and to take their place in the life, worship and governance of the Church (i.e., to perform those ministries related to the life of the church to which God calls us).

How do we find our gifts for ministry and begin to function in the lay ministry or ministries to which God calls us within the body of Christ? Resources for helping us to find our spiritual gifts and ministries related to them are available. But there are ministries to which all people are called.

Some Ministries to Which All Are Called

- (1) *Witnessing*. Christ would have us share, by word and deed, our love for him and what he is doing in our lives as the opportunities present themselves.
- (2) *Making Disciples*. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus tells us to go and make disciples. That's what we do when we aid newer Christians in growing in their faith so that they, too, may become dedicated followers of Christ who do his ministry in the world.
- (3) *Intercessory Prayer*. God expects all of us to be praying for others.

- (4) *Reconciliation.* We are to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19), bringing people into relationship with God and with one another as best we can.
- (5) *Presence.* Christ wants us to be present to others in need, because it is in that manner that we bring to them the presence of God through the Holy Spirit in us.
- (6) *Healing Prayer.* Some people are especially blessed with the spiritual gift of healing, but all of us can pray healing prayers for our loved ones and others in need as we have the opportunity to do so, and God will bless those prayers.
- (7) *Servanthood.* Christians are on earth to serve (Matthew 20:25-28). We are to serve in any way the Lord would choose to use us.
- (8) *Generous Giving.* We are to share what we have with others, giving generously to the Lord's work and other worthwhile efforts.

Question: Are you ministering to others?

Session 10

Telling the Story

We are called to be witnesses to our Lord. The New Testament literally shouts the words, "You are my witnesses." (See, for example, Matthew 4:19, 10:32, 28:18-20; Mark 5:19, 16:15; Luke 24:45-48; Acts 1:8, 6:7, 8:4; Romans 10:9-15; and 2 Peter 3:15). We may not be called to be evangelists in the sense of confronting others with the claims of Christ but—by the very identification of ourselves with the Christian faith—we are all witnesses, either good ones or bad. That is simply because, if people know we are Christians, they will view us as ones who look and act as Christians look and act. We should want, with all our hearts, to be good witnesses; otherwise, we betray the very Lord whom we say we honor.

If all Christians would simply tell of our relationship with Christ when we have opportunities to do so, God would honor that obedience to Scripture and we would be much more effective in bringing the world to Christ. Few people come into a relationship with the Lord because of the action of one person alone, but each person is important in the total process of an individual's coming to Christ. It is a process of sowing seeds of God's love of which telling our story is a vital part.

We each have a story to tell. Our story is the story of how Christ changed our life and is changing it day by day. Our lives will be enriched as

we tell how Christ came into our lives and what has happened as a result.

We are to tell our story in a natural way. There is no prescribed formula for telling our story. It is simply a matter of relaxing and letting the Holy Spirit lead us. If we are truly willing to be used by God in telling our story, He will guide our words and redeem our mistakes.

Thank God, the flame of His love has been passed from person to person down through the generations so that we, too, may be alive in Christ. That has happened, blessing us, because others have told their story of God's love. And, there are few things that can keep us as conscious of God's presence in our lives as telling others about Jesus and what he means to us. We become more closely in line with the Holy Spirit within us. We notice with gratitude the good things that happen through the grace of God during the day. We see Christ in others to a greater extent than we would otherwise. We become better able to hear what others are saying to us with their hearts as well as their voices.

All of this equips us to witness our faith to others. We can be most effective if we have the sensitivity to understand where others are in their own spiritual journey. Then, in a natural way, we can tell them what Christ has meant to us as we faced what they are facing. The Holy Spirit can guide us in what to say and not say. Often, sensitive listening is the most important opening to sharing God's love.

Question: How have you shared your faith with others?