



Blessed to Be a Blessing

Lenten Study

Day 1

Read: Genesis 12:1-3

Introduction

The Israelites forgot, and sometimes I think that maybe we have as well. God's covenant with Abram (later called Abraham) was that his descendants would be blessed and all the people on earth were to be blessed through them. Instead, the Israelites came to think of themselves as the unique children of God, took pride in that, and failed to reach out to the world around them. Jesus Christ then came as a descendant of Abraham with the New Covenant, a covenant of "the grace which Christ is and brings" (*The New Bible Dictionary*).

This Lent we will be looking at what it means as Christians to be blessed and to be a blessing to others, something clearly anticipated by the New Covenant.

I want you to draw a picture in your mind. Envision a piece of paper turned side-ways with a dividing line down the middle. On the left side of the page is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one tree in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve were not to eat of, although they did so to their eternal regret and ours. You might want to place words on either side of the trunk of the tree: good and evil, right and wrong, win and lose; and at the bottom of the tree would be the word "death." Then, on the right side of the page would be a cross and under it would be the word "life." Many other words could be added around the cross, words that will surface in our Lenten study: eternal life, access to God, forgiveness of sins, guidance from the Holy Spirit, peace of mind, comfort in sorrow, and so many others. These are ways we are blessed in Christ so that we can bless others.

The point is this. Whether a person believes historically in the story of Adam and Eve, the principle that story reveals is the story of human life: we want what we want regardless of the consequences. It is the road to death. The greater part of the world's population lives according to the picture on the left side of the page. Good or evil, right or wrong, win or lose...these choices are based on culture and any number of other influences, but not on God. The dividing line on the page is conversion or regeneration. On the right side of the page are those who are not living by the standards of their culture but on the truth that is only in Jesus Christ. They are the blessed to be a blessing.

R&D If you were to physically draw the picture outlined above, how might you use it in helping another see the difference that Jesus Christ makes in your life and could make in theirs?

Prayer: Lord, You bless me greatly; help me to be a blessing to others.

Day 2

Read: John 15:1-8

Access to God

There are two main points in our passage for today that speak to our theme for Lent. The first is that we are blessed by being in Christ, in the Vine. The second is that we are to produce fruit (be a blessing) or we are worthless. The key is not only *being* in Christ but *remaining* in Christ. A *Life Application* footnote relating to verses 5 and 6 says, “Remaining in Christ means (1) believing that he is God’s Son (1 John 4:15); (2) receiving him as Savior and Lord (John 1:12); (3) doing what God says (1 John 3:24); (4) continuing to believe the gospel (1 John 2:24); and (5) relating in love to the community of believers, Christ’s body (John 15:12).

Today I’d like to focus primarily on the matter of being in relationship with God through Christ. As disciples of Christ, we are to *be* Christ to the world around us. The only way we can do that is to be, and remain, in communion with God.

In his series for *The Journey* called “Shadows of Eternity,” Don Hultstrand told the story of Chandu Ray. If you recall it, Ray had sought God first as Hindu, but could not find access to God through that religion. So he then sought God through Islam and found only rules and regulations but no access to God. His third option was reading the Bible, but he did not fully understand it until he met with a Christian missionary. The missionary shared with Ray that he was losing his sight, and Ray wondered why he didn’t pray about it because, it seemed to Ray from his reading of Scripture, that Jesus promised to heal. The missionary asked Ray to pray for him, he was healed, and Ray became a Christian. He had found a God to whom there was access!

What greater blessing can we have than being in relationship with God? And yet, again, it is not to be an end in itself. We are to reflect the joy of that relationship in all of our contacts in life that others may come to know Christ through us.

R&D How do you understand your relationship with God through Christ? Do you find God to be accessible?

Prayer: Jesus, you are the Vine; help me to be one of your fruitful branches.

Day 3

Read: 1 John 1:5-9

Forgiveness of Sin

We are told that the blood of Jesus purifies us from sin. That is a huge blessing. How does it happen? In Old Testament times, sins were forgiven by way of animal sacrifices. The sins of the believer were symbolically transferred to the animal (see Leviticus 4 for a description of this ceremony). The animal’s death on behalf of the sinner paid for the sin and allowed the person to remain in God’s favor. Faith in God was shown by the obedience of the person in observing His commandments concerning the sacrifice. Those days looked forward to the time when Jesus would come to remove sin completely.

True purification from sin came through the blood of Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus did not die for his own sins because he had none. Although it may remain a mystery to us, we accept on faith that Jesus died for the sins of the world. By committing our lives to him, we—in a sense—die with him. He paid the price of our sins, and we are purified by his blood. What a blessing!

The question then is: what about the sins we continue to commit from time to time? “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (v.8). But, as John goes on to say, if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. Admitting sin and confessing it isn’t always easy. We hate to admit that, despite all God does for us and all we have learned through our relationship with Him, there is a lingering selfishness that catches up with us from time to time in our thoughts, actions, and inactions (not doing things we ought to do). Yet, in being repentant of our sins and confessing them, there is a freedom that comes with God’s forgiveness and opens the door to growth in Him. For us to be a blessing to others, we don’t want to sin against them or in any way that would adversely affect them...including being a bad example to them. But it is also true that confessing our sins and accepting God’s forgiveness “cleans the slate” and allows us to be “wounded healers” in the lives of others.

R&D How has God’s forgiveness of your sins made you a better person in your relations with other people?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that You know us for who we are and love us still.

Day 4

Read: John 3:16-21

Eternal Life

In considering the blessings we have as Christians, eternal life with God has got to be at the top of the list. That’s undoubtedly why John 3:16 is thought to be the most popular verse in Scripture.

A footnote in the *Life Application Bible* says, “Eternal life is God’s life embodied in Christ given to all believers now as a guarantee that they will live forever. In eternal life there is no death, sickness, enemy, evil, or sin. When we don’t know Christ, we make choices as though this life is all we have. In reality, this life is just the introduction to eternity. Receive this new life by faith and begin to evaluate all that happens from an eternal perspective.” This quote is particularly meaningful to me because I can graphically remember the moment I realized that eternal life was not something in the future, but that I was living in it right now.

So, we know what a blessing eternal life is to the Christian. But, what about the majority of people who don’t know that? Many of them are just ignorant of what it means to be a Christian. They have false ideas about the faith. Maybe they know people who are only nominally Christians and see nothing life-changing in their lives. Or they may fall into the category of people Jesus speaks about in our reading...those who walk in darkness because they don’t want their evil deeds exposed.

This is why it is so essential that we be a blessing to others. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that leads people to Christ, but we are vital cogs in the process of bringing that about. It is as we shine the light of Christ into dark places that others can “begin to see the Light” that is Christ. We do this by being Christ to the world around us in word and deed. God sent His Son into the world to save the world through him. We have an essential role in that process.

R&D How is God using you to bring the Light of Christ to others?

Prayer: Lord, show me what I can do today to lead someone closer to Christ.

Day 5

Read: John 16:5-15

Guidance of the Holy Spirit

In a time when so many find it necessary to seek psychiatric help and counselors of various kinds, what a blessing it is for Christians that we have the greatest Counselor possible, the Holy Spirit. “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray” (16:1). Jesus, in our reading for today, is telling his followers that, although he is going away, God will send the Holy Spirit to be a Counselor to help keep them (and those of us who would come after) from going astray. The Holy Spirit is our Guide to give direction to our lives.

In verses 8-11, Jesus gets specific about some things the Holy Spirit will do. He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment. As we learned in our last lesson, convicting the world of guilt is not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17) by giving people the opportunity to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and to repent. Because Jesus would no longer be present in the world, the Holy Spirit would reveal God’s standard of righteousness to guide our way. And, Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection would allow the Holy Spirit to convict the world of judgment in the sense that Satan had been defeated and the way to righteousness opened to all.

The result of all of this is that the Holy Spirit will guide Christians into all truth (v.13). He will not speak on his own, but what he hears from God. This would include, for the disciples, the inspiration to record the material that we know as the New Testament. For us, it means guidance in understanding the truth that is in Jesus as the Holy Spirit guides us through Scripture and in other ways.

These are the blessings to us who are Christians; and, allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us, guiding our lives, should be a blessing to others.

R&D How can the Holy Spirit in your life be a blessing to others?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, guide the hearts of the faithful and enkindle in us the fire of your love.

Day 6

Read: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Resisting Temptation

Before leading to the key verse in our Scripture reading for today (v.13), Paul gives us a series of warnings from Israel’s history. Our immediate reaction might be to see these incidents as so foreign to our life today as to think them irrelevant. But, in that case, we need to think again.

The first example Paul cites is idolatry; the worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32) may have been in Paul’s mind. The instance of sexual immorality may have had reference to Numbers 25:1-9 wherein the Israelites worshiped Baal of Peor and engaged in sexual immorality with Moabite women. They were constantly questioning God and putting Him to the test; and, their grumbling against Moses and Aaron resulted in a plague (Numbers 14:2, 36; 16:41-50). As heinous as these acts were, are they so different from what is happening in the world around us?

The idolatries of are more often tied to the desire for power, prestige, and wealth; they are our “golden calves.” Sexual immorality of many kinds is rampant in our day, perhaps more insidious and prevailing than what happened in Numbers 25. In our relativistic age, our testing of God is more in the nature of rationalizing our behavior, reminding us of the “you will not surely die”

temptation of the serpent in Genesis 3:4. And grumbling! People today grumble about everything; the Israelites can't be thought to have outdone us on that.

Paul reminds us that any temptation we face is common to mankind. Our faithful God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can endure; and, when we are tempted, will provide a way out so that we can stand up against it. We Christians are blessed by this promise and the knowledge that, when we fail, God is willing to forgive us. By our good example of standing up against temptation, we can be a blessing to others.

R&D What recent temptation have you faced, and how did you deal with it?

Prayer: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Day 7

Read: Philippians 4:4-9

Peace of Mind

Today's reading not only teaches about peace of mind, but demonstrates it. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter, and yet it is filled with rejoicing. There's an important lesson to be learned here. Our inner life does not have to be suppressed by our outer circumstances. Paul knew that, no matter what happened to him, he was in the Lord's hands. He is urging his hearers to be joyful and content despite the challenges they were facing as a fledgling congregation in a hostile world. Ultimate joy and contentment comes from Christ dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit.

When Paul makes specific reference to the peace of God that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (v.7), he is talking about a peace that is very different from the world's view of peace. The peace we have in Christ is much more than the absence of conflict. It is more than positive thinking or good feelings. It is the realization, deep within us, that God is in control. We are living in the Kingdom of God, there is a purpose for our lives, and we can have victory over sin. God's peace can guard our hearts and minds against worry and fear.

Paul goes further, however. He talks about how to build God's peace within our lives. It is by doing whatever is noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable...anything that is excellent or praiseworthy. He wants us to think about these things. As they permeate our hearts and minds, we will be shaped into the people God wants us to be. And we will have peace of mind, a great blessing to ourselves.

Think also, though, about how following Paul's teaching and example can be a blessing to others. "Let your gentleness be evident to all" (v.5). Paul wants us to be sensitive to others, considerate of and responsive to their needs. If we are firmly rooted in God and at peace with those around us, we can be Christ not only to those closest to us but to a very needy world.

R&D How would you rate your peace of mind today? What can you do to gain more of God's peace?

Prayer: "When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul." H. G. Spafford

Day 8

Read: Romans 5:1-11

Encouragement in Times of Testing

Our reading for today seems to be an extension of our last lesson: “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.1). Paul then goes into how those to whom he writes are to find peace, perseverance, character, and hope in the face of suffering. He is trying to encourage them in a time of testing.

Paul is dealing with two important facets of life—the spiritual and the practical—and how the spiritual should beneficially affect the practical. The spiritual is the grace in which we stand as followers of Jesus Christ (v.2). The practical is the suffering that is a part of life here on earth. Paul combines words of faith, hope, and love to encourage us to withstand whatever troubles may befall us. The early followers of Jesus were facing serious troubles that led many to martyrdom in the very city to which this letter was sent. They (and we) can be encouraged by “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (v.8b). The relationship with God through Christ is the remedy for whatever we must face.

Paul was dealing with some heavy stuff. God can encourage us when we face serious testing, but He can also give us gifts of encouragement in simple situations. When I concluded writing the Peace study yesterday, I was led to end it with a prayer that was actually the first stanza in an old hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul.” Right before going to bed last night I checked my email. An unexpected one popped up: a quartet singing that very hymn. I believe that God uses coincidences (“God-incidents”) such as these as ways to encourage us along the way. What a blessing!

As in our other teachings this Lent, however, let us remember that we are blessed to be a blessing. One of my disciplines this Lent is to encourage someone each day. Earlier today it was a note of encouragement to an old friend who is ill, someone who needs encouragement in his time of testing. And, of course, I was blessed in doing it.

R& D By what discipline this Lent are you being blessed or blessing others?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the encouragement You give us; help us to remember to encourage others.

Day 9

Read: 1 John 4:7-21

God’s Love

God is love, and God is our source of love that we might love ourselves and others. In these beautiful verses from John, we get a complete picture of how much God loves us and how that love is to work in our lives. God loved us enough to send His only Son to show us how to live, and to die for our sins. Jesus is our example of what love means; everything he did was the epitome of love. We are able to love because God first loved us (v.19), and we can love others because of the Holy Spirit of God within us. As we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, we grow more and more like Christ, reflecting God’s love to the world around us.

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love casts our fear...” (v.18). A great blessing of being a Christian is to know that we can have confidence in the day of judgment. Although that will be a time when we will be held accountable for our actions and inactions, there is no reason to fear it. Christ has paid the price for us. We will be blessed with an even greater life in the fullness of the presence of Christ.

Whenever we tend to get fearful of something, it is time to remind ourselves of God's love. We know that He loves us perfectly (Romans 8:38-39). Instead of focusing on our fears, we can devote our attention to God's immeasurable love for us. He wants the best for us regardless of what is going on in our lives. We are blessed.

One caution. If we find that we talk a good game about loving God, but are showing animosity toward others, something is wrong. "For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (v.20). We are to bless others; and, if we are not doing so, we have to question whether God's love is truly in us. It's Lent, and time for confession.

R&D *How much do you believe that God loves you? How much do you love others?*

Prayer: *"For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind." F. W. Faber*

Day 10

Read: 1 John 3:11-24

The Ability to Love Others

Today we sort of pick up where we ended our last study. There we focused primarily on God's love of us; today on our ability, by God's grace, to love others. John is calling us not only to be loving in our thoughts, but in our actions as well. The heart of our reading for today is: "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongues but with actions and in truth" (v.18).

We are reminded of what James had to say on this subject (James 2:14-26). "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?...In the same way, faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead" (vv.14, 17). We cannot earn our salvation by good deeds. Many people in the world today, whether or not they are practicing Christians, seem to believe "they'll be all right with God" if they can be seen by Him to be doing good things for others. They think God grades on a scale. Unfortunately for them, that is not the case; but, if we are being led by the love of God within us when we take loving action on behalf of others, our deeds are a verification of our faith in Christ.

We are able to love others in word and deed because of God's love within us. As John talks about how to judge whether we really love one another, he says that we will know the truth of it in our hearts. Our hearts will either condemn or affirm us. If our love of others is real, it will be manifested in laying our lives down for others. That means serving others without thought of reward. That's how we truly bless others.

For the benefit of the introverts among us, I want to go back to a footnote from our last study concerning how we are to love others. "Some people simply enjoy being with others. They make friends with strangers easily and are always surrounded by friends. Other people are shy or reserved. They have a few friends, but are frequently uncomfortable talking with people they don't know or mingling in crowds. Shy people don't need to become extroverts in order to love others. John isn't telling us *how many* people to love, but *how much* to love the people we already know. Our job is to love faithfully the people God has given us to love. If God sees that we are ready to love others, he will bring them to us. No matter how shy we are, we don't need to be afraid of the love commandment. God provides us the strength to do what he asks."

R&D *In what ways do you reflect God's love in you by loving others?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to be the loving person my dog thinks I am.*

Day 11

Read: Galatians 5:1-14

Bound for Freedom

I recently had a dream in which I was to put together a poster representing the freedom of opportunity we have to pursue what we tend to call “the American dream.” I decided to call it “Bound for Freedom.” The idea behind this title was its double meaning: (1) its message would seem to be that people who have the willpower to make the best of their lives are “bound” (destined) to succeed; but (2) as Christians, our focus should not be on the American dream but on God’s purpose for our lives. In this latter sense, we are to be “bound” as slaves of Christ (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 7:21, 22), and that is what gives us true freedom (v.1).

In our reading, Paul is telling us not to be slaves to the expectations of others. That would be trying to justify ourselves by going along with the prevailing “law”...in the Galatians’ case, being circumcised to conform to the law of Moses; in ours, conforming to what is “acceptable” in the culture in which we live, otherwise known as “going along with the crowd.” As followers of Christ, we should be beyond that. Pleasing others for the sake of pleasing others, particularly when to do so would infringe upon our faith in Christ, makes us slaves to the world. Paul, on the other hand, tells us: “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (v.6).

Paul goes on to give the Galatians encouragement concerning the progress they have made (v.7a) while being dismayed that they have so easily been misled (v.7b). He is confident that those who are leading the Galatians astray will face the judgment of God.

As Christians, we are greatly blessed to be slaves of Christ. Not only does God have a plan for us that greatly exceeds anything the world has to offer us, but He promises us protection against going astray. We are called to be free (v.13). That freedom allows us to focus on serving one another in love (v.14), not out of some false sense of obligation; and that can be a wonderful blessing to others.

R&D Lent is a time for self-examination and repentance. In what ways might I be falling short of God’s expectations of me because I am too bound by the ways of the world?

Prayer: *Set me free, Lord, from the entanglements of the world that I may be free indeed.*

Day 12

Read: Psalm 23

Comfort in Times of Grief

It is no surprise that the 23rd Psalm is so often read at memorial services for someone who has died. But it can comfort us in a range of situations of grief that we may face. Grief can come from the death of a dream, such as when a marriage falls apart, we lose our employment, or someone we care about disappoints us in some significant way. No matter what our pain, the Good Shepherd is there for us.

The concept of the shepherd in this psalm is appropriate because it centers on the matter of dependence. Sheep are totally dependent on the shepherd. They trust him completely. And that is what we need in times of grief. We need someone to take us out of our focus on ourselves and give us green pastures and still waters, away from the chaos of self-absorption that accompanies our

grief-stricken life. We need restoration to some sense of normality when grief has invaded our space and blinded our path. We also need the guidance that the Good Shepherd can give. Decisions often lay in the aftermath of grief-inflicting situations. How are we to cope with life now that things have drastically changed?

As we deal with radical change in our lives due to the death of a loved one or some other heart-wrenching loss, this psalm can be a great comfort. God has a plan, a much better one than we could devise for ourselves. It is one of protection for ourselves and eternal life for a loved one who has died in Christ and whose loss has otherwise brought us profound grief.

God blesses us in our loss. As a result, how we handle our grief puts us in a place to bless others who are having great difficulty in coping with their grief.

R&D *In what specific ways does Psalm 23 bless you?*

Prayer: *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”*

Day 13

Read: 2 Chronicles 6:36-39, 7:14

Heartfelt Prayer

In our reading from chapter 6, Solomon is praying for the dedication of the Temple; and, in the verse from chapter 7, receives God’s reply. Solomon’s prayer acknowledges that the people will sin, and prophesies their ultimate captivity. But he also anticipates their seeking forgiveness, receiving it from the Lord, and being returned to the land the Lord had given them. The Lord’s response assures Solomon of the truth of what he has sought on behalf of the people. 2 Chronicles 7:14 is one of the most important promises in the Bible and is an ideal basis for heartfelt prayer. The prayer group in the church across from where we worship meets at 7:14 to honor this scriptural promise.

On a personal level, the Lord is telling us to humble ourselves by admitting our sins; to pray to God, seeking forgiveness; to seek God continually; and to turn from our destructive behavior. These are profoundly simple steps toward the wholeness God wants for each of us.

And then, on a broader level, this message from the Lord is as applicable to our country today as it has been at any point in our past. He is telling us how He will bless our nation in times of national uncertainty, moral decline, and the tendency to look to the culture instead of faith to guide our pathway. We are to humble ourselves; that is, to realize that we can’t solve our problems by our own ideas and resources. We are to seek His face; that is, to admit that He is the only source of our hope. We are to repent of our sins; that is, to seek God’s forgiveness not only for our personal failings but those of our nation. For this, God promises to forgive our sins and heal our land.

God is telling us how to pray for the blessings He wants to bestow on us, our nation, and its people. We are blessed by the opportunity to pray this prayer, and others will be blessed by our doing so.

R&D *How seriously do you believe that we need to follow the Lord’s guidance by way of 2 Chronicles 7:14? Explain.*

Prayer: *Show us Your face, Dear Lord, in the midst of our troubles and our uncertainty.*

Day 14

Read: Genesis 1:26; Deuteronomy 31:6

Self-confidence

Perhaps it seems strange to follow a teaching involving humility with one dealing with self-confidence. Humility involves looking to God rather than to ourselves as the real source of our strength, but that doesn't mean that Christians are to be spiritual doormats. As a friend has wisely said, "The person who cannot say 'no' is not free to say 'yes'." There is a lot that God wants to do in this world of ours, but He is planning on doing it through us. He wants us to be strong, be bold, because the Lord God is with us.

Our two verses of Scripture form the basis of our self-confidence. We were made in the image of God for the purpose of ruling over the earth and all that is in it. "Knowing that we are made in God's image and thus share many of his characteristics provides a solid basis for self-worth. Human worth is not based on possessions, achievements, physical attractiveness, or public acclaim. Instead, it is based on being made in God's image. Because we bear God's image, we can feel positive about ourselves. Criticizing or downgrading ourselves is criticizing what God has made and the abilities he has given us. Knowing that you are a person of worth helps you love God, know him personally, and make a valuable contribution to those around you" (*Life Application Bible*).

In the verse from Deuteronomy, Moses is telling his successor Joshua to "buck up" for the task ahead: "Be strong and courageous...for the Lord God goes with you." We can have self-confidence because we are made in the image of God and He goes with us when we are about His work.

In an age in which so many people feel inadequate, it is important to remember that, as God's people in the world today, we can be confident in the source of our strength to be Christ to those around us. We are greatly blessed that this is so, and, as a result, can be a blessing to others.

R&D *What is your level of self-confidence? How can you be stronger in the Lord?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to see myself in relation to You. That can both keep me humble and give me confidence.*

Day 15

Read: Philippians 1:1-6

Partners in the Gospel

Paul opens his letter to the Philippians with words of thanksgiving and prayer. Though written while Paul was imprisoned, it is also his letter of joy. It contains his wonderful "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice" (4:4). Paul was full of joy because he knew that, regardless of what might happen to him, the Lord was with him. We'll look specifically at the subject of joy later in this series; but, for now, reflect on how the natural showing forth of joy in our lives can not only aid our health, but refresh the lives of others. We can hope that we are thought of as joyful people.

Our main focus for today, however, is on our partnership in the gospel through which God can begin to carry out good work through us. The Philippians had been good partners in the gospel by the practical help given Paul during his visit to Philippi ten years earlier and the financial support they had subsequently provided. We, of course, can be partners in the gospel by the support we give our clergy, in fulfilling our ministry responsibilities within and from the congregation of

which we are a part, and in the financial support we give to the church, through the church, and in so many other ways.

There is an old hymn that contains the promise of verse 6 of our text that we can have confidence that the good work the Lord has begun in us will be carried to completion. This good work continues through our lifetime. God began that work in us when Jesus died on the cross in our place. It took the next step when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. At that time the Holy Spirit came to live within us enabling us to become more like Jesus every day. We are, hopefully, continuing in that process of Christian growth. It is because of the good work God is doing *in* us that He may do good work *through* us. He blesses us that we may be partners in the gospel and bless others.

R&D In what ways to you think of yourself as a partner in the gospel? Is there more you need to be doing?

Prayer: Partnering with You in the gospel is an awesome thought, Lord. Give us the guidance and strength we need to do what You would have us do.

Day 16

Read: Romans 12:1-8

Spiritual Gifts

Our reading for today is one of the most important passages of Scripture. There is much to consider here. In this season of Lent it is appropriate for us to be thinking of ourselves as “living sacrifices” (v.1). We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (v.2). Scripture should do much more than *inform* us; it should *transform* us in the way we think and act. And, doing what is pleasing to God is our spiritual act of worship. A clergy friend’s last words to his congregation on Sunday mornings were, “Worship is over, the service begins.”

Having said all that, however, our focus today is on spiritual gifts and how we are to make them available by way of ministry. 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. For too long, the term “minister” has been understood to be only those ordained.

When Paul outlined the gifts for ministry, he was not talking about the ordained ministry. 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 manifest in a world desperately in need of the benefit of those gifts. Some of those gifts are named in our passage for today. You might also want to check 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 for other lists. We are the Body of Christ, engifted to serve one another and those in our workplaces, neighborhoods, and elsewhere. We will find that we are blessed by using our spiritual gifts and others will be blessed by benefiting from them.

R&D Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? If not, are you willing to find them and use them?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for empowering us to do Your work in the world. Help me to use my gifts for Your glory.

BRF's workbook *Discovering Our Ministry* is a Gifts Discovery Exercise that has helped thousands of people find their spiritual gifts (or be affirmed in those gifts they have perceived that they have). This workbook can be found on our website: www.biblereading.org.

Day 17

Read: Galatians 5:16-26

Fruit of the Spirit

Today's reading is another especially good one for Lent. Jesus said, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33). "Fruit inspection" of ourselves is a good exercise for Lent.

Paul begins by telling us to live by the Spirit. If we do, we won't fall into the sins listed in verses 19-21, but will bear the fruit of the Spirit listed in verses 22-23. If what we really want in our lives is the fruit, we can know that we are being guided by the Holy Spirit. We are being led by the Spirit when we want to hear and are ready to obey God's word, and have the sensitivity to discern between our own selfish desires and God's best for us. We should live in such a way that the Holy Spirit can guide our pathway one step at a time.

If we are honest about it, there is nonetheless a war going on within us and Paul notes some examples of our sinful nature. He lists both the obvious sins (sexual immorality and witchcraft) and the more subtle ones (selfish ambition and jealousy); but, they are all sins and we need to examine ourselves to see if we are guilty of any of them, seeking God's forgiveness.

Lent is also a good time to take stock of the fruit we can see growing in our lives. Do we have joy, are we at peace, is patience an asset we have, are we kind and good and gentle and self-controlled, do we remain faithful? If so, know that the Holy Spirit is in control and we are blessed to be a blessing.

R&D Do you find the "checklists" in our reading for today helpful in evaluating your spiritual health? Why or why not?

Prayer: Lord, we want to bear fruit of Your liking. May we be led by the Spirit in all we do.

Day 18

Read: Hebrews 6:13-20

Hope

It is in remembering what God has done in the past and what He has promised to do in the future that is the basis of hope for the Christian. God made a covenant promise to Abraham; and, although what He promised didn't seem feasible and didn't take place for a long time, it was fulfilled. God's promises are trustworthy and unchanging. God is trustworthy and unchanging. We can bank on what God promises, and that gives us good reason to hope. He has promised us eternal life with Him through faith in Jesus Christ (the one who has access to the inner sanctuary on our behalf, vv.19-20), and that is a hope we can build our lives around.

My original plan in writing this Lenten series was to center it on the promises of God, and I am using many passages that spell out God's promises because they represent blessings we have as Christians through which we can bless others. The Bible is literally filled with the promises of God. Because God's promises are trustworthy and unchanging they can give us hope that is an "anchor for our soul, firm and secure."

We look forward in hope because of God's promises, but reflecting on what God has done in the past is also a basis for hope. Lent is a good time for reflection, not only to test ourselves against His standards in a penitential way, but to rejoice in what God has done and is doing in our lives. Whether it be "mountaintop experiences" or those wonderful little coincidences ("God-incidents") in which God gets our attention during the course of a day, or the words of Scripture jumping off the page to answer the deepest longings of our hearts...or whatever...the memories of how God shows His love to us blesses us with hope. That's hope we can share with a very troubled world.

R&D Do you consider yourself to be a hope-filled person? Why or why not? What can you do to become more hopeful?

Prayer: You are the anchor of our hope, Lord Jesus; hold us firm and secure in your love.

Day 19

Read: Luke 12:22-31

Freedom from Worry

One of the great blessings of becoming a Christian is that we begin to have an entirely different value system. The silly things we used to worry about just aren't important. We no longer have to be the best-dressed person at the gathering. We don't have to have the biggest house and the newest, most fully equipped automobile. Our focus is no longer on eating the most exquisite cuisine at the fanciest restaurant or being seen in all the "right" places. And so on. We're answering to a different Lord, no longer to the ruler of this world (Ephesians 6:12), a pagan world (v.30).

In our reading for today, Jesus is telling us not to worry. He is not telling us to dress in a sloppy manner or eat food that doesn't taste good; he is saying that we need to keep our priorities straight. He expects us to order our lives in a timely and proper manner, but we are not to agonize about every little inconsequential detail. He calls us to be perfect (in the sense of moving toward the righteousness he wants for us), but not to be a perfectionist. So, there is a balance to be struck.

If we have a tendency to worry, there are some practical steps we can take. Think the thing through and ask yourself, "What would be the consequences if what I am worrying about really happened?" Seek the reason for the thing you are worrying about; what is the underlying cause? Ask advice from someone who can help you deal with the problem rather than obsessing about it yourself. But, most important of all, remember the words of Jesus to seek first the Kingdom of God (v.31) because everything else is secondary to that. The faith we show by leaning on God rather than our own understanding will bless us and others.

R&D Do you have a tendency to worry? In what ways might today's study help you deal with your worries?

Prayer: Lord, free us from the tyranny of our concerns that we may be more available to Your guidance in matters large and small.

Day 20

Read: Matthew 10:17-20, 26-31

Freedom from Fear

We now take a giant step from worry to fear. We don't tend to think of facing the kind of persecution Jesus has in mind in our passage for today. His followers would be imprisoned, tortured, and martyred. That is happening to many Christians in other parts of the world today, but, thankfully, not to us. Yet real persecution still exists. I had occasion earlier today to send a note of support to a Christian couple who are under great verbal assault here in our own country for taking a stand that is unpopular with others. I cited our today's Bible passage as an encouragement to them to continue to stand firm.

In the first section of our reading, Jesus' focus is on what we are to say when confronted with the animosity of others. He tells the disciples that they don't have to worry about what to say because the Holy Spirit will speak through them. This promise is fulfilled in Acts 4:8-14 when Peter faces imprisonment or worse before the religious rulers. What Jesus is promising does not mean that we send our brains on vacation when anticipating challenges to our beliefs, however. When we can, we should have carefully prepared, thoughtful statements (Colossians 4:6). Jesus is not saying to stop preparing but to stop being afraid.

In the second section of our reading, Jesus makes the point that, even if we should have to give our life in order to be faithful to him, those who would take our life cannot take our soul. He goes on to point out that God is watching over us. If His eye is on the sparrow, He is certainly watching out for us. Those who truly stand up for Jesus, in spite of the difficulties we face, are blessed to be a blessing.

R&D Do you regularly pray for those in other parts of the world who are in danger because they are standing up for Christ? Is there someone or some group you should add to your intercessory prayer list?

Prayer: May those who come behind us find us faithful.

Day 21

Read: James 3:13-16

Wisdom

Although I have chosen this passage from James for a look at the blessing of wisdom, reading Proverbs from time to time yields much fruit on the subject. A friend who continually exhibits godly wisdom has a practice of reading a few verses of Proverbs almost every day. This is something you may want to consider as a part of your Lenten discipline.

James, in his usual straightforward manner, deals with two kinds of wisdom, though it would be more appropriate to say that he tells us what wisdom is and is not. Just as we can identify a tree by the fruit it bears, we can evaluate wisdom by what it produces. If our tendencies are toward envy and selfish ambitions, they will lead to disorder and "every evil practice." The world tells us about our rights and what we deserve, and encourages us to reach the top of the ladder regardless of those we have to step on to get there. Worldly wisdom is an anathema to God.

Real wisdom, on the other hand, can be measured by the depth of a person's character. Seeking God's wisdom frees us from the need to compare ourselves to others in a way that would lead to envy and selfish ambition. Instead, we can be "peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere," as James recommends. It's easy to see that this

kind of wisdom is a much greater blessing to us than worldly wisdom. It's equally easy to see how this kind of wisdom, expressed in our own lives, will bless others.

R&D Think of people you know who show godly wisdom and others who reflect worldly wisdom. Do their lives illustrate the points James has made? Why or why not?

Prayer: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:9)*

Day 22

Read: James 5:13-16

Good Health

Years ago, my wife's first cousin (who was like a sister to her) had a severely debilitating spinal condition. She was in constant pain, but had had so many surgeries on her spine that the doctors were reluctant to try anything more. Anne was not a practicing Christian at the time, so my wife was led to pray regularly for her healing. One day, in the course of those prayers, it was as though the Lord said, "Don't pray for her healing; pray that she will come to me." "All right, Lord," my wife replied, "if you're not going to heal her, I pray that she will come to you." Soon thereafter, Anne, finding that nothing else would work to heal her pain, started reading the Bible. She found today's passage, accepted it as fact, went to her family's pastor and asked for prayers, became a Christian and was healed. She went on to have a fine son...something her condition would have made virtually impossible...and a productive Christian ministry.

What a blessing it is to know that we can go to our "elders" (priest, pastor, healing prayer team, etc.) when we need healing. It should be a natural expectancy on our part when the need arises. If this is not a ministry provided in your congregation, isn't it time to find out what can be done about that? God wants good health for His people. We are blessed in our congregation not only to have a healing prayer team at every worship service but to also have an expert on nutrition who teaches a class and regularly shares helpful information with our people.

Some people have the spiritual gift of healing; that is, being gifted by God as His instruments of healing. But all of us should include in our intercessions healing payers for others. It's another blessing with which we can bless others. And, we should also lay hands on our loved ones when they are ill and those who ask for our healing prayers. Further, spiritual healing may be the greater need, and, as James points out, confession is an important part of spiritual healing.

R&D What is your involvement in Christian healing? In what ways might you need to be more involved?

Prayer: *Lord, You are the Great Healer. Thank You that You love us so much that You want us free of illness and fit to do the work You have for us to do.*

Day 23

Read: Luke 13:6-9

Patience

There are a number of instances of patience in Scripture. In Genesis 29:15-28 we learn that Jacob had to wait many years before being allowed to marry his beloved Rachel. David knew he was to be the King of Israel many years before Saul died, and David waited patiently over all of that time. The psalms speak of "waiting on the Lord" (Psalms 27, 33, 40). And, there are familiar

jokes about the problem of patience: (1) the person who prayed, “Lord, please give me patience and give it to me right now”; and (2) the one who advised his friend, “If you pray for patience, you had better be prepared for what God may send to teach it to you.”

Our reading for today is another way to look at the blessing of patience, which is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). In last year’s Lenten series in *The Journey*, Robin Jennings said this about our reading for today: “If God is not in a hurry, but is patient, then maybe we should slow down and put on the brakes. We just read [Luke 12:35-48] a parable about watching and waiting. Patience is a word that is not very popular in our microwave culture that asks only: ‘What have you done for me lately?’” Face it, we’re not a very patient bunch of people. Patience only comes by the grace of God.

The two primary qualities needed in order to be patient are inner peace and living one day at a time. We are blessed when we have the inner peace that comes from a stable relationship with the Lord through prayer, Bible reading, and worship. That helps keep things in perspective, and focuses our attention on others and their needs—thus blessing them—rather than our selfish desires. Living one day at a time allows us to experience life at its fullest rather than fretting over things of the past or present.

R&D How do you rate on the patience scale? What do you need to do to become more patient?

Prayer: Lord, help me to quit uprooting trees, but, instead, giving them a chance to grow.

Day 24

Read: Matthew 5:21-26

Handling Anger

Today’s passage is from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus often made references to what had been taught based on the Law of Moses only to show the deeper meaning. That is what he is doing in our reading for today. Jesus is not doing away with the law or substituting his own beliefs; instead, he is giving a fuller understanding of what God meant in the first place. Moses said, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). Jesus is telling us that we shouldn’t even get angry enough to feel like murdering someone because, in such case, we are committing murder in our hearts. It is easy enough for us to say we have not murdered anyone, but God wants us to look at the intent within our hearts...a particularly good thing to be doing in Lent.

Anger is a sin because it violates God’s command to love one another. Anger leads to broken relationships, but a lot of other grief as well. For one thing, it can destroy our health as we allow the bitterness to spread within us, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. It not only ruins our relationship with the person against whom we have the anger, but others on the periphery of the matter. Instead of being blessed to be a blessing, we become just the opposite.

So, what do we do when we have feelings of anger? The first step in dealing with anger is acknowledging it rather than exploding in a rage or stuffing it down within us. Then we need to reflect on the nature of the anger and how to deal with it constructively. Jesus calls for reconciliation (vv.23-24). I can testify from personal experiences that when I have done this, not only has reconciliation happened, but deeper friendships have developed.

R&D How have you dealt with anger in the past? How has that worked out?

Prayer: *Lord, help me to see how love and reconciliation are so much more of a blessing than being angry.*

Day 25

Read: Numbers 6:22-27

Blessing Others

This ancient blessing of God's people in the Old Testament became very popular in Christian churches following the Reformation. 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.

God gave Moses these words as instructions concerning how the sons of Aaron (the Jewish priesthood) were to bless the people, but those same words can be used by all of us today. 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 them 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, or 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.

R&D In what way or ways do you ask the Lord to bless your loved ones? Would the manner described in this study work for you?

Prayer: *Lord, please bless our loved ones that they may come to love You.*

Day 26

Read: Acts 9:1-19

Courage

There's not so much teaching about courage in the Bible as there are instances of it being shown. One person who showed great courage is Ananias. His story is almost lost in the drama of Paul's conversion. But reflect on how vital it is to that story. What if he had said "No"? His "No" might not have been as devastating as a "No" from Mary to Gabriel would have been or a failure of Jesus to say "Thy will be done" in the Garden of Gethsemane; but it would have been one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the world nonetheless. Ananias knew that a wrathful Saul could have wreaked great havoc upon the Christians in Damascus, and Ananias would have been seen as an accomplice in that disaster. Ananias questioned the wisdom of the command; but, given assurance, he courageously obeyed.

Life tests courage in a variety of ways. A brief period of reflection is all most of us need in order to recall the key times in our lives when our courage has been tested and stood or failed. A

godly couple, friends of ours, set out to build a Christian retreat center years ago. They had a beautiful piece of land in a rural setting, easily reached from the Interstate, and they firmly believed God wanted them to use it to His glory. The problem was lack of money and building experience. Emboldened by 1 Chronicles 28:20, which they believed the Lord had given them for the project, they began the effort without the funds to cover it, or, as they said, to cover their mistakes. That took courage! It required believing God was directing them to fulfill His purpose. The Lord did provide, and a wonderful Christian retreat center is the result.

From the moment we give our lives to Christ, the issue of courage changes significantly. Once our primary allegiance is to Christ, it becomes much easier to stand against many of the things that have challenged our courage in the past. We are now operating under a different set of rules with entirely new values. We are blessed and our courage can bless others.

R&D When was your courage last tested? What happened?

Prayer: Lord, help us to be bold in You that we may stand against the challenges of this world.

Day 27

Read: Psalm 32:8-11

Effective Decision-making

If we truly look to the Lord for guidance in our decision-making, some wonderful things can happen. But we shouldn't be surprised. As our psalm tells us, "I will counsel you and watch over you." God can guide us through our prayers and Bible reading, in our interchange with other people, and sometimes just by the way things seem to work out (the opening of some doors and the closing of others). Growing in our relationship with Him attunes us to His guidance in the several ways in which we might receive it. God longs to guide us with love and through wisdom rather than through "bit and bridle."

There are practical ways that we can make decisions. We can begin by making a list of our options and then consider the pros and cons of each. We can weigh them, taking consequences into consideration, and then write down our conclusion and the reasons for it. This last point is a good idea in case we begin to question our decision at some later time. God will honor our prayerfully going through an approach such as this.

But, if our decision involves a moral choice, there are some other matters to consider: (1) is it consistent with my commitment to Christ and Scripture?, (2) does it help me do my best?, (3) am I thinking of myself or of the other person?, (4) is it the loving thing to do?, and (5) does it glorify God? Following these simple guidelines can help us make better decisions and ones that honor God. Thereby we are blessed, and our decision is much more likely to bless others.

R&D Think of a major decision you have had to make recently. Would the above guidelines have been helpful to you? Why or why not?

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to perceive Your guidance in the decisions we are called upon to make.

Day 28

Read: Acts 1:1-8

Witnessing

“You will be my witnesses,” Jesus told his followers (v.8), and that message is just as much for Christians today as it was for those to whom he spoke it. We may not be evangelists, but all Christians are witnesses. An evangelist is someone especially called by God to share the Christian faith with others; that is his or her primary ministry. The rest of us have a great variety of other gifts and ministries (see, for example, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4), but we are all called to witness. We are like the blind man in John 9:25: “One thing I know. I was blind and now I see.”

In our passage for today Jesus promised to baptize his followers in the Holy Spirit to equip them to carry his message to Jerusalem (their own “neighborhood”), all Judea (into the surrounding countryside), Samaria (among those “half-Jews” whose beliefs were different from the beliefs of traditional Jews), and to the ends of the earth. Jesus’ message should be just as clear to us today. We are to share our faith in him with our family, friends, and neighbors (our Jerusalem); the un-churched in our own country (our Judea); atheists, agnostics, and people of other religions (our Samaria); and to the ends of the earth.

Many of us are intimidated by the idea of talking about Jesus with others. We consider our faith to be a private sort of thing. But where would we be, spiritually speaking, if no one had told us about Jesus? The secret is realizing what God is doing in our lives and reflecting that in our everyday words and actions. It is, in a perfectly natural way, letting the other person know what Jesus means to us as we have opportunities to do so. When we do, we are blessed and so are they.

*R&D When was the last time you witnessed to another person what Jesus means to you? Are you willing to become more conscious of opportunities to do so? Why or why not? **

Prayer: Make me bold, Lord, to share the joy of being a Christian with those who are and those who are not.

** Loving to Tell the Story, a book by Harry C. Griffith, discusses how to enjoy sharing with others what Jesus Christ means in your life. It can be found on our website: <http://www.biblereading.org/>.*

Day 29

Read: Matthew 20:25-28

Servant Leadership

“Leadership is a process of influence. Any time you seek to influence the thinking, behavior, or development of people in their personal or profession lives, you are taking the role of a leader.” (From *Lead Like Jesus*). “Whether you serve others as parent, spouse, family member, friend or citizen...or whether you have a leadership title and position like CEO, pastor, coach, teacher, or manager...you 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 servant leadership.

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). God wants to bless us as servant leaders so that we may be a blessing to others.

R&D *Have you thought of yourself as a servant leader? Will you now?*

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help me to be the servant leader You want me to be.*

Day 30

Read: Romans 10:8-13, 17

Faith

“The Lord richly blesses those who call on him” (v.12b). It is logical to assume that everyone who is reading this Lenten series has faith in Jesus. We are ones who call on him. We have been saved by faith. So, why have a study on the basics of faith in the middle of this series?

Two reasons. First, isn't it a good idea to be reminded of all we have in Jesus? That is actually what we have been considering in this series: instance after instance of what a blessing it is to be a Christian. We possess the greatest gift of all, but perhaps we begin to get beaten down by the world or tempted by its fruitless promises. It's time to remind ourselves of what a blessing faith in Christ really is.

But, secondly, let's be reminded that there are so many around us who have never accepted the message. As I write these words I am looking out at an area in our yard where we have transplanted some daffodils. The bulbs were very productive where they previously were, producing an abundance of beautiful blossoms; but, in this new location, there are no flowers. Their foliage is just as tall and green, they look just like they did in their former location, but no flowers.

Think back now on our recent study about witnessing to our faith, and how God might use us with the people around us who have never confessed that Jesus is Lord. They're like those un-blooming flowers...they need the faith and fulfillment they can only find in Christ. How will God use us to bless them?

R&D *To whom might God want you to go in order to help them bloom in some beautiful way?*

Prayer: *Your Word, Father God, is in my heart, and I confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord.*

Day 31

Read: Colossians 3:1-17

Righteousness

Righteousness means doing what God wants us to do: obeying the laws of God. It has to do with being in a right relationship with God. It leads to a holy life. There is everything right and nothing wrong with righteousness; it is what God supremely wants of us. The problem comes when we become conscious of our righteousness and/or lack of it on the part of others. That leads to self-righteousness, and is where the word *righteous* gets a bad name.

What Paul has done for us in our reading for today is give us a wonderful set of rules for holy living, the road to righteousness. He wants us to set our hearts and minds on things above,

striving for God's priorities in our daily lives. He tells us we have died with Christ (Galatians 2:20) and our life is hidden (safely protected) with Christ in God. This isn't just a future hope, it is an accomplished fact. The good things we do are not to earn our salvation, but the results of it. Paul is assuring us that we already have the power to live for Christ, to be his people in the world today; and then he goes on to show how Christians are to act today that we may be prepared for eternity with Christ.

Because we have died in Christ, we should have also died to sexual impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. We are to rid ourselves of the old life and put on the new. In the new life we are "clothed" with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. We are to bear with one another and forgive. We are to let peace reign in our hearts, be thankful, and sing joyful songs. What a blessing we have in Christ. Pass it on.

R&D Lent is a good time to reflect on how we are doing against the rules for holy living that Paul give us in today's Scripture.

Prayer: I have died in you, Lord Christ; help me learn how to live in you.

Day 32

Read: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Generosity

Few passages of Scripture so well illustrate blessing to be blessed as our reading for today. Perhaps that is because few attitudes manifest blessing to be blessed as does the attitude of generosity. "God is able to make all grace abound in you, so that in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work" (v.8). Paul is telling us that God will meet our needs that we may meet the needs of others.

Many years ago the Lord convicted me about tithing. One of the major breakthroughs in my spiritual life occurred when we began giving away 10% of our income. So, it is natural that I have always taught tithing when I had the chance to do so, and still do. But, in a sense, God wants more than that from us. God loves a cheerful giver (v.7). As Christians we should realize that all we have belongs to God, and it is a great pleasure to be able to share our bounty (as limited as that may be at times) with others.

As I write these words our country is going through a tough time financially. Many are out of work. Others have taken jobs for which the compensation is much less than they have earned in the past. Rather than being weighted down by the negativity of the situation, some of us may be able to see it as a time of opportunity...a time to help those who are less fortunate than we are. Generosity begins in the heart. At the end of our Bible study group this week we were faced with the poverty-stricken need of a brother in Christ, and it was the least well off person in the group who made the first move to help. It's a matter of attitude.

R&D How are you doing on the generosity scale? What might God be saying to you this Lent concerning the needs of others?

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

Day 33

Read: Ephesians 2:11-22

Spiritual Maturity

Paul begins today's passage by reminding the Ephesians that they were once Gentiles, separated from Christ. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (v.13). Of course, the same could be said of each of us; until we came to Christ as our Lord and Savior, we were also separated from God. Christ has destroyed the barrier and given us access to the Father through the Holy Spirit. We are no longer foreigners and aliens but members of God's household. Yes, but where does Paul want us to go from here?

"We are being build up together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (v.22). There is the old saying that God loves us just as we are, but He doesn't want us to stay that way. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, Paul admonishes those who are not growing in Christ: "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, but not solid food, for you were not ready for it." In Hebrews 5:12, the writer uses similar terminology: "You need milk, not solid food!" And Peter says (1 Peter 2:2): "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that you may grow up in your salvation." We are blessed to be members of God's household, but we are not to remain as spiritual babies but to grow spiritually all the rest of our lives.

How did Jesus do that? He searched the Scriptures. Jesus knew God's purpose for his life because he knew Scripture. He found fellowship with the Father in prayer. Jesus' whole life was one of prayer. He sought fellowship with God's people. He chose twelve disciples, and poured his life into them. It's the course God would have us follow if we want to be blessed to be a blessing.

R&D What steps are you taking toward the spiritual maturity God wants of you?

Prayer: Lord, I want to be all that You want me to be; guide me in the direction You would have me go this day and all the days ahead.

Day 34

Read: Philippians 2:1-11

Humility

Paul, in encouraging the Philippians to "look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (v.4), is focusing on humility. He then draws from what is thought to have been a hymn of the early Church (vv.5-11) to demonstrate Christ's humility. The idea, of course, is that we should imitate Christ in this regard.

There is really only one guideline concerning how to be humble: having a right relationship with God. If we are in a right relationship with God, humility is a natural consequence. We are aware of our insignificance in relation to God and our total dependence on Him, but we are assured by our faith that we were made in the image of God and are very precious to Him. It is in that balance that humility thrives. Phillips Brooks put it this way: "Humility is not seeing ourselves as less than we are but standing at our tallest height and measuring ourselves against Christ."

A young friend who is a missionary said this: "I think humility is a natural consequence of the gospel when we see the humility of Christ in his incarnation and suffering out of his great love for us. The worship that this understanding creates produces genuine humility. The guideline is to look at and savor the grace and humility of God in Christ and to have those powerful truths transform the way we think, feel and behave."

That transformation blesses our life because it puts us in God's will and leads to our responding to Paul's plea that we look toward the interests of others, blessing them.

R&D *In what ways might today's study broaden your view of humility?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to take the focus off of myself that I may be more sensitive to the needs of others.*

Day 35

Read: Psalm 100

Joy

This psalm is an invitation to enter joyfully into God's presence. Its words of praise should fill our hearts with love for God. In it, we acknowledge that God is Lord, that we are His people like the sheep of His pasture. Perhaps that reminds us of the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:10-14), a wonderful word picture of joy. The teaching contained in the parable is that the Lord rejoices over the one lost sheep who is found (i.e., He "does not want anyone to perish," 2 Peter 3:9). The picture many of us have in our minds as we think of this parable is Jesus as the shepherd, carrying the lamb on his shoulders, rejoicing as he brings it back to the fold.

Joy is an inner quality in the life of the Christian. A fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), it is a work of the Holy Spirit within us. Our inner attitudes do not have to reflect the outer circumstances surrounding us. Joy is centered in our relationship with God. That is the foundation that holds us in place regardless of the situation we are in. If we truly know that our life is in Christ, and that what really matters at any given time is what he expects of us, we can have joy in the midst of the worst kind of trouble.

The joy that comes to us in truly committing our lives to the Lord—we were all, at one time, "a lost sheep"—should carry over into all of life. As long as we remain in relationship with God, we have every reason to rejoice. We can enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise, giving thanks to Him and praising His name. Joy in the Lord is not only a great blessing to us, but blesses those who come in contact with the joy that exudes from our heart.

R&D *How would you rate yourself on the joy scale? What brings the most joy in your life?*

Prayer: *"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth."*

Day 36

Read: Exodus 18:13-27

Ministry

Today's reading is one I have always referred to as "The Jethro Solution." It has been the basis for teachings I have had the opportunity to do over the years on the subject of lay ministry. The obvious reason for all of this is that Moses, like many clergy in our day, was being worn down by the expectations of others. As a result, he was not as effective as he should have been; and those around him, who should have been sharing the load, were constantly dumping it on him. The same thing happens in our congregations when there is not a sharing of the gifts of ministry among the people of God.

As noted earlier in this series, 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.

The *Book of Common Prayer* has it right in saying that 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).

In those congregations in which the laity share fully in using their gifts for ministry, they are blessed, the congregation is blessed, and the community around them is blessed.

R&D *What is your congregation’s understanding of lay ministry and how is that being lived out in the church and in the world?*

Prayer: *Use us, Lord, that You may be glorified in who we are and what we do in You.*

Day 37

Read: Psalm 27:1-6

Protection from Evil

According to *The New Bible Dictionary*, evil is the opposite of good. “Evil has a broader meaning than sin. The Hebrew word comes from a root meaning ‘to spoil,’ ‘to break in pieces,’ being broken and so made worthless. It is essentially what is unpleasant, disagreeable, offensive. The word binds together the evil deed and its consequences.” The spectrum that the word evil runs in our minds might be anything from something that someone has said that hurts our feelings to supernatural satanic influences that might lead to abject fear. But the good news, as we see from our psalm, is that we live under the protection of God whatever the evil thing may be.

The point is that, regardless of what is threatening our peace of mind, body, or spirit, God is our salvation and strength. He is the stronghold of our lives. We can have confidence that God wants the best for us in whatever circumstances we face. Things may not be great in the short run, but in the long run God will prevail on our behalf.

When David, in the psalm, talks about being in the house of the Lord or in His temple as a place of shelter, he probably had reference to the tabernacle that housed the Ark of the Covenant because Solomon’s Temple had not been built. These references to a physical structure, however, really are meant to convey the idea of being in God’s presence. We tend to run to God when we are in difficult circumstances. The psalm is calling us to be in God’s presence all the time. Therein is our protection. This is a blessing for us and for all whom we may be able to “gather under the shelter of our wings” (Luke 13:34; Psalm 17:8).

R&D *Reflect on a recent incident in which you experienced God’s protection from evil.*

Prayer: *“Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil.”*

Day 38

Read: John 14:4-14

Truth

As we approach the end of Lent, it is a good time to reflect on the truth that is in Jesus Christ by looking at one of the most important passages in Scripture. It is here that Jesus tells us that he is the truth, among a number of other especially significant matters such as that he is the only way to the Father. Jesus, as the truth, is the reality of all of God's promises. He is the tangible image of the invisible God; it is through Jesus that we know who God is and what He is like.

"The scientist must not think of the result he wants from his experiments," said William Temple, "he must look to see what really does happen. He has got to put all his predilections aside; he must not be primarily interested, for example, in providing evidence for the theories on which his reputation rests. He must be concerned with the facts and not with his desires; otherwise, he will be no true scientist. And it is the same in religion. We must give ourselves over to the search for the real truth concerning God and his word. 'Thou had made us for thyself, and our souls are restless until they find rest in thee.' It is only in the truth that they will find rest, and not in any devices of our contriving that may accord with what we suppose will bring satisfaction."

Truth is found in Christ, and the Christ we know is the Christ of Scripture. It is in the Bible that we find truth. It is only as we become increasingly knowledgeable of Scripture and let it shape our lives that we can grow in truth. As we do, we are blessed that we may be a blessing to others.

R&D In the secularistic age in which we live, how would you show someone who thinks that Christianity is too exclusive that, in truth, it is completely inclusive?

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for being the way, the truth, and the life and opening the door to the Father for all who believe.

Day 39

Read: John 14:1-3

Trust

My wife and I have been in many prayer/Bible study groups over the years. There is an interesting phenomenon that happens in groups of this type. To be successful, the members of the group have to grow in trust of one another if they are going to be able to share their thoughts and feelings at a deep level without fear of being misunderstood or that what they have said will be repeated outside of the group. It takes a while for that level of trust to build within the group, but it usually does...that is, until someone new is added to the group. Then the trust level immediately drops until the group becomes comfortable with the trustworthiness of the new person or persons.

Trusting God works the same way. It is built over time as a result of the trustworthiness of the relationship. I'm talking, of course, about our trusting God. His trusting us is problematical at best! We come to trust God as we grow in our relationship with Him through prayer, Bible study, worship, and service. We increasingly are able to see His hand in the situations and circumstances we face in life. We come to know that we can rely on Him.

Our passage today has to do with the supreme test of that trust. Jesus says that he is going to prepare a place for us in eternity. There aren't many verses in Scripture that describe eternal life but these are rich with promises. Paul said, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Corinthians 15:19). Our hope extends beyond this life because of what Christ has done for us—so poignantly remembered on Good Friday—and our ability to trust

him at his word. There are many around us who do not take eternal life seriously, and we have a great blessing to share with them.

R&D *In what ways are you building trust in your relationship with God?*

Prayer: *Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.*

Day 40

Read: Luke 16:19-31

Conclusion

This morning, before preparing to write the conclusion to this series, I had the opportunity to read today's passage and Robin Jennings' commentary on it in last year's Lenten series. It seemed to me to be an ideal passage to end our forty days of looking at how we Christians are blessed to be a blessing. Like our last two studies, it considers the greatest blessing of all: eternity with God. But, in contrast to them, it considers the other side of the picture: missing that opportunity.

The rich man in Jesus' parable got all his blessings while he was on earth, but squandered them on himself to his eternal despair. Lazarus had a dreadful life on earth, but was gathered into his Father's bosom at death. The parable, then, deals more with the disaster of missing what God so freely offers us than with the blessing of receiving it, a sobering thought to consider here at the end of Lent. Jennings used this passage to remind readers that repentance is a good thing to be thinking about in Lent.

So, as we come to the end of this series, remember that we have thought of a great many of the ways in which we are blessed to be Christians: access to God; forgiveness of sins; guidance in so many ways; protection in so many others; spiritual gifts and fruit of the Spirit; faith, hope, and love; and eternal life with God. We are truly blessed. But God didn't put us here just to bless us. He gave His only Son to die for us and the Holy Spirit to live in us so that, through Jesus, we might be a blessing to others. Our reading for today gives us a grim picture of what happens to those who miss that blessing. Be available to God that He can use you to lead others to Him.

R&D *How is God reaching others through you? In what additional ways might you serve Him in the future?*

Prayer: *Lord, I cherish Your blessings as I look forward to the glory of Easter.*

by Harry C. Griffith

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