



# Jesus' Difficult Sayings

## Lenten Study

### Day 1

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**Read: Matthew 5:38-44**

#### **Retaliation**

Years ago, the famed Bible scholar William Neil wrote a book called *The Difficult Sayings of Jesus*. The writer of the Lenten study that begins today had the privilege of preparing the study guide for that book. Neil chose those things Jesus said that seemed most difficult for people to understand, and explained them in simple terms. In an age when people are increasingly questioning the Bible, it seemed timely to take a fresh look at some of those “difficult sayings.” Lent is an especially good time for examining our faith in the context of Scripture, strengthening our beliefs and rededicating ourselves to the Lordship of Christ.

In the Sermon on the Mount, of which our reading for today is a part, and in several other places in the Gospels, Jesus sometimes uses startling illustrations in order to get the attention of his hearers. He doesn't expect his listeners to take him literally. He is trying to get their (and our!) attention in order to teach an important principle.

Jesus begins by making reference to the “eye for an eye” law (Exodus 21:23-25) of Old Testament times. It was instituted as a guide for judges, not as a way of dealing with personal relationships. The principle of that law was only that the punishment should fit the crime. Human nature being what it is, many undoubtedly rationalized that law into allowing them vengeance when they felt they had been wronged.

Jesus not only corrects that misunderstanding of the Old Testament Law, but also takes the principle to a higher plane. We are not to retaliate at all. The ministry of Christians is one of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19b), not retaliation. Despite Jesus' wording, however, this is not to be carried to the extreme. It does not mean we shouldn't exercise reasonable self-defense when attacked. And it certainly doesn't mean that we watch helplessly while someone molests another person.

Likewise, we are not to take the “love your enemies” to a ridiculous extreme. He is again talking about personal relationships. Because God loves everyone, we, as His people on earth, are to love them as well. As William Neil says, that doesn't mean we have “to *like* someone who is bent on breaking up our home life, destroying our marriage, leading our children into bad habits, spreading malicious gossip, or making trouble for us in our jobs.” But, with God as our example, we should show good will to all, disregard personal insults, forgive those who wrong us, and be generous to all.

*R&D When were the principles of this teaching last put to the test in your life? How did you handle the situation? What happened?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to love those whom You love and to be Your minister of reconciliation in all my relationships.*

## Day 2

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**Read: Matthew 10:34-39**

### Peace

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth.” “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” These statements in our passage for today need to be taken in combination to understand what Jesus is saying. He is not primarily talking about a “war and peace” issue. He is talking about the natural divisions that will occur in families because of him.

From the days of the early Church, faith in Jesus caused division in families. Early Christians were disowned by their Jewish and Roman (pagan) families, and many were martyred for their faith. We don’t, however, have to look back to the early days of Christianity to see this situation occurring. Christian conversions in Muslim countries produce the same results today. There were more Christians martyred in the last century than in all previous centuries combined. The relationship with Jesus is clearly more important than our relationships with our own parents and siblings. Anyone who has missed this truth has missed what the relationship with Christ is all about.

As William Neil has pointed out, there is, however, another sense in which verse 34 needs to be considered. Although the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus’ birth brought the promise of peace on the earth (Luke 2:14), his arrival on this planet did not bring an end to conflict. We might wish for peace as an end to armed conflict; but, as G. A. Studdert Kennedy said, “War is kinder than a Godless peace.” There are some kinds of peace that are not worth the price. As followers of Christ, we are expected to fight against evil in ourselves, in society, and in the world around us. Our calling is toward peace through strife, not peace through cowardly compromise or indifference. In the long run, the only solution to the problems within our families on the one hand, or world conflict on the other, is universal commitment to Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of our lives.

*R&D What conflict have you experienced in your family or among your friends because of your commitment to Jesus?*

*Prayer: Lord, help us not to be condemning of family, friends, and others who feel differently from us about You; but may we always be willing to speak the truth, in love.*

## Day 3

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**Read: Matthew 17:14-20**

### Faith

“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move.” Once again we have Jesus using exaggeration in order to get the attention of his audience. But just because he has set forth an unrealistic proposition doesn’t mean we should miss his teaching. He wants to be sure he has the ears of his listeners because the principle he is sharing is so important.

Jesus wants his followers not only to have faith, but also to show that they have faith by doing something with it. There is the old charge against clergy that, when they really don’t know what else to tell you in your time of doubt or need, they might say, “This is a matter of having faith.” Jesus is saying, instead, that we should show our faith by stepping out boldly for the Lord.

Faith isn't some fond wish, it is trusting in God despite opposition and discouragement; it is moving forward into the unknown because you believe that is where God wants you to go.

Hebrews 11 is about the heroes of the faith who did great things for God. We find them in the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, and David, for instance. But the author of Hebrews goes on to say that there are nameless heroes who remained faithful to God despite hardships, persecution, and torture. On reflection, we can probably name many in more modern times whose faith has led them to great sacrifice, even martyrdom.

These heroes and heroines of the faith may not have moved any physical mountains, but they have figuratively moved mountains of ignorance, poverty, prejudice, and injustice. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe, by having the faith to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, did more to bring an end to slavery in this country than perhaps anyone else.

Now that is moving a mountain!

R&D *Who are your heroes and heroines of the faith, and why?*

Prayer: *Father, give us faith to move the "mountains" that block the world's view of Your beauty and love.*

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## Day 4

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**Read: Matthew 26:47-56**

### War

"All who draw the sword will die by the sword." The use of this wording by Jesus was not, as has been the case in a couple of the studies so far, an exaggeration. But his meaning is not immediately clear. The words were spoken in the Garden of Gethsemane following his arrest. Apparently, men did sometimes carry swords at that point in the history of Judea. According to the Gospel of John, it was Peter who drew a sword and cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant.

What Jesus said was not a command that no one ever should engage in fighting. It was simply a statement of truth, more commonly expressed as "people who live by the sword die by the sword." Violent criminals often die violent deaths. Terrorists are likely to die in the same way; and, as we have seen in our day, some of them by their own hand.

Jesus and his followers were clearly on the side of peace rather than war, but they undoubtedly also regarded war as inevitable. Although there was thinking in the early church that war was inconsistent with Christianity, many Christians were in the Roman army. Later, the church at large accepted the idea of war fought for a just cause. The clearest example of a "just war" was the Allied position in World War II, fighting against the Nazi regime and its inhuman practices. Many would take the same position concerning the current war against international terrorism. On the other hand, both sides claimed the support of God in World War I, and many question whether the Viet Nam conflict was a "just war."

Thus, committed Christians can be found on both sides of the issue of war and peace. Pacifists and non-pacifists can pray together, although both would certainly prefer peace in the world rather than violence and death. And, as noted in an earlier study, "There are some kinds of peace that are not worth the price." When war is thrust upon us, the non-pacifist will consider it his Christian duty to defend his country and to share with his fellow citizens the task of maintaining its freedom.

R&D *What is your thinking concerning "just wars"?*

Prayer: *Lord, we pray for peace, but not peace at the price of being able to worship You.*

## Day 5

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**Read: Mark 2:13-17**

### Sinners

“I did not come to invite virtuous people, but sinners.” People who are serious enough about Bible study to be reading this Lenten series could be jolted by these words if we were hearing them for the first time. Surely, as Christians, we are trying to live godly lives rather than sinful ones. In the context of what was going on in this passage, a clearer understanding of what Jesus meant might be: “I did not come to invite self-righteous people, but those who know they are in need of redemption.”

Just as the Pharisees of Jesus’ time thought they were better than everyone else, we Christians can also become smug about the kind of people we would like to see in our pews on Sunday. I’m reminded of the cartoon in which a stately couple speaking to the priest following worship say, “What is all this talk about evangelism? Everyone in this town who ought to be a member of our church already is.” How do we feel when the so-called “dregs of society” begin showing up at our church?

In our reading for today, the people at Levi’s dinner were truly the dregs of society in Jesus’ day. Not only did they perform the despicable job of collecting taxes (and apparently practicing extortion on the Jewish populace) but they also were agents of the hated Roman overlords in doing so. No Pharisees would have been found at that party! But Jesus was there because the tax collector Matthew (Levi) had become a follower of his, as did Zaccaheus later on (Luke 19:1-10).

There are no favorites with God. He loves all people, and Jesus demonstrated that fact in today’s passage and in many other places throughout the Gospels. The key verse in a popular Christian song is “His [God’s] favorite song of all is the song of the redeemed.” God loves the sound of the wind in the trees, rain on the ground and waves crashing against the rocks...the songs of creation. And He loves to hear the angels singing “holy is the Lamb.” But nothing compares with God’s joy when a sinner is redeemed.

R&D *Is your church a hospital for sinners or just a comfortable place for people like you?*

Prayer: *Lord, give us a heart for the lost sheep in our families, in our neighborhood, and throughout the world.*

## Day 6

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**Read: Mark 2:23-28**

### Sabbath

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” In our reading for today, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath. Apparently hungry, they picked a few heads of grain, and the Pharisees protested that they had violated the Sabbath. There was nothing illegal about their picking the grain; the edges of the grain fields were dedicated to use by passersby (Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 23:25). The Mosaic Law, however, also stipulated that farmers could not harvest on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had interpreted this to include the picking of grain by anyone and included it within the 39 activities they forbade on the

Sabbath. Jesus used an illustration from David's life to refute the Pharisees, but then makes this difficult statement about the nature of the Sabbath.

Jesus, in dealing with the issue, was not speaking just to the Pharisees, but to people in our day as well. There are Christians who also have been rigid in interpreting the Fourth Commandment, the one concerning the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). Jesus was more concerned about meeting needs than in sticking blindly to rules and regulations. He often got in trouble for good things he did for people on the Sabbath. In our day, hospitals must remain in operation on the Christian Sabbath (Sunday) and those who serve in the police, fire, and transportation services will also have Sunday duty, just as a few examples of those who must "break the rule."

There are two primary aspects of the Sabbath. We are to keep it holy, and it is for rest. The Ten Commandments were not given by God to place undue restrictions on our lives, but to give us guidelines for godly living. God knows we need rest. That's why He made the Sabbath for us. However, He also wants us to keep it holy. We should worship God every day, all day; but we are to especially set aside time to worship Him on the Sabbath.

*R&D How do you observe the Sabbath? Do you need, this Lenten season, to re-think your use of the Sabbath?*

*Prayer: Lord, help us observe the Sabbath in the manner You desire of us...not being rigidly legalistic about it, but not being too casual either.*

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## Day 7

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**Read: Mark 3:22-30**

### **Sin Against the Holy Spirit**

"Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin." Although some psychiatrists still scoff at the whole idea of sin, it is very real to Christians. We know, from our own experience, that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We also know we can be forgiven. But what about this "sin against the Holy Spirit" from which we apparently can't be forgiven?

If we look at the context in which Jesus made this difficult statement, we have a better picture of what was going on. Jesus had been performing miracles, including healing people of physical, emotional, and spiritual illnesses. Instead of acknowledging the good that Jesus was doing and being open to who he was, the doctors of the law (Scribes) accused him of being under the influence of Satan. In his "house divided against itself" rebuttal, Jesus proved the absurdity of their charge, but they continued all the more to denounce him until they could put him to death.

These Scribes were calling good "evil." This represents a depraved state of mind. Jesus wasn't dealing here with an individual who had committed some heinous sin or even one who evidenced a pattern of grievous sin, but a state of mind that was totally closed to God's truth and grace, refusing to see the Holy Spirit at work through Jesus' life, teachings, and miracles. How could such a person ever be forgiven; they would never seek it.

Those who are in Christian service will, from time to time, run into a person who fears that he or she has committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. As a friend well stated it, "If you are worried about whether you have committed this sin, you haven't."

*R&D Has Jesus' saying about the sin against the Holy Spirit troubled you or others you know in the past? How did you handle the question?*

Prayer: *There are those in our day whose state of mind is fixed against Your Holy Spirit; Lord, have mercy.*

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## Day 8

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**Read: Mark 3:31-35**

### True Family

“Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” Jesus makes this statement at a time when his family, wondering what is going on with him, has come to check on him. Mark places it at this point in his Gospel to illustrate the controversy that was building up about Jesus. The only other time Jesus’ family is mentioned in this Gospel is when (in 6:1-6) he returns to Nazareth and begins to teach among his hometown folks. The immediate reaction of many is a negative one: “Who does this guy think he is? Isn’t he Mary’s son, the carpenter?” This leads to Jesus’ statement that a prophet is without honor in his hometown, and he could perform no miracles there.

There is no reason to believe Jesus ignored his family in today’s passage. We can assume he was grateful for their concern and met with them. Because there is little about Jesus’ childhood and his family in the Bible, this passage is interesting for what it says and does not say. For instance, there is no indication that Joseph was with the rest of the family, and the Mark 6 passage calls Jesus the son of Mary without reference to Joseph, which certainly indicates Joseph had died at an earlier date. But these facts are not important to the point Mark is trying to make in our lesson for today.

Mark is dealing with a bigger issue here. In the part of the country I am from (sometimes called the Deep South), those who do not know you will ask, “Who are your people?” What is fundamental, from Jesus’ point of view, is not “who your people are” but whether you are obedient to God’s will in your life. That is the test of Christian discipleship, and those who commit themselves to this way of living are bound together in a fellowship that transcends the natural ties of the human family. Jesus is not belittling family ties; he is just calling on us to realize our more important role in the greater fellowship of Christians who seek to do God’s will.

*R&D Reflect on your family relationships and your relationships within the Christian community. Which are more important to you, and why?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us always to have in mind the needs of those to whom we are related, both in our Christian family and our natural family.*

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## Day 9

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**Read: Mark 4:10-12**

### Parables

“To those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding: otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.’” What in the world did Jesus mean by that difficult saying? It sounds as though he doesn’t want people to understand his message because otherwise they might repent and be saved!

As background to this passage, it might be helpful to read Isaiah 6:9-10, from which Jesus is quoting. There God was speaking to Isaiah about how hard-hearted and stubborn the people were to His message. They had callous hearts beyond repentance. God was exhausted with their

rebellion against Him. Why, then, call Isaiah to prophesy to them? Because some would listen. There would be a remnant.

Jesus was facing the same thing, and he was the Son of God! What Jesus is saying is not that he spoke in parables to confuse people, but that he was frustrated when so few really wanted to hear and understand the vital message he was bringing them. In our passage for today, Jesus is sharing these thoughts with a small group of followers rather than the general public.

In fact, the parables were a very effective method of communicating and one that Jesus used brilliantly. The parable has been defined as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It revealed truths greater than the plain illustration it contained. It caused people to think. In the age in which we live, “story” is undoubtedly a more effective way of communicating truth than straight teaching.

*R&D What is your feeling about the effectiveness of parables? How might we use parables more effectively in our day?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to communicate your love and your message in the most effective way we can.*

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## Day 10

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**Read: Mark 4:13-25**

### **The More You Have, the More You Get**

“Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” Jesus is continually teaching about and demonstrating generosity toward the poor throughout the Gospels. And he likewise warns against the danger of wealth. So what could he possibly mean by this difficult saying?

We can imagine, in our day, someone winning the lottery—especially someone who was already well off financially—and others using this quote about him. Of course, it would be done sarcastically and undoubtedly as a result of envy on the part of those making the remark. To then attribute to Jesus their authority for the remark is reprehensible. Too often, words in the Bible are taken out of context and used to ridicule Scripture. We need to be prepared to correct such erroneous thinking when we hear it.

In fact, although Jesus may have been using a saying that was common in his day, the quoted words were not about money or physical possessions at all. When this saying appears in Mark, Jesus has been talking about preaching the gospel and our response to it. He has used what we call the Parable of the Sower (4:1-9, 13-20) to illustrate his point. The one who accepts the word of God can produce a remarkable (spiritual) crop, whereas the others in the parable have missed the gift God would bestow upon them.

Jesus uses the same saying at the end of two other parables in the Gospels: Matthew 25:14-30 (the Parable of the Talents) and Luke 19:11-27 (the Parable of the King’s Servants). In both instances, Jesus talked about money, but these were parables, and—as we noted earlier—we look for the deeper meaning. In these stories what Jesus is talking about is the spiritual gifts, talents, and abilities God gives us to use for His glory. The more we use them, the more we will be given; the less we use them, the more they will simply dry up. Within the context of these stories, Jesus’ saying is not difficult to understand.

R&D *To what extent have you experienced the truth of the teaching that the more you use the gifts God has given you, the more you receive?*

Prayer: *Use us, Lord, to Your glory.*

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## Day 11

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**Read: Mark 5:21-43**

### Healing

“Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” “The child is not dead, but asleep.” In our passage for today, two miraculous healings occur. The first is from a bleeding problem that had been plaguing a woman who, in faith, touched Jesus’ garment and was instantly healed. The other was a child who had died and was brought back to life by Jesus.

There is a tendency in our day on the part of many to discount the miracles of Jesus as well as other miracles in the Bible. Some would take the position that the miracles never really happened; they are reported by those who were so enthusiastic about their faith that they let their imaginations run away with them. Others would say that the situation wasn’t as serious as it appeared; for instance, the child was just in a temporary coma rather than being dead. Still others would say that there was simply some other logical explanation that caused the result to look like a healing; for instance, that we now know that the mind and the body affect one another in such a way that dealing with someone’s emotions (absolving them from guilt) can produce physical results.

In contrast to these skeptical positions, if we are honest, we have to admit that it is a matter of whether we accept the truth of Scripture or not. There are too many miracles—and especially too many healings—in the Bible for any of these positions to hold water. Miracles were as much a part of Jesus’ ministry as were teaching and preaching. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ followers are also instruments of the Church’s healing ministry today.

At the same time, it is important to remember that God also works through practical means of healing in our day. We can be grateful to Him for the modern medicines and medical techniques that we are blessed with, and also the capable doctors, nurses, and technicians whom God uses in the healing process. We can have the “best of all worlds” with regard to our medical needs when we have Christian doctors and nurses on the one hand, and the prayer support of our faith community on the other.

R&D *What healing miracles have you experienced in your own life, or know of in the lives of others?*

Prayer: *Lord, we thank You for the medical breakthroughs that relieve our pains and extend our lives here on earth, but, most of all, we thank You for healing us in so many ways—mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically.*

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## Day 12

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**Read: John 3:1-21**

### Being Born Again

“You must be born again.” This response from Jesus to the inquiring Pharisee Nicodemus not only puzzled him, it has puzzled many down through the centuries. Nicodemus was



sympathetic to Jesus and wanted to know more, although he was unwilling to approach Jesus openly and came secretly by night. In our passage for today we have only a portion of the conversation that went on between the men, but it appears that Nicodemus had asked how to become a part of the Kingdom of God and experience eternal life. To this, Jesus responds that a person must be born again of “water and the Spirit.”

For many, the implication of being “born again” has seemed to indicate that a person must have a dramatic conversion experience through which the specific date and time of conversion is known. Certainly Paul had such an experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19a). However, it is clear that not all Christians come into a relationship with Christ in that way. A great many of us have experienced conversion over a period of time so that we know generally when the change occurred but not as specifically as the one whose conversion has been abrupt.

Jesus is not indicating to Nicodemus the speed with which conversion takes place, but the cataclysmic effect that it has upon the individual. To become a Christian is to change one’s life completely. It is something God does within us that gives us a whole new outlook on life. We become new creations in which the Spirit of God dwells. Our new life is symbolized in baptism (wherein we experience “water and Spirit” of new birth). We break with the past and embark on a new life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Having committed our lives to the Lord, God begins remaking us and raising our lives to a new dimension. Although being born again is a prerequisite to experiencing the sovereignty of God in our lives, it is only the beginning of a life-long process. This is spelled out magnificently in the eighth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans (Romans 8:1-17).

*R&D How would you describe your conversion experience?*

Prayer: *“Create a pure heart within me, O God, and give me a new and steadfast Spirit” (Psalm 51:10).*

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## Day 13

**Read: Mark 8:31-38**

### Forfeiture

“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”

Originally, Jesus had played down his Messiahship in order to establish his ministry and reach people with his message. He was not the kind of Messiah the people were expecting and if he had revealed himself too soon, he would have gone to the cross before his work on earth had been accomplished.

In today’s passage, Jesus is at the turning point. He is telling his followers what lies ahead for him. But he is also letting them know what lies ahead for them as well. We trivialize today’s lesson when we make reference to “taking up our cross” as an illustration such as putting up with a bad cold or a troublesome mother-in-law. Although the incidents of persecution are presently subtle in our country, there are Christians dying for their faith every day all over the world.

There is a choice to be made by each of us. We can set out to “gain the whole world” by seeking fame and fortune, or we can do God’s will and model servanthood. Going the former way, we may accomplish much in the eyes of the world but have, in the end, nothing to take with us. The life lived in obedience to Christ, however, may not be remarkable by worldly standards, and will certainly involve sacrifice, but brings an eternal reward from God. Jesus, then, is simply laying it on the line to his followers, and to us. The choice is ours.

R&D *Which way are you going? What evidence is there to support your answer?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for the choice You give us and the reward we receive from making the right choice.*

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## Day 14

**Read: Mark 9:38-40**

### Intolerance

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” This saying by Jesus seems to be in direct conflict with Matthew 12:30 where Jesus says, “He who is not with me is against me.” This may be the classic illustration in Scripture of how what Jesus said must be taken in context. Those who would ridicule the Bible use quotes such as these to argue that Scripture is unreliable.

When looked at in context, it is clear that two entirely different situations were involved, leading to contrasting sayings by Jesus. In Matthew 12:22-37, Jesus is being accused of being under the power of Satan. Specifically, he is being attacked by the Pharisees for healing the sick by diabolical powers and not by the power of God. Jesus’ meaning in that case is that those who do not refute such a charge, preferring to stay silent, are, by doing so, giving support to the Pharisees’ assessment of the situation. He is telling his followers to stand up and be counted.

In our reading for today, an entirely different matter is under consideration. A man who apparently was not a follower of Jesus was nonetheless driving out demons in Jesus’ name. The disciples wanted to stop him. Here Jesus is accusing his disciples of intolerance toward someone who was doing good work. The situation parallels one in Numbers 11:4-30 when Moses set aside 70 elders to assist him. Something similar to the Pentecost visitations came upon them, but this also happened to two of the 70 who were not present at the gathering. Joshua wanted to stop this manifestation of the Spirit on these two because they had not been part of the crowd. Moses, however, took the same position as Jesus in our reading for today.

Such intolerance remains in our day when people of one Christian denomination speak badly of other Christians. Because the worship services in our church are more structured than services in some other denominations, the grandmother of children who attend our church told them that our church was evil and they should stop worshipping with us. This is the type of intolerance Jesus was speaking against in our passage.

R&D *What can you do to promote greater understanding between Christians of different denominations whom you know?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, to be discerning but not judgmental.*

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## Day 15

**Read: Mark 9:43-48**

### Self-Discipline

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell.” As we have seen before, Jesus uses exaggeration to engage his listeners when the subject is of such a serious nature that he especially needs to get their attention. That is certainly the case in this instance.

It is not our hand that decides to reach out and take something that doesn't belong to us; thievery is rooted in our inner being—our mind, heart and will. It is not our foot that takes us where we are not supposed to go, nor even our leering eye that is the offending party if we lust. Therefore, it wouldn't do any good to remove the offending body parts anyway. Jesus is not talking about self-mutilation, but self-discipline. He is telling us to deal with those evil tendencies that threaten to ruin our lives.

In his book on this subject, William Neil uses several quotes to re-enforce the point. "Watch your step and save your life" (Proverbs 16:17). "The greatest performance in the life of a man is the government of his spirit" (Benjamin Whichcote). "The Christian is a competitor in the life-long struggle for an eternal prize" (B. F. Westcott). When Jesus speaks of "entering life" in our passage for today, he is talking about eternal life, life with God, beginning now and fully realized hereafter.

Self-discipline, self-control, is the key. What we may consider as depriving ourselves of unhealthy earthly pleasures that others enjoy is nothing compared to what we gain not only by a clear conscience in this life but in an eternity with Christ.

*R&D Think through what your hand, foot, and eye might be doing that offends God and deal with the inner desires that cause such action.*

*Prayer: Father God, clean us up from within that we give no offense in what we do, say, and think.*

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## Day 16

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**Read: Mark 10:1-12**

### Marriage and Divorce

"What God has joined together, let man not separate." "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her." In an age in which divorce, even among Christians, has become so commonplace and there are those arguing for marriage between people of the same sex, Jesus' words take on special meaning. But they also had special meaning in Jesus' day.

In our reading, the Pharisees were once again trying to trap Jesus. If he had supported divorce, which was unlikely based on his other teachings, he would have put himself in league with the Pharisees, but they were sure he would not do that. If he took a position against divorce, he would seem to be going against the teachings of Moses, he would offend those who were divorced, and he might even incur the wrath of Herod who had already killed John the Baptist for speaking out against his divorce and adultery.

Typically, Jesus, goes not to Moses for his authority but to God the Father and His intention for marriage. God had created humans male and female to be joined in marriage. Jesus lifted the concept of marriage out of the realm of legal arguments and placed it on its highest plane. Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman in which God is an essential Third Party. To break that covenant not only creates brokenness between the man and woman but injures the relationship with God.

Of course there are instances in which divorce is a lesser misfortune than a disastrous marriage, but in Jesus' day men were able to divorce their wives on trivial grounds. The situation is not much different today, with many couples entering into pre-nuptial agreements in anticipation of divorce. We had prayer time this morning with our pastor and his wife. She is headmistress of

a Christian school and prayed for a number of her students suffering the pain of broken homes. Such situations break the heart of God.

R&D *What is your position on marriage and divorce?*

Prayer: *Heal the land, Dear Lord, of the sickness of divorce and the trivializing of marriage. Help us not to forget that You created us to love and care for one another as husband and wife in the covenant of holy matrimony.*

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## Day 17

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**Read: Mark 10:13-16**

### Children

“Anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” The disciples, in our reading for today, were not necessarily being unkind in trying to turn the children away. They were concerned about Jesus and the use of his time and energy, but clearly they misunderstood his priorities. To Jesus, the children were a priority, and he noted that the Kingdom of God belonged to such as these.

The Kingdom of God, in the sense in which Jesus was using the term in this passage, meant the sovereignty of God, the “territory” of God’s rule in our individual lives. To enter into the sovereignty of God is to let Him take control of our lives now and forever. What, then, did Jesus mean by having to enter the Kingdom like a little child?

Jesus is not talking about simplistic faith that blindly moves ahead without counting the cost (see Luke 14:27-30). Nor does he make this reference to children because of their innocence. Children evidence the fallen nature of humanity from a very early age. What then?

The characteristic of childlikeness that Jesus intends in our reading for today is the total dependence that a small child has upon others. For a person to enter the Kingdom of God, there must be total dependence on God. We have to put aside our pride and self-sufficiency if we are going to turn our lives over to the Lord. To have the abundant life that Jesus wants for us (John 10:10), we have to accept it as a free gift of God’s grace, and trust Him completely just as a small child trusts his parents.

R&D *To what extent are you committed to total dependence on God?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to give myself freely to You each day, trusting You completely.*

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## Day 18

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**Read: Mark 10:17-27**

### Possessions

“Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Over the centuries, those words have been taken so seriously they have caused wealthy people to do just what Jesus asked the young man in our reading to do. St. Francis of Assisi would be an example. However, did Jesus mean for all of us to do exactly what this saying seems to indicate?

In the passage, the man had come to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus spoke of the Ten Commandments, and the young man indicated he had followed all of these to the letter of the law. Obviously, however, keeping the commandments had not brought him peace of mind and a relationship with God, which is what he indicated he wanted. Thus, Jesus was

able to go to the heart of the matter: the man was possessed by his possessions. He could not be free to follow the Lord as long as his priorities were in a different direction.

When the young man had gone sadly away, Jesus dealt with the issue of wealth. When people “have everything that money can buy,” it is understandable why they are much less dependent on God. While Christianity languishes in the Western world today where we have so much affluence, it is spreading like wildfire in the Global South where people have little in the way of possessions but much in the way of faith that looks to God for help.

This message should speak to us in at least two particulars. If we are truly wealthy, we had better watch what our priorities are. If our focus is on the Lord Jesus and what he wants from us, we can rejoice that we have been given so much that we can share with those in need. But even for those of us who are of “average means,” we need to remember that all we have comes from God and we should be giving at least 10% of it back to Him for His work in the world.

*R&D To what extent may I be letting my possessions control my life? Are there other things that take my focus away from Jesus? What am I going to do about it?*

*Prayer: Lord, make me aware of the needs of others and give me a generous heart to help those who are in need.*

## Day 19

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**Read: Mark 12:13-17**

### Church and State

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Here we have another saying of Jesus that, taken out of context, can easily be misinterpreted. In the past it has been used by some Christians to oppose government policies and by others to embrace them. This should be a lesson to us to always look at the situation in which a saying occurs in the Bible in order to get a full sense of what the saying means.

Jesus’ opponents were always trying to trap him. This incident occurred during Passion Week in the vicinity of the Temple. Hostility toward Jesus was reaching its climax, and his enemies sought an opportunity to arrest him without stirring up the people, who might riot. Jesus was approached at this time by an unholy alliance of Pharisees and Herodians (a Jewish political group that catered to their Roman overlords).

The question (“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”) was a particularly clever one. Because the Jewish people were required by the Roman government to pay the tax, if Jesus had answered in the negative, he could have been arrested and charged with treason. If he had answered in the affirmative, he would have lost the loyalty of those Jews who supported him. By his answer, he thwarted the plot. He proved himself not to be a revolutionary by acknowledging responsibility to the Roman authority. However, by the way he worded his answer, he made it clear that far more than the tax owed to Caesar is the obedience, worship and service that is due God.

This one answer is not the guideline Christians need to deal with whether they are obliged to obey their government or rise up against it. There are teachings by Paul and Peter (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13ff) that recognize the purpose of governments and our responsibilities to those over us. Yet, we also know that over the centuries (including in our day) many Christians have been martyred who find that their loyalty to Christ requires them to stand against repressive and ungodly regimes. All of us must answer to our own conscience, informed by Scripture, prayer, and Christian fellowship.

R&D *Think of instances when Christians should have stood against their government even unto martyrdom, and other instances in which this would have been inappropriate.*

Prayer: *Lord, help us always to have such a relationship with You that we will be able to discern wisely between justice and injustice, and to have the will and the way to do something about it.*

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## Day 20

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**Read: Mark 12:18-27**

### Life after Death

“When the dead rise, they will neither marry or be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.” In today’s passage, Jesus is once again being challenged. This time it is by the Sadducees. At this point in the history of the Jewish faith, the Pharisees believed in life after death but the Sadducees did not. Those who confronted Jesus in this instance used a far-fetched hypothetical situation to cast doubts on the idea of an afterlife. Once again Jesus carries the conversation to a higher plane.

Greek philosophers taught that the body perished at death but that the soul was immortal. Most Jews believed that the body and the soul were inseparable and life beyond the grave involves a bodily resurrection. The Sadducees, refusing to accept the idea of a bodily resurrection, pose for Jesus the situation of a woman who, in the afterlife, has seven husbands. Jesus answers with the accusation that the Sadducees know neither Scripture nor the power of God.

By his reference to the power of God, Jesus is saying that God can create a new order of life in the hereafter that is not bound by the way we live here on earth. In the future life, in which death does not exist, the physical aspects of marriage (other than companionship) along with a lot of other things common to us in this life will also be non-existent. Jesus then uses Scripture (Exodus 3:1-6), noting that, when God identified Himself to Moses in the burning bush, He referred to Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—ones who had died long ago but about whom God refers in the present. In other words, they are dead to us, but not to God.

The psalmists believed in the afterlife (Psalms 16:8-11; 49:15; 73:23-26), and the New Testament writers clearly did as well (see, for instance, Romans 8:38-39). Jesus rose from the dead and promised to prepare a place for his followers (John 14:1-2) who would come after him. We are not told much in the way of what life will be like after our time here on earth, but we can have confidence that we will be reunited with those we love who have gone before us in Christ, and leave whatever that life is like to God.

R&D *What are your views on what life after death holds for the Christian?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us not to be pre-occupied with what the afterlife is like other than the opportunity to worship You.*

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## Day 21

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**Read: Matthew 10:1-16**

### Animal Comparisons

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” In our passage for today, Jesus is sending his disciples on a missionary venture.

He gives them specific guidance about what to do and what not to do. Then he ends with this peculiar saying about animals.

Jesus uses the images of sheep and shepherd several times in his teachings. He has come as the Good Shepherd, and he intends to protect his sheep (see John 10:1-21, for instance). The disciples on this mission will especially be like sheep because of the vulnerability he requires of them. They won't be taking money or extra clothes with them, and they will have to rely on others to feed them and give them a place to sleep. In this way, it will be clear to others that they are dependent on God alone, and that will give authenticity to their message. The wolves they will face could be false prophets (see Matthew 7:15) or the Pharisees who always opposed Jesus and his teachings.

In the process of their missionary activity, the disciples are also to be as shrewd (some translations say "wary") as snakes. Snakes are always on the alert. They may appear to be sleeping on a log, but it is best to steer clear of them even then; they are especially aware of what is going on around them and ready to react quickly. So the disciples, while being as vulnerable as sheep, are to be ever vigilant about and responsive to what is going on around them. Sharing our faith with others is as important as anything God calls us to do, and we should give it our best at all times.

Finally, the disciples are told to be as innocent as doves. Doves, in this instance, represent sheer goodness. Being shrewd or wary as a snake does not mean being prepared to strike back at those who attack us or disagree with us. While being conscious of what is going on around us, we are nonetheless to manifest the fruit of the Spirit so that our faithfulness to God will be attractive to others. These instructions that Jesus gave to his disciples should also shape the manner in which we carry his message to our world.

*R&D In what ways might this teaching be helpful to you in sharing your faith with your neighbor?*

*Prayer: Lord, please make us ever mindful of the needs of those around us and responsive in a manner that will reflect Your love to them.*

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## Day 22

**Read: Luke 6:37-39**

### Judging Others

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged." When Christians protest immorality in society today, this is a verse of Scripture that is sometimes quoted against us. What can Jesus have meant? Surely he was not telling Christians that they are to accept the behavior of others no matter what it might be. And clearly we are called to stand up against injustices although that requires our judging what is an injustice.

Again, it is essential to look at the perspective in which Jesus uttered this saying. He follows the words quoted above with reference to "the blind leading the blind." That, in turn, parallels Matthew 15:12-14 wherein Jesus is clearly talking about the Pharisees. The Pharisees are the "blind guides" Jesus has in mind. It is their attitude and outlook with which Jesus is taking exception. The Pharisees were notorious for finding fault in those who did not follow their particular religious practices. As a result, their hypocrisy was what Jesus most consistently and most vigorously attacked in the gospels.

What we are dealing with here is the problem of self-righteousness. Because we are followers of Christ who read the Bible daily, say our prayers, and show up to worship God at least

every Sunday, it is easy for us to look down on those who don't. Instead of condemning others for what we consider to be their failures or laxity, Jesus wants us to show compassion and understanding. "The Lord does not see as man sees; men judge by appearances but the Lord judges by the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). We don't know what may be going on in the other person's life and what difficulties that person may be facing. Jesus urges us to look to our own hearts before we start judging others. We cannot expect God to be merciful to us if we are unwilling to be merciful in judging our neighbor.

*R&D Where does the Christian draw the line between judging and discerning in trying to decide what God would have us do and say in the face of what appear to us to be immoral, unwholesome and perhaps even illegal actions by others?*

*Prayer: Dante said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral crisis. Lord, You do want us to take a stand against evil. Guide us by Your Holy Spirit to know what to do and what not to do.*

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## Day 23

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**Read: Luke 7:36-50**

### Thankfulness

"Her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." This saying of Jesus, on the surface, seems to indicate that we need to sin a lot so we will have a lot for which to be forgiven and thus love God more because He forgives us. To take that position would miss the point Jesus is making by this combination of incident and parable.

Jesus had been invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee, perhaps after preaching in the synagogue. While reclining at the banquet table with his feet extended out behind him, Jesus experiences a prostitute washing his feet. She wet his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair before anointing them with perfume. Her actions were a graphic illustration of thankfulness. She either had heard Jesus at the synagogue or otherwise knew his teachings concerning forgiveness, and she was overwhelmed with gratitude that such forgiveness was available to her. Her very actions led to forgiveness by Jesus and his words that she had been saved by faith and should go in peace (v.50).

The Pharisee is offended by all of this. First of all, from his point of view, it proved that Jesus was no prophet of God or he would have realized the sinful character of the woman. Furthermore, Jesus ended up forgiving her. Simon, on the other hand, was undoubtedly a disciplined Pharisee who would have thought he had no sins. It was up to Jesus, by way of the parable, to turn the tables on him. Through Jesus, there is a new way of understanding sin and forgiveness—it is a matter of the heart and not superficial piety. (See Luke 18:9-14).

The more a person understands the nature of God's forgiveness and how far short of deserving it we fall, the more that person will be thankful for it. That doesn't give us license to sin more, but to be more conscious of how sinful we are.

*R&D With whom did you identify in this passage? Why?*

*Prayer: Blessed Lord, we have so much to be grateful for, but nothing that equals our thankfulness for Your forgiving love.*



## Day 24

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**Read: Luke 9:51-62**

### Discipleship

“Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” Earlier in this series we found Jesus pointing beyond natural family ties to the wider fellowship of the church in which we are brothers and sisters in Christ. However, in doing so he did not downplay the importance of family relationships; he simply put them in the perspective of the greater calling of loyalty to him and the gospel he proclaimed. Today we look at two sayings of Jesus relating to family that seem to be harsh in the extreme.

Once again, it is a matter of looking at the situation in context. In our reading for today, three men are involved and the issue is discipleship. The first man indicated he would follow Jesus, but Jesus told him how difficult that might be (v.58). He then calls the second man to “follow me.” It is that man who has the excuse of wanting to bury his father, and he is told to let the dead bury the dead. The third man, apparently also called to follow, has the excuse of wanting to go back to tell his family goodbye.

We know too much about Jesus from other passages of Scripture to conclude that he was hard-hearted and uncaring about the needs of people, especially their need to show love to those closest to them. So, what is going on here? In our reading for today, Jesus is approaching the end of his Galilean ministry and is headed toward Jerusalem where he would challenge the authorities and inevitably be killed. Those who would come with him now had to renounce all other obligations in order to be in the chosen band that would follow him to his death. Total and unconditional loyalty was needed at this point, not completely unlike what Gideon sought in the small fighting force he was to take against an overwhelming foe (Judges 7:1-8).

It is not appropriate to try to apply today’s teaching directly to us today. But it should remind us how essential each of us is in carrying the gospel to the world in our day. Discipleship is not something to be entered into lightheartedly. If we don’t tell the story and call others to discipleship, who will?

*R&D What has Christ asked me to leave behind in order to follow him?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, knowing what you did for us, help us always to be willing to give first priority to what you ask of us.*

## Day 25

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**Read: Luke 13:1-5**

### Pain and Suffering

“Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?” What was going on here, and what did Jesus mean? In Jesus’ day, the feeling persisted among the Jews that, if people suffered in some way, it was because they deserved it. If the tower fell on these people, it must have been because they sinned. Jesus wants to refute this type of thinking.

At the same time, Jesus also wants to make the point that we never know when the day of our death may come. We are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Each of

us needs to repent and be in relationship with God so that we are prepared when our time comes. These are the primary things we are to learn from this passage of Scripture.

Concerning the matter of pain and suffering generally, Jesus is silent here. As William Neil says, “Jesus does not embark on any attempt to give an answer in terms of philosophy to the problem of pain any more than he gives us any philosophical arguments for the existence of God.” It is obvious that some people do suffer because of their own sin; those who commit violent crimes, for instance, may well come to a violent end. Some suffer as the result of the sins of others; a person injured or killed by a drunk driver would be an example. Still others die because of the laws of nature; certainly the law of gravity at least contributed to the tower of Siloam falling on the people mentioned in the reading for today.

Nonetheless, there are things we will not fully understand in this lifetime, including why some people who seem to be faithful and loving die young while others live to a ripe old age. As to suffering, especially when we, or a loved one, is suffering, we might consider the suffering that Christ went through for us. He is our example. And we can know that, in the midst of our pain, God is with us.

*R&D Recall an instance in which you questioned why God would allow a particular tragedy or the pain or death of a loved one. How did you handle the situation?*

*Prayer: Lord, help us always to be “repented up” and prepared to be with You; and, in the midst of life that sometimes involves pain and suffering, help us to look to Your Son as our example of how to bear it and turn it into glory.*

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## Day 26

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**Read: Luke 15:1-7**

### Repentance

“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” On the surface, this saying is hard to take. Wouldn’t God be happier about 99 people who follow Him all of their lives than one who doesn’t, and has to be brought into the faith? There are several messages here if we are to understand all that Jesus is teaching in our passage for today.

First of all, although “sinners” and tax collectors were gathered around Jesus, so were Pharisees and teachers of the law who muttered against him. They were the ones who thought themselves to be the “99 righteous persons,” when, in fact, they were sinners just like everyone else. Jesus was contrasting their complacent self-righteousness with the openness to repentance he was more likely to find among the “sinners and tax collectors.”

But Jesus is also indicating that, at some point in our lives, each of us is the lost sheep. It is not we who earn our way to heaven by “staying in the fold,” but God who reaches out to us in our sinful state and shows us His love. When we repent and turn to Jesus, there is just as much rejoicing in heaven as when a notorious sinner does so. And, even though we faithfully remain in Christ’s fold for the rest of our lives, we still sin and need to repent over and over again.

Finally, Jesus is giving us a picture of God’s love. It might seem unwise for the shepherd to leave the 99 to go after the one who has strayed. But, in fact, the 99 were safe and the one was in danger. The sheep was of great value to the shepherd, and that is why he searched so diligently to find it. God’s love for each person on earth is so great that He will go to all ends to seek us that we might be brought to Jesus. In a parallel to today’s reading, we have the Parable of the Lost Son

(Luke 15:11-32). In that familiar story, the father (representing God the Father) does not stand and wait for the son to come to him, but runs to the son with open arms. That is the God we have; rejoice and be glad in it.

R&D *In what way does today's reading most poignantly speak to you? Why?*

Prayer: *Lord, may I never forget that I was once a lost sheep for whom You searched and then found, carrying me back to the fold that I might live for You rather than for myself.*

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## Day 27

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**Read: Luke 16:1-8**

### Single-mindedness

“For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light.” In today’s reading, it is not this saying that is so difficult but the parable that Jesus uses in leading up to it. One wonders if Jesus had a smile on his face as he told this story. I’d like to think so because it would make explaining it a lot easier. Otherwise, one might question whether Jesus was having a bad day, as people joke that God must have been having a bad day when He concocted the ostrich or the avocado seed.

Clearly Jesus is not commending the actions of the dishonest manager. That would simply run contrary to everything Jesus teaches us in Scripture. We wish Luke had begun the passage with, “Jesus, with a wry grin on his face, told his disciples....” Since he did not, we have to make the most of this we can.

The manager, knowing he was going to lose his job, decides to do the best he can to make friends. So he goes to everyone who owes money to his master and reduces their indebtedness. It didn’t save his job, but his master acknowledges his shrewdness in making the most of a bad situation. Jesus uses this as an example of the way things work in the world. People dealing with everyday situations face them as creatively as they can to get maximum benefit out of them for themselves. Worldly selfishness causes people to work harder and think harder.

Jesus’ point is simply this: why don’t his disciples work and think just as hard about how to live the Christian life and how to bring others to him as worldly people do about how to make a living and get ahead? It’s a good question, one we need to deal with in our own lives. Although we may say faith in Jesus is the priority in our lives, do we show it by the amount of time and effort we spend with him and for him?

R&D *Remember that we are in Lent, a time for self-examination. Use the question immediately above for reflection and self-examination.*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to take more seriously the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).*

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## Day 28

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**Read: Luke 17:7-10**

### Duty

“So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” Jesus has not only given us a difficult saying here but also another difficult illustration. In the freedom-loving world in which most of us live, it is hard to identify with the master/servant story Jesus uses to make his point. In fact, however,

such conditions existed in Jesus' time, so it was appropriate for him to use the illustration to make his point with those who were listening to him.

Our definite preference is the master/servant illustration Jesus uses in Luke 12:35-37, wherein the master who finds his servants waiting comes and prepares a banquet for them. But, again, we have to look at the stories Jesus tells in light of the particular point he is making at the time. Of course, there are blessings upon blessings for those who follow Jesus; but there is another side to our relationship with God that Jesus wants his followers to take very seriously. There is duty.

All the hard work we might do for the sake of the Kingdom of God proves no merit on our part. We do it only because of the grace of God. If we do it in our own strength, it is meaningless to God. If we do it because of His love flowing through us, we have simply done our duty. It is what God expects of us. Jesus "pulls no punches" on what Christian discipleship is all about.

These lines from Jane Borthwick's famous hymn well state the situation:

"Come, labor on.

Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain,

While all around him waves the golden grain?

And to each servant does the Master say,

'Go work today.'"

R&D *What do you understand to be your Christian duty?*

Prayer: *Lord, forgive me for saying so, but I do hope that, when I have done my duty and come to be with You, You will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."*

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## Day 29

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**Read: Luke 17:20-21**

### Kingdom of God

"The kingdom of God is among you." Here we have a saying on which even Bible scholars are not agreed. The NIV version of the quoted sentence is: "The kingdom of God is within you." As William Neil points out, there is a big difference between the two translations, and we need to look elsewhere in Scripture to determine what Jesus is really saying.

As we have noted earlier, the term "Kingdom of God" means the sovereignty or kingly rule of God. From early times it was thought that the power of evil in the world would not last forever, but that one day God would confront His enemies, vindicate His chosen people (the Israelites) and inaugurate a new age of peace and righteousness. When Jesus arrived on the scene of history, the Jews had fallen into despair that such a time would come. That was the reason for the Pharisees' question of Jesus in verse 20 about when the Kingdom would come.

The Greek word *entos* is subject to several translations, which is what has led to the confusion about Jesus' reply. It can mean "within you" or "inside you," as some translations have it. But Neil argues that such wording gives the impression that the Kingdom is a trait that can be cultivated by human beings to transform the world. It puts the emphasis on people rather than God. In Luke 11:20, on the other hand, Jesus points out that, in his driving out demons by the power of God, it is obvious that "the Kingdom of God has come to you."

Jesus is not thinking of the Kingdom of God being inside people. He is thinking of the kingly rule of God being present in a new way, associated with himself, and evidenced by the power of God being manifested through exorcisms, healings, and miracles as well as in his

teachings and his care and concern for those in need. Jesus was himself the Kingdom of God, the Messiah who proclaimed the new age that had come and who called all people to accept the sovereignty of God over their lives.

*R&D How do you think about the Kingdom of God in relation to the world in which we live today?*

*Prayer: Lord, You have given us Your Holy Spirit within to guide us in doing those things Jesus did, that Your Kingdom may be manifested to a needful world. Help us to be obedient to that guidance.*

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## Day 30

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### Read John 4:1-26

#### The Jews

“For salvation is from the Jews.” Christians know that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ, so what could Jesus have meant by this saying? Once again, we must look at the context in which the words were spoken.

In our reading for today, Jesus was having a conversation with a Samaritan woman. At the point at which Jesus speaks the quoted words, the discussion was centered on the issues of the true temple and the true faith. Samaritans occupied the territory between Judea and Galilee. They were a part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel that had been taken into captivity prior to the captivity of Judea (Southern Kingdom). They had intermarried with foreigners, they accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), and they worshiped at a temple on Mount Gerizim. They ignored the Temple in Jerusalem and disregarded the other books of the Old Testament, including the Psalms and the Prophets. Orthodox Jews regarded them as heretics.

Even though Jesus had compassion for the woman and was willing to converse with her, he was loyal to his Jewish roots with regard to the issue at hand. He pointed out that the issue was not where a person worshiped (Gerizim or Jerusalem), but the quality and nature of the worship. In stating that, he clearly asserted that true knowledge of God depends on the Scriptures as a whole and not the limited version the Samaritans accepted: “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know...” (v. 22a). It is then that Jesus makes his remark about salvation coming from the Jews.

Indeed, the whole of the Christian faith comes from its Jewish roots. Jesus and his early followers were Jews, as was Paul. We cannot fully understand who Jesus is and what he did for us unless we understand the Old Testament and its history of the Chosen People from which Jesus came. When Jesus summed up all the commandments in the two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor, he took the words directly from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). Orthodox Jews, however, still await a Messiah who has already come; and that is the reason for the difference between Judaism and Christianity. Salvation, indeed, comes from the Jews, but only by recognizing Jesus as their Savior and ours.

*R&D How can we Christians be better witnesses to Jesus among our Jewish friends and neighbors?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for our Jewish roots, for Your grace to Your Chosen People over the centuries, and for the Old Testament to help us better understand who Jesus is and what he did for us.*

## Day 31

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**Read: John 5:24-27**

### Life Eternal

“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned.” There are two elements of this saying that may seem difficult. The first has to do with the nature of eternal life and the second concerns how one passes to eternal life without being condemned (without passing through judgment, according to other translations).

It is not healthy to focus too much on eternal life in the sense of what it will be like, and the New Testament writers don't speculate on it or encourage us to do so. The nature of life after this time on earth is simply beyond our comprehension. William Temple stated it this way: “There is nothing in the world of which I feel so certain. I have no idea what it will be like, and I am glad that I have not, as I am sure I would be wrong.” If we trust God, we must trust Him to have the best for us, whatever it is like.

There remains, however, the question of whether we will qualify. Being conscious of our own sinfulness and the fact that we are far from perfect in being obedient to what Christ calls us to be, we wonder about judgment. Will we pass the test? Jesus is telling us that eternal life begins now. “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). If we believe in Christ and are obedient to his word...although we fall into sin but ask God's forgiveness...there is not a test waiting for us that we must pass in order to enter into eternity with Him.

Paul says it this way: “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10).

*R&D What understanding do you have about eternity beginning here on earth, and have you sensed that you are living in eternity? Explain.*

*Prayer: Lord, help us to live for You, that we may have fullness of life here and hereafter.*

## Day 32

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**Read: John 6:51-66**

### Bread of Life

“I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” This saying by Jesus was so difficult that it caused many disciples to turn back and no longer follow him (v.66). It comes on the heels of his “I am the bread of life” discourse that is in John 6:22-40.

Today's reading is a shocking message. To eat flesh and drink blood sounds cannibalistic. (In point of fact, Christians were later martyred because, in celebrating Holy Communion, their accusers alleged that they were eating flesh and drinking blood). The thought of drinking blood, especially human blood, was repugnant to the religious leaders of Jesus' day because the Jewish Law forbade it (Leviticus 17:10-11). Jesus, of course, was not talking about actual blood. He was saying that his life—his flesh and blood—had to become their life. As the apostle Paul understood it, this body and blood imagery had to do with the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), and it has been so regarded by Christians down through the centuries.

How could Jesus give us his flesh as bread to eat? To eat living bread means to become one with him by fully accepting him into our lives. We become one with him by believing that he

died for us and our sins (the sacrifice of his flesh) and rose again; and by devoting our lives in obedience to him, guided by Scripture and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, we can regularly re-commit ourselves to that life and receive spiritual refreshment every time we participate in Holy Communion.

There are disagreements within Christendom about the exact nature of the body and blood as received at Communion. Perhaps the great Anglican theologian Richard Hooker expressed how best to consider it. “Let it therefore be sufficient for me, “he said, “presenting myself at the Lord’s Table, to know what I receive from him, without search or enquiry of the manner how Christ performs what he promises.”

R&D *What does Holy Communion mean to you, and why?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, sustain us by your grace as we come to you in Holy Communion to partake of your body and blood.*

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### Day 33

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**Read: John 14:1-14**

#### Father/Son

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” This statement by Jesus has been described as “the most staggering saying in literature.” There are, in John’s Gospel, including our reading for today, a number of startling revelations relating to Jesus’ Sonship. The quoted saying, however, goes further than any of them.

Even during this period when church attendance has been decreasing in the Western world, the vast majority of people still say they believe in God. But what kind of God: “the Force be with you,” the Old Man in the Sky, or the Great Mathematician? Our spiritual forebears, the Jews, learned from the psalmists and prophets that the Creator God, the Lord of history—while holding the destiny of nations in His hands—is nonetheless merciful and compassionate, tender and loving, hating evil but always ready to forgive the penitent sinner. Yet, what is He really like?

Jesus referred to God as Father. Philip, quite naturally, wanted to know exactly what this Father is like. Jesus told him, basically, “He is like me; if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” Jesus had been trying to get the point across to his disciples and everyone else that he did nothing on his own; it was the Father in him who was doing the work (vv. 10-11). When we—and others today—want to know what God is like, we need only look at Jesus: what he did and what he said.

G. A. Studdert Kennedy put it this way; “To attempt to worship a God without a name is to attempt the impossible. Religion is falling love with God; and it is impossible to fall in love with an abstract God, he must have a name. The Christian faith says boldly to mankind, ‘Come, let us introduce you to God. His name is Jesus, and he was a carpenter by trade.’”

R&D *How could you help someone who believes in God in general come to see Jesus as God in particular?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus; you have given us the only picture of God we will ever need.*

## Day 34

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**Read: John 16:29-33**

### Conquest

“I have overcome the world.” In the *New English Bible*, verse 33 reads: “The victory is mine; I have conquered the world.” These words, coming from the one we regard as the Prince of Peace, may well seem startling. Yet, even Napoleon had no doubt about the nature of spiritual warfare. He said, “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for him.”

Let us look at the situation in which Jesus makes the claim that he has conquered the world. It is the night before his crucifixion. He knows that his hour has come (13:1) and that he will be betrayed by one of his closest followers. He had taught them (by washing their feet) the example of service to one another. He had spoken of his love for them in laying down his life for them (15:13). Judas Iscariot had left the group in order to betray Jesus. Peter’s denial would soon follow, and his band of disciples would run for their lives. He would be crucified. Yet, at this moment, he says he has conquered the world! He moved toward death not as a defeat but as a victory.

As we look at our reading for today, in verses 31-33, Jesus sees himself as being deserted by his companions, leaving him alone to face his passion and death. But he will not be alone because his Father will be with him. That is the reason for his strength and courage. His followers will likewise face opposition, affliction, and martyrdom. Yet the world will be conquered through them because God will be with them, as He is with us in our day.

The battle is for God’s rule (the Kingdom of God) in the hearts of people. Jesus claimed the victory for us in being willing to die for our sins and rise again. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans, “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (See Romans 8:35-39). “The victory that defeats the world is our faith, for who is victor over the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4-5). We can go forward with confidence of victory.

*R&D In what sense do you see that Jesus has conquered the world? Does anything need to be done to preserve the victory? Explain.*

*Prayer: Show us, Lord, the role You have for us in the continuing conquest of the world in Your name.*

## Day 35

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**Read: Matthew 7:6**

### Dogs and Pigs

“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs.” Tossed in at the end of a teaching about not being judgmental (vv.1-5), what does Jesus mean by this hard saying?

According to the Mosaic Law, pigs were unclean (Deuteronomy 14:8). A person who had touched an unclean animal could not go to the Temple to worship until the uncleanness had been removed. Jesus is saying that we should not entrust holy teachings or sacred acts to “unclean people.” By this, Jesus certainly did not mean that we should minister only to those who are not “sinners.” As so many other passages of Scripture make clear, it was to those whom the Pharisees regarded as sinners that Jesus most often ministered. See, for instance, earlier studies in this series: Mark 2:13-17, Luke 7:36-50, and Luke 15:1-7.



The issue in this saying is “teachability.” Jesus was telling his followers not to waste their time on the hard-hearted who had no intention of being open to the Gospel. In doing so, the disciples would not only be using their time unwisely, but they would be inviting retaliation and abuse. There are plenty of people “out there” who are open to the message of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ, and we are called to go to them with the Good News.

Jesus is telling us that it is futile to try to teach holy concepts or share communion with people who don’t want to hear what we have to say or to accept the ministry we would offer them. They will simply take what we offer and turn it against us. We should never stop reaching out to unbelievers, but we should use good sense in discerning what to teach to whom, so that we are not wasting our time.

*R&D Who might be the “pigs” before whom we are not to cast our pearls in our day?*

*Prayer: Lord, give me the wisdom to know how best to use the time You give me to reach those whom You want me to reach for You.*

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## Day 36

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**Read: Matthew 6:5-8**

### Why Pray?

“Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Some years ago, our priest preached a sermon on prayer. He began by citing what appear to be very different things Jesus said about prayer, including this difficult saying. At first it appeared he was making light of these apparent inconsistencies. However, what he really did was to pull together all of Jesus’ teachings on prayer to show how they complement one other, giving us a more complete picture of what prayer is all about. It was a lesson in how we need to look at the Bible as a whole rather than putting too much emphasis on a verse of Scripture standing alone.

In other places in the Bible, Jesus tells us to ask and we shall receive (Matthew 7:7), and in the story of the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-7) he commends the woman for continuing to plead her case until the judge is exhausted from hearing her. Immediately following our reading for today is the Lord’s Prayer in which we are to ask for our daily bread. It is clear that Jesus is telling us to bring our everyday needs to our Father in prayer.

What Jesus is doing in today’s reading is to bring us into a deeper understanding of God and of prayer. He points out that hypocrites try to attract attention to themselves and their self-righteous piety by praying where everyone can see them, and pagans think they can attract the attention of whatever god they pray to by using a lot of words. It is against these illustrations that Jesus makes the statement that God already knows our needs before we ask.

William Temple once said, “God is perfect love and perfect wisdom. We do not pray in order to change his will, but to bring our wills into harmony with his.” Prayer is not trying to get God to change His mind; it is attempting to perceive what He wants of us so that we may be walking in oneness with Him. God doesn’t want us babbling on about all of the things we want, but He does want us to bring to Him the things we think are needed so that, with Him, we may evaluate priorities and understand ourselves. He knows what we need, but do we? He will give us what we need, but not necessarily what we ask for. Prayer is a relationship with God in which we seek to understand who He is and who we are in relation to Him.

*R&D In what ways does today’s lesson shed light on your prayer life?*

Prayer: *Lord, teach us to pray.*

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## Day 37

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**Read: Mark 11:12-14**

### Cursing the Fig Tree

“May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” Many have called this Jesus’ most difficult saying of all. Why? Because when it occurred it was too early in the season for a fig tree to be producing fruit. It seems very unlike Jesus to be condemning something that was really innocent of offense.

The saying needs to be looked at in light of the incident immediately following it in Mark’s gospel (the clearing of the Temple, vv.15-17) and the Parable of the Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9). Bible scholars agree that what Jesus said to the fig tree in today’s passage was an acted-out parable. His attitude toward the fig tree parallels his attitude toward the moneychangers: You are not producing the fruit of good works your God expects of you.

The parable in Luke tells about the owner of a vineyard who wanted his fig tree cut down because it was not producing. The caretaker of the vineyard, however, asked to be allowed to fertilize and care for the tree for another season in hopes that it would produce. If it did not produce after that time, the owner demanded that it be destroyed. The fig tree represented holy living, and Jesus was making the point in that parable that God would not tolerate forever the lack of productivity on the part of His people. Likewise, the fig tree was a symbol of Israel itself.

The time is Holy Week. Jesus faces death on a cross. He had done all he could do to convince the Jews that he was their expected Messiah, but they have finally rejected him. In killing him, they are killing their hoped-for fulfillment. The result would be a withering of their faith, as evidenced the next day by the disciples when, passing by, they found the fig tree withered (vv.20-21).

*R&D Reflect on the fact that our Jewish brothers and sisters who have failed to recognize Jesus as the long-sought Messiah continue to hope for one who has already come. Pray for them.*

Prayer: *Lord God, we are grateful for our spiritual forebears, the Jewish people, but we grieve that so many of them have never recognized Jesus as their Messiah. Help us to be loving witnesses of Jesus to them that many may still accept him as their Lord and Savior.*

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## Day 38

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**Read: Matthew 5:17-20**

### The Law

“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” This statement seems to stand against all that Jesus taught about the Jewish Law no longer being the path to salvation. It conflicts, as well, with his own willingness to flout the Law by healing on the Sabbath, eating with people considered unclean and “sinners,” and opposing the divorce laws handed down by Moses (Mark 3:1-6; 2:15-17; and 10:1-12). However, because Jesus seemed often to ignore or reject the Law, as the Jews understood it, we are given a pathway to discover what Jesus was really doing and saying.

Obviously, Jesus’ words and actions could create the impression that he was attempting to lower the standards set by God, letting people who “did not seem entitled” enter the Kingdom of

God. This is the problem respectable religious people have when someone tries to offer God's redeeming grace to others they consider unacceptable. Jesus needed to make it clear that, while he opposed the Pharisees' views of legal correctness, he was not watering down the commands of God and offering "cheap" grace.

In fact, what Jesus goes on to do in the Sermon on the Mount, of which our reading today is a part, is to raise the requirements of God to a higher level. We are not only forbidden to do certain things, we are sinning when we desire to do them in our hearts. Over and over again Jesus says, "You have heard it said..., but I say to you...." Each time, he is raising the bar concerning issues such as anger, sexual morality, divorce, retaliation, and enemies (vv. 21-48).

Jesus came, not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. The teachings of Jesus go beyond what was contained in the Law in the sense that they complete what was previously incomplete. They also provide a corrective to how the Pharisees had interpreted the Law, Jesus demonstrating the spirit rather than the letter of the Law. Jesus, in the difficult saying quoted above, also mentions the Prophets. He is likewise fulfilling the prophecies that pointed toward the mission and actions of Jesus. The Law and the Prophets both reached their ultimate fulfillment in the teachings and actions of Jesus.

*R&D What would you now say is your understanding of the role of the Jewish Law in living the Christian faith?*

*Prayer: Lord, help us always to look beyond the legalism of a situation to the heart of it, that we might better understand what Jesus would do in that situation.*

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## Day 39

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**Read: Mark 14:32-36**

### Answered Prayer

"Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will." Jesus had taught, "Ask and you will receive" (Matthew 7:7), indicating that if we ask God for what we want, He will give it to us. Here, however, we find that even Jesus does not get the answer to prayer that he seems to want. What are we to make of this?

The scene in which Jesus' prayer takes place is the Garden of Gethsemane. It is the night before his crucifixion. Although, at this point, Jesus may not have fully known what he would be facing, he certainly knew much of it. The physical suffering would be horrendous, but that was only a small part of it. He was facing the end of his ministry on earth, condemnation by and victory for the religious leaders who hated him, betrayal by his closest followers, and indifference by some and hostility from others among the populace. Yet, even that was a small part of what lay before Jesus. The fact was that, on the cross, he would be bearing the sins of the whole world and experiencing separation from his Father God. Is it any wonder that he might pray that "this cup" be taken from him?

The key, however, is in the second part of Jesus' prayer, and that was the point of Jesus' victory: "Yet not what I will...." William Temple said this: "God is perfect love and perfect wisdom. We do not pray in order to change His will, but to bring our wills into harmony with His." Jesus' prayer was answered because, most of all, he wanted to be in the Father's will—whatever that entailed.

The message for us is that our prayers should always be submitted in a way in which we seek the will of God more than the specific need or want we may have. We should be specific in

what we ask for in our prayers; to do otherwise is not honest praying. It is not effective praying to suppress our real desires and simply say, “God, do whatever Your will is in this situation.” But we should always want, most of all, God’s will.

The result is that God will sometimes answer our prayer just as we asked, at other times His answer will involve our having to wait until the timing is right, and at other times—for His ultimate purposes and often for our own good—His answer will be “No.”

*R&D Recall instances in your own life when the answers to your prayers were “yes”, “wait,” or “no.”*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that the most important aspect of prayer is that Your will be done, and help me to shape my prayers to be in harmony with Your will.*

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## Day 40

**Read: Matthew 20:1-16**

### Unfair Wages?

“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” This saying comes near the end of one of Jesus’ parables that has caused difficulty for many over the years. In the story, the landowner had hired laborers to work his vineyard at different times during the day. Those he hired early in the morning had agreed to work for a denarius for the day. When the day was over, he gave those who had only worked only a short time the same amount he gave those who worked all day long. It just didn’t seem fair, and those who had put in the full day grumbled about it. Thus, the quoted verse. What could Jesus mean by this illustration?

This parable is a clear example of Jesus trying to demonstrate that we are saved by grace and not by works. It is the same point the apostle Paul makes in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” The Pharisees seemed to believe that they could achieve favor with God by following the letter of the Mosaic Law as they interpreted it. That was their boast. In the Kingdom of God (Matthew uses the term “kingdom of heaven”), however, the legalism of the Pharisees is of no account. Jesus is making the point that the Kingdom is all about grace.

Parables often have more than one meaning, and there is another important issue to which this speaks: what is often referred to as “deathbed repentance.” The notorious sinner who repents at the last minute and receives forgiveness from the Lord will have just as solid a place in eternity as the Christian who has “done all the right things” throughout a long and faithful life. We should rejoice and be glad in that fact; we, earlier in this series, looked at the rejoicing in heaven when the one sheep that has gone astray is returned to the fold. Sometimes we, like the older brother in the Parable of the Lost Son and those who worked all day in today’s story, may think it unfair. If we do, we have a wrong view of the Christian life. We should be glad that we have had the experience of a relationship with the Father for many years, whereas the one who comes late to repentance has missed many blessings along the way.

*R&D How do you feel about the notorious sinner who repents on his deathbed? Why?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for allowing us to journey through this life with You, and then to be with You in glory!*

## Day 41

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**Read: Genesis 21:1-21**

### God Is Able to Perform

God has waited to fulfill His promise of a child to Abraham, a child that God would call, “Abraham’s only son” (see 22:2). Now He graciously allows Sarah to become pregnant. Isaac, whose name means “laughter,” was born, and the nation began to emerge. Isaac was circumcised on the eighth day according to God’s command.

It was Abraham’s faith in God that fully persuaded him that God had the power to do all that He promised. This faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness (see Roman 4:19-22). That same righteousness is also ours; “The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Romans 4:23-24).

God also is with the maidservant Hagar and her son Ishmael. Though they are sent out on their own, God hears the boy and begins to honor the promise to Hagar (see Genesis 16:10-11).

Ishmael became ruler of a large tribe or nation, the Ishmaelites. These people were nomads in the Desert of Sinai, south of Israel. One of Ishmael’s daughters married Esau, Ishmael’s nephew (28.9). Psalm 83:6 notes the hostility that later existed between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites. The Bible gives us, among many other things, a fascinating view of history.

*R&D Is there something in your life that you need, but have not asked God for?*

*Prayer: Father, we bring our need to You in faith, knowing that You are both willing and able to do abundantly and exceedingly more than we can ask or imagine.*

## Day 42

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**Read: Genesis 22:1-14**

### A Vision of Things to Come

God tested Abraham by asking him to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham had waited twenty-five years after being promised a son, the one God said was “*your only son*” (v.2). Amazingly the next thing we read is, “*so Abraham rose early in the morning...*” (v.3). Abraham does not intercede for his son’s life as he did on behalf of Lot. Abraham did not ask for a sign. He did not ask God what His plan was, he simply rose early the morning to carry out God’s request.

Abraham’s preparations were complete: he took a donkey, two servants, wood, fire, a knife, and Isaac. Abraham’s faith comes through when he tells his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you” (v.5). Abraham believed the promise of God that through this son the nations would come. He believed that if necessary God would raise Isaac from the dead (see Hebrews 11:17-19).

“Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Isaac asked. “God will provide for Himself a lamb for the burnt offering,” Abraham answered. What faith they both had! “So the two of them went together” (v.8).

It was this prophetic word from Abraham, “God will provide for Himself a lamb,” that Jesus comments on in John’s Gospel. “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). God did provide for Abraham a *ram* to replace Isaac as a sacrifice, and later it was John the Baptist who introduced Jesus as *the Lamb of God* who would be provided to take away the sin of the world for us all.

R&D *Is there something that God wants you to do that you are waiting on rather than doing?*

Prayer: *Father, help us to be more like Abraham who responded to You at once with faith.*

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### Day 43

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**Read: Genesis 27:1-29**

#### **The Father's Blessing**

Isaac had a long life in which he bore twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was born first, and therefore was the son entitled to his father's blessing.

Warning! The soul—mind, will, and emotions—cannot always depend on an accurate analysis of information it takes in through the senses. Isaac wanted to bless his son Esau, so he used all five senses to insure that he had the right son, but he was wrong. Isaac blessed Jacob instead of Esau because Jacob was God's choice.

Isaac's eyes had grown dim (v.1) so he could not rely on sight. His sense of touch was fooled by the goatskin that Rebecca put on Jacob's hands and neck (vv.16, 22), so even though Jacob's voice gave him away, the touch of his hands had the feel of Esau. Rebecca had prepared the goat in such a manner that it had the taste of game that Isaac had expected (vv.3, 4). Isaac's sense of smell told him the clothing was that of his son Esau (v.27), but Isaac could not tell that Jacob was wearing it.

Although Jacob received the blessing intended for Esau, his deception would cost him greatly in the years ahead. Fearing his brother's wrath, Jacob escaped to Haran and never saw his mother again. He was exiled from his family for years, was tricked by his uncle Laban with whom he lived, the family became torn by strife, and his brother Esau founded an enemy nation. Jacob was God's choice to carry the covenant forward, but the manner in which he did so was not pleasing to God. Regardless of what our motives may be, we suffer the consequences of our misdeeds.

R&D *Has anyone ever taken advantage of you the way Jacob did? How did you handle the situation?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to have pure motives; and, if I should take advantage of another, give me the grace to ask forgiveness and make restitution.*

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### Day 44

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**Read: Genesis 35:9-15**

#### **I Am God Almighty**

When God appeared to Abram and changed his name to Abraham, God said, "I am God Almighty" (Genesis 17:1). Now God Almighty appeared to Jacob, blessed him, and formally changed his name to "Israel". God repeats the promise of a nation, including kings. God Almighty told Israel, "The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I give to you and to your descendants" (v.12).

This takes place at Bethel where Jacob had earlier had an encounter with God (28:10-22). Jacob had later married and began to build a large family. Unlike his father and grandfather, Jacob ended up with twelve sons who would become the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. And one of his sons, Joseph, would become the second most important person in Egypt and one of the heroes of the Old Testament. But, getting back to our passage....

A pillar was set where a memorial stone and an altar already stood (Genesis 28:22; 35:7), but the introduction of the drink offering transforms the location—Bethel, house of God—from a memorial to a place of worship. Jacob here was fulfilling his own promise, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You” (Genesis 28:20–22).

The Jewish people, the Israelites, are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs of the nation. Over these few studies we have had a chance to see their strengths and weaknesses. We have seen that they are people like we are—capable of goodness and evil, of faithfulness to God and waywardness. A God who was there for them is here for us as well. May we be faithful that, as God has blessed us, we may be a blessing to others.

R&D *With which of the characters we have met in this study do you most identify? Why?*

Prayer: *Father, who needs to hear from me this day? Whom would You have me call, or write, or bless in some way?*

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## Day 45

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**Read: Genesis 32:24-32**

### He Will Empty

Jacob camped alone at the brook of Jabbok, “he will empty,” and a man wrestled with him until the break of day. The man that Jacob wrestled with, the angel of the Lord, revealed Himself in verse 28 as God. The wrestling match sums up Jacob’s lifelong attitude toward God. God marked Jacob by dislocating his hip, the wrestler’s pivot of strength (v.31). Jacob could no longer depend on his wits and strength, his natural powers were now crippled. Every step he would take in the future would remind him of his dependence upon divine grace. Jacob must acknowledge his weakness before he is transformed and is re-named *Israel* (“one who struggles with God”) from *Jacob* (“deceiver”). Renaming Israel indicates that the elect patriarch had matured in his faith. Jacob had learned that the cause of his well-being would be God’s blessing rather than his own deceptive resourcefulness. His change of name reflects this change of character.

R&D *Name one thing that you are still trying to do in your own strength. Can you turn it over to God?*

Prayer: *Father, I thank You for being so dependable. How freeing it is to put all of my life into Your hands.*

*by Harry C. Griffith*

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