



Reconciliation

Lenten Study

Day 1

Read: Mark 1:15

Introduction

For most of us, Lent is the primary time during the year when we do some serious self-examination. Therefore, Lenten Bible study should aid us in that process. This year, we will look at our responsibility to be reconciled to God and to others, and we will consider what is expected of us by way of the ministry of reconciliation to which all Christians are called.

From the time of the fall, God has been trying to make it clear that He wants to be in relationship with people. Through Moses and the prophets, He constantly sought to get that message across to His chosen people. In the fullness of time, He sent His only Son to live and die for us, that we might be in relationship with Him. God's message has always been one of reconciliation.

Theologically, reconciliation is rooted in the idea of restoration, the ending of conflict, and the establishing of peace between parties. According to the dictionary, reconciliation is restoring to friendship. God wants to have that sort of relationship with people, He wants people to be friends to one another, and He makes us ambassadors of the ministry of reconciliation: helping other people to come into that sort of relationship with Him.

For Lent, there are nine studies on the subject "Reconciliation Between People," followed by ten each on "Reconciliation Between God and People," "Making Reconciliation Known," and "The Ministry of Reconciliation."

R&D *What does reconciliation mean to you?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, our relationship with you and with each other begins with repentance, something not to forget as we begin this Lenten journey.*

Day 2

Read: Genesis 13:1-11

Neighbors

We live in a neighborhood, not just on a street or in a city, but in a neighborhood. Recently an out-of-town friend called needing a place to stay, and as we already had guests visiting, we called a neighbor to see if she could give our friend a place to stay, although we knew that she would be out of town on that particular night. She said: "It's all God's anyway. You don't need to ask—just come on in and use it."

We sometimes fall under the mistaken notion that those things that we call our own are ours. Our neighbor reminded us of the Christian understanding of possession and stewardship. Abram and Lot were staying together "but the land could not support them while they stayed together for their possessions were so great" (v.6). Their relationship broke down because "quarreling arose" between their herdsmen.

Abram understood the principle of which our neighbor reminded us: it's all God's anyway. He understood that the problem would not go away. He believed that God's providence was big enough to take care of two successful ranches. He resisted the temptation to make himself the more powerful and instead sought God's way of humility and generosity.

Offering Lot the best—"Is not the whole land before you?"—he helped Lot to see that God was big enough to provide for both, and that generosity and humility could bring reconciliation. "Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord." This is the land which Lot chose because he believed that Abram was sincere in his offer for reconciliation.

It is easy to let our possessions become the focus of our attention when conflict arises. Abram believed that there was something greater at work than quarreling herdsmen. He believed that an opportunity for glorifying God was present; and, by acting with generous humility, God would honor both parties in their labor. Godly neighbors are indeed good neighbors.

R&D Consider a situation in your life where godly generosity and humility would bring reconciliation.

Prayer: You are willing to go before us in those difficult situations in which You call us to follow.

Day 3

Read: Genesis 16:1-6

Impatience

When I was in grade school a teacher once told me to take the time to do my work right the first time. "If you can't find the time to do it right the first time, how will you find the time to correct it?" she asked.

Abram and Sarai had a promise from God, the promise of a child and descendants as great as the stars in heaven (15:5). But Abram and Sarai grew impatient, and their haste led to disaster. While they should have been content to be "pregnant with anticipation," they desired to be pregnant. They had not learned to get it right the first time.

The result was predictably disastrous. Hagar "began to despise" Sarai; Sarai grew angry with Abram; Abram got fed up with both of them; and through one act of haste, the children of Abraham, both Jew and Arab, have been in turmoil from that day.

Having gone through two pregnancies with her, I have heard my wife say on more than one occasion: "When will this be over?" Waiting on the Lord is necessary in all situations. This passage illustrates the danger in making hasty decisions. Sadly, there was never reconciliation between Hagar and the family for whom she had sacrificed so much. Abram and Sarai eventually "laughed" when Isaac was born, but one wonders if that laughter might have been richer, fuller if they had simply waited.

In the end, we understand as Christians that God will bring peace to the world through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. But how much pain has the world suffered as the result of one moment of impatience by two people with a promise from God? Our actions do indeed have eternal significance.

R&D How has an impatient heart or hasty decision brought difficulty to your life?

Prayer: *How often have we been on the verge of saying, "Lord, give me patience...and give it to me right now"?*

Day 4

Read: Genesis 27:41-45

"Breaks"

Some people get all the breaks. From time to time we all feel that way about another person, and this is exactly how Esau felt about Jacob. Jacob bribed his brother into giving him his birthright and then tricked their father into giving him his blessing. Esau's rage toward his brother is understandable; but let's face it, he was probably just as mad at his own poor judgment and shortsightedness.

Jacob was one who got all the breaks, but not without a price. When Esau's grudge turned to murderous thoughts, it was the brother with everything who was sent packing. He ran from his brother; he eventually had to run from his uncle (chapter 31); and reconciliation between Esau and Jacob seemed impossible. But God specializes in the impossible.

The problem in this situation is really common. There are those whose lives seem to be so "blessed" that everything they do seems to work. But, as with Jacob, a life built on deceit and trickery is about as stable as a house built on sand. Jacob had so built his life on his charm and ability to get his own way that he became isolated from almost every person who had ever been important to him. The impossible had to happen.

When confronted with the probability of meeting his brother (chapter 32), knowing how they had parted company, Jacob reached the moment when he was able to learn to trust God rather than his own resources. He wrestles with God and would forever bear the pain of this battle, yet in defeat God allowed him to prevail. Jacob discovered that reconciliation is the fruit of trusting God for peace between people rather than trusting our human resources. Reconciliation came between brothers only after the "winner" got his relationship with God in order.

R&D *How have you been hurt by another person's deceit and trickery? Are you willing to trust God to bring that person to a place wherein reconciliation is possible?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, to see beyond our selfish pains to reach the joyous point of reconciliation.*

Day 5

Read: John 17:6-12, 20-23

Prejudice

I heard a song recently and the chorus caused me to understand the principle of reconciliation in this passage. The chorus said: "Don't tell them Jesus loves them 'till you're ready to love them too."

There is a temptation that every Christian struggles with, a temptation to be out of relationship with unbelievers. How can we tell them Jesus loves them until we are ready to love them? "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that they may be one" (vv.21-22). Jesus prays that we will be one with those who are not yet in the fellowship of believers.

Several years ago, I attended a worship service in a large inner-city congregation. I had my eyes closed during the prayers of the people, and suddenly my nostrils were filled with the smell of a dirty human body. I opened my eyes and saw a street person who had slipped into the pew next to me. He smiled, I smiled and we both prayed. I was very aware of being out of relationship

with the man with whom I was sharing a pew, because he was so very different from those with whom I usually worship, and I felt uncomfortable. “Don’t tell them Jesus loves them ‘till you’re ready to love them too.” At the passing of the peace, he stretched out his hand first and said: “I don’t want to miss the soup downstairs; see you for the meal.” That day the small piece of bread and sip of wine seemed like the feast that we proclaim it to be. “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (v.23).

Reconciliation with the persons with whom we share God’s creation is not an option; it is a necessity if the kingdom of God is to be established and God’s peace is to reign.

R&D With what group or individual do you need to reconcile in order that they might see Christ’s love at work in your life and theirs?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to see you...of the potential of you...in the eyes of everyone.

Day 6

Read: Ephesians 2:11-22

Bigotry

Religious bigotry is always difficult to change. Only Christ can overcome such division. Division between groups of believers has existed in the church since apostolic times. As a priest, I never cease to be amazed at the walls of division erected in the church, and the stumbling blocks fellow Christians create for one another. Paul struggled with the hostile division between Jew and Gentile which threatened the fabric of unity which Jesus died to create.

Today division between believers is sadly very common. When we look at the church, we see division between East and West, Protestant and Catholic, evangelical, liberal, charismatic, Anglo-Catholic—the list goes on and on. Most denominations seem to be controlled by “special interest” Christians rather than by our unity in Christ.

Paul was calling for something which was beyond any idea of unity than those early Christians could have conceived. Paul was obedient to the Lord by upholding the law of love and reminding all believers that God looks at us and sees the blood of Christ, not our outward appearance or church alliance, and this is how we are to see one another. Division in the church is abhorrent to God, because we are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (vv.19-20).

Reconciliation within the church is not an option, for it is the foundation on which the church was laid. In Jesus we are being “built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (v.22).

R&D How can Christians differ and yet remain in communion with one another?

Prayer: Lord Christ, I thank you that, through Bible study and prayer groups with people of other denominations, I have found unity in you.

Day 7

Read: Galatians 3:26-29

Differences

One of the most difficult characteristics of God is God's apparent blindness to the differences between people that we, as sinful humans, so easily identify. I was watching Sesame Street with our children recently, and there was a segment in which two of the characters were discussing the ways in which they were alike and the ways in which they were different. They each had two eyes, two ears, two hands, but one had blue fur while the other had orange "skin"; one had no teeth, while the other had two large fangs. In the end they decided that they were more alike than they were different, and yet each was happy to have been uniquely made.

Paul knew something of people and, in his life, he had allowed the mind of Christ to be formed in his mind. The extensive travels of this former "Pharisee of Pharisees" were a great opportunity to learn about people, and Paul had come to understand that every person, every culture, every congregation has its own unique personality; and yet, like those characters on Sesame Street, they had more that was alike than was different.

As sinful people we tend to focus on our differences. We set standards of membership which are not based on the scriptural teaching of our Lord. Reconciliation is possible only when we accept the common ground all Christians share, the ground which is at the foot of the cross.

Our common life comes from our full adoption as children of God through Jesus Christ. "All of you who were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ" (v.27). We are all wearing the same outward appearance if we are baptized into Christ. We do not cease to have our unique and God-given inward qualities, but our "clothed selves" are the result of our faith in Christ Jesus. We have received the spiritual clothing of the King of kings and Lord of lords. We dwell on common ground with all Christians at the foot of the cross. Reconciliation between believers requires keeping our eyes on Jesus and not on the unique qualities which each Christian has.

R&D Is your outward expression consistent with your "royal heritage"? Do you look for people's "spiritual clothing" or at their physical clothing? How do these judgments affect our common life in Jesus Christ?

Prayer: Blind us to our differences, Lord Jesus, and awaken us to opportunities to reach out to others.

Day 8

Read: Colossians 3:1-14

Ambassadors

We live in a world where it is easy to have consistently inconsistent beliefs and actions. As Christians we must resist this temptation and allow our actions to be consistent with our beliefs. This may put us in conflict with our earthly loyalties and may even put us at odds with "truths" that we have always held as dear. For example, we may find that our Christian belief system puts us at odds with the beliefs of the political party with which we had always been aligned, or that our Christian beliefs do not permit us to indulge ourselves in activities which we used to find perfectly acceptable.

Who we are in Jesus Christ is of eternal value and significance. If our Christian behavior is not consistent with the beliefs of Christianity, then what distinguishes a Christian as a Christian? "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs

to your earthly nature” (vv.2, 5). Our actions are not the means to our salvation, but they are the sign of our salvation. If there is not an outward and visible sign of this inward and spiritual grace, the world and other Christians will see this inconsistency, and our witness will be less than it should be. We will be out of relationship with the world and with the body of believers because our life will be an inconsistent Christian witness.

The life we live is the only one we have in which to glorify Christ. In all that we do, in our homes, in our churches, in our Bible studies, in our schools, in our jobs, in our friendships, we are ambassadors (reconcilers) for Christ. We are called to holiness, not by our own ability or strength to perfect ourselves, but by receiving the overwhelming gift of God’s desire to bring us to perfection. In receiving this gift, reconciliation will be the desire of our heart in all relationships.

R&D Ask yourself tonight, “What did I do today that only a Christian would do?”

Prayer: We are here for a purpose, Lord Christ, to bring the world to you.

Day 9

Read: Acts 2:36-47

Bold Proclamation

“When the people heard this they were cut to the heart” (v.37). Peter’s sermon to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem was as piercing as the nails they had caused to be pounded into the Savior’s flesh. A mere 53 days following the crucifixion, Peter proclaims the gospel to thousands, many of whom were probably present on Good Friday and called for Jesus’ crucifixion. Three thousand lives were transformed that day in one of the greatest works of reconciliation ever seen.

Not only were these people who had crucified Jesus (v.36) reconciled to God, they also were reconciled to the apostles and all believers. This miraculous conversion of the thousands from a “corrupt generation” (v.40) took place because Peter received the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit and called those who had murdered Jesus, and threatened his own life, into reconciliation. “Repent and be baptized” (v.38), Peter tells them, and in so doing he laid down his life for those of whom he was fearful.

As Christians we too are called to a bold proclamation of the reconciling love of God. Sometimes it will be to those who have harmed us or a loved one in some significant way. Peter not only pointed out their sin, but he also gave them the only way out of that sin—Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

For most of us, Peter’s boldness seems impossible, but Peter had just been empowered by the Holy Spirit as he had never before been empowered. His boldness is really just the expression of God’s working in him to do greater things than he could ask or imagine.

An equally great work of the Holy Spirit happened in the lives of the three thousand new believers. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v.42). Those who had once called for his crucifixion were now devoted members of the body of believers in Jesus Christ. They were reconciled to God and to one another because one Christian boldly and lovingly called them into reconciliation.

R&D To what extent are you willing to hear a call to be reconciled to someone you have harmed?

Prayer: If we only listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit within us, our opportunities for reconciliation are multiplied greatly.

Day 10

Read: Matthew 18:1-20

Division

I was once in the procession at a church convention and noticed many clergy letting others process before them. I realized they just wanted to be close to the back, near the bishop. A friend commented to me: “Have you noticed that the church is the only place where people rush to get to the back of the line?” Spiritual pride and seeking special honor in the body creates division.

When the disciples wanted to know who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus showed them a child. In very graphic words he then told them to rid their lives of anything which might prevent them from living in childlike reverence to God. But Jesus knew that children sometimes quarrel with one another, so in verses 15-17 he restates the letter of the law about dealing with conflict. “This is what the law allows you to do, go one to one, take some witnesses, go before the whole assembly,” etc. (vv.15-17). But as Jesus always did, he raised the law to the law of love. He concludes by saying that he cannot be present with us if we are not in right relationship with one another. “I tell you the truth that if two of you on earth agree (live reconciled lives) about anything you ask for, it will be done for you. For where two or three come together in my name, I am with them” (vv.19-20).

When we allow division to exist in the church, we keep ourselves out of relationship with Jesus. Agreement with one another is not just a way to keep the peace, it is the only way to keep peace! Spiritual pride and seeking honor always lead to broken relationships. We are called to be in agreement with one another if we want Jesus to be in our midst.

R&D What are you willing to sacrifice to be in agreement with all Christians?

Prayer: Humble us of pride, O Lord, especially spiritual pride.

Day 11

Read: Genesis 3:1-19

Death

In the beginning the sin of pride and rebellion first erupted in humankind as Adam and Eve, who being tempted to be like God by the most cunning and subtle of all creatures, chose to believe the lie of the serpent over the commandment of God.

Chief among the consequences of their action was death. Certainly physical death, but more significantly, spiritual death—a permanent separation from God during a lifetime and beyond for eternity. This critical consequence is mysteriously passed on to all who are born of the seed of man. It is removed only by Jesus (not born of man but of the Holy Spirit), who became the Paschal Lamb sacrifice for the original sin of man and sins of the world.

The first glimmer of the gospel of God’s reconciliation with man comes when He says the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. The seed of the woman is Jesus. Satan, who once held the power of death, was defeated at the cross when Jesus overcame sin and death. Victory!

At the same moment that the God of justice cursed man—“from dust you are and to dust you shall return”—He provided in His infinite love the way to everlasting life with Him now and evermore.

A new covenant of reconciliation has been established. Reconciliation is needed when relationships are broken. Our broken relationship with our Father, God, and our broken relationships with our fellow human beings are all healed through God's provision of His Son, whose shed blood sacrifice for our sin brings new life and restoration.

R&D How have you been tempted in a subtle way and found personal reconciliation with God the Father?

Prayer: Temptation is always around us, Lord Jesus; thank you for giving us an escape.

Day 12

Read: Psalm 5:1-8

What God Hates

Try to feel the intensity of the psalmist in his morning prayer as he sighs and cries out for help from the one he knows as King, Lord, and God.

This brings to mind the question of how often we pray at the beginning of each day with the kind of intensity and sincere earnestness which pours from a humble heart that knows God. Or do our prayers generate from a self-centered need to use God for our own purposes?

Can we agree with the psalmist that God does hate, and that the nature of God will not allow the wicked to dwell with Him, nor the arrogant to stand in His presence; and that God hates "all who do wrong" and abhors the deceitful?

Psalm 55:21 (NRSV) describes a deceitful person as one who has "speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war; with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords." Deceitful people live false lives, deceiving through perfecting a performance. ("You make the cup clean on the outside but your inward part is full of wickedness" Luke 11:39.)

Proverbs 6:16 adds more to the list. God hates haughty eyes, hands that shed innocent blood, hearts that devise wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, false witnesses that pour out lies, and people who stir up discord.

Yet, this Almighty One who abounds in mercy is always present to receive the repentant and reveal the straight paths of right living as we wait for His direction with willing, expectant hearts and patient endurance.

R&D How many of the things that God hates have affected you personally and how have you responded?

Prayer: Lord, You hate many things that people do, but Your deep desire is their reconciliation with You.

Day 13

Read: Isaiah 6:1-8

Holiness

Isaiah's commission for his prophetic ministry is one of the most dramatic in the Bible. His vision, the worship of God by angelic beings ("Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory") is an example many of us follow in our worship services.

We, too, join the angelic beings in worshipping God for who He is by nature—holy. Holy means He is not like anything created. He is totally separate and apart from the created order. His

holiness has been defined as “the deepest mystery of His being, the wondrous union of His righteousness and His Love.”

Because of His righteousness He cannot be in the presence of sin. Isaiah understood this once he grasped God’s holiness. His first reaction was to feel ruined, undone, falling apart. Then he realized that he was but a man, not God, but only God’s creation. Then of all the offenses against the righteousness of God that he could have confessed, he chose “unclean lips.” It is with the lips that we speak our lies and deceptions, attack the character of others and exalt ourselves as God. Our lips are used to convey what is really in our hearts.

But God in His love takes away Isaiah’s guilt and atones for his sin. He does the same for us in Jesus. God in His holy love treats His enemies as if they are not enemies at all. That is reconciliation.

R&D When you think of the nature of God, what reactions do you have?

Prayer: God, when I survey my life, it amazes me that You can forgive so much. Thank You, Lord.

Day 14

Read: Luke 5:1-11

Obedience

Being reconciled with God through hearing the word of God, seeing miracles, confessing and repenting of sin, prophetically being told what the future holds, giving up all and following in faith is ideal. Jesus, though, knew the difficulty.

As described in the parable of the sower—where soil is likened to a person’s heart—the word of God falls on all soil, but if the heart is hard the person will not understand. Satan takes away the seeds of reconciliation. If the heart is shallow and rocky, the message received with joy at first will not root; when trouble or persecution ensue, enthusiasm fades and despair comes. A heart of thistles takes in the seed but worldly cares and longing for money choke it out. The good soil in the heart of Peter, James, and John listened and understood. Immediately each gave up all to be a disciple.

Hearing a teaching by Jesus led Peter to be obedient to Jesus’ command. That obedience enabled Peter to see a miracle. The fact that Jesus can do what man’s striving cannot accomplish brought Peter to his knees, recognizing Christ as Lord and himself a sinner. Reconciliation had begun. Faith in Jesus supplanted Peter’s faith in himself, enabling him to give up everything. How often we pause in our Christian walk for a season returning to an existence of striving on our own, thereby missing a miracle because of disobedience and unrepentance.

R&D What is the thing holding you back from being more fully a disciple of Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are life; all else is just details.

Day 15

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:11-15

Resting

Conceivably, God could have gone about the process of reconciling mankind to Himself in other ways. For example, he could have sent Jesus just to be our teacher or example. By following Jesus’ teachings, we could possibly have earned some measure of reconciliation with God.

Gratefully, He did not choose such a method. Just think of the effort we would have to make to earn our way into a relationship with God. When have you loved others enough?

The teachings and the example of Jesus are important but not as a basis of reconciliation with God. God took the initiative in bringing about reconciliation only through the cross. One could follow Christ's teachings and example and never be reconciled to God. The first step is to accept Jesus as the entirely righteous one, the sinless Lamb of God, who at Calvary took and endured the punishment we deserved, namely separation from God, so that we could be made righteous. We are made righteous because the shed blood of Jesus has covered our sins. God sees us through His Son. We rest in that reality.

Man, created on the sixth day, was meant to live in God's rest, the seventh day. With the fall we lost the opportunity to rest in God. But now, because of what God has done through Christ, we have been restored to our original position. We can rest in God.

Jesus' teachings are our guide to whether we are resting. When we take control of our lives away from God, we lose what God provides—peace and joy, and a life without fear, anxiety and worry.

R&D What circumstances take control of you that cause you to cease from resting in God?

Prayer: In a life faced with so many alternatives, Lord Christ, help us to know deep within us that there is no alternative to you.

Day 16

Read: Colossians 1:15-23

Middleman

Jesus is referred to as "firstborn over all creation." That does not mean, as the Jehovah's Witnesses claim, that God the Father preexisted the Son. That view was condemned by the church as heresy centuries ago. The "firstborn" to the Israelites related to preferential status, authority, sovereignty, responsibility, and the right of succession. When the word is used figuratively as it is applied to Jesus here, it implies an excellence, a certain preferential status and closeness to the Father.

Once I had a Christian say to me, "Why should I include Jesus in my prayers when I can go straight to the 'chairman of the board' (the Father) and avoid the middleman?" Let's look at this "middleman." Scripture says the Father and Son are one. Jesus is in the Father and the Father in him. Prior to coming to earth as a visual image of an invisible God, Jesus was with God when all the world was created and through Him all things were made. By Jesus all the heavens were created, visible and invisible, along with all powers and authority.

When Jesus was sacrificed as the Lamb of God for the sins of everyone, he rose as the firstborn from the dead having supremacy over everything. He is the head of the Church of all believers. Obviously, this is no middleman in the Father's eyes nor should he be in ours. By Jesus' blood God has reconciled you and me to Himself. God gave His best, His Number One! Second best was never an option.

R&D Reflect on where you give second best when you should give your best. At home? The office? Church? Environment?

Prayer: *Gracious Father, You gave Yourself to us in Your Son so that we might better know You as You really are. We are grateful.*

Day 17

Read: Romans 5:1-11

Rejoice

The operative word in this reading is “rejoice” (joy), which comes through reconciliation or peace with God through the one and only way, Jesus the Christ.

As Andrew Murray expressed in *Abide in Christ*, “Abiding fully in Christ is a life of exquisite, overflowing happiness. As Christ gets more completion of the soul, it enters into the joy of the Lord...joy is the essential characteristic of the life of the believer who fully abides in Christ.” Therefore, if joy is not full in the life of a Christian, one must question, “Is Jesus full in that life?”

Jesus wants his joy to remain in us so that our joy may be complete and full. Perfect joy can come only through the only one who possesses it. Christian joy is superlative to all circumstances. A paramount example is Jesus, “who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

Most definitely we shall walk through physical and emotional valleys; but the steadfastness and strength of the Spirit within rejoicing in our Lord will make unspeakable joy flow more abundantly than tears, penetrate more piercingly than pain, motivate more strongly than despair, and give us more completely a hope in our sufferings—thereby building strong Christian character.

The immature spiritual roller-coaster ride ends when the character of the soul has matured through suffering and is governed by the Spirit. Then the joy of the Lord will be the strength essential in a fallen and broken world.

R&D *In what ways have pain and suffering molded you into the likeness of Christ?*

Prayer: *The experiences of life in you, Lord Jesus, shape the fullness of our joy.*

Day 18

Read: Ephesians 1:1-10

Somebody

Human beings continue the historic, desperate search in all directions to discover who they are. This leads to lust for power to control situations and people; desire for possessions for appearance sake; people pleasing, as in enablers, rescuers, codependents, and performers; and seeking direction from the misguided.

Erupting through a state of bewilderment, this passage becomes for us a laser beam of light into our dark atmosphere of wandering lostness. The great God of the universe, the creator of the heavens, the earth and all that lies within, says that sinful man reconciled to Him through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, is a saint!

The Almighty, the King of kings and Lord of lords says you are a *somebody*, a special somebody whom He chose before the beginning of the world. Not only are you chosen and an adoptive child of the all-powerful God of all, but you have been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing. You now have power, the kind that overcomes evil. All your needs are now supplied by His riches and glory. And your desire now is only to please God, not people. As Oswald Chambers said in *My Utmost for His Highest*, “A saint is never consciously a saint; a saint is consciously dependent on God.” Our experiences should line up with our position as saints.

A person's search for identity should end when he is reconciled with God. Identification with Jesus brings blessings of unconditional love and acceptance, lavishing on us all wisdom and understanding, and life eternal.

Important psalms on the subject are Psalms 91 and 139.

R&D Compare that which you sought prior to reconciliation with God with what you seek now.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, nothing compares to the abundance of Your love.

Day 19

Read: Hebrews 2:1-9

Grace

The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus as the revealer and mediator of God's reconciliation with people. He is writing to Jewish Christians who are wavering in their commitment and are tempted to return to Judaism with its law and sacrifices.

This lesson is pertinent to those today who have accepted Christ and feel a need to return to self-inflicted laws of "should not, have to, and ought not," which in ignorance is thought to be needed addendum to the proper Christian lifestyle.

Salvation through grace is all-sufficient. We need not add more to nor take anything away from what God has done in Jesus Christ. The reader is warned that if violating the law had serious consequences, then how much greater the consequences would be of turning from God's method of reconciling man to Himself. Nothing in this supreme act is lacking; and this method has been confirmed through signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to His will.

Once we have been reconciled with God through Jesus, we need never again go back to "trying to do the best we can." Through submission to the all-sufficient one, all things are done through His strength and power. The law is now a desire to do the will of God, not an order of oppression. The Holy Spirit of our Lord perpetually directs and guides us into all truth. We are set free from the chains of dos and don'ts of the past, thus enabling us to walk in the future paths of right living (righteousness) with Jesus leading us.

R&D When have you slipped and wanted to return to self-made laws?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, keep us on track for we are wont to go astray.

Day 20

Read: Romans 8:1-17

Spirit of Life

Two powerful forces or laws that are at work in the universe are the law of sin and death and the law of the Spirit of life. Just as the law of gravity has to be overcome to send a rocket into space, so the law of sin and death can be overcome by a more powerful force, the law of the Spirit of life. When reconciled with God we receive this new power, the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ. The defeated ones become overcomers!

Jesus did not talk much about right or wrong. He spoke more about life and death. He said he is "life." Not that he has it; he *is* it. If we want the power of the Spirit of life, we must choose

Jesus, the life, into our life. Then the indwelling Christ (the vine) will produce through us (the branches) the fruit of his life which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and a self controlled by the Spirit.

Is this new life principle for special Christians or for all Christians? Romans 8:9 (NEB) says, "If a man does not possess the Spirit of Christ, he is no Christian." Are there two kinds of Christians? Those with the Spirit and those without? No!

Those reconciled with God, though, face a choice: whether to live a life controlled by the Spirit of life or the law of sin and death. Many choose the latter and live defeated lives as Christians. God has a better way. It comes through submission to the power of Christ within, who can defeat the power of sin and death.

R&D Under what circumstances are you more likely to live under the law of sin and death rather than under the law of the Spirit of life?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for this simple truth: Jesus frees us.

Day 21

Read: Matthew 11:7-19

Friend

John the Baptist "sang a dirge" (v.17) of repentance for the religious establishment who did not pick up the refrain. Jesus "played the flute" of God's healing and saving love but the same people refused to dance with the "Lord of the dance." John's spiritual discipline of fasting was rejected as evil by the leadership which was committed to maintaining the status quo of their world. Jesus' celebration of God's forgiving love was slandered as gluttony and drunkenness by the same people for the same reason.

What a terrible trap for them and for us to be unwilling either to mourn our sins and the suffering of the world, or to rejoice with the Savior! That state of spiritual paralysis causes the self-righteous to dismiss Jesus as "a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.'" Here we find the key to the passage and to our relationship with the Lord Jesus as his disciples and messengers.

Jesus' work was to befriend those who suffered from the curse of being cut off from the synagogue and thus being excluded from God's family. God Himself sought them out to love them. Is not this, and the changed lives that responded to Jesus' love, the "results" (v.19, NIV) of God's wisdom? Jesus reconciled to God the people who didn't know God's love. He did it by his personal presence and witness. Even at the risk of being tagged a friend of the "wrong" kind of people, should not you and I be doing the same, seeking out as Jesus did?

R&D How could you show an imprisoned criminal God's love?

Prayer: Open our eyes, Lord Jesus, to see those in need of your love all around us every day.

Day 22

Read: Matthew 28:16-20

Go

The current period of our cultural and intellectual life has been influenced by a growing range of philosophies, spiritualities, and so-called religions. They promise varying degrees of

personal power and fulfillment. They are nothing new, really, just a revival of various ancient and persistent pagan ideas and practices centering on the individual person's temptation to be as a god.

In our last lesson, we read about John the Baptist announcing the authentic coming age of the kingdom of God as a "forcefully advancing" (Matthew 11:12, NIV) reality. In today's passage, Jesus inaugurates that new age as a present entity and experience with the Great Commission to the remaining eleven disciples after the suicide of Judas.

Rather than give them some esoteric methods of meditation or occult practice, the risen Christ first calls them into his living presence which is a call to worship him (even with their doubts!), and then proceeds to command them to an active life of faithful witness (made disciples), faithful obedience (baptism), and faithful growth (teaching) in the new life of the age of the kingdom of God. It is a complete program of relationship with the one, true God which makes clear that we are to share what we have received if our faith is authentic. Jesus promises you and me that he will be with us if we are part of his mission of sharing the "good news" in our personal relationships with other people.

R&D Are you faithful to worship Jesus even in the midst of doubts?

Prayer: You have given us the authentic, Blessed Lord. Help us never to accept anything else.

Day 23

Luke: 24:36-49

Opened Minds

The mystery, or deepest truth of reality, is that Jesus lives in a new order that we simply cannot comprehend. Our sense-oriented perception or even our abstract reasoning cannot describe or analyze the new creation of what God has done! But we can receive what Jesus wants to give us—his peace. In that life-changing grace of harmony with God we can then go on to the next gift that is both so exciting and essential—to have our minds opened.

Jesus teaches us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus speaks to us through the ministry of the church. None of us has an immediate, direct revelation of the whole gospel truth in the moment of our conversion or baptism. Like the first disciples and Paul, we need a continuous relationship of being a student (disciple) of God's Word in order to be effective witnesses. We give our minds to the Lord in order for our understanding to be enlarged, deepened, corrected, and enlightened with saving truth and complete faith.

As the church is led by the Holy Spirit to remember (recall into the present) the mighty works of God as recorded in the Scriptures, we are guided into authentic interpretation by the experience of the early church as it was led by the same Holy Spirit. We call it tradition, the hand-over of that treasure which is the saving truth. We then can apply the gospel by again depending upon the Holy Spirit to guide our decisions in the holy wisdom which can only come from God.

R&D Review what ways you have sought to grow in understanding the Scriptures and ask yourself if you know more of Jesus now than last year. Five years ago?

Prayer: Equip us, O Lord, for the opportunities to grow in ourselves and show to others.

Day 24

Read: John 15:1-17

Branches and Fruit

As a child growing up in northern Missouri, I enjoyed the fresh fruits of the earth from apple and cherry trees as well as blackberry bushes. My wife enjoyed peaches from her native Colorado. What kind of fruit does the Father enjoy from us who have been made part of His family, the church? In this powerful passage Jesus gave us the last of his seven “I am” statements that reveal his nature and identity. He is the “true vine” which means that he is everything that Israel lacked in faithfulness and holiness. As the baptized and believing members of the Body of Christ, we bear fruit as we remain in him.

One essential way to remain in Jesus is never to cease studying and praying his words, i.e., the Scriptures. Another way is to have a meek or teachable spirit that seeks to obey our captain of the faith. As we are faithful to Jesus’ words and will, he will lovingly prune us to bear more fruit. He will give us the grace to grow out of our immaturity and selfishness.

The command of Jesus is for us to love as he loves us, i.e., to seek out the lost, the sin-sick, and the broken and to call them our friends, just as he calls us the same! The fruit that shall last is nothing other than our faithful, mature, obedient witness to the saving love of Jesus. We make that witness in what we do and what we say to others. We show love by “laying down our lives” through the painful decision to risk being vulnerable by sharing our faith and experience of God’s love in Christ.

R&D Who around you at home or at work needs to hear the “good news” from you?

Prayer: Let us not hide our faith nor shy away from opportunities to share your love with others.

Day 25

Read: Romans 10:1-15

Life in God

The modern virtues are preached with vigor: self-confidence, peace of mind, positive thinking, name-it-and-claim-it-by-imaging! Corporations and individual people spend a lot of money getting training just for these things. Yet, that which is the only thing eternally significant—life in God—is given to us through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We couldn’t afford to pay the price. Only Jesus could offer his own godly love and holiness to reconcile or justify us.

As Paul explains salvation in this difficult text, we see that the problem of sin is universal. It is the original toxic waste that pollutes human life and creation whenever we touch it. The reality of our choosing our own will and way over against God’s is that we thereby choose to be hostile to our creator and Lord. It is we who are angry at God, not the other way around. God’s “wrath” is indeed His separation from the contamination of our evil, but it is we who reject the love of the living God. But God’s grace is greater than our sin.

Jesus’ act of reconciling love not only gives to the baptized faithful the new life of justification, but it also offers that same new relationship with God to everyone willing to receive it. As we stand and rejoice in this wonderful love of God, the “overflow” of His grace to the many is through us, by our acts and words of reconciliation to those who are estranged from God. Our ministry is to be the “Immigration and Naturalization Service” for God’s kingdom, not to keep anyone out, but to seek and bring in those still alienated.

R&D *Who is unacceptable to our gracious God?*

Prayer: *Teach us Your hospitality, Father God, that we may be a more welcoming people.*

Day 26

Read: 1 Corinthians 9:1-2, 16-27

Compelling Freedom

The poignant and enigmatic questions by Paul in the beginning of this chapter should be set to a lovely tune for a Christian song. It could be the song of every baptized and faithful believer, for we are all called by God and His church to share in the apostolate of being a witness for Christ Jesus. Those who believe because of our life and words are the seal upon our active love as Jesus' disciples and messengers.

We are not to brag about the number of souls we have “bagged” for God, for, again like Paul, we are “compelled” to share our experience and love of God. How shall we conduct our ministry of freely giving away the invaluable treasure of the gospel? Some charged that Paul acted like a chameleon, changing the color of his religion to reflect whatever group with whom he was sharing the “good news.” He did not compromise the gospel, but he didn't hesitate to abstain from anything that would bring offense to his hearers. His goal was not to win their approval for himself, but to place no impediments to the hearing of God's saving love! He was not without principle. His goal and his ethic were the same: “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”

Our blessed freedom in the Holy Spirit is to be free from the restricting bonds of self-protection and self-promotion so that we are free to serve the will of God to share His glad message in whatever way best conveys the perfect love of our Savior. Now, that's a happy and healthy compulsion!

R&D *Have you ever refrained from drinking alcohol or profanity or ceremonial rigidity in order to claim common ground with someone else for the sake of their hearing the gospel?*

Prayer: *It is as we “meet people where they are” that we are best able to convey your good news, Lord Jesus.*

Day 27

Read: Ephesians 4:17—5:2

Construction Materials

We are told that nature abhors a vacuum. This is true for us as a universal spiritual reality as well. When we put on our baptismal garment, be it a family heirloom as a baby, or our best suit as an adult, we are acting out the clothing of our whole self with the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. But that doesn't complete our wardrobe. Every now and then, my wife and I will take inventory of our closets and select clothes to give to a Christian agency for the poor. Many people do this. Paul is teaching us that we need to clean out the closets of our habits in order to imitate or reproduce the love of God that we see in Jesus. We are still people with all the strong feelings of any human being. Baptism and faith don't change our molecular or personality structure. Growth in grace is indeed a partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Are we willing to undergo the training, the discipline, and the growth in order to become more godly, more Christ-like? Do we see bitterness, rage, sinful anger, brawling, slander or any

malice in Jesus? Remember, what others see in us is what they know of our Lord! We can practice the behavior of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness as we use all the means of grace in worship, small group accountability, spiritual direction, etc. Our goal is to build up others for their benefit. As we meet the needs of other people, so they will know more of the wonderful love of God that promises new life now and forever.

R&D Lent is a strong reminder to keep up a regular schedule of spiritual house-cleaning. Have you included in self-examination by the standards of God's love and law all your relationships, behavior, and language? What evidence is there that you have built up others?

Prayer: As we examine ourselves this Lent, Lord, let us not forget those around us who need our love.

Day 28

Read: Philippians 2:1-16a

Friendship in the Spirit

I'm conscious of two congregations that go by the name Church of Reconciliation. Note that it's not "the" reconciliation, but congregations committed to be reconciling in the love of God. This is an important dimension of our life in Christ. Not only important, but essential to our salvation.

To be "united with Christ" and have "fellowship with the Spirit" means our will and our actions are to be governed by the canon set forth here by Paul. He is merely reflecting and applying the teaching of Jesus. We who are called into the colony of the kingdom of God called the church cannot live as if the world was correct in looking out for Number One. Our point of reference is totally different. To be in Christ and in his Spirit is to practice being "like-minded," which is not agreement on all issues of faith and order in the church, but means to be of the same intention, to serve Christ by loving each other and all those God sends our way.

Our model is Jesus himself. Whatever our station in life, offices in the church, ministries, spiritual gifts, etc., they are nothing compared to the glory of God that Jesus took off in order to be God incarnate, the fullness of God present among us as one of us. Our witness begins by bending our knee in worship and praise and confessing with our speech the truth of Jesus. We do this both in creed and conversation. By seeking to be reconciling believers, we "hold out the word of life" as friends to all for the sake of Christ.

R&D Would inquirers be attracted to your church because of the quality of the fellowship they find there? Explain.

Prayer: Will they know we are Christians by our love, Lord Jesus?

Day 29

Read: Philemon 1-16

A Full Understanding

This is one of the most charming of all the letters of Paul. With the easy affection and humor that genuine friends share with each other, no matter how distant they may be from each other, Paul calls upon Philemon to be a friend to his runaway slave, Onesimus. Paul well knows that the law allowed, even mandated, the most severe punishment for a runaway slave.

The fear on the part of the Roman Empire is clearly reflected in the movie *Spartacus*, for such rebellion was dangerous to the order of the state. But Paul calls upon a higher claim, that of Christian friendship. He is confident that the faith shared with Philemon, and now with Onesimus as well, will unite all three of them in the common bond of God's love.

Note the significance of verse 6 in the *New International Version*: "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." In other words, Paul is telling us that our growth into the full joy and light of Christian faith is dependent on our willing and active sharing of it by being a friend in Christ to all.

If you feel stuck in a rut as far as your relationship with God is concerned, then look at the level of activity in your sharing your faith. If your gauge needles are low, then the key to this Lent, to the coming Easter celebration, and to your joy and usefulness in the Lord, is in the decision to be actively sharing what God has given you—His friendship.

R&D *What do you need to do today to begin actively sharing your faith as a friend in Christ?*

Prayer: *Help us never to forget, Lord God, that You are our best friend and one with whom we should share everything.*

Day 30

Read: James 2:14-26

The Other Side of the Coin

James reminds us that Abraham was called "God's friend" because of his willingness to act out his faith in the living God. He was willing to trust God with what was the most important part of his life, his son. The other side of the coin of justification by faith is the test of faith—active love of God expressed by what we do. There is a central spiritual truth in the heart of this teaching—the unity of God's grace. To illustrate this part of our relationship with God is the very nature of sacramental life—the outward and visible not only represents God's love and grace, but actually conveys it as well.

By the same token, we cannot separate our worship from our witness, nor keep our money apart from our ministry as baptized believers. In the same way, faith and friendship are one in the work of the Holy Spirit. Real friendship seeks to meet the needs of the befriended. To be a reconciler in the name of Christ is to be an active friend with those who are brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, and with those God is calling into that fellowship through our witness.

I claim John Wesley's personal motto as part of my rule of life: "Believe, love, and obey." Ask God for the grace to trust Him so we can hope in Him and act out His revealed will in our personal relationships day by day. We are God's friend with Abraham as we befriend the lost and lonely in this world.

R&D *Test your faith by the measure of its concrete activity on behalf of others: what have you done to show, share, and grow your faith by active love for others?*

Prayer: *It is by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God's love that we can be effective for you, Lord Jesus. May we not fail.*

Day 31

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Ministry of Reconciliation

Three terms seem to leap out at us from this passage: “a new creation,” “the ministry of reconciliation” and “ambassadors for Christ.” Let us look at the meaning of each.

Am I the same old me who existed before I invited Christ into my life? Am I the same old me who entered into the Lenten season several weeks ago? Paul says that if anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation; and, if we take our faith seriously so that we are constantly growing in our understanding of what being in Christ really means, we are continuously being created anew.

And for what purpose? That we may carry on Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, the ministry he has given to us (v.18). The Bible is a record of God’s desire to be in relationship with people. That is what reconciliation is all about. Since the fall, God has been seeking the restoration of friendship with people. In Christ He has made the ultimate connection between humankind and Himself. It is our ministry to make that message known.

And how are we equipped to do it? As ambassadors. We are not puny, powerless people out begging the world to accept Christ. We are Christ’s ambassadors, his authorized and empowered representatives, with credentials to proclaim his reconciling love to a very needy world. It is a mind-boggling ministry indeed, and one to which each of us is called.

R&D In what ways do you serve as an ambassador for Christ in his ministry of reconciliation?

Prayer: What a privilege (and responsibility) it is to be your ambassador, Lord Christ. Help me to represent you in an effective way to the world around me.

Day 32

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Servanthood

Serving others is serving Christ. This is the servanthood theme of the Matthew passage. Those who are blessed are those who have served the least ones (v.40). The servant fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the homeless, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison.

To illustrate this servanthood, I have two separate and true stories of women I shall name Rebecca and Diane. Rebecca was a woman of ill repute. She was even the madam of the house of ill repute. Upon encountering the saving grace of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:21), her life was reformed. She renounced her life of prostitution. She desired to serve God in gratitude for her life’s redemption. She would collect leftover food from various places—day-old bread and cake from the bakeries and unused food from restaurants—and take it to downtown New York City. She set up a table in front of the bus station and distributed the food. As the number of people increased, more tables and food were needed. A small act of servanthood grew into a large ministry of servanthood.

Diane was a maidservant. She had very little monetarily to give to her Lord and the work of the church. However, she had a real desire to serve. She took home the daily newspaper from her workplace and started praying intensely for those imprisoned, for those who were sick, for those who were in trauma or tragedy. It didn’t matter to her whether she knew them or the outcome. She prayed as a servant of God.

R&D Discuss people you know whose lives exemplify servanthood ministry.

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, for giving us the sacred work of serving others in your name.*

Day 33

Read: Luke 4:33-44

Healed to Serve

Illnesses affect many of us each year. No one likes to be sick or have a fever. We all want to be well! We have too much to do to be ill. The main question to be asked in this passage is why are we healed? Is it to make us feel good or to have a happy time? God wants us healed in order that we can serve Him.

Simon's mother-in-law had a high fever. Jesus stood over her, rebuked the fever, and it left. She immediately got up and waited on her guests. The very first act she did was to serve others.

The gospel is full of Jesus healing people. He wants a kingdom of God here on earth in which his people are whole of body, soul, and spirit. He wants a kingdom in which people love and serve each other. He wants a kingdom in which people serve those not in the kingdom. To do that we need to be well or whole—salvation is wholeness. Jesus came that we might have salvation. As a people, we are sick—body, soul, and spirit. As a Christian we can, with Jesus, intercede for God's people, asking them to be healed in order that they might serve Him.

R&D *How have you seen people healed to serve?*

Prayer: *May Your healing power be made known to a greater extent in our day, Gracious God.*

Day 34

Read: Luke 22:14-20

Come and Believe

Jesus says that he is the bread of life. Whoever comes to him will not go hungry and whoever believes in him will not be thirsty (John 6:35-36). We spend a lot of money and time in order to keep ourselves from being hungry and thirsty. Yet Jesus promises us that if we come to him, we will never be hungry or thirsty. "Come" and "believe" are the words for us to hold to as we go about our daily life and work. "Come" and "believe" are the words we hold to as we feed the poor and pray for the sick. "Come" and "believe" are the words we hold to as we aid the needy and listen to the pain of many.

After Holy Communion is over in our church, the priest lays the chalice on its side so that the congregation can see that it is empty. This is symbolic of the fact that the body and blood of Jesus has been poured out for us and in us. We then can go forth as his people to be his body and blood poured out for others. "The worship is ended, the service has begun." Just as God reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, we can, because of Jesus Christ, bring God's reconciling grace to others.

R&D *How do you bring God's reconciling grace to others?*

Prayer: *Holy God, You are within us through Your Holy Spirit. When we go forth, that Holy Spirit is with us and in us to do through us what You would have us do.*

Day 35

Read: Luke 22:24-34

Who Is the Greatest?

It's hard to imagine that this dispute arose among the disciples on the evening of the Last Supper. According to Luke it arose after the disciples had shared the Passover meal with their master and after he had announced that one of them would betray him.

No one desires to be at fault. Each disciple was saying, "Surely not I" (Mark 14:19). Even Peter protested the most saying, "Lord, I am prepared to face imprisonment and death itself because I'm so faithful!" One would rather hear about how great one is rather than one's faults.

Jesus took the conversation to a new level of understanding by saying that the greatest among you must be the servant. Jesus points to himself as one who sits at the table, for we all know that those who sit at the table are greater than those who wait on the table. Yet, Jesus says, "I am in the midst of you as one who serves you."

This is truly the example of Christian servanthood. No matter who we are or where we are, or what we do, we are the servants of the Lord. A business executive can get coffee for a secretary; a husband can change a diaper; a teacher can run an errand; and the list goes on. We do what we do because we love Jesus Christ. We are reconciled to God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). Because of that reconciliation, we ask to serve Christ by serving humankind!

R&D How does your life reflect the servanthood of Jesus?

Prayer: You have made it clear, Lord Jesus, that it is in serving others that we serve you.

Day 36

Read: John 13:31-37

Love One Another

Jesus has a new commandment for us. We are to love one another. He then goes on to say that we're to love one another as he has loved us. That's the difficult part of the statement. He loved us enough to lay down his life for us. As we are learning how to lay our lives down for others, he walks with us and sustains us. Here is a story of how God helped Rachel lay her life down for Jane.

Jane was about to have a baby. Jane wanted Rachel, a mature and recognized church leader, to be one of the godparents for her child when it was born. Rachel felt in a trap. She already had many godchildren. She didn't like Jane, but was embarrassed because she felt that, as a Christian, she should like Jane. She didn't want to be a godmother because she felt Jane would impose on her and take advantage of the relationship. Rachel prayed and prayed. Two separate answers came to her. A church leader said, "What would Jesus do?" A preacher in a sermon said, "Scripture says to love your enemies; anyone can love their friends; even the pagans love others, according to Paul." Rachel prayed and struggled more. She finally told the Lord she would be a godmother if it were a girl since she had no daughters. She hoped it would be a boy. Jane indeed did have a girl and she named her Rachel. Rachel was devastated! She looked to the Lord and said, "Thank you, Lord, for helping me lay down my life. It was hard, but nothing compared to your crucifixion."

To love one another means to lay our life down for other people—Christians and non-Christians alike. This is the servant ministry of bringing God's love to the world. He will sustain us. The world will know we are His disciples because of this love.

R&D *How has the Lord helped you lay down your life for another?*

Prayer: *I've sometimes wondered, Lord, if I would run in front of a car to push a child to safety or into a burning building to rescue a person crying for help. I'll never know the answer to those questions. But I do know that I am being called upon to show love to those in need around me all day every day.*

Day 37

Read: John 13:1-17

Foot-washing

Have you ever washed someone's feet? It is a humbling experience. Even to allow someone else to kneel before you and to wash your feet is humbling. To kneel before another person and wash his or her feet epitomizes the servant ministry. This is the point Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples. Here Jesus is putting into practice his teaching on who is the greatest (Luke 22:24-34). On an even deeper level, Jesus is trying to convey the depth of the necessity of his laying down his life for God's people.

To this end he told Peter, "I have to wash your feet so that you can be part of me." Jesus says, "I am the teacher and I set the example. If I wash your feet, then you must wash each other's feet."

This suggests what we are to do for each other—literally and figuratively. We remember that in Jesus' day the people wore sandals. Their feet were dirty and rough from walking. To wash their feet was more than a gesture of hospitality. It was servanthood. It is servanthood for us also. In some churches on Maundy Thursday in Holy Week, church members wash one another's feet as a symbol of this servanthood. In day-to-day living, we as Christians participate in this servanthood in a variety of ways.

R&D *How can I wash someone else's feet?*

Prayer: *We can "wash one another's feet" when we take time, Lord, to listen to their issues with a concerned and understanding heart.*

Day 38

Read: Exodus 12:1-14

Maundy Thursday

When Ralph's mother was dying, she said to him, "Ralph, I want you to go to church every Sunday." Those were her parting words to him. They held great power because, as a result, Ralph has been going to church ever since then.

On the night before Jesus died, he had a Passover meal with his disciples, and he told them three things he wanted them to do. (1) He told them to participate in partaking of Holy Communion, his body and blood. (2) He told them to wash each other's feet. (3) He told them to love one another as he had loved them. These words hold great power for us.

We in the church preach, teach, and work at loving one another. The liturgical churches are more faithful in participating frequently in Holy Communion, and the nonliturgical churches are more faithful in participating in foot-washing. We name the day we celebrate the Passover meal of Jesus Maundy Thursday because Maundy means command. "The title for Thursday in Holy Week derives through Old French Mantle from the Latin *mandatum novum*, a new

commandment” (*The Westminster Dictionary of Worship*). Jesus commanded us to do these three things on the night before he died. He made these commands at the ritual Passover feast which the Lord God had commanded Moses and Aaron to do.

R&D *How do these commands have power and authority over you? How are you fulfilling them?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, for the commands you have given us in remembrance of your sacrifice on our behalf.*

Day 39

Read: Luke 23:26-46

Good Friday

The way of the cross is the way of true servanthood. It is the way in which we respond to the reconciling love of God. In this passage we see the groundwork and structure for a life of servanthood—the way of the cross. A closer look at Simon of Cyrene, the repentant thief, and Jesus Christ will reveal the way. We will look at these three in reverse order.

First, Jesus is the reconciling love of God. God loves us, the world, so much that He sent Jesus his Son to die for our sins (John 3:16). Jesus took the form of a servant and obediently died on the cross (Philippians 2:7-8).

Second, the repentant thief asks to be remembered when Jesus is in his reign. Jesus responds by saying yes: “I assure you this day you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43, NAB). Jesus can promise that because his own death opens the way to salvation—ultimate reconciliation.

Third, Simon of Cyrene, was “pressed into service.” Cyrene, modern Tripoli, was far from Jerusalem. Simon was undoubtedly a Jew who was fulfilling a lifelong ambition to eat one Passover in Jerusalem. At the moment the Roman centurion chose him to carry Jesus’ cross, it was probably a bitter experience for him. His great joy at being in Jerusalem was crushed in the humiliation of being forced to carry a cross for a common criminal. But many believe that references to a Rufus in Mark 15:21 and Romans 16:13 show that the servant cross-bearer became a person of honor in the Christian Church.

Thus, in the way of the cross we see Jesus whose death gave us salvation. Our reconciliation comes through accepting that salvation, being repentant like the thief and then being obedient like Simon of Cyrene.

R&D *How did you accept the salvation of Jesus? How has repentance and obedience to Jesus caused you to be his disciple?*

Prayer: *May we this day be especially conscious of your love for us, Lord Jesus. What more could you have done for us than this? Praise you, Blessed Lord.*

Day 40

Read: John 19:31-42

The Tomb

Walking with the Lord is joyful and victorious. However, we can become weary being his servant. We feel as if we are trapped in a tomb. Nothing is happening. It seems dark. Paul understood this weariness and wrote in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not grow weary of doing good; if we do

not relax our efforts, in due time we shall reap our harvest” (NAB). We can rest our weariness with Jesus through meditating this Holy Saturday on Jesus in the tomb.

Meditate on this passage of Jesus’ being taken down from the cross. Picture yourself with him. Experience the costly spices and perfumed oils soothing your tired and irritable body. Imagine being carefully clothed in linen. Think about the beautiful garden in which the tomb resides.

Then meditate on the release of whatever holds you in the tomb—weariness—weariness enhanced or caused by fear, resentment, anxiety, hatred or whatever. When we are the Lord’s servant, the Lord doesn’t want bondages to inhibit our ministry for him. The more we work for him, the more we are aware of our own frailties and the more he sets us free to be unencumbered servants.

Take time to do this meditation. You will find yourself released, relaxed, and ready to celebrate the resurrection tomorrow and to reap the harvest in the coming months as Christ’s ambassador in his ministry of reconciliation.

R&D *What circumstance makes you feel as if you are in a tomb?*

Prayer: *Waiting, Lord, is often the hardest thing to do. We await your direction in our lives that we may be Easter people, full of joy and promise to serve you through others in the days ahead.*

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