



The Abundant Life

Lenten Study

Day 1

Read: John 1:1-10

Introduction

Lent is a time for self-examination and repentance. Why, then, a 40-day study of the abundant life? Because it is an opportunity to measure ourselves against the bountiful graciousness of God. A time to look at our many blessings as Christians to see if we are availing ourselves of all that God has for us. And, wherein we may find we are falling short, to rectify the situation.

In our reading for today Jesus reveals himself as the Good Shepherd whose flock know him and follow him. But he also uses the analogy of the gate, because a good shepherd serves as a protecting barrier for the sheep...shielding them from those who would come into the pen to injure or destroy.

Over this Lenten series we will explore the many ways Jesus seeks to lead us, on the one hand, and protect us, on the other. The overall result is to show us how to live the abundant life God wants for us.

William Barclay put it this way: "When we walk with Jesus, when we know his presence in our lives, there comes into life a new vitality, a super-abundance of life. It is only when we live with Christ that life becomes really worth living, and that we begin to live at all in the real sense of the word."

R&D What does the abundant life mean to you?

Prayer: Show me, Dear Lord, all that You have for me that I may give You all of myself.

Day 2

Read: John 11:17-27

Salvation

As we look at the abundant life we have in Christ, it seems logical to start with the gift of salvation. Nothing could be better than this...eternal life in the greater presence of God.

In our reading, Jesus has arrived at Bethany where his good friend Lazarus had recently died. Jesus could have gotten to Bethany in time to pray for Lazarus' healing rather than delaying his trip until after his friend was dead (11:1-16). It is obvious that Jesus had a reason for his delay. Although it would place him in great danger from the Jewish authorities to raise Lazarus from the dead, it was an essential act for him to perform. His followers needed to know about salvation.

When Martha questions why Jesus had not arrived sooner, she is met with the claim that Lazarus will rise again. Mary responds with the understanding that there will be a resurrection "at the last day" (v.24), referring to Jesus' teaching about "a time that is coming...when all in their graves will come out" to be judged (5:28). This opens the door for Jesus to say, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live...and never die." That is the promise that

should mean more to us than any other; and all the promises of God find their “Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Jesus has power over life and death: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me” (14:6). He who *is* life controls life. Those who believe in him have a spiritual life that physical death cannot take away. When we realize this fantastic gift that God has given us in Jesus Christ, how can anyone consider an alternative? For believers we have the assurance that “Because I live, you will also live” (14:19). Our responsibility is to pass the message on.

R&D *Do we tend to take “being saved” too lightly in our day? Why or why not?*

Prayer: *Lord God, it is sometimes hard for us to comprehend all that You have done for us. Give us thankful hearts.*

Day 3

Read: 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

The Aroma of Christ

In the midst of Paul’s missionary journey, he arrives at Troas but does not find his disciple Titus there. So he goes on to Macedonia. In the midst of telling the Corinthians about this unscheduled trip to Macedonia, Paul gives us a glimpse into his thinking about his ministry and the direction the Lord is leading him.

He is thankful to God to be doing what he is doing. It is not for profit (v.17). No, there is something much greater going on here: “in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God” (v.17). Furthermore, there is an aroma that he calls “the fragrance of the knowledge” of Christ that spreads wherever the gospel is being preached. To those who are being saved, that aroma is the fragrance of life; to others, it is the smell of death.

We Christians probably don’t think much about the aroma of Christ that should be an innate part of us. My wife and I are part of a church that started on our large screened porch a few years ago and has now grown to a thriving congregation in a facility we are in the process of purchasing for our own. There is a pleasing “smell” to this body of Christ. It is the most loving and mutually supportive church we have ever been a part of. I’m convinced that new people are attracted to our church because of the aroma of Christ in our midst.

On the other hand, Paul is correct that the aroma of Christ is not pleasing to those who want nothing to do with Christ. We see that being played out in horrendous terms on the world scene by the acts of militant Islamists. My wife and I regularly pray that those who oppose Christ will have “Damascus Road experiences” as Paul did (Acts 9). Those who do will discover the aroma of Christ.

R&D *How is the aroma of Christ in your congregation? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, help us to be the sweet-smelling representation of the church You call us to be.*

Day 4

Read: 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

We Are Letters

Continuing in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, he changes the metaphor from the aroma of Christ to letters from Christ. Letters of recommendation were common in Paul's time. He wrote them himself on behalf of Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) and Timothy (1 Corinthians 16:10-11). He is concerned about those false teachers who might commend themselves to the Corinthians and he wants to make the point that he needs no such letter because, by the grace of God, the people to whom he is writing are themselves his letter of recommendation.

For us, however, what is more important is that, as Christians, *we* are letters of recommendation from Christ. "You show that you are a letter from Christ...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tables of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (v.3). The powerful imagery used by Paul relates back to Old Testament prophecies. Jeremiah 31:33 says, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." And Ezekiel 36:26 says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Our conversion results from God planting the Holy Spirit within us, giving us His power and presence to do His work in the world.

As disciples of Christ, we are ministers of a New Covenant. As such, we are competent not because of any talents or abilities of our own but because our competence comes from God.

The "letters of God" analogy should get our attention this Lent. What a privilege, on the one hand; what a responsibility, on the other! We are letters of God in all we do and say. How will we live into that reality in the days ahead?

R&D A possible Lenten practice is contacting someone each day with the gift of encouragement. It can be done in person, by phone, or through social media. Is this something you might want to consider?

Prayer: You have written yourself on my heart, Lord Jesus. Help me to pass the message along.

Day 5

Read: Luke 10:25-37

Good Samaritan

It's a familiar story, but let's look at it in a somewhat different light. Jesus was illustrating the importance of loving our neighbor and did so by showing the fallacy of living by the letter of the Law rather than the spirit of it. He does so by having the two religious leaders, a priest and a Levite, ignore the injured man because of the rule against ceremonial uncleanness (Leviticus 21). Instead, he chooses a Samaritan, despised by the Jews, as his hero. Doing what is right is what God wants of us, not making lame excuses or rationalizing.

For the purposes of our study of the abundant life, however, I want us to think of God as the Good Samaritan. One of the reasons we as Christians have the abundant life is because we realize that we have a loving God who wants the best for us, is watching over us, helps us in times of trouble, and comforts us when things go wrong. He does that in a multitude of ways.

Here's a personal illustration. I recently had a laser procedure on my left eye in connection with glaucoma. In the process I ended up with a small abrasion on the eye that made it uncomfortable to blink. After spending two days keeping my left eye closed so that it could heal, I found that my vision in that eye was totally blurred! That was a Sunday morning, so I went for prayers at our

worship service; we always have a prayer team in a separate room for that ministry. I was afraid I was losing the sight in my eye; but, following the prayers, I had confidence things would work out. It is God's world and He can work through medicine as well as in a multitude of other ways. When I saw my eye doctor first thing the following morning, he prescribed drops that cleared up my blurred vision. God provided for my healing, but He did it through a prayer team, a doctor, and the right medicine.

The abundant life involves availing ourselves of all that God has for us. It also means being ready to love our neighbor as ourselves in whatever way God would use us.

R&D Recall an instance in your life when you were especially conscious of God using others to bring peace, healing, or comfort.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are ever ready to show Your love to us and others.

Day 6

Read: Luke 12:13-21

Our Lifestyle

Jesus' next parable is about the foolishness of storing up treasures for ourselves here on earth. His teaching is in response to a man complaining about how an inheritance had been divided up. It is a matter that often divides families. As we look at the issue of the abundant life God wants for us, it is clearly not an abundance of wealth that He has in mind. There is nothing wrong with being wealthy. It's what we do with what we have that matters.

This is a teaching on lifestyle. It forces us to look at what we value in this life. If our idol is wealth (or power and prestige), as it was for the fellow in the parable, we are not going to have the satisfying life that God wants for us. There is too much of a natural tendency toward selfishness in every human being; it is part of what God wants us to abandon in order to experience true freedom in this life. We'll never completely achieve that; but the more we can, the more we will find fulfillment because fulfillment comes in the will of God.

What wealth (or power and prestige) gives us is the ability to serve others in need. From God's point of view, nothing is as satisfying as being able to help others. It is what the Good Samaritan did in our last study. Storing up for ourselves treasures here on earth is a dead-end lifestyle that feeds upon itself. Sharing what we have with others is a joyful lifestyle, one reflective of the love of Christ within us. It's the abundant life.

R&D When you go to be with the Lord, how would you feel about Him checking out how you have used the resources He has provided you?

Prayer: Give me a generous heart, O Lord, that my care for others will reflect Your care for me.

Day 7

Read: Luke 13:6-9

Our Productivity

Just as generosity is a characteristic of the abundant life, so is productivity. Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree to make this point. The fig tree was a symbol of godly living in the Old Testament (see Psalm 1:3, Jeremiah 17:7-8). But what about a tree that does not produce...one

that occupies valuable space but does not respond to the care of the gardener? Jesus was illustrating that God would not have infinite patience with those who lacked productivity in living in accordance with His will. It is the same point John the Baptist was making at Luke 3:9, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The parables we have been looking at in the Gospel of Luke are challenging us along a pathway, step by step. The one about the Good Shepherd called us to acts of love, the Rich Fool encouraged generosity, and now the Unproductive Fig Tree emphasizes the need to produce good fruit. It is all part of the abundant life God has for us.

There are at least a couple of ways that we can look at the issue of productivity, and we will deal with each in more detail as we continue through this series. One is to think of it in terms of our ministry. God calls all of us to ministry in His name. He engifts us through the Holy Spirit for a variety of ministries (see Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4). If we are to be productive, we need to know what gift or gifts we have been given, and exercise those gifts.

But there is also the need to be productive concerning an expectation that God has of all of us: to share our faith with others in whatever manner is natural for us. We know the abundant life because we have given our lives to Christ; how will others know unless we tell them?

R&D In what way or ways might you be more productive?

Prayer: Use us, Lord God, that we might experience some measure of the joy You find in caring for us.

Day 8

Read: Luke 14:15-24

The Banquet

Jesus wants the best for us and he pictures this in the form of a great banquet. The man who raised the issue with Jesus had in mind the glory of God’s kingdom, but he did not understand that the kingdom had come in Christ Jesus. This leads to the parable. The religious leaders to whom Jesus was addressing the parable would have expected to be invited, but they wanted nothing to do with the New Covenant being inaugurated in Christ. Instead, as Jesus makes clear, the banquet will be open to those who accept the invitation, the ordinary people who want the saving power of God offered through Christ.

We have a somewhat different situation in our day, but the same principle applies. It is not Pharisee-like people who reject Christ today. The Pharisees missed the banquet because they were spiritually comfortable with their way of life; today’s secular person will miss it because of being physically comfortable.

In the western world, we have become complacent. We’re not faced daily with whether we have enough food on the table or a home to live in. Constant danger does not surround us. We treasure human ingenuity and scientific breakthroughs that provide us with so many conveniences and promise us long life. As a result, faith declines in the west just as it grows in those parts of the world where people do not have the physical comforts we enjoy.

So, who will come to this great banquet that is a part of the abundant life? It will be those who do not allow the distractions of life to keep them away from the wedding supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-9). It will be those whom God is able to reach whether or not they are physically

comfortable because they realize that an eternal relationship with God is something vastly more important.

R&D How do you try to reach your friends and neighbors who see no need for God?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be an example of what You mean by an abundant life that others may see the blessing of serving You.

Day 9

Read: Luke 15:8-10

Remembering

As Jesus continues with parables...this one being about a lost coin that is found...we will look at it from the standpoint of the abundant life. We can glory in the fact that “there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God” over any sinner who has repented. That’s “us”...that’s who we Christians are, sinners who have repented.

The problem is that we can forget what God has done for us. It’s the problem we see, time and again, in the history of the Jewish people in the Old Testament. They lost their bearings. They continually lost their memory and fell back into sinful ways.

One of the most powerful sermons I have heard was entitled “Forgetting to Remember.” The preacher noted the failure of the Israelites to remember all God had done for them, but his focus was on the fact that we, too, can so easily forget the abundant life God has for us.

When we look at putting on “The Whole Armor of God” (Ephesians 6:10-18) later in this series, we’ll consider the shield of faith. For me, the shield of faith that protects us from the wiles of the evil one is centered in standing on what God has done for us in the past and is doing for us now. That involves remembering. Just as the Israelites planted “memorial stones” to remind themselves of God’s favor in crossing the Jordan River (Joshua 4:19-24), we need ways to remember God’s blessings. That builds and sustains our faith. One of the ways my wife and I do that is by having a “Thank You” box in which we put coins (and sometime larger amounts) in thanksgiving for God’s blessings.

R&D What helps you to remember all that God has done for you?

Prayer: Lord God, may we never forget to remember.

Day 10

Read: Luke 15:11-32

Our Relationship with God

Two aspects of the familiar story we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son deal with the abundant life. One has to do with the father and the other with the older brother. The return of the lost son is usually the focus. It is a powerful story of forgiveness and redemption. I don’t want to minimize its importance; it’s just that there are two aspects of the story that are often overlooked.

The father in the parable is, of course, God the Father. The boy was finally coming home, “but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him” (v.20b). That’s the kind of God we have. No matter how far we have strayed, He is watching out for us and is filled with compassion toward us. And He takes the initiative; He doesn’t wait for us to get back but runs to meet us, welcomes us, even hugs and kisses us. He forgives us and prepares

a banquet for us. This awesome picture of God's love will be played out for us in the life and sacrificial death of Jesus on our behalf. Think what all of this means in connection with the abundant life God has in mind for us.

Shifting gears, let's now look at the older brother in the story. He is a guy who is missing the abundant life. There is no joy in his life. He even resents the return of his brother. He then becomes so angry that he refuses to go into the feast. He is all justice and no mercy. But, most of all, he is one who has been present with the father but saw it as duty rather than privilege.

The older brother shows us the bad side of two types of individuals we face in our day. One is the person who has no understanding of the grace of God and is trying to work his way into the kingdom. The other is one who sees our earthly life as a tragedy we must endure in pursuing the promise of life everlasting. These are ones we would hope to reach with God's love.

R&D Lenten check-up time. Are there any "older brother" traits in your life that need to be corrected?

Prayer: Mold our heart, Lord, into the loving compassion You show to all.

Day 11

Read: Luke 16:10-13

Our Focus

Our reading for today deals primarily with money. We touched on this issue in looking at the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-21), but Jesus' words here deserve further consideration. In these few verses he is speaking of trust and focus. If we are to live the abundant life, our focus must be clearly on serving God and not on money. We evidence our understanding of this principle by how we handle what has been entrusted to us.

By accepting us as His own in Jesus Christ, God has given us the most precious gift imaginable. One of the primary ways we demonstrate our trustworthiness of holding this gift in our earthen vessel is how we handle money. God expects us to be honest in even those small details it is so easy to rationalize away. What's wrong with padding our expense account a little bit every now and then? Everybody does it. The cashier gave me more money back than she was supposed to; I ought to return the money, but I'm too busy with other things that people expect of me. Of course I do a little fudging on my income tax. The government takes too much of my money as it is. In these and a multitude of other ways we are tempted to go "the way of the world" rather than God's way. But, as Jesus makes clear, if we are untrustworthy in small things we simply cannot be trusted. If we can't be counted on to handle small sums here on earth we will be unworthy to handle the vast riches of God's kingdom.

Furthermore, money can too easily take God's place in our lives. Jesus says we can't serve two masters, God and money. How do we avoid that trap in our affluent society? Lent is a good time for self-examination. How much time do I spend thinking about money and/or the material things money can buy me? Are my goals in life more toward doing what God wants me to do or being financially successful? Do I find true joy in giving money away to meet the needs of others, or do I do so only begrudgingly?

A generous spirit is evidence of the abundant life, and that includes being generous with our money.

R&D *What did I learn about myself from this teaching that may call for some corrective action in my life?*

Prayer: *Everything we have is Yours, Lord. Help me to be trustworthy and accountable for what You have generously given me.*

Day 12

Read: Luke 16:19-31

Our Concern for Others

At first glance, today's reading might appear to be another one about money. Yes, there was a rich man who cared nothing about the poor man named Lazarus at his gate, but money wouldn't have been the answer here. There's a much deeper issue.

I have a friend who likes to say that sin is really self-centeredness. We want what we want when we want it. Jesus' teaching today is that the abundant life is found, instead, in compassion toward the needs of others...not just when we find them injured along the road as in the Good Samaritan story...but in every situation of life. We are to *be Christ* to those around us. Mother Theresa's selfless ministry was an ideal example. But we are to have this focus not just to meet physical needs but to lead others to Christ. The deceased rich man knew what he had missed and didn't want that to happen to his five brothers.

We have a choice in this life. We can live for ourselves or we can live for Christ, which means living for others. A selfish life feeds upon itself. It provides only immediate pleasure, and often long-term misery as a result. It leads nowhere. Most of all, it does not lead to eternity with God. The selfish person trades a few minutes here on earth at the sacrifice of a glorious forever.

A disciple of Christ, on the other hand, has an abundant life, and not only saves himself but can be the catalyst for the salvation of others. He demonstrates the love of God by example. He shows compassion to others and guides, encourages, and supports them on their way. He prays for them in their time of need, and he tells them of Jesus.

R&D *Reflect on people you have known who were examples of a selfless life.*

Prayer: *Lord, show me what You would have me do today to bless another.*

Day 13

Read: Luke 18:1-8

Our Persistence

Our focus on the abundant life today is prayer. The abundant life is a prayerful life because we want to be in the will of God, and we receive inner guidance from the Holy Spirit through a life of prayer to help us understand and follow God's will. I had the privilege of serving as the director of an international prayer fellowship for eleven years. That involved many sessions of teaching others about prayer. People responded well; they wanted to know about prayer. Too often, however, their answers to questions I asked revealed that they were not doing much praying!

The parable for today tests us on just how serious we are about prayer. The woman in the story is persistent. She wants justice and she is not going to be content until the judge has rendered justice in her case. If even a self-seeking judge will yield to such pressure, how much more will a loving God do so? If we are serious about prayer, we will be persistent in praying.

Cuthbert Bardsley, the late and great Bishop of Coventry, England, loved to tell the story about an alcoholic he felt led by God to pray for. The man was on his prayer list for years without showing any signs of improvement. Bardsley would periodically become convinced that Bill was never going to change and would want to take him off the list. Each time he would take the matter to God and consistently received the reply, “Keep Bill on the list.” The good bishop persisted in prayer, and eventually Bill came to the Lord and was healed.

As the *Life Application Bible* tells us, “To persist in prayer and not give up does not mean endless repetition or painfully long prayer sessions. Always praying means keeping our requests constantly before God as we live for Him day by day, believing He will answer.”

R&D *How is your prayer life? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to develop a rule of prayer that is feasible for me and acceptable to You.*

Day 14

Read: Luke 18:9-14

Our Humility

We now look at how to pray and how not to pray. In this parable, Jesus makes it clear that the Pharisee had it all wrong, but the tax collector knew what he was doing. The issue turns on humility.

Humility is knowing who we are in relation to other human beings and God. Each of us is just as good as any other human being, but not any better. That is why we can boldly approach God. We are not inferior, and God loves us just as much as He loves anyone else. On the other hand, when we measure ourselves against God, we realize we are nothing without Him, and see our failings—our humanness—and our need for His forgiveness and love. Maintaining that balance is at the heart of humility.

The Pharisee in our story actually thought he was better than anyone else. Therefore, instead of approaching God in prayer in a manner of obeisance, he is haughty. He is asking God for nothing. He is telling God and anyone else who might hear him how wonderful he is. Self-righteousness is directly contrary to the will of God, leads to rejection of others, and to anything but the abundant life.

There is hope for the tax collector, however. Tax collectors in Jesus’ time worked for the hated Roman government and were generally considered sinners by everyone else. (Note that Matthew, one of the Twelve, had been a tax collector, Matthew 9:9). The tax collector knew that he was a sinner. He approaches prayer to God in a penitent manner, not demanding but pleading. His prayer—“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”—is one that is always appropriate for all of us.

Again, prayer involves balance: being bold enough to know that we are going before a loving and listening God, but doing so in humility because only we and God know the depth of our sin.

R&D *Compare your normal prayers with the two people mentioned in the parable. What do you discern about yourself as a result?*

Prayer: *God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Day 15

Read: Luke 19:11-27

Our Faithfulness

In today's parable, Jesus was showing what things would be like when he was no longer with them. Like the king in the story, he would be leaving the kingdom to them, to us. The question is what we will do with what we are given until Christ returns. It's an issue of faithfulness.

God equips each of us in special ways through talents, our experiences of life, and gifts of the Holy Spirit to minister in Christ's name. He expects us to use each of these for His glory. Whatever our talents might be, we are to think of them in terms of service to God and not solely for our own benefit. Likewise, our lives are shaped by our experiences—good and bad—that we might learn from them and share what we have learned with others as they face similar experiences. More specifically, as we have noted earlier in the study, we need to know what our spiritual gifts are (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4) and put them to constructive use for the benefit of the body of Christ and the world around us.

When we face the Lord in glory, how will we measure up? If we have been proven faithful in what God has given us, we will be blessed because of that faithfulness just as the first two servants in the parable. We certainly don't want to fall into the category that the third servant did!

Why was the king in the story so hard on the third servant? These are issues we can measure ourselves against this Lenten Season. First, the man didn't share his master's vision of the kingdom; are we too focused on our own lives rather than God's purpose for us? Second, he didn't trust his master; if our faith in God is weak, what would He have us do about that? Third, his concern was only for himself; do we, instead, love God and our neighbor as ourselves? And finally, he did nothing with what God had given him; how faithful are we in constructively using all that God has given us?

R&D It's Lent. How are you measuring up? Explain.

Prayer: Mold me and make me into the kind of servant You want me to be, Dear Lord.

Day 16

Read: Galatians 5:16-26

The Fruit of the Spirit

Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke were helpful in identifying various aspects of the abundant life. We'll now spend a few days looking at some results of the abundant life: the fruit of the Spirit that should be growing within us. In our passage for today, Paul lists those sins we have a propensity to commit if we live by the world's standards rather than by the indwelling Holy Spirit. On the other hand, if we live by the Spirit, we manifest the fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If we want to see the extent to which our shortcomings are being removed, one of the best methods is to examine the fruit of the Spirit working in our lives. God replaces bad habits with good fruit.

According to the *Life Application Bible*, "The fruit of the Spirit is the spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit produces these character traits that are found in the nature of Christ. They are the by-products of Christ's control—we can't obtain them by *trying* to get them without his help. If we want the fruit of the Spirit to grow in us, we must join our lives to his (see John 15:4-5). We must know him, love him, remember him, and imitate him. As a result, we will

fulfill the intended purpose of the law—to love God and our neighbors.... Because the God who sent the law also sent the Spirit, the by-products of the Spirit-filled life are in perfect harmony with the intent of God’s law. A person who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit fulfills the law better than a person who observes the rituals but has little love in his or her heart.”

The best defense against falling back into our old destructive patterns is to live a life that manifests the fruit of the Spirit. Where the fruit is growing in a healthy manner, life is abundant, and there is less room for the weeds of our past sinful ways.

R&D Reflect on: “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to be free of self and let Jesus live through me.

Day 17

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

The Fruit of Love

Having had an opportunity to look at how we might judge the quality of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, let us now spend a day on each of these fruit that we might better understand them and how they are to manifest themselves in the abundant life. The first fruit listed in Galatians 5 is love.

Our reading for today is Paul’s classic treatise on the nature of love. It is the standard by which we measure selfless love (*agape*). Its words are just as pertinent today as when they were written, and this passage is often read as a part of the wedding ceremony. Here are some ways we manifest love as a fruit of the Spirit:

Affirmation. One of the greatest gifts we can give in this life is affirming others by caring enough to love them. God doesn’t care what other people think of us, but He cares very much what we think of other people.

Sensitivity. Part of our growth as Christians is our growing love and concern for others. Our sensitivity to the needs of those around us should become more finely tuned. We should have an intercessory prayer list of people who are on our heart and need to be in our prayers.

Thanksgiving. One way to grow the fruit of love in our lives is to become more conscious of the love being shown to us. I’ve earlier mentioned the blessing of having a “Thank You” box. Find a container into which you can drop a coin representing each special kindness shown to you; and, when the container is full, give the money to a worthy cause.

Spontaneity. Acting lovingly because we want something in return or out of a feeling of obligation or guilt is not selfless love. It occurs when, spontaneously, we do the loving thing that the fruit of love is being shown (see Matthew 25:31-40).

R&D Reflect on an instance of unconditional love being shown to you by another and of you showing unconditional love to another.

Prayer: Jesus, I am not capable of loving anyone but myself. But you love everyone unconditionally. Live your resurrected life through me. Love through me.

Day 18

Read: Matthew 18:10-14

The Fruit of Joy

Joy is an inner quality in the life of the Christian. Our inner attitudes do not have to reflect the outer circumstances surrounding us. Joy is centered in our relationship with God. That relationship is the anchor that holds us in place regardless of the situation we are in. If we truly know that our life is in Christ, and that what really matters at any given time is our relationship with him, we can have joy in the midst of the worst kind of trouble.

The parable of the lost sheep is a wonderful word picture of joy. The teaching contained in the parable is that the Lord rejoices over the one lost sheep that is found. The picture many of us have in our minds as we think of this parable is Jesus as the shepherd, carrying the lamb on his shoulders, rejoicing as he brings it back to the fold. Here are some ways to grow in the fruit of joy as a part of the abundant life God has for us:

Serve others. Few things give as much joy as unselfish acts for the benefit of others (Acts 20:24).

Worship God. True worship is one of life's most exhilarating experiences (Psalms 30:5, 89:15).

Read and study Scripture. The Bible both enlightens and inspires when read devotionally (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6).

Be in relationship with God. It changes your whole perspective concerning the things that happen in your daily life. Knowing and trusting God is the source of great joy (1 Peter 1:8).

Share your faith. Leading people into a relationship with Jesus is not easy, but the end result is cause for joyous celebration (John 4:6).

Remember that you are a child of God. You'll spend eternity with Him (Romans 15:13).

R&D *Why do you have, or not have, joy in your life? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord God, grant me Your joy by helping me glorify Jesus by serving others.*

Day 19

Read: Romans 5:1-11

The Fruit of Peace

Peace, as a fruit of the Spirit, is much more than simple absence of fear or anxiety. Peace comes from being better able to see things from God's point of view. Anxiety can paralyze us, draining our energy and preventing us from making the right decisions and doing the right things. Peace allows us to back off and gain perspective on the situation, seeking God's guidance and inspiration, and creatively dealing with whatever problems we face. Peace comes from deep within, where God dwells in us through His Holy Spirit.

Our reading for today contains a teaching from Paul that true peace comes from faith in God. "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us." Despite what we face in life, our relationship with God through Christ is there to sustain us and point us to a better way. "So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God—all because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us in making us friends of God." Here are some steps we can take toward attaining peace:

First, we must relinquish control of our lives to God. The Lord can run our lives much better than we can on our own (Matthew 11:28-30).

Second, peace grows as we grow in our relationship with God. We come to see that, regardless of the problems that confront us in life, the Lord is with us (John 16:31-33).

Third, peace increases as we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. When we quit allowing our old, sinful nature to control us, we can experience genuine peace (Romans 8:5-8).

Fourth, God's peace rules in our hearts. As long as God is our first priority, the situations we face can always be kept in perspective (Colossians 3:15).

R&D *To what extent is God giving you wisdom and discernment about daily events? Does it give you peace when you are able to let go and let God?*

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, help me to let go today and live as a child lives, trusting and joyful.*

Day 20

Read: Genesis 29:15-28

The Fruit of Patience

Our passage for today tells the story of Jacob who had to work 14 years to earn the right to marry Rachel. Laban, the father of Rachel and Leah, tricked Jacob because Jacob did not know the custom of the land that the older daughter must be married first. So, after working seven years for Laban, Jacob was given Leah as a wife and then had to promise to work another seven years in order to marry Rachel, the one he truly loved.

In our day of "instant everything," our first reaction is that Jacob's plight seems harsh in the extreme. Yet, in real life, our patience is constantly being tested. It can be as small a thing as being trapped in a traffic jam when we are late for work or for an appointment. It can be as great as a crippling injury or illness that seems to put our entire life on hold. We can either accept patience as a friend who is telling us to slow down, or we can rail against it as an enemy and suffer the consequences of ill temper and ill health. The former, of course, is more compatible with abundant living.

Two primary qualities are needed in order that patience as a fruit of the Spirit can be manifested in us. They are inner peace and living one day at a time. Inner peace, as we have seen, comes from a stable relationship with God through prayer, Bible reading, and worship. It helps us keep things in perspective, and focuses our attention on others and their needs rather than on our selfish desires. Living one day at a time allows us to experience life at its fullest rather than fretting over things of the past or future.

R&D *Reflect on whether you are you able to live in the moment and enjoy life daily, or do you spend your time projecting into the future or regretting the past?*

Prayer: *Father God, I know that You live with me in the now, not the past, or the future. Help me to really live with You this day and get the most out of each hour today.*

Day 21

Read: Exodus 2:15-21

The Fruit of Kindness

Kindness, like the other fruit of the Spirit, is a characteristic of Jesus. Jesus was the epitome of kindness, showing compassion to all with whom he came into contact. His divine compassion reached out to illness (Matthew 14:14), sorrow (Luke 7:13), hunger (Matthew 15:32), loneliness (Mark 1:41), and bewilderment (Matthew 9:36). Likewise, the opportunity to show kindness to others surrounds us every day and makes life more abundant.

Moses was a good example of kindness in not allowing the shepherds to drive the daughters of Reuel (also called Jethro, Exodus 3:1) from the well. Moses was a stranger, just having escaped with his life from Egypt. Yet seeing the injustice done to the women, he immediately came to their aid. That kindness led to his becoming a member of Reuel's household and the husband of Reuel's daughter Zipporah.

Kindness often leads to kindness. Simply smiling at someone at the supermarket leads to that person smiling at someone else; the one smile can create a virtual epidemic of kindness.

As a guideline to kindness, here is what John Wesley said: "Do all the good that you can, by all the means that you can, in all the ways that you can, in all the places that you can, at all the times that you can, for all the people that you can, for as long as ever you can."

R&D *What can you do today to show God's kindness to someone, or everyone?*

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, help me to let the love of Jesus pour through me to everyone today.*

Day 22

Read: Hebrews 13:1-8

The Fruit of Goodness

Goodness as a fruit of the Spirit manifests itself in many ways, as illustrated by this passage from Hebrews. We will show kindness to strangers (v.2) and empathy towards those in prison and those who have been mistreated (v.3), we will respect our marriage vows (v.4), and be content with what we have (v.5). The inner quality of goodness shows respect, sensitivity, and kindness in a great variety of ways.

In the Old Testament, three people "entertained angels without knowing it": Abraham, in Genesis 18:1ff; Gideon, in Judges 6:11ff; and Manoah, in Judges 13:2ff. All of us have had opportunities to be good to people who were strangers to us whether they were "angels" or not.

Prisons have always been intended to be places of rehabilitation as well as punishment; the name *penitentiary* indicates a place of reformatory discipline. However, drug-related crimes have so overcrowded the prison system in this country that good intentions have had to take a back seat. As a result, Christian ministries such as *Kairos* and Chuck Colson's work have been a special blessing to prisoners in our day. In the days of the early church, many prisoners were persecuted Christians; and, from a world standpoint, there are many Christian prisoners of conscience today. Thus, there continue to be many opportunities for us to work and pray for prisoners through the fruit of goodness.

Goodness toward our Christian leaders should also be foremost in our minds (v.7). Often they lead lonely lives because others think they are "so spiritual, so close to God" that they do not need human friendship and care. Nothing could be further from the truth. And when we can't show goodness through our actions, we can through our prayers.

R&D *Reflect on an act of sheer goodness recently shown to you. Rejoice in it.*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, if you want me to take Matthew 25:37-40 to heart, I am open for you to show me what you want me to do.*

Day 23

Read: Genesis 9:20-29

The Fruit of Faithfulness

Faithfulness as a fruit of the Spirit is, according to William Barclay, in the nature of trustworthiness or loyalty. Our reading for today tells the story of Shem and Japeth covering their father Noah's nakedness. Following the flood, Noah and his family had settled down. Noah became a farmer, grew grapes, made wine, became drunk, and lay naked in his tent. It was Noah's other son, Ham, who came upon the scene. Instead of covering his father's nakedness, Ham went and told his two brothers, apparently with a mocking attitude. Shem and Japeth, however, proved trustworthy in the modest way in which they handled Noah's dishonor. They were models of faithfulness.

When our spouse, children, leaders, co-workers, friends, loved ones, brothers and sisters in Christ, and others with whom we have a relationship are attacked in any way, we have the opportunity to exhibit the fruit of faithfulness. The closer the relationship, the more likely we are to be faithful; the more remote the relationship, the more we may be tempted to do the thing or take the action that serves us best rather than being faithful. This is true in our relationship with God as well as with people. We especially demonstrate the gift of faithfulness when we stand up for someone who is in the right even though we could easily avoid the situation altogether.

While Saul was still king of Israel and David had secretly been anointed as his successor, Saul's son Jonathan and David were nonetheless very faithful to one another and remained so. These foundation stones of their relationship can be guidelines for us in showing faithfulness: (1) they based their relationship on commitment to God, not just each other; (2) they let nothing come between them, not even career or family problems; (3) they grew closer together when their friendship was tested; and (4) they remained faithful to one another to the end. Faithful living—because it is in the will of God—is abundant living.

R&D *Are you faithfully committed to an individual or a small group of Christians you are accountable to? Do you pray for them daily and are you there for them when needed?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to be a "Barnabas" to other Christians. Help me to encourage them and help them along their spiritual journeys.*

Day 24

Read: 2 Timothy 2:22-26

The Fruit of Gentleness

We live in an age that has been said to evidence the death of civility in our dealings with our fellow human beings. People's focus seems to be on their own rights without regard to the effect that exercising those rights might have on others. It is not a "gentler" world.

There was a time when it was a high compliment to be called a gentleman or a gentlewoman. This writer's grandfather was such a gentleman that he was still opening doors for women when he was well into his 90s. Men always stood up when a woman entered the room, and younger

people likewise stood up when their elders entered. Men would give their seats on a bus, tram, or train to any woman who was standing. Foul language was never used in mixed company. That was a gentler world. It reflected an attitude of serving and otherwise being considerate of others and was in line with the teachings of Jesus.

In our passage for today, Paul is giving Timothy guidelines for gentility. He tells him to get out of the way of evil and, instead, to pursue the good. Don't get into foolish arguments and quarreling. Be kind to everyone. Take advantage of opportunities to teach others rather than resenting them. With those who honestly disagree with you, gently instruct them so that they may be led to truth. Be patient and courteous in helping others understand.

Paul's guidelines could apply to us as well. We may not be able to bring back an age of gentleness in human affairs, but we Christians are certainly called to be salt and light to a tasteless and dark world (Matthew 5:13-16), just as we are expected to manifest the fruit of gentleness to those around us. It is a way we can project the abundant life to others.

R&D Are you a gentle person? What have you done lately to show that you are a gentle person? What are you going to do today to show your gentleness?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were always kind and gentle. Help me to reflect your gentle character today.

Day 25

Read: 2 Samuel 16:5-13

The Fruit of Self-control

William Barclay said that self-control as a fruit of the Spirit "is the spirit which has mastered its desires and its love of pleasure. It is used in the athlete's discipline of his body (1 Corinthians 9:25) and in the Christian's mastery of sex (1 Corinthians 7:9). It is the virtue which makes a man able so to be master of himself that he is fit to be the servant of others."

In our Scripture reading David gives us an example of self-control in facing the insults of Shimei. Following the rebellion of David's son, Absalom, David is fleeing Jerusalem. On the way, he is continually cursed by Shimei, a relative of Saul. The curses are unjustified because David had no part in Saul's death. Nonetheless, David and his entourage quietly tolerate Shimei's abuse. If we cannot squelch unjustified criticism, it is best to ignore it. This is not easy because it is a strain on our emotions to face accusations of which we are innocent. At such time, it is important to remind ourselves that we live for God only; He knows we are in the right, and that is all that counts in the long run.

In the face of a confrontation that he knew would lead to his death, Jesus remained in control of himself (Mark 15:1-5). He didn't argue with Pilate. In response to the second question, he didn't even answer. It would have been human nature to defend oneself, to lie if necessary to save one's life, even to grovel for mercy. Jesus will have none of that; he is our example of self-control. Jesus' self-control was rooted in his relationship with the Father. He didn't have to react; he could look within for the Father's will in the situation and act accordingly. The fruit of the Spirit we know as self-control comes from resolving conflicts within ourselves by the grace of God so that we don't have to react, but can act according to God's will. And that is, again, what the abundant life is all about.

R&D Are you able to resolve conflict without losing your temper? When was the last time you lost your temper? When was the last time you had victory over your temper and remained in self-control?

Prayer: Father God, help me not to take control when I am in disagreement with another. Help me to let Jesus live his resurrected life through me in those stressful times. Thank You for the power of the Holy Spirit that is always available to me.

Day 26

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Our Gifts

I've made earlier references in this study to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Today's passage is one of Paul's delineations of these, the other two being in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. Another feature of the abundant life God has for us is the presence of these spiritual gifts within us. It is a blessing to receive these gifts and to use them for the benefit of others. As Paul points out in the verses following our reading for today (vv.12-31), we Christians are a part of the body of Christ (the Church) here on earth. These gifts are to work together (like parts of the human body) to form the body of Christ.

It is a powerful picture to view the body of Christ equipped in this manner to meet need within itself and for the benefit of the world around us. It illustrates the potential that Christ's Church has in a broken and needy world. The gifts are varied, and some may seem more important than others but they are not. They are all to work together for the common good.

These gifts are given to us for ministry, and they are parceled out to all of God's people. Some people have more than one gift. Regardless of what your gift may be, there are others who need to be recipients of what you have to offer them because of what God has given you. If you have been given the gift of healing (v.9), for instance, you should be on the healing prayer team in your church. But you should also be conscious of how God can use you in bringing His healing power in your home, neighborhood, and workplace.

Yesterday my barber told me of a Christian young man still in high school to whom others come for guidance on a great variety of matters. He may not even be conscious of what gift or gifts of the Holy Spirit he has been given, but God is using him to reach others. Of course, it is best for us to know our gift or gifts so we can participate in the appropriate ministry or ministries within the body of Christ. Few things are as fulfilling as being used by God in this way.

R&D Do you know your gift of gifts of the Holy Spirit? How is God using you as a result?

Prayer: Lord, I am of no real use unless I am of use to You.

Day 27

Read: Acts 1:1-8

Our Story

In addition to the gifts of the Holy Spirit for ministry, there are a number of ministries that we are all expected to pursue regardless of giftedness. We will look at these over the next few days because they are additional ways in which we can experience the abundant life by being Christ's people in our world.

In today's passage, Jesus tells his followers, "you will be my witnesses" (v.8). He didn't say that some of you will be; it was a message for all of them and all of us. If we are Christians, we are witnesses to Christ, whether we are good or bad ones, and it is much more fulfilling to be a good witness.

I have the privilege of being an "online missionary" for Global Media Outreach. GMO reaches people all over the world through the Internet. Those people respond to GMO by asking about Christ, noting that they are already Christians but need help in growing in their faith, and any number of other things. Online missionaries have the ministry of responding. It is a great way to witness to our Lord. A couple of days ago an inquiry I received asked how to tell other people about the Christ my correspondent had received. My reply: "Tell them your story." It's as simple as that. We don't need to have an extensive theological background or training in techniques of evangelism—although more knowledge about the faith than we have at the moment is always better—we just need to be able to tell another person what happened to us as a result of our giving our life to Christ.

The sort of "classic" way of telling our story has these steps: (1) what my life was like before I came into a relationship with the Lord, (2) how I came into that relationship, (3) how my life changed as a result, and (4) how it is changing day by day. But, regardless, your story is your story and there are people out there who need to hear it. You will be blessed when you share it.

R&D In what ways do you witness to the Lord in your home, your neighborhood, your workplace, and elsewhere?

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to be a good witness.

Day 28

Read: Matthew 28:18-20

Our Disciples

Another ministry to which all of us are called is making disciples. Our brief reading for today, the Great Commission, given by our Lord immediately before his Ascension, was to "make disciples." Although we should all be witnessing to our faith by telling our story, we should also—to the extent possible—be leading people to become disciples of Christ. Many of us are probably discipling other Christians without realizing we are doing it just by spending time with those who are less knowledgeable in the faith or need help of one kind or another in their spiritual growth.

A clergy friend defines *disciple* in this way: "A disciple is one who had received the good news of Jesus Christ and has made an intentional decision to follow him in a disciplined manner." The three key words here are "received," "intentional," and "disciplined." It is Jesus who takes the initiative in inviting us to follow him. We *receive* it as good news, God's grace and gift. But, the matter of faith is a "two-way street." It is up to us to respond to the invitation and to follow Jesus and learn from him. We have to be *intentional*. Finally, we are to be *disciplined* in our following of the Lord. An intentional, disciplined following of the Lord is what is called for in the Great Commission.

Accepting what it means to be a disciple, what does that tell us about carrying out the ministry of discipleship? First of all, it means giving of our time and attention to ones who are growing in their faith. This shouldn't be limited to spiritual matters but also involve helping the disciple with virtually anything we are capable of handling. Secondly, we are to be a role model to the disciple, realizing that our lifestyle, trustworthiness, integrity, faithfulness, etc. will be

looked at as an example of what maturing in Christ should look like. Thirdly, we have a responsibility to help the disciple get fully incorporated into a community of faith.

In other words, our ministry of discipleship involves helping the other to become a disciple who will then go and make disciples.

R&D To what extent is God using you to make disciples? What more could you be doing?

Prayer: Give me confidence, Lord, that I too am capable of making disciples, and give me the opportunities to do so.

Day 29

Read: James 5:13-16

Our Prayer for Others

Another ministry to which each of us is called is intercessory prayer. God expects all of us to be praying for others. It's another aspect of abundant living...having the privilege of being in God's plan for the benefit of others as well as being the recipient of the prayers of others.

Sometimes, when our friends or loved ones are faced with an especially trying situation, our attitude is, "All I can do is pray for you." Yet, that is something we *can always do*; and the Bible tells us, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (v.16b). God counts on His people to be praying for the needs of others, and our prayers are powerful and effective.

Some steps in intercessory prayer are:

Be sensitive. As we grow in our relationship with the Lord, we should be growing increasingly sensitive to the needs of others. If we don't have a number of people we are praying for, it may well mean we are insensitive.

Be confident. People need more than our sympathy; they need help. We should be confident that God wants to help, and will.

Be specific. We should seek God's guidance concerning the person or situation we pray for, and pray in specific accord with the guidance we receive.

Be thankful. As we pray, we should thank God for caring, and for what He will do in the situation or in the life of the person for whom we pray.

Be persistent, yet trustful. We should be willing to pray for as long as God keeps the person on our hearts, but also willing to release the person into God's hands, trusting Him for results.

There is much more that could be said about intercessory prayer and why God calls all of us to that ministry. However, as is true with other ministries as well, rather than spending too much time trying to figure out all the aspects of intercessory prayer, the best learning experience is simply doing it.

R&D For whom do you pray regularly? What other people or situations should you be praying for?

Prayer: Gracious Lord, You care about everyone; thank You for allowing me to share in Your concern by giving me those for whom You want me to pray.

Day 30

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Our Reconciliation

In the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount we find, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9). The seventh Beatitude reminds us of Paul's words in our reading for today: "God was in the world reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them, and he has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation" (v.19). As Christians, we are God's instruments of reconciliation in the world. We are all called to be peacemakers, and in responding to that call are evidencing our relationship as the children of God.

We are not only to be reconciled to God ourselves, but as ambassadors of Christ, we are agents of God's reconciling power in the world. In that capacity as ambassadors, we have a commission to make friends for God. How many people do we know who are walking in the darkness of doubt, fear, loneliness, or illness because they do not know God? They do not know that God has answers for their distress.

Forgiveness is at the heart of reconciliation. We become reconciled to God by admitting our sins, seeking forgiveness, and being restored to relationship with Him. It is part of the abundant life we have in Christ. Likewise, we become reconciled to one another by seeking forgiveness for those things we have done or left undone that have caused a breach in our relationship with the other person. One of the ways in which we become effective ambassadors of reconciliation is by being a forgiving person ourselves, modeling for others what forgiveness is all about. Another is by sharing with others in need of reconciliation the processes of forgiveness that have worked for us.

Being peacemakers results in our being called children of God, not in the passive sense but in the sense that we are people after God's own pattern, engaged in the very work of God our Father.

R&D Recall an incident in which you were used by God to bring reconciliation in your relationship with someone else or in their relationship with one another.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that You make our lives abundant by using us to Your glory.

Day 31

Read: Matthew 19:13-15

Our Presence

The ministry we look at next is being present to the other person, often primarily a ministry of listening and simply reflecting God's love to the other.

Although we can say with conviction that Christ is the answer to all the problems of the world, we know that *we* do not always have the right answer for our friend or loved one in need. Rather than giving a simplistic answer or a shallow one, it is better to admit that we don't honestly know. Yet we can be there for that person, letting him or her know that we care and want to be of any help we can. Often that is a more powerful witness to Christ than "having all the right answers."

Today we live in a time of epidemic loneliness. The fact that people are living longer results in an increasing number of older people who have little or no family around them. These people need to know that they have not simply been dumped on the trash heap of life, but are loved. My

grandfather ended up in a nursing home that was located in conjunction with a high school. Often a young man from the school would come by to see my grandfather, bringing some fruit with him, and they would have valuable sharing times just by the gift of presence to one another.

Jesus gave the gift of presence not only to the little children in our reading, but that is what he was doing in Luke 8:40-48 when he interrupted his mission to heal a sick girl in order to minister to a woman who had touched the hem of his garment. A large part of the ministry of presence is simply listening to the other person.

Paul, following his explanation of gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, then goes on to say that the greatest gift is love (1 Corinthians 13). The gift of presence, to which each of us is called, is a gift of love. Live it abundantly.

R&D Reflect on opportunities you have had to give and receive the gift of presence.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to be more conscious of those around me who simply need to be heard.

Day 32

Read: Mark 1:29-31

Our Healing Prayers

Okay, Jesus was God so he had the benefit of all the gifts of the Spirit, but today's reading is particularly touching on the issue of each of us having a ministry of healing prayer whether or not we have that particular gift (1 Corinthians 12:9). Jesus, in this instance, wasn't healing the multitudes or dealing with someone's especially serious illness or disease. He was just praying a healing prayer for Peter's mother-in-law who simply had a fever. It was the kind of domestic scene we might face in our own home, and it was an opportunity to pray for a loved one.

We've looked at gifts of the Holy Spirit earlier in this series, and now we are considering ministries to which each of us is called regardless of our specific giftedness. Healing prayer is a ministry to which each of us is called in particular situations. For instance, if our spouse or child is ill, of course we call a doctor. But, in the meantime, shouldn't we be praying for their healing? The prayer of healing is not a last resort but a first one. And, of course, it is entirely appropriate to pray for our own healing when needed.

I've mentioned healing prayer teams in connection with worship services at church. It would be ideal if only people especially gifted by the Holy Spirit for healing were members of these teams, but there probably aren't enough of them to go around. So, others who have a special heart for healing can serve on those teams. God can use us in particular situations regardless of our specific giftedness.

What a blessing it is to be able to pray for others for healing and other needs. It's part of the abundant life in Christ, doing the sort of things he would do because we are to be Christ in our day.

R&D What has been your experience in praying healing prayers for others and/or having others pray healing prayers for you.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you work in miraculous ways through your Holy Spirit to heal. Help me to know when I am to be your instrument for that healing work.

Day 33

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Our Service

Then there is the ministry of servanthood. Jesus set the example for us when, in the Gospel of John, he washed the feet of his disciples (13:1-17). And, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (20:25-28).

Perhaps, however, the most poignant passage of Scripture dealing with servanthood is our reading for today. It has to do with the “end of the age” when people will be judged for their life on earth. The only ones whose actions find approval are those who unselfconsciously have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, invited the stranger in, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoner. These are all activities of servanthood.

Because of this passage of Scripture, we tend to think of servanthood as always meeting the physical needs of others. However, it also includes the ministry of listening, healing, prayer, and exercising gifts of the Holy Spirit.

One caution concerning the ministry of servanthood. It can’t earn our way to heaven. We are saved by grace through faith; but good works that are the fruit of our love of Christ are blessings to us and to those we serve. Few things are as rewarding as servanthood. There is a deep inner satisfaction that comes from following Jesus’ servant example and giving of ourselves for the benefit of others. It is something we Christians are expected to do, and you might say it is abundant living.

R&D What would you say are your ministries of servanthood? Explain.

Prayer: Lord, may I truly make myself available to You to meet the needs of others.

Day 34

Read: 2 Corinthians 9:2-9

Our Stewardship

According to the dictionary, a steward is one employed in a large household or estate to manage domestic concerns (as the supervision of servants, collection of rents, and keeping accounts). Stewardship, in the Christian sense, means the act of taking care of, or managing, the resources of God.

We are all stewards of what God has given us, and what we do with what we have is our ministry of stewardship. As one person put it, “Stewardship is what you do with the rest of your life after you acknowledge that everything you have is a gift from God.”

There are many passages of Scripture dealing with stewardship, money, and generosity, but our reading for today is one of the best because its focus is at the heart of the abundant life. We give because we want to give, not because of a sense of obligation. In it is Paul’s inspired thought, “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (v.8).

Here are some thoughts from David E. Sumner on the ministry of stewardship:

1. Stewardship is not about fundraising to support the church’s needs; it is about your relationship with God.

2. When we give to God and the church, we are not giving what is “ours.” Everything we have belongs to God. We are just giving back a portion of what God has given us.
3. Giving is based on our trust and faith in God. We don’t give because the church, or God, needs our money. We need to give. Giving does more for the giver than the receiver.
4. The more we give, the more we are risking for God. The more we risk for God, the more dependent upon Him we become. The more dependent upon God we become, the more we grow in our relationship with Him.
5. The more we love God, the more we will give.

R&D *What kind of a steward are you? Explain.*

Prayer: *As a very generous friend always reminds me, Lord, “You can’t out-give God!” Thank You for that truth.*

Day 35

Read: Ephesians 6:10-18

Our Warfare

The final ministry to which we are all called that we will consider in this series is spiritual warfare. We’ll first look at it in general and then within the elements of putting on “The Whole Armor of God” over the remaining days.

Paul was very conscious of the spiritual battle that was going on in his time and it was not so different from our own. Many people, including many Christians, don’t believe there is an evil force (Satan) at work in the world. They just think there are bad people or simply unfortunate circumstances. Paul knew better, and probably you do as well. We are not to be paralyzed by fear; Satan is a defeated enemy. Nonetheless, until Christ returns, we will have spiritual battles on our hands in which we need to rely on the Lord.

Paul is not only giving counsel to the Church, the body of Christ here on earth, but to individual Christians as well. We all need to be armed for protection. As we do battle against “the powers of this dark world,” we are able to fight in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

The armor Paul suggests is a way of reminding ourselves, preferably every morning when we awaken, of the protection God provides us: the salvation we have through Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf, the righteousness that is our growing relationship with God, the truth that is Christ and in which we are called to live, the gospel of peace that we are to share with others, the faith in which we have confidence and (the only “offensive” weapon mentioned) “the sword of the Spirit” that is Scripture.

Furthermore, in addition to “putting on” these means of protection, we are to pray in the Spirit on all occasions. How do we do that? By making a habit of going to God in prayer concerning the situations we face throughout the day until that becomes our natural, first response to every opportunity and challenge. It is just another advantage of the abundant life.

R&D *How seriously do you take the issue of an evil force in the world that seeks to destroy the Christian faith? What do you do to combat it?*

Prayer: *Lord, I commit myself into Your hands this day, body, mind, and spirit; and put on the whole armor of God: the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the sword of the Spirit, and the shield of faith.*

Day 36

Read: Matthew 5:3-11

Our Salvation, Our Righteousness

Today we'll look at two of the pieces of protective armor we can put on each day to protect us from evil influences: the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness.

By accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we gained our salvation. That, to me, is the first piece of armor I put on each morning, because it entitles me to put on the remaining pieces.

The breastplate of righteousness has to do with being in a right relationship with God. The sixth Beatitude speaks directly to righteousness: God creates an inner hunger and thirst for righteousness that, by the grace of God, will be filled.

The other Beatitudes spell out the ideal Christian life, the goal toward which we work. These are the things that, ideally, tell us what righteous living is supposed to be. They give us a checklist against which to compare ourselves, particularly during Lent. To be blessed means to have received the favor of God. His grace and love have profound effects in a person's life. We can read the Beatitudes as a progressive description of growth in the Christian life. God's blessing causes us to realize our spiritual poverty, the need for God. Then we mourn over our sins and the havoc that sin causes in human life. Next, His blessing makes us meek, willing to be guided by God's direction. Then we become merciful as we receive mercy. Purity in heart means sincerity, genuineness in our love of God and people. As we looked at earlier in our study, peacemakers seek to reconcile hostile, alienated people with one another. Finally, as the disciple becomes like the master, we share the rejection and persecution suffered by the Lord.

The rewards for the blessed are descriptions of the graces bestowed on those who enter the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ. They inherit the kingdom, are comforted, and find mercy. They shall see God and be called the children of God. The Beatitudes describe the believers as we mature in the faith. It's abundant living.

R&D: How has God's blessing affected you? Which of the Beatitudes describes you?

Prayer: Help us, O Lord, to become the blessed, that we may live to Your honor and glory.

Day 37

Read: John 17:6-19

Our Truth

As a part of the ministry of spiritual warfare, the next piece of armor we put on to protect ourselves is the belt of truth. Our reading for today is Jesus praying for his disciples, whom he will soon be leaving. It is a stirring prayer to the Father for the protection and guidance of Jesus' followers. He asks the Father: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (v.17).

When we put on the belt of truth, we are—in a sense—putting on Christ. For us, the truth is what we know about Christ and how he wants us to live. Jesus is the upper-case Word of God (John 1:1-2). But we know Jesus today primarily through Scripture, the lower-case word of God. Thus, the action of putting on the belt of truth involves both putting on the Word and the word. This emphasizes just how important it is for us to know Scripture.

We can never envision what a day may bring. We can be fairly sure we will face challenges of one sort or another. In each of the situations and circumstances of life, we want to be Christ's person, dealing with everything the way we think he would have us do. How can we do that? Only

by having the confidence that comes from a working knowledge of Scripture. We can't often stop where we are in the course of the day to go look up a similar situation in the Bible. This illustrates how important it is to be building up our knowledge of the Bible day by day, so we have confidence we are doing the right thing.

We shouldn't despair, however, that our knowledge of Scripture is too meager if we are truly trying to know the word of God. As Christians who have put on the belt of truth, we always have the Word of God (by way of the Holy Spirit) within us to guide us. It's an abundant life.

R&D Where do you believe yourself to be in knowledge of the Bible? Explain.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that I have the opportunity to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Holy Scripture.

Day 38

Read: Philippians 4:4-9

Our Gospel of Peace

The next piece of protective armor we want to put on is the gospel of peace. We are to get our "feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15). Paul seems to be indicating that we are not only to be shielded by God-given peace but are to carry this with us for the benefit of others. Our reading for today is one of Paul's expressions of joy in his joyful letter to the Philippians. Peace brings joy and is a result of joy.

Paul was in prison at the time of writing this letter. His attitude teaches us an important lesson. Our inner attitude influences our outer circumstances. Paul knew that whatever happened to him, Jesus Christ was with him in the midst of it. He is therefore an ideal example to us of how to wear the shoes of the gospel of peace.

The peace that the apostle has in mind for us rests in Christ, showing confidence in him. It is calmness in the center of the storms of life. It is much more than a freedom from fear. If we dress ourselves in this peace at the beginning of the day, we carry with us as a blessing to others with whom we come into contact during the day. If we exude the peace of Christ in our attitude and actions, that can have a calming effect on those around us.

Furthermore, in a sense we are not only carrying our peace to others but we are carrying the gospel as well. People can be drawn closer to Christ by the Christ they see in others. Thus, not only do we experience peace as a part of our abundant life in Christ, but our feet can carry that gospel of peace to many others.

R&D How, specifically, can you carry the gospel of peace to your family, your neighbors, and co-workers today?

Prayer: Lord, Paul was at peace while in prison; please give me that depth of peace.

Day 39

Read: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Our Sword of the Spirit

Paul begins today's passage of Scripture with the sufferings he had experienced for the sake of the gospel as a contrast to the experiences of self-seeking false teachers about whom he is warning his protégé Timothy. Paul wants Timothy not only to be aware of the guile of false

teachers but to understand that loyalty to Jesus will lead to persecution. He is bolstering Timothy up for what lies ahead of him, just as we need to be forewarned.

Fortunately for Timothy, the young man has been blessed by having a mother and grandmother who had taught him Scripture from an early age. He was equipped with the belt of truth and the sword of the Spirit.

Then Paul gives us that great affirmation of the Bible: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (vv.16-17). The whole Bible is God’s inspired word. It teaches and trains us, it inspires us, but it also serves as a corrective to keep us in line with God’s will for us.

When we earlier considered putting on the belt of truth, one focus was on Scripture. We know God’s truth largely through Scripture. Today we look at the only offense weapon that is an integral part of the whole armor of God. In this regard, Scripture works for us in at least a couple of ways: it shields us by teaching us God’s truth, but it also is our primary battle weapon against evil. We need the protection of knowing Scripture because Satan can use it out of context against us as he did against Jesus in Luke 4:9-11. But Jesus then shows us the aggressive use of Scripture as he rebukes Satan in the following verse, ending the temptation. As a part of the abundant life God wants for us, the same protection that Jesus had is available to us.

R&D When has your knowledge of Scripture allowed you to reject temptation or testing?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, we are weak, but You are strong. May we commit our lives into Your hands, protected in the ways You have provided for us. We are grateful.

Day 40

Read: Matthew 17:14-21

Our Shield of Faith

Today we come to the end of Lent and of our study of the abundant life. We look at the final piece of the whole armor of God with which we can equip ourselves each day to stand “against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). With the protection that God provides us, we can go boldly into Easter in the glory and love of the Lord.

The Ephesians passage says that the shield of faith is to protect us against the fiery darts of the enemy. The shield will be as large and as strong as our faith is.

In our passage for today, Jesus and three of his closest disciples have just returned from the awesome mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration to the reality of life in the valley. A man whose son is apparently demon-possessed has asked for healing, but the other disciples were unable to effect the healing. Jesus, in frustration, says that is because those disciples had too little faith. He then goes on to paint a picture of what could happen if his followers just had a mustard seed of faith, the mustard seed being very small but capable of great results (see Matthew 13:31-32). Jesus wasn’t condemning his disciples; he was trying to show them how essential faith would be to their, and our, future ministry.

As noted in an early study in this series, faith is largely based on our ability to remember and appreciate all God has done for us in the past. Faith builds on our experience of faith. As we have believed God’s promises and have seen the results of them, we become stronger in our faith

that God will continue to protect us, forgive us, guide us, and love us. And that makes for an abundant life!

R&D *Reflect on how your faith in God has allowed you to stand against the challenges of life.*

Prayer: *Lord God, we thank You for the abundant life You provide for us through faith in Your Son Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.*

by Harry C. Griffith

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