



# The Commands of Christ

## Lenten Study

### Day 1

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**Read: Matthew 5:11-12**

#### Rejoice and Be Glad

Lent being a time of self-examination and repentance, over these 40 days we will be examining the commands of Christ. We will have the opportunity to measure our response to those commands against our way of life and to make any corrections that might be called for.

Eugene Peterson said this in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*: “It is not difficult in our world to get a person interested in the message of the Gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier Christians called holiness.”

Taking the above thoughts into consideration, we might sigh and say to ourselves, “We’re getting ready to have 40 days of ‘do’s and don’ts’ aimed at whipping us into spiritual shape, and I’m not sure I’m looking forward to that!” In fact, as is also true of the Ten Commandments, the commands of Christ aren’t given to us as harsh correctives or rules to take joy out of our lives; they exist to protect us and to guide us in the abundant life God has for us (John 10:10).

Prior to our reading for today, Christ has commanded that we repent (Matthew 4:17) and that we follow him (Matthew 4:19). Then, in our brief reading, he warns us how we may be treated as a result and commands us to nonetheless rejoice. In whatever sacrifices we make in the name of Christ, we grow in our union with him. Christ is telling us how to deal with that reality: Rejoice!

*R&D Think of a situation in which you were in a tight spot because of your faith in Christ. Were you able to rejoice in it? Why or why not?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, whenever I am feeling persecuted for my faith in you, help me remember that you are in it with me...and that is reason enough to rejoice.*

### Day 2

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**Read: Matthew 5:13-16**

#### Let Your Light Shine

What do we have to rejoice about? We are privileged to be here on earth representing Christ! By the Holy Spirit, we are filled with the light of Christ. That should be manifesting itself in us and in the way we live. That is what Christ is telling us in the command for today.

First, he uses the illustration of salt. Salt is worthless unless it maintains its flavor. Otherwise we might as well throw it out. Christians who make no effort to affect the world for good are that useless to God.

Then we have the illustration of light. Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world. Wow! We aren't just important to God...we are *essential* to His plan for the world. Who we are in Christ is not to be hidden; we are to shine the light of Christ into a world that is very needful of him.

We are to let our lights shine so that others can see "our good deeds" and praise our Father in heaven. According to William Barclay, the Greek word for "good" in the Bible is *kalos*. It is a word that means that a thing is not only good, but that it is also winsome, beautiful, attractive. There is a winsomeness in Christian goodness. But, Barclay notes, it is not to draw attention to ourselves but to God. If we are seriously examining ourselves about who we are this Lent, we know that whatever goodness we have comes from God. That realization can free us to let the light of Christ shine through us to the glory of God.

R&D *Reflect upon a recent instance in which you let the light of Christ shine.*

Prayer: *"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."*

### Day 3

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

#### **Honor God's Law**

In today's reading Jesus is commanding us to be obedient to God's law. God's moral and ceremonial laws were designed to help us love God and follow His will for our lives. The ceremonial laws related to Israel's worship (see Leviticus 1:2-3, for instance) and would reach their culmination in Jesus Christ. These laws were therefore no longer applicable after Jesus' death and resurrection. However, the principal behind them—to worship and serve a holy God—would still apply.

On the other hand, there were the oral or scribal laws that both Jesus and Paul soundly condemned. The Jews weren't content with living by the broad principles spelled out in the Ten Commandments and elsewhere in what we call the Old Testament. They therefore tried to make a rule for every possible situation in life. While God intended His people to live by the spirit of the law He had provided, they insisted on looking to the letter of the law in great detail. Some of the ways in which Jesus dealt with this problem will be seen over the next few days.

With the above in mind, Jesus is saying that God's law (the Ten Commandments and Scripture generally) are not only binding but need to be followed by Christians today and not rationalized away when they disagree with current customs or cultural change. Living by Scripture enhances life. We ignore health warnings to our physical detriment. We ignore the guidance of God's law to our spiritual and perhaps eternal detriment.

R&D *In what ways do you honor God's law?*

Prayer: *Gracious God, You have provided Your law to keep us on track. Help us to stay on track and not get led astray by temptation, rationalization, or compromise.*

## Day 4

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**Read: Matthew 5:21-26**

### Be Reconciled

Jesus now begins to show us what he means by obeying the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. “You have heard it said” was his way to reminding us what was required by the law; now he wants to apply it. But notice that he is not setting down a new set of rules. He is not doing away with the law nor adding his own beliefs. Rather, he is giving us a more complete understanding of why God made the law in the first place.

The Sixth Commandment is that we shall not murder (Exodus 20:13). Jesus is telling us that we shouldn’t allow ourselves to become so angry that we have murderous thoughts on our mind. The Pharisees would have found themselves innocent of murder while masking their murderous thoughts about Jesus that would ultimately lead to his crucifixion. Jesus wants us focused in the opposite direction...avoiding anger and seeking reconciliation.

We are to love God and our neighbor. Anger violates both. Broken relationships hinder our relationship with God. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his neighbor, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). Anger keeps us from developing a spirit that is pleasing to God. Holding a resentment against another is bad enough in itself, but it also has a debilitating effect on our body, mind, and spirit. Jesus encourages us to “settle matters quickly” and not to go before the altar while we are in a fit of anger against another; to do so is to be a hypocrite. Again, the commands of Jesus are, in the broadest sense, for our good health.

*R&D What situations are most likely to cause you anger? How will you deal with them?*

*Prayer: Lord God, my relationship with You is the most important thing in my life. Guard me against those feelings that drive a wedge between others and me...and therefore injure my relationship with You.*

## Day 5

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**Read: Matthew 5:27-30**

### Do Not Lust

Here again Jesus takes one of the Ten Commandments and applies a fuller understanding to it. The Seventh Commandment tells us not to commit adultery (Exodus 20:14), but Jesus says that the desire to have sex with someone other than our spouse is mental adultery and therefore also sin. If the act is wrong, so is the intention. The trust relationship between husband and wife is necessary for a successful marriage. That trust can be broken by lustful desires toward someone other than our spouse.

This teaching needs a couple of clarifications. One is that Jesus is not condemning natural, normal desires that are a part of human instinct and human nature. We can admire beauty in another without a deliberate intention of lusting after that person. As William Barclay states it, “The man who is condemned is the man who deliberately uses his eyes to awaken his lust, the man who looks in such a way that passion is awakened and desire deliberately stimulated.” In our day the Internet’s easy access to pornography and our overly accommodating secular society have combined to open the door to the sin Jesus is here condemning.

The other clarification has to do with the rather drastic remedies Jesus seems to be suggesting. He is speaking figuratively; he doesn’t mean we should maim ourselves to fight this par-

ticular sinful desire. But he is making a point. It is much better for us to be rid of anything that will keep us from eternal life with God.

R&D *What steps do you take to build and maintain trust in your relationships with others?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us to stand against lustful thoughts in our own lives and in the lives of others.*

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## Day 6

**Read: Matthew 5:33-37**

### Keep Your Word

“His word is his bond” was a common saying in times past. People didn’t need to sign contracts when agreeing upon certain actions; their word was good enough. In Jesus’ time there were intricate rules about oaths. Jesus is simply telling us to be truthful.

The reason Jesus was emphasizing the importance of telling the truth is because people were breaking promises and using sacred language carelessly. Doing what we say we will do is essential in building trust. The Bible condemns making vows or taking oaths casually, giving our word on some matter knowing all the time that we cannot or don’t intend to keep it. This includes swearing falsely in God’s name (Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:1-2; Deuteronomy 19:16-20). Oaths were needed in some situations because of inherent distrust.

Although oaths and vows were common in Jesus’ time, he tells his followers not to use them. Our word alone should suffice (see James 5:12). If we are as honest and transparent in our dealings with others as Jesus would have us be, there is no need for an oath. What we say we are going to do, the promises we make, won’t need to be backed up by some guarantee. Others should know that when we say “Yes” we mean “Yes.”

R&D *How practical do you believe this command of Jesus to be in our world today? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, may my word be my bond.*

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## Day 7

**Read: Matthew 5:38-42**

### Go the Second Mile

The Old Testament (“You have heard it said”) focus was on justice; Jesus’ is on mercy. The “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” was a way of saying, “Let the punishment fit the crime.” It was a way of judging fairly in a situation; it was not a guideline for personal revenge (Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:19-29; Deuteronomy 19:21). These laws were intended to limit revenge and administer justice that was neither too strict nor too lenient. People being who they are, however, many used (and still use) the phrase to justify whatever havoc they planned to unleash upon someone who had done them wrong.

The command of Jesus takes us in a different direction altogether. His focus is on mercy. If our most important relationship is with God, other relationships take on new meaning. Just as anger with another separates us from God (as we learned in an earlier study), wanting to avenge a wrong committed against us has the same effect. Driving wedges between people is not loving our neighbor as our self. Not only does it amplify the difficulty between us and the other person, but often it brings others into the dispute, blowing the whole matter out of proportion.

Jesus has a different plan: go the second mile. Our desire should not be to get even but to use the situation as an opportunity to show others what Christian love is all about. What is more important: getting our way or showing someone else Christ's way? "You are the light of the world" (5:14).

*R&D Reflect on a situation in which you had the opportunity to go the second mile.*

*Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to see people in the way that you see them, and to love them when they aren't being very lovable.*

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## Day 8

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**Read: Matthew 5:43-46**

### Love Your Enemies

As he so often seems to do, Jesus now takes us a step further. The Pharisees interpreted Leviticus 19:18 as meaning that we only need to love those who love us in return. To them, Psalms 138:19-22 and 149:9-11 indicated that we should hate our enemies. Jesus says that, instead, we should love our enemies. By loving our enemies, we acknowledge the God of love as the Lord of our life.

How do we do this? First of all, we realize that this is something that is not natural to us as human beings. Only the supernatural can make it possible, and that is one of the things the Holy Spirit can accomplish within us. He can guide us to do those things that are not natural for us because he represents the love of God within us. He can help us, for instance, to see what impels the other person to be our enemy, and why we should not only overlook that person's attitude and actions toward us but perhaps even feel sorry for the person and want to be of help to him or her.

The Holy Spirit can help us see the situation from God's point of view. God wants everyone reconciled to Himself. How does He accomplish that? Through you and me. What better evidence is there of God's love than when a Christian shows love to someone who is opposing us, perhaps injuring us in some way? What a supernatural thing to do! Not only can reconciliation result in the relationship between us and our "enemy", but reconciliation between that person and God becomes more likely. It's a ministry that we are all called to perform (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

*R&D How can you be a more effective minister of reconciliation?*

*Prayer: Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.*

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## Day 9

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**Read: Matthew 5:47-48**

### Be Perfect

Jesus' command to be perfect relates to Christian maturity. It is a call to grow in our relationship with God. We won't reach perfection until we are with Christ (1 John 3:2-3), but we are challenged to be growing in that direction our entire time here on earth.

In the *Life Application Bible* there is an excellent outline of how we are to move toward perfection. First, to be perfect in *character*, although we can't be without fault, our goal should be to be as much like Christ as possible. Then, in *holiness*, we are to separate ourselves from the

world's sinful values, to be devoted to God's values rather than our own, and to carry this love and mercy into the world. Next, in *maturity*, although we can't achieve Christ's character and holy living all at once, we can be growing toward the wholeness he has for us. We have different expectations from a baby, a child, a teenager, and an adult; in the same way God has different expectations from us, depending on our stage of spiritual maturity. Finally, in *love*, we can seek to love others as God loves us.

It is too easy to say that Jesus' command to be perfect is simply unrealistic and not take it seriously. In fact, however, we can show signs of perfection commensurate with our maturity as a Christian. Manifesting the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), for instance, can give us an insight into our spiritual growth toward perfection. Our tendency to sin should never discourage us from seeking to be like Christ; God knows our failings. A Lenten focus on acknowledging our sins and seeking His forgiveness is a vital part of the process of moving toward perfection.

R&D *How seriously do you take Christ's command to be perfect?*

Prayer: *"Lord, I ain't what I wanna be and I ain't what I'm gonna be; but, by Your grace, I ain't like I used to be."*

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## Day 10

**Read: Matthew 6:1-18**

### Practice Secret Disciplines

What Jesus is warning about in our passage for today is what someone has called "piety on a stick." Acts of piety are not to be performed so that people will praise us for them. They are to be performed for God alone.

Jesus' command that we practice secret disciplines deals with three well-known practices in worship of God: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. He is telling us that even these otherwise godly acts become idols if they are undertaken ostentatiously. We are to handle our *giving* for the Lord's work and for the benefit of others as confidentially as possible.

The references to rewards and implied punishments are not intended by Jesus as a way of motivating us. Instead, he is stating a simple truth: if we perform acts in order to get praise from people, we have our reward. God's "reward" to the faithful is knowledge of being in His will.

Concerning *prayer*, Jesus cautions against long-winded ones; nothing is gained by saying words for their own sake, no matter how beautifully they might be phrased. Instead, he gives us a simple pattern for praying, what we call the Lord's Prayer. He encourages private prayer; our time alone with the Lord should be the most important part of each day. Note also Jesus' focus on forgiveness.

*Fasting* was a useful tool for spiritual growth in Jesus' time as it is today...especially during Lent. Once again Jesus emphasizes it as an act directed to God and not for the praise of others.

R&D *To what extent do you believe you are following Christ's command that we practice these three secret disciplines?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for the precious time I'm privileged to have with You.*

## Day 11

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**Read: Matthew 6:19-24**

### Lay Up Treasures

In Jesus' command that we not store up for ourselves treasures on earth, he is basically saying, "What we treasure the most controls us and the way we live." He wants us to choose eternal values over temporary, earthly treasures. What we store up for ourselves we spend our time and energy thinking about: how to protect it and how to make it grow (see Luke 12:13-21). God has better things for us to be thinking about.

In verses 23 and 24, Jesus is making the point that spiritual vision is our capacity to see what God wants us to do. Unfortunately, our spiritual vision can easily be clouded by the world around us and the temptations we face each day. Selfish desires, interests, and goals get in the way. Multiple distractions lead us astray. Our spiritual vision is blurred. Putting God first is the best way to restore it. A "good" eye is one fixed on God.

Looked at from God's point of view, there is a good side to earthly treasures...the more we have, the more we can give away for His causes. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, "The *love* of money is the root of all evil." Money itself is not the problem if we see it as belonging to God and given to us for stewardship on His behalf as opposed to loving it as *our* treasure. We store up treasure in heaven when we use those resources God has given us to do the work He would have us do.

*R&D How would you feel about going over the use of your treasures with Jesus?*

*Prayer: Help me, Lord, to use what You give me in the way You want me to use it.*

## Day 12

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**Read: Matthew 6:25-34**

### Seek God's Kingdom

There are really two commands of Jesus in today's passage. One is "do not worry" and the other is "seek first God's kingdom." It is as we seek the latter that we solve the problem with the former. The "kingdom" one is by far the more important command, but Jesus takes time to deal with the "worry" issue because he knows us well; he knows how much time we spend worrying when we should be focused on God.

Why shouldn't we worry? It can damage our health. It's Lent, so I'll confess that worry badly affects my sleep, and that's not healthy. It can negatively affect the way we treat others; we become grouchy and irritable. It occupies our thoughts with things that may never happen when we should be thinking about those things that will. It reduces our productivity; we paralyze ourselves with worry instead of getting on with the job ahead of us. Most of all...and this is the point Jesus is making...it reduces our ability to trust God. He is telling us that if we seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, all the things we need will be given to us.

What is behind our anxiety? Lack of faith. Absorption in worldly endeavors shows lack of trust in God. The reference to "little faith" (v.30) is a favorite expression in Matthew (see 8:26, 14:31, 16:8). To be overly anxious is to insult our heavenly Father who knows what we need. Our focus is to be on His kingdom. If we display faith, God will meet our needs. There is nothing we can do about tomorrow anyway, so why add to the problems of today?

*R&D To what extent is worry a problem in your life? What will you do about it?*

Prayer: *When I start to worry, Lord, help me remember that You are in charge.*

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### Day 13

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**Read: Matthew 7:1-5**

#### Judge Not

William Barclay taught that there were three reasons we should not judge someone else. The first is we never know the whole facts or the whole person. It's impossible for us to know all of things going on in the life of the other person that causes him or her to act in the way they do or say the things they say.

The second thing is that it is almost impossible for us to be strictly impartial in our judgment. That has to do with what is going on in our life, including how our life has been shaped by our culture, experiences, and upbringing. Only God can be completely impartial.

The third is that no one is good enough to judge another. That is Jesus' point. He drew a vivid picture of a person with a plank in his eye trying to look at the speck in the other person's eye. Only a person who is faultless has a right to find fault in another. Needless to say, none of us is faultless!

One note of caution concerning this command of Christ. There is a difference between judging and discerning. Being judgmental is an attitude that tears others down in order to build ourselves up. But Jesus is not telling us to throw away all critical thinking; we are to be discerning rather than negative. Jesus taught, for instance, that we should expose false teachers (7:15-23), and Paul taught that we should exercise church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1-2) and trust God to be the final judge (1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

R&D *How do you distinguish between judging others and simply being discerning?*

Prayer: *Help me, Lord, to see others as You see them.*

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### Day 14

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**Read: Matthew 7:7-8**

#### Ask, Seek, Knock

Jesus' command that we ask, seek, and knock is a call to perseverance in prayer. If we are serious about the matter concerning which we pray, we shouldn't treat it casually as though all we have to do is put the matter before God and then forget about it. God answers prayer, but it is not always an immediate answer, and it is not always the answer we expect. There is a process here, and Jesus is giving us some guidelines. Mainly, to persist.

There is an underlying truth in this teaching that we don't want to miss. God wants to be in relationship with us. That is why Jesus lived and died for us, that we might be reconciled to God. Prayer is a primary way in which we maintain that relationship with God. Therefore, we should be often in prayer...and, of course, persistent in it.

Furthermore, prayer isn't telling God what to do. It is sharing with Him what is on our heart. It is offering the person or situation up to Him for His resolution of the matter. But there should be a lot of *listening* on our part if we truly want God's solution. Through His Holy Spirit, God can inform our thinking so that our will becomes aligned with His. That's when prayer becomes real. And note that, in that process, God may ask us to "put feet on our prayers." He may want *us* to *do* something about the matter for which we pray.



R&D *It's Lent. Take an inventory of your prayer life to see how it can become more real.*

Prayer: *I want to grow in my relationship with You, Lord; help me to make time with You a greater priority in my life.*

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### Day 15

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**Read: Matthew 7:9-12**

#### **Do unto Others**

In the illustration Jesus gives, the child asks good things of his father: bread and fish. If the child had asked for a stone or a snake, would the father have given him those items? Not very likely! The father in the illustration is, of course, God. God will give us the good things we ask for in prayer. In truth, we sometimes ask for the stone or the snake, and God doesn't respond favorably to those prayers. One of the blessings of the Christian life is that we can grow in our relationship with God to such an extent that we know how to pray for the good things that are in His will and avoid the snakes.

Jesus gives us a contrast between a loving God and we human beings. "If you, then, though you are evil" is a way of recognizing the human condition. Left to our own devices, we are selfish and have a tendency to sin. God, on the other hand, is pure of heart. Jesus is showing us the heart of God. He is a loving Father who understands our needs and wants to fulfill them. If we humans can be kind, think how kind our heavenly Father can be by comparison.

Thus, the groundwork is laid for what we call the Golden Rule: Do to others what you would have them do to you. If, by the Holy Spirit within us, we have some measure of the heart of God, we will be concerned about others and want to meet their needs. We won't have to be reminded of the Golden Rule; it will be the most natural thing in our life to want the best for others and to do our part in making that happen.

R&D *Are we to set our minds to do good deeds or simply to love our neighbors as ourselves and let that love flow out of our lives for the benefit of others? Or both?*

Prayer: *Lord, make me more conscious of those around me and more perceptive to their needs.*

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### Day 16

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**Read: Matthew 7:13-14**

#### **Choose the Narrow Way**

Those who oppose Christianity sometimes support their position by saying it is too restrictive; how can Jesus say that he is the only way to eternal life with God (John 14:6)? The fact is that, by our nature, the human race is alienated from God. It is by the grace of God that we have been given a solution to that problem. That there is only one way to heaven is because Jesus alone died for our sins and made us right before God. That "narrow way" is not restrictive...it is open to anyone who accepts Christ as Savior and Lord (John 10:7-9). Living this way may not be popular but it is clearly the only way to live.

Put another way, the narrow way may be a lonely way, but it is worth it. Having said that, we should—to the extent possible—surround ourselves with others who are pursuing the narrow way. The circumstances of our life may necessitate our being with unbelievers much of the time. God can use us to reach them for Christ. But, to the extent we cannot, we want to avoid falling into the pattern of their lives and the ungodly thoughts and actions that are a natural result. In-

stead, we want to regularly worship in a community of faith that gives us support and encouragement. And we should cherish our Christian friends.

Pursuing the narrow way is living in the manner God wants us to live. It is the better, healthier way in every regard. Sin never fulfills the promises it makes. Joy comes from being in a right relationship with God.

R&D *What does choosing the narrow way mean to you?*

Prayer: *Lord, Your way is the only way for me; help me not to go astray.*

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## Day 17

**Read: Matthew 7:15-20**

### Beware of False Prophets

False prophets were common in Old Testament times, telling the kings and people what they wanted to hear. Apparently they were also common in Jesus' time. We have them in our day as well. They are particularly dangerous when they pose as Christian teachers and leaders but stray from Scripture in order to have a message that is more attractive in today's world. Jesus is warning us of the consequences of following the lead of false prophets.

Fortunately, we are given a way to test them: look at the fruit of their efforts. A false prophet may have an impressive following, but does he personally live a Christ-like life? Do his teachings match what Scripture says? Do the people who follow him reflect the love of Christ? The prophet must meet all of these criteria for us to be able to say that he bears good fruit.

Teachers need careful examination because of the far-reaching effect of their influence on the minds of others, especially young minds. Just as trees are consistent in the kind of fruit they produce, good teachers consistently display good behavior and moral character as they live out the truths of Scripture. No one is perfect; we all fall short of God's expectations of us from time to time, and teachers are human too. Let's not judge one slip-up too harshly, for instance. But we should be able to see a pattern of godliness among those who teach and lead us; and, if we do not, we may discern them to be false prophets and need to steer clear of them.

R&D *Wherein do you see false prophets in our midst today? How do you deal with your concern about them?*

Prayer: *Lord God, help us to be able to discern false prophets among us; and, most of all, keep us from being false prophets in anything we say or do.*

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## Day 18

**Read: Matthew 9:35-38**

### Pray for Laborers

Jesus, as he traveled and taught, saw multitudes of people in need. In the Western World today we see multitudes of people who seem to have all they really need when compared to those to whom Jesus ministered. The picture today is misleading. People today are in as much need as they ever were because our greatest need is to be in relationship with God and our world has become so materialistic and secularized that people don't realize that need.

Jesus pictures the situation as sheep without a shepherd, symbolism often used in the Old Testament. Ezekiel, for instance, saw the people of Israel as sheep without a shepherd (Ezekiel

34:5-6). Jesus came to be the Shepherd, the one to lead his sheep safely, avoiding the pitfalls of life (John 10:14).

The agrarian symbolism immediately shifts to envisioning those in need of salvation as a field ripe for harvest. Jesus' disciples are asked to pray for workers to go into that field to bring in the harvest. The idea is that a great many people would come to the Lord if someone would show them the way. And, of course, we should be praying along those same lines today just as Jesus asked the disciples to do. But if we are sincere in our prayers, God is going to make it clear that we have more to do than pray. As Christians we are all to be laborers in the field. We may not consider ourselves to be evangelists, but we all have a story to tell...the story of our relationship with Christ. Doing so is an essential part of the harvesting process.

R&D *How is God using you to reach others for Christ?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, there are so many around us who do not know you. Help us to help them to come to you as their Shepherd.*

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## Day 19

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

### **Be Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves**

The command of Jesus we are looking at today comes at the end of this passage, but the background to it is important. Here we find Jesus officially naming the Twelve and giving them spiritual authority. First, he equips them spiritually. They will be able to heal the sick, raise the dead, and drive out demons. He wants them to give and receive freely. He equips them as he himself is equipped.

Next, Jesus sends them out in ministry. Here he gives them practical guidance. He tells them where to stay and how to conduct themselves. If they experience rejection, they are not to waste their time in that place. There is a world to bring to Christ; move on. But he also wants to warn them about what they face: they will be like sheep among wolves. And then he concludes with this command: "Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (v.16).

Here is how the *Life Application Bible* explains Christ's command: "The opposition of the Pharisees would be like ravaging wolves. The disciples' only hope would be to look to their Shepherd for protection. We may face similar hostility. Like the disciples, we are not to be sheeplike in our attitude but sensitive and prudent. We are not to be gullible pawns but neither are we to be deceitful connivers. We must find a balance between wisdom and vulnerability to accomplish God's work."

R&D *Reflect on an example in your own life of being wise as a serpent but harmless as a dove.*

Prayer: *Lord, make us ever mindful of the needs of others and ever needful of the minds of others.*

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## Day 20

**Read: Matthew 10:17-31**

### **Fear Not**

In today's reading Jesus continues to warn his disciples while, at the same time, giving them assurances and encouragement. He told them that, when arrested for doing the ministry he had assigned to them, he would give them the words to say. How could this be? Although at this

time the disciples did not understand that the Holy Spirit would be in them to guide them, that is basically what Jesus promised: “At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” This promise would be fulfilled in Acts 4:8-14 and elsewhere.

In commanding us not to fear, Jesus uses the illustration of the sparrow. If God’s “eye is on the sparrow,” He surely watches over you and me. The point is that God is aware of everything. We are far more valuable to God than the sparrow. We are so valuable that God sent His only Son to live and die for us. Because God cares that much for us, there is little reason for us to fear personal threats and difficult times. They may not be pleasant, but He is in the middle of them with us.

The “Fear not” command doesn’t, of course, mean that our lives will be free of troubles. Life here on Planet Earth is not always easy. It is like a training ground for eternity, and we constantly face testing of one kind or another. But Jesus says that we are not to be afraid of even those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul (v.28). If we are faithful, we can make it through; and nothing can “separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

*R& D Do you have a problem of fear? How might God, through the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit, help you deal with that?*

*Prayer: Father God, give me such a measure of trust in You that I have no cause to fear anything.*

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## Day 21

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**Read: Matthew 11:28-30**

### Take My Yoke

As a consequence of the fall from the close relationship Adam and Eve had with God, God promised hard work for mankind from that time forward (“through painful toil...all the days of your life,” Genesis 3:17). Thus, we all must work to earn a living to support ourselves and our family. That may seem a burden to us, but it is not the burden Jesus is talking about in this command. The greater burden we all face is the burden of sin and all that leads to it: distraction, temptation, confusion, rationalization, and such. These are the burdens that have eternal consequences.

And these are the burdens Christ is available to help us overcome. If we take his yoke upon ourselves, he provides us with love, healing, guidance, and peace that come from being in relationship with God. A relationship with God not only frees us from the burden of sin, but it changes meaningless, wearisome toil into spiritual productivity and purpose, giving new meaning to our lives.

A yoke is a heavy wooden apparatus that fits over the shoulders of the oxen, attached to the piece of equipment the oxen are pulling. Taking such an instrument upon ourselves doesn’t sound very comfortable! However, the point is that, as long as Jesus is in that yoke with us, he is pulling a far greater portion of the weight. Partnering with Jesus always makes the yoke easy and the burden light.

*R&D What burden are you carrying today that you need to share with Jesus?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for going the extra mile for me and carrying me along the way.*

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## Day 22

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**Read: Matthew 15:1-9**

### Honor Your Parents

The issue at stake in today's command is a classic example of how the Pharisees had constructed rules (traditions) that were supposed to provide details for carrying out the Ten Commandments but, in fact, often worked against God's law. The hypocrisy involved in such thinking was something that often met Christ's ire.

The practice of *Corban* (meaning "offering"; see Mark 7:11) allowed a person to make a vow to dedicate money to the temple that otherwise would have gone to support their parents. Thus, *Corban* had become a religiously acceptable way to neglect parents, circumventing the child's responsibility under the Fifth Commandment to "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). Jesus uses the absurdity of the *Corban* tradition to rebut the attempt by the Pharisees to blame his disciples for breaking a similar "tradition" in failing to wash their hands.

Jesus restates the command that we are to honor our parents. He uses Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 29:13) to speak to the hypocrisy of these Jewish leaders that would allow the command to be ignored. The Pharisees knew a lot about God, but they didn't understand God. As a result, the spirit of God's law seemed to evade them. They filled the gap with rules and regulations covering a wide variety of religious practices that they used to justify themselves while missing the heart of God's love and mercy. We can fall into the same error in our day. We don't want to become what someone called being sanctified by vinegar.

R&D *In what ways do you honor your father and mother?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for loving parents who taught me how to love.*

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## Day 23

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**Read: Luke 9:21-26**

### Deny Yourself

In our reading for today Jesus predicts his death for the first time, but he didn't want his disciples talking about it. They still did not understand fully who he was and the kind of Messiah he was. The Messiah was thought to come as a conquering king, but what lay ahead for Christ was something very different from that. When the disciples ultimately experienced Jesus' death and resurrection, they would understand what the Messiah had come to accomplish and they would understand his kingship in the way the Father had always intended. They would be able to share the good news of the king who had come to conquer hearts.

With this background, Jesus issues the command that we deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. This was obviously a hard teaching for the disciples. They knew what it meant for the Roman authorities to crucify a criminal, forcing him to carry his cross to the place of his execution. Also, self-denial must have been a new concept for them. Yet, Jesus was presenting a clear and challenging picture of what the Christian life is all about. Being a disciple of Christ means putting aside our selfish desires and focusing on what God wants us to do. For the original Twelve, it would mean physical suffering and death.

We can be grateful that Christ's command is not likely to cause us the degree of physical suffering that faced disciples in the early Church. But, "taking up our cross" is not a "once and

for all time” heroic sacrifice. It’s a continual obedience to what God has for us this moment, this hour, this day. We are to spend our lives serving God and the people around us. We fail, of course; but the good news is that we can confess our failure to God, who’ll pick us up, dust us off, and send us out again.

R&D *As a practical matter, what does taking up your cross mean to you?*

Prayer: *I’m falling way short of what I should be doing as your disciple, Lord Christ; help me to see your way more clearly day by day.*

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## Day 24

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**Read: Matthew 18:10-14**

### **Despise Not the Little Ones**

Having recently looked at our responsibility to honor our parents, we are now faced with Christ’s command that we not look down on children. William Barclay said this: “For us the great value of a child must always lie in the possibilities which are locked up within the child. Everything depends on how that child is taught and trained. The possibilities may never be realized; they may be stifled or stunted; that which might be used for good may be deflected to the purposes of evil; or they may be released and unleashed in such a way that a new tide of power floods the earth.” Little children are the future of the human race, and we should prize them.

In our passage for today, Jesus seems to be dealing with an issue that has further significance: he doesn’t want us to be looking down on *anyone*. Everyone has the capacity to become a child of God by accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord. As an online missionary for Global Media Outreach, I often have the opportunity to respond to an email from someone somewhere in the world who has just prayed to receive Christ. The first thing I say to them is that they have just made the most important decision in their life. I often can’t tell by their names whether they are male or female, what their age is, or anything about the circumstances of their life. But I do know they are someone God loves and rejoices that they have found salvation in Christ.

Just as a shepherd is concerned enough about any lamb that goes astray to search for it, so God is concerned about every human being He has created, not wanting anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). We often have the opportunity to help steer a child in the right direction, whether it is a child of our own or one we know as a neighbor or student. Furthermore, we also have the opportunity to know people who are “lost children” because they have not found a relationship with Christ. Whether we would consider them “our kind of people” or not, Christ is telling us never to look down on them. We need to do all we can to steer them to Christ by our example, our words, and our acts of kindness; and, of course, everyone should be “our kind of people.”

R&D *Do you have a list of people you pray for who have not yet given their lives to Christ? Is there anything else you could do to lead them in the right direction?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me not to look down on people who look down on people.*

## Day 25

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**Read: Matthew 18:15-17**

### **Responsibility to Offenders**

Today's passage is a remarkably practical way to deal with issues that, unfortunately, do happen between Christians. When another Christian sins against us, Jesus commands how we are to deal with it. (Incidentally, this process also works when a dispute that might not reach the measure of being sin occurs between brothers and sisters in Christ). The step-by-step procedure outlined is to be followed just as written. It works.

In this series we have already looked at how important it is to be reconciled with others. When we harbor ill feelings against others, it not only separates us from them but drives a wedge between us and our relationship with God. Thus, we see why the outlined procedure is so important.

Furthermore, we do not want there to be dissension within the body of Christ that is our community of faith. It is a terrible witness to the love of Christ for there to be bickering between Christians. It not only creates disharmony within the church but gives non-Christians an excuse to scoff at us and ignore our attempts to reach them for Christ.

Note that Christ's command is not a license to attack a person who has hurt us or slighted us in some way. It is not a means of starting a campaign against someone we feel has done us wrong. It is a sensible way to reconcile serious disagreements within the family of Christ before they have an opportunity to get out of hand and create ongoing distress.

*R&D Have you ever had occasion to put Christ's procedure into effect? How did it work?*

*Prayer: Thank you, Lord Christ, for giving us guidelines for living that are in accord with the will of the Father in heaven.*

## Day 26

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**Read: Luke 12:13-21**

### **Beware of Covetousness**

Today's lesson begins with a common problem: squabbling within a family about who gets what. It gives Jesus an excellent opportunity to talk about greed. Too often people, including Christians, get wrapped up in the values of the world. We are bombarded with advertisements aimed at getting us to buy things we may not need or to improve our image by having something that is better than what others have. Jesus lays it on the line: "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Jesus then uses a parable to teach the foolishness of acquiring wealth for its own sake, which might be summed up in the bumper sticker that says, "Hearses have no trailer-hitches." He is teaching that the abundant life has nothing to do with the possessions we acquire, and he is warning against the covetousness that wants what other people have.

The wealthy man in the parable dies before he can take advantage of what he has stored up in his barns. Planning for our retirement—preparing for life before death—is a good thing, but that should be done within the context of our life after death. As we looked at in an earlier study, we need to be storing up treasures in heaven while we can do so here on earth. But that means sacrificial living on behalf of others rather than focusing on having everything we could possibly want in the here and now.

R&D *How have you avoided the trap of acquiring things you really don't need?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to focus on what is important to You rather than the things I want just because I want them.*

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### Day 27

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**Read: Matthew 18:21-35**

#### Forgive Offenders

Here again we have Jesus answering a question by giving a parable to illustrate his point. It is Peter who asks the question in this instance. The rabbis taught that a person should forgive those who offend them three times. Peter perhaps thought he was giving that rule a generous stretch when he suggested seven times (seven being considered the “perfect” number). Jesus, of course, takes the matter a huge step forward. His seventy-seven times is simply a way of saying we shouldn't keep track of how many times a person offends us; we should always be willing to forgive.

The parable tells a story that clearly resonated with his disciples. In Jesus' time, serious consequences resulted from failure to pay one's debts. The debtor and his family could be forced to work out the debt; and, if that didn't satisfy the obligation, he could be put into prison until his property was sold to offset the debt. If that didn't work, the debtor could remain in prison for life. With this reality in mind, Jesus' story is about a man who is forgiven of his debt but is unwilling to forgive the person who owes him. More the punishment for him!

The point is that God has forgiven us our sins. His Son died to pay that price. When we reflect on what that forgiveness means to us, it should be easy to forgive others. If we don't forgive others, we are setting ourselves outside of God's gift of love.

One other point, however. Forgiving another repeatedly does not mean that we are mindless of that person's continuing offenses against us. God expects us to use our brains; He gave them to us. Wisdom dictates that, to the extent we can, we avoid encounters that will allow the offenses to continue.

R&D *How effective have you been in forgiving others? What might help you do better in the future?*

Prayer: *Father, forgive us our offenses as we forgive those who offend us.*

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### Day 28

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**Read: Matthew 19:3-9**

#### Honor Marriage

The Pharisees continually tried to trap Jesus. They were content with Judaism in the form they had shaped it, and Jesus definitely did not fit into their plans. John the Baptist had been put into prison and killed at least partially because of his support of marriage and opposition to divorce. The Pharisees assumed they could get Jesus into similar trouble if they could force him to take sides on the theological controversy concerning divorce.

In Jesus' time there were two schools of thought that represented the opposing positions on divorce. One group supported divorce for any reason. The other believed that divorce could be allowed only for marital unfaithfulness. These positions depended on how one interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Jesus focuses on marriage, not divorce. He makes it clear that God intend-



ed marriage to be permanent; the man and woman leave their parents and become one flesh. God has joined them together and mankind has no right to separate them.

The Pharisees then bring up the argument that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, a practice that was still followed. It was hardness of heart that caused Moses to permit men to divorce their wives; it was not God's plan. This leads to Jesus' stern warning: "anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." Divorce is rampant in our day, even among Christians; but God's plan has not changed. God's forgiveness is there when marriage fails, but God forbid that we should ever take marriage casually. Christian marriage—holy matrimony—is a sacrament in which God is a party.

R&D *In what ways have you honored marriage?*

Prayer: *What God has joined together, let not man separate.*

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## Day 29

**Read: Matthew 20:20-28**

### Be a Servant

In this situation it is the mother of two of the disciples who precipitates Jesus' teaching on servanthood. The mother of James and John wants special places for them in God's kingdom. Jesus' response demonstrates that he is under the authority of the Father who alone can decide who has special places in heaven. But he raises the question of whether these disciples will be able to maintain their commitment to him in face of the trials that lay before them all.

The rest of the disciples learn of the matter and become indignant. Apparently, they all wanted to be the greatest in the kingdom (18:1). This laid the groundwork for Jesus' teaching. The greatest in the kingdom would be the servant of all. Greatness, from God's point of view, is not based on achievements, power, recognition, and such things. It is based solely on unselfish giving for the benefit of others. Even like being a slave, Jesus says. Jesus described leadership from an entirely different perspective from what might otherwise be expected. Instead of using people to accomplish our own purposes, we are to serve them. A true leader has a servant's heart.

Jesus' mission was to serve others and to give his life away for the benefit of us all. He was to be a "ransom for many". A ransom was the price to be paid to release a slave from bondage. Jesus often told his followers that he must die; here he tells them why. Only by his death could he save them and all who would follow.

R&D *Think of a person who has exhibited Christian servanthood to you. How can you best follow that person's example?*

Prayer: *Lord, give me a servant's heart.*

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## Day 30

**Read: Matthew 21:18-22**

### Ask in Faith

Jesus has illustrated his commands by way of parables a number of times in this series. In today's reading he does it by way of an acted-out parable. His problem was not with the fig tree but with religion without substance. The Pharisees had not only added to the letter of the Law,

but they seemed to have entirely lost the spirit of the Law. Just as the fig tree looked good from a distance but was fruitless, so the form of Judaism looked good but was of no substance.

Specifically, our passage has to do with prayer. What does Jesus mean by saying that if we have faith and don't doubt, we can move mountains? He is, of course, speaking figuratively, but forcefully. Prayer isn't magic. Here is the paradox. There would be no room for faith if all we had to do was pray about something and it would automatically happen. On the other hand, if we really do pray in faith, we can expect things to happen.

"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." This verse is not a guarantee that we will get whatever we pray for. God doesn't answer prayers in a way that will cause us harm or that would violate His will or go against His nature. "Belief" means praying in accordance with God's will. The stronger our belief, the more likely our prayers are to be in accord with God's will. Those are the prayers it is God's joy to fulfill.

*R&D It's Lent and a good time to assess your prayer life. What do you need to do to grow in your prayer relationship with God?*

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

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### Day 31

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**Read: Luke 14:7-14**

#### **Reach Out to the Poor**

Today we have a lesson within a lesson. The command of Jesus we are looking at is that, when we have a banquet, we are to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind...in other words, those in need. But our teaching this time begins with a parable. Jesus sees that people are angling for the places of honor at a table, so he warns them against that tactic. He points out to them that they may end up having to move to a lower place because the host thinks someone of higher regard should be in that place. Then they suffer the embarrassment of having to move to the end of the table. It's much better to seek the lower place first and then be asked to rise higher.

Jesus is, of course, talking about humility as a backdrop to his command. If pride is thinking too much of ourselves, humility is not thinking too little. Humility doesn't mean thinking ourselves unworthy. Instead, it is having the perspective of seeing ourselves in relation to Almighty God on the one hand and yet a child of God on the other. In other words, it's a matter of balance.

Jesus then takes the next step. It is not just a matter of the seating arrangements at a luncheon; it's a question of whom we invite. His point is that reaching out to friends, neighbors, and loved ones is not a bad thing to do, but simply leads to those people returning the favor. To Jesus, it is much more important that we serve those in need. Rather than doing the socially acceptable thing, and having that as our focus, what about thinking of the many ways we can help those who cannot help themselves? That's what the kingdom of God is all about.

*R&D What are you doing to reach out to those in need? What more could you be doing?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to focus less on myself and more on those in need.*

## Day 32

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**Read: Matthew 22:15-22**

### **Render to Caesar**

Once again we have a situation of the Jewish leaders trying to trap Jesus. Here it is the unlikely combination of Pharisees and Herodians who approach him. The Pharisees resented Roman rule of Palestine; the Herodians approved the policies instituted by Rome. It looked like a no-win situation to ask Jesus whether or not it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. If he approved of the taxes, it would be like saying that money that should go to support the Jewish religion should go to the ungodly Roman treasury instead, justifying the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus. If he said it was inappropriate to pay taxes, the Herodians could turn him over to the Roman authorities on the charge of rebellion.

Once again Jesus thwarts their efforts. He asks for a coin used for paying the tax, and questions his antagonists about whose image is on it. When they say it is Caesar's, he gives the wise command, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Jesus avoided the trap by pointing out that dual citizenship was involved (1 Peter 2:17). Our citizenship in our city, state, and nation makes it necessary to support the governments of those entities. We have to pay for the protection and services we are provided, just as did the Jews of Jesus' time in supporting a Roman government of which not all of them approved. But, we are also citizens of the kingdom of God, to which we pledge our ultimate obedience and commitment. It wasn't an issue for Jesus to deal with at the time, but when there is a clear conflict between loyalty to our civil government and loyalty to God, we are clearly to stand with God.

*R&D How do you deal with the issue of dual citizenship?*

*Prayer: Lord, we lift up to you those prisoners of conscience who live in places where Christians are persecuted. Guide them, protect them, and help them to be witnesses of Your love to those who persecute them.*

## Day 32

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**Read: Matthew 22:34-40**

### **Love the Lord, Love Your Neighbor**

In between our last reading and today's the Sadducees had taken their turn in testing Jesus on the issue of the resurrection (in which the Pharisees believed and the Sadducees did not; vv.23-33). Jesus' response to that test had come out on the Pharisees' side in favor of resurrection. Rather than being encouraged by Jesus' silencing of the Sadducees, the Pharisees were still not satisfied. So they decide to try something else to trap him by asking Jesus what is the greatest commandment in the Law.

This was an issue for the Pharisees because they had come up with over 600 laws, supposedly enhancing and clarifying God's Law. They were continually trying to distinguish between those laws that were most important and those that were not. Thus, one of the Pharisees—an "expert in the law"—questions Jesus about what he believes to be the most important law. Relying on Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus answers with the two greatest commandments, love of God and love of neighbor.

It was, of course, the perfect answer. Loving God and neighbor summarizes the Ten Commandments and the other Old Testament moral laws. Augustine of Hippo supposedly said

something like, “Love God and do as you please.” The fact is that, by “loving God with all you heart and with all your soul and all your mind” and loving your neighbor as yourself, you will be keeping all the commandments. This is looking at the Law positively, from God’s point of view. When we do that, it naturally follows that we will be in God’s will.

R&D *Is it possible to obey these two commandments? Is it worth trying?*

Prayer: *Lord God, I fall far short of Your goal for me; thank You for Your forgiveness and the encouragement that keeps me trying.*

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### Day 34

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**Read: Matthew 26:26-30**

#### **Take, Eat, and Drink**

As Jesus has his last meal with his disciples before his crucifixion we have the model of how we are to remember what he did for us and what it means to be with him in our day. The *Life Application Bible* states it well: “Each name we use for the sacrament brings out a different dimension of it. It is the *Lord’s Supper* because it commemorates the Passover meal Jesus ate with his disciples; it is the *Eucharist* (thanksgiving) because in it we thank God for Christ’s work for us; it is *Communion* because through it we commune with God and other believers. As we eat the bread and drink the wine, we should be quietly reflective as we recall Jesus’ death and his promise to come again, grateful for God’s wonderful gift to us, and joyful as we meet with Christ in the body of believers.” No wonder Jesus commanded us to do this in remembrance of him.

The wine represents “my blood of the covenant,” poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Under the old covenant, those who lived before Jesus could only approach God by way of a priest and an animal sacrifice. Now all people can come directly to God through faith in Jesus because his death (the shedding of his blood) has made us acceptable in God’s eyes (Romans 3:21-24). The old covenant was a shadow of the new (Jeremiah 31:31; Hebrews 8:1ff). It looked to the day when Jesus would become the ultimate sacrifice for all mankind.

There is great comfort in sharing Holy Communion. It not only reminds us of what has been done for us, but it assures us of what is to come. Jesus did that in our brief passage for today. He tells his disciples of the victory over death that he will achieve on their behalf and promises to drink the wine anew with them in his Father’s kingdom.

R&D *How important is the celebration of Holy Communion in your life? Why?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the bread and wine you give to me through your body on earth.*

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### Day 35

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**Read: John 3:1-15**

#### **Be Born Again**

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians had come to Jesus to test him, to catch him in a trap. Nicodemus comes innocently. He is truly interested in discovering the truth that Jesus has brought into the world. The problem is that he only seems to be able to understand on an intellectual level while Jesus is clearly speaking on a spiritual one. It is the same problem we run into in our day. The difference is in being born again; and that is not just a suggestion on Jesus’ part...it

is a command just like the others we have been considering in this series. To be in relationship with God, we must, in the spiritual sense, be born again.

Jesus says we are to be “born of water and the Spirit” (v.7). This could relate to the contrast between physical birth (water) and spiritual birth (Spirit). Or it could have to do with being regenerated by the Spirit and demonstrating that rebirth by water baptism. Nicodemus would have been familiar with Ezekiel 36:25-26: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you.”

Jesus was trying to make it clear to Nicodemus that coming into God’s kingdom involves more than an intellectual assent to certain truths. It means turning our life over to God so that His Holy Spirit may come into us and take control of us. It is only then that we can begin to understand God’s will for us because we stop looking at things from primarily a worldly point of view and look, instead, for God’s purpose in our life. We can rejoice that Nicodemus may have come to understand what Jesus was telling him because he later spoke up boldly in Jesus’ defense (7:50-51) and assisted Joseph of Arimathea (19:39) in Jesus’ burial.

*R&D When were you born again? Have you shared your experience with others? Why or why not?*

*Prayer: Blessed Lord God, You provide for us all we need to love You and grow in our relationship with You. Thank You.*

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## Day 36

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**Read: John 14:15-21**

### Keep My Commandments

Today’s reading is a command that comes with a promise. It is a promise that the Holy Spirit will come into Jesus’ followers as a Counselor. The Holy Spirit might also be called our Comforter, our Encourager, our Advocate. Jesus is telling his disciples that, when he is gone, he will not be leaving them on their own. He will be with them and in them by the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. This regenerating power of God came on the disciples just prior to Jesus’ ascension (20:22) and was poured out on all believers at Pentecost (Acts 2).

The Holy Spirit is the very presence of God within us, guiding our lives in the directions God would have us go. In our reading for today and the immediately following chapters, we can learn many things about the Holy Spirit. He will be with us forever (v.16), the world cannot accept him (v.17), he lives with us and in us (v.17), he teaches us (v.26), he reminds us of Jesus’ words (v.26; 15:26), he convicts us of sin (16:8) and he brings glory to Christ (16:14), among other things. Although the world cannot understand and accept him, the Holy Spirit is, for the believer, a gift beyond measure.

By keeping Jesus’ commands and obeying them (v.21), we show that we love God...and we get a picture of the interconnectedness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He who loves Jesus will be loved by the Father, and by Jesus, and Jesus will show himself to us through the Holy Spirit. Obedience is the key. It is easy to say that we love Christ; we show it by obeying his commandments.

*R&D Reflect on the ways in which the Holy Spirit works in your life.*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit of God, help me to keep Christ's commands.*

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### Day 37

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**Read: Matthew 26:36-41**

#### Watch and Pray

Although the command of Christ we look at today was directed to specific people (his disciples) in a particular situation (his agony in the Garden at Gethsemane), it nonetheless has universal application. What was going on was, of course, one of the most significant things that has happened in the history of the world. It was Jesus' time of testing. Would he accept the plan God had for him, knowing the great agony of body, mind, and spirit he would have to endure for that plan to succeed? The future of Christianity depended on the decision that Jesus would make. What a responsibility it was for his disciples to be praying for him at that time!

Yet, is Christ not often calling on us to watch and pray? In one of those situations that I like to call God-incidents, I had the opportunity to do so this morning. Following the teaching at our monthly men's breakfast, we normally have a period of discussion concerning the topic of the teaching. Today, however, our leader asked us to take fifteen minutes to watch and pray. It was a blessed time.

Life is filled with crises. They may be our own or they may be situations our friends or loved ones are facing. These are times to watch and pray. The "watch" part is not just that we not be led into temptation, distraction, or (in the disciples' case) drowsiness, but to watch for what God would say to us in that prayer time. The best prayer is communication with God...not just our telling God our needs or the needs of others, but listening for His inner guidance concerning the situation. Maybe He has a solution for us, or a suggestion about what we might do to alleviate the problem. As noted earlier in this series, sometimes God wants us to "put feet on our prayers."

R&D *When have you seriously taken time to watch and pray? What did the experience mean to you?*

Prayer: *Lord, teach me to pray.*

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### Day 38

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**Read: John 21:15-19**

#### Feed My Sheep

Once again today we have a command that comes to a particular person (Peter) in a specific situation (Jesus' challenge to him); but, again, it has universal application to us all. Peter had denied Jesus three times, and Jesus was giving Peter three chances to repent and express his undying love for Jesus. The first two times, when Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" he used the Greek word *agape* for the word love. *Agape* is self-sacrificing love. Peter replied with "you know I love you" using the Greek word *phileo* (brotherly love). The third time Jesus used *phileo* and Peter responded with the same word. Jesus didn't get the *agape* answer he wanted, but apparently he believed he had reached Peter on sufficiently stable ground that a dramatic change had occurred.

Jesus needed to remove the cloud of doubt about Peter. He was counting on Peter to lead the disciples in the greatest mission the world would ever know. It is easy enough to say that you love Jesus, but he was calling Peter to a lifelong commitment...just as he does each of us. Once

Peter realized who Jesus really was, his occupation changed from a fisherman to a Christian leader and his character changed from impetuosity to a “rock” on which Christ would build his Church.

Being told to “feed my sheep” is not simply a call to feed the poor or to otherwise care for those in need. That call to Peter went much deeper. Jesus would no longer be physically present. Peter, with all his faults, had proven himself a natural leader. A leader cares for those under his charge in multiple ways. That is what Jesus now expected of Peter. In varying ways, it is what he expects of all who follow him.

*R&D In what ways does Jesus call you to “feed my sheep”? How are you doing at it?*

*Prayer: Lord, You have blessed me with such great teacher/leaders; may I have learned from them how You would best have me lead.*

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### Day 39

**Read: Luke 24:44-49**

#### Receive God’s Power

In today’s passage, we are truly at a divine moment. Jesus has just spent 40 days with his followers and now he is about to ascend into heaven. “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (v.45). That must have been the world’s greatest Bible study session! Jesus explains to them how Scripture has been fulfilled in him as the long-awaited Messiah. His role as a prophet had been foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15-20; his sufferings were prophesied in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53; his resurrection was predicted in Psalm 16:9-11 and Isaiah 53:10-11. He wanted to be sure they understood the entire story before departing from them.

These people were going to be witnesses “of these things.” The future of the Church was on their shoulders. They were to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name not only locally (beginning in Jerusalem, v.47) but to all nations. How could they do that?

They would do it by the power of the Holy Spirit. They would be “clothed with power from on high” (v.49). And this is Christ’s command to us as well: receive God’s power. We have earlier looked at the nature and importance of the Holy Spirit and the characteristics of the Spirit. Now we focus on the empowering that comes to us when we give our lives to Christ. We are empowered with gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4) to minister to one another and the world around us. We cannot reach the world for Christ unless empowered by the Holy Spirit; but, with that power, nothing can stop us.

*R&D What is your sense of being empowered by the Holy Spirit? How are you using your spiritual gifts?*

*Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, empower your people by the grace of your love.*

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### Day 40

**Read: Matthew 28:16-20**

#### Make Disciples

As we reach the end of Lent and last of the commands of Christ, we have a natural follow-up from yesterday’s study. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and

teaching them to obey everything” Jesus has commanded. God gave Christ authority and we are his authorized disciples to accomplish this purpose. Nothing is more important.

Does this mean that we are all evangelists? No, God will use us in many ways to make disciples. But we are all witnesses to our love of Jesus and should share that whenever we have an opportunity in ways that are natural to us. By use of our gifts of the Spirit, we may meet the needs of others who would thereby become disciples. When they do, we can teach them or support the teaching of them that they may know to obey all that God has commanded. That may be as simple as leading a Bible study group. If we are aged or incapacitated, we can nonetheless be prayer warriors in support of others. There are unlimited ways in which we can do our part in this great effort to bring the world to Christ.

As we have looked at the commands of Christ over these 40 days, perhaps we have been convicted that we have fallen short of his expectations of us. Thank God that He forgives us when we fail, and Lent has been an ideal time to measure ourselves and seek forgiveness. We may also have realized that the commands are challenges, opportunities to go forward more boldly in Christ’s name. The commands of Christ are not burdens that he has laid upon us; instead, they are revelations of how to live the abundant life (John 10:10) by walking closely with our Lord and Savior.

*R&D In what ways are you fulfilling the role of making disciples for Christ?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for the season of Lent and for the opportunity for self-examination, repentance, and forgiveness.*

***by Harry C. Griffith***

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