



“Yes, But How Can We Do That?”

Advent Study

Day 1

Read: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

Introduction

It has been reported that Mark Twain was once asked, “How do you handle the passages in the Bible that you do not understand?” Mark Twain replied, “*It is not the ones I don’t understand that bother me. It’s the ones I understand only too well and don’t live up to that bother me.*”

That is the dilemma of virtually every serious Christian. Our problem is only incidentally what we don’t understand in the Bible. Like Mark Twain, there is so much more that we understand only too well but have difficulty living up to that is the problem. For example, Jesus said, “*love your enemies*” or “*forgive seventy times seven,*” which means “without limit.” But in the mix of daily living those, and many other instructions we are given in the New Testament, are much more easily said than done.

This Advent Season series will be an attempt to address that problem, to build bridges over which we can choose to walk, if we will, to enable us “*to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.*” In these 28 days, we will try to look at some of the teachings in the New Testament that are easy enough to understand but are often difficult to adequately practice. To the extent that we are able, this will be a “how-to” series, trying to suggest some concrete steps to bring those teachings more deeply into our daily practice. To succeed and grow in this daily devotional effort will take some thoughtfulness, the help of God in prayer, and a measure of personal awareness, determination, and sacrifice. But then what better way is there to use this Advent Season and to prepare ourselves more fully to accept the Lord Jesus into our hearts and home this Christmas?

R&D Think of some of the teachings of Jesus that you have experienced as difficult to put into practice. How do you reconcile the differences between how we are called to live and how, in fact, we do live?

Prayer: O Lord, You teach us to walk and not to faint. Arm us, we pray, with Your grace that we may be strengthened to use this Advent Season to grow in those things that are difficult for us.

Day 2

Read: Matthew 5:1-11

Living the Blessed Life Now, Part One

One of the most beautiful and, at the same time, most daunting collection of verses in the New Testament, are the twelve verses we call the Beatitudes. Because of their beauty, many of us grew up memorizing these “blesseds” in Sunday school. We also probably grew up thinking that, however beautiful they may be, the behavior they called for in us is not just impractical, but impossible.

But Jesus is a very down-to-earth leader who consistently sets standards that are within the reach of his disciples. So, can we understand these Beatitudes so you and I can not only live into them but live into them most of the time?

Recent scholarship has suggested that the words translated “Blessed are” should more accurately be translated “O the blessedness of...” or “Blessedness comes to...” These more accurate renderings of the original language open two doors for us. First, they lead us to see that blessedness is not a permanent state to which we might graduate some day, but an occasional state that we can actually experience from time to time. The rewards promised in the Beatitudes are also not future goals but are attainable qualities we can live into in the here and the now. That kind of understanding, which is closer to what Jesus intended, can lead us to see the Beatitudes in a new light.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God” can become “Blessedness comes to us when we are penitently conscious of our own spiritual poverty. At that moment of honesty before ourselves and God, we are already living in the Kingdom of God.”

“Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when we are able to share in the sufferings of others for through that offering of sorrow, we will discover the power of God’s comfort for ourselves.”

“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when we seek to solve problems and not to control people, for in dealing with people in that way, we will inherit a piece of eternity.”

You see, each of those blessings is available to each of us now. As Jesus intended, we can reach for every one of them today.

R&D *Think of a time when you have already behaved in any of these ways. Did you find some satisfaction in that behavior? Could that good feeling be called “blessedness”?*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit, guide us we pray you, to live into these things that Jesus has laid before us. Then, we pray, help us to recognize in ourselves the gift of your blessedness.*

Day 3

Reread: Matthew 5:1-11

Living the Blessed Life Now, Part Two

Yesterday we suggested that new scholarship on the Beatitudes has given us a more accurate understanding of what Jesus had in mind with these “blesseds.” Blessedness is not a permanent attainment but something that comes to us when we behave in the ways Jesus is describing. Yesterday we looked at three of the nine “blessed.” In that same vein, we will try to look at the next three today.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when we long for righteousness as a starving person longs for food or a thirsty person longs for water, for in that moment of longing, the peace of God will belong to us.”

“Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when we try to understand others rather than to judge them, for when we try to see with their eyes, others will do the same for us and we will know what God has done for all of us in Jesus Christ.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when our motives are morally right even though our actions may be clumsy. For in that internal purity of intention we shall stand in the presence of God.”

Many of us already live life, at least some of the time, on the basis of these things. Many of us also know that living into these qualities is the door through which God’s blessedness has already come to us.

R&D *Which of these three qualities is easiest for you to live by? Which is the most difficult? Can you think, in either case, of why?*

Prayer: *Almighty God, thank You for this wondrous description of the Christian life. Confirm in me those things in my life that show forth these qualities. Strengthen me to grow in those things that are difficult.*

Day 4

Reread: Matthew 5:1-11

Living the Blessed Life Now, Part Three

When we think about the blessings we have in life, we sometimes think of them as coming from outside of ourselves. We say of good friends or family, “You are a real blessing to me.” Or we say, “My life has been blessed with good health and good fortune.” Jesus understood those kinds of blessings and he wants us to acknowledge and give thanks for them. But Jesus also understood that blessings can come into our lives as a result of our own good behavior. The Beatitudes are, in fact, a list of behaviors that Jesus tells us will generate blessedness in us. The behaviors Jesus describes, and the blessings that stem from them, are all within our reach. To help us grasp that, again, as we have the past two days, here is how we might rephrase the final three.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when we work to resolve differences between ourselves and others and between others and others, for then we will be doing God’s work as His sons and daughters.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the Kingdom of God,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when we stand for what is right in spite of anything those around us do or say, for in that moment we will know that we belong to no one but God.”

“Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you...on my account...for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you,” can become, “Blessedness comes to us when we stand our moral ground even though we are ridiculed and people make fun of our faith, for then we will know that we stand in a long line of people whose faith is known in heaven.”

However we may try to rephrase each of these Beatitudes to more accurately represent what Jesus intended, at the heart of it is the truth that none of these is intended to be a “counsel of perfection.” Rather, Jesus wanted all of us to practice and live into them as part of our every day. He also wanted us to know the blessedness that will follow such behavior. So, how about going on a journey with these 11 verses and, on the journey, coming to know the blessings of God more intimately than ever before? It is a journey that is worth taking.

R&D *In what circumstances in your life now could you more intentionally put one or more of these Beatitudes into practice? How could you go about doing that?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you have taught us to seek the blessings of God and you have opened the doors through which we can attain them. Now, we pray you, give us the wisdom to see those doors and the strength and courage to open them and to walk through them in our own lives.*

Day 5

Read: Matthew 5:17-28

A Higher Law

St. Paul once wrote about the Ten Commandments that “the law is our schoolmaster...” (Galatians 3:24). He meant that it is the Ten Commandments, and the moral law that stems from them, that teaches us to recognize right from wrong, good from evil. The function of the moral law is to set standards of behavior by which we will be judged and into which we need to grow.

In this passage, Jesus takes this a giant step further. He expands the scope of the law to give it authority, not only over what we might do, but also over what we might think of doing.

“You have heard that it was said... ‘you shall not kill’... but I say unto you, anyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to the same judgment.” And again, “You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall not commit adultery’ but I say unto you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

The anger and lust of which Jesus speaks is not the random, involuntary thought that, because we are human, arises quickly and just as quickly passes on. Jesus is concerned with the anger and lustful thoughts that we choose to feed on and nurture in our minds. He knew that most immoral acts, before they become actions in the body, are given birth as thoughts in the mind. He also knew that keeping and feeding such thoughts over time can threaten to change our behavior.

So, how can we assert control over such brooding thoughts? There are two things that might be helpful.

We can fill our minds with such good thoughts about people and things that there is little room for other thoughts to linger long. When thoughts of anger or lust come inviting our attention, we can greet them by saying, “I’m sorry. I am too busy with better things to think about.”

More profoundly, we can recognize that our sinful thoughts, as with our sinful behavior, are not just sins against our neighbor but sins against God. Ask yourself, “Would it please God to know what I am thinking about?” If not, we have an additional motive to turn our minds elsewhere.

In these words, Jesus sets a very high moral standard because he believes the words of the writer of Proverbs: “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7).

R&D *How do you usually dismiss morally unwelcome thoughts when they pop into your mind uninvited? Does it usually work?*

Prayer: *O Lord, my God, You know my uprisings and my down sittings. You know me inside and out. Cleanse me, body, mind and soul that I may draw nearer to You in Christ Jesus my Lord.*

Day 6

Read: Luke 6:27-36

Love Our Enemies, Part One

Not too many years ago, there was a popular bumper sticker that read, “Don’t get mad; get even!” One of the most primitive instincts of the human heart is the instinct for justice or, in its worst form, for revenge. We do not like to be taken advantage of and, when we are, the impulse to get even is a powerful one.

Jesus calls us to a radically different ethic. He calls us to, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who spitefully use you.” For most of us, loving our enemies will not be an action of the heart as much as it will be a decision of the will. We can choose, as St. Paul once wrote, “not to be overcome by evil but to overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). And the choices, while not easy, are clear. We can begin by refusing to allow our emotions or the encouraging emotions of people around us urging us on, to determine our behavior, regardless of what has been done to us. We can choose, rather, to put our behavior under the control of our minds and the basic principles of behavior we have learned as Christians. We can choose to behave ourselves only in ways that are morally right. We can simply refuse to retaliate. We can refrain, and encourage others to refrain, from speaking ill of an enemy. We can choose to pray for our enemies, not just that they might change, but that good may happen to them. Choosing to behave in these ways, perhaps in the providence of God, a door will be opened so conversations with our enemies may be initiated and the hurt and the tension between us relieved.

It is the strong person, depending on the grace of Christ, who can choose to do these things. It is the weak person, depending only on himself, who will choose to be satisfied with nothing but getting mad and getting even.

R&D How would you define the difference between passively becoming a doormat for your enemies and consciously choosing to love your enemies as Jesus commanded?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, it is so unnatural and nearly impossible to love those who do me harm. Expand my heart and soul that I may be enabled to live more fully into this command you have given me.

Day 7

Matthew 5:38-48

Love Our Enemies, Part Two

I recently heard a report of the missionary work of a major Christian denomination in Uganda. Unlike most African nations, Christianity is the majority religion in Uganda. Part of the report described some of the ugly tactics being used against Christians by some fanatics in the militant Muslim minority. In the question period that followed, someone asked, “Why don’t the Christians fight back and defend themselves against such personal attacks?” The answer was as stunning as it was unexpected. “We try, instead, to show them that we love them because that is what the Gospel requires us to do.”

Jesus tells his followers, “You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say unto you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.”

Of all the distinguishing traits to which Christians are called to aspire, this call to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us is one of the most challenging. The old law of “love your neighbors and hate your enemies” is still very much alive in our culture.

Yes, but how can we change that attitude to become more as Jesus calls us to be? Part of it has to do with intentionally and consciously adopting some principles from which we will not waver. 1) Retaliation and revenge, however justified they seem to be at the time, are always morally wrong. In the mind of Jesus, there are no exceptions to that. 2) Resentments and unresolved conflicts are always more harmful to the one who holds them than they are to those against whom we hold them. 3) While all conflicts cannot be resolved, there can be no escalation of the conflict when we choose to forgive those who have sinned against us. A fire without new

fuel eventually dies out. 4) We can replace resentment and hate with prayer. It is nearly impossible to continue to hate someone for whom we are praying regularly.

Is any of this easy? It isn't for me and it won't be for you. But is it right? Jesus thought so, and one goal of every Christian is to become more like him as we grow.

R&D What steps do you think you could take to express the love for our enemies to which Christians are called?

Prayer: O God, You are the Father of all Your creatures and You love both my friends and my enemies. Stir within me that same love for friend and foe alike, that I may more fully walk that path that Jesus trod.

Day 8

Read: Matthew 5:43-48

The Ultimate Demand

There is a streak of perfectionism that runs in our family. Whatever is to be done must be done the very best that one can do it. The golf to be played must be the best golf, the paper to be written must be the very best paper, and the special dinner to be served must be the best ever. Such a standard invites frustration for seldom can one be the very best, and never can one be perfect.

It is disturbing then to read this astounding and impossible demand from Jesus: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v.48).

Douglas Hare writes that the Greek word translated "perfect" doesn't mean "without flaw." The Greek word actually means "complete," or "functional." A wrench is a perfect wrench when it fulfills the purpose for which it is needed. A tree is perfect when it fulfills the purpose for which it was planted. A person is perfect if he/she attains the purpose for which he/she was created.

At the beginning of this reading, Jesus says that one way we become perfect is to show love not only to family and friends, but to our enemies as well: "Love your enemies."

The Greek word for love used here is "agape," which is a love that describes "unquenchable benevolence" (Barclay). This love is a goodwill offered to others no matter what their actions have been towards us. This is the love that desires only the highest good towards another no matter what has happened.

God asks for this streak of benevolence in those who would be His children. Yes, but how is such a love possible for you and for me? Its origin lies not in the heart but in the will and requires a determination of the mind. 1) It finds its impetus as we forgive others for their past actions. 2) It asks that we relinquish revenge and retribution. 3) It means that we are expected to acknowledge that all others, even our enemies, are children of God and created in His image. 4) It requires us to understand that God, who loves us in spite of our sins and disobedience, also loves them.

We must love because in so doing we reflect the nature of God. Then and only then do we fulfill the purpose for which we were created. Then, we become perfect.

R&D How does it help me to know that perfection in God's eyes comes as we fulfill the purpose for which He created us?

Prayer: Lord, help me broaden the boundaries of my love. My love for You and my family and friends stems from love that You gave me. Grant me now to have Your streak of benevolence to all those around me so that I may be that person You created me to be.

Day 9

Read: Matthew 7:1-6

Judging Others, Part One

Judgment of others is a sin with which I have often struggled. I remember years ago an oft-repeated happening. The person in front of me in line at the grocery store checkout counter would be ill dressed and unkempt. Their grocery selections would include items that I considered luxuries, things that I could not afford to buy for my own family. When the time to pay came, they would take out their wallet and use food stamps with which to pay for their groceries. And I would think, “We work very hard for what we buy for our family. Why can’t they do the same?”

This self-righteous hypocritical judging of others is not my sin alone. As a society, it so permeates the workplace that we have myriads of laws to protect those who are different from the accepted norm, those who are obese or disabled in some way, or of another race or religion or sexual orientation. We prefer to associate with those who in outward appearance are just like us. And we judge, often harshly, those who are different, who do not seem to measure up to the standards that we have set for ourselves.

Douglas Hare warns that such judgmentalism is a disease of the spirit for in it “the critic arrogantly assumes a superiority that entitles him or her to assess the failings of others.”

Yes, but how can we avoid the judgment of others that damages us spiritually? 1) We remember that we also have faults and imperfections which God meets with generous forgiveness and kindly correction. 2) We seek to develop a “there but for the grace of God go I” attitude towards others whom we see as different from ourselves. We recognize that we do not and cannot know the circumstances of their lives that have influenced how they are. 3) We keep in the forefront of our minds the knowledge that we please God when we show forth His own attitude of compassion and concern for all people.

R&D It is said that most of our suspicions of others are aroused by our knowledge of ourselves. How do you find your own failings entering into your judgment of other people? What steps can you take to change?

Prayer: Lord, help me to look at others, all others, especially those different from me, as Your children and worthy of Your love and therefore my love as well. Help me to consciously remember when I am tempted to criticize another, how generous You are with me.

Day 10

Read: Romans 2:1-11

Judging Others, Part Two

Albert Camus once wrote, “I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment, it takes place every day.” Camus was not a religious man and held no belief in the Last Judgment. He was, however, a keen observer of human behavior. He knew well the tendency we all have to judge one another. St. Paul, writing to the Romans, spoke of it powerfully, “Therefore, O man, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge another....”

On one level, judging other people is both necessary and desirable. We judge people when we choose our friends. We are wise to judge the people with whom we are willing to do business. As parents, we are careful to judge the moral character of the young people with whom we want our children to associate. Such judgments are not only necessary but good common sense.

What concerned St. Paul was our human tendency to judge the faults of others as a way of making ourselves look better, first to ourselves and then to others. He was speaking of the judgments of others that are designed, consciously or otherwise, to sully another person's reputation. He was referring to the malicious gossip, in which we sometimes participate, directed at people we don't like or with whom we don't agree or who we somehow feel are below our station in life.

Changing that behavior will be easier when we recognize some basic and powerful truths more fully. Change could begin when we recognize that we tend to be most critical of behavior in others of which we ourselves are guilty. Our criticism is often, unconsciously, a way to deflect judgment away from ourselves. St. Paul also wrote, "In passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself for you are doing the same things." Change could grow when we recognize that our casual judgment of others isn't free. The extent to which we judge others is the very extent to which we will be judged by others and, ultimately, by God (Matthew 7:1). Finally, change could be established when we recognize that God, and not ourselves, is the only judge. Unlike us, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Psalm 19:9).

R&D *In what ways do you think that we do damage to ourselves when we are too quick to judge others?*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit, the Psalmist once said, "Judgment is mine says the Lord." Create in me the heart to lean fully on that so I may resist the temptation to want to play God and exercise hurtful judgments myself.*

Day 11

Read: Matthew 3:1-10

The Problem with Repentance

Repentance has acquired a bad name in these early years of the twenty-first century. There seem to be few who are really willing to acknowledge their faults.

Some years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger of the famous Menninger Psychiatric Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, wrote a book entitled, *"Whatever Became of Sin?"* He spoke of the movement in the counseling field to describe all bad behavior in psychological terms and, in his view, the unfortunate tendency not to hold anyone responsible for their faults. He writes, "The very word sin was a proud word. It was a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a reality in every human being's life. But the word went with the notion of sinfulness. Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Isn't anyone responsible for his behavior anymore?"

When John the Baptist came to Israel and shouted, "Bear fruit that befits repentance," he had the same problem with the people of his day. The sad truth is that there is more internal spiritual pain in this world stemming from guilt and unforgiven sin than from any other single cause. So, what keeps us from acknowledging our sin and seeking God's forgiveness?

One reason is that we tend to use a measure that is too easy. We say, "I may not be perfect but I am as good as the next one." As long as our standards of good and bad are other people's behavior, we will seldom see our need to repent.

Phillips Brooks, the great preacher of Trinity Church in Boston had a better idea. He once wrote: "Humility is not seeing ourselves as less than we are but standing at our tallest height and measuring ourselves against Christ."

Recognizing our need for genuine repentance depends on the standard against which we are willing to compare ourselves. Comparing ourselves with Christ, our unworthiness will be evident. Then, confessing it in a genuine act of repentance, we will be led to God's forgiveness.

R&D In what ways do you offer your repentance to the Lord? Over what kind of sins?

Prayer: O Lord Jesus Christ, open my mind and heart to see myself as you see me and empower me to come openly to repentance that I may know your forgiveness and peace.

Day 12

Read: Matthew 18:7-9, 5:27-30

Cut It Out and Throw It Away

In some primitive cultures, a thief caught in his crime is punished by having his hands cut off. A woman caught in inappropriate sexual activity is punished by losing her life. We look at these things, whether in the past or the present, with revulsion. And well we should.

What, then, does Jesus mean when he says, "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire."

The words are not to be taken literally. Jesus is not asking us to maim ourselves in the cause of religion. Jesus is asking us to name our worst sin which is maiming us spiritually and throw it away! Failure to do so is to live life impaired both here and into the hereafter.

So, how do we do that? The process is simple to describe but more difficult to execute. But the reward is well worth it.

The hardest part may be to identify our worst moral or spiritual failing, our major moral fault. If you can't see it for yourself, ask your closest friends or your family. They probably know it better than you do. Then, as you might do if you were going on a diet or planning to quit smoking, make a conscious decision to cut it out of your life. Then, stop doing it! When you fail or backslide, forgive yourself as God has already forgiven you, and start over again. Every day, pray for the power of God to keep you on the right path. Finally, expect and welcome the change that is happening in you as you grow and mature as a Christian.

It is not our hands or our feet or our eyes that God wants from us. It is our hearts and minds. We will want to make that offering as pure and as noble as our efforts and discipline, multiplied by God's grace, can achieve.

R&D Remember a time when you successfully dieted or quit smoking or drinking. What disciplines did you find helpful then? Would the same disciplines help you cut out and throw away a sin from your spirit?

Prayer: Almighty God, open my mind to see clearly the sins that threaten to maim me spiritually and empower my spirit with the courage and tenacity to root it out, for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ.

Day 13

Read: Matthew 18:21-35

A Way to Forgive

A business man once boasted, “You won’t catch me getting ulcers. For one thing, I just take things as they come. For another, I don’t ever hold a grudge, not even against people who have done things to me that I will never forgive.”

Our need to offer and receive forgiveness is one of the major themes of the Bible. It is also one of the easiest things to speak about but one of the most difficult things to do.

Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” And Jesus said to him, “I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven.” Forgiveness is to be offered without limit both in regard to whom to forgive and how often. That makes it difficult.

Yet, Jesus teaches us to forgive without limit for several very good reasons. Regardless of how another person chooses to respond to our forgiveness, in the act of forgiving, we remove the destructive burden of anger and resentment from our own heart. Healthy relationships are never built on judgment and unresolved angers, however justified we may think they are, but only on loving and forgiving each other. Forgiving without limit leads us to enter into the heart of God, who always forgives without limit.

So, how do we do it? Like most good things we do, it begins with a decision. Reread the Parable of the Forgiving King. Note the character of the king and that of the servant. Then, make a conscious decision about which one you want to be like.

If the sin is grievous and forgiving is hard, try a technique used by some of the saints. Write down the name of the person who has sinned against you and briefly note your understanding of the harm it has done you. At the bottom of the sheet, write “I forgive you” and sign your name. Then, fold the piece of paper and put it in your waste basket, into God’s waste basket if you will, and walk away from it. Now forget about it and go on without the burden.

Always remember that the reason we forgive anyone is that God, in Christ Jesus, has already forgiven us. What we do is simply to acknowledge that blessing and pass it on to another person as an act of thanksgiving.

R&D Is there anyone in your life now to whom you need to offer forgiveness? Can you devise a plan this week to offer it?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you forgave even those who sentenced you to death on a cross. Invade my spirit with your Spirit that, following your example, I, too, may become a forgiving person.

Day 14

Read: Matthew 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:31—5:2

Benefits of Forgiveness

It is a fact of life that sometimes we are hurt by other people, sometimes unwittingly, but sometimes deliberately and with conscious malice. Among other things, spouses betray their marriage vows, children reject the standards and values of their parents and perhaps their parents themselves, friends are disloyal, co-workers let us down.

One of the imperatives of the Christian faith is the necessity to make forgiveness operative in our lives. We desperately need the forgiveness of God and are thankful to accept it. We are also called to extend that same forgiveness to those around us. This is a difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible, thing to do.

Many years ago, in a rural area in which we lived, we had a good friend who had a thriving veterinary practice. He and his family lived modestly. It was a source of surprise to us that money, while sufficient, was not overly plentiful. He had an employee who cared for the finances of his business. It was also a source of surprise how affluent this employee and his family seemed to be. That contrast was solved when the employee's embezzlement from the practice was discovered. In the ensuing months, the amazing thing was the lack of anger and bitterness on the part of our friend, and his protection of his employee and his family from the legal ramifications that might have justifiably occurred. He was able to forgive.

Yes, but how did he do it? 1) He made the determination not to hurt his friend or his family, so he resisted anger and bitterness and the impulse to get revenge. 2) Face to face with the one who had hurt him, he worked through how the employee could make amends for what he had done. 3) Once forgiveness was offered and amends were offered and accepted, both persons were able to move on, the perpetrator without guilt and our friend freed from the burden of distress and resentment that could have weighed him down. Forgiveness set him free. So, too, can it do for us!

R&D As you consider the times that you have been offered forgiveness, how does it make you feel? As you think about the times that you have forgiven someone else, how does it make you feel? Can you find any commonalities in the two situations?

Prayer: O Lord, You have taught us to say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Help us to remember the guilt You have removed from us, the faults You have forgiven and the consequent freedom and joy that we have felt from that forgiveness. Give us the will and the strength to offer that same forgiveness to others.

Day 15

Read: Luke 5:36-39

The Cost of Discipleship

In today's world of easy credit, there is no end of material things that we can have even though we do not have the money to pay for them. Want a new car with no money down? There are companies that will accommodate that want. Want a big house without the proper down payment and a safe interest rate? That too is possible. Want more things than you need? Those wants are easily satisfied in our plastic society. The day of accounting is in the future, so we will enjoy what we want in the present. But reality eventually looms and the piper must be paid.

Poor planning in financial matters is one thing. Poor planning in the spiritual realm is something entirely different. Jesus continually warned all who would follow him to count the cost of their discipleship. Once we become followers of Jesus, the old ways of doing things and the old ways of thinking are no longer acceptable. There is a cost to be paid and the asking price is change. "No one puts new wine into old wine-skins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed."

The question always becomes "Yes, but how?" The avenues to help us bring about change in our lives are readily available to us.

1) One open door to change is active membership in the body of Christ, the Church. Being with other Christians, watching their example and being fed by their fellowship helps us gauge our own lives and see where we need change. 2) A second and powerful agent of change is our willingness to engage in a daily prayer life. Daily communication with God feeds us and shows us the things we should and should not do. 3) A third vehicle of change is regular study of the

Scriptures. The Bible has been called the manual for the Christian life. It belongs on the shelf of self-help books that we use to enable us to do things in other areas of our life. Scripture is the self-help book of the spiritual life.

Does it cost us anything to make these things the core of our lives? Of course it does: time, energy, a denial of self, but is there anything more valuable? They enable us to grasp the pearl of great price, a growing relationship with Christ.

R&D How willing am I to pay the cost of discipleship? How do I use the avenues to a deeper relationship with him?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, so many times I have tried to put the new wine of life with you into the old wineskin of my life and it just doesn't work. Change me and help my life to become the new wineskin that can be filled with the new wine of your presence.

Day 16

Read: Matthew 6:19-21

Money Can Be a Spiritual Tool

It was that time in the fall when the spiritual temperature of the congregation was being taken. It was time for the annual stewardship campaign. The rector had preached several stirring sermons on giving. The vestry had instituted a calling campaign to try to get people in church. And now it was time to sign a pledge card that would be a commitment to give a set sum of money to God each week through the church.

For some, who had learned the truth of Jesus' words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), it had become an accepted part of their spiritual discipline. For others it was a time to endure until the congregation went on to more pleasant topics.

Money is a very personal thing. We share our time with others. We usually share our talent with others. We are less eager to share the money that we have earned, sometimes through very hard work. And here is where the difficulty lies. Until we recognize that all we have and all we are is a gift of God, until we recognize that the skills and talent we use to earn that money are gifts of God, we will see no need to share our material goods with God or with others. We may give a little to keep the church functioning but never understand that we give as a way of saying "thank you" for the many gifts God has given to us. This is the point where giving becomes a spiritual matter, where it offers the test of our spiritual values.

Yes, but how do we move towards using our money as a spiritual tool? We just begin! The amount is less important than the fact that we set aside a portion of our income and dedicate it to God. Out of our thanksgiving for His abundant blessings, we give back a set amount regularly, weekly.

The benefits that accrue to us from such systematic and generous giving are enormous. There is the knowledge that God approves of our giving. There is the satisfaction of knowing that we are a part of the work of the church, something that is beyond ourselves. There is the discovery that when we give a part of what we have, the remainder is always more than enough to care for our own needs.

R&D Jesus said, "Give and it will be given to you." Further he says, "For the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38). How have you seen the truth expressed in these words to be relevant to your own life?

Prayer: *“We give Thee but Thine own, what e’er the gift may be. All that we have is Thine alone, a gift, O Lord, from Thee.” Help me to remember the truth of these words and to give generously, liberally out of that which You have given to me.*

Day 17

Read: Matthew 7:21-29; James 1:22-27; John 14:15-17

A Call to Obedience

When I was young, I was an obedient child because I loved my mother and wanted to please her. When I became a parent, I would say to my children, “Don’t tell me you love me, show me,” by which I meant obey the rules that your father and I have laid down for you. So these somewhat harsh words of Jesus in verse 21 make perfect sense to me. We are fond of saying “Love God and do as you please.” And if one had a perfect faith such words would be a fine way to live. But with our imperfect, often wavering faith, a better rule of life is “Love God and do what pleases Him.” Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

In other areas of life, the necessity of following what is commanded is easy to see. If we drive the highways without obeying the rules of the road, accidents are inevitable. If we neglect our health, sickness often follows. If we cheat on our income tax, trouble with the IRS awaits us.

So, too, are there consequences of following Jesus by our own rules. No matter how theologically correct our thinking, no matter how deep our knowledge of Scripture, no matter the frequency of our attendance at worship, unless we put into practice the ethical and moral teaching of Jesus, we have no part in him. An authentic relationship with Jesus makes an obvious and observable impact upon what we say and do.

Yes, but how does this happen? There is nothing magic about being obedient. Obedience is a choice that we make over and over again. In each moral and ethical situation, there is always a more moral, more ethical choice. But there is no obedience without the decision. How honest will I be in telling the truth? How ethical will I be in my business dealings? What kind of integrity will I have in all my relationships?

It is a straight and narrow path that leads to the heart of Jesus and to intimacy with him. In our decision to follow Jesus, the strength and the power to be “doers of the word and not hearers only” are given to us.

R&D As I consider my own recent choices, decisions that I have made concerning job, people, money, sex, etc. how obedient have I been to the commandments of Jesus? If I have made decisions that I now regret, what can I do about them?

Prayer: *O Lord, once as a child I learned these words: “Jesus wants me for a sunbeam to shine for him each day, in every way try to please him, at home, at school, at play.” Help me to still urgently desire to be that kind of person, obedient to You and pleasing You in all that I do, think, and say.*

Day 18

Read: Matthew 18:1-6

Becoming as Little Children

I have two friends who have 14 year old sons. While they dearly love their boys, they both report the same problem. Their boys are beginning to see themselves as more grown-up and think

that they should make some of their own decisions. While this is a healthy, budding adulthood, neither dad is willing to abdicate his parental role. The occasional result is a certain amount of tension in the life of the family.

The urge to become independent is such a universal impulse that it surprises us to hear Jesus say, “Unless you turn and become as little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

But how can we become as children again?

The most fruitful way is to cultivate a deep sense of thanksgiving. We are surrounded by magnificent gifts from God. There are such profound things as the life we have been given to live. None of us did anything to create it. We just woke up one day and realized that we were alive. It was a gift of God. We have innate talents which we did not create but which we discover, gifts that we may develop and use. We have been given the capacity to love and to receive love from others, a capacity we did not create for ourselves but discovered in ourselves and learned to use.

On a much simpler scale, almost daily we can see a bright, warm sun in the morning, or feel a refreshing rain in the afternoon, or marvel at the beauty of a sunset as it paints the western sky in the evening. Or, we experience some personal and unexpected blessing. These, too, are gifts of our creator God. Realistically, there is no end to such gifts.

But it is not a list of gifts we need so much as it is a sense of thanksgiving. Seeing our lives through the eyes of thanksgiving for all these gifts is to begin to recognize ourselves as God’s dependent children. Like children who see their parents as those who will always do what is best for them, so, Jesus says, when we rely on God as our Father, we too will begin to enter the Kingdom of God.

R&D In what other ways can you see your relationship with God as a Father/child relationship?

Prayer: Father in heaven, the only thing I want more than to be my own person is to be Your person. Help me daily to acknowledge Your countless gifts to me and to the world and, thus, to joyfully accept my dependence on You as Your child.

Day 19

Read: Romans 5:1-5

Being a Victim or a Victor

A young grandchild was ill. His anxious parents visited doctor after doctor trying to find the cause and a cure for his illness. While not life-threatening, it was debilitating and limited his activities. The hope that the doctors held out was that he might outgrow the illness in puberty. Through it all, my grandson endured the surgeries and medications uncomplainingly. Troubled, I sought help from a friend who was a psychiatrist. He said one of two things happen with children who are chronically ill. They either become complainers and victims, or they develop endurance and as adults meet life challenges more courageously.

Paul is writing to the early Christians who were suffering persecution, encouraging them to endure. He is also writing to us. While we American Christians do not ordinarily suffer physically for our faith, we do experience challenges to our faith from the ridicule and disbelief and cynicism of others. In our secular society there are constant tests of the moral and ethical beliefs that we hold as Christians.

We also suffer in the crisis times of our lives: the loss of a marriage, a needed job, unexpected illness or death of loved ones. Paul says that more than just enduring the tough times, we should rejoice in them. Yes, but how is this possible?

When trouble strikes, there is the initial reaction: “Why did this happen to me?” We can then become victims or we can endure and use the trouble to grow in our faith. The avenues of help are many. We turn to others outside ourselves for help. We seek the advice of trained specialists in the area of our problem. We seek the love and concern of family members and friends who will even make sacrifices to help us. As Christians, however, our greatest source of strength in crisis lies in our relationship to Jesus Christ.

God is never far away from us but in troubled times, he is as close as thought, his presence as near as breathing. Turning to God, we find a sharp turning point in our ability to endure the suffering of difficult times. We become stronger, more faithful people who are filled with the hope that the difficulty can be overcome.

Did my grandson outgrow his illness? Praise God for His infinite generosity and answer to prayer, he did.

R&D How do I deal with the difficult times in my life? Am I able to endure them courageously? Do I have the hope that God will act in my situation? Am I able to see anything positive in the hard times of life?

Prayer: “I know not where the road will lead, I follow day by day, or where it ends: I only know I walk the King’s highway. I know not if the way is long, and no one else can say; but rough or smooth, uphill or down, I walk the King’s highway.”

Day 20

Read: Philippians 4:1-5

The Right Attitude

One of our grandsons is talented musically. Now in middle school, he plays in the band. In a recent phone conversation, I asked him how he was enjoying band this year. “Not very much,” he said. “The other kids aren’t very good and we don’t sound good.” I suggested that perhaps the other children hadn’t had as many lessons. “No,” he said, “They just don’t work hard enough. I don’t like to play with them.” As it has a way of doing, when we are very good at something, pride rears its ugly head.

Each one of us has a talent. There is something at which we excel. It may be in an area of academics or sports or in organizing people or managing money or in the creative area of music or writing or drama or painting or architecture. It may be in gardening or cooking or in teaching. And we want to respect and use that talent. The rub in our relationship with others comes when we think that our gift makes us better than other people.

Pride leading to an attitude of superiority is damaging, not only to individual relationships, but to the community as a whole. Yes, but how do we overcome the tendency to pride, that characteristic that heads the list of the seven basic sins? 1) Basic to overcoming pride is the recognition that there are many others who can do what we do, and some of them do it even better! Accepting that “I am not the smartest kid on the block” helps us overcome feelings of superiority. 2) Fundamental also is the recognition that my gifts are God-given. I may have worked hard to develop them, but God gave me the raw material with which to work and the resources to cultivate them. 3) Perhaps most helpful in overcoming pride is being thankful, not only for our own gifts, but for the gifts of others. Developing an attitude of gratitude for all gifts changes the focus from us to the Giver of all gifts.

Our grandson is very young and his pride in his achievements is good at this time in his life. I pray these other attitudes will come as he matures.

R&D What is there in my life in which I take pride? How do I handle the accolades that come to me when I do something extremely well?

Prayer: Dear Lord, when the sense of satisfaction in my accomplishments turns into pride that separates me from others and from You, forgive me and bring me back to a right sense of thankfulness of Your many gifts to me. Let my motivation in using my gifts always be to bring honor to Your name.

Day 21

Read: Matthew 6:25-33

Measuring Success

Periodically, a list of the 100 richest men and women in the country will be published. The assumption of that listing is that these are, therefore, the most successful people in the nation. Success tends to be measured in essentially materialistic terms.

Jesus believed in a different measuring stick for success. He taught his disciples, “Do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat and what you shall drink..., nor yet for you body, what you shall put on. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.”

Providing adequate food and clothing for ourselves and our families is expected. We step over the line when we believe that the accumulation of money and things is the best measure, both to ourselves and to others, of how successful we are. And that trap is easy to fall into because that is what the world teaches us to believe.

To avoid that trap, Jesus is suggesting some different criteria.

The most successful people in the world value people above things. Successful people are much more willing to sacrifice to maintain a good marriage than to sacrifice to buy the newest car. Successful people understand that love is not communicated by the size of our paycheck but by the size of our concerns for others around us. The most successful people in the world live, principally, to serve others.

Occasionally, I read the obituaries in the newspaper. Often, I read things like this: “She was a school teacher who loved her students.” Or, “He was well known for his volunteer work with the Head Start Program.” Or, the best one I ever read, “He never said *no* to helping someone when he could say *yes*.” We are remembered by our friends and, ultimately, by God, for what we have done for others.

The most successful people in the world live with God as their daily companion. When we sense that our very life is a gift of God and give thanks for that, God is within us. When we sense that our ability to love and to receive love from another is a gift of the way God made us, God resides within us. When we routinely look for evidence of God in our world, in nature, in other people, and in events, God becomes real to us. And when God resides in us, there is no need to accumulate things to prove that we are people of worth.

Henry David Thoreau put it well: “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.” Jesus put it best: “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.”

R&D *Make a list of the people in your life whom you value the most. How can working to strengthen these relationships make you a successful person?*

Prayer: *Help me, O Lord, to value people and to use things, and not the other way around. And lead me to see myself as a successful person—not by what I own, but by what I am able to do for others in Your name.*

Day 22

Read: James 1:13-15; 1 Corinthians 10:12-13

Overcoming Temptation

We are all tempted and we all fall. Often our first reaction to our failure is to lay the blame outside of ourselves. We may try to blame God saying, “This is the way that God made me and I can’t be blamed for what I couldn’t help.” We may be like the comic Flip Wilson who, in his famous routine, made people roar with laughter with his “The Devil made me do it.” Or we may try to blame others as did Adam and Eve in the garden, “The woman made me sin. The snake made me sin.” Or we may simply put the blame on the circumstances of our lives, the way we were brought up, our limited opportunities and say, “We simply had no other choice.”

James will have none of our justification and evasions. He says that we must take personal responsibility for falling to temptation and the resulting sinful actions. Not God, not the devil, not others, not circumstances, I alone am responsible for my actions.

Yes, but how then do we deal with temptation? 1) Be aware of the areas of your life where temptation comes. Is it love of material things? Is it in sexual matters? Is it in a need for power to control those around you? Whatever it is, know yourself and your weaknesses. 2) Knowing your vulnerabilities, take specific steps to protect yourself. Build a bulwark around that area of your life. It is said that he who does not want to do business with the devil should stay out of the devil’s workshop. If you are tempted by food and drink, develop specific ways of coping with food and drink, and enlist others to help you follow it. If you are tempted to sexual indiscretion, stay out of the company of those who are a temptation to you. If you are tempted to be dishonest in financial matters, recognize that cheating financially makes you a thief and money your god. In speaking of temptation, Mark Twain said, “It’s easier to stay out than to get out.” 3) As in all other areas of the Christian life, our greatest help comes from God Himself. Paul assures us that as we turn to God in our temptation, He will strengthen us to meet and conquer it.

R&D *In what areas of my life am I prone to fall to temptation? How do I resist such urges? What do I do, if I do give in to temptation?*

Prayer: *“Yield not to temptation for yielding is sin. Each victory will help you, some other to win. Fight manfully onward. Dark passions subdue. Look only to Jesus, he will carry you through” (old gospel hymn). Thank you, Lord God, for the strength to battle the things that tempt me away from you.*

Day 23

Read: James 3:2-12

The Importance of Words

It has been said, “Remember, every time you open your mouth to talk, your mind walks out and parades up and down the words.” The writer of James would heartily agree. Our speech and its control is one of the major themes of his letter. He argues that it is through our words that one can see who and what we are and how committed we are to Christ. He further says that if we were able to control our tongue, we would be able to control all of the evil impulses of our body. James compares the size and importance of the tongue to a bit in the mouth of a horse and to a rudder on a ship. These are small, but they control the direction of the horse, the ship, and the body.

The importance of the words we say cannot be underestimated. They can be used for evil or for good. The words we say can instruct, encourage, comfort, aid, enlighten, and build up the body of Christ. Or the words we say can destroy reputations, subvert the truth, spread hate and destruction, or crush the spirit. They can sway people to violence or move people to accomplish good things.

James says that our words are like a fire, a fire that burns and pollutes the air around it. In the same way, our tongue can pollute our inner nature and change the course of our life. Our words have great power. When our speech is controlled, it has power for great good; when uncontrolled, it has power for great evil.

Yes, but how do we control our tongues? Perhaps these suggestions will help: 1) We avoid those people and those situations in which we have discovered that our words are less than kind and charitable and where gossip is the main topic of conversation. We are wary of those persons who always carry bad news or rumors about others. 2) We consciously practice an awareness of what we say and the effect that it has on others. We ask ourselves, is what I say helpful, is it kind, is it honest, does it express genuine interest? 3) As “no human being can tame the tongue,” we daily confess our lack of control and ask God to be our companion in our speech.

R&D Jesus said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:37). What do his words tell me about the importance of my speech? Where have I been lax recently in controlling my tongue?

Prayer: Lord God, give me the desire and the will to always be pleasing You in all I say. Let my voice be an instrument for Your service to show Your love in the world and be used to build up others.

Day 24

Read: 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 4:7-12

The Greatest Commandment

We all have vivid memories that last over the years. I had been asked to read a lesson at the marriage service of a niece. The lesson chosen was 1 Corinthians 13. As I prepared to read, I recall thinking that this is the love to which we are all called and it is an impossible assignment. Married for several years myself, I knew that to maintain love was difficult and required constant effort and vigilance. Further, the challenge of these words goes far beyond the marriage

relationship, for they were written to the whole Christian community as a standard for all of our dealings with each other.

Jesus compounded the difficulty of Christian love with his words, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

We all respond to those who love us, who are kind to us, who are good to us, who meet our needs. We all understand “tit for tat” love in which both persons receive the things that they need. Most of us can master this kind of love.

But Scripture holds up a different standard. It is Jesus’ love. It is love that we see displayed on a cross. It is love without thought of return. It is given to others without consideration of whether they are worthy to receive it. It is self-giving love.

September 11, 2001, was a day that led to many examples of self-giving love. First responders and ordinary citizens took extraordinary risks to their own personal safety to help others, and many gave their lives for others. It was perhaps one of the finest hours in American history. No one stopped to ask if the people in need were worthy. It was enough to know that they had needs.

This is the love to which we are called. Yes, but how? 1) We determine to treat each person as a person of worth. 2) We recognize that others will be different from us and learn to accept those differences. 3) We pray for those persons who are difficult for us to love, asking God to give us the patience and understanding that we need to deal with them.

R&D How would I define the love that I exhibit to those around me? What words can I use about myself? Can I think of a recent situation where I have denied myself for the good of another person?

Prayer: O God, sometimes I feel my love for You and for others slipping, and my love for self gaining ground. Forgive me for abusing Your gift of love and strengthen me to care deeply, not only for family and friends, but for each individual whom I meet.

Day 25

Read: Matthew 5:9; John 14:25-27

On Being a Peacemaker

Two characteristics of Christians are the qualities of love and peace. While we have some knowledge of the quality of love, peace is a less understood trait.

We understand conflict. It is everywhere around us! To read the daily paper and watch the television news is to see the results of conflict which range from wars between nations to quarrellings over city school boundaries and to family squabbles over inheritance, among many other things. In the midst of this massive turmoil, the Christian is called to be a peacemaker.

John Killinger writes, “Jesus is an itinerant rabbi, with nothing of great worldly value to leave behind. But he gives the disciples a priceless inheritance...his blessing of fullness...fullness of being.” Jesus puts it this way, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). The peace of which Jesus speaks is not the absence of conflict, but rather a sense of total well being.

But it is not enough for the Christian to have peace within. As with all of God’s gifts, it is given to us to share with others. Our calling is to imitate God’s generosity of spirit. We are called to return good for evil, to love those we do not like, and to build bridges between peoples. Our

task is to take that blessed fullness of being and the absence of fear in our own lives and to share it with others.

Yes, but how? 1) I must cultivate my relationship with Christ; grow it through prayer, study, and worship. I must allow my own being to be filled with his being. 2) I can try to be the voice of reason in the midst of conflict by trying to find the middle ground. 3) I can avoid the leap to judgment in conflict situations, and insofar as possible, try to mediate between those in disagreement.

To take the risk of being a peacemaker is often difficult and dangerous, sometimes bringing the wrath of others down on you. Yet to this risk we are called.

R&D The tendency of most people is to avoid conflict rather than to try to make peace. How do I deal with conflict? Am I willing to become involved in situations that may possibly put me at risk?

Prayer: "Drop Thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess, the beauty of Thy peace." O God, help me to claim my inheritance of peace and let me not be greedy but be willing to pass it on.

Day 26

Read: 2 Peter 1:3-11

Zealous Effort

It is said that anything worthwhile takes effort. When asked by his pupil how he had achieved greatness in his chosen field of endeavor, the master replied simply, "Practice, practice, practice." Paul when describing his prominence as a rising Jewish leader said, "I was zealous for God" (Acts 22:3). When something in any area is important to us, we are willing to give it a place of priority and to accord it whatever time and energy is required to achieve excellence. Peter says that this same zealous effort must be applied to our spiritual life as well.

Because it requires real effort, the Christian life has been described as "an initial spasm followed by a chronic inertia" (Moffatt). We have seen this description played out in the lives of others and may have experienced it ourselves. Peter rejects this growth paralysis. He describes a ladder of effort, the practice of our faith being an upward climb. It is called a "ladder of virtues" (Barclay) or a "ladder of faith" (Green).

Peter says that Christians will always be adding to their faith. Yes, but how? He writes: 1) "*Supplement your faith with virtue*"—the Greek for virtue meaning excellence. We desire never to be satisfied to be less than the best Christian that we can be. 2) "*Supplement virtue with knowledge*"—we have a consuming desire to learn more about our faith. 3) "*Supplement knowledge with self-control*"—we make every effort to control our physical desires, our impulses, and our need for self-assertion instead of being controlled by them. 4) "*Supplement self-control with steadfastness*"—we cling to our faith and expect that it will see us through whatever the circumstances of our lives. 5) "*Supplement steadfastness with godliness*"—we seek a personal goodness that shows a reverence for God and a respect for others. 6) "*Supplement godliness with brotherly affection*"—"Love for Christian brethren is a distinguishing mark of true discipleship" (Green). 7) "*Supplement brotherly affection with love*"—we determine to show *agape* love that desires the best for others to all persons, either friend or foe.

Faith itself is the foundation upon which all of these other Christian traits rest. Faith itself is a gift from God. We are expected, however, to expend all our efforts to expand what Jesus, through his divine power, has granted us.

R&D Many Christians never add any of the disciplines of Christian living to their faith. How guilty am I of coasting along on a faith that is static and not growing? What steps can I take to be more zealous in my devotion to Jesus Christ?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me be more diligent in seeking to appropriate these Christian traits. I know you now, but I seek to know you more completely. Work in me, Lord, in my will, my heart, my mind, and increase in me the desire to be seen as your disciple.

Day 27

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Pray Without Ceasing

The Thessalonian Christians held a very warm place in St. Paul's heart. They grew rapidly and were virtually without conflicts and tensions. But here at the end of his intimate and personal first letter to them, Paul lays what seems to be an impossible task on them all. He exhorts them to "Pray without ceasing..." or, as in some translations, to "Pray constantly...."

If by prayer we think only of the saying of words addressed to God, praying without ceasing would be impossible. But if, as one writer has put it, prayer is "standing attentively in the presence of God," then a multitude of possibilities open up.

For example, if we greet a beautiful day saying, "What a nice day this is," that is a comment on the weather. If, on the other hand, we greet a beautiful day saying, "What a beautiful day You have given us, O Lord," that is a prayer. When we engage ourselves with other people and see them, not only as family or friends or co-workers or volunteers, but as fellow children of God, that recognition acknowledges God's presence in our world and that is a prayer.

Or, to be more specific, we can pray what some call "arrow prayers." These are short, one sentence prayers most often provoked by things that are going on around us. While driving your car in traffic, pray for the driver in front of you. When you hear a police, ambulance, or fire engine siren, at that moment pray for the person or persons they are going to help. When you see children playing on a playground or going to or from school, pray a one-sentence prayer for them. At that moment, think to pray for your own children or those of your extended family.

The possibilities are endless when we think of prayer as "standing attentively in the presence of God." Each of us could build a long list of everyday situations that have prayer potential in them. Indeed, bringing God into our lives consciously in that way is not only a wonderful and natural way to increase our own conscious awareness of God, but is to follow St. Paul's dictum to "pray without ceasing."

R&D Make a list of 10 situations in which you find yourself daily that you think might be potential prayer opportunities for you.

Prayer: O Lord, open my eyes to see You in all the conditions of my daily life and open my heart to pray, not just occasionally, but in all times and in all places. I pray this in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ.

Day 28

Read: Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

Life in Transformation

A group of older women were deeply involved in a weekly study and prayer group. One woman recounting a difficult situation and how she had dealt with it remarked, "I don't know if it is just that I am getting older and more able to deal with things, or if I have been brainwashed by all of the study I have done."

St. Paul would say that she was being transformed. Her different way of dealing with the problems of life was a result of her commitment to Jesus Christ and her willingness to put his teachings into practice.

Bruce writes, "Doctrine is never taught in the Bible simply that it may be known; it is taught in order that it may be translated into practice." Yes, but how do we do this? Paul says that this transformation can happen as we commit ourselves to doing three things.

We present our "bodies as a living sacrifice" to God. The bodies in which we live are gifts from God. We can use or abuse them. We can use them to serve only our own needs and desires, or we can commit a part of our physical nature and energy to serve others. Jewish worship was based in part on animal sacrifice, but the believer is asked to be a living sacrifice as we yield the actions of our bodies in obedience to Jesus' teachings.

We can be "transformed by the renewal of your (our) mind(s)." Changed behavior begins with changes in thought. When our thoughts are primarily influenced by the world, the television, the movies, and the way unbelievers live, we live in and are of the world. Conversely, St. Paul wrote, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). Such words can become our gatekeeper to judge what we allow ourselves to think about.

Thirdly, Paul says that with dedicated bodies and transformed minds, we will discover how satisfying it is to live in God's will for us. Our experience of living in His will reveals to us what is good and acceptable and perfect.

These facts are why my friend is so different than she once was. And it is how you and I can be different as well.

R&D What is there in your life that keeps you from being completely committed to Christ? How can you become the living sacrifice that believers are called to be?

Prayer: "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee. Take my moments and my days; let them move in ceaseless praise. Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love; take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne."

by John and Shirley MacNaughton

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