

The Journey

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



MAY-AUGUST 2024



Bible Reading Fellowship

**Eternal God,
Your word is always a light for our way;
Open our eyes and enlighten our spirit that we
may understand your truth in all its power and
holiness.**

**Give us courage to allow it to transform our lives
and enable us to grow more and more into the
image of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.**

Amen

The Journey is a daily Bible reading program which covers the Bible every five years. Each month addresses a book of the Bible or a Scripture theme.

Each day's reading consists of a 10-15 verse Bible passage followed by clear, helpful commentary. A reflection and discussion question and applicable prayer are also included. The passage of Scripture should be read just before studying *The Journey* commentary.

The following features make *The Journey* unique:

1. Commentary on Scripture to aid in better understanding the passage (as distinguished from devotional material based upon Scripture)
2. Presented in a relational way (i.e., what does this say about how God wants me to live?)
3. Easily adapted to group study (the "Reflection and Discussion" questions at the end of each lesson can be used for group discussion)
4. Special readings for Advent and Lent

We sincerely hope that you will find this resource a valuable companion on your "journey" through productive Bible reading for many years to come.

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The Bible Reading Fellowship is committed to the Church's classic teaching that the Bible is the inspired word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation.

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John

Chapters 10-16

Wednesday, May 1

Read: John 10:1-14

Shepherd

There is a term we hear more and more these days, the term caregiver. It is a designation that describes all kinds of people with all kinds of functions that have one major thing in common. These are people who are entrusted with the care of others. Teachers, especially pre-school and elementary school teachers, deserve such a designation. Someone said, “Teachers in the lower grades needn’t worry about automation until someone invents a machine that can blow noses and remove snowsuits and boots.” Baby-sitters are caregivers. Parents are caregivers... and grandparents... and doctors and nurses... and counselors. Clergy are caregivers.

I first became aware of the real meaning of the term when I watched a dear friend assume the ever-increasing decisions and responsibility for her husband who had terminal cancer. She described herself as his major caregiver. The picture the word conveys is that of a person who cares for, takes care of, another.

In another identifying image, his third “I AM” proclamation, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me.” The Greek word *kalos* which is translated “good” also means beautiful or attractive. John Killinger says it also conveys the idea of “perfect, right, or exemplary.” Jesus is describing himself as the true or perfect caregiver.

When Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd,” he was not using a new image. The image of the shepherd permeates the Old Testament where it is used widely to illustrate the relationship of God to His people. God is described as the shepherd of Israel (Isaiah 40:10-11, Ezekiel 34:15ff). From earliest times religious leaders were called to emulate this care-giving relationship that

God had with His people. In each succeeding generation, the expectation of the religious leader was that he would fulfill that role. By Jesus' time, however, Israel's leaders had all but abandoned that role.

It was in that context that Jesus deliberately appropriates the image of the shepherd for himself. He claims to be the true shepherd of the real people of God. As Jesus saw the relationship between shepherd and sheep, it was one of intimacy, of knowing one another. It was also a relationship where the sheep were dependent upon the shepherd for safety and protection.

R&D When have I filled the role of caregiver in my life?

Prayer: Lord, strength us as we minister to the needs of those to whom you bring us.

Thursday, May 2

Read: John 10:7-10

Door

One of my favorite comic strips was Calvin and Hobbs, a strip about an obstreperous, brainy six-year-old with an overactive imagination. Calvin lived in two worlds, the ordinary and the extraordinary. A glance at the strip would tell immediately which world he was inhabiting. The world of the ordinary is where he dealt with his parents and teachers and friends as best he could, seeking every advantage and vying for power. The second world of the extraordinary was where his friend and companion, a stuffed tiger, came alive and with whom he had extraordinary adventures and battles. His imagination was the "door" to this extraordinary world.

Almost buried within Jesus' picture of the good shepherd is another powerful identifying image, that of Jesus as the door. "I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." The sheepfold that harbored the sheep in safety during the night could have been a common courtyard in front of the homes of the owners guarded at night by a gatekeeper. If the feeding pastures were far from home, the sheepfold was probably four rough stone walls with a single opening that could

be guarded by the shepherd himself. The sheepfold provided a safe haven at the end of the day. Jesus claims to be not only the shepherd for the sheep but the entrance to the sheepfold as well.

What kind of life can we expect if we enter it through Jesus? As Calvin's door of imagination leads him from the ordinary to the extraordinary, so does Jesus the "door" provide entrance to a life that is extraordinary. Jesus is the door that gives entrance to salvation, "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved...." Jesus is also the entrance into a life of security and freedom, "And will go in and out and find pasture..." And Jesus is the door into an abundant life, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."

R&D How does the life that I live with Christ fit into the "extraordinary?" What specifically has he changed in and around me from ordinary to extraordinary?

Prayer: *The Lord is my Shepherd....*

Friday, May 3

Read: John 10:11-42

Sacrificial, Inclusive

There are two other characteristics of Jesus' shepherd ministry that are evident in this passage. (1) Jesus knows that sacrifice would be required of him in order for the sheep to be saved and he is willing to undertake that sacrifice. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." How soon he faces life-threatening danger! Very shortly, probably some three months later, enraged by Jesus' claims of oneness with the Father, the Jews attempt to stone him. Then, thwarted in that action by his words and manner, they try to arrest him.

Sacrificial caring is a difficult concept for us. There is little in our time to equate with the dangers the shepherd was willing to undergo for the sheep. There are soldiers in time of war who face death to secure or ensure freedom for their nation. There are police who draw dangerous assignments who face personal jeopardy to provide a stable environment for the people of the city. There are fire fighters who enter burning buildings to save lives. There are health care workers who work with patients suffering from highly

contagious diseases. There are those who care sacrificially, as we do for our spouses and children. Jesus as the great caregiver recognizes the sacrifice required of him and he is willing to make it as a voluntary self-offering in loving fulfillment of the Father's will.

(2) Jesus wants everyone to live in relationship with him. There is no one who is to be excluded. "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd." The Jews were eager to exclude everyone who was not exactly like them from the love and fellowship of God. Not so the good shepherd, who loves and cares for all.

R&D Jesus wants me enough to sacrifice himself for me. How does that knowledge affect my life?

Prayer: You gave your all for us, Lord Jesus. We are eternally grateful.

Saturday, May 4

Read: John 11:1-16

Whose Timetable?

We receive the urgent message that someone we love is desperately ill. All thoughts of our own present or future plans are put on hold and we immediately prepare ourselves to do what is needed by way of support. Hurried trips are the order of the day. Nothing can interfere with the need of the loved one. Anything we can do, whatever we can do is done. Nothing is too much.

It is just such a message that Jesus receives from some of his dearest friends, Mary and Martha of Bethany. The urgent message came to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (v.3). Jesus responds to their urgent plea for help with words which are both reassuring and puzzling. "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it" (v.4). Whenever Jesus speaks of being "glorified," he refers to his death. According to John Marsh, "When John uses the word glory, he has in mind the glory of the victory of God which is to be attained through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

John then records a second remarkable response of Jesus. Receiving an urgent message of need from intimate friends, Jesus

delays responding to it. To return to Jerusalem at this time is to put himself into life-threatening danger. Thomas confirms this danger only too well. “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (v.16). It is but a matter of days before the crucifixion.

The delay of Jesus in responding to his friends is a matter of great conjecture. Could it simply have been that Jesus has a calling which takes priority even over meeting the immediate needs of those he loves? That calling is to do the will of the Father. Jesus lives his life according to the Father’s timetable. He uses proverbial language (vv.9-10) which indicates his belief that he will face death only when the Father wills the end of his life. The climax of Jesus’ work will come only on God’s timetable.

Faith rests, responds, and is renewed when we are able to place ourselves with confidence in God’s hands, putting ourselves and the matters about which we are concerned in His will. Through faith in the “I AM” God, we are enabled to put ourselves—our life and our death—on the Father’s timetable as Jesus did.

R&D When have you specifically sought God’s will and left the results in God’s hands? How was your faith strengthened?

Prayer: Lord Christ, if I am truly living in you, I am in your hands. By your Holy Spirit, guide me each step of the way.

Sunday, May 5

Sabbath Time

“You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart.”
Jeremiah 29:13

Prayer does not throw the laws and the course of this universe out of kilter because somebody turns on a strong flow of self-will and points it up toward God. Prayer at first often brings relief and comfort. Then prayer is likely to go into a period when there is a good deal of hard work about it. And when a pray-er has stuck it out through the early stages, then prayer, especially for others, is likely to show some remarkable fruits.

Read: John 11:17-27

No Respect

Concerning a party he attended, Barry Farber wrote, “I was the only one there that I never heard of.” Benjamin Franklin once said, “If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead, either write things worth reading or do things worth writing.” For most people, fame or infamy live only a short time. However, there are some people who are remembered for generations, some for centuries, some forever. Some are remembered as better than they were, and some do not get the praise that they deserve.

Belonging to that last group is the woman around whom much of this “I AM” proclamation revolves—Martha. Martha, like the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, often “gets no respect.” For many, she carries the reputation of the unthinking, over-earnest, insensitive homemaker who didn’t have the wisdom to recognize proper priorities and who missed out on what was really important. Such a misunderstanding of Martha comes to us when Jesus recalls practical, down-to-earth Martha from the cares of her daily life to remind her that there are things in life that are more important (Luke 10:41-42). Martha heard Jesus’ words and learned her lesson well.

Martha has been described in many ways: a woman of action, practical, one who serves, associated with the kitchen, unselfish. She is seldom described as a woman of faith and yet, that is her preeminent quality. It is Martha’s firm belief in Jesus, her open-hearted faith, her seeking mind which gives her the privilege of receiving this identifying image of Jesus.

It is also Martha who makes the most complete affirmation of faith recorded in John’s gospel prior to Jesus’ resurrection. Running through Martha’s words is the perception that the Messiah’s reign has already begun. The powers of the age to come are already present and at work. The miracle which was to follow was sign and proof that “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:14-15). “She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I

believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world” (v.27).

R&D *As I examine the life of Martha in Scripture, where do I find myself identifying with her? How does she serve as an example of “faith” to me?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the faithfulness of so many women who have carried your love to their spouses, their children, their church, and those around them so faithfully these centuries.*

Tuesday, May 7

Read: John 11:17-54

The Sixth Sign—Lazarus

In a powerful and supremely poignant passage Jesus joins in the grief of Mary and the other mourners. John describes Jesus this way, “He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (v.33), “Jesus wept” (v.35). “Then Jesus deeply moved again, came to the tomb” (v.38). Jesus is capable of intense emotion and during this event is gripped by the deepest of feelings. What stirs him so greatly when he knows what he plans to do?

Scholars disagree concerning the cause of Jesus’ emotion. One wrote that it is simply the “tenderest description of his human nature to be found in all the gospels.” Jesus’ emotion was caused, in part, as he found himself involved in the grief of those he loved. In the compassion and love and empathy that was a part of his nature, he felt pain and loss and sorrow.

Scholars agree, however, that the Greek words translated “deeply moved” also contain the implication of indignation, of cold anger. Jesus was angry about the terrible hold that sin and death have on the human race.

Yet Jesus never doubted the Father’s victory over “Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God” as the *Book of Common Prayer* so succinctly describes the power of evil. He never doubted the Father’s victory in his own life or in the life of Lazarus. To demonstrate the ultimate power of God, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

The miracle, the raising of Lazarus, breaks the power of death and validates Jesus' claim, "I am the resurrection and the life" (vv.25-26). The action Jesus takes is not his work alone but the work of the Father in and through him. In Jesus' relationship with the Father (vv.41-42), there is life for all who believe, life not only at the last day but life in the present. John Killinger describes this gift from God as "the immediacy of life in Christ."

Lazarus, hearing the voice of Jesus in death, receives new spiritual life as well as a new physical life. Scripture extends this promise to us. Hearing the voice of Jesus, responding to it, we are immediately given new life by and in him. We rest assured through faith in him that his power extends beyond death, beyond this physical world, beyond the limits of our sight. Responding to him in faith, we live immediately now and continually, "eternally," we "shall never die" (v.26).

R&D How does the truth presented in this miracle affect me? What influence does it have on my thinking concerning my life now and my inevitable physical death?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Christ, for taking away the fear of death for all who live in you.

Wednesday, May 8

Read: John 11:17-54

The Fifth Self-Portrait

There is no doubt that Martha did not fully understand Jesus' remarkable proclamation, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (vv.25-26). Many who heard Jesus' words and saw the miracle of new life for Lazarus did not understand the meaning of Jesus' actions. Some who actually witnessed the miracle could not believe what they saw. The Jewish establishment refused to accept the event and saw it as the "last straw" that led them to take decisive action to put Jesus to death (vv.45, 53).

Jesus reinterprets resurrection. Jesus, the "I AM" God, is the vehicle of new life. What the Pharisees believed about the resurrec-

tion and what Jesus proclaimed as the resurrection were profoundly different. Gerard Sloyan writes: “Obviously the tale of Lazarus’ restoration to life at Jesus’ word of command is meant to illustrate the power Jesus claims he has with God. But his is not the power merely to raise the dead—as if that were not enough. It is the power to give new life.”

The Christian belief in Jesus as resurrection and life is that eternal life is now—and then. It is life in Jesus Christ which is basically the same on both sides of the grave. Life is changed, not taken away. With great insight, Paul wrote, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:4-5).

Like Lazarus, we come forth from the old life to live a new life, a life in Christ. Like Lazarus, released from the wrappings of death, we live a life unbound. We live a life of freedom, freedom to love and be loved, freedom to be who we are created to be, freedom to grow in Christ. We find a liberation, a stripping off of the old person, which results from God’s action in our lives. We are able to give up the wrappings of old habits, old sins, old ways—and live even now a resurrection life!

R&D How has your experience with Christ “the resurrection and the life” transformed your attitude toward life and death?

Prayer: It is a wonderful life in you, Christ Jesus; may we live it as you would want us to do.

Thursday, May 9

Read: Acts 1:1-11

Ascension Day: Leaving Home

Today is the day the Christians celebrate Ascension Day. After 40 days with his disciples, Jesus was going home to be with the Father. During his time with them, he had proved the reality and significance of his resurrection, he had taught them, and he had prepared them for the great mission ahead. Because of the res-

urrection, his followers now knew for sure that he was the Messiah. They were able to listen and learn with a much greater depth of understanding. He was physically with them to answer their questions and give them the love and assurance they needed. And then he was gone.

For the disciples, even though Jesus had gone home, it was, for them, like leaving home. In those years of growing up in a home, there are parents to tell us what to do, to show us love, to answer our questions, just as Jesus did for the disciples. Ideally, they are present to us when we need them. Then the day comes when we are gone, when it is time for us to leave home. A dramatic change takes place. We have to begin to make our own decisions and plan toward our life's goal. Yet, we have a foundation that has been laid in the home, and we can usually reach our parents for guidance in case of desperate need. It is a time to mature, to become the people God called us to be.

So it was for the disciples in their relationship with Jesus, and is for us these 2,000 years later. Jesus is not physically present to us, and we must make our decisions and choices on our own. But we have a foundation, the Bible, to guide us. And we have access to Jesus through the Holy Spirit in prayer. We have the opportunity to mature, to become the people God calls us to be.

R&D What parallels can you see between your relationship with your parents and with God?

Prayer: Lord Christ, help me to mature in my relationship with you.

Friday, May 10

Read: John 11:55—12:11

Boundless Gratitude

After a complicated and difficult pregnancy, our second granddaughter was born. Her parents who are devout Christians named her “Grace” in thanksgiving to God for His love and mercy to them. Frank S. Mead tells us: “Gratitude is from the same root word as ‘grace,’ which signifies the free and boundless mercy of God.” Grateful people are thankful people. In Mary of Bethany, we see a deeply thoughtful person who is aware of the grace of God

in her life and who is moved to action by the boundless gratitude which fills her heart.

Knowing full well the dangerous consequences of his actions, Jesus returns to Bethany near Jerusalem to respond to the needs of his friends. Martha and Mary and Lazarus have given a dinner in his honor. During the meal Mary takes one of her most precious possessions, a jar of precious nard, and anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair. It is an action of boundless gratitude.

What was the cause of Mary's thankfulness? No doubt the mere presence of Jesus filled her heart with joy. He often stayed with her family using their home as a place for respite. She loves her brother Lazarus and Jesus has raised him from the dead! The grief which she had experienced has turned to joy. Her feelings are tumultuous and overwhelm her with the need to respond to Jesus. What can I give him, what can I do to show my love and gratitude to him? What, she thinks, is the most precious possession I have—my precious jar of nard. Filled with gratitude, she takes the valuable perfumed ointment and anoints the feet of Jesus. This is not the sinful woman described in Luke's gospel who performed a similar action in the house of Simon the Pharisee and who received forgiveness for her sins (Luke 7:36-50). Rather, Mary's actions are motivated by the boundless gratitude which grows out of the relationship which she has with Jesus. It is an affirmation of the powerful joy that she experiences because she knows Jesus.

Even within this intimate circle of his loving friends and disciples, Jesus still feels the cold breath of the storm ahead. Wilbert F. Howard says, Judas acts out of "sordid motives" and is a "grudging critic" of Mary's actions (vv.4-6). Jesus looks beyond the moment, defending and accepting Mary's action as a work of mercy: "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial" (v.7).

R&D Has there been a time in my life when I have felt a boundless gratitude for having Christ in my life? How have I expressed my gratitude?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, that we all had the opportunity to wash your feet with our tears of love.

Read: John 12:12-36

Turning Point

The turning point for the ministry of Jesus has come. In a dramatically enacted parable, Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey and thus, in an action understood by all, proclaims himself to be the Messiah (Zechariah 9:9-10). And a great crowd of cheering, welcoming pilgrims comes out to meet him. Included in the crowd of people who have traveled to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover are God-fearing Greeks, Gentiles who worship the God of Israel. They, like so many of the Jews, have heard of Jesus. Now they want to see him and to hear from him. The Greeks who have come to “see” are the sign for which Jesus has been waiting. Their arrival causes a marked change in the words and ministry of Jesus. No longer does Jesus say, “my hour is not yet come” but “the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified” (v.23). The “good news” will be no longer for Jews alone but for the whole world.

In the final teaching of his public ministry, Jesus speaks of life which comes through death. As a seed is buried in order to generate new life, so Jesus is willing to face death in order to bring new and eternal life. Jesus is not some blithe, uninvolved spirit marching unknowingly into the future, but a flesh and blood human soul full of passion and only too aware of the power of pain. He has seen the suffering of crucifixion firsthand but still is willing to experience it in obedience to the Father’s will. Conquering the survival instinct which he too surely possessed, Jesus’ response is not “save me” but rather “glorify thy name”—let thy will be done, O Father. He dedicates himself to the experience of the passion which faces him.

As it is now the hour for Jesus, so it is also the hour for each person within the sound of his voice. There is for each of them a turning point. They hear his words of sacrifice. They can, if they are able, hear the Father’s words of reassurance to Jesus. They hear Jesus’ words of ultimate victory. Yet one last time, he offers the people an opportunity to believe in him: “While you have

the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light” (v.36). As the hour came for Jesus, as it came for the people who heard his voice, so that same hour faces each individual. There is for each of us a turning point.

R&D Jesus asks that we die to self in order to live in and with him forever. Our answer to him is the turning point in our life. In what way or ways have I answered him?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for that turning point at which I gave my life to you.

Sunday, May 12

Sabbath Time

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
Psalm 139:23

More and more one sees that, whatever kind of furnishings the interior life may have, its climate is one of faith or of fear.

Monday, May 13

Read: John 12:36b-50

Rejection

One of the most perplexing truths about each of us is that we have the ability to see truth or reality but not accept what we see. We can reject truth. Imagine yourself in a troubled job situation in which one problem after another arises. A fellow worker, who is also a close and concerned friend, takes you to lunch and tells you that the problems in your job result from your own attitude and behavior. You hear the words your friend has spoken but you are unable to see the situation in the light of his or her words. You cannot see the truth. So blinded are you by your own needs, your pride or preconceived ideas that you reject any counsel and go on as you have in the past.

Such was the situation at this time in Jesus’ ministry. He has seen the acute needs and the deep problems of people and has offered himself as the truth, as the solution to those needs. He has met with rejection.

John has now reached a turning point in his gospel narrative. Looking back at the public ministry of Jesus, he summarizes

the main themes of Jesus' preaching and teaching (vv.44-50). He sums up also the response of the nation to Jesus (vv.36-43). As Jewish history was full of the rejection of God, so here the response to Jesus is unbelief. He has been rejected by his own people. Even those who did believe did not publicly acknowledge him for fear of loss of place or position. Personal needs, bias, prejudice, and preconceived ideas kept people from seeing Jesus as he really was. Though they looked and saw what he did, and they heard the words that he said, they rejected him as the son of God. They rejected Jesus as the solution for life.

C. K. Barrett shares his insight into John's gospel at this point. "It is particularly striking that John ends his final summary of the public ministry on this note (v.50). Jesus is not a figure of independent greatness; he is the Word of God, or he is nothing at all. In the first part of the gospel, which here closes, Jesus lives in complete obedience to the Father; in the second part he will die in the same obedience."

R&D Where have I found that Jesus has the solution to the problems in my life? How do I leave him out of the problems that I face?

Prayer: Lord God, when I'm busy doing my own thing, problems occur. Help me to seek Your path for my life and to follow the plan You have for me.

Tuesday, May 14

Read: John 13:1-20

Washed to Serve

The awe-inspiring liturgy of the ordination service has reached its climax with the laying on of hands by the bishop and fellow priests. Holy Communion has been movingly celebrated and now draws to a close as the congregation begins to sing a hauntingly beautiful Ghanaian folksong: "Kneels at the feet of his friends, silently washes their feet, Master who acts as a slave to them. Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you." Following the command of Jesus Christ, another life of servanthood has begun. "For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you"

(v.15). The great teaching of the servanthood of all believers has been heard and accepted.

Dark forces are moving swiftly to draw Jesus to the cross. Jesus has withdrawn from public ministry. Now, in the completeness of love which he has for his disciples (v.1), he devotes his energy to preparing them for what is to come. Yet the darkness enters even the inner circle as one man there makes a final rejection of Jesus. Judas opens himself to the power of evil and makes the final decision to betray his master (vv.2, 18-30).

John places the event of the Last Supper one day earlier than the other gospels (see also 18:28; 19:31, 42). For John, who hails Jesus as the Lamb of God (1:29), the death of Jesus occurs as the Passover lambs are being slain in the temple. At this Last Supper, in another enacted parable, Jesus reminds his disciples of his mission as the Suffering Servant and he also invites them to participate in that mission of suffering and service. The power which will be needed by the disciples to join with Jesus' mission comes to them as they are washed by him. "Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part in me'" (v.8). It was only as they—and we—are washed of sin and self by Jesus that they were and we are able to serve him and others.

Many commentators find a reference to baptism in Jesus' words (v.8). We read in the *Interpreter's Bible*: "The death of Jesus is a baptism with which all his disciples must be baptized. That death is the culmination of a life of self-denying love and service. Through faith in their Master and Savior, shown by obedience to his spirit and example, his disciples share in his baptism and are cleansed from sin."

R&D *Many churches have foot-washing services. How do you feel about that? Why?*

Prayer: *It's my heart that needs washing, Lord; make me clean.*

Read: John 13:21-38

A Glorious Life

On a trip to France on a visit to the Palace of Versailles, I came to an understanding of the word “glorious.” Even to the most casual observer, the use of space and light and color created by the architects and artists of that marvelous building bring a sense of awe and respect and honor. There is something uniquely glorious about the entire complex of grounds and buildings.

John’s gospel now records a series of teachings (vv.31—17:26) known as Jesus’ Farewell Discourse and his Pastoral Prayer. Jesus and the faithful few are left alone after the departure of Judas. Jesus begins the final preparation of his disciples for his death on the cross. His first words remind his listeners of the true character and essence of God. God is glorious, worthy of honor and praise. What Jesus has done and will do—even his death on the cross—will bring glory to the Father. The Father shares that glory, that honor and respect and praise and greatness and majesty with the Son (vv.31-32). They are uniquely worthy of tribute and homage and worship.

Acutely aware of his approaching death, Jesus speaks again of that idea which is at the core of his teaching: “Little children (the only time he uses such a phrase in John)... A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (vv.33-35). It is through exhibiting to others the all-encompassing, self-sacrificing, accepting love which Jesus has shown that they and all future believers are “marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Peter, who is the “everyman” of Scripture, is so sure of his own ability to do as Jesus asks, he protests that he is willing to offer his own life. But Jesus warns Peter of the need for further growth as he predicts his denial (vv.36-38). We are invited by Jesus to share in his glorious nature and belong to him. Like Peter, many of us are accustomed to living out our relationships by our own strength and power, and we, too, try to respond to Christ on our

own terms. And also, like Peter, we fail and even have our own times of denial.

R&D In my own life, where do I give God the honor and glory which He deserves? How do I cope with my own times of denial of Jesus Christ?

Prayer: We are so like Peter, Lord Christ; ready to say how much we love you and yet so prone to fall short, over and over again. Forgive us.

Thursday, May 16

Read: John 14:1-27

The Legacy

Some time ago, a television program showed examples of videotaped last wills and testaments. In these videos, the parent tapes a message of love and affirmation to be shown to the children after the parent's death. The video is made in an attempt to give support to the bereaved family throughout the grieving period and to assure them one last time how much they were loved. There are also promises of the legacy which the parent intends to leave them, a description of the gifts and bequests which will be theirs.

In many ways, Jesus' "farewell discourse" is like his last will and testament. It is given not only for his beloved disciples then, but for all his disciples, those who would believe in him in the future. There are affirmations of love and promises for the future for you and me as well as for the disciples.

It is within this context that Jesus utters his sixth "I AM," proclamation: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (v.6). The increasing storm clouds of doubt, disbelief, jealousy, self-protection, and unwillingness to change have joined. Together they will produce the cataclysmic storm which will result in the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Even among his disciples there will be personal upheavals of betrayal and denial. In the midst of all this, Jesus reaches out to his disciples to strengthen and enable those he will leave behind (v.1).

There are five areas of life about which Jesus gives promises and assurances. Underlying each of these areas is the pledge that Jesus will continue to be present! (1) There is the promise of a

prepared place with God, the hope of a home in heaven (vv.1-3). (2) There is the promise of access to, knowledge of and relationship with God (vv.4-11). (3) There is the promise of continuing important and essential work to do (vv.12-14). (4) There is the promise of the return of Jesus to be with his disciples after the resurrection and ascension (vv.15-26). (5) There is the promise of the gift of peace (14:27).

R&D How do you feel when you realize the legacy which Jesus has given to you? What is your response to such gifts?

Prayer: In addition to all the gifts You give us, Lord God, You engift us with Your Holy Spirit to bring Your loving gifts to others. May we not fail Your love.

Friday, May 17

Read: John 14:6-14

The Sixth Self-Portrait

Steve Harper writes, “If we wish to be effective disciples, we must learn the truth of this section: the way is personal. The disciples did not see this. Thomas wanted to know the way. Philip desired to see the Father ... to help both Thomas and Philip, Jesus pointed them to himself. The way is personal. They would see the Father in him.” “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way... no one comes to the Father, but by me’” (v.6).

Like Peter, we feel we can do it by ourselves. Just give us the directions, we are tempted to say. If we just do all the right things, if we are just good enough, surely we are on the way. We can find the Father. We can do it! Jesus says that we cannot. And the Father, knowing that we cannot find Him without a guide, provides Jesus the Son to show the way and provide the access to Himself.

Jesus is the way by which people come to God. He is the agent or the envoy of God. Someone said, “A man’s agent is like unto himself,” meaning the agent is the person. How is Jesus, and Jesus alone, the way to God? Jesus claims to be not only the “way,” but the “truth and the life.” C. K Barrett says that these two words, truth and life, are the explanation of how Jesus is the way. “Because

Jesus is the means of access to God who is the source of all truth and life, he is himself the truth and the life for men.”

God’s nature is truth, God’s nature is life and, because Jesus and God the Father are one, Jesus reveals God truthfully in a way that no one else can. He is the life-giver in the very same way that God is the life-giver. “Of one being with the Father” is the way the Nicene Creed states this belief of the Christian faith. John records the words of Jesus which are the foundation for this faith: “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves” (vv.7, 11).

R&D What experiences do I have in my life which have shown me that truth comes through Jesus? That life comes through Jesus?

Prayer: Lord, through Your Holy Spirit, You are always present with us. We can experience Your love and presence all day long every day and we are truly grateful.

Saturday, May 18

Read: John 14:12-14

Work—Greater Work

Modern society has an interesting attitude toward work. Bill Gold humorously expresses how many people feel: “I’ve met a few people in my time who were enthusiastic about hard work. It was just my luck that all of them happened to be (people) I was working for at that time.” Many others, however, find their attitude expressed by Theodore Roosevelt: “Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.”

Jesus worked. He found his work completely fulfilling. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (4:34). Tradition tells us that he worked as a carpenter as his earthly father, Joseph, had done. Scripture tells us that at the call of God, Jesus left that work to begin a new work for his heavenly Father, preaching, teaching, and healing, bringing about the kingdom of God. Jesus worked diligently and faithfully. His

expectation was that those who are his disciples, then and now, would do the same (v.12).

What are these greater works the believer is called to do? The work of Jesus was that of reconciliation between God and man. This is the same work which he entrusts to us: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). C. K Barrett writes concisely, "The greater works therefore are the gathering of many converts into the church through the activity of the disciples."

Reconciliation is the work of Christ and it is the work he has given to us. There is no other way that his presence can be known if we do not carry it. We give our action the name "evangelism." Samuel Gordon said, "The way from God to a human heart is through a human heart." We are Christ's agents in the world, and that fact is what makes our own witness so important and so urgent. The greatest gift that we can share with another person is our own personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The greatest work we can do is to introduce another person to him.

How can we do such work? That which Jesus calls us to do, he also enables. "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it" (vv.13-14). In this context, the promise of Jesus is that when we prayerfully share him with others, he will be there with us in the sharing. Jesus completely and without reservation fulfilled the work he had been given to do. Therefore, as ascended Lord, he hears and answers our prayers.

R&D As I consider my own personal evangelism efforts, what steps could I take to be a more effective witness for Christ?

Prayer: Lord Christ, please help me to reach others for you.

Sunday, May 19

Sabbath Time

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:12

We must see clearly where the evils of America lie, and recognize the corruption and compromise and materialism and godlessness that have eaten into the spirit of our nation. These things can and, unless checked, will destroy us. They are destroying us. They blind our eyes to the truth. They put rope where our spines ought to be. They drag down our youth. They break apart our homes.

Monday, May 20

Read: John 14:15-31

Never Alone

One of the basic fears instinctive to human beings is the fear of abandonment. That fear never completely leaves us. I remember seeing such fear in our eight-month-old granddaughter. As an infant, she loved everyone and always had ready smiles for the person who gave her care and attention. Then suddenly, without warning, she began to cry when her mother left the room. She then progressed in her development and was soon able to distinguish the familiar and the unfamiliar. Her mother was her security. She was afraid of being abandoned and left alone.

Jesus has spoken to this basic human fear of abandonment before, and he does so very clearly once again. The disciples are afraid of being left alone and to that fear Jesus promises his eternal presence: “And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth” (vv.16-17) ... “I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you” (v.18) ... “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (v.23)... “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name” ... (v.26). These are the first two of five promises of the Holy Spirit found within the Last Discourse of Jesus.

The precise promise of Jesus is that we will never be left alone. The fear of aloneness that we carry within us can be replaced by faith in the promise of his presence. The Greek word which is translated “counselor,” or “advocate,” or “comforter,” is *paraclete*. The Greek *para* means alongside, and *kletos* means to call. There is always someone alongside of us upon whom we can call. We are

never alone. The Holy Spirit is with us to show us truth (v.17), to be our teacher (v.26), and to bring our attention continually back to Jesus (v.25).

Paraclete also carries the connotation of the legal profession. The word could be used to refer to a lawyer or an advocate. Steve Harper writes, “*Today’s English Version* translates this word as ‘helper.’ I like that more general rendering because it is closer to the heart of the Greek, for God gives us the Holy Spirit to be our helper in any situation. If we need advice, he can be our counselor. If we need strengthening, he can be our comforter. Whatever we need, he is our helper.” We are never alone.

R&D Never separated from him, we are able to feel the constant presence of Jesus in our lives through the Holy Spirit. What is your response to such a promise?

Prayer: Lord God, You know I need help—and You have graciously provided that help through Your Holy Spirit.

Tuesday, May 21

Read: John 15:1-11

The Seventh Self-Portrait

A conversation at the dinner table with a niece centered around grapes and wines. She and her husband are the owners of a California vineyard, and they recently discovered a major problem in their vineyard which is plaguing many grape growers in California. The root stock on which the vines grow has been infested with a tiny mite that causes the vines to shrivel up and die. At the present, there is no pesticide or chemical to kill the pest. Their only remedy is to take new root stock that is immune to this insect and to begin again. New rootstock is the only way.

Jesus used just such an image to describe himself and the relationship of his followers with God. He reinterprets a familiar Old Testament image, which describes the nation of Israel as a vine tended by God (Psalm 80:8-11). Jesus proclaims that a new time has come. There is a new way to God which is found in him. These new people of God are united to the Father through him. New rootstock is the only way. “I am the (new) vine,” Jesus says.

The nation of Israel had its source in the covenant which God made with Abraham. That covenant set forth the fruit which Israel was to bear. In return for the love and guidance and protection of God, they were to be a people of “one God” in a land of peoples who worshiped many gods. They were to be a people of obedience, a people who looked to God for direction and obeyed His laws. They were to be a people of witness, a people who witnessed to the nations around them of the might and power and goodness and love of the one God, Yahweh (Genesis 12:lff).

Jesus uses the familiar figure of the vine which has designated the nation of Israel and applies it to himself: “I am the true vine... I am the vine, you are the branches” (vv.1, 5). Like the vines in the vineyards of California which can no longer bear fruit and must be replaced with new and disease resistant root stock, so Jesus in this “I AM” proclamation claims to be the new and true vine.

R&D Exactly how do I picture myself as a branch of the vine that is Christ?

Prayer: May we, Lord Jesus, as branches of your vine, produce good fruit for you.

Wednesday, May 22

Read: John 15:12-17

Chosen for the Family of Love

In anthologies there is one subject which invariably commands the most space. It is the subject of “love.” Things said about love range from the ridiculous to the sublime. A suitor once said to his beloved, “I’d die for you, my love.” She replied, “O Harold. You’re always saying that, but you never do it.” More seriously, Carl Menninger wrote, “Love cures people ... both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.” Frank Tyger put it most succinctly, “Love: in tennis, nothing; in life, everything.”

Concerned not only with the believer’s relationship with the Father but also about their relationship with each other, Jesus invites all who believe in him into a family whose primary identifying trait is that of love. The family has other characteristics. It is identified by its chosenness: “You did not choose me, but I

chose you...” (v.16). It is identified by the friendship which exists between the family members and the one in authority (the divine head of the family), a friendship based on knowledge of each other and of the family’s purpose in being (v.15). Yet the family is identified primarily because it is a family of love for one another (v.17).

Christian love is Christ-like (v.12). It is a sacrificial love, willing to give and endure and uphold and support, a love involving self-denial (v.13). It is an obedient love, one which recognizes the place of each family member and above all the head of the family (v.14). It is a fruit-bearing love, one which not only receives but gives. It promotes an ever-growing family where new members are sought and welcomed gladly (v.16). It is a love which is enabled and strengthened by the father (v.16).

In the Christian family or community, family love is horizontal as well as vertical. Love flows not just from parent to child and child to parent, but from child to child. There is no family, no community, without this essential element. It was said of the early Christians, “See how they love one another.” Into such a family of abiding relationship, Jesus invites each one of us.

R&D What is the most recent example in my life of Christian love in action?

Prayer: Help us, Lord, increasingly to show love in its fullest, self-sacrificial sense to those around us.

Thursday, May 23

Read: John 15:18-27

On the Outside

Have you ever been a part of an organization about which another member has been very critical? What do we do when someone refuses to conform to the standards of our group, criticizes its members, and then forms what we perceive to be another competing group outside the fellowship? If we are typical, we tend to respond to such behavior in indignation, anger, and, perhaps, even with hostility and hatred. The depth of those responses will be in direct proportion to how important the group is which criticized us.

In many ways, Jesus found himself doing exactly that. Forced outside the religious institutions that were unwilling to make any changes in the status quo, Jesus gathered a new group with new standards around him. Anyone who had any stake in the institutions which Jesus exposed as inadequate and corrupt was bound to respond to him in indignation, anger or even hatred. John Killinger writes: “The ‘Jews’ would hate the Christians because Christ threatened their authority in religious matters. The Romans would hate them because they worshiped Jesus instead of Caesar. From a spiritual perspective neither the ‘Jews’ nor the Romans had just cause to hate him. But the perfidious thing about hate is always its baselessness and ridiculousness.”

As sinful people, we live in a sinful world, a world that lives essentially apart from God and in opposition to God. When we accept the world’s standards, the world loves us. “The world loves only its own, those who conform to its spirit, accept its values, and worship its false gods,” says Rogert L. Fredrickson. When we accept the call of Christ and welcome him into our lives, we step outside the world and when our lives stand in judgment of the world’s standards, the world hates us for it. In the words of Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, we become “resident aliens.”

If we are lukewarm Christians, if our commitment to Christ is so minimal that it changes nothing about how we think or behave, we easily coexist with the world. But if we accept him into our lives in a “vine-branches” relationship, he recreates us, sets our hearts on fire with love for him and gives us a desire to share the news about him with others. The Holy Spirit who is his witness in the world (vv.26-27) works in our lives. Suddenly people can see that we belong to Jesus Christ and we find ourselves truly on the outside.

R&D How willing am I to be seen as different from others because of my faith in Christ?

Prayer: Gracious Lord Christ, it’s the old question of whether our love for you is sufficiently evident that we could be arrested for being a Christian.

Read: John 16:1-11

The Believer's Advantage

An old maxim suggests that to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Such a saying may work in warfare but in matters of the heart, it only softens the blow. When personal danger or death threatens or the loss of a loved one is eminent, anguish is very real and must be endured. The Epistle of James suggests that it is in the steadfastness of facing trials that believers become mature and complete (James 1:2-4). Because of Jesus' presence among the disciples, they had been protected from the worst of the opposition and persecution. Without his presence, the disciples would be without his protection. C. K. Barrett writes: "Now however, when he is (to be) separated from them, he foretells their persecution, in order that the memory of his words may provide an additional protection."

Jesus continues to reassure his friends by making them an unusual promise. The loss which they will experience in and through his death will be of advantage to them: "... it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (v.7). This is now the fourth promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus will be present to his disciples through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus speaks of a threefold thrust of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will work through persuasion: He will convince (convict) the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (vv.8-11). By the Holy Spirit, a person can be persuaded that he or she is wrong and so enabled to change his or her mind. (1) The Holy Spirit will show that sin is unbelief (v.9). Lives which are not centered in Jesus are sinful lives. Sin is the rejection of him. (2) The Holy Spirit will show people true righteousness. Righteousness is seen not in adherence to a set of rules and regulations but rather it is seen in the life of Jesus. William Temple wrote, "The Ascension of Christ is indeed the seal set on his life as a manifestation of righteousness, and we may learn from him what righteousness really is." (3) The Holy Spirit will show the world

that through the cross, evil is judged and defeated. “He will make it clear that there is such a thing as judgment, because the prince of this world already stands condemned,” writes R. V.G. Tasker. A Pentecost hymn prays, “Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me...” This kind of relationship, this kind of companionship is promised to you and me. This is the peculiar advantage promised by Christ to his disciples and to all believers. It comes to us through the Holy Spirit. Christ, through his Holy Spirit, can be a part of our lives wherever we are and wherever we go and whatever we do.

R&D Persecution, presence, and power are the focus of Jesus’ words in this passage. Where, in your life, have you seen these three basic characteristics of the Christian life?

Prayer: Guide us, Holy Spirit, in all that we do that we may reflect the love of Jesus to the world around us.

Saturday, May 25

Read: John 16:12-15

Teacher-Glorifier

Sometimes it is lack of experience which blinds the mind. Sometimes it is emotions which cloud the understanding. Sometimes it is the sheer amount of information or the importance of events that overwhelms us and limits what we can comprehend at one time. It may have been one or all of these things that Jesus perceived in his disciples, for as he continued to speak of the work of the Holy Spirit, he did not tell them everything. He promised further and future revelation when they would be able to hear it. He promised his friends that the Holy Spirit would be their teacher. This is now the fifth saying concerning the Holy Spirit in John’s gospel.

It is said that the task of the disciples was to be the “link” between Jesus and all future believers. In order to be that link they needed to know who Jesus was and to be constantly reinforced and renewed in that knowledge. They needed a more complete understanding of the events of Jesus’ life, of his death, and of his resurrection. The task of the Holy Spirit was and is to guide into

all truth, to declare the truth of Jesus. C. K. Barrett writes, “The Paraclete brings to bear, directly upon the church and immediately upon the world, the truth, the truth of God which was manifested in Jesus. Through him the ministry of Jesus is prolonged.”

A second and interrelated work of the Holy Spirit, which is so closely allied to teaching the truth about Jesus, is to glorify Jesus. In the same way that everything Jesus said and did glorified the Father, so the purpose of the work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus. The Holy Spirit is a witness to Jesus. He continues to reveal the nature of Jesus.

R&D What new understanding do I have about the person of Jesus Christ today that I did not possess five years ago? Last year? Yesterday?

Prayer: And let us not forget, Lord Christ, that what we know about you through Scripture was the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who put those truths into words.

Sunday, May 26

Sabbath Time

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Ezekiel 36:26

It is not enough to ask people to come to church, or to have a little religious discussion with them. There is no sale, there is no transaction, nothing really has happened, till they have made an actual commitment of themselves to Jesus Christ. I dare to say that, if the Church would really learn that, and get people converted before it gets them running through its often-admirable routines, we could sweep the world. But our history won't do it, our decency won't do it, our “incomparable liturgy” won't do it. Nothing will do it but the conversion of our hearts, and learning how to pass on to others the reality of Christian faith and life and witness.

Monday, May 27

Read: Psalm 106:6-14

Memorial Day: Remembering to Remember

The Israelites had a problem: they kept forgetting what God had done for them. Psalm 106 has been referred to as a summary

of man's sinfulness. Psalm 105, which immediately precedes it, is a summary of God's faithfulness. God had performed miracle upon miracle to take the Israelites from slavery and lead them into the land He had promised them. But, they kept forgetting. In the desert (v.14), they were so intent on taking care of their bodily needs they became blind to their spiritual needs. They wanted what they wanted, not what God wanted of them. They forgot who they were in relationship to Him, and put Him to the test.

Isn't the story often the same with us? We get mired down in our own petty concerns and forget what God has done for us. On the other hand, if we will just take the time to list all of the things God has done for us, our lives can be filled with praise and thanksgiving. The important thing is remembering to remember.

Today is the day we celebrate Memorial Day in the United States. It is a time to remember those who have died that we might be free. It is easy for us to get caught up in the politics or problems of the day and forget how much we have to be thankful for. We are privileged to live in what truly is a "promised land," and we should be grateful to God and for the brave men and women who have made it so. The important thing is remembering to remember.

R&D *What do you have to be thankful for this day?*

Prayer: *"Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His love endures forever."*

Tuesday, May 28

Read: John 16:16-24

Sorrow Turned to Joy

Puzzled bewilderment once again descends upon the disciples. Jesus' words of imminent departure and return are more than they can understand. They seemed to grasp the fact that his going away would be his death and that it would happen soon. But his "coming again," the possibility of his being raised from the grave was an absolute mystery to them. Not even the raising of Lazarus had prepared them for the resurrection.

Jesus uses the analogy of childbirth to explain to his disciples how they will feel. When a woman delivers a child there is a

time of pain, hours of discomfort in labor, even fear of what the final outcome will be. She feels anxiety about herself and about the baby. But when the child is born, very quickly the pain and discomfort and anxiety are forgotten in the delight and the pleasure and the joy which the beautiful infant brings to the mother.

How insightful is Jesus! After the birth of our first child, I proudly took him to the doctor for his first checkup, knowing that he was the most perfect baby that had ever lived. As the doctor moved through the examination, I asked, "I would like to have another one right away. Would that be all right for me physically?" The doctor looked at me quizzically for a moment before replying and then said, "I'll never understand you women. After the experience you went through, I should think that you would have had enough." He didn't understand. He had never experienced the joy of being a mother.

But Jesus understood. He knew the kind of sorrow his disciples would feel at his death and the kind of joy that they would experience at his resurrection. It would be joy that was permanent: "no one will take your joy from you" (v.22). It would be joy that was complete, "that your joy may be full" (v.24).

R&D Where in my life have I experienced sorrow or anguish and discovered through the grace and power of Jesus Christ that I was also able to experience joy?

Prayer: You provide us with the opportunity for joy at the beginning of each day, Lord God.

Wednesday, May 29

Read: John 16:23-33

In His Name

As a part of the promise of joy, Jesus repeats the promise of the power of prayer in his name: "In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give whatever you ask in my name ... ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (vv.23-24 NIV). Jesus bestows gift upon gift as he promises believers direct access to the Father through prayer "in his name." He reassures his disciples of God's love. Jesus revealed

the Father's love for all people through his life. He assures believers that the Father loves them because they love and believe in Jesus (v.27).

It is said that to pray in Jesus' name means to pray as Jesus himself would pray. To pray in his name means to pray according to his will. It is also said that we can test our prayers by the example of his life, that we can evaluate our prayers by the mind of Jesus. Jesus' life gives us insights into his prayer life and our own.

To pray in Jesus' name is to have a realization of our own dependency. It is to understand that we desperately need him and what he has to offer. It is to pray with a realization that he is the source of all our strength. It is to know where we can find the resources with which to deal with life.

To pray in Jesus' name is to pray in acceptance. Jesus prayed, "... nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). We pray neither demanding that our wishes be carried out nor demanding that our circumstances be changed. Sometimes we receive both. But we pray in acceptance of the power that prayer releases. There is the power to accept change in ourselves, or the power to accept what is happening, or the power to see purpose in whatever it is that we are enduring, or the power to accept God's directions, or the power to accept delay and await His decisions.

To pray in Jesus' name is to pray in confidence. We pray knowing that there will be an answer. We have confidence in God's saving grace and love for us as shown in the life of Jesus. We have a confidence of direct access to God through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection.

R&D As I examine my own prayer life, how can I pray more fully in the name of Jesus?

Prayer: We honor your name above all names, Lord Jesus, as we seek to learn how truly to pray in your name.



God at Work in the World

Thursday, May 30

Read: Matthew 19:13-15

God at Work in the World - 1

While many churches face an aging congregation and shrinking numbers, St. Francis of Assisi in Novato, California decided to make a concerted effort to attract more families with children. “We decided to pay more attention to children,” said the Rector, the Rev. Phil Rountree. “We designed a service especially for families.”

The decision was made to have easier songs that are more fun to sing than the hymns that had been used. A traditional service was put together but with easier-to-understand language and explanations of the different parts of the service. “Most importantly,” according to Rountree, “we adjusted our expectations for children’s behavior. We do not expect them to sit quietly through the whole service. We tell parents it’s okay to bring dolls, toys, and books from home to increase their comfort level at the service.

“The church also supplies Bible coloring books and a children’s weekly worship bulletin with activities related to the Sunday readings. The sermon is not a ‘kiddie’ message, but always includes a story or example that will attract the attention of young ears. The preacher either avoids big words or defines them. Children also help usher, serve at the altar, and present gospel skits.

“And don’t underestimate the children,” says Rountree. He tells of a parent whose seven-year-old played with his baseball cards during the entire service, but then recited the sermon verbatim on the way home. Let the little children come to Jesus.

R&D What do we need to do in our congregation to make worship more welcoming of and meaningful to children?

Prayer: *I remember, Lord Jesus, that you said, "Let the little children come unto me."*

Friday, May 31

Read: John 13:31-35

God at Work in the World - 2

Dr. John Bernbaum, a past executive vice president of the Christian College Coalition, was about to return from Russia when he and his wife were asked to appear on a popular talk show hosted by a famous Russian film star and media personality. It was a live talk show scheduled for prime time the Friday before Easter, Good Friday night. All during the week the network had been showing the film *Jesus of Nazareth*, produced by Campus Crusade for Christ.

The talk show host asked about the Bernbaums' family, and about freedom and personal responsibility. Then came the unexpected question: "What do you think love is; how would you describe love?" Mrs. Bernbaum jumped right in with how God's love for us enables us to love one another, and Dr. Bernbaum pointed out God's love for us as sinners.

As soon as the show was over, the program director leaped out of her chair, clapped her hands and ran over to embrace the Americans. "This is what our country so desperately needs. What you said about God's love is what we need to hear," she said.

A thought ran through Bernbaum's mind. Herein lies a parable for the West. American media leaders had much to learn from the crisis in Russia. Do we have eyes to see what happens to a society when it is stripped of moral and religious values?

R&D What does the secular media need to learn about the love of God? How do we help them learn it?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, perhaps the only way we can teach love is to show to others the love you have shown to us.*

Saturday, June 1

Read: Matthew 25:14-21

God at Work in the World - 3

Fred Gore died on October 18, 1992 at the age of 78. His obituary was not in national newspapers or magazines. It was probably in very few church papers. Yet, Fred was remarkable in a way that only Christians can understand. He was obedient to God, and he invested his talents to the utmost in the kingdom of God.

From a secular point of view, there were many things that Fred was not. He did not have a charismatic appearance or personality; you would never have noticed him in a crowd. He was not a particularly good speaker or commanding leader. He had made no record for himself in a profession or industry. He was not wealthy.

What can be said for Fred is that he had a vision. In 1970, he realized that the Church needed the infusion of spiritual renewal that was making an impact by way of lay witnessing weekends. Fred was the primary founder of Faith Alive, a program that has brought spiritual refreshment to some 2,000 churches and tens of thousands of people.

By worldly standards, Fred didn't have a lot to work with. But he took all the Master gave him and invested it at the highest rate of interest in the world (the bringing of people to Jesus). Only God knew the returns. And now Fred does too.

R&D What gifts has God given me that I need to invest more wisely?

Prayer: You don't need superstars to carry your work forward, Lord Christ; just ordinary people who love you and want to do what you would have them do.

Sunday, June 2

Sabbath Time

Truly no man can ransom himself or give to God the price of his life.

Psalm 49:7

The inner life of many people is simply vacant. They may once have had a faith to give life coherence and meaning. But the widespread materialism about them, and the corrosion of a secularistic philosophy in education, have robbed them of it. The cheap, irresponsible materialists and the clever but unwise educators seem

to have formed a coalition bent on drawing down the minds of the oncoming generations from the beliefs and values on which great living depends, and reducing them to concern for what they can possess and feel and touch and enjoy.



Speaking God's Word

Monday, June 3

Read: Mark 1:1-3

Introduction

Many years ago, when we began publishing *The Journey* in a daily, dated form, we studied Isaiah and Jeremiah. Our goal then, as now, was basically to cover the Bible every five years through the various studies. Being perhaps overly faithful to that goal, we spent one month studying Jeremiah and two months studying Isaiah!

For the most part, our subscribers were not happy with our spending so much time dealing with Old Testament prophets. Having learned some things over the years, we approach Isaiah and Jeremiah in a different manner these days by combining the study of both prophets into the theme: Speaking God's Word.

We have chosen what we believe to be the most important passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah. Of special help in doing this was Archbishop George Appleton's book *The Heart of the Bible*. Furthermore, we have tried to consider these Old Testament passages in light of the New Testament.

Isaiah is the twenty-third book of the Bible and is named for the great prophet who was active in Judah from about 738 to 700 BC. Isaiah is regarded as the undoubted author of Chapters 1-39. Because Chapters 40-66 have a marked difference from the first part of the book, most scholars credit them to an unknown prophet simply referred to as Second Isaiah. Jeremiah is the twenty-fourth book of the Bible and is named for the prophet whose history covered the span of 40 years, from his call in the thirteenth year of King Josiah (626 BC) to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He prophesied under the last five kings of Judah.

The Old Testament prophets were truly men who spoke God's word.

R&D *How important to us today are the messages of the Old Testament prophets?*

Prayer: *Lord God, the Bible is Your Book. You spoke Your word down through the ages so that we could have a complete picture of Your plan for humankind.*

Tuesday, June 4

Read: Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah's Call

Holiness is at the heart of being able to speak God's word. If we are to be God's people in the world today, and to show forth the love of Jesus Christ in word and deed, we are called to holiness, just as Isaiah was in this passage. But we, like Isaiah, when faced with the holiness of God, will immediately be conscious of our sins—how far we fall short of the glory of God!

There is ecstasy in this passage, some of the most beautiful words in Scripture to picture the holiness of God. We could easily get lost in the splendor of the words and forget two important points. The first is that this was a call to ministry. All of God's people are called to ministry; some experience powerful encounters with God as a part of the call while others simply understand that ministry is an inherent part of the life of the Christian and perhaps go about it totally unselfconsciously. That is not to say that one "call" is greater or more important than another; God has His purposes for each of us, and His way of dealing with each of us. Regardless of how God calls us to ministry and how we perceive that call, there are steps involved; and that is the second important point to retain from this passage. Isaiah's experience was: (1) vision, (2) preparation, (3) call, and (4) acceptance.

It would be difficult indeed for God to call someone to ministry who did not have some vision of the holiness of God and of God's love for him or her. Likewise, there needs to be growth in the relationship with God that is preparatory to His making known the ways in which He wants us to serve Him. With this background, we are open to the call itself whether (as indicated above) it comes dramatically or only as a natural part of Christian

maturity. Finally, there is acceptance. That is the hardest part! We either know we are too sinful (as was the case with Isaiah) and need repentance; or, we feel inadequate and have to be reminded that God works best with people who know that, except for Him, they are not adequate.

R&D What is your experience of having been called by God to ministry?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Your Church will never be the Church You call it to be until Your people know and accept Your call upon their lives to minister to one another and the world around them.

Wednesday, June 5

Read: Isaiah 1:10-17, 20

God Denounces Evil

Our passage for today begins with, “Hear the word of the Lord,” and ends with, “the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” The prophets spoke God’s word. They were the means of communication between God and His people in Old Testament times. These words not only evidenced divine proclamation, but contained an essential warning: “if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword.” Thus we see not only how important it is to speak God’s word, but how necessary it is for us to hear and obey.

The particular things singled out in this passage are that religiosity (ritual for its own sake) is an abomination to God and that what God really wants of His people is justice and obedience.

God was not calling His people then, nor is He calling us today, to set aside our liturgy. Rituals have their proper place in the life of the Christian, enhancing worship and nurturing our spiritual growth. The problem is in getting things out of balance, so that we concentrate on outward appearances to the exclusion of living godly lives within ourselves. Rather than using substitutes (sacrificial animals and appointed feasts) as a means of trying to appease God, He wants His people to, “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean” (v.16).

Then, in verse 17, God says, “Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” In other words,

do something. This passage is a condemnation of hypocrisy. The word God is speaking to His people is to quit putting on a show of religion and get busy doing the work He calls us to do.

R&D *Wherein may you have become so wrapped up in the trappings of the faith that you have neglected to do God's work?*

Prayer: *In Your call on us, Lord, may we never substitute form for substance.*

Thursday, June 6

Read: Isaiah 1:18-19

God Promises Cleansing

Nothing is more central to the Christian faith—and here we find its seeds in the Old Testament—than the need to repent and the fact of forgiveness when we do. Again, Isaiah has said it in beautiful words. “Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” Followed, however, by the big “if.” “If you are willing and obedient.”

Repentance is at the heart of Scripture. In concert with the prophets, John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2), Jesus (Matthew 4:17), and Peter (Acts 2:38) all began their ministries with the call to repentance. In this “feel good” age in which we live, there is a negative attitude toward repentance. It involves admitting we are sinful during a time when self-affirmation is the rule. But the truth is that we are sinful. There may be many good things about ourselves that we need to affirm in order to have a healthy self-image, but we only fool ourselves if, in the process, we ignore our fallen nature.

The good news, of course, is that, as Christians, we understand that we can be forgiven. All that is necessary is a willingness to admit our sin and genuinely to seek God's forgiveness. The whole of the Christian life is about turning things around (from the way we lived in our pre-Christian years and the way the world lives today) and heading in a new direction, giving our lives over to God and His will for us. God will wash away our sins and give us a new robe of righteousness to wear to His glory.

R&D *Think of an instance in which God has impressed on your heart the “Come now, let us reason together” approach.*

Prayer: *Lord, where would we be without Your forgiveness when we repent?*

Friday, June 7

Read: Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7

Messianic Expectation

For Christians, these verses have always been very special ones. They are seen by us as messianic prophecy. We believe that they foretell the birth of Jesus because, in him, the prophecy is fulfilled.

When, at Christmastime, we say, “Unto us a child is born,” we have no doubts about who that is. The words become a hymn of our thanksgiving for the fulfillment of the hope that burned in the hearts of God’s people through centuries of darkness and pain, that God would visit and redeem them. The promise has come true; “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” On us has shined “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

These verses tell us what the Messiah will bring: not only a light in the darkness, but also growth, joy and provision for our needs. In verse 6, the reference to government is really a rare Hebrew word meaning either “the burden of authority” or some symbol of majesty—and certainly that finds fulfillment in Jesus as he brings into reality the kingdom of God. Then we see the nature of Christ’s rule in that kingdom by virtue of the titles in verse 7.

The word God speaks through Isaiah is not a listing of grandiose titles for an eastern monarch but the characteristics of one sent by God and standing in a unique relationship with God. The type of kingdom will be determined by the character of the king. Isaiah does not list promises of enlarged territory, strong armies, thriving commerce and the like; the results of the Messiah’s reign will be justice and righteousness.

R&D *Why, over the last some 2,000 years, have not all people in darkness seen the light of Christ?*

Prayer: *Forgive us, Lord; we have failed to bring the light of Christ into this dark world.*

Saturday, June 8

Read: Isaiah 11:1-5

Messianic Age I

In this passage, Isaiah is speaking God's word about the Messiah (he will come from the root of Jesse; that is, of David's line of descent), but we will look at it from a standpoint of how we are to be as representatives of the Messiah in the world today. God would have all of us rich in wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord.

"And his delight shall be in fear of the Lord." Why the emphasis on this? Are we really to fear God? In Jesus Christ we have come to see that God is truly a God of love. Why fear, then? When the Bible talks of the fear of God it is talking about something we would call awe or extreme respect, filial fear (the feeling a child has toward a parent whom he loves very much but also respects as the source of authority). It is too easy to become casual about God and to treat Him as sort of a holy fire marshal whom we only call on to put out the fires in our lives.

If, on the other hand, we pay due homage to God and seek to know Him better, we will have the gifts God intends for us. Verses 3b and 4a speak of being able to look behind the surface of things to perceive the real needs that exist and to have the heart to reach out to the poor and the meek. Verse 5 focuses on righteousness and faithfulness. These are the qualities of life that God intends for each of us in order that we might speak God's word boldly to a very needy world today.

R&D *What does being righteous and faithful mean to you?*

Prayer: *Lord, to me being righteous means being in a right relationship with You...and that requires faithfulness on my part in studying and following Your word.*

For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. 1 Peter 1:9

We fill our hands and our time with all kinds of activity to make us forget, while our souls are empty of those convictions and standards which alone give life purpose or direction. People turn to pleasure, business, radio and television, sex, drink, drugs, anything to while away a leisure hour, and forget the yawning vacuum that gapes in the place where their souls ought to be. The body dies at our death, and the soul alone survives. Yet we stuff the body and starve the soul, living for the moment and forgetting eternity.

Monday, June 10

Read: Isaiah 11:6-9

Messianic Age II

Today's verses are a beautiful description of how life should be on planet earth: the peaceable kingdom. Yet, we have known only conflict. As people become theoretically more advanced, rather than learning to make peace, their capacity for committing atrocities seems to increase.

Although the picture of wild animals and domestic ones living in harmony with one another may be the subject of famous paintings, that is probably not what God is trying to show us through Isaiah in this passage. In Scripture, the world of nature is often used to illustrate social, moral, and religious truths. Therefore, this prophecy is probably not about the taming of wild animals but a new age in which old hatreds will be forgotten. The powerful will live peacefully with the weak, exploitation of the poor will cease, people will love one another.

This is the ideal of the Messianic Age. It is the vision of a world characterized by justice, righteousness, and peace. It will be a world ruled by the Messiah in which the people (not the animals) "shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord."

This is not the world of our day, but it is a vision of how God wants it to be; and, because of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, it is a possibility. We can only do what we can do, but we can do all we can do—our share of making this vision a reality.

R&D *What is your role?*

Prayer: *Grant us peace within ourselves, Lord God, that we may reflect Your peace to the world around us.*

Tuesday, June 11

Read: Jeremiah 1:4-10

His Call

Having looked at how God called Isaiah to be a prophet, we now see the manner of Jeremiah's call. There are several aspects of it with which we may identify as we reflect on the way or ways in which God has called us into action from time to time.

The first thing to note is Jeremiah's reluctance (v.6). He claims youth, ignorance, and inability to speak. Many Christians profess that their failure to stand up for God's word is because they are too young in the faith, there is too much that they do not yet know. God can use us nonetheless, especially if we are honest enough to admit what we do not know and willing to go find it out. And, certainly, we should be growing in knowledge of the Lord that will remedy our ignorance.

The second thing to notice is God's assurances. Jeremiah's objections are countered in verses 7-8. He is told to look beyond his own resources and is given a promise, the promise that runs throughout the Old Testament and is confirmed in the New, the promise of God's continuing and reliable presence. See especially the Gospel of John, chapters 14-16, wherein Jesus discusses with the disciples how the Holy Spirit will be in them to guide them. This promise is true for us as well.

The third thing to note is that speaking God's word is often difficult. Jeremiah was given very unpopular things to say; and, although God was with him, he suffered mightily. When we stand up for truth, we too will face opposition. God did not promise us a rose garden. He does promise us the opportunity to be His ambassadors to speak His word in the world today, and eternal life with Him.

R&D *When has God called you to speak tough truth in love?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, that You allow us to speak for You in crucial situations.*

Wednesday, June 12

Read: Jeremiah 9:1-3

Lament over Israel

Jeremiah's lament over Israel could well be our tears of sorrow concerning the state of our nation, world, and even Church. Family structures have been shattered, divorce continues at an astounding rate, crime and drug addiction are rampant, pornography, abortion as a means of birth control, scandals within the government and the Church—the list goes on and on. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the evil around us.

Faced with such a situation, there are two especially important messages for us in this passage. The first is that it is healthy to weep about the matter. If we can weep, it is a sign that we are deeply sensitive to the tragedy around us. Only as we care enough to shed tears of sorrow will we be motivated to take the kind of action God wants us to take—that we may speak God's word effectively at such a time as this.

Secondly, we should avoid the temptation to escape. "O that I might leave my people and go away from them!" cries Jeremiah. It is normal simply to want to ignore, avoid, or rationalize it all, but that is not God's way. He has us here as His ambassadors for a purpose, to speak His word for good and against evil in whatever way we can wherever we are.

R&D *What are you going to do about it?*

Prayer: *Instead of avoiding the unpleasantness of things that are wrong, give me the eyes to see them and the courage to face them, in Your strength, Lord.*

Thursday, June 13

Read: Jeremiah 17:9-14

Human Heart

In our passage for today, verses 9 and 10 contain reflections on the mysterious deviousness of the human mind. Experience

teaches us (and certainly had taught Jeremiah) that the human mind (Hebrew “heart”) can be very puzzling, perverse in the extreme. We so easily overlook our motives, fail to see our blind spots, rationalize our actions, ignore our sins. Only God knows what goes on in the human mind and heart (the two words are perhaps used here to reflect the whole range of a person’s inner life).

We then get this interesting parallel to the animal world again. The partridge is used as an example of one who hatches someone else’s eggs only to see the resulting birds abandon this unnatural parent. This will happen to the person who acquires unjust gains; “easy come, easy go,” and he is left feeling the fool.

But, God tells us, there is another way. If we are faithful and obedient to the Lord, He can even deal with our wayward heart and mind and lead us to “the fountain of living water” (see also John 7:37-44). This is a message of hope (v.13) for those who do not turn away from the Lord, and of healing (v.14) for those who seek the Lord.

The passage is about choices. We can rely on worldly ways of doing things despite these warnings about the deceptiveness of our mind. Or we can have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5) by being faithful in worship, Bible study, prayer, and service.

R&D How can we be sure that the “fruit of our own doings” (v.10b) is pleasing to God?

Prayer: It is only as we grow in You, Lord, that we grow in the willingness to do things Your way.

Friday, June 14

Read: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hope of New Covenant

Covenant is one of the words used in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between God and His people. It is a relationship rooted in God’s initiative, in what He has done for the people and what He expects from them in return. The Covenant is summed up in “you shall be my people and I shall be your God.”

In this passage we see hope for the New Covenant which would be fulfilled in Christ. What will be “new” about it?

God's law would be written within people rather than being on tablets of stone (the Ten Commandments) or other written documents. That is, instead of obedience being response to an external command, it would be second nature. Inner response would replace external demand. As Christians know today, God's Holy Spirit within (though needing to be perceived by growth in knowledge of Scripture and a focused journey with the Lord—"walking in the Spirit," Galatians 5:25) provides the guidance that Jeremiah envisioned.

The other great theme of this passage in looking toward a New Covenant is the promise of forgiveness. Not only will God forgive the sins of which we repent, He will forget them ("and I will remember their sin no more")! We can be grateful for the New Covenant and the opportunity to live within it as Christians, but we do need to ask ourselves if we are doing any better in faithfulness and obedience than the Jews to whom Jeremiah prophesied.

R&D *If not, why not?*

Prayer: *Because of Your Son Jesus, Lord God, we have no excuse for not living into Your New Covenant.*

Saturday, June 15

Read: Jeremiah 38:2-6

Babylonian Invasion

As has been noted from time to time in this study, speaking God's word can be costly. Perhaps it would be good to enter into the content of the story—what is actually going on in the life of Jeremiah—to illustrate the point more graphically.

Jeremiah has been arrested and condemned by the very words he had spoken (vv.2-3 are a virtual quotation of what Jeremiah had said in 21:9-10). His accusers demand the death penalty because, in their eyes, he has demoralized the troops just at the time they needed utmost resolve in facing the Chaldeans (Babylonians). From their point of view, what Jeremiah had said was clearly treason. The king's actions would remind Christians of Pilate, washing his hands of the situation and turning the prisoner over to those crying for his blood. Jeremiah believed that, in the

purposes of God, Jerusalem must be destroyed, and he had simply spoken God's word. The result was he was thrown into a cistern to suffer an agonizing death. Fortunately, someone who cared about Jeremiah went to the king and secured his release from the cistern (vv.7-13).

Jeremiah was no traitor. He did nothing undercover; he spoke boldly where he could be seen and heard. He counseled his fellow citizens to surrender, yet he ended up remaining behind, sharing in the suffering of those who refused to heed his warning. He was not a pacifist nor pro-Babylonian; he was simply speaking the word of God. There would be great pain in Jeremiah's life, but the mental and spiritual anguish he would have suffered if he had been disobedient to God would have been vastly greater.

R&D What sacrifices have you had to make because of your obedience to Christ?

Prayer: On the surface we live in easier times than Jeremiah, Lord; but there are always storm clouds of disaster ahead when Your will is being ignored. Prepare us and strengthen us for those times.

Sunday, June 16

Sabbath Time

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

The effect of living in times like these is hard on our emotions. Add to this the fact that many of our educational institutions have exposed our young people to nothing but a secularistic, naturalistic view of life, and robbed them of the powerful spiritual resources which alone come to the rescue of our emotional difficulties, and you need not wonder at narcotics and crime and despair in so many of the youth of our time.

Monday, June 17

Read: Jeremiah 38:14-28

Consultation

Let us look today a little more closely at Jeremiah and the situation he faced. Having seen him as uncompromisingly brave in the previous lesson, one might question that here. He seems to

want assurance that he will not once again be handed over to his detractors if he speaks God's word to Zedekiah.

To be fair to Jeremiah, his attitude was probably, "What's the use?" Based on past experience, he did not believe that Zedekiah would really listen to him. The king would not like what Jeremiah had to say, and, to justify himself, would betray Jeremiah to those who wanted to kill him. It was only after assurances that this would not be the case, and Zedekiah would take him seriously, that Jeremiah spoke. Yet, once he spoke, it was again boldly the word of God.

Let's look also at Zedekiah. Does he remind us of politicians of our day? We choose people for leadership, "statesmanship" perhaps, and too often we get people looking for the easy compromise which is just the opposite of leadership. Zedekiah reminds us of Pilate, and they both may remind us of some political leader who has failed our expectations of him or her. People in leadership positions do get themselves in tight spots, often not of their own making. As Christians, it is our job to speak God's word to them, affirming them when they do what is right and holding them accountable when they do not.

R&D Identify your frustration with a political or spiritual leader who compromises rather than taking the courageous though unpopular stand.

Prayer: What can we do, Lord God, to take more seriously the corruption and false values being displayed around us?

Tuesday, June 18

Read: Jeremiah 32:6-15

Faith in the Future

Today's lesson is an acted-out parable, something Jesus also did (Matthew 21:18-22). At the time of our reading, Jeremiah was in prison for speaking God's word concerning what was going to happen to Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. Yet, this is clearly a story of confidence in the future. What this says to us is that the prophets had the "big picture" because they lived in utter obedience to God. In the midst of the most trying of circumstanc-

es—personally and for his nation—Jeremiah had confidence that, in the long run, God’s plan would be carried out.

This is clearly a message for us as well. It is easy to get caught up in bad things that are happening in our own day in the world, in our country, in the church, and in our own lives. They can lead us to despair. But despair is not what God wants of us. He cannot use disheartened people. He needs people who have faith in the future.

When all else fails—and preferably long before all else fails!—we can pray. God wants us to be living within His will, and He can speak to us most clearly about His will for us through obedience in prayer, worship, and the study of Scripture. As He speaks to us, we can better see His “big picture” and fulfill the part He has for us in it, as small as it might seem to be.

R&D *What act of hope could you perform today?*

Prayer: *Sharpen our focus, Lord, to see the “big picture” that You lay before us so that we may pray more effectively.*

Wednesday, June 19

Read: Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort

We now switch back to Isaiah, looking at passages attributed to “Second Isaiah” and beyond. Specific references to people and events make it clear that in these chapters the author is addressing Jewish exiles in Babylon, soon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Historians refer to this period as the end of the Babylonian and beginning of the Persian period. It was a major turning point in the history of the world.

The glory of God was revealed to the author and he pours forth with words of beauty and grace. In a very difficult time for the Jewish people, it is a message of hope. For Christians, the reference to a voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord,” reminds us of John the Baptist and his Elijah-like preparation for the coming of Jesus. It has been said that nowhere in the Old Testament is there more of the Christian gospel than in today’s reading and the one that follows. We see God as creator and

sovereign of all nations; God at work in history, in judgment and redemption; and God's gracious forgiveness of His people.

We also see how precious Jerusalem and God's people are to Him. Because of Jesus, we know how true that is: that there was no end to what God would do to be in relationship with people (John 3:16). We know that, in parts of the world that have been under oppression for many years, the Christian church "in exile" has prospered and grown. Perhaps we, too, feel that, in the pluralistic society in which we live, Christianity has lost its influence and God is not taken seriously. Is it not time that we speak God's word of hope to a world that will not find the answers to the mystery of life anywhere else than in Jesus?

R&D What is the message of hope I can speak today, and to whom would God have me speak it?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that those of us who have life in Jesus Christ have confidence in Your ultimate victory no matter how bad things look at any given time.

Thursday, June 20

Read: Isaiah 40:9-11

God's Doing

Today's study is a continuation of our last lesson. What a blessed picture of our God this passage gives us, and we can see how it was lived out by Jesus. The reference, for instance, to God as shepherd feeding His flock and gathering the lambs in His arms has special significance for the Christian. We remember Jesus' teachings about the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18) and his parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14).

It would be difficult indeed to read today's passage without getting caught up in the glory of praising God. Adoration, or praise, is called the highest form of prayer. Through it, we express our love of God, allowing that love to flow through us in an uninhibited way. Adoration is abandonment to God, recognition of our utter dependence on Him. It has, or should have, a cleansing effect upon us.

An example of the ultimate in adoration was King David's dancing before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:12-16): "And David danced before the Ark with all his might" (v.14). It is a magnificent story of the great king acknowledging the Great King.

Perhaps we need to speak God's word about praise more often and more clearly today. We can, ourselves, experience praise by the reading of such passages as today's and many of the psalms.

R&D *In what ways do you praise God?*

Prayer: *Praise God from Whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below.*

Friday, June 21

Read: Isaiah 40:27-31

God's Unfailing Support

Today's verses are an appeal to Israel to trust in the Lord. In light of the spectacular evidence of God's wisdom and power (vv.28-29), how can a person doubt? The last four verses of the reading deal with the particular problem of faintness and weariness (the terms are repeated in each verse), and answer it with assurances of God's power and the strength of those who put their trust in Him.

What we have here is the promise of God's unfailing support and a listing of practical ways in which God sustains us. There are times when it is difficult, because of illness or depression, to do anything. In these times, if we let Him, God will give us the strength to "walk and not faint." When we might otherwise be overburdened by the routines of life, yet know that there is a job to do, God will fill us with the energy needed to "run and not be weary." And there are times when, pursuing the will of the Lord in all that we do, we will even experience mounting up "with the wings of eagles." The word God is speaking to us today through Isaiah is perseverance. We have God's unfailing support, but we must hold up our end. We have to "hang in there." How do we do that? We "wait for the Lord" (v.31a), to give Him the opportunity to renew our strength. This means seeking His will, particularly in prayer

and Scripture study. The word God would have us speak to others is that He will provide if people will give Him the opportunity.

R&D *What does it mean to you to “wait for the Lord”?*

Prayer: *Lord, I know what You want of me today and I am grateful for Your support in giving me the strength to do it.*

Saturday, June 22

Read: Isaiah 42:1-4

First Servant Song

In the second half of the Book of Isaiah there are four poems that are called the “Servant Songs.” They depict a Servant of God suffering patiently a series of indignities and, finally, death. Christians see in this suffering Servant none other than the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Let us look briefly at each, the first of which is our reading for today.

In this first poem, God is seen describing His call to the Servant and the way in which that Servant is to present God’s message, both to Israel and to the nations.

In the second poem (49:1-6), the Servant speaks of his call and his apparent failure to bring Israel back to God. He is told that his mission is much greater: he is to be a light to the nations so that God’s salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

In the third poem (50:4-9), the Servant speaks of growing opposition and injury. Nonetheless, he resolves to continue his mission, confident that God will sustain him and that his enemies will ultimately be thwarted.

In the last poem (52:13—53:12), the Servant has died, and many of those who thought his sufferings were God’s punishment for his sins now realize that, instead, he was the bearer of their sins. Through his pain and death, God has brought forgiveness and blessings. In the last two verses God vindicates His faithful Servant and promises that he has won the victory.

As we reflect on these words, we see the enormity of what Jesus did for us, and we marvel that the prophet could speak these words so clearly fulfilled in Jesus our Lord.

R&D *In what specific ways did Jesus fulfill these prophecies?*

Prayer: *You never fail to amaze us, Lord God. We are in awe of You.*

Sunday, June 23

Sabbath Time

"I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.'" Luke 15:18

I heard a college president say many years ago, "Education will save the world." I thought it was a lie then. I know it is a lie now. Education in the ordinary sense has nothing with which to subdue and tame the raw instincts of man. It is not enlightenment that we need alone, but transformation.

Monday, June 24

Read: Isaiah 55:1-5

God's Free Gifts

This chapter in Isaiah is an invitation to share in the fruit of a glorious new age God will bring to pass. There are gifts that God would give to all, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

The invitation to the poor ("he who has no money," v.1) to eat and drink what is good is at the heart of biblical theology. The water, wine, and milk, the bread, and the "fatness" (v.2) that are offered here are not things of this world but spiritual gifts of much greater value. The theme of "living water" runs throughout the Bible: the psalmist longs for God "as a deer longs for flowing streams" (Psalms 42:1); "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14); and the "fountain of the water of life" that is "without price" in Revelation (21:6, 22:17).

For Christians, the symbolism here represents the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. John 7:38 says, "He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" We drink by placing our faith in Jesus; he quenches our thirst by filling us with the Holy Spirit. And, to those who are filled with the Spirit, he imparts gifts for ministry (Romans 12:6ff; 1 Corinthians 12:4ff; Ephesians 4:11-12).

The word God would have us speak today is that He empowers us to do the work He calls us to do. He gives us His Spirit

and He imparts to us gifts of the Spirit that we may be of service to Him and the world He has created.

R&D *What does it mean to you to have Jesus' "living water" in you and overflowing?*

Prayer: *May Your gifts flow out of your servants, Lord, to the blessing of those around us.*

Tuesday, June 25

Read: Isaiah 55:6-11

God's Thoughts

Our reading for today begins with a call to repentance (vv.6-9). "Seek the Lord... call upon him... for he will abundantly pardon." Verses 10-11 then continue an earlier theme that "the word of our God will stand forever." Just as the rain and snow cannot help but water the earth and make things grow, so God's word, spoken by the mouth of His prophet, cannot help but be fulfilled. God's purposes cannot be defeated by evil, doubt or despair. Again, we have a great song of hope.

Underlying these words are reflections on the "otherness" of God. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways." This is, at one and the same time, a realization that we can never attain to the thoughts of God and yet we are to strive all of our lives to know Him as best we can.

How are we to live? We are to live, as best we can, in accordance with God's will for us. How can we know God's will? We can never know it perfectly because "His thoughts are not our thoughts." But He does expect us to do our best by way of spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, Bible study, and service.

The word God would have us speak today is of the importance of spiritual disciplines. We are to "seek the Lord while He may be found."

R&D *How do you "seek the Lord?"*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, You provide a great variety of ways for us to grow in the knowledge and love of You. May we avail ourselves of all of them.*

Read: Isaiah 57:15

Home of the Eternal

Archbishop George Appleton wrote of this verse: “This is one of the most inspired and inspiring verses of the Old Testament, picturing God the Eternal and Holy, dwelling not only in the eternal heavens, but also with the penitent and humble, giving new life to their spirits, anticipating the New Testament, that the Holy and High God will incarnate Himself not only in the promised Messiah, but also in the humble and holy of heart.”

The word translated “inhabit” and “dwell” in the verse, as Appleton concluded, has special theological nuances. The word “tabernacle” (Exodus 25:8-9, Revelation 21:3) and also the term “divine presence” are derived from it. Just as “the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), so here God dwells among the humble and brokenhearted. His presence is with them.

Who are the humble and brokenhearted? The words remind us of the “poor in spirit” of Matthew 5:3. The New English Bible translates this first of the beatitudes as “How blest are those who know their need of God.” The humble and brokenhearted, the poor in spirit, are people who understand that they are totally dependent on God. We are here talking about people who are detached from things of the world because they are firmly attached to God.

The word God would have us speak today is that the kingdom of God belongs to the humble and holy of heart. The person who relies utterly on God rather than the world’s cleverness is already living in the kingdom.

R&D *How can we be more humble and holy of heart?*

Prayer: *It is comforting, Lord, to know people who know who they are...that is, those who do not pretend to be anyone other than who You have created them to be and are content in being Your people here on earth.*

Read: Isaiah 58:6-11

God's Demand

This passage contains very specific “marching orders” for God’s people. The kinds of things we are to do are spelled out in detail. Verses 6-7 bring to mind the judgment of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31ff. Only by removing injustice and oppression, by helping the hungry, homeless, and naked, can we fulfill God’s expectations of us. But, if we do, then a new age will dawn for the righteous (v.8).

These verses provide us with a series of things we are to do, and then spell out the rewards we will receive from following the Lord’s demands. In addition to the duties listed above are things we are not to do. We are not to lay burdens (yokes) on others, nor to “point the finger” (showing contempt; instead, we are to reverence others as the children of God). Nor are we to speak wickedness (idle words, gossip, slander). We are also to “pour ourselves out” for the hungry and “satisfy the desire of the afflicted.” This does not mean a contribution to some good cause from our abundance; “the gift without the giver is bare.” Then, again, the promises for those who obey: our light will rise in the darkness, our desires will be satisfied with good things, we will be strong and well cared for.

God’s word for us today is that there are things He would have us do and not do. And Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28 NIV). In a real sense, that is exactly what we are to do as Christ’s people in the world today.

R&D *Which of these things are you doing?*

Prayer: *We all do many of the things You call us to do, Lord God, but do we do enough? Help us always to see the next step You have for us to take, the next thing You have for us to do.*

Read: Isaiah 61:1-4

Conclusion

The four categories of people to whom the prophet is called to bring news are put together in an interesting way, perhaps to emphasize the need to include victims of both physical and spiritual distress. The poor and afflicted are paired with the broken-hearted. Captives are to be physically released from captivity while “opening of the eyes” (in Hebrew) of those who are bound suggests release from spiritual bondage.

Verse 2 refers to the year of jubilee in Leviticus (when debts are forgiven) and to the Day of the Lord (see Isaiah 4:2). The fulfillment of such prophecies marks the dawn of a new age.

This passage, of course, is the one Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21) as the cornerstone of his ministry. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus said (v.21). Again we see a listing of “things to be done” —things that were done by Jesus and that, as his people, we are also to do.

And so, over this last month, we have looked at the key passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah as those prophets have spoken God’s word. We have tried to see what these passages say to us about how we are to live and what “word of God” we are to pass on to others. We are not called as prophets in the sense that Isaiah and Jeremiah were (thank God!), but there are things we are supposed to be learning as we grow in relationship with God, and we are to pass them on—by word and by deed—to others who may not know.

R&D What is the most important thing you have learned from this study?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for showing us the continuity of Your plan of salvation.



First Corinthians

Saturday, June 29

Read: Read: Acts 18:1-11

Introduction

Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians was written at or near Ephesus, probably between 54 and 57 AD, while Paul was on his second and extended stay there. He was on his third missionary journey at the time, and remained in Ephesus for more than two years.

The planting of the gospel and church in Corinth had been done by Paul who was probably the first Christian to set foot in the city. This had occurred during his second missionary journey and followed his brief stay in Athens. Paul had been joined by Silas and Timothy in Corinth and had remained about a year and a half, teaching and baptizing many converts.

About five years later he had written to members of the Corinthian church advising them not to keep company with evil persons. The reply he had received apparently was not satisfactory. Furthermore, immorality within the church had been reported and factions had developed among its members. And, the Corinthians had sent Paul a letter inquiring about various problems. Paul's letter is a response to these situations. This epistle has been called "a tract for the times."

R&D What is your opinion of Paul?

Prayer: Thank You, Father God, for Your servant Paul through whom we have so much to learn about life in the early church.

Sunday, June 30

Sabbath Time

What is man that thou are mindful of him? Psalm 8:4a

God is a Father, responsible, really loving, not a spoiling old grandfather with nothing but candy and a good time. God

runs the universe. He wants this world to be what it should. It will not be such till we cooperate with Him. That must be voluntary cooperation, or it means nothing. We find our lives by cooperating with God.

Monday, July 1

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

He Will Keep You!

Given the difficult, painful, and even sinful situations about which Paul will confront the Corinthian church in his letter, the beginning of this epistle is nothing less than astonishing. Paul describes the Corinthians as “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (v.2), “enriched” (v.5) and not lacking in “any spiritual gift” (v.7). The reader could assume (at least from these opening paragraphs) that Paul is addressing a mature and well-balanced church rather than one full of strife, abuses, and divisions.

Yet Paul is neither lying nor even exaggerating. Paul is not engaging in flattery. Rather, he is speaking the truth based, not on the Corinthians’ moral performance, but on the sovereign will of God. This is not verbal sleight of hand. Paul’s perspective is that God is working out His purposes even in the midst of the Corinthian abuses.

In other words, God is stronger than all human weakness, and He is having His way, even amid their sinfulness. Writing to the Philippians Paul says, “I am convinced that he (meaning God) who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6). That is an unconditional promise. When we commit ourselves to Him, He commits Himself to us.

Have you already committed your life to God? Do you know you belong to Him? If you do, then understand that even in the midst of our bad choices and sinful rebellion, God is working out His divine purposes in us. He has pledged Himself in faithfulness to us as His children, regardless of our everpresent tendency to wander from His will. “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). Entrust yourself into God’s care. He is faithful! He will keep you!

R&D *What have you been worrying about that you need to commit to God afresh?*

Prayer: *It is comforting, Lord, to know that You love us despite our sinfulness and unwillingness to always be as You would have us be.*

Tuesday, July 2

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:10—2:5

True Strength

What is the true source of our strength as a Church? Is it erudite arguments, or powerful, public personalities? Is it facile organization, or an army of well-equipped laity? No. It is none of these things. And while programs to train laity, equip preachers, or assist congregations with organizational development are all helpful, none of them tap into the root of our true strength.

Our true strength comes from two things: the message of the cross and the demonstration of that message through the Holy Spirit visibly acting in our midst. What did Paul mean by “the message of the cross?” To put it simply, it is this: God loved us enough to send His Son to die for us while we were still sinners, so that we might be reconciled with God.

No other organization on the face of this planet can offer such an astounding message. Through the death of Jesus on the cross, we, mere sinful mortals, have been reconciled to Almighty God! To speak this message with passion and clarity is the Church’s highest calling. No personality or program should ever hinder its proclamation.

When such truth is proclaimed, God, by His Spirit, always honors it. He honors the message by pouring out the fruit of that message upon its hearers, which is the personal and corporate experience of repentance and the forgiveness of sin.

When we hear the message of the cross, each of us experiences God’s invitation to repentance. After responding to this call, we then receive His forgiveness and are reconciled to Him through the victory of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is an extremely personal message. It’s not simply a matter of God sending His Son to planet earth. He sent His Son to you and to me. He is calling each

one of us to repent and turn to Him. He is speaking the word of forgiveness to you and me. God knows each of us by name, and by name God is drawing us to Himself.

R&D *Where in my life am I especially grateful for God's presence?*

Prayer: *The miracle of it all, Lord God, is that we can be in personal contact with You. You care that much for us. It's hard to comprehend, but we are eternally grateful.*

Wednesday, July 3

Read: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Peculiar People

In the last lesson we sighted the true strength of the Church: the message of the cross. While this strength may be obvious to those of her members who are genuinely committed to Christ, this strength is not so obvious to others, especially to those who count themselves outside the circle of Christian faith. Remember the famous quote: "It's not that Christianity has failed; it has never been tried."

The Christian (if that Christian is thinking biblically) has a very different world view than the secularist. The Christian starts with God, specifically a God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. That means we recognize that there is more to life than what is revealed to us through the five senses. We would disagree with Carl Sagan, the astronomer, who said, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." Where is God in that equation?

No, we would say, "In the beginning God!" There is no reality greater than He, including the entire created order. Our very understanding of the nature of reality is different. The fact that we call Jesus God in the flesh sets us apart (see 1 John 4:12). In the eyes of many, we are a "peculiar people."

It was this very acknowledgment, that God has revealed Himself in Jesus, that Paul calls the "message of wisdom" that the "rulers of this age" do not understand and that the one "without the Spirit" considers "foolish" (v.14).

For some Christians, such a strong line of demarcation makes us uncomfortable. We do not like being "peculiar," and no

one actually wants to be thought of as “foolish” by anybody. But such is the price of faithfulness. In fact, the Scriptures teach that if one is not being thought of as “foolish” or “peculiar” by those outside the Christian faith, maybe one is not being faithful to Christ.

Misunderstanding by others is a part of our inheritance as Christians. But so, also, is the “mind of Christ” (v.16).

R&D As a Christian, how am I different from those who do not believe in Christ?

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to be less concerned about how different I may be from others because of Christ in my life and more concerned about how I can be used by You to make that difference in theirs.

Thursday, July 4

Read: Hebrews 11:8-16

Independence Day: The Formula

Today’s lesson is one of the Church’s suggested readings for the celebration of Independence Day. It prescribes a formula for how Christians are to live. That formula is freedom equals obedience over faith. The people of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 sought freedom. They were wanderers in the land without being bound by the land because they looked toward a heavenly home. Their freedom resulted from accepting the responsibility for what God told them to do, and they went forward obediently in faith.

The same is true of the founders of this nation. Although all were not Christians, they had a strong reliance on God, and they sought freedom by obedience to, and faith in, Him. That fact is reflected in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. The conviction of its truth was lived out on the battlefields of the land and in the blood shed for our freedom as a nation. We can be grateful that this is so.

As Christians, we are “aliens and strangers” on this earth. We can live free not only because of what our forefathers did on our behalf but because we are moving toward a heavenly home through obedience based on faith. It’s the right formula.

R&D What does freedom mean to you? What are you doing to protect it?

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for a nation in which we are free to worship You; help us to preserve that freedom.*

Friday, July 5

Read: 1 Corinthians 3:1-17

Lasting Foundation

God's enterprise in the world is the redemption of all that He has created. It is a task that is as large as the entire universe and particular enough to include every human being on this planet who has ever lived, or will live. The redemption of the world is not some optional hobby to God in the midst of more pressing business in interstellar space. Quite the opposite, all of God's activity in the world finds its heartbeat in calling creation to Himself. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son" (John 3:16).

When God called Paul to be an "apostle to the Gentiles," Paul knew that God was inviting him to become God's instrument in that enterprise. But Paul was not the only one invited. So are we. As members of the Church, we are called to "seek and serve Christ in all persons." As baptized Christians we are also called, even mandated, to give our lives to be instruments in His hands for the carrying out of His purposes. "You are not your own, you are bought with a price" (v.20).

Consequently, all that you and I undertake will be measured by that same standard. How are we participating in the plan of God for our lives? What is our purpose in living? Why were we born? To give our lives over to God for the carrying out of His purposes is His highest and best will for us. Giving our lives to Him is the only way we can build upon the "foundation that has been laid, which is Jesus Christ" (v.11). As the Scriptures make painfully clear, all that has been built upon this foundation will last. All else will be burned up at the Day of Judgment (v.14).

Think about how you spend your time. How do you order your day? What are your priorities? Do the details of your life fit comfortably into the foundation which is Jesus Christ? Let your life count for eternity. Give yourself over to God's highest purpose. Do not be satisfied with anything less than His very best.

R&D *How can I practically pursue God's best for me today?*

Prayer: *You always have in mind something that You would like us doing, Lord God, if we are just open to Your calling upon our lives.*

Saturday, July 6

Read: 1 Corinthians 3:18—4:21

Cultural Glasses

How most of us order our thinking comes as a byproduct of who we are, where we were raised, and the kind of education we have had. Many of us identify ourselves, proudly, as Midwesterners, Southerners, New Englanders, or Texans (who consider themselves a nation all their own!). We cherish our regional and ethnic heritages. Paul himself spoke proudly of being a Jew who was a “Hebrew among Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5).

But Paul was also aware that any ethnic heritage, no matter how grand, could keep him (and us!) from seeing the gospel with real clarity. All that we inherit is both a blessing and a curse. We are not only formed by our cultural traditions, but we are also limited by them.

It is hard for us to hear words from the gospel that go against the grain of what we have always been taught. If you have always been taught that success meant worldly accomplishments, it is hard to hear that in the eyes of God, success means becoming a servant (Matthew 20:26). If you have always been taught that God helps those who help themselves (Benjamin Franklin), it is hard to hear that God helps those who are helpless, and that real strength comes from God only when we admit that we are truly weak (2 Corinthians 12:10).

All of these cultural, ethnic, and even philosophical views are the “glasses” through which we see the world around us. Paul in this passage is challenging the Corinthians to take off the “glasses” of their world (“the standards of this age,” v.18) and put on a different set of glasses, whose lenses are the foolishness of Christ (4:10).

R&D *How does my Christian faith teach me to think differently from my culture?*

Prayer: *Help us to see through the mirages, distractions, and blind-spots that keep us from you, Lord Jesus.*

Sunday, July 7

Sabbath Time

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. Ecclesiastes 12:13b

You will think life is a bad game unless you find out what its object is, and then play with all your might, regardless of what happens to you in the process. Life calls for thought and philosophy. But still more life calls for purpose and for heroism. If a vast war between Good and Evil is being fought in this universe, my life and the winning of its battles can be a footnote to that great conflict. But if I see life only as a chance to please myself, then I live constantly in sin. That's what sin is—to miss and ignore the purpose of God, and put my own little purposes in place of His.

Monday, July 8

Read: 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

When Mercy Fails

One of the great themes of 1 Corinthians is the call for the Church to walk in unity, literally to “be of the same mind” (1:10). The Church has been made by God to function in a kind of co-operation that is analogous to the operations of the human body (see chapter 12). Paul teaches that the local church is more than a human association. The church is a group of individuals who have been transformed by baptism into a single organism, the unique locus for God's activity in the world. Consequently, it is only when a local church moves together in unity that it is healthy. Internal strife and division are forms of sickness that impair the church's ability to do mission. Unless a group of people can move together in the same direction, how can they get anywhere?

But what if someone chooses not to walk in the same direction as the rest of the church? How does that contrary direction impair the church's ability to move ahead in unity? What if those actions are completely contrary to the very mission of the church? What kind of impact does the action of one individual have on the direction of the rest?

Can the actions of that individual be so notorious as to sabotage the mission of the rest? For Paul, in the case of gross immorality, the answer is a resounding “Yes!” Because the church is an organism (rather than a collection of individuals), immorality is never merely a personal choice. It is sabotage. For Paul, the actions of any member of the Body always impact—for good or ill—the rest of the Body.

That is why his prescription for dealing with one who is both immoral and rebellious to his responsibility to the rest of the Body is so severe. Paul calls for this person’s excommunication from the rest of the congregation (“hand this man over to Satan,” v.5). This is done, not as punitive revenge, but so “his spirit be saved.” In other words, the one who has sinned must bear the full consequences of his action so that he might repent.

R&D *What kind of church discipline exists in my home parish?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, for unity in your Body that we may show your love effectively to a divided world.*

Tuesday, July 9

Read: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Reconciliation

Handling disputes between church members is tricky business. One of the factors that makes such an undertaking so difficult is the consumer mentality most people bring to their understanding of church membership: “If this church doesn’t meet my needs, I’ll quit and go to another church that will meet my needs.” To add insult to injury, this attitude is often exacerbated by a selfish impatience that not only asks: “What have you done for me?” but, “What have you done for me lately?”

When these attitudes underlay people’s attitudes to church membership, people often leave a local congregation at the slightest provocation, especially when that provocation involves one church member hurting the feelings of another (as it so often does). Many of us have the idea of church as a safe haven from the struggles of the world. Consequently, when one church member is hurt by another, we feel as if our right to this “safe haven” has been violat-

ed. It doesn't help for us to realize that this idea of a "safe haven" is quite unrealistic when all of our fellow church members always bring their own struggles with them to church (as do we!). The obvious truth is that conflicts are inevitable, and we don't like them!

But because few congregations have any mechanisms with which to deal with disputes between church members, when civil law is broken, the natural inclination even for church members is to sue. Paul says that if such suits exist "you are already defeated" (v.7) because these suits are symptomatic of both a false understanding of the church and of church membership.

A biblical understanding of church membership rests on two pillars. First and foremost, on an unconditional surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ (as expressed in baptism). Secondly, on a willingness to live out that surrender in collegial accountability with other Christians within the context of a local church. To put it simply, if I am really serious about loving Jesus, I will do that with others who share that same commitment.

Do lawsuits have a place in such relationships? Obviously not, except as last resort when, and only when, an individual no longer can claim surrender to Christ with any real integrity.

R&D *Are you loyal to your local church? Why or why not?*

Prayer: *Help us to think always in terms of forgiveness, Lord, rather than revenge.*

Wednesday, July 10

Read: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

A Higher Purpose

If a Christian begins a discussion of ethics with the comment, "I don't see anything wrong with it"—"it" referring to the action in question—one can be sure that the discussion has begun on the wrong foot. From a biblical perspective, the issue is never, "What is right or wrong with this action?" Rather, the starting point should be: "How does this behavior reflect (or not reflect) my surrender to the Lordship of Christ?"

For the Christian, the primary goal in life is somehow to be a witness for Jesus. By comparison everything else is of secondary

concern. Christians understand that we have made this surrender to God out of sheer gratitude for the sublime gift of being made His child. We belong to Christ; we are his possession. As expressed in the words of a song, “How can I say ‘thanks’ for all the things he has done for me?”

One way that gratitude is practically lived out is in framing all of life’s questions within the confines of Christ’s ownership. That context is exactly how Paul deals with the question of permissible sexual activity: because our bodies belong to God (rather than to us), how do we glorify God with our bodies? The answer to that question, for Paul, rules out sexual promiscuity of any kind.

If I belong to Christ, then all that I am, including what I do with my body, must come under his control. Such a commitment shatters any sense of “unspiritual” decisions. I am “owned” by Christ. I have become his servant. Now, my only choice is to do what is pleasing to him.

R&D How do my bodily habits reflect (or not reflect) my commitment to Christ?

Prayer: We have made our choice, Lord Jesus, and it is in you. Help us to stick to that choice in the decisions we make.

Thursday, July 11

Read: 1 Corinthians 7:1-40

Trying to Answer

Paul begins this section of his letter with, “Now for matters you wrote about,” indicating that he is trying to answer practical questions which have already been raised. For many, this section is the most troubling of the entire epistle. The reader’s frustration is only heightened by the fact that we know we are only getting half the story, since we do not have the previous piece of correspondence.

The overarching principle seems to be: if possible—meaning, so long as it does not lead you to sin—remain in the state of life you were in when you were converted to Christianity. Or, to put it negatively, “Don’t use your conversion as an excuse to change your status.”

It is important to emphasize that Paul's point in this passage is narrow. His concern is overusing one's conversion as a rationale for other behavior that may or may not be wise. Paul is not trying to write a full treatise on any of the pastoral issues he mentions, including singleness, marriage, or slavery. Still, such a summation of this passage hardly removes all of the troubling questions. Some have used this passage to condone slavery (even though, in Philemon, Paul urges a slave owner to grant his slave freedom) and mandatory celibacy which is something Paul would obviously not condone.

So, how are we to use this passage now, in our time? At least regarding singleness, one principle from this passage could be offered: singles are never to be second class citizens in the church. According to this passage, quite the opposite is true. Paul is clear that those who are not married have an advantage in God's service over married people rather than a social disadvantage which is how many singles are perceived in our churches. It is because single people have the freedom to live unencumbered with the responsibilities of a spouse and children that Paul considered being single a gift. In the church of today, single people need to be challenged to use that gift for the sake of the gospel. They are encouraged to go places and do things that married people cannot accomplish because of their responsibilities. Why use the status of singleness merely to work additional hours for career advancement or material accumulation? How do those things express your surrender to Jesus? Hear a higher call: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel!"

R&D *In what specific ways can I support the single people in my parish?*

Prayer: *Whatever our condition in life, the Christian looks to how it can best be used to serve you, Lord Christ.*

Read: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Personal Sacrifice

This is another passage that is troubling for contemporary readers. Why is this the case? We live in a time when people are consumed with vigilance over personal rights. As a culture we seem absorbed by individual agendas. The last thing many of us want to happen is for someone else to thwart us in our path to personal fulfillment. “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother” has been quickly replaced with “It’s not my problem.”

The principle that underlies the ancient issue of whether to eat or not eat “food sacrificed to idols” is that individual Christians tangibly participate in each other’s spiritual development. In other words: “I, as an individual Christian, ‘the weak’ in this case, need you, ‘the strong,’ to understand that your example affects me in my own walk with Christ. Your witness is setting an example for me, whether you want it to or not. I am watching you; I am learning from your actions.”

Again, the issue is not whether or not a particular action is “right or wrong.” The salient question is, “How does this behavior reflect (or not reflect) my surrender to the Lordship of Christ?” If I am surrendered to the Lordship of Christ, not only do I take into consideration my own strengths and weaknesses, I also have to take into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to whom I am an example.

To the secular mind, this appears to be giving up any understanding of personal freedom and autonomy. What is being asked, to the secular way of thinking, is to allow one’s choices to be controlled by the opinion of others.

Paul’s own testimony would say, “Not so!” to such an argument. Rather, Paul would argue that the true goal of all Christians is to see others come to faith in Jesus Christ. For Paul, all questions of personal behavior had been looked at through the question: “What helps bring people to Christ?” As result, at the end of this section, Paul says, “If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again.”

R&D *What have I had to sacrifice in my own life for the sake of being a witness for Christ?*

Prayer: *It is sometimes in the many small sacrifices of life that we grow in God's will.*

Saturday, July 13

Read: 1 Corinthians 9:1-14

Clergy Pay

There seem to be at least three attitudes regarding the payment of clergy. One is that being a member of the clergy is a life of sacrifice; thus, a clergy person's salary should reflect that sacrifice (i.e., poverty). Another seems to be that members of the clergy should be paid on the same scale as someone in business with a similar level of organizational responsibility. Another attitude is that clergy salaries should be determined solely by the restrictions of the parish budget (with input, of course, from the parish treasurer!).

In this section from Paul's letter, he offers the following principles on paying those who are in God's service: (1) All human effort reaps some kind of reward (v.7). (2) The reward that one reaps should be appropriate to the kind and amount of labor expended (e.g., one who tends the vine reaps a portion of the grapes (v.7). (3) Those who give themselves in the service of Christ ought also to reap some kind of reward (v.10). (4) The reward for those in God's service is to be material as well as spiritual (v.14). (5) That material reward should be appropriate to the spiritual labor expended (v.11).

Paul sums up his own argument by saying that "those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." He authenticates this rule by calling it a command from the Lord. Paul could have been thinking of this saying of Jesus: "the worker deserves his wages" (Matthew 10:10). In other words, this is no small matter.

What lessons are we to gain from this passage? The first lesson is obvious. Those who earn their living from the gospel should be compensated in such a way that their standard of living is not

a hindrance to their calling (either by receiving too much or too little). This lesson speaks both to the sin of stinginess on the part of congregations and to the sin of material greed on the part of clergy.

The second lesson is more general but no less important. All who are within the family of the church bear a responsibility to watch out for each other's financial (as well as spiritual) wellbeing. Financial stewardship is a deeply spiritual thing; and how we use our money is of great importance to God. We are called repeatedly in the Bible to: (1) give generously to those in need, especially to those who are of the household of faith; (2) listen to God for His will concerning our financial decisions to protect us from selfishness; (3) support the work of the kingdom of God.

Are we our brother's keeper? Yes.

R&D In what specific ways do I encourage good financial stewardship in others?

Prayer: All we have is Yours, Blessed Lord. Thank You for letting us share it with others.

Sunday, July 14

Sabbath Time

For who sees anything different in you? 1 Corinthians 4:7a

I believe that every man and woman who calls himself or herself by the name of Christian should be a marked person. There ought to be something distinctive and different about them—not self-conscious and prudish, but honest about themselves and humble and obviously in touch with God. More than that, they ought to be carriers and contagious influences for the Christian life, ever alert to help others to know Him and find faith. Chesterton says of the Franciscan brothers that it was their purpose to see that anyone “who met one of them by chance should have a spiritual adventure.” That should be the purpose of every Christian.

Monday, July 15

Read: 1 Corinthians 9:15-23

Saving Some

In this passage Paul lays out his understanding of his ministry as an apostle. He begins by describing himself as “compelled”

to preach (v.16). This compulsion, this drive, came out of his profound gratitude to God. All Christian ministry, if it is done in the Spirit of Christ, is—at its heart—an act of gratitude. Seen from this perspective, ministry is a privilege, not a burden. Even in difficult situations, most of those in ministry would say that they would rather be engaged in ministry than to be doing anything else in the world.

It is gratitude that allows Paul to see ministry as its own reward (v.18). For Paul, one of the key reasons that monetary compensation is not an issue is precisely because his “compensation” is the privilege of God’s allowing him to be engaged in His service. This attitude, along with his skill as a tentmaker, allowed Paul to offer his ministry to the Corinthians without charge.

Second, because Paul was so grateful for being able to engage in the privilege of ministry, he was free to identify with anyone who wanted to hear the gospel. Becoming “all things to all men” does not mean becoming a chameleon. Rather, it means being able to walk beside anyone who is spiritually hungry.

So many people in ministry are hampered because they can only relate to people like themselves. One of the reasons that some are so limited is that, for them, ministry is primarily a place where they can get their needs met, rather than a place where they can serve the needs of others.

Paul had the wonderful ability to reach beyond the chasm of his own experience and touch the life of another because of his passion to see them won for Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer could sum up the Christian life with the phrase “a life for others.” It is that sentiment that precisely sums up Paul’s commitment for reaching everyone possible with the message of the gospel.

R&D *Describe your gratitude to Christ.*

Prayer: *We may not do it as well as we should, but there is no privilege greater than doing ministry in your name, Lord Jesus.*

Read: 1 Corinthians 9:24—10:13

Spiritual Sloth

Henry Fairlie in his book *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, describes sloth as the “hatred of all spiritual things which entail effort” and “faintheartedness in matters of difficulty.” This section of the epistle is Paul’s warning against such spiritual laziness.

Paul begins with his own life, presenting it as a battle. He never shares with his readers the source of his struggles, although many have been speculated. However, he does share a graphic picture of how he sublimates any bodily desire that would lead him to sin.

Many would find such a picture of personal struggle shocking. They would ask Paul, “Why do you fight your own desires? Don’t you know that God’s best for you is personal fulfillment? Why are you denying the very nature God gave you?”

But a careful analysis would find their argument deceptive, as this viewpoint does not take into consideration the depth of the Christian struggle against sin, nor does it recognize humanity’s ability to lie to itself. In the book of Proverbs one will find stated, “There is a way which seems right to a man; but the end is destruction and death” (14:12). Paul backs up his example with a more ominous lesson from the history of Israel. The implication is that while they were “baptized” and ate and drank “spiritual food,” this was not enough to protect them from God’s judgment because of their rebellious disobedience.

But this lesson is not all gloom and doom. This section ends with an extravagant promise: God will provide you a way out of all temptation. As William Barclay puts it: “This way out is not the way of surrender, and not the way of retreat, but the way of conquest in the power of the grace of God.”

R&D What might be examples of sloth in my life? Where do I need to find God’s way out?

Prayer: *It is so easy to make excuses for ourselves, Lord, and to rationalize. Help us to heed the example of Paul and work through our weaknesses and our disobedience so as to follow Your will for us in all things.*

Wednesday, July 17

Read: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Single-minded

Paul is speaking here of a peculiarly Corinthian problem. Because the pagan religions of Corinth undergirded almost all of life in Corinth, the simple act of choosing not to participate in any pagan rituals (or the fruit of those rituals) was nearly impossible. To refrain from any form of pagan idolatry would mean choosing not to participate in almost all of the civic, economic, and cultural institutions of the day. And yet, that is exactly what Paul is asking of these Corinthian converts.

Paul understands that the result of such single-minded devotion to the Christian faith would mean becoming a social outcast. But Paul is not asking the Corinthians anything that he, himself, did not also undergo as a Jew who proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah.

Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that, as those who participate in the body and blood of Christ, they must also have such a single-minded devotion. Those who handle the body and blood of Christ in worship can participate in no other forms of worship. Anyone who sits at the table of our Lord Jesus Christ can never be comfortable at the table of some false god who would deny the very blood that bought us salvation. Why does Paul draw such a strong line between Christian worship and pagan worship? Paul understands that pagan rituals are not merely empty, “superstitious” forms, as some would say. Rather, such rituals are acts of worship to demons, who are spiritual entities which Paul considered literally real (see Ephesians 6:12-13).

Is this concern only for the church in Corinth? No, the same spiritual reality is at work today. Paul would never believe in our modern caricature of a man in a red suit with horns and a tail. Rather, he would consider our modern relegation of such notions to fantasy as hopelessly naive. He firmly believed in, and personally

battled, demonic powers. Paul knew that spiritual warfare is a real battle in which all Christians are engaged by virtue of their baptismal commitment. Such a battle requires single-minded devotion to Christ alone.

R&D How does Paul's understanding of the spiritual world compare with my own?

Prayer: Lord, we are involved in spiritual warfare every bit as real today as it was in Paul's time. Protect us and guide us against evil, Lord Jesus.

Thursday, July 18

Read: 1 Corinthians 10:23—11:1

Example

Here Paul deals with some of the pastoral considerations regarding choosing not to participate in pagan worship. Most food sold in the market had been dedicated to a pagan deity. So, what could Corinthian Christians eat? Paul says that they can buy and consume anything with freedom because the true source of all food is God, not an idol.

However, such freedom has its limits, and that limit is always the effect of our behavior on another believer's conscience. Paul states that, as Christians, the limit of our freedom is affected by our relationships with both fellow believers and nonbelievers. It touches our relationship with nonbelievers, because our responsibility toward them is to always show the love of Christ. Our hope is that they, also, might believe. We deliberately choose to fashion our lives in such a way that others might see Jesus in us. This is not done in an ostentatious way, but in a manner that speaks of his love for them. Remember Paul's own declaration earlier, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (9:22). Such a commitment touches our relationship with our fellow believers because we bear an equal responsibility toward them to point the way to Christ. We never live our lives in a vacuum. Someone is always watching us and taking their cues from our behavior. While such mimicry might not always be

healthy, it is still a fact of human behavior. This passage realistically faces that fact and calls Christians to account.

So, what is our standard? Paul's answer is, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (v.31). Again, Paul emphasizes that the focus of life is not personal satisfaction, but, rather, the greater glory of God.

R&D Are there places in my life which could be "meat offered to idols" in the eyes of another?

Prayer: Help us always, Lord, to look beyond our own wants and desires to the effect that our actions might have on those around us.

Friday, July 19

Read: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Public Worship

Living as we do in an era that struggles for equal rights between women and men, this passage could be read as laughably out of date. In fact, the historical situation seems quite antiquated to our modern sensibilities. Worse, many Christians have seen this passage used as a club to deny women any place in Christian ministry at all. It has also been used to unduly criticize men with long hair.

So, what is the situation behind this passage? Most scholars would agree that the source of the struggle was between the truth that both women and men should participate in worship and the demand for modesty through the wearing of the veil. Paul goes ahead of his time by actually making a place for women publicly to pray and prophesy in church, which was in contrast to the synagogue worship of his day. But he is not willing to abandon the use of the veil on either cultural or theological grounds.

The veil was a large single piece of cloth that wrapped the woman from head to toe, leaving only the eyes visible to the observer. That is, if anyone was impertinent enough to look at a woman directly. This veil was both a symbol of her inferiority to men (and, hence, her protected subordination), and a symbol of her virtue. Only prostitutes would walk the streets of Corinth with their faces exposed and their hair cut short.

Given that, as a body, we struggle with the different issues concerning women and men in ministry, what are we to do with this passage? It would be a mistake to use this passage as a way of trying to duplicate the Corinthian situation in our own church. There are too many variables in dynamics between then and now.

But, is there any underlying principle that can timelessly apply to us? I believe that there is. That principle is Paul's concern that no behavior in worship would bring disgrace to Christ, a principle that underlies all of chapters 11-14. To put it another way, all the actions found in worship should be entirely consistent with the Christ that worship proclaims. The highest goal of Christian worship is to exalt the one who makes all worship possible. In true Christian worship, Jesus is always our focus.

R&D Would Jesus be comfortable coming to our church on any given Sunday morning? Why or why not?

Prayer: Inappropriate behavior is not acceptable in worshipping you, Lord Christ; may we always be respectful of you and worship you in accordance with your expectations of us.

Saturday, July 20

Read: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Supper of the Lord

Continuing Paul's concern for worship that exemplifies Christ, he takes up another abuse within worship, specifically "divisions" amongst those gathered around the Table of Christ. Such divisions expose the fact that unity is a sham. Because Paul understands that genuine unity is critical both for the health and mission of the church at Corinth, he is scandalized. The historical situation represented was the practice of believers to gather in someone's home to celebrate a common meal. This meal was designed to celebrate their unity in Christ. At the climax of this meal came the "supper of the Lord," at which point the Last Supper was reenacted. More than likely, the gathering place would be the home of one of the financially better off members of the congregation.

Exacerbating the problem of social distinctions was the fact that most ancient dining rooms were quite small so that the meal

would have to be eaten with members occupying different parts of the house. Since human nature is to congregate with people “like us,” the more fortunate would gather in the dining room with the food and drink they brought, while the less fortunate had to make do in less auspicious parts of the house with little or nothing to eat. The celebration of Christian unity had become the celebration of pagan selfishness.

Paul sees the true purpose of the “supper of the Lord” and is understandably horrified. He knows that God intended the Lord’s Supper to be a threefold public expression of Christ’s complete commitment to us, our complete commitment to Christ and our complete commitment to each other as sisters and brothers in the Lord. Not to “discern the Body,” meaning the presence of Christ in our midst and the presence of each other as members of his Body, brings down the severe judgment of God, even including the untimely death of some of the members of this particular congregation (v.30).

Paul invites the Corinthians, and us, to reexamine our services of worship. He also invites us to examine our own attitudes about these services of worship, especially Holy Communion. The “supper of the Lord” is the place where heaven and earth meet, where God and His Church sit down at the same table.

R&D Do we have similar “divisions” in the Church today? What can we do about them?

Prayer: Unity in you, Lord Jesus, is our strength. May we strive at all times to prevent division within the Body of Christ.

Sunday, July 21

Sabbath Time

Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. Psalm 34:14

We can sin just as much through moodiness, or inflexibility of plans, or temper, or resentments, or self-pity, as through adultery or drunkenness. Whatever keeps us from living, loving relations with other people—or from a vital and open relation with God—is sin. Look at your gambling and your petulance and your love of power, and ask yourself whether they are keeping you from being a force for God. Turn the sins over to God and let Him take

the steam you used to put into them and put it into something useful and constructive that helps build His kingdom.

Monday, July 22

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Foundation of Worship

Some people view worship as a kind of spectator sport. As the old cliché goes, “The ministers minister and the congregation congregates.” To put it another way, the laity are the ones in the bleachers, while the clergy, with their assistants, are the ones on the playing field. In other words, the view is that worship is conducted in a hierarchical manner where the clergy are at the top and laity are at the bottom. But such a concept of worship is completely foreign to this chapter of Paul’s letter to Corinth.

While there is certainly leadership present, the assumption is that all members have something vital to contribute, some “gift” from the Holy Spirit, given through an individual church member to the rest of the congregation. The model for Paul is that of God pulsating through the entire congregation, inspiring not only the appointed leader, but also anyone He chooses. If not handled properly, the result could be chaotic. If handled properly, this movement of the Spirit could be uniquely vital and utterly dynamic.

With such a “high risk” approach to worship, the possibility of abuses abounds; and there were plenty of abuses in Corinth. But Paul is not interested in stifling the Spirit into predictability. Quite the opposite, he wants to correct the abuses so that the Spirit could have full reign to do whatever he chooses. The ideal is spontaneity orchestrated by the Spirit of God.

Paul begins to correct these abuses by laying a proper foundation. The foundation of all true worship (and, hence, all true manifestations of the Spirit) is the confession, “Jesus is Lord.” This confession is the intentional opposite of the political/religious declaration of the time which proclaimed, “Caesar is Lord.”

In other words, while dealing with a different issue in worship, Paul takes his readers back to the very same principle which underlies the previous chapter. And this is that all truly Christian

worship must exalt the one who makes all worship possible: Jesus Christ.

Manifestations of the Spirit that are genuine gifts from God will always reflect the nature and character of Christ. For example, because Christ himself regarded all people with equal love, the Holy Spirit inspires everyone with something to contribute (not just the privileged few). Because Jesus himself warned of religion that was monotonous and mechanical, the Holy Spirit inspires the Church with manifestations that are fresh and vital. The nature of Christ and the nature of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit are one.

R&D What part does the inspiration of the Holy Spirit play in my worship? Be specific.

Prayer: May the gifts of the Holy Spirit be more greatly manifested in our worship and service, Lord.

Tuesday, July 23

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Functioning as One

In the previous lesson, we stated that the ideal in worship that Paul presents is spontaneity orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. For such an ideal to be realized, there must be an instrument through which the Holy Spirit can operate. This instrument, as a whole, must not only be open to the Holy Spirit's direction, but each individual must work in complete cooperation for that instrument to operate smoothly.

For Paul, the ideal "instrument" is an organism: the human body. Using the human body as an analogy, Paul presents three principles: (1) the body is a single unit, (2) all parts of the body are necessary and (3) not all parts of the body have the same function.

The body is a single unit. The operation of the Spirit always exalts Jesus, the head, not individual members of the body. In the body, cultural, ethnic, and racial distinctions all are united under the authority of Christ. Such an authority does not eradicate those distinctions. Rather, each distinction is coequal with the others so that all people stand as equals before Christ. When that is not

the case, the body becomes malformed because one member has become grotesquely enlarged or atrophied with disuse.

Paul goes on to say that all parts of the body are necessary. In other words, we need each other. Because each Christian is organically united to the other, one Christian cannot come to completion without the assistance of the rest. For Paul, the spiritual journey was not a lonesome quest, but a collegial enterprise, each member contributing to the needs of the other. To put it bluntly, I cannot mature in Christ without your assistance.

The final principle is that while all parts of the body are necessary, all parts of the body do not have the same function. No one member of the body can completely express Jesus alone. Rather, each member will uniquely express some aspect of the work or character of Christ. The good news is that, as each member of the body matures, each one becomes more the unique person God created him or her to be. For one member to mimic another would defeat the whole purpose of one's function within the body.

R&D Suppose your church were to function more like an organism and less like an organization. How would it be different?

Prayer: Thank You for Your gifts of ministry, Lord God; help us to use them as You would have us do.

Wednesday, July 24

Read: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Love

If the purpose of the body is to exalt the head, Jesus, then it is only fitting that Paul would break out in this hymn of love right in the middle of his exposition on worship. Few other portions of Scripture so succinctly capture the character of Jesus as do the lines in this poem.

Paul begins by deliberately citing manifestations of the Spirit he has named in the previous chapter and shows their worthlessness without the character of love. Without love, even martyrdom—much less the operation of these gifts—appears worthless and pagan by comparison.

He then goes on to describe the qualities of this love; and each quality perfectly exemplifies the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus himself was patient and kind. Jesus himself was never boastful or rude. Jesus himself never fails.

The parallel between this love and the life of Jesus is important. Because so few Christians actually have encountered this kind of love, even within their Christian fellowships, there is a desperate need for some kind of model. We need to know exactly what this “love” looks like. The answer to that cry can be found in the face of Jesus.

Finally, Paul shows that only the nature and character of Jesus is eternal. The operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church is necessary, but only for this temporal age. Now we are still children, doing our best to approximate the work of Christ. But when we see “face to face,” all that we needed when we could only look through “the dim reflection of a mirror” will no longer be necessary.

Ultimately, Paul states that the highest goal is to be like Christ.

R&D What portion of this chapter best defines my aspirations in my Christian journey?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for this beautiful poem of love that has inspired so many for so long!

Thursday, July 25

Read: 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Other Tongues

For some the idea of speaking in tongues reminds them of the worst kind of religious stereotypes—sawdust trail camp meetings filled with people emotionally out of control, or of high glitz televangelists talking their naive viewers out of their Social Security checks.

But what Paul is describing in Chapter 14 had little to do with ecstasy, frenzy, or emotional manipulation. In fact, Paul is writing this chapter to make sure that none of these excesses occurred. Paul sees speaking in tongues, as well as prophecy, as gifts

from God to His people, a means of divine communication between Christ and his beloved Body, the Church.

The best definition of speaking in tongues could be found in Paul's own words: "the language of angels" (13:1). This is not to say that speaking in tongues is the actual communication used by angelic beings in heaven. Instead, "the language of angels" is a metaphor used to describe what is essentially "inspired speech"—unintelligible to either the speaker or hearers, but perfectly intelligible to God. Indeed, Paul describes tongues as "mysteries spoken by the Spirit." Tongues is the language of another world. Prophecy is also the language of another world—the world of the eternal—but spoken in an earthly vocabulary, entirely intelligible both to speaker and hearers. To put it simply, prophecies are messages from God spoken through His people to His people in a language they can readily understand.

Both prophecy and speaking in tongues (with the appropriate interpretation) are given so that the people of God, as well as the inquirers, will recognize that "God is in your midst" (v.25). In other words, these gifts are not given for personal entertainment or as spiritual merit badges for the advanced. Instead, their purpose is to be a sign of the manifest presence of God—acts that will point people to Christ.

R&D How do we experience "God in your midst" in our services of worship?

Prayer: Praise be to God for His many manifestations of His Spirit.

Friday, July 26

Read: 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Order in Worship

In the last section of Chapter 14, Paul closes with some short admonitions about order in worship. In the first section of the passage (vv.26-33a), Paul talks about expectancy in worship and the proper conduct of those who speak for God. The implication of the passage is that God can and will speak through whomever He chooses. "Everyone" has something to offer to the rest. The call is to come expecting God to speak and anticipating that

He might use you to deliver a part of His message. How different an emphasis this is from the modern expectation of those who come to church only to be fed by someone else!

Paul also calls for civility and graciousness among those who deliver words from God. Since actions speak louder than words, the conduct of the one delivering the message must be in keeping with the message itself. All should be done “for the strengthening of the church” (v.26).

The second section (vv.33b-35) deals with the problem of some of the women speaking out of turn. Since there is no corresponding section in the letter to describe what was going on, it is extremely difficult to speculate on what Paul was trying to correct. What the text implies is that there was disruptive speech that Paul found “shameful” (v.35), something that was quite the opposite of worship occurring “in a fitting and orderly way” (v.40). Beyond that, we know very little.

Given what we do know, however, it would be important to say that the use of this text as a prohibition of women in ministry (which has occurred) would be to misinterpret the passage. Why? Because, according to other parts of the New Testament, women were already publicly praying, prophesying, and serving as deacons in Paul’s churches. Something was happening in Corinth that deserved Paul’s attention; but he was certainly not imposing a general ban on women publicly and vocally participating in worship.

In the last section (v.36-40), Paul reminds his readers of his apostolic authority, knowing that some of his admonitions would be highly unpopular (if not downright offensive) with the exuberant Corinthians. He closes with both a call to orderliness and a reminder to be “eager to prophesy” (v.30). He is trying to maintain a balance so that should they attain orderliness, they might not become fossilized.

R&D *What is your experience of God speaking through His people?*

Prayer: *We are grateful for worship services that provide both order and appropriate exuberance.*

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

Eternal Focus

With the beginning of Chapter 15, Paul turns his attention to an entirely different subject, the resurrection of the dead. The questions apparently raised by the Corinthians are: Is the resurrection from the dead real? How does one know that? If the dead are raised, then how does it happen? What kind of body do the resurrected have? In this section of the passage, Paul tries to answer the first two questions.

All of these questions seem obvious ones to those for whom resurrection is a new concept. They might seem tedious to those who have grown up in the church and, as a result, assumed resurrection to be true.

So, Paul begins his case. His first point is that the resurrection from the dead is a fundamental part of the gospel which Paul first preached to them, that same gospel which offers them salvation. In other words, the resurrection from the dead is not a side issue—it is central (vv.1-2).

The second point he makes is that the resurrection from the dead finds its genesis in the historical fact of the resurrection of Christ. By reminding the Corinthians of those who were eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection, he is declaring that Christ's resurrection from the dead is not a myth, a fable or metaphor. Jesus Christ, at a specific point in the lifetime of Paul's readers, actually died and bodily came back from the dead.

The third point he makes is that the historic resurrection of Christ is fundamental to a belief in our own resurrection from the dead. "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (v.14). For Paul, the empty tomb is the historic, observable confirmation of all that he preached.

The fourth point Paul makes is that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so will we who are in Christ be raised. This general resurrection from the dead will inaugurate the end of time as we know it. For the resurrection from the dead is the sign that all that God has created is under His authority.

Finally, the moral point of his argument is this: if Christ has been raised from the dead and we will be raised from the dead, let us live life now with eternity in view. Do not live as if the afterlife did not exist, or as if it did not matter. Live all of life with heaven in mind.

R&D *What difference does the future promise of the resurrection make in your life?*

Prayer: *Once we have given our lives to you, Lord Jesus, we live eternally with you now and in the future.*

Sunday, July 28

Sabbath Time

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” 1 Peter 5:5b

One reason why Christianity has been so salutary for mankind is that it has known just where to lift man up, and just where to keep him down. When he is discouraged, caught in his sins, “sunk” about himself, Christianity offers him hope and forgiveness. But when he is full of himself and his importance, when his pride runs away and lifts him up about his own virtues and achievements, Christianity reminds him who he is. Christianity always “puts down the mighty from their seat, and exalts the humble and meek.” It levels up man’s despair about himself, and levels down his pride.

Monday, July 29

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Death Not the End!

In this section of Scripture Paul answers the second two of the four questions raised by the Corinthians: If the dead are raised, how does it happen? What kind of body do the resurrected have?

Paul begins this section by pointing to nature. Just as the outer husk of a seed dies in the ground to release a strong plant (all of which, in potential, was contained in that seed), so also our outer husk, our bodies, die so that a strong “plant” (in this case a new body) can be released for us. But it will be a different kind of body—not a “natural” body, but a “spiritual” body.

In other words, the essence of who we are is not to be found in our physical bodies only. We are also spiritual creatures who in death will receive a spiritual body (v.44) to accommodate and reflect our true spiritual selves. This new, spiritual body will not only reflect who we really are as people (it appears that we will be recognizable to others), it will also reflect the very image of Jesus, the first born from the dead. As John says in another letter, “We shall be like him because we will see him just as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Thus, we will be entirely changed. All of sin and sorrow will finally be gone. All that has made us less than who we could be in Christ will no longer exist. The sins that so easily beset us will vanish. Glory and freedom will be our inheritance. “God will wipe away every tear from our eyes” (Revelation 7:17).

Paul goes on describe the actual event of the resurrection. At a moment in time, when some are still alive and others “asleep” in death, God will commission the blast of a trumpet and all (both alive and dead) will be changed. Death, which up until that point was certain, will then no longer exist. Death and all of its powers will be “swallowed up” in Christ’s victory forever.

Finally, as in the last section, Paul moves on to the moral imperative: “Stand firm!” (v.58). If you know that all that stands against you as a Christian will ultimately be defeated, do not lose heart! Give yourselves completely to the work that God has for you. You are participating in preparation for eternity. The work of Christ is never in vain.

R&D How does the knowledge of eternity assist you in living faithfully as a Christian?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Christ, for the freedom we have in you day by day.

Tuesday, July 30

Read: 1 Corinthians 16:1-9

God’s Open Doors

In this closing chapter Paul mentions a number of different concerns. The first has to do with the collection of funds for the Christians in Jerusalem (v.3). Paul mentions this effort in a

number of his letters (see Galatians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, and Romans 15:25). Why should the church in Jerusalem be the object of such financial assistance? There appear to be two reasons. The first has to do with the number of widows in that church that needed help (see Acts 6:1-6). The second reason had to do with the effect of a famine that had broken out in that region. God had forewarned the church about the coming famine through a prophecy spoken during one of their services (see Acts 11:27-30). Upon the receiving of that prophecy, the collection was instigated.

Something can be learned from Paul's instructions. The content of his instructions is not so surprising as is his tone. In a very matter of fact fashion, he instructs them to set aside a portion of their income on a weekly basis. There is no cajoling, no threats of divine punishment or reward, just a softly spoken imperative. Apparently, there was enough instruction about the giving of one's income that Paul assumed no further emphasis was necessary.

In the second letter to the Corinthians we discover, in fact, that Paul's assumption was wrong. More instruction was necessary and the strain in Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church was, in part, due to the Jerusalem collection. The collection was finally successful; but it was not easy.

But the goal Paul was reaching for was a worthy one. A door for ministry had been opened for the Corinthians because of the need in Jerusalem. Paul naturally assumed that the Corinthians would respond and be eager to be used by God on their behalf. Would that God raise up Christians who would be eager rather than reticent to be used by God.

The second concern has to do with his travel arrangements and his excitement over an "open door" God had given Paul for ministry in Ephesus as well as the promise of strong opposition. We do not know what that "open door" is. But this verse (v.9) typifies Paul's own eagerness to be used as God's instrument regardless of the personal cost. Paul knew that such eagerness was what God expected of him. How could Paul respond in any other way, so grateful was he for his own salvation?

The lesson for us is that God is looking for men and women with the same eagerness. He is looking for those who are ready

and willing to be His instruments regardless of the personal cost. Will He be disappointed in us in the same way that Paul was disappointed by the Corinthians? May it never be.

R&D *What blocks me from having the eagerness that Paul had to serve God?*

Prayer: *Every day is a new opportunity to serve you, Lord Christ, if we are fully open to the Holy Spirit's guidance.*

Wednesday, July 31

Read: 1 Corinthians 16:10-24

Faith, Courage, Love

The closing salutations and greetings found at the end of this letter are typical of how Paul would close one of his epistles. But the exhortations to faith, courage, and love are particularly appropriate to the situation at Corinth.

“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith” (v.13a). The call to be on your guard has to do with watchfulness, being alert both to danger and opportunity. There was always the threat inside the fellowship for more internal division and members falling away. In fact, the emphasis in this letter indicates that the dangers to the Corinthian church were much more internal than external. But there was also a great opportunity before them. In spite of all of their difficulties, the church at Corinth was an extremely gifted congregation with an enormous opportunity to touch Corinth with the Gospel.

To be able to see the opportunities in the midst of the difficulties is to see with the eyes of faith. It is much more than optimism. Rather it is a courageous assessment of God's provisions in the midst of real difficulties; and God's provisions for Corinth were great.

“Be people of courage; be strong” (v.13b). The allusion to courage was made in the preceding paragraph. Courage is the choice to move in faith rather than fear. Some could assess the situation at Corinth and say that things were hopeless. Others could examine this church and see the possibilities but do nothing personally. It is the courageous who see the situation, know the pos-

sibilities and then choose, in faith, to act knowing that God will honor their courage.

If courage is what gets one going, it is strength that provides the stamina to continue. The parable Jesus told of the sower and the seeds indicates the necessity of strength. The seeds that fell on rocky soil were the ones that began well but failed to persevere (see Matthew 13). Strength is the determination to continue when others have quit. Strength sees the prize at the end of the race and allows nothing to prevent the obtaining of the prize.

“Do everything in love” (v.14). This is a quick summation of chapter 13. It stands as a brief but potent standard by which all behavior is judged. The pursuit of strength, faith or courage without love is “worth nothing.” However love, without courage, strength and faith, is not true love.

All of these attributes are facets of the same gem: a description of the character of Christ. These are the attributes that God is working in us by His Spirit. May we always cooperate with God’s courage, strength, and faith toward us.

R&D Which do you need the most of right now: strength, courage, faith, or love? Why?

Prayer: You equip us mightily, Lord God, for Your call upon our lives. May we obediently respond.



Principles of Christian Living

Monday, August 1

Read: Read: Proverbs 1:1-9

Introduction

Over the many years of producing *The Journey*, the Bible Reading Fellowship has been able to secure writers for our daily studies who are both serious Bible students and good communicators. The Lord has blessed us mightily in supplying these dedicated writers who give of their time and talents without any remuneration other than serving the Lord. These people review the understanding that the Church has had over the years concerning the passage of Scripture for the day; and, relying on these standard commentaries, help us to see what the passage means and how it applies to our lives. Your comments about *The Journey* show us that you appreciate what these folks do for us.

As a break from the normal routine, however, we thought it might be of interest and benefit to you to have a series of teachings that, although tied to Scripture, were not strictly commentary on Scripture. Thus, this month we will be looking at “Principles of Christian Living” from the pens of some of the finest Christian leaders and writers of our past.

Each study deals with some important aspect of the Christian life, something it would be helpful for us to understand (or be reminded of) in order better to serve the Lord. It is our hope that this series will be of sufficient interest to you that it will be worthy of being repeated from time to time.

R&D *What are some “principles of Christian living” you would like to know more about?*

Prayer: *Lord, it has been argued that Christianity is not based on “principles” but on the life of Christ. Yet, certain guidelines do shine*

forth as we grow in the knowledge and love of Christ over a period of time. May we be helped by what we experience in this study.

Friday, August 2

Read: John 3:1-21

Conversion

In his book *The Becomers*, Keith Miller spoke about the process of conversion. He said that, as a person experiences the gospel message in conversion, many basic questions about life are laid to rest. Is ultimate reality evil or good? It is good to the point of abundant graciousness. Is life meaningless, or does it have a purpose? Not only does life have a purpose, but God has intervened in human events to convey the meaning of that purpose.

What is the nature of the relationship with God? Jesus shows us that it is a generous, forgiving, saving love. In the end, will life triumph over death or vice versa? The new follower of Jesus Christ is confident that the kingdom of God cannot be vanquished, not even in death.

What the newly converted hears Jesus saying is that in the end all will be all right, that nothing can harm us permanently, no suffering is irrevocable, no loss is lasting, no defeat is more than temporary, no disappointment is conclusive. Of course, not all new Christians experience the same feelings or sequence of events—some have a separate experience later in which they become more conscious of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Nonetheless, the newly converted person tends to “know” these new truths, even though it may be years before he or she can articulate convincing reasons for what has happened.

R&D *Try to relate your own conversion experience.*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, for choosing me to be one of your own.*

Read: Matthew 16:24-26

Purpose

In this busy age in which we live, people are not looking for something to do, but something worth doing. The story is told of a young couple who got married and began to “shop around” for a church home. In the churches they visited, they were told over and over again how easy it was to be a part of that church. Tragically, they ended up as Jehovah’s Witnesses, because that was the first church they visited which really challenged them by its demands.

In *Setting Men Free*, Bruce Larson gives an interesting illustration to make the same point. The Italian patriot Garibaldi was recruiting an army, but he had little to offer but pain. “Soldiers,” he supposedly said, “what I have to offer you is fatigue, danger, struggle, and death; the chill of the cold night and the heat of the burning sun; no lodging, no munitions, no provisions, but forced marches, dangerous watch posts, and continual struggle. Those who love freedom and their country follow me.” The response was overwhelming in numbers and in loyalty.

This is, of course, the same sort of thing that Jesus was saying to those who would follow him. It is often missed by Christians today. We tend to tell people how wonderful our church is, what benefits they will receive from being a part of it, and how secure the Christian life can be. These are only partial truths. Worse still, they smack of “cheap grace” and lack of real commitment. Larson says that, of the churches he has known, those which placed the most difficult and strenuous requirements on membership have had the greatest success in recruiting new members.

R&D *How challenging is membership in your church?*

Prayer: *Your promises are great, Lord, but there are challenges that go along with each one of them.*

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” John
10:10b

The Church is not a museum but a school or even a hospital; not a place where people are on exhibition or parade, but a place where they are learning how to live.

Monday, August 5

Read: Psalm 23**Prescription for Health**

We live in a “stressed-out” time. More people are in need of psychological counseling than in the history of the world. Over and over again, we hear of cases of “successful” people having nervous breakdowns or escaping into alcohol or drugs. It is rare if we have no one in our family or among our friends who could be said to fall into that category; perhaps it is true of ourselves.

Charles L. Allen began his book *God’s Psychiatry* by “prescribing” the Twenty-third Psalm for such an illness. He told the patient to read it five times a day for seven days. He was to read it the first thing upon awakening in the morning. He was to read it carefully, meditatively, and prayerfully. Just after breakfast, he was to do the same thing. This was to be repeated immediately after lunch and dinner, and then the last thing before he went to bed.

The “patient” was told not to be hurried in reading, but to think about each phrase, giving his mind time to absorb as much of the meaning as possible. At the end of one week, Allen promised, things would be different for the troubled person. The results were so helpful that Allen continued to prescribe the same remedy for many people he counseled in subsequent years.

R&D *Are you willing to try the same prescription?*

Prayer: *Sometimes, Lord, if is the simple things that are readily available to us that can give us a new perspective on how to live in you.*

Read: 1 Corinthians 4:14-20

Power

Too often today, we sell the Christian faith far short of its potential. We accommodate when we should heal. But to be effective instruments of God's healing power, we have to believe in the potential of that power. "For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power" (v.20).

In his book *Healing*, Francis MacNutt says that what we have done all too frequently is to take the Good News and change it to the Good Advice. The Good News is that Jesus has come to help us enter into the very life of the Father so that we can be transformed by His power into new people—people who can love, and rejoice, and heal, and serve others in ways far beyond our own capabilities. Good Advice is to hold up the Christian ideal of life and service, and then to say, "Here's an ideal you'll have to rely on your own willpower to achieve."

A good way to test where we are on this matter is to ask what we would do if an addict came to us and asked for help. Would we give him all sorts of advice and then challenge him to use his own willpower to stay off drugs? Would we call a local agency and help the addict get enrolled in a treatment program? These would, of course, be proper things to do. But, would our first thought be of praying with the person, asking the Lord to free him of the addiction? If we believe in prayer, it will not be the only remedy we may suggest, but it certainly should be the first thing that comes to our mind. Jesus not only holds up the ideal, but he gives power to reach it.

R&D *How would you handle the addict? Why?*

Prayer: *So often, Lord, we look to prayer as an aftermath—"Oh, and we also prayed about it"—instead of our first step toward healing.*

Wednesday, August 7

Read: 2 Peter 1:13-21

Transfiguration

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the younger brother said, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” According to Henri Nouwen in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, for the son to want his own share of the inheritance that he could take it and do with it as he desired was the same as saying, “Father, I wish you were dead.”

There is a sense in which anyone who says he or she believes in God and yet does nothing to grow in a relationship with God is like the Prodigal Son. Such a person is saying, “I can get along without you, God” (which is the equivalent to saying, “Wish you were dead”).

The key to knowing God is Scripture. Thus, to those who would just as soon not be bothered about growing in a relationship with God, the Bible is not only of little significance, but is to be questioned (and, if possible, ridiculed). That is why, in the inspired wisdom of the writers of Scripture, we have passages such as today’s which affirm the authenticity of Scripture. Here, Peter makes it clear that we are not dealing with myths but with the words of an eyewitness of the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

R&D To what extent am I surrounded by people who fail to honor God and to honor Scripture? What would God have me do?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that we all have translations of the Bible available to us that we can read and understand, reducing (if not eliminating) the excuses of those who would rather go their own way.

Thursday, August 8

Read: John 8:39-47

Force of Evil

Despite all that we have been through in recent years, there still remains a naivete, “innocence,” and powerlessness among Christian people with regard to the real evil that exists in the world. So says James McNamara in *The Power of Compassion*. He

contends that the human struggle between good and evil is the very stuff of the spiritual life.

Teachings from psychology have, in recent years, provided a healthy balance to the negativism of the past. People who have benefitted from such teachings feel better about themselves, and this is good. However, it may also have contributed to supporting that innocence and powerlessness to which McNamara refers, and thereby impeded our spiritual growth.

Sin does exist, and we do need to repent and be forgiven. That's why Jesus came as Savior, and that's why we desperately need him. The crisis in faith today results precisely from the fact that people do not recognize their need for Jesus Christ, and they fail to recognize this need because they do not see their own capacity for evil. McNamara stresses that, in the spiritual life, it is as important to be in touch with your capacity for evil as it is to be in touch with your capacity for good.

R&D *To what extent are you conscious of good and evil in your life?*

Prayer: *Lord, do not let us be deceived or distracted. You provide protection and Jesus died to allow us to be forgiven of our sins. Help us to avail ourselves of what has been provided for our benefit.*

Friday, August 9

Read: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Letting God Work

Today's passage is about "seed-sowing" the word of God. Paul planted, Apollos watered, and God gave the increase. It is easy for us to attribute our allegiance to one Christian leader or another as the special person in our spiritual awakening and/or growth, and that is apparently what was happening in Corinth. What Paul is trying to say is that God does use various ones of us to bring others to Christ, but the one who is really doing the work is God, and He is the only one to whom we should "give credit" for what has happened.

Ted DeMoss, an insurance man, was president of the Christian Business Men's Committee for fourteen years and is the author of the book, *The Gospel and the Briefcase*. The suicide of a

college professor of his had a profound effect on him; he was filled with anger that he and many others had not evidenced to this man the love of Jesus Christ. He became convicted that, as opportunities presented themselves, he would tell others what Jesus meant in his life.

At 25 years of age, calling on what he thought would be an insurance prospect, the man on the other side of the door would not let him in. After finally convincing the reluctant man to at least talk to him, he found the man to be old and blind. Knowing that he was not an insurance prospect, DeMoss saw this as a chance to talk to him about the Lord. He read to the man from the Gospel of John and then asked him if he would like to invite Christ to come into his life.

When the man responded with a “yes,” DeMoss had one of the greatest surprises of this life, because the old man wanted his mother to be present for that step of faith. In the kitchen was the man’s 98-year-old mother, an invalid! When told what her son wanted to do, the woman shrieked with delight, “I have prayed for my boy every day for over 80 years!” DeMoss soon learned that there was also a Christian neighbor who had been caring for the pair for years and also shared Christ with the man. DeMoss then realized the principle that Paul was teaching in our passage for today; others had planted the seeds, he had just been there for the increase. It is God who does the work.

R&D Reflect on a time when you were able to share with a stranger what Christ means in your life.

Prayer: Lord, if we are conscious of it, every day we have the opportunity to share Your love with others in one way or another.

Saturday, August 10

Read: Matthew 6:5-8

Prayer Room

Today’s passage is one that is often misunderstood by those who will say, “My faith is very personal; it is not appropriate to talk about it with anyone else. The Lord told us to go into our private room to pray so no one else would see us doing it.” What Jesus was

actually dealing with here was the ostentatiousness of the Pharisees who made a great outward display of their faith while reflecting little inner spiritual growth. Philip Parham, in his book *Letting God*, provides a helpful insight into the passage.

“What is the ‘room’ that Jesus spoke of? Houses in his day did not have rooms as we know them today. Most homes in Palestine had only one room. The word room meant ‘inner room of the soul.’ It did not refer to any objective, outward, physical place, but to something subjective, inward, spiritual.

“We all have such a place within. It was written of Catherine of Seina that ‘she had built in her soul a chapel which she resolved never to leave, whatever her occupation. No one could take that interior chapel from her and she never left it.’ Brother Lawrence once said: ‘It is not necessary for being with God to be always at church; we may make a chapel of our meekness, humility, and love.’

“Jesus meant for us to make within us a temple for the Holy Spirit, where we may be still, where we may speak and listen to God—and no other voices.”

R&D *Do you have, or will you now be able to “make,” a room for God within yourself?*

Prayer: *Lord, Holy Spirit, you speak to us from within “if we have the ears to hear.” And, you speak to each of us in different ways. Help us to know how you best communicate with us that our prayers may be more effective and our time with you more precious.*

Sunday, August 11

Sabbath Time

Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Romans 12:10

There is a story about a man who sat in front of a fire talking with his minister. He said to him, “Parson, I don’t think I’ll come to church any more. Religion is a very personal thing. I think I’ll just try to work it out by myself.” The parson said nothing, but took a pair of tongs and lifted a live coal out of the fire, and laid it on the hearth. They both watched it slowly go out. Then the man said, “I see what you mean. I’ll be back next Sunday.”

Read: Galatians 3:10-14, 23-25

Self-righteousness

Paul was dealing with one of his favorite topics in the passage for today. As one who had fully observed the Law as a devout Jew, and found it wanting, his message was that Christians should live by faith rather than by Law. He realized the tendency that many young Christians, especially those from a Jewish background, had to revert to living under the demands of the law rather than the freedom gained through life in Christ. Sinclair B. Ferguson, in his book *Grow in Grace*, deals with this same tendency among some Christians today.

Ferguson's book deals with how we are to grow spiritually, but he notes that some people seem, instead, to have been "sanctified by vinegar." By this he means that they have become "unloving, unyielding, 'holy' in a formal, critical, unattractive way. They have a holiness (it would be better to say 'rectitude') without love. They have been 'sanctified by vinegar' not by grace.

"But this is not genuine holiness. Nobody is drawn closer to the Savior, or restored from rebellion and sin, by such a Christian. Only grace can restore. That was why Paul shared his own need of grace, and the welcome which Christ's grace in his own life would give" to others.

Although it is important in our day not to stray from God's moral demands upon us, it is equally crucial that we not fall into the trap of self-righteous legalism. Otherwise, we may end up as a person sanctified by vinegar.

R&D *What tempts us to fall back into religious legalism?*

Prayer: *Gracious goodness and loving kindness should shine forth in the Christian's life that others may know what life in you, Lord Christ, is all about.*

Read: John 15:1-8

Leadership

This familiar passage, one of the “I am” statements of Christ in the Gospel of John, deals with how essential it is for Christians to be in a close relationship with God. We are to see ourselves as branches of the vine that is Christ, and that whatever good comes forth from us is as a result of having been engrafted into Christ. Few people in our day have dealt with this principle of Christian living as effectively as Henri Nouwen.

In his book *In the Name of Jesus*, Nouwen speaks specifically of the necessity for Christian leaders to be in a close relationship with God through prayers. “For the future of Christian leadership it is of vital importance to reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every advice given, every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately. I have the impression that many of the debates within the Church... take place on a primarily moral level. On that level, different parties battle about right and wrong. But the battle is often removed from the experience of God’s love which lies at the base of all human relationships.

“Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance.” Nouwen is speaking not just to those whom we look up to as leaders, but to each of us—for every Christian is an ambassador for Christ with a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

R&D *To what extent are your “burning issues” primarily formed as a result of an intimate relationship with God?*

Prayer: *Thank You for always being there for us, Holy Father, as we come to You in prayer.*

Read: Ephesians 3:14-19

Spiritual Well-being

Today's reading is like a continuation or extension of yesterday's. Paul, as was true with Jesus, is talking about the necessity of being rooted in God through prayer. Paul is praying for the Ephesians that they may be strengthened in their inner being so that Christ may dwell richly in their hearts.

Michael Baughen, in his book *Breaking the Prayer Barrier*, uses this passage to deal with the fact that spiritual well-being should be our priority in prayer. He says that these verses are “a magnificent expression of heartfelt praying for the Ephesians to know increasing spiritual power, in terms of the riches of God's glory rather than mere human expectation. How much we need to pray like this! Even though we have been born anew by the Holy Spirit, brought into a spiritual dimension of living, we can so easily grow content with mediocre spiritual standards, lacking boldness in witnessing, and failing to maintain victory in the fight against ‘the world, the flesh and the devil.’ In our own strength we will fail. Only by the increasing power of the Holy Spirit can we keep growing and gaining in the spiritual realm.

“The aim of Paul's prayer is that believers may be filled with the fullness of God—never content with second-rate Christian living, always wanting to grow no matter what their chronological age. One of the marks of the spiritual life in elderly Christians is that, however old they are, they want to learn more of Christ and to grow in him. There is no retirement from the Christian life. As the external fabric decays, the inner nature is continuously renewed day by day.”

R&D *Reflect on older Christians who still have a young faith.*

Prayer: *One of the glories of life in you, Lord Jesus, is that there is always more room to grow.*

Read: Psalm 37:3-7

Surrendering Expectations

It is difficult “to wait upon the Lord.” Most of us are action-oriented people. We live in that sort of world today: instant everything! We know what we want, and we want it now. The psalm reminds us that we need, instead, to trust in the Lord, to dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture, to be still before God and wait patiently for him.

James Dobson, the Christian psychiatrist, learned this in a hard way as recounted in the Bill Bright book *The Greatest Lesson*, from which several stories in this study are being drawn. Dobson’s book *Dare to Discipline* had been enormously successful, so he had followed it quickly with *Hide and Seek*, because, as he says, he did not want to be a “flash in the pan” one-book author. Although the second book is now his favorite one, he had found it difficult to write. When it was published, he determined to do all he could to make it a success, including (by example) participating in seventeen radio, television, and newspaper interviews in the space of three days. Yet the sale of the book dragged miserably.

One day he took his publisher to lunch and grilled him about why the book was not selling. The publisher turned the questions back on Dobson: “How come this book is so important to you? Why are you acting like this?” Dobson felt insulted by the questions, but later the Lord spoke to him about them. Basically, what was impressed on Dobson’s heart was the fact that the questions had really come from God. He (Dobson) was taking both the credit and responsibility for the book instead of simply releasing it into the Lord’s hands. When he did, the book took off like a rocket!

R&D *When have you failed to release something to the Lord and suffered the consequences?*

Prayer: *Lord, when we try to control things, it never works. Will we ever learn?*

Read: John 14:1-14

Knowing the Way

Today's reading is another of the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John, arguably the most important one. In a pluralistic society such as we live in today, not everyone believes that Jesus is the "Way." Many are adherents of other faiths. Many others have a vague belief in a higher power but do not actualize that notion into a faith commitment. Still others believe that Jesus was a great person whose example we should follow but fail to recognize his claim to be God. Finally, there are even Christians who accept Jesus as their Lord but speculate that other people have some other lord who is best for them.

It is a basic principle of Christian living that we know what we believe about Jesus. C.S. Lewis stated it most clearly in *Mere Christianity*.

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus: 'I'm ready to accept him as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

R&D *How do you react to those around you who do not know Jesus or only know him in a superficial way?*

Prayer: *May the world awaken to the truth about you, Lord Christ; half-measures of faith fail completely.*

Read: Luke 19:1-10

Kindness

The illustration of godly kindness (one of the fruits of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23) is perhaps shown in this passage as clearly as any other place in Scripture. Here was Jesus, basically on his way to his death, concerned about a little tax collector who was curious enough to have climbed up a tree to see Jesus pass by. Jesus affirms the man in the most profound way, asking to stay in Zacchaeus' home. That simple "reaching out" to one shunned by others led to the man's dramatic conversion.

Keith Miller tells a similar, up-to-date story in his book *A Second Touch*. Miller had become convinced that he had a need to express his faith in the personal relationships that were laid before him each day. On the way to work he stopped in a store he had been patronizing for several years but, when the guy working there spoke to him, he was shocked to realize that he did not even know the man's name. Miller glanced at the name tag and said, "Good morning, Charlie," and started a conversation with a man he had been virtually ignoring for years.

"Say, Charlie, do you have a family?" Miller asked. That started a conversation that led to a first-name friendship. The man had a large family, and later, when one of the children became seriously injured in an accident, Miller was able to respond as a friend rather than as a "Christmas basket Christian."

Every day we face opportunities to be sensitive to the people around us, affirming them, supporting them, and praying for them when they especially need our prayers. It's just Christian kindness.

R&D With whom will you establish a personal relationship although you have been taking the person for granted in the past?

Prayer: We are here for you, Lord Jesus, to be your people in the lives of others. May we not miss the opportunities you give us all day long every day.

That through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known. Ephesians 3:10a

You send presents in packages to protect them. Trees have bark because sap cannot run without a protective covering. Water comes into our houses in pipes, because it would be of no use to us in a stream without a channel. People who think they can just be “spiritual,” without regard for the outward forms and worship of the Church are fooling themselves by their own pride of self-sufficiency, and they are failing to remember the very nature of Christianity itself. We need the inward, and we need the outward. We need the Spirit, but we need also the body.

Monday, August 19

Read: John 13:1-17

Our Example

Jesus was certainly our ideal example in the Zacchaeus story. He was even more poignantly our example in washing his disciples' feet. Although the kindness shown to Zacchaeus was certainly a part of the nature of Christ, his essential nature—that of servant as well as Lord—is shown in today's passage. It speaks volumes of how we are to serve in being Christ's people in the world today.

In *Grow in Grace*, Sinclair Ferguson points out how important it is for us to have Jesus as our example. “When the New Testament speaks about the fullness of grace which we find in Christ, it does not mean only forgiveness, pardon and justification. Christ has done much more for us. He died for us, but he also lived for us. Now he has sent his own Spirit to us so that we might draw on his strength. He grew in grace, and when we draw on his power we shall likewise grow in grace.

“Our faith can only receive what grace provides and can only believe what Scripture reveals. But faith should receive everything grace provides and Scripture reveals. We impoverish our spiritual experience and deny ourselves Christ's help when we fail to see how important his spiritual growth was. But when we see that our Savior himself grew in grace, new dimensions of his love

for us and new possibilities of our own spiritual development are opened to us.

“The Christian life depends on how we think about Jesus.” It is as we study the Bible and note all of the ways in which our Lord and Savior grew, especially in his servant ministry, that we can also grow in grace.

R&D *In what ways do you use Jesus as your example in Christian living?*

Prayer: *Show us your ways daily, Lord, so we may continue to grow in Your grace.*

Tuesday, August 20

Read: John 9:24-33

Focus

In one of the classic stories in the Bible, of which today's passage is a portion, a blind man is healed by Jesus and then begins to catch grief from every side from those who question what has happened to him. Despite it all, he maintains his focus: “All I know is that I was blind and now I can see.”

In Philip Parham's *Letting God*, he mentions that C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, points out that the devil's goal is to keep Christians in a “Christianity and...” state of mind and away from the knowledge that they are in a state of grace. “The devil,” says Parham, “tells his demons to keep Christians talking about Christianity and psychology, Christianity and politics, Christianity and marriage.” The idea is to keep the emphasis away from “Christianity is.”

Parham says that when we concentrate on what our life in Christ is, we are alive and well. Trying to figure everything out is when we are apt to lose our focus. We need, at such times, to say, with the man in today's passage, “All I know is that I was blind and now I see.”

“We are pilgrims traveling our road with Christ, not spectators on the sidelines, thinking about grace. We are in a state of grace, and grace is our heartbeat, giving us the power we need” to get up and go about the work the Lord gives us to do.

R&D *In what ways do you tend to get distracted from simply living in the glorious grace of God?*

Prayer: *Keep us focused on you, Lord Christ.*

Wednesday, August 21

Read: 2 Peter 1:1-10

Diligence and Wisdom

God gave us minds and He expects us to use them well in seeking wisdom to live the Christian life. In our reading for today we are taken, step by step, through a process that begins with faith (belief in God) and carries us through virtue (the quality of character and attitude in Jesus Christ), knowledge (attaining to the mind of Christ), self-control (temperance), fortitude (steadfastness, patience), godliness (recognition of our dependence on God), and kindness (care and concern for others) to love (the highest quality of the Christian life). The epistle demands of us diligence so that the wisdom we seek and the truth that is revealed to us may be deep and rich.

A practical problem occurs when the Christian becomes like a spiritual butterfly, flitting from one church to another, from one conference, workshop or seminar to another, and between a multitude of books and devotional methods. Such a person is not wise in the selection of spiritual disciplines. Charles Whiston, in his book *Teach Us to Pray*, calls for diligence in seeking the wisdom that God wants us to have. Harm, he says, can come from reading too many books. There is an analogy to bees making honey. During the late spring and early summer there is an abundance of flowers, but the bees flit from flower to flower, never going deep enough into the honey sacks. Later in the year when there are fewer flowers, the bees must dig deep into the flowers and then produce the best honey.

So it can be with devotional study. We can try to read too many books, scattered around the house, seldom finishing one, just skipping from one to another. Instead, we should select the best books and diligently pursue the best plan of study to attain the wisdom God wants for us.

R&D *What revisions do you need to make to your devotional practices?*

Prayer: *Help us to explore the depth of resources you provide us, Lord Christ, rather than the quantity.*

Thursday, August 22

Read: Psalm 8

Spiritual Renewal

Our reading for today is one of the great psalms of praise in the Bible. It is as we truly contemplate the majesty of God that we recognize how far short we fall of His glory. We praise Him for who He is while thanking Him for His mercy and grace to us. We see the responsibility for caring for His creation that He has left to us, and that also gives us knowledge of how far short of His expectations we fall.

In *Dynamics of the Christian Life*, the author Richard Lovelace is talking about preconditions to spiritual renewal. “Men and women cannot know themselves until they know the reality of the God who made them, and once they know the holy God, their own sin appears so grievous that they cannot rest until they have fully appropriated Christ.” Lovelace says that knowledge of God and knowledge of self are preconditions of spiritual life because revival involves awakening. A problem occurs when the Church, in concert with the world, plays down the awesomeness and “otherness” of God, rendering Him to be like a giant Boy Scout in the sky.

“The tension between God’s holy righteousness and His compassionate mercy cannot be legitimately resolved by remolding His character into an image of pure benevolence. There is only one way that this contradiction can be removed: through the cross of Christ which reveals the severity of God’s anger against sin and the depth of His compassion in paying its penalty through the sacrifice of His Son. In systems which resolve this tension by softening the character of God, Christ and his work become an addendum, and spiritual darkness becomes complete because the true God has been abandoned for the worship of a magnified image

of human tolerance.” If we are to live in a dynamic and growing relationship with God, it is essential that we never forget who He is and who we are.

R&D To what extent do you and other Christians with whom you worship and live have an understanding of the “awesomeness and otherness” of God?

Prayer: Lord God, we can never fully comprehend Your fullness, but help us to be ever growing in the knowledge and love of You.

Friday, August 23

Read: John 10:11-16

Hearing God’s Voice

This passage is another of the “I am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. The primary point for us today is that, as the Good Shepherd, Jesus knows the voice of his sheep, and the sheep know his voice. He belongs to them and they belong to him.

In her book *You Can Witness with Confidence*, Rosalind Rinker tells a story of how to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Years ago, as a missionary in China, she was having some carpentry work done in the small apartment in which she lived. While she was studying Chinese in one room, the carpenter was working in the other. She began to get “nudgings” to tell the man about Christ.

The voice within Miss Rinker seemed to say, “Aren’t you going to talk to the carpenter? You’d better do something. How long are you going to wait?” When she thought about our Bible passage for today in light of the messages she was getting, she realized immediately that this was not the Good Shepherd’s voice. She prayed, “Lord, I don’t believe it was you who spoke. You never push, and you’re never in a hurry. You know I’m ready to do everything you want me to do. Please give me the patience of a quiet heart that I may hear you when you are ready to speak.”

With that assurance, Miss Rinker settled down to her work. Later, in a perfectly natural way, the carpenter asked her about a Christian picture on her wall and she was able to talk to him about Christ.

Recognizing what is, and what is not, the voice of the Good Shepherd does not happen from the moment we become Christians. It takes time with him to develop that relationship; but, if we are willing to spend time with the Shepherd, we come to know his voice.

R&D Reflect on an experience of hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Prayer: Lord God, You speak to us in many ways, largely through Your Holy Spirit within us. Give us the ears to hear.

Saturday, August 24

Read: Luke 18:18-30

Sacrifice

As Christians, we are called to sacrifice. Sacrifice is, however, a relative thing. It can mean suffering (for the early Christians, and even for some today, it can mean martyrdom), or it can simply be yielding to an inconvenience. The key to the meaning of our actions is what those actions reveal of our heart. Our heart and our “treasure” are likely to be in the same place. The story of the “rich young ruler” gives us an illustration of one who was possessed by his possessions, and not willing to make the sacrifice that Jesus discerned as necessary for him.

Keith Miller, in *A Second Touch*, gives us a modern day illustration of the same principle of Christian living. A young businessman was rushing to catch his commuter train to work. He had made a decision that morning to let Christ run his life that day, resolving to be a Christian in the personal contacts he would experience. Jesus, rather than business appointments and office duties, would reign in his heart.

By the time he got to the train station, he was running late. Hurrying across the lobby, he heard the last “all aboard.” He reached the train just in time, but as he attempted to step aboard, he bumped into a small boy who was carrying a jigsaw puzzle. The puzzle fell to the platform and scattered in every direction.

The busy man stopped and looked down at the tears in the child’s eyes. With an inward sigh, he smiled and (as the train

pulled out) stooped down to help the child pick up his puzzle. In fascination, the boy watched. “Mister,” he asked, “Are you Jesus?”

R&D *What was the last sacrifice you made for the Lord?*

Prayer: *The opportunities for small sacrifices in the name of Christ are around us every day. May we not miss them, Lord.*

Sunday, August 25

Sabbath Time

Pray constantly. 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Cultivate the habit of praying as often as you can think of it. You have a moment in the office when you are free: spend it praying for someone. You are lying awake at night and cannot sleep—wonderful time for a good long prayer for many people. You are walking down the street alone; your thoughts can be idle or wayward, or they can be turned into prayers. Talking with God becomes natural after we know Him and begin to love Him. It is amazing what life takes on of meaning, significance, excitement, when we begin working with Him, and that is what prayer really is.

Monday, August 26

Read: Isaiah 42:5-9

Humility

Our reading today is a prophecy from Isaiah in which God reminds the people who He really is. It is easy for us to get caught up in our own little successes and forget that it is to God that the credit should go. When we do realize what we owe to God, humility is the result.

In *The Greatest Lesson*, Billy Graham tells a story of humility learned early in his preaching ministry. Through the leadership of Dr. Harold John Ockenga, Graham had been urged to lead an evangelistic crusade in Boston over a ten-day period. This, despite many “discouraging words” about how the people of Boston were steeped in tradition and far too sophisticated and cultured to respond favorably to the type of preaching Graham did at his crusades. As pastor of Boston’s prestigious Park Street Church, Ockenga thought otherwise and was willing to go out on

a limb to support the crusade by making his church available for the meetings.

Early into the crusade, so many people wanted to attend and had to be turned away in the thousands that larger facilities had to be found. The city's daily newspapers gave the event front page coverage and hundreds of people each day turned to Christ at the meetings. Impressed with the success of the effort, Graham went to see Dr. Ockenga to thank him and to share with him the great personal satisfaction and justifiable pride the man must have been feeling as a result.

As he entered Ockenga's office, what Graham found was entirely unexpected. Here was the great man, face down on the floor, in tears, praying earnestly and fervently. He was humbly acknowledging his unworthiness and his total dependence on the Holy Spirit. He was beseeching God to pour out His blessings on the crusade. Graham, recalling the words of Isaiah 42:8, "I am the Lord... I will not give my glory to another," graphically saw humility in action. It was God who was getting the credit.

R&D *What lesson in humility has the Lord taught you lately?*

Prayer: *Giving credit to ourselves for the things You do through us, Lord God, is sheer foolishness. Help us to see more clearly.*

Tuesday, August 27

Read: 2 Corinthians 7:8-10

Shame

Today's Bible passage speaks of sorrow and grief, but what was experienced by the Corinthians was much akin to shame. Paul had made some accusations; the Corinthians had accepted them and repented. They were not embittered by Paul's reproof, but gained from it.

In *Letting God*, Philip Parham deals with the value of shame. "It's unfortunate that the word shame has almost disappeared from our vocabulary. There is no question that feeling humiliated or 'put down' is not healthy, but being humble and possessing a proper sense of shame is right! It is no disgrace to blush. Jesus commends the one 'who humbles himself' (Matthew 23:12).

“Unlike guilt, which is a judgment on our actions, shame is a feeling. It is the emotional reaction to our guilt. Like an itch that needs to be scratched, shame urges us to relieve our guilt. Healthy shame acknowledges the guilty act, shows sensitivity and responsibility, and moves toward forgiveness, confessing, ‘I have done the things I ought not to have done.’ The church calls this healthy reaction to guilt ‘contrition,’ a true and accurate sense of sorrow for our sins. It is the pathway back to reconciliation. It is the urge to ‘make amends.’ Healthy shame is confessed, cleansed, eliminated and forgotten.

“Unhealthy shame is ‘scrupulosity,’ which is more than the temporary feeling of shame for real misdeeds. A scrupulous person has a constant attitude of self-hatred...and clings to feelings of unworthiness no matter how much forgiveness is offered.” The important thing in the Christian life is to maintain balance, accepting shame and repenting of sin, but not becoming scrupulous, thinking everything we do is sin.

R&D *How do we maintain a balance between healthy shame and scrupulosity?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us to maintain balance in all aspects of our life.*

Wednesday, August 28

Read: Acts 9:26-31

Risk

In today’s Bible study, Barnabas took quite a risk with Paul. At the time, Paul was a notorious character to the apostles in Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that Paul (as Saul) had persecuted Christians, and it was now difficult to accept that he had become a changed man. They suspected instead that he was a secret agent intent on further damage to the church. It was Barnabas who was willing to stand up for Paul, and the entire Christian Church can be eternally grateful for that!

A modern day parallel to the story is told by Charles Colson in his book *Born Again*. To the general public, and to politicians in particular, Colson had certainly become a notorious character as a result of his involvement in the cover-up of the Watergate scandal.

But, during the crisis that arose from Watergate, Colson experienced a genuine Christian conversion. A handful of prominent politicians who were also Christians decided to stand by Colson much as Barnabas had done for Paul.

Initially few people knew that men of the stature of Senator Harold Hughes were willing to meet openly with Colson. But the men who formed a weekly prayer group did not hide their connection with him. They risked their political reputations to support a brother in need. In the following months, untold sacrifices of time and energy were expended by these men on Colson's behalf. When the time came, they traveled miles to visit him in prison. One of them even uncovered an old law that allowed one person to serve the prison term of another, and volunteered to do this for Colson!

R&D Who has taken a risk for you? For whom have you risked your reputation?

Prayer: Standing up for you, Lord Christ, and standing with your people, can be a risky business, from time to time; but it is an honor to be able to do so when the opportunity presents itself.

Thursday, August 29

Read: Mark 15:33-41

Absence of God

In our passage for today, even Jesus encountered separation from God. Although, in his case it was for a very different reason (that he might fully experience taking upon himself alone the sins of the world) and was suffered at a deeper level than we can ever comprehend, it is a common experience of Christians to sense the absence of God from time to time.

Cecil B. Murphey, in his book *Prayer Pitfalls and Possibilities*, tells of an experience of the absence of God in his own life. For a period of several months, Murphey's life had felt like a vacuum. He was not willing to admit that God had "deserted him," and he was unwilling to admit to himself that he was praying out of habit rather than from an awareness of God's presence.

One cold, cloudy winter afternoon, as he walked along, Murphey prayed about his situation. "Lord, you used to assure

me of your presence. When I prayed, or read the Bible, or went to church, something happened inside of me—I felt alive! For months now, my heart has been as cold as this weather.” As he complained about “God’s behavior,” Murphey realized that God is with us even when we are not conscious of His presence. He remembered Isaiah 45:15: “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.” At that moment, Murphey resolved to change his attitude. “God, even if you never again give me visible evidence, I am still with you. Job said he would trust you even if you killed him. I am determined to do the same.”

As Murphey continued walking, the dark clouds rolled away, and the sun broke through for the first time that day. And, once more, the warmth of God’s love broke into Murphey’s life.

R&D *Reflect on a time when you have felt separated from God.*

Prayer: *Perhaps You seem separated from us for time to time, Lord, simply to remind us of how essential You are to all aspects of our life.*

Friday, August 30

Read: Psalm 40:1-10

Our Song

There are a number of passages of Scripture that speak of a “new song” and of the importance of spiritual singing. No wonder that music plays such an important place in worship. God does “lift us up” from our difficulties and problems and fill us with the joy of song. Our psalm for today also recognizes the wonders the Lord does, speaks of faithfulness in the great assembly, and confidence in God. All of these factors are represented in a story told by Jack Hayford in *The Greatest Lesson*.

He begins by telling about eight-year-old Aimee interrupting him, a pastor of a large congregation where the worship service was about to begin. Hayford could see in the child’s eyes that it was important. She wanted to sing to him a song the Lord had given her, and he listened with joy. It is Hayford’s contention that God will give each of us a song, just for our own use, if we will let Him.

But that is getting ahead in the story. Ten years earlier, Mike and Cheri, members of Hayford’s congregation, had learned

that, for medical reasons, they would be unable to have children. Hayford did not know these facts nor of the prayerful desire that, after eleven years of marriage, they might still conceive a child. During the worship service, however, Hayford experienced and shared with the congregation a message from God: “Fill your house with song, and as you do, the life-giving power of song will establish a new atmosphere and make way for the conception you desire.” He knew the message was for some couple in his congregation; it was for Mike and Cheri.

They went home and filled their house with song. In due time, Aimee was born.

R&D *Has the Lord given you a “new song?”*

Prayer: *Indeed, Lord, fill our lives with the music of Your heart.*

Saturday, August 31

Read: Ephesians 3:1-13

Holy Boldness

Christians are called to boldness in the Lord. This may mean taking a dramatic and unpopular stand on a vital issue. It can also simply mean speaking a word of faith when it would be easier to remain silent. In our reading for today, Paul demonstrates his boldness of speech and the motivation for it.

In the book *Fire in Coventry*, Stephen Verney tells of the holy boldness that the people of Coventry were called to for the dedication of their famous cathedral. Bishop Cuthbert Bardsley realized that people would come from all over the world to see the new cathedral that was being built alongside the ruins of the ancient cathedral bombed out during World War II. Bardsley wondered if visitors would find a consecrated people, something of much greater importance than a consecrated cathedral.

As a result, a series of meetings took place throughout the Diocese of Coventry in which Bardsley tried to convince his people that God was calling them to be a church filled with His love and service. He talked about a converted people with the inner peace, joy, and love that only a consecrated people can possess. At the end of each meeting, he asked them to do something that

Anglicans are not accustomed to do: to pray aloud, from their own hearts and in their own words.

On one occasion the bishop prayed, followed by a long, painful silence. Then Bardsley roared, “O God, forgive us our cowardice!” With that, a woman in the front row prayed, followed by others. It seems such a small thing to be bold enough to pray out loud in the midst of a crowd of people; but for those who have done it for the first time, we know how daunting that can be. Yet, at all levels of our lives, God calls us to holy boldness.

R&D *When have you had to be “bold in the Lord?” What happened?*

Prayer: *Give us the courage to stand with you, Lord Christ, no matter how difficult the challenge may be.*