

2021
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

This devotional begins with Jesus' baptism and temptations and then continues through the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as presented in the Gospel of Matthew. My prayer is that it will enrich your Lenten experience and lead you to a most joyful Easter celebration.

Artie

“The basic lesson of the Sermon of the Mount is to narrow all your interests until your mind, heart, and body are focused on Jesus Christ. (Taken from **My Utmost For His Highest**, by Oswald Chambers, updated edition, c. 1992, edited by James Reimann, Oswald Chambers Publications Assn., Ltd.)

ASH WEDNESDAY
February 17

Matthew 3:13-4:11

Spiritually speaking, Jesus has just had a mountaintop experience. He has obeyed his Heavenly Father and been baptized by John the Baptist. At that moment, Jesus is baptized with the Holy Spirit just as he had been baptized with water. His Father gives a resounding “amen” from heaven as he declares, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

Although we don't know how long Jesus was able to bask in this experience, it seems as though it is only a short time before Jesus is facing a time of testing and temptation. Alone, deprived of physical sustenance and emotional support, Jesus is confronted by the tempter.

Having a lofty spiritual experience is often followed by a time of testing. This is not only true for Jesus, but for us as well. And, like Jesus, to confront and survive the schemes of the devil requires knowing and using Scripture. Jesus navigates each temptation by wielding the sword of the Spirit.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I know that I will face times of testing and temptation in my walk with you. Please help me to access the power of the Holy Spirit to help me be strong in my determination to follow your will and your ways without being distracted by the devil and my own desires. In the strong name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

February 18

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-4:11

Arguably, Jesus' journey to the cross began in a stable in Bethlehem. But, it began in earnest as Jesus was baptized. God the Father gave his stamp of approval and the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus as he embarked on his public ministry.

Beginning with his temptation, and over the next 3 years, Jesus resolutely went about teaching his disciples, and demonstrating the power of the Kingdom of God by his preaching, teaching and healing. Of course, this journey took Jesus to the cross. To be obedient to his Father and to complete his mission, Jesus faced many hardships and trials, and daily denied his personal needs in order to sacrifice for others. We see Jesus choose this path of selflessness, service and sacrifice in the temptations he faced in the wilderness following his baptism.

In the temptations, he refused to miraculously meet his physical hunger. He refused to perform a miracle for selfish reasons, and also refused to perform another miracle to stroke his own ego, even though such a miracle would reveal his divine identity as the Son of God. And, he refused to give his allegiance to anyone other than God, or to elevate himself above the common human experience.

Just as Jesus' journey to the cross required many sacrifices, and ultimately led to his death, to be a follower of Jesus requires that we walk a similar path. The gospels say that we must deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. Paul describes the life of a disciple as one in which the disciple dies to himself. To be transformed into the image of Christ only happens as we emulate his life of selfless and sacrificial love.

Prayer: I want to follow Jesus and to be transformed into his image. Help me Lord to surrender myself to you in such a way that I will come to be like Jesus, no matter the cost. Amen.

February 19

Scripture: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1).”

According to the scripture verse above, Jesus was led by the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) into the wilderness. In the gospel of Mark the verb “led” is much more forceful. It says that he was “compelled” or driven into the wilderness. What is important to note is that Jesus was given divine guidance, or prompted in such a way, that he went into the wilderness. These days in the wilderness became for Jesus a school where he refined the nature and characteristics of his ministry. The verse says he went to be tempted by the devil. God allows the devil to do what the devil does—tempt people. In this case, the person he is tempting is Jesus. Later in the New Testament it is written that God does not tempt us. The motive of a tempter is to entice someone into wrong, or sin. God doesn't do that. God will sometimes “test” us. The motive of a test is to purify and/or mature us through the means of difficult circumstances. Sometimes God allows hard things into our lives, knowing they can have spiritual value for us. Through these temptations, God allowed Satan to tempt Jesus, and in so doing, Jesus refined the nature of his messiahship, and grew stronger as he overcame each temptation. By looking at the example of Jesus, we see that we can face the devil and his temptations, and choose to follow God until we are matured as his disciples.

Prayer: Jesus, our Savior, who has been tempted as we are, and knows our every weakness, give me strength to be refined and matured into your faithful follower as I resist the temptations of the evil one. May I be continually shaped and molded into the person God has made me to be, even as I surrender to the testings I face in my life. Amen.

February 20

Scripture: "After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:2-4)."

Jesus has not eaten for 40 days. It is in this weakened and vulnerable state that Jesus encounters the devil. He was hungry. The tempter says, prove that you are the Son of God by causing these stones to become bread. (The implication here is that Jesus absolutely could have turned the stones into bread.) But, Jesus recognized it as the trap it was.

This is a challenge to Jesus in so many ways. First, Jesus is fasting for spiritual reasons, and the devil encourages him to forget that mission in order to meet a physical desire. Second, it is also a temptation to trust his own strength as the Son of God, rather than as a human. In the incarnation, the Son of God has committed to living his life in fully human ways. He must trust God to meet his needs, as all humans are encouraged to do. Thirdly, it is a temptation to selfishly use his miracle-working power to meet his own needs rather than the needs of others. But, Jesus, even in his weakened and hungry state, quotes scripture from Deuteronomy 8:3, clearly stating that he chooses to deny his hunger, rely on God to meet his needs, and choosing to use his miraculous powers to meet the needs of others.

The implication for each of us is that the devil will try to get us off our path to discipleship by appealing to our physical desires. We too can follow Jesus' example: choosing to follow God; denying our human desires; trusting God to meet our needs and to satisfy us. And, the words of the Bible and God's promises can be a powerful weapon in resisting temptation.

Prayer: Powerful and sustaining God, give me eyes to see the temptations before me to meet my own needs in my own strength, and to satisfy my physical desires instead of waiting and looking to you to find your will and then relying on you to be able to do your will. Amen.

February 22

Scripture: Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' (Matthew 5:5-7)."

Satan approached Jesus with a second temptation to prove himself to be the Messiah by jumping off the highest point of the temple. The devil seems to be saying, "I mean, don't you want everyone to know who you are?" And, "you won't die because there is a verse from Psalm 91 that says so." Satan knows scripture and will misuse it to attempt to pull us away from service to God. He was tempting Jesus to make a big, splashy entrance into his ministry. But, as followers of Jesus, we are called to sacrificial love, self-denial and servanthood. There is nothing loud or sensational about Christian discipleship. In fact, Jesus said that we are to take up our cross daily and follow him. The cross has not ever been "splashy." The cross is a sign of humility and ultimate surrender of self to follow after God's ways.

Jesus countered the words of Satan with another verse that says we are simply to believe and act on God's promises. We are not advised to try to put God in a box and force him to keep his promises, or to act in a certain way. We know from the Biblical description of Jesus' ministry that he did not try to pursue the limelight, but rather humbly laid down his life daily as he went about teaching, preaching and healing. Our call is to be the same.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give us the strength to walk in the footsteps of our Savior by denying our desires to be the center of attention, and instead serving in selfless and sacrificial ways. Amen.

February 23

Scripture: Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him (Matthew 4:8-11).

A third time the devil came to Jesus and said "if you will bow down and worship me," I will make you King of the World. Of course, he was appealing to the very human quality: lust for power. Although the Bible calls the devil the prince of this world, and even though there are areas in this world where it seems as though the devil reigns (places of addiction, violence, abuse, sexual perversion), it is not true that he reigns. The devil lied to Jesus. He couldn't give him the created world. The Bible says the earth is the Lord's. However, anyone who chooses to worship anything other than God gives the devil and sin power to appeal to the human lust for power. In so doing, one may misuse that power to trample on others to build a kingdom for oneself.

Jesus once again resists the temptation for earthly power, or to allow any idol in his life and ministry. Jesus reminds Satan of God's command that we should only worship and serve God. Jesus fully committed to a ministry that displayed God's Kingdom, and manifested and pointed others to God.

Notice here that Jesus tells him to go away. We are told in James that if we submit to God, we can resist the devil and he will leave. The devil won't hang around to tempt us if we are quick to resist and send him on his way. Through the Holy Spirit, we have all the power, and Satan has none. It's important to be vigilant in the faith because the Tempter is always looking for a place of vulnerability where he might pull us off the path of discipleship.

Prayer: Lord, give me discernment to see when the devil is lying to me. Give me the ability to recognize when I let my own desires make me vulnerable to the wiles of Satan. Let me be always spiritually attuned to your voice and guidance in my life. Amen.

February 24

Scripture: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:3-12).

The verses we are focusing on today are called the Beatitudes. In the Beatitudes, Jesus outlines a series of attitudes that, if put into practice, will allow us to live happy lives, basking in the blessings and favor of God. These rules for living are not things that come easily or naturally to us. Consider these calls to meekness, mercy, purity, peacemaking. All of these attributes mentioned in the Beatitudes require us to take stock of who we are in relationship to God, to yield to his leadership, to deny ourselves, to surrender. If you begin at the first beatitude and progress to the last, you will find they present a framework for the life of a disciple, from our first awakening to one who is mature to the point of joyfully suffering for the sake of the Kingdom of God. To be a good citizen in the Kingdom of God requires that we surrender to the Lordship of our Heavenly Father. It also requires that we deliberately choose attitudes and actions that put others first, thus denying our selfish ways. Isn't this a picture of our Savior, Jesus Christ?

Prayer: God, I need help becoming the person you have called me to be. I need help to attain the attitudes and actions revealed as characteristics of your followers. So, lead me, guide me, empower me to follow these guidelines until the image of Jesus Christ is formed in me. Amen.

February 25

Scripture: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).

As Jesus began to teach his disciples, he began with the most basic of steps in following him as a disciple. Look at the verse above. It seems so unreasonable to say that persons who are poor in spirit should be happy or feel blessed. But, these are the very words of Jesus, stated as a promise. It does not seem as though there is anything commendable about being poor in spirit. Yet, this is the very first step into a life of blessings that come as a result of being a disciple. It has been said that the first step in the journey to recovery for an addict is admitting that one has a problem—a problem that the addict is powerless to solve. You and I are enslaved to sin, a prisoner to sin, powerless to defeat it or overcome it. Spiritually, we are bankrupt. We have no way to escape our predicament. We are poor in spirit. Yet, Jesus says that once we accept our inability to escape this sinful situation, he then gives us the keys to freedom, and access to the very Kingdom of God. This really is good news! And, the very reason Jesus came.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for convincing me of my inability to escape the clutches of sin without you. Even now, convict me of any sin in my life, and lead me to repentance, and freedom to serve you. Amen.

February 26

Scripture: Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted (Matthew 5:4).

Although this verse has often been used as a promise that Jesus comforts us in our grief of loss (and he does), this verse refers to a quite different grief. This verse refers to those who mourn their sinfulness.

Once we recognize our need, and how inadequate we are to save ourselves, it becomes obvious that the thing that causes our separation from God is our sin. When seeking God, our journey to a relationship with God often begins when we recognize that we are sinners. We should be sad when we recognize that we lack the goodness and godly characteristics necessary to be a good disciple. We mourn our sin and failure to follow God as good and faithful disciples. But, as we recognize our sin, as we mourn our sin, and as we repent of our sin, Jesus offers us comfort. This comfort comes in the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins, and a daily call to an ever-deepening commitment to be like Jesus.

Prayer: God, thank you for wooing us by the Holy Spirit. Thank you for bringing me to a place where I recognized my need for your salvation. Thank you for the comfort you offer in forgiveness. Amen.

February 27

Scripture: Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

Some folks despise the word “meek.” Perhaps this is because we equate it with weakness, or maybe we visualize ourselves as the proverbial doormat in our relationships. But, meekness is not either of those two things. Meekness is understanding who I am in relationship to God, and as I accept that I am a forgiven and beloved child of God, the result is a quiet strength. It means that I recognize that I am a valued and a valuable person. Therefore, I no longer need to demand attention, seek out the spotlight, or bully others into getting my own way. It is knowing that I have been redeemed and empowered by the God of the universe with the same power that raised Christ from the dead—all the power I need for life and godliness. But, it is knowing the greatest strength is shown by those who possess power, but humbly restrain themselves from misusing or abusing their power. Meekness allows a person to be strong and steadfast, but also kind, gentle and selfless. Meekness allows one to be so secure in our place in God's kingdom that we can put others first, be selfless and live lives of servanthood. And, in the beatitudes, Jesus says that we won't be weak or doormats. We will instead “inherit the earth.” Our reward will be all the benefits of a good, good earth lived in an abundant relationship with a good, good Father. As it says in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you know that meekness does not come naturally or easily to me. Give me strength to cultivate the attitude of meekness in such a way that I am a blessing to others and blessed by you. Amen.

March 1

Scripture: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled (Matthew 5:6).

What does one do when hungry for food or thirsty for water? You look for it. You pursue it and seek it out. It is no different with regard to spiritual sustenance. Jesus says in order to be satisfied we must proactively seek righteousness. It is important to note that we must do more than try to learn what righteousness is. True righteousness is gained only as one engages in righteousness. We must have right motives, right thoughts, and practice acts of righteousness. In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches about 3 examples of acts of righteousness: prayer, fasting and giving. There are other acts of righteousness, of course (things such as corporate worship, reading the scripture, praying, baptism, communion, acts of service, etc.). Jesus' promise to his disciples is that as they are seeking righteousness that they will be filled: filled with the Holy Spirit and deeply satisfied and content as citizens of the Kingdom of God, and as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, whet my appetite for you and the righteousness that comes from living my life in communion with you. I ask that you give me a desire to pursue those acts of righteousness that bring me into a closer relationship with you. Use those same acts of righteousness to mature me as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Amen.

March 2

Scripture: **Blessed** are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7).

Mercy seems to be a truly divine attribute, rather than a human one. Therefore, mercy tends to be practiced most often by those who have walked closely with God and who have matured as disciples. According to one dictionary “mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.” When one is merciful, one must give up something: our sense of being wronged and our sense of being innocent. Even if it is true that we were wronged and we are innocent, when we are merciful we choose to deny ourselves those feelings, etc. Instead, we choose to offer forgiveness, whether or not deserved in our own eyes. We recognize that we have only deserved death and judgment because of our sin, but our Heavenly Father has offered us grace and mercy. When we extend that same mercy to others, the result is reconciliation and healing. Jesus says when we freely and readily offer mercy, then when we are in need of mercy, mercy will be ours.

Prayer: God of mercy, help me to offer mercy to others in the same way you have offered mercy to me. Amen.

March 3

Scripture: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5:8).

This is certainly a promise that will not be fulfilled by human will alone. The Bible says, “There is none righteous, no not one.” We must live in a very close relationship with Jesus, “abide in him,” if we have any hope of being pure in heart. For it is only as the Holy Spirit transforms us that we can be free from the power of sin. And, while we can't be pure in heart without a vital relationship with Jesus, we also cannot be pure in heart unless we are completely invested in an ongoing pursuit to be transformed into the image of Jesus. We must be wholeheartedly seeking to know God and to do his will. We must submit to God's “pruning” work in our lives so that all of life is brought into submission to him and sin is rooted out. The promise is that if we do these things, we will “see God.” We will comprehend him more—his love, his goodness, his power. We will be able to see his face and know his will. We will be able to live a more fruitful life.

Prayer: Holy God, I know that I am a sinner with no hope of righteousness apart from your saving grace. I know that I need to seek you every day through Christian disciplines until my heart is completely transformed. Holy Spirit, work in my life until I desire you and your will only, and purify me so that I can see you. Amen.

March 4

Scripture: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matthew 5:9).

What does it mean to be a peacemaker? And how does being a peacemaker result in being called a child of God? Surely it means more than negotiating a cessation of conflict. In fact, it is very possible for there to be a situation where there is no visible signs of conflict, and yet none of the parties experience peace. So, what is peacemaking and how can it lead to happiness, satisfaction and contentment?

True peace is a state of mind built on a foundation of confidence and complete trust in the all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever present and ever loving God. It is the unshakable faith that allows one to work and rest in the God who holds us and tomorrow in his hand. It is possible to experience this peace whether or not there is visible conflict. But, to be a peacemaker is to be able to help usher others into the peace of sure confidence in God. It sometimes also means acting as a mediator for those who are not at peace. It means helping people to look at issues with selfless eyes and with an eye toward what is best for all, not just themselves. Then peace can reign in the hearts of all, knowing that all are valued and cared for, and trusting that God will work all things together for the good of all parties. We most resemble God when we act as agents of reconciliation, between God and persons, and between individuals who are at odds. This fulfills the two greatest commandments.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for blessing me with the peace that passes all understanding no matter what my circumstances. Thank you that I am at peace with you because Jesus has redeemed me and saved me from sin and death. Help me to introduce others to the peace they may find in you. Also, help me to be one who tries to facilitate peace between others. In Jesus' powerful name I ask. Amen.

March 5

Scripture: Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:10-12).

The greatest indicator of one's commitment to anything or anyone, and especially as disciples of Jesus Christ, is to be willing to be persecuted, even to the point of death. This beatitude addresses specifically persecution that results because of one's right actions, things such as caring for the poor, alignment with victims of injustice or refugees, etc. One doesn't always think of these as the cause of persecution, but in our attempts to maintain our own lifestyle of plenty, of ease and comfort, we can reject and marginalize the downtrodden. (For example, we don't want the homeless camp on our street corner because it might bring down property values.) So, sometimes we are the persecutors. But, to be recipients of the Kingdom of Heaven, we are to be compassionate toward the least, the last and the lost. We should speak up for them and take up their cause. These actions may lead to persecution. But, it also leads to a place in the Kingdom. Jesus so wanted us to “get” this idea that he reiterates it in the next two verses of chapter 5.

1 Peter 2:20-21 says, “. . . But if you suffer for doing good, and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” A person would be crazy to seek out persecution, but if one is persecuted for doing godly things, he/she is only following in Jesus' footsteps. And if we follow in his footsteps, suffering for the cause of the Kingdom, we will be commended by God.

Prayer: I want to be so committed to you, Jesus, that I would choose to die for your sake, if necessary. But, I honestly don't know if I really am that committed. I want to be willing to be persecuted for the truth of the gospel, but I don't know if I am. So, I appeal to you to give me the courage to follow you wherever you lead, no matter where that may be. Through Christ I pray, amen.

March 6

Scripture: You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot (Matthew 5:13).

As Jesus is teaching his disciples he says to them, "You are the salt of the earth." Now we know that in Biblical times salt was valuable. It was used as a seasoning, a preservative, a disinfectant, and even currency. How does this knowledge of the uses of salt help us understand what Jesus meant when he called his followers the "salt of the earth?"

Very briefly, as citizens of the Kingdom of God who are also living in a secular society, we contribute Kingdom characteristics and values that help maintain and preserve some semblance of godliness in the world. Without God's care and presence, without the very real evidence and activity of Christlike character and the fruit of the Spirit, the world would devolve into a selfish, warring, chaotic and evil place. Things like peace, love, hope, patience, kindness, generosity, mercy and justice are godly attributes that when lived out preserve society and keep the message of the gospel alive.

In the second half of the verse Jesus seems to issue a warning. If salt loses its saltiness, it has lost its value. In Jesus' day salt was impure, mixed with other minerals or matter. So, if it was exposed to sunlight or rain, it could lose some of its saltiness. When that happened, it lost its value and was thrown out to become material for roads or pathways. So, what might the spiritual implications of this verse be? First, the believer has the control and the ability to keep his/her "saltiness." You and I can make life decisions and incorporate daily practices which allows us be useful and valuable in the Kingdom of God. If we keep our "saltiness," then like salt, we help to "season, preserve and disinfect" the world. In myriads of ways, followers of Jesus impact society with words and deeds that help to make the presence and love of God known, and create space for the gospel of Jesus Christ. In what ways are you being the "salt of the earth?" What are you doing to maintain your "saltiness?"

Prayer: Jesus, train me in such a way that I contribute godly characteristics and deeds to my church, community and world, as I faithfully follow you. Amen.

March 8

Scripture: You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

While teaching his disciples, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." From that phrase to the end of the next 2 verses, it seems that Jesus makes two very obvious points. First, it would be ridiculous to light a lamp, and then cover it up. Light has one very clear purpose: to illuminate what surrounds it. It's job is to overcome the darkness. Jesus uses this metaphor to describe the role of his followers in the world. We are to think, speak and act in ways that overcome sinful thoughts, words and deeds. As we do, the darkness is driven away. So, how do we do that? We imitate Jesus Christ. We read the scriptures to see how he spoke to people and treated people, and we follow his example. We use our money and our talents to further God's Kingdom and to bring good and godly things to the world around us. We feed the hungry, take care of the alien, the widow and the orphan. We speak about God's love displayed in Jesus Christ, and we love in the same sacrificial ways Jesus did. These deeds display in very real ways the God who loves the world.

Secondly, it is very clear from these verses that there is only one proper outcome from living as the "light of the world." These deeds are to bring glory to God, to point people beyond ourselves to the one who is the source of our light.

How can I better illuminate the goodness of God by my words and deeds? How can I be a reflection of Jesus, who is the light of the world?

Prayer: Loving and forgiving Father, so often I fail to be the light that you have called me to be. I repent. Forgive me. Change me and then guide my every footstep, every decision, every word so that I can help to shed light in the world, thus revealing the love of God. Amen.

March 9

Scripture: Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-20).

Although Jesus is speaking to his disciples, it is good to remember that there were others gathered outside that circle, a larger group—curious bystanders, and probably religious leaders, like the scribes and Pharisees. It may well be early in Jesus' ministry, and those gathered are still trying to figure out what Jesus' message is and whether they want to follow him, or support him. So, Jesus tells them very clearly that he did not come to attack or dismiss the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament. In fact, although he came to establish a new covenant, he would do so by fulfilling the terms of the Law and the Prophets. He went so far as to warn that the Law as given to Moses is to be honored, and no one should try to ignore it or do away with it, or encourage others to do so.

Jesus shocks those listening further when he makes this statement: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (v. 20). The scribes and Pharisees prided themselves in their emphasis and attempts to perfectly keep the Law (and the additional laws that had been added as interpretations of the law). In fact, they were considered the most righteous of the Jews. But, they were prideful and often judged those who didn't keep the Law. So, Jesus surprised his disciples by saying they needed to be more righteous than the Pharisees.

As much as Jesus respected the Law, and came to live his life in accordance with the Law, he is implying that one must live out more than the letter of the Law. The Law is more than a checklist of do's and don't's. The Law is given to bring people into relationship with God and into community with other God-followers. In the verses that follow in chapter 5, Jesus gives several examples showing how one must keep the Law, and more. One must access the heart of the One who gave the Law in order to really be successful in keeping the Law.

Most of us are like the Pharisees. We adhere to the Ten Commandments; we do acts of service; we are good. We do not plan to sin. Yet, it is so much easier to check off a list of spiritual disciplines and good deeds than to have our hearts and minds transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We must allow God to change our minds, root out pride and unforgiveness, etc. and fill us with compassion and humility and mercy. Although it is important to do good works, it is important also to think like Christ and have Godly attitudes.

Prayer: Lord, transform me by renewing my mind so that I follow your written commands in the Bible, but also transform my motives and attitudes so that I have a heart like yours. Amen.

March 10

Scripture: You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48).

In Leviticus 19:18 Moses instructs the people of God to “love your neighbor as yourself.” In these verses in Matthew, Jesus reminds his disciples that they have been taught that these words mean love you neighbor, and hate your enemy. Jesus then goes on to say that to obey the command to love one’s neighbors means to also love one’s enemies, as well as to pray for them, even if those same persons are your persecutor. To be like our heavenly Father we must love all, value all, want the best for all. We know this because he sends common blessings to the righteous and the unrighteous. In fact, even heathens and the worst of humanity love those who love them back, and will converse and be civil with those who are civil and will converse with them.

Followers of Jesus are instructed to go beyond reciprocal love and kindness. To be like God, we must love like him, and act like him. We must really be imitators of Jesus. We must love even our enemies. In doing so, we will become like our heavenly Father. So, who are my enemies? How can I show my love for them, and God’s love to them? How can I pray for them?

Prayer: Loving Savior, I want to be like you. But, it is so hard to truly love a person who has been unloving to me or my friends and family. It is so difficult to want only your best for them. But, I recognize that to be your follower means to be like you. I admit I don’t know how to do that, but I submit to you to be taught how to love as you love. Teach me Lord. Amen.

March 11

Scripture: Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven (Matthew 6:1).

Why do you do good works? What is your motivation for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, the bereaved, the prisoner? Is it duty? Is it to gain “stars in your crown?” Is it because the book of James says, “Faith without works is dead.”? The verse above warns that to do good works in order to look good before men or gain praise from men is without spiritual benefit. Why did Jesus do good deeds? A reading of the gospels seems to indicate that he did good for others because he cared for them, had compassion for them, and loved them. He didn't do them because his Heavenly Father told him to do so (although Jesus himself said he only did what his Father said to do). He didn't do good works for applause or accolades. He didn't do good deeds to gather larger crowds or to impress his disciples. He did them because persons had needs he could meet, and he cared enough to meet those needs. And, it follows that we grow more spiritually mature and are increasingly conformed to the image of Christ as we are motivated by love to do acts of righteousness.

Prayer: Jesus, I want to follow in your footsteps, and do my acts of righteousness and good works motivated by the love you have shown me. So, melt me and mold me and use me to show your love to others. Amen.

March 12

Scripture: So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:2-4).

As mentioned in the previous devotion, there is no benefit to us spiritually if we give to the needy seeking the accolades of humans. Their accolades will be our only reward. What we can ascertain from these verses is that it is God's desire that we give to the needy. In fact, in Matthew 6:1 Jesus calls giving to the needy a "righteous act." In v. 2, Jesus says, "**when** you given to the needy," indicating that citizens of his Kingdom do in fact give to the needy. But, we must be on guard against the sin of pride as we give. It seems we are so prone to pride that we should give so privately or secretly that it is as though even our left hand will not know that we gave with our right hand. Then the gift will benefit both the one who gives and the one who receives the gift.

Do you make a practice of giving to the needy? Do you give freely, cheerfully, and lovingly regardless of who knows about your gift?

Prayer: I can be so greedy with my money that I want to keep it all for me and my family. I can care so little that I fail to have compassion for those struggling with the basic necessities of life. I can be so judgmental about how they came to be in need. Or, I can be the opposite, and want to be recognized for my gift. Lord, I repent for my sinful attitudes. Forgive me and free me to be a cheerful giver, acknowledging that all that I have is a gift from you, and is given to me as seed to be sowed. Amen.

March 13

Scripture: And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:5-8).

There are so many little nuggets of spiritual insight in these verses. Just as “giving to the needy” is an assumed practice of Jesus' followers, so is praying. Yet, just praying doesn't mean the person who prays is righteous. In fact, Jesus calls some of these persons who pray “hypocrites.” These are the ones who pray only to be seen as righteous by others. They pray eloquent words and stand in public places to pray, but their desires and motives are to please and impress others rather than to connect with God. This is not saying that it's wrong to pray publicly or on street corners; it is saying that when we pray on street corners or publicly, we can be distracted in our conversation with God, and allow our pride to desire to impress those listening, rather than to honestly and purely voice our praise and petitions before God.

In verse 6 Jesus says that it's best to eliminate the distractions and get alone with God, to speak to him privately, and to focus on him and our relationship with him. Then, God will respond and bless us.

Jesus reminds us that God already knows what we need before we ask, but we need to ask, we need to pray. God uses our time in prayer to ground us in our trust that he can and will meet our needs. God uses these moments in our prayer closet to solidify the fact that he is God and we are his followers. A proper relationship acknowledges that we are merely humans dependent on the grace and mercy of God. So, we pray. In prayer, we praise and glorify the one who loves us, who alone is worthy of all honor and glory, and in doing so, the relationship is made stronger, and we are matured in our faith.

Prayer: God, I want to spend more time with you. Help me have the discipline to take the time necessary, and to remove the distractions as necessary, to concentrate and focus in prayer with you. Make my prayer time fruitful. Speak to me. Open the words of the Bible to me so that I can understand. Guide and direct me in making life decisions. Give me eyes to see your wonder and glory. Then, help me to pause and listen to you and revel in your presence, Lord. Amen.

March 15

Scripture: For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14-15).

Jesus has just instructed his disciples in a model of prayer, which we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” In that prayer, the disciples are taught to ask for forgiveness from God, just as they would forgive one who has injured them. In some translations, the term debtor/debts is used, but this instruction goes beyond anything monetary. The verses above immediately follow the model prayer, where Jesus reiterates the importance of forgiveness of others. Jesus very boldly says that when we forgive others, God forgives us. When we don’t forgive others, God doesn’t forgive us. In other words, there is a connection between my forgiveness from God and the forgiveness I offer to those who have wronged or offended me.

God mercifully offered us salvation and forgiveness of sins while we were still sinners and without merit. When we receive that forgiveness, God has the expectation that we will reflect his nature by doing the same with others. If we refuse, this verse says that God will not forgive us. It does not mean he simply will not. It means my ability to receive God’s forgiveness and to live as one forgiven is affected if I refuse to give forgiveness. “Freely you have received, freely give (Matthew 10:8).”

Prayer: Jesus, help me to be so grateful for all that you gave to bring me forgiveness of my sins, and abundant and eternal life, that I will willingly and freely forgive anyone who has wronged or offended me. Amen.

March 16

Scripture: When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

For the third time in this chapter of Matthew, Jesus warns against the hypocrisy of deeds of righteousness for worldly attention. This time Jesus uses fasting as the example. Apparently the “religious” folks would create some sort of outward sign so people would know they were fasting, perhaps ashes on their faces. But, Jesus says one should groom oneself as usual, and go about one’s business as usual when one is fasting. God knows what you are doing. No one else needs to know.

Fasting means to refrain from food (usually) for a longer than normal period of time to free up time for prayer or other spiritual disciplines. [In the modern church, fasting has expanded to include abstaining from other things, like electronic devices, or just particular foods.] Most all of us pray and give to the needy. Far fewer of us fast. Yet, Jesus says **when you fast.**” There seems to be an expectation that fasting is usual for disciples of Jesus. So, it must be spiritually beneficial for us. It’s easy to try. Skip one meal, and pray or read the Bible during that time. Fasting can be especially useful when we seek God’s guidance about a particular decision. Try it, and see how God responds and blesses you.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give me the courage to try new ways to spend time with you. Holy Spirit, nudge me to fast. Teach me the discipline and benefits of fasting, and add your blessings to my time with you. Amen.

March 17

Scripture: Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

What do we treasure? Money, possessions, status, power, recognition, leisure, entertainment? Of course, we should treasure our church, friends and family. These verses caution against trying to gather or amass things that don't have eternal value, or that distract our hearts and minds from our Heavenly Father and his kingdom. Money and stuff can be destroyed in a moment. Status, power and recognition can be lost with one bad decision, one rumor or the loss of one's health. Things with eternal value cannot be destroyed by any earthly thing. So, we should focus our time, energy and attention on those things that mature us as followers of Jesus. We should do those things that display God and his love, things that glorify God, and will draw people to him. Of course, we need to work to meet our needs, but it isn't necessary to collect an abundance of material things. And, every one reading this devotion most probably has an abundance of things. These material things rot and decay and have no heavenly value. And, Jesus says, that the things we treasure reveal our true love and what we value. So, what do you treasure? Does it have only earthly value? How can I store up heavenly treasure?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, make me more willing to desire the things that have eternal value and to spend less time pursuing those things with only earthly value. God, I want to treasure what you treasure and desire what you desire. But, I need you to be able to do that. So, come Holy Spirit, and work in my life so that I treasure you and your kingdom more. Amen

March 18

Scripture: The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! (Matthew 6:22-23)

I've often read these verses and struggled to understand their message. Reading the study notes in my NIV translation of the Bible has given me some insight. Jesus has just been speaking about storing up eternal treasures, rather than earthly, material treasures. Then he starts talking about healthy and unhealthy eyes. The study notes indicate that "healthy" could be translated "generous" and "unhealthy" could be translated "stingy." The passage above makes sense to me in the context of discussing treasure.

As we live our lives in ways that are generous, as God is generous, then our spiritual eyes are opened to see spiritual, Kingdom truths. But, when we are stingy with the things God has given to us, we live in spiritual darkness, with no light to grasp the truths of God and his Kingdom. We have no light to see and value what God values. "How great is that darkness." So, it is very important to be good and generous stewards of what God gives us, storing up treasures in heaven. God loves a cheerful giver.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, guide me as I try to be a good steward of the gifts God has given me. As I am faithful, give me light to see with my spiritual eyes the truths of God's kingdom. Make me into a person "full of light." Amen.

March 19

Scripture: Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (Matthew 6:25-26).

Here is a clear command, "Do not worry about your life." Yet, as believers we often excuse or rationalize our worry. Yes, we should make plans for our life and future, while working hard and trusting in God's provision, but we should never be anxious about our future. The creatures, such as the birds, work to collect what they need for today, and God also adds his care and provision to their labor. Jesus says, "Are you not much more valuable than they?" When we see how God cares for his creation, our faith should be built up so that we can see that God will provide for our physical needs, and how much more he will care for our spiritual and emotional needs. God is much more than we can comprehend, and he does much more to care for us than we will ever know. So, don't worry. Rest in his care. After all, what does worry accomplish? It only drains us of spiritual energy and erodes our faith. You are valuable to God. Don't be anxious or worry. Do your part, and let God do the rest.

Prayer: God, how many times I have told you that I won't worry, that I know you have control of all that I face, and yet so often I fail to keep this promise to you. Remind me, Lord, that you are immensely capable of meeting my needs, of solving my problems, and of caring for my loved ones. Help me to trust you more and more, and to worry less and less. Amen.

March 20

Scripture: And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:28-34).

In these verses Jesus continues to encourage his followers to trust in the care and provision provided by our Heavenly Father. Jesus says that we have no need to overwork or worry about clothes because even wildflowers are beautifully dressed by God, through no effort of their own. And, even though the grass of the field is only gathered to be burned for fuel, it is still beautifully adorned by the Creator. God, the Creator, cares for all of creation. He has made his creation beautiful, whether it lives a day or years. The implication is that God cares much more for his followers than for grass and flowers. (He has made them only a little lower than the angels Psalm 8:5.) So, don't waste your life trying to earn food, shelter and clothing in your own strength or by being a workaholic. Instead, focus your energy on seeking God, pursuing holiness and building God's Kingdom. Then God will bless you with all your physical needs. Now, this is not license to be lazy. This simply means that in all of our daily activities, we need not be stressed about our needs. Even as we pursue our daily activities, we need to have an awareness of God's plans so that in all things we are seeking to be godly and to do godly things with a Christlike attitude. Is the first concern of our lives pursuing God, trusting that our other needs will be met?

Prayer: As we follow you, God, may we continually seek you and your ways. Let us rest securely in your care and your provision so much that we can focus on maturing in the faith and building your Kingdom. Amen.

March 22

Scripture: Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? (Matthew 7:1-3)

These verses are the opposite of the beatitude that says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7)." That positively states that when we show mercy, mercy will be shown to us by God (and others). In the verses above, Jesus cautions his followers using the negative form: "Do not judge or you too will be judged."

First, he says, don't judge. In all the millennia of humans walking the earth, there has only been one perfect human, and he spoke these words. We all make mistakes, make terrible choices, and say horrible things. And, when we do, we want others to forgive us, show us mercy, and give us a second chance.

Second, because we are imperfect, we aren't qualified to judge. We must choose to let the One judge who is just and loving and can read the hearts of men. Why? Because when we judge, others will judge us using the same critical attitude. It is our sinful, human nature to let ourselves feel better by judging others. Jesus encourages us to choose differently lest we make an error in judgment. For example, we may judge the speck in another person's eye while blinded by the plank in our own eye. Then, we have not only been wrong, but unfair. We are encouraged to always be persons who are quick to examine ourselves rather than judge others.

Prayer: The Psalmist says, "If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" I know I can only stand before you because my sins are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. So, let me be so grateful for your mercy, Lord, that I refrain from judging others. But, Lord, if a brother or sister is wandering, let me inspect myself first and make sure I have dealt with my own sin before I attempt to help another in need of your mercy. In Christ's name I pray, amen.

March 23

Scripture: How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye (Matthew 7:4-5).

In the previous 3 verses Jesus begins to instruct his disciples regarding judgment. He tells them they are not to condemn or judge harshly. However, he is not saying that we should not judge in the sense of analyzing or discerning. It is absolutely necessary to analyze and use discernment in making decisions in our daily lives. It is also absolutely necessary to use discernment and analysis as we evaluate our own motives and actions. We must be diligent in judging our own spiritual maturity and growth. If there is a “plank in our eye” we must recognize it and remove it. Earlier in the sermon Jesus used very harsh words to describe the necessity of dealing with sin. He said, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away (Matthew 5:29).” Obviously, he didn’t mean literally. He just means we must take drastic actions to remove temptation and sin from our lives. Once we have done this, we can be helpful to a person struggling with a “speck in his eye.” This is especially true if that person struggles in the same area as I struggle. Has God delivered you from a specific sin and temptation? How could you be helpful to others who are struggling in the same areas as you have without judging them?

Prayer: God, thank you for forgiving my sins, and using me in your service, even though I am a broken vessel. Please deliver me from my propensity to judge others. Make me useful to help others who are struggling with sin or brokenness, without judgment. Amen.

March 24

Scripture: Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces (Matthew 7:6).

This verse is somewhat puzzling. It has the flavor of an old hillbilly saying or backwoods wisdom. But, for the last 2 chapters Jesus has been talking about living in the Kingdom of God as his disciples. The NIV Bible study notes for this verse indicate that Jesus probably is talking about sharing the gospel and teaching Kingdom principles and values. Jesus has tasked his followers with going and making disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). But, what should one do when people repeatedly and consistently refuse the gospel? What if people ridicule the gospel? In another place in the gospels, the story is told of Jesus sending out his disciples in ministry. Jesus instructed them “shake the dust off your feet” and move on if people aren't interested in listening. Here he says, “do not give dogs what is sacred,” or “do not throw your pearls to pigs.” (In the time of the New Testament, dogs weren't domesticated in the same way they are today. They were wild scavengers. And, of course, pigs were considered to be one of the most unclean of animals.) The gospel and the message of the Kingdom is valuable. We have only a limited amount of time and few opportunities in our lifetime to share the gospel. Use that time wisely by sharing the gospel with persons who are open to hearing about it, and not resistant. There is a time to be persistent if one sees a glimmer of interest. To continue to talk to those who ridicule or are close-minded is like throwing your jewelry into the pig pen, and hoping the pig will value and treasure it as you do. This doesn't mean God does not love these persons or care for them. It means God wants us to move on to more fertile ground if they aren't interested. The Holy Spirit will continue his work to convict and convince those stubborn souls. The words you shared, but which were not received, become seed that may be watered by others until they come to salvation.

Prayer: Saving God, give me insight as to when sharing the gospel is the right thing to do, and when it is better to move on. But, let me be willing and prepared to share your love and saving grace with anyone I encounter. Amen.

March 25

Scripture: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Matthew 7:7-11

Sometimes, we read these verses and it seems like a blank check, like we can get everything we want simply by asking God. But it is more likely a verse that somewhat parallels the verse in chapter 6 that says we should seek **first** the kingdom of God, and **then** all the additional blessings follow. Remember, Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of God, and living as citizens of that kingdom on the earth. In these verses, he is describing avenues to learning about God, ways we move toward maturity as his followers. Sometimes, when we are seeking God's will and his plans for us, or sometimes when we are reading Scripture and we are confused, we simply ask God in prayer and he gives us the direction or answer immediately. At other times, getting to know God and his ways requires that we seek him. Perhaps, this implies more time and effort to arrive at what we are looking for, whether that is guidance, answers to prayer concerns, knowledge of God or Scriptures. It may mean searching Scripture, talking to a spiritual advisor, enrolling in a Bible study or attending Sunday School. Finally, Jesus says, "knock and the door will be opened to you." Maybe knocking necessitate or invites us to find God and his kingdom in still another way. When one knocks at a door, most of the time one **waits** for the door to be opened. So, here Jesus may be reminding his disciples that sometimes we must put in more effort by walking into God's throne room, knocking in prayer and then waiting. Sometimes, seeking and finding God is as easy as asking. Sometimes it requires us to spend more time and energy as we seek to grow in our faith. And, there are times in our relationship with God when we must knock and wait for God to act. The really wonderful message in these verses is that God is happily waiting to reveal himself to us. In Jeremiah 29, God tells the people that if they seek him, they will find him. Just remember to ask, seek and knock.

Prayer: God, we are so blessed that you have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ. We are so blessed that you want to know us and be known by us, that you happily wait for us to seek you. Remind us to faithfully ask, seek and knock as we strive to know you better and to be more faithful disciples. Amen.

March 26

Scripture: So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12).

This verse is sometimes called “The Golden Rule.” Earlier in Matthew, Jesus said he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and here he says by keeping this one “rule,” we have kept the Law. It should be easy; it's only one rule. However, it is not easy. First, the rule says, “in everything.” That means in business and in personal relationships. It means to young and old alike; those we like and dislike; those who in our opinion are deserving and those who aren't; to clean and dirty; to citizen and alien; to Democrat or Republican; to those who are white, black or brown; to those who are Christians and those who aren't. You get the picture. There are no exceptions. In everything do to others what you would have them do to you. We must do to everyone, everywhere—no matter what—what we would have them do to us.

So, how do I want to be treated? I want to be loved and forgiven. I want to be treated kindly and fairly. I want to have second chances and opportunities to become all God created me to be. I want to serve God and help others. I want to have enough. I want to be able to give. I want to be seen and heard. I want approval and encouragement. I want to be treated by others as God has treated me. So, all I am commanded to do is to treat others in that way. How do I need to change to be true to The Golden Rule?

Prayer: Jesus, I admit that I don't really want to treat people as the Golden Rule says I should. There are people who don't deserve it, and others who will not reciprocate if I do treat them in accordance with this rule. But, I want to be like you, so help me to have eyes to see others as you see them, made in your image, ones for whom you died and ones you have invited into your kingdom: people just like me. Amen.

March 27

Scripture: Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

As followers of Jesus, we are instructed to enter through the narrow gate because it leads to life. Yet, there is another way. It's wide and it's easy and many follow that path, but it leads to destruction. The choice is ours but only the narrow gate leads us to abundant life, and eternal life. Why do so many choose the broad road? The Broad Road is the way that our human nature leads us because on the broad path, I am the center of my world, and make choices that are in line with my wants and desires, and that don't take others into account. This is the easy path, and the one that many people take. This is the path we are encouraged to take by secular society and others. One need not make a choice to follow the broad path. If we make no choice, we have taken the broad path.

There is another path and we must choose the path through the narrow gate. On that path, we have a Lord and Master who leads us and guides us in a way that allows us to both lose our life and find it. Instead of randomly pursuing happiness on my own and only for me, the narrow path leads me to happiness by following the one who made me. This path leads to satisfaction and contentment and fulfillment. By following my loving master and loving others as he loves me, I find myself and LIFE.

Prayer: Jesus, I choose to follow you. I choose the path that isn't always easy. Even when I resist following you, remind me that I have chosen this path. Give me the courage and determination to be your servant, and to follow you into abundant and eternal life. Amen.

March 29

Scripture: Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them (Matthew 7:15-20).

“Watch out for false prophets.” Prophets are people who claim to speak for God. Sometimes these persons are pastors, Sunday School teachers, evangelists, or television preachers. Sometimes these persons are not “professionals,” but are our trusted friends and advisors. We must be aware and wary when following humans. False prophets can be slick and look good on the outside, but what they teach will destroy the unity and community of the local church or the larger church. Examine the fruit of the prophet, his words and deeds. His/her words, his/her character and his/her actions should be like Jesus. If his/her teaching or preaching is contrary to the Bible, he/she is a false prophet. If he/she uses or encourages hurtful or hateful speech or if he/she is proud or boastful or has a superior attitude towards others, then he/she may be a false prophet. Those we follow will not be perfect but they will be seeking God's best for others; they will be compassionate toward the least, the last and the lost. A true prophet will be attempting to show the love of God to all regardless of who they are or regardless of what differences there may be. A godly prophet is worthy of honor and can be known by their fruit. Be careful who you follow. Be discerning regarding the prophet's teachings.

Prayer: God, I want to follow you, and I want to follow in the footsteps of those who follow you. Give me a questioning and curious mind to seek out your truth. Give me a discerning spirit so that I can inspect the fruit of those I follow, and those I allow to influence me. Ultimately, God, I only want to follow you. Help me as I seek to bring others into my life who want to do the same. Amen.

March 30

Scripture: Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matthew 7:21-23)

Just as there are false prophets, there are false disciples. This can be such a disturbing or scary thought. Within the walls of Christendom there are imposters. The sad thing is that these impostors may not be aware that their relationship with Jesus is not real. According to these verses, these false disciples are doing and saying all the right things. They call Jesus “Lord” but the implication is that Jesus isn't really Lord and Master in their lives. These persons also do things that are characteristic of those in the Kingdom, but for some reason the powerful and even miraculous things (somewhat like Cain's sacrifice) are not acceptable to God. It's difficult to know why these disciples are rejected, but perhaps we can interpolate. In verse 22 there are hints. These acts were done “in God's name.” But, maybe they used God's name like a magical incantation rather than acknowledging that it is only by God's power that we achieve fruit for the kingdom. It is possible that they failed to point those who received the miracles toward God so that he receives the glory as is proper.

In verse 21 those who are acceptable in the kingdom are those who do “the will of my Father.” To be faithful followers of Jesus, we need to act in accordance with God's will rather than according to our own agenda. We sometimes rush to do good things in the name of Jesus without first taking the time to discern God's will for the situation, or what God's will is for us to do for others in a specific situation. There can only be one King in this Kingdom. Unfortunately, we sometimes attempt to usurp that position. So, Jesus cautions his followers that being a disciple is about more than just using the correct words and mimicking the acts of other disciples. To be true disciples is to live in relationship with Jesus in such a way that we are sensitive to the spiritual nudges to speak when we should and act when and how God moves.

Prayer: God, I'm afraid that I won't be a true disciple, but that I won't know it. So, Holy Spirit, I need you to continue to lead me in paths of true righteousness. Help me to cultivate my relationship with Jesus until I am sensitive to his every leading. Holy Spirit, may I rest secure in my relationship with you. May your Spirit bear witness with my spirit that I am a child of God. In Jesus' name I ask, amen.

March 31

Scripture: Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash (Matthew 7:24-27).

Many people have heard the words of Jesus through the centuries. But, Jesus says it is the ones who put them into practice who are wise. Those who practice the things Jesus taught are laying the strongest of foundations on which to build a life, a life that will stand strong in the face of life's storms. Life brings all kinds of difficulties: sickness, poverty, death, betrayal, persecution, emotion and psychological pain, abuse and the list goes on and on. But, in those difficulties, we will stand because we have built our life on the rock that is Jesus and his principles. Every time we are challenged and we look to the words and life of Jesus in order to respond to that challenge, we are made stronger for the next storm. Is your life built on the certainty of the rock or the uncertainty of the sand?

Prayer: God, sometimes I assume because I have studied the life of Jesus, and have read the Bible many times, that I have built a strong foundation. But, I admit Lord, that sometimes I have not put your principles into practice. I have had wrong attitudes and motives, and I have lived selfishly, and have not trusted you as I should. Forgive me Lord. And help me to better use the disciplines of study, worship, prayer and others until I have built a rock solid foundation. Amen.

April 1
Maundy Thursday

Scripture: Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39)

He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” (Matthew 26:42)

So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. (Matthew 26:44)

In these verses we see the full humanity of Jesus on display. At the same time we see Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, fully submitted to God the Father. It is the night of the Passover meal, and Jesus has celebrated with his disciples. Jesus and his disciples have gone to Gethsemane, a place where they have often met and prayed. God has revealed to Jesus that he will be crucified soon (Matthew 26:2). In agony of spirit, just as anyone facing death, Jesus began to cry out in prayer. In verse 39 he asks God, “May this cup be taken from me.” In his humanity Jesus is hoping for a Plan B, anything other than the crucifixion. He doesn't want to die. In verse 42, you see the prayer change somewhat when he prays, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” Jesus begins to yield his human desire to live to his Father's plan for redemption. In verse 44, the Bible says Jesus went back and prayed a third time saying if there is no other way for Jesus' mission to be accomplished except through crucifixion, then Jesus prayed for God's will to be done through him. Having prayed 3 times and being fully confident of God's will, Jesus resolutely went to his disciples to begin the drama of the passion that results in the salvation of the world.

Prayer: Jesus, I want to be as committed to God's plans for my life as you were to God's plans for you. I want to be yielded to him, and submitted to him so that he can accomplish his plans. But, I know that I am often none of those things. So, may I become like you as my mind is renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Make it so. Amen.

April 2 Good Friday

Scripture: And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit (Matthew 27:50).

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).

It is the afternoon of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus has been tried by the Jewish Sanhedrin and convicted to death by the Romans. He has been mocked, ridiculed, beaten, spat upon, and had spikes driven into his hands and feet and had a crown of thorns placed on his head. He has spoken to those beside him on their crosses, spoken to those at the foot of the cross, and quoted from the Psalms. He has endured it all to make the final, once and for all sacrifice of redemption on the altar that is the cross. His human body is giving out and near death. Jesus cries out one more time: "It is finished." Jesus has completed his assignment, his mission. He has taken on the sin of the whole world. He is facing death which is the penalty and result of sin. (See 2 Corinthians 5:21.) He has shed his blood for the remission of sin (Hebrews 9:22). Then he gives up his spirit. As the divine Son of God, no one could take his life from him (John 10:7-8). So, in order to complete his task, he surrendered to the human experience of death. The curtain has dropped on the drama of the crucifixion. Jesus has confronted both sin and death, and it appears they have won.

Prayer: Jesus, I am sorry for my part in your death. I repent of my sin. Thank you for taking it on for me even though you didn't deserve it. Thank you for submitting to the full human experience, including the most scary experience of all: death. I know your wounds were real, and the pain was real. So, thank you for all you endured. Let me live in gratitude for all that you suffered. Thank you for the love for the world displayed on the cross. You are worthy of praise and glory and honor, and rightfully claim the majesty that is yours as the Son of God. Hallelujah! Amen.

April 3
Holy Saturday

Scripture: He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (Romans 4:25).

We don't know what happened between the time Jesus died and the time he was resurrected. Was he simply in the sleep of death waiting for God's power to miraculously bring him out of the tomb? Was he on some other "mission" to explain the mysteries of God's redemptive plan to those who died before Jesus defeated death? We don't know. What we do know is the disciples and the followers of Jesus are experiencing the deafening silence of death. They are crushed by the disappointment of broken dreams and overwhelmed by fear of possible impending death themselves. The worst has happened. Their hope is dead. They are languishing in a vacuum of despair. You and I read this account knowing the outcome. But, these disciples did not realize the outcome (even though Jesus had told them about the resurrection on several occasions). So, we skim over the very real hurt and sadness of his followers. There is still a very real lesson for us as we contemplate the silence between crucifixion and resurrection. When we face pain, disease, death, abandonment, fear, disappointment, broken dreams and other crushing events in our life, God has not stopped working for good in our lives. He still speaks life in the face of death, and victory in the face of defeat. When God seems silent, and we wait, God is still at work.

Resurrection is coming!

Prayer: God, help me to live my life as one who realizes that you are the God of life, the one who speaks life in the face of death, and victory in the face of defeat. Help me to wait expectantly to see how you work out the devastating things I face in my life, knowing that you are working out what is for my good and your glory. Amen.