

# REMAINING ON THE VINE

## Matthew John Silverman's Reflections on Christian Character, Growth and Maturity

Part Two of a Three Part Series of Christian Sermons and Devotions

by

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to our sweet and brilliant Matthew John Silverman, with our undying love

From Lara Silverman, your beloved wife, and Joel Silverman and Anna Silverman, your loving and devoted parents

\*Matthew's sermons and devotions listed in this volume are not in chronological order. Some were written before his second cancer, and some during. Where the original date of writing is known, it is included.

*\*\*\*With special thanks to our loving friends and family, including Ann Karagozian Sarafian, Caroline Sagherian, Sona Bekmezian, and Joey Sarafian for invaluable assistance in the final round of the editing process of Matthew's many works.*

## FOREWORD

*This book contains Part Two of the beautiful Christian writings of our beloved Matthew Silverman, whose dedication to the Lord and the church shone brightly in all he did. Part Two focuses on how the Christian is to grow in character and spiritual maturity throughout his or her Christian walk. Despite facing cancer twice throughout his life, Matthew stayed grounded in Christ, was a shining example of spiritual maturity, and trusted in God's love and sovereignty in all circumstances, even when placed right in the center of the fiery furnace of suffering.*

*We encourage you to consider, meditate, and pray over the Biblical wisdom and principles in these works. Matthew's greatest hope was that these Christian sermons and devotions would bring the listener or reader into a closer, life-giving relationship with the risen Christ. May God bless Matt's extraordinary legacy through these writings and powerfully impact many lives while advancing God's Kingdom.*

## LIFE BIOGRAPHY:

### MATTHEW JOHN SILVERMAN'S LIFE AND CHRISTIAN WORK

Matthew John Silverman, a faithful servant of the Lord whose Christian impact was manifested in Armenian Evangelical churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, at Camp Arev, and in missions work in Haiti and Vietnam, passed away at the age of forty on June 10, 2024, after a three-year battle with intestinal cancer.

Matt was born in Mountain View, California, on October 16, 1983, to parents Joel and Anna (Sarafian) Silverman. He was the oldest of three children in the family, which grew to include brother Jeffrey and sister Lauren. Matt was a light in the eyes of his grandmother, Arshalous Sarafian, grandparents Millie and Herman Silverman, and godparents Arpi and George Banerian. Matt attended Bubb Elementary School, Graham Middle School, and Mountain View High School. He was an exceptional student, excelling in math and science in particular.

As a freshman in high school, Matt was diagnosed with stage 4 non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. He underwent a year of chemotherapy while still attending classes, not willing to give up any of his advanced placement courses. Members of his grandmother Arshalous's church, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church, prayed faithfully for his healing. After a year of surgeries, chemo, and great pain, Matt was said to be cured of this cancer. He excelled in his high school classes, played the flute in the marching band, and even achieved the Eagle Scout rank. He was an amazingly gifted and resilient young man.

Matt began college at UCLA in 2002, majoring in Chemical Engineering and playing flute in the UCLA Marching Band. He began attending the United Armenian Congregational Church (UACC) with his Sarafian cousins and soon participated regularly in Bible Studies and youth activities. Matt was not shy about asking tough questions and delving deeply into Scripture. While his intellectual knowledge of Scripture grew, Matt realized during his second year of college at a Camp Arev retreat that "any plan God had for my life would be a better plan than anything I could come up with on my own, and it was time to face the reality that this God was real and was in control." Then and there, Matt accepted Jesus as his Savior and prayed a prayer of faith.

As Matt later shared in his testimony, everything changed from that moment on. While he continued to pursue his education at UCLA, doing well and eventually earning B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, his real focus was on serving the Lord and sharing the Gospel. He joined Christian groups at UCLA, primarily Chi Alpha, a missions-oriented ministry. At UACC, Matt began teaching Sunday School with his cousin, Joey Sarafian, and was elected to the church's Board of Christian Education. He led an after-school tutoring

program at UACC, outreach activities to serve the homeless on Skid Row, and Christian revival events.

Faithfully, Matt served as a counselor at Camp Arev each summer and winter for over fifteen years. His fruitful ministry in Los Angeles reached countless children and young adults for the Lord. His ministry with Chi Alpha led to his taking numerous mission trips to poverty-stricken Haiti and Vietnam, where he regularly preached to hundreds of people while helping to meet their physical needs.

Matt received his Ph.D. in 2014, publishing his dissertation on PET imaging to detect pancreatic cancer. He returned to the Bay Area and was hired at San Francisco State University to teach Clinical Laboratory Science in the Medical Diagnostics graduate program. He helped train hundreds of graduates working in hospitals all over California. His many gifts in teaching were appreciated by countless students and colleagues over the years.

Upon his return to the Bay Area, Matt joined his beloved grandmother's church, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church (CACC). With the encouragement of then-CACC pastor, Rev. Nerses Balabanian, Matt began serving as the church's volunteer youth pastor. As a direct result of his engaging devotional programs and leadership, Matt drew in scores of teens and their families to the CACC community, growing the youth group from three to forty kids in ten years. The youth of CACC adored Matthew for his caring and compassionate disposition; he was "always just a phone call away" for them.

CACC also regularly called upon Matt to preach, and his enriching sermons encouraged others to grow closer to Christ, with novel and unique examples that were often science-based. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Matt provided online updates on the science behind the disease and its treatment, answering questions and calming fears while encouraging his audience to trust the Lord with their future. He also recorded dozens of Christian devotional messages on YouTube, bringing deep spiritual insights to youth and adults alike.

In May 2021, Matt was diagnosed with a very rare form of intestinal cancer, at stage 4. He immediately began researching experimental treatments and clinical trials while enduring chemotherapy for the second time in his young life. But even amidst his great pain and weakness, Matt continued to serve as CACC youth pastor and periodically preached sermons.

During this time, as a CACC Deacon, Matt started to visit a young lady from church, Lara Palanjian, who was suffering from her own severe illness. The two rapidly fell in love, discussing theological topics for hours and comforting each other about persevering in suffering. The two wed on March 4, 2023, with a wedding theme focusing on the latter part of Isaiah 43:20, "*I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen.*" Matt and Lara's story was indeed a God-designed love story.

After they were married, Matt and Lara lived in their Daly City home, where they spent as much time as possible enjoying and encouraging one another amidst their pain. They started a YouTube channel called "The Silverman Show," which became a platform for sharing spiritual ideas in addition to Lara and Matt's musical and comedy skits and performances. The couple celebrated

their first wedding anniversary at CACC with friends and family, using it to raise support for one of Matt's favorite charities, Impactful Missions, which is seeking to build a school in Haiti. Matt and Lara also performed for their guests, playing flute and violin. It was a unique and memorable evening, raising \$13,000 for the Haiti mission.

Not long after their anniversary celebration, and after a painful three-year battle with cancer, no hope for successful treatment, and many challenges eating and drinking, Matthew made the brave decision to enter hospice. He and Lara stayed at his parents' home in Mountain View, under the loving care of his parents and devoted brother and sister, who left their "normal" lives to be with Matt around the clock.

Matt's last nine weeks of life during hospice were as impactful for the Lord as any before then. He met personally with family and friends, including many who traveled from around the country to be with him one last time. There were songs of praise and comfort that encouraged everyone. He held one last impactful session with his beloved CACC youth group, encouraging them to remain connected to Jesus as the True Vine. Matt told them, "Do not let things like death scare you. Death is the victory and ultimate reward for the Christian." Despite his great pain, Matt's last days were dedicated wholly to the Lord and his family.

On June 10, 2024, surrounded by his loving family, Matthew entered eternity with his Savior. Matt is survived by his parents, Anna and Joel Silverman, brother Jeff, sister Lauren and her husband, Simon Margolis, nieces Addison and Emma, and his adoring wife, Lara. A meaningful and emotional memorial service was held for Matt on July 13, 2024, at the Calvary Armenian Congregational Church in San Francisco, and the link to the video can be found here: [Matt's Memorial Service](#). A separate memorial service was held at Camp Arev on July 27, 2024, for close family members.

Matthew's final wish was to continue to serve God through others' donations in his memory to any of the following organizations: Calvary Armenian Congregational Church in San Francisco and his two missionary groups: Impactful Missions and Hope Beyond Borders. Contributions in Matt's memory to the Camp Arev Campership Fund to benefit young campers with financial needs are also much appreciated. Of Matt, we can surely say, "*Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your Master.*" (Matthew 25:21).

## MY CHRISTIAN WALK: A TESTIMONY BY MATT SILVERMAN

Written April 27, 2024 (while in Hospice)

Romans 8:38-39:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I was twenty years old, in my second year studying Chemical Engineering at UCLA, when these simple verses changed my life. Up to this point, my education was probably the most significant focus in my life. I was used to being the smart one in the class, used to having the answers to all the questions, and life was pretty good. Even after going through non-Hodgkin's lymphoma at the age of fifteen, I'd say I had my life pretty well together. A prestigious degree from a prestigious university... what more could someone ask for?

I had started going to church on Sundays with my cousins, not really out of a great interest in God as much as something to do to hang out with my cousins. Yet, as I started attending, I couldn't help but notice there was something more, something more than good grades and admiration from people. The people at church... they had something... it was something real... something I hadn't experienced before. I got interested in studying the Bible intellectually; there was wisdom and knowledge that I had never seen. Perhaps I had some glimpses of it, occasionally being taken to church by my grandmother as a kid or going to a week-long Bible camp here or there in elementary school, but this was something more... something tangible.

I took advantage of it, joining Bible study groups, asking questions, challenging the teachers, and seeking answers. But the more I asked, the more my curiosity grew. Was this Jesus person real? Did He really perform miracles? Did He really rise from the dead? Then came the opportunity... a weekend college getaway where we could just focus on learning about the Bible and asking questions about it. No shallow, fourth-grade level answers. Instead, real, in-depth discussions. That weekend, He transformed me. I'll never forget the weekend's theme: the power of prayer.

We looked at the book of James and talked about what it meant to make a genuine prayer of faith, to pray and believe God was going to respond. As we studied these Bible passages, I realized I didn't have that faith, but if I prayed for it, God would answer and give me the faith.

I realized it wasn't my intellectual doubts getting in my way of true prayer but rather my pride. I had a pretty good life going for me: a great career path and admiration from the people around

me. I wasn't interested in giving up my life to follow some God who might send me halfway around the world to serve some random people I never met before.

But as I read my Bible that night, I came across Romans 8:38-39, and I realized any plan God had for my life would be a better plan than anything I could come up with on my own and that it was time to face the reality that this God was real and was in control. So, in humility, I prayed a simple prayer: "God, give me the faith to make a prayer of faith."

In that moment, everything changed. It was like a wrecking ball crashed through some unseen wall in my heart, and the very next words I heard was someone in the room behind me reading out loud those very same words in Romans 8:38-39. My life changed coming down from that mountain. My priorities were now about serving this God who rescued me, the God who came down to earth to pay the price for our sins, who died the death of the cross so that we would have eternal life. To top it off, I've even traveled to Haiti almost a dozen times, serving the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

As I find myself now (alongside my beautiful wife) counting down my final days at the age of forty—dying from terminal intestinal cancer—I'm grateful that God has blessed me with twenty years of fruitful ministry, two decades of opportunities to impact lives, countless relationships to encourage me along the way, and most importantly the knowledge that this salvation Jesus offers can never be taken away. No power of Hell, no crafty scheme of any human, can ever take away the perfect gifts of God, and I go home now to a rest that is sweeter than the greatest treasures this world has to offer. I have Heaven, where there will be no more sickness, pain, or death, and I can spend all my days with my God, who loved me to death.

## GIVING GOD EVERYTHING: JANUARY 1, 2023 SERMON AT CALVARY ARMENIAN CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Genesis 28:10-22:

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

What would you do if someone randomly came up to you and gave you a billion dollars? Completely out of the blue. You're in a bad place in life, your mistakes are catching up to you, and your future is uncertain. Then someone walks in, tells you that they see your situation, and they're going to help. In a single moment, your entire life is turned around. What would you do? How would you respond?

Perhaps those stories of people who win the lottery come to mind. Suddenly a person finds themselves with hundreds of millions of dollars that they don't know what to do with, and within a year or two it's all squandered and they're back to where they were before. Or perhaps the person is so thankful for this gift they received that they do everything they can to honor the person who turned their life around. A life of gratitude for the gift or a life of selfish indulgence. How does a person respond?

I'm sure we're all familiar with the story of Jacob. He takes advantage of a moment when his brother Esau is hungry to get Esau to give up his birthright as the first born, and then later

disguises himself as Esau to get their father to bless him. Needless to say, this trickery does not sit well with Esau, who eventually starts entertaining the idea of killing Jacob to get back at him. And here we find Jacob, fleeing home under the excuse of looking for a wife. Up to this point, his life has been defined by trickery and deception, and his past decisions are finally starting catch up to him. Cut off from friends and family, no clear path forward, no idea if he'll ever be able to go home. We don't really talk about this aspect of the scene very often, because we're usually focused on God's plans and provision for Jacob, but this is a really bad place to be in life. He's even using a rock as a pillow, I mean, come on. It honestly looks pretty hopeless.

Then we have the twist. God shows up on the scene with a promise. Jacob, even though he was technically the second born, is going to inherit the promise of Abraham and Isaac. It would be his descendants who would inherit this promised land, and it will be through his line that the world will receive the blessing of salvation. This moment may catch us a little off guard, because there really doesn't seem to be any reason Jacob should deserve this promise. As near as we can tell, neither Jacob nor Esau had been seeking God at all or concerned with God's commands. They may have heard their father talking about God's promises, but that didn't seem to be on either of their radars at the moment.

Despite this past, despite all of Jacob's decisions, God shows up, and we see what happens when God changes a life. Even more interesting about this moment is that this promise from God is unconditional. There's no, "Well, as long as you offer enough sacrifices." Or "as long as you say the right prayer" or "as long as you don't make any more major mistakes." No, just, "I am God, and I'm going to be with you and I'm going to bless you. You have a future, and a good future." There are all kinds of promises from God in the Bible, but the most powerful ones are the unconditional ones. Those promises that we didn't earn, that are just pure grace.

Romans 5:6-10:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

The unconditional promise given to Jacob is that his line, his descendants, would be the source of this unconditional promise for us: a salvation granted not to the perfect, not to the righteous, but to the sinner.

As he wakes up, Jacob realizes the full ramifications of this promise. The God of the universe is with him. How do you respond to that?

The first thing he does is set up a memorial. He sees this location as holy and starts treating it as such. I'm not sure how much God really needed him to set up a rock as a home; I suspect the throne room of heaven is a little nicer than the rock Jacob set up, but we'll ignore that for now. The point is Jacob realizes he needs to respond with reverence. He needs a public display demonstrating the impact God made in his life.

The second thing he does is make a promise. A promise to give back to God as God blesses him. Considering God's promise to him earlier, this is almost like writing a blank check. He has no idea how much God is going to give him, so he has no idea what a tenth of everything is going to look like, but he's committing it now. And let's be clear, Jacob is not trying to manipulate God with this promise. This is not a bribe, or some kind of a deal to give to God so that God will give to him later. This is not one of those prosperity preachers saying, "God wants to bless you, you just need to be willing to give first." The promise from God has already been made, and now Jacob only has one reasonable response.

What do you give God when he steps in and changes your life? On the one hand, God doesn't really need our stuff, does he? The entire world belongs to God; what could we possibly offer that can compare? Yet there's something in us that compels us to give back to the one who blessed us. We want to do something to recognize the gift we receive. And while Jacob here is talking about giving back a tenth, we as Christians know there's a lot more to the promises of God and a lot more that we need to respond with. God isn't giving a measly little country; he's giving us eternal salvation. And while we often talk about tithing in church, and what percentage of our income is appropriate to give, the reality is God doesn't just want ten percent of our material wealth; he wants our whole hearts, our whole mindset.

Take a look at this one, a familiar story, yes?

Luke 19:1-8:

"Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be

the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

The wealthy man became wealthy through corruption and theft. And now as Jesus steps in and changes his life, there’s only one way he can respond. His wealth, his possessions, all meaningless. He’s going to use it all to honor Jesus, and he’s going to honor Jesus by providing for those in need and paying back those he had wronged. Now everyone, when they look at Zacchaeus, will realize what a powerful impact the Messiah has on a life. There will be no mistake going forward: Jesus changed the life of this man. This Jesus guy, he’s the real deal.

And that’s what our lives should look like when we’ve been touched by God. It’s not about giving the right percentage of our money or attending church the right number of days per year or spending so many hours working on a luncheon or a food festival or something. People should look at our lives and think, “wow, that is a life that has been changed by Jesus. That person; they’re different; they’re living by a different set of rules, they’re living with a different mindset, and boy is it powerful.”

For Zacchaeus, it was about seeing his moral compass completely turn around. And maybe for some of those with a past filled with sin and regret, that’s what it looks like to give our lives to God. People look at them five or ten or fifteen years later, and say “Wow, you’re not the same person you were before. What happened?”

We might also think about something like the life of Paul, who encountered God while on his way to Damascus. Paul is struck blind, and then he’s healed and turns to Christ.

Acts 9:20-22:

“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah”.

God touches Paul’s life, and Paul responds by telling everyone he can about Jesus. And not just this day, not just this week, not just this year, but for the rest of his life: this is Paul’s purpose. He dedicates his life to telling as many people as he can about the salvation Jesus offers. Paul shares with us some of his mindset as he does this.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

“Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

He was saved, and now he’s dedicating his life to save as many others as he can.

We’re going into the New Year now, so for the next few weeks we’ll be hearing about everyone’s New Year’s resolutions, right? One person will say they’ll go to the gym this many times a week, another will say they’ll learn a new language, maybe another will read more books. And they’ll work on their resolution for...a few weeks usually, right? And then, life gets in the way, things get busy: “I don’t really have time; it wasn’t really that important, was it?” All the excuses come in. Their dedication to their goal just doesn’t last. And I think there’s a reason for that. Dedication really needs to come from the heart. It comes from a burning desire, a passion, to see something happen. Inner transformation needs to drive the outer conformation. And that’s what God offers us. God is transforming our hearts, and our lives are conforming to his will.

People who wait until the New Year to make a resolution don’t usually follow through with it because it’s a transformation that’s based on a date, not a conviction. If you were really convinced this is important, really convicted, you would start whenever you felt that conviction. You go to the doctor, he tells you that you need to exercise more and lose a little weight, and you believe him; you start there and then because you know it’s important. If you can wait until the start of the New Year to dedicate yourself to a particular goal for that year, it really isn’t that important to you.

Yet here we are, at the start of the New Year, and we each need to ask ourselves, “What am I going to be dedicating myself to this year?” But more importantly, what are we going to be dedicating our lives going forward to?

Psalm 95:6-8:

“Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, “Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness.”

Hebrews actually refers to this song when talking about how we respond to the gospel. Today, if you hear his voice. Not tomorrow, not next week, not next month if you get around with it. If you

know God is speaking to you, calling you, and offering salvation don't let bitterness and resentment harden your heart. Respond to the call; take it seriously. Like Jacob, we need to each make an intentional decision to dedicate our lives going forward to God. Now what that looks like can be different for each one of us. Perhaps for some it's turning away from a certain sin. For some maybe it's giving more generously. For some maybe it's doing a little more ministry, sharing the Bible with more people, teaching and discipling more. Maybe it's being more intentional in our prayer or Bible reading time. But whatever it is, let it be based on the knowledge that our sins and debts have been paid for, and that we have an eternal gift that can never be taken away, an unconditional promise that we have a future in that promised land.

I want to wrap up with a little story from my own life, from my fourth year at UCLA. The school year was starting off, I had been a Christian for almost two years at this point, and I came under the conviction that video games, and electronics and such in general, had too much of a control over my life, and I needed to do something about it. So, I was thinking to myself about what I wanted to cut back on: did I want to cut out video games, or maybe webcomics, or maybe social media stuff, this or that, and I eventually came to the conclusion that maybe it was good enough to just cut out video games because the other stuff was "too important." I decided to do just a forty-day "fast."

Forty days without video games, and that was what I promised myself I would do. And as I started on this commitment, I realized that this was a big thing, and I should include God in this vow. So, I prayed, "Lord, help me cut out video games from my life for the next forty days." I kid you not, the very next day, my laptop died. Just like that, it wouldn't turn on. I took that as a sign from God that maybe the other things would be good to cut out too. Of course, I still used the campus computers to do work and assignments and such but stayed away from all the electronic entertainment stuff. And you know what, turns out those things really weren't as important as I thought.

More than that, though, that year marked my greatest growth as a Christian, when I went from someone who just showed up to someone who was teaching and leading. I got plugged into campus ministry and eventually got connected to the Chi Alpha group. I started teaching Sunday School, started being intentional about learning and sharing my faith. And it all started with a promise to give up something that was holding me back, because I realized God was greater. So think about what your life would look like dedicated to God. What would you leave behind, what would you cling to going forward? Where does God want to take you? Jacob is here giving ten percent back, but really everything is God's anyway. So let's go all out, and see where God leads us.

## TEARING DOWN IDOLS

I'm happy to get a chance to share from God's word with you today. I thought it would be nice to give everyone a window into what we've been covering in our junior high and high school group. In this youth group study series we've been going through different callings in the Old Testament and the theme is "Called by God." Today we're looking at Gideon. So, if you have your Bible with you, you can open to Judges 6. This week we're focusing on getting rid of idols, and Gideon is such an appropriate story to look at.

To set the stage, the book of Judges takes place between the time the Israelites got into their land, but before the time of the kings began. After Moses and Joshua, but before guys like King Saul or King David. You can see here some of the surrounding nations at the time. A common theme throughout the book of Judges was a people who really didn't know what they were doing. There's this recurring line: "and then everyone did what seemed right in their own eyes." Over and over again. Whenever that happened, things would start going downhill, and these other nations would start to invade. Gideon was living in such a time when Israel was being oppressed in particular by the Midianites, and a few other armies as well. Let's take a look.

Judges 6:1-10:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help. When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, he sent them a prophet, who said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me."

This is a time of desperation. A time of feeling helpless, facing impossible odds. Hiding from the danger, sheltering in place for seven years. Maybe we can relate. They were facing enemies they couldn't possibly hope to defeat. Maybe it feels like that for us now, up against a challenge that none of us really knows how to deal with. We're confused, there's conflicting information, you don't know who to trust, you don't really know what the path to victory looks like. It feels like

you're stuck in place, with nowhere to go forward. Sometimes we take stories like this to mean that every time disaster comes it's because God is punishing us. Things go wrong, and we start thinking, "oh, it's because I did something, now God is punishing me." Things start going bad enough, and then you have the folks who start quoting Revelation, right? "It's the end times! Repent! Jesus is coming back!"

And then we all start watching the "Left Behind" movies while we wait for Nicolas Cage or Kirk Cameron to save us, right? Is that what happens in those movies? I haven't actually watched any of them, so I don't know. They've made a bunch, right?

You can tell it's a good "Left Behind" movie because there's fire and lightning in the background, right? You can't have a good movie about the end times without fire and lightning in the background; I think that's one of the rules.

But joking aside, I think there is something important that happens in a disaster like this, when things start falling apart. I don't mean a disaster like a Nicolas Cage movie; I mean a disaster like what Gideon's living through, like what we're living through. During a disaster, we find the things we used to trust in may not have been very reliable. The things we thought would keep us safe. The things we thought would be our tower of refuge. In the end, they didn't really have the power we thought. And in the midst of this, Gideon is called.

Judges 6:11-16:

The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior. "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

"Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family. The Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

Gideon is chosen and called, but he has trouble accepting the message "The Lord is with you." I can't say I blame him. His family is desperate and starving. He's hiding his grain in a pit, in a winepress, so the enemy soldiers won't find it.

He's not feeling hopeful, no one feels safe. He's not some great warrior. In fact, there's a bit of pain in Gideon's response to God. If you keep reading the story, later you find out Gideon's brothers had been killed during this time. He's lost people he's cared about and now God has the nerve to come to him and say, "God is with you?"

Really God? Have you seen my situation? Have you seen what I've lost?

I love this response, because it's something we can all relate to, isn't it? The problem of suffering. How can God be good when everything seems to be going from bad to worse? God, if you're so good, if you're with me, why have I been out of work for so long? God, I've just lost my best friend, I've just lost my brother, I've just lost my... How can you tell me you love me? God, my child is sick, she's dying, how can you tell me you love me?

It's what we feel, isn't it? I think maybe we're sometimes afraid of pouring out our heart to God like that, because we're afraid we'll get some kind of lecture of all the bad things we did and that we deserve it. Right? God's punishing me, I don't want to talk to Him now, and all these other conflicting thoughts and emotions. But notice, God doesn't give Gideon some big lecture. He doesn't walk Gideon through all the Old Testament laws he or his people have broken.

The reality was God hadn't walked away from Israel; Israel had walked away from God. It's like if you walked away from solid ground to stand on thin ice. At some point, that ice is going to break and you're going to fall through, aren't you?

But God doesn't actually answer Gideon's question, does he? He had actually answered it earlier; there had been a prophet who said why this was happening, but this wasn't the time for that. This was encouragement time, assurance that things were about to change for the better.

There's a part of Gideon that wants to believe this, so he responds in faith.

Judges 6:17-24:

Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you." And the Lord said, "I will wait until you return." Gideon went inside, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak. The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so. Then the angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff that was in his hand. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread.

And the angel of the Lord disappeared. When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!"

But the Lord said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die." So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it The Lord Is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

The Bible never actually says why Gideon decides to do this. I wonder sometimes what he was expecting. Sometimes we bring our offerings to the Lord and expect them to be used in a certain way. We set up an endowment fund or some special account for a project. We have an expectation. I don't know what Gideon's expectation was; all I know is his family was probably starving and he's bringing a lot of food to this messenger. I don't know how I'd feel bringing an offering that valuable to God in such a desperate situation only to watch it get burned up. Maybe that's the Armenian in me; I don't like to see food wasted.

But God accepted the offering, and now Gideon realizes that everything is about to change. He's ready; it's time to change the course of a nation. And so, God gave Gideon his first assignment.

Judges 3:25-32:

That same night the Lord said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering. So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.

In the morning when the people of the town got up, there was Baal's altar, demolished, with the Asherah pole beside it cut down and the second bull sacrificed on the newly built altar! They asked each other, "Who did this?" When they carefully investigated, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it." The people of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it." But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar." So because Gideon broke down Baal's altar, they gave him the name Jerub-Baal that day, saying, "Let Baal contend with him."

It's interesting: Gideon's first assignment isn't to gather his soldiers, it isn't to get weapons, he isn't giving a big speech. Before Gideon can save the nation, he needs to get his worship right.

So, God says to him, “alright it’s time to get going, but first, there’s one thing you need to do. Those idols you have to other gods at your house? Time to get rid of them. They couldn’t save you before, and they can’t save you now. It’s time to start trusting in the right thing.”

I think there’s an important lesson in there for each of us. God isn’t looking for the strongest. He isn’t looking for someone who is rich. Gideon didn’t have advanced college degrees, not even a deep theological education. He wasn’t the bravest, and he wasn’t a clever strategist.

God doesn’t look for those things. The people God chooses to save the world are the people who are willing to leave their useless idols and follow God in faith. It can be a dangerous thing, though; people hate it when you stop worshipping their idols. Look at the response of his town. They’re ready to kill him. And notice, it’s not because he tore down their idols. He didn’t go around vandalizing other people’s property. They’re mad at him for tearing down his own idols. Why? By pulling down those statues, Gideon showed they had no real power at all. And people get angry when their idols are questioned.

We see so much anger around us today, don’t we? There’s a lot of hatred, because there are honestly a lot of things people worship without realizing it. We think of statues being torn down here, and maybe we think of all the people angry when statues are put up or torn down around the United States lately. All those Civil War statues. A lot of people are furious about it today; they don’t even know who those people were. A statue comes down, and they say, “You’re destroying my history!” But you don’t even know who that person was. Or the people who are furious when you don’t support their politician or their political party. And then there’s the Second Amendment obsession that the things that will save us are our guns. “If I have a gun, then I’m safe.”

Or this weird notion of tolerance. I remember back during the time of that proposition eight stuff back in 2008, on the gay marriage issue. The night of the election, I was walking back to the dorm at UCLA and as I was walking, I passed by one of those “no on prop 8” groups, and they were asking everyone who walked by if they had voted no on it. The polls had already closed, so I was a little confused as to why they were there. As I was passing by, they called out to me asking if I had voted no on it. I looked at them in a little confusion and asked them if they knew the polls had already closed. That’s all I said. Oh, they were angry, started shouting at me. One person shouted as I was walking away, “I hope your sandwich is rotten!” Which was a little strange, since I didn’t actually have a sandwich, but... anyway, they were angry. I’ll always remember the irony of so much hatred coming from people holding up signs talking about love.

The anger when you don't use the right slogan, right? Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives matter, All Lives Matter. Stances on social justice, nationalism, and worship of country; the obsession of whether or not you believe in science.

Why do people get angry? Because when you stop worshiping the things they worship, it sends a message. A message that says "Your idol can't save. I'm going to something else." And this anger, it's different than righteous, godly anger when we see evil. God does get angry at wickedness, when the weak and the innocent are abused or exploited, and we'll get angry at that too if our hearts are aligned with God's. But the anger when our idols are challenged is a self-centered anger... when we feel our own self-worth is being called into question.

If Gideon was going to change the course of a nation, he had to admit that the idols his family had been worshiping didn't have any real power. And I want each of us to think; has this crisis we're in now shown you any idols you're still worshipping? I don't mean tools you're using, I mean idols you're worshiping; there's a difference. Tools are great to use. I have a science and engineering background; I use science all the time as a tool to accomplish things. But science is a process to determine truth; it isn't the truth itself.

Someone can say "I believe the scientists," "I believe in science" but what do you do when two researchers disagree with each other, and both have plenty of evidence to support their positions? It happens all the time. To say you believe a scientist without actually understanding the evidence for their claim is actually the opposite of the spirit of scientific investigation. We can recognize that something has stopped being a tool and started becoming an idol when we fall into despair when it doesn't work the way we wanted. That's how you can tell when it's become an idol for you. When you're angry when others aren't valuing it as much as you do. When you believe it's the only possible way forward.

And ultimately, you'll find the idols in your life will start clashing with God. That's just how idols work, when they stop becoming tools. Tools can be powerful, but only in the right hands. A power saw is a great tool to cut wood, but not in the hands of a four-year-old. For tools, we recognize there's a time and a place. An idol, on the other hand, just takes over, consumes you, and before long you feel like you can't live without it.

And as Christians, let's be honest, the battles we fight and the tools we use are just different than the rest of the world. We don't fight the way they fight, and we don't fight for the things they fight for.

Ephesians 6:12-13:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

2 Corinthians 10:3-5:

“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

For the Christian, the battle is spiritual warfare, not religious warfare. There’s a difference. Religious warfare is about power. It’s about control, getting people to follow certain rituals and actions. Spiritual warfare is about the heart. We’re fighting against ideas, we’re defeating arguments. We’re battling against hatred and bringing people into peace with God. Religious warfare uses the tools of this world, tools invented by man. Spiritual warfare uses prayer, and fasting, and a reliance on God’s power above all things. How many times, how many battles throughout the Bible does God say, “The Lord will fight for you, you need only be still.” We persevere in faith, in hope, and in love, because we know the ultimate battle is in God’s hands.

I see so many people in the body of Christ around the world today who have stopped relying on the power of God, and they’ve started obsessing over the tools of man. We think that lawyers, and court cases, and lawsuits will be what we need to win the battle. If we just get the right person elected to office, that will do it. If we just get the right person on the Supreme Court, that will solve everything. If we can just win our court case, then we’ll... but I think in our hearts we all know... that isn’t the way to win, is it?

Another thing I’ve seen promoted is this idea that there are seven mountains, seven pillars of cultural influence. I think the idea came somewhere out of the themes in Revelation, and there’s this idea that Christians are supposed to go out and conquer these seven mountains in order to win the war, or something. These seven things, religion, family, education, government, media, entertainment and the arts, and business. Those are apparently the things you’re supposed to take over to advance in the world. I feel like if an Armenian had made this list, food probably would have been added somewhere in the mix, maybe like an eighth mountain or something. The mountain of pilaf or kebab, I think, it would... or maybe it would replace a category? Do you really need control of the government when you have sou boreg?

Look, joking aside, sure, these are things to pray about. We want our families to be strong. We'd like it if there were godly, righteous leaders making wise decisions. But let's be honest, throughout almost all of human history God has been working his plan despite those things, not because of those things. The power of Christ is greater than all these things put together, because He is truly the power to change us from the inside out. If you can share the gospel with an important government official, sure do it. If you can share it with some business leader, some media executive, sure share the gospel with everyone you can. The message that Jesus died for our sins so that we might have eternal life is a message for everyone to hear.

But also, share that message with the weak and the powerless. Share it with those society has cast aside. Jesus did not spend the majority of his time with the wealthy and the influential... He spent it with fishermen, with nobodies, with people the world looked at and said, "this person will never amount to anything." How many of you can actually name the major Roman officials that lived during Jesus' time? The ones who aren't named in the Bible? You probably don't know many of their names... but you know the names of twelve nobodies, you've read the words over and over again of twelve nobodies, people whose faith and words echo on to this day two thousand years later. That's power you can't beat. That's what happens when you stop trusting in the idols of this world and put your faith wholly in God.

Think of the things we've been putting our trust in up to this point, the tools that maybe have become idols. The things that get credit when we do well. Maybe it's something external, or maybe it's something internal. I remember, during one of the hard times of doing my Ph.D., it really looked like I wasn't going to make it. Things kept going wrong, I kept having setbacks, and so many people were telling me that I wouldn't be able to succeed in finishing my Ph.D. if God stayed the number one thing in my life. And I was constantly asking myself, almost every day, what if I fail? What if I have to drop out, because it doesn't work out? What happens if everything I set out to work on just falls apart, and the only thing I would be able to say after it was all said and done was, I stayed faithful to the calling of God.

I really thought about the question, when it's all said and done, "If I walk away looking like a failure, but God is glorified, am I OK with that?" That people would look at my life and say, man that guy, he can't do anything right, he sure is lucky his God saved him.

Don't get me wrong, I believe God does lead us from victory to victory; He does bring us vindication, but our victories don't always look like the victories the world around us celebrates. A whole crowd of people ready to kill Gideon because he tore down a statue sure doesn't look like a victory in the moment, does it? But later, when it came time for the battle, for the victory, there was no mistaking who won the battle.

God ends up sending Gideon into battle with three hundred soldiers against an army of one hundred twenty thousand. They didn't even go into battle with weapons. They went over at night, in the dark, with trumpets and jars and torches. I remember there was one documentary that was trying to teach about stories in the Bible, and they had one guy saying "This was the first example in history of a group of commandos doing a special operation" or something like that.

Let's be clear, these three hundred guys were not, like, spartan three-hundred-pound guys. These were not mighty warriors, they were nobodies. And together, in the middle of the night, they just all blew on their trumpets and made a racket. Broke the jars. Got the entire camp of Midianite soldiers awake, and in the dark, in the confusion, these half-awake soldiers start looking around for the enemy, and they just see people in the dark, so they start fighting each other. So, in one night of confusion, the entire army defeats itself and runs away.

This was not some great plan or strategy. Gideon showed up that day, hoping to win the fight. And he was terrified. This was not his plan. But God wanted this, so that everyone would understand that it was God who was winning the battle, and nothing else.

What's going to get credit when you get your victory? Will people say, "Oh, it's because he has all that wealth."

Proverbs 18:11:

"The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale."

Proverbs 11:4:

"Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death."

Proverbs 18:10:

"The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe."

What will get the credit? "Oh, she was smart, that's why. He was good-looking. She had political connections. If only I get into that college, then my life will be set. In order for my kids to succeed, they need to take all the advanced classes, they need to do all the right extracurricular activities... we don't have time for church, or Bible studies, or prayer. If I get that promotion, that's really what I need."

Maybe those things can be good tools, but if those are the things that get credit when you succeed, if those are the things you think you can't do without? Maybe they've crossed the line a little.

What's the tower you run to when everything seems to fall apart?

And let's be honest, our trust needs to be in Christ and Christ alone, doesn't it? I think there are a lot of people that go through life thinking they can have one foot in and one foot out. They can have one foot on solid ground, and one foot on the thin ice. Half the house built on a solid foundation, and half the house built on sand.

Spend half the time keeping your guard up against a dangerous animal, and the other half of the time you drop your guard. But it doesn't work, does it? When that ice gives way, it doesn't matter that you have one foot on solid ground, you'll fall in the water just the same. When the earthquake hits, it doesn't matter that half the house is on a solid foundation. Anyone remember the good old 1989 earthquake? Doesn't matter if you keep your guard up half the time around a dangerous animal, when you drop your guard, it's still going to bite you.

The challenge of the Christian walk is to always examine ourselves, looking out for our own idols that have taken hold. It's the process of removing the idols in our lives. We won't be perfect; we'll make mistakes along the way. A disaster will come, something will go wrong, and we'll realize, oh, maybe that thing wasn't as powerful as I thought. Maybe I shouldn't have put so much trust in that thing. Or maybe the thing I was working for really wasn't that important. And let's not forget, all the things of this world are temporary, aren't they? We leave it all behind when we die, don't we? If nothing else, it'll all get wiped out when the sun explodes in a few billion years anyway. Right?

I remember seeing the advertisements for the cryopreservation of people a while back. People so desperate to escape death, they'd pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to freeze themselves in the hopes that one day they can be made immortal. It's ironic... it's sad but it's also ironic; people are willing to spend everything they have if they think it will let them live forever, but the reality is eternal life is something only God can give, and He gives it to us for free. Jesus paid the price already, in full.

I think one of the reasons people have gotten so angry during this pandemic is because it's forced them to face their own mortality in a way they're not used to. The reality is people die every day, from a lot of conditions other than COVID-19. Heart disease, six hundred fifty thousand deaths per year. Cancer, six hundred thousand. Accidents, one hundred seventy thousand, chronic respiratory diseases, one hundred sixty thousand per year. Abortion... one million per year in the United States, roughly? You know, it's interesting, during Gideon's time, some of the other

religions, Molech in particular, involved sacrificing your own child, killing your own baby, so the god would bless you and reward you. So you would prosper. Maybe things really haven't changed much in all these thousands of years, have they?

The point is the death rate hasn't changed since the dawn of time; it's still one death per person. We'll all face it, we can't escape it, and when that happens, what will you be putting your hope in? One of the challenges we would give to each other in one of the Christian ministries at UCLA was this question: If you died and came before God, and He asked you to give one reason why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?

Would you start listing off your good works? Would you say, "Hey, at least I didn't kill anyone." It's funny how almost everyone has this notion we have to be good enough to get into Heaven, but they always draw that line in the perfect spot so they can feel like they're good enough without really having to change anything. But we look at what Jesus teaches, the standard of righteousness He sets, "be holy, be perfect, because God is perfect," and we have to be honest with ourselves that we have not met the standard God has set.

I don't know who's reading this sermon today. I don't know how much you know about Jesus, or Christianity. I think there are a lot of wrong ideas floating around about what the Bible actually teaches. The message of the cross is very simple; Jesus died on the cross to pay the price we couldn't pay. He lived the perfect, sinless life we couldn't live, and paid the price for us sinners. The message is not "you need to live a perfect life and follow all the rules." It's not, "ok once you're baptized and say the sinner's prayer and follow this ritual then you go to heaven."

It's about being honest with ourselves; we know in our hearts we've fallen short of what God has created us for. We broke our relationship with our Creator, and now someone needs to fix it. That's what Jesus does. He makes that broken relationship whole again, for all who are willing to just trust Him and not our own accomplishments and successes. That's ultimately what needs to change. We'll go through disasters in life like this, sure, and God will bring us through. Gideon, man, seven years they're hiding, sheltering in place. We won't be doing this for nearly as long. Or, I don't know, what if we are.

What if this goes on for seven more years? What if, for the next seven years, we wake up every day not knowing when it will end, not knowing what we should do, and the only certainty we have is God's promise that he'll see us through to eternal life? Because no matter what, this is temporary. How it ends, who knows, but it will end. This life I'm living will one day end. And on that day, when I stand before God with nothing else to lean on, no righteousness of my own, no accomplishment that could earn God's favor, that day when all I can say is have mercy on me God, a sinner just like everyone else.

All I have on that day is the promise from Jesus, that my sins will be wiped away and remembered no more. And that's the promise to each of us, young and old, near and far, the wise and the foolish. Come and repair that broken relationship with God, come and have fellowship with Him again, set your guilt and fear aside, and enjoy the life God has created for you. If that's you today, if you don't have that and it's something you want, I encourage you, reach out to us. Email, phone calls, Facebook, whatever, if you realize you've been trusting in things that couldn't save you and you're looking for the things that can, come talk with us, one sinner to another.

And for those of you who are already followers of Jesus, and you're wondering what you should be doing during this time: pray and ask God to reveal to you any idols that have taken hold of your life. God is faithful; if we ask Him to work in our hearts, we receive. Ask for courage to tear down those useless idols, and the strength to put your hope in Christ alone. Not one foot in and one foot out; but completely, totally standing on the solid ground.

Because He is worth it, and He'll see us through.

## BACK TO BASICS: BEING DISCIPLES

We're talking this week about being disciples, and it reminded me of a very interesting passage in John 6. This is a scene that happened shortly after Jesus fed about 5,000 people with just a young boy's lunch. And as Jesus starts going on his way, the crowd follows Him. They seem to have mixed motives for chasing after Him. Some seem to just want more food. Some are thinking Jesus might be the Messiah and would do more miracles. And some are asking about what God wants them to do. In his exchanges with the crowd, He tells them that He is the living bread from Heaven and believing in Him is the thing God requires.

The crowd is confused by the things Jesus is saying. They don't understand how Jesus can be like bread that they're supposed to eat, and they start grumbling about it. Jesus is talking about how his death will pay the price for their sins, but they don't get the message. Check out what happens.

John 6:66:

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 'You do not want to leave, too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.'"

Imagine that. These people had seen Jesus perform miracles. They had listened to his teachings day in and day out. And in the end, they decided it was just too hard to follow Him. Jesus wasn't doing and saying the things the way they wanted. So, they walked away from Him.

Even today, you'll find people follow Jesus for different reasons. Some people do it just out of tradition; they do it because their parents did it, and their grandparents did it, and on and on. Maybe it's something just for Easter or for Christmas. Maybe it's just something for their wedding day. But it never really becomes something personal to them.

Others come because they're hoping for a miracle; maybe if I come, God will heal me, or bless me, or something like that. Some people come because they like hearing the nice messages about love and forgiveness and Heaven, but they'll get a little upset when you start talking about our need to repent of our sins, or the dangers of Hell. These people will come and go; you'll see them sometimes, and other times they'll have other priorities in life.

But see Jesus' interaction with his twelve core disciples here. He asks them if they want to leave too. He's not changing his message to make it easier for people to believe. He's standing firm on the truth. If they don't like the message, here's their chance to bail out. Yet Peter responds on

their behalf; there's nowhere else to go, they've seen enough and heard enough to know that Jesus is the Savior they've been waiting for. And at the end of the day, that's what it means to be a disciple.

Even when the entire crowd is turning away, we keep following Jesus because we know He has the words of eternal life. It doesn't mean that it's always easy to follow Him, and it doesn't mean we don't make mistakes. Really, the disciples make a lot of mistakes! But even if there are times we stumble, we get back up and keep pressing forward.

Scenes like this give us a chance to look inward and ask ourselves whether we're following Jesus out of convenience or out of conviction that He has the words of eternal life. How would we respond if He gave us a teaching that was hard to accept? Discipleship isn't something we turn on or off at different times. It's not an optional setting we pick whenever we feel like it. It's something that takes hold of our entire life, following the author of life. And as we grow, we find that we're leading others in discipleship as well. The more we're filled with Jesus' teaching, the more it spreads to those around us. So, let's not limit the impact Jesus has on us to just one day a week, or a few days a year.

Let's bring Jesus into our entire lives, and watch Him transform not just us, but others around us, too.

## BACK TO BASICS: USING FINANCES IN A GODLY WAY

We're talking about how we can use our finances in a Godly way this week, and I think a nice interaction to reflect on is a scene in Mark 10. In this passage, Jesus is approached by a rich young man who seems to have an important position in the community, and he has a big question for Jesus.

Mark 10:17-27:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

This is a very famous scene, and there are a lot of interesting things going on. This man comes to Jesus knowing that there's something missing in his life. He's lived a good life by all accounts, and he seems to be very blessed. Yet something draws him to Jesus. He knows Jesus has something to offer him that he doesn't have.

"What do I need to do to get into Heaven?" is the question he asks. At first, Jesus just talks about living righteously and lists off a few things. But this guy knows something is still missing. He's followed these commandments, but he knows there's something still lacking. So, Jesus shows him his problem; at the end of the day, he's too attached to worldly things. His money is the god of his life, so that's where his true worship lies. Give that up, and he'll be free to follow Jesus with his whole heart.

Now, don't misunderstand this. This is not a general command for us all to sell everything, give away all our money, and walk around homeless. But it does draw our attention to something very important; our money is something we have only for this life. We can't take it with us when we

die. And God blesses us with it so that we can be a blessing to others. What we own really isn't our own; we're just stewards of it. Everything we have is from God.

There's a reason we bring our offerings to church. It's not so that we can have nice carpeting. It's not to buy expensive furniture. It's first and foremost because we are showing that our money ultimately belongs to God, first, and we are worshiping God when we give it back to him. The church, then, is using that money for a mission—not for ourselves—but rather for those who are in need; for important causes and people that need our help.

We need to be careful because we're a lot more like this rich young man in this story than we realize. If you have \$20 in your pocket and food in your refrigerator, you're actually one of the wealthiest people on the planet. There are billions of people who would trade everything they have just to get that much.

I've shared stories from Haiti with you guys. There's a lot of poverty and a lot of need there, and people there look at us from the United States like we have everything. Unbelievable riches. We may not always feel like that here, but as far as the rest of the world is concerned, we have great blessings. And with that great blessing comes great responsibility to use what we have well and give generously and give wisely.

So how much are we supposed to give? Like I said before, Jesus isn't giving a universal commandment here for us to all become homeless. He's showing that money mattered more to this man than the chance to actually be with Jesus and follow Him. Our giving should be along that same line: reminding us not to get too attached to our possessions. The best principle I've ever heard is that we should give enough that it's a sacrifice; meaning we actually have to give up something we'd like; meaning it makes us feel just a little uncomfortable, and then maybe give just a little bit more.

It's not an easy principle to follow, but you'd be surprised at the ways God tends to provide when we're willing to be faithful with the things He gives us. So always make sure you're setting aside something to give to God and see how God uses what you bring for great things.

## BACK TO BASICS: SPIRITUAL GIFTS

We're talking about spiritual gifts this week, and as we're thinking about them, I want to take a quick look at an interesting scene in the book of Exodus. Moses has successfully led the Israelites out of Egypt, and they're getting ready to travel to the promised land. As they continue their journey, Moses has a chance to meet up with his father-in-law, Jethro, who starts watching how Moses leads the nation. In his observations, he notices an issue that he brings to Moses' attention.

Exodus 18:13-20:

“The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, ‘What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?’ Moses answered him, ‘Because the people come to me to seek God’s will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God’s decrees and instructions.’ Moses’ father-in-law replied, ‘What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people’s representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.’”

Moses, of course, had an important role as leader, but there's a problem. He's doing too much. He's trying to be the judge for every single dispute or conflict that arises, and even working all day he can't get to them all. Moses was incredibly gifted by God, one of the greatest prophets and leaders in the entire Bible. But even he can't do everything.

This is an important point to reflect on as we're talking about spiritual gifts this week. Often, church congregations think they're supposed to put all the work on the pastor; that by himself the pastor is supposed to somehow do everything the church is supposed to do. But as we saw on Sunday, we each have different gifts that we're supposed to use for God. We each have a different role to play. Part of our walk as Christians is to recognize what our gifts are and identify the assignments God has given us.

Romans 12:3-8:

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

Even things as simple as encouraging someone, or helping someone in need, are important roles that we can have been given. Note that we never want to be prideful and think that our role is more important than someone else's because we all need each other just like all the different parts of our body need each other. None of us can do everything, not even Moses. So, this week, think about the different gifts God has given you. Maybe you're good at teaching others. Maybe you're good at encouraging someone who's going through a rough time. Or maybe you're able to give to someone in need.

Whatever your gifts are, pray that God would show you the opportunities you have to use them for good. And together we'll build each other up to be stronger than any of us would be alone.

## BACK TO BASICS: PRAYER TIME

What do you do to recharge your strength when you're worn out? What is your source of power? As we look at the ministry of Jesus, it seems like he's always doing something. Everywhere He goes, there's a crowd of people hoping to be healed. All kinds of people seeking his attention. It must have been exhausting.

Mark 1:32-37:

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus was up late healing and performing miracles, and then we see Him get up early in the morning, while everyone else is asleep, and He goes off by Himself to pray. He wants to make sure his day starts off with an uninterrupted time of prayer and seeking the will of the Father. Jesus is God on earth, but even He needs his time of prayer.

If Jesus needed it, how much more do we need to daily spend time with God to give us the strength we need to face our challenges? Our time with God needs to be fueled by the Bible.

Psalm 119:97-104:

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

We see in these verses that the best way for us to receive from God in our prayer time is for our prayer time to be grounded in the Bible. We read, we meditate on what we read, and we pray. We ask for wisdom and understanding. We ask that God strengthens us for the day and gives us guidance. And just like how the fuel we add to our cars allows us to drive them, the fuel we get from our prayer time and reading our Bible gives us fuel to face the challenges. So don't miss out on the strength God has to offer us. Take the time out to seek God daily, and God will be faithful

in leading and guiding us through both the easy times and the hard times. He's not going to run out of power.

## MANAGING EMOTIONS

Proverbs 22:24-25:

“Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.”

We’re talking about managing our emotions, and I think this proverb is particularly relevant to the culture we see around us today. More and more I see people, whether it’s on TV, on the news, or on the internet, or even out in the streets, giving into just pure anger and hatred. They can’t say a kind word to the people they disagree with; they have to fight. The greater the emotional outburst, the more attention they get. Not only do they have to fight, they insist that you fight with them, even if what they’re fighting over doesn’t really matter. That’s why I think this proverb is so important for us today, because it’s very true that anger is contagious and will draw you in if you aren’t guarding against it.

We should clarify here, because there is such a thing as righteous anger. We see in the Bible, God has a righteous anger when He sees evil, and we’ll feel that kind of anger as well. When we see evil going unpunished, when we see suffering and tragedy, in our hearts we can feel anger and a strong desire to do what is right. But that anger needs to be guided by wisdom, because if we just act on emotion alone, we’re going to find that we almost always do more harm than good.

Unfortunately, acting on emotion alone seems to be pretty popular in our culture today. We can see it in movies like “Inside Out,” where we have a character, Riley, who’s completely controlled by her emotions. The emotions are pictured as being in some control room, and they get to dictate how Riley responds to situations. And anger is there, of course, ready to catch on fire and break things.

Proverbs 29:11:

“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.”

We’re surrounded by a culture that wants to pretend that our feelings are “always right” or they’re our “personal truth” or something like that. Of course, we know that isn’t true. How many times have you reacted to something, and then sometime later realized that maybe you overreacted, or maybe your reaction wasn’t based on accurate information? And you know what? We learn from those mistakes. We gain wisdom. So, in the future, we’re able to respond in a better way. It’s OK to admit that we made a mistake in how we reacted to something because we’re all going to do it from time to time. We just treat it as a learning experience and apologize when we need to.

So, what can we do to reduce the chance of responding to a situation with too much anger? First, it's good to have a few trusted people you can confide in, people you know will give you honest feedback on whether your response to a situation is correct, and not just tell you what you want to hear. Recognize when your emotions are starting to take hold of you and try to distance yourself from the problem until you can talk through it with someone who can give you a more balanced view of the situation.

Above all else, remember that God is still in control, even in our worst situations. He hasn't forgotten us, and He isn't ignoring us. Sometimes just reminding ourselves of that is enough to give us peace to last us through the crisis. And don't forget that emotions are good; God created us with them. They each have a proper role to play in our lives, even anger and sorrow, but wisdom helps us use them in the right way.

Proverbs 3:

My son, do not forget my teaching,  
but keep my commands in your heart,  
for they will prolong your life many years  
and bring you peace and prosperity.  
Let love and faithfulness never leave you;  
bind them around your neck,  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
Then you will win favor and a good name  
in the sight of God and man.  
Trust in the Lord with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make your paths straight.  
Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
fear the Lord and shun evil.  
This will bring health to your body  
and nourishment to your bones.

John 14:25:

“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to

you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

## GOSSIP

Proverbs 16:28:

“A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.”

Some people just know how to make a fight worse, don't they? We're talking about dealing with conflicts this week, and few things stir up a conflict better than gossip. Sometimes it can be hard to define gossip, because it's more than just talking about someone else. Take a look at these two proverbs.

Proverbs 11:13:

“A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.”

Proverbs 20:19:

“A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much.”

We see that gossiping involves revealing information that is best kept confidential. Talking about someone else in a way you know they wouldn't want you to be talking about them, or sharing things that are more likely to harm their reputation than help it. These are gossiping.

This is a problem in a lot of our churches today. Often there's an excuse behind the gossip; “Oh I just thought you should know.” or “This way we know how to help that person.” And there can be a time for that, but it takes a great deal of wisdom to know when to share sensitive information and when not to. And when you do, make sure it's very clear who is allowed to know this information and who isn't, so we don't end up starting a chain of people sharing information they shouldn't be.

How do we overcome the temptation to gossip? Remember that someone's reputation is very important, and doing things to harm someone's reputation is like doing direct harm to them. And you know what? People find out. They notice that they're being treated differently, they notice comments that weren't there before, and before long their relationships start breaking down, friendships start falling apart. And believe me, you don't want to be the one responsible for something like that. We serve a God who has a heart for reconciliation, and that should be our heart as well.

So, what can we do once gossip has already done damage? Apologies sometimes help, but sometimes the person who was hurt is just not going to be ready to forgive. We should do our best to cut off any future opportunities for gossip, and make sure our words are encouraging and helpful.

Proverbs 17:9:

“Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.”

Avoid bringing up the pain of the past, unless it's in a specific setting to help someone deal with their pain. And sometimes bringing in a respected mediator goes a long way in bringing people back together.

As we continue looking at proverbs that deal with managing conflicts this week, we'll see that there are a lot of different actions we can take; there's no one size fits all when it comes to healing and reconciliation. So, let's continue to think carefully on this topic, and seek the wisdom needed to handle the conflicts we'll all face in life. And as much as you can, avoid a gossip, because you know it makes every conflict worse.

## IT'S OFF TO WORK WE GO!

Proverbs 24:27:

“Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house.”

When we have a lot of different tasks to do, sometimes it can be difficult to know how to prioritize them. Do I do the most important thing first? Do I finish the quickest task to get it out of the way? Do I do the hardest thing first?

This proverb gives us an interesting perspective; faced with the choice of getting your fields ready to grow food or getting your home comfortable to live in, focus on the field first. Comfort can wait, but the timing of planting and harvesting crops sometimes leaves very little room for error. And while we generally aren't farmers here in the Bay Area, there are some important principles we can pull from a proverb like this. Before you start thinking about comfort and luxury, you need to make sure you have a stable source of income.

This might seem obvious, but you'll notice a lot of people in our current culture are more concerned with living an extravagant lifestyle than having financial stability. Their desire to impress other people has them buying things that are more expensive than they can really afford. Fancy cars, expensive clothing and in the end, it never feels like enough.

Proverbs 13:7:

“One pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.”

We've talked about this before, but it really is true that a lot of people in our society are so caught up in their image they spend themselves into poverty. They want the comfortable, luxurious home and want people to be jealous of them, but they don't pay any attention to their fields. And let's be clear, there's nothing wrong with being comfortable. Life is not supposed to be an endless chain of pain and suffering, but remember that we need to prioritize things properly. There's no point in having a house worth millions of dollars if you're starving.

Proverbs 12:11:

“Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.”

Of course we don't really have land that we work; maybe a backyard that we grow some vegetables in, but this proverb is about more than just growing food. We each have different gifts and resources God has given us, and He wants us to use them for something productive.

Following worthless pursuits is like chasing after those get rich quick schemes, trying to find shortcuts in life without really doing the work. Whatever profession we end up going into, it's going to take hard work and preparation. We'll need to study and train, and as we're faithful with the things God has given us God will be faithful to provide for us.

We could also make the mistake of getting jealous of someone else's path, wishing we had the gifts and opportunities they have, and as a result we miss out on the things God has given us. Don't be so focused on someone else's land that you lose sight of your own. This proverb reminds us not to forget about the work God has assigned to us, whatever it is, because there is great reward in completing it.

So be mindful of the things that are worthwhile to pursue, and work for them. God has prepared good work in advance for us to do, so let's be faithful in the things He's given us.

## OFFERING

Today we are looking at King David, one of the most well-known people in the Bible. A huge section of the Bible is devoted to events that occurred during his reign, and one of the most interesting ones is actually a disease outbreak that hit during his later years as king. David had a brief period of disobedience to God, and God responded by sending a plague over the land after giving David a few options to choose from. Over the course of just a few days, seventy thousand people died from this disease, and as the angel who brought the disease approached Jerusalem, he stopped by a farm. David sees this, somehow, and asks God to relent and instead direct his anger to David alone, rather than the people of Israel, since David had been the one to commit the wrong. God then sends the prophet Gad to David with some instructions for how to proceed, and a very interesting scene plays out:

2 Samuel 24:18-25:

“And Gad came that day to David and said to him, “Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” So David went up at Gad's word, as the Lord commanded. And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground. And Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the Lord, that the plague may be averted from the people.” Then Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the Lord your God accept you.” But the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.” So, David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.”

David is instructed to build an altar at this site, and the owner of the land is more than happy to give his king everything needed, both the land and the animals for the sacrifice, but David says no. “I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.” It's such a powerful line, because David knows something very important. Offerings we give to God have meaning because they are something that have value to us. Some leftover scraps that we don't really want; some unwanted gifts we received that we're looking to pawn off, something we stole or cheated to acquire; these are offerings that don't actually cost us anything. They're not coming from the heart; we're just giving it to God so we can get it out of our way, or even worse, maybe just to put on a show of being generous so other people will applaud us.

But David knows the most important thing isn't the value of the offering, but rather the heart behind it. We see this mindset reflected in one of the lines he wrote.

Psalm 51:16-17:

“For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

It's not about the monetary value of the sacrifice, but rather the heart behind it. Too often, the offerings people bring to church are just their unwanted leftovers. Church closets are filled with various items “donated” by people just looking for a place to dump their unwanted junk. You'll also run into people who only give donations when they can get some kind of public recognition for it, i.e., get their names on the sides of buildings or get some other special accolade. These offerings aren't coming from a love of God as much as they're coming from a love of self.

So, what makes a good offering? A good offering is first of all willingly given, as well as cheerfully given. It's something you feel will have value to God because it has value to you; maybe it's money, but maybe it's time, or useful items such as food for the hungry or clothes for the poor. It's also important that the offering not be done for attention or recognition or with the goal of getting something in return, and if you feel that's a temptation of yours it might help to give your offering anonymously, so only God knows about it.

Lastly, remember that we're not giving to God because we want Him to give us something; we're giving back because we've already received. We're acknowledging that God is the source of everything we have, and by giving to God out of our blessings we're giving Him honor and glory. We're declaring to all the people around us that God is the one sustaining and providing for us, both during the good times and the hard times. And David's offering here had a major impact, not just for the plague but also for the future of God's people, because that farm David bought was eventually the site that was used to build the temple of Jerusalem, which was the center of worship all the way up to the time of Jesus.

So, let's not bring meaningless offerings; we'll give the best we have to God, and watch as He makes something even better out of it.

## A FOOL'S PROVOCATION

Proverbs 27:3:

“Stone is heavy and sand a burden, but a fool’s provocation is heavier than both.”

The world record for heavy weightlifting is currently held by Lasha Talakhaze, setting the record in the Tokyo Olympics with his competition lifts totaling 1,073.6 pounds. It is a tremendous strain to carry such a burden and requires an intense amount of training. You can’t just wake up one day and lift hundreds of pounds; you have to prepare.

The proverb shows us that of all the heavy things we could possibly try to carry, provocation from a fool weighs even heavier on us. Insults, slander, foolish statements, every ridiculous thing they could possibly say, it weighs on us, angers us, and we just have to respond. Those words can impact us long after they’re spoken, and if we’re not careful they can really derail us. We can get angry, make a rash decision, and before you know it, you’re the one acting like a fool.

In the same way, a weightlifter needs to train to carry a heavy load, we need to train our own hearts and minds to be able to withstand the burden that can come from foolish provocation. So how do we do that?

Proverbs 22:1:

“A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.”

This is something that we all intuitively know, our reputation is important, we want other people to respect us. When we face foolish provocation, there can be a part of us that feels like our reputation is being attacked, that others will think less of us because of the words the fool has spoken. We’re afraid of shame. But remember what we were talking about earlier? The source of shame is pride, and true humility is the cure. When we have the right attitude of humility, when we’re focused on how God sees us, rather than how other people see us, we’re able to resist the burden of provocation. God doesn’t listen to fools, and He knows the truth about us, both the good and the bad.

Proverbs 18:7:

“A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.”

Often, we don't need to do a lot to respond to a fool. Eventually, they're going to ruin themselves with their words, and they'll turn people against themselves. It may take time, but when we're trusting in God, we can have the patience to wait for the fools end to come. Now, sometimes it's right to respond to someone's false statements.

Proverbs 9:7-9:

“Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproveth a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.”

One of the things we need to ask ourselves when someone says something we know is wrong is how this person will respond to our corrections. If they're someone who doesn't care about truth, if they don't care about doing right, you're probably wasting your time. You can try, but they're probably going to get upset with you as a result. I've had that happen to me a lot over the years, even during this pandemic as I've tried to provide accurate medical information to people who really didn't want to hear it, and over time you learn to recognize who we should spend more of our time investing in. The fools and the scoffers, you can try a little bit, but when they start getting hostile you just accept that they won't listen and walk away. Instead, focus on the people who want to learn and grow, and pray that over time the hearts of those who are foolish will be more receptive to correction.

Proverbs 27:6:

“Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”

Not every comment that makes you upset is necessarily bad. When someone says something that upsets us, one of the things we should ask ourselves is if this person is looking out for our good. Their words might hurt in the moment, but they also might save us from a greater pain later down the road. Meanwhile, watch out for someone who never tells you anything you don't want to hear. They'll flatter you, tell you to overlook your faults, and before long, you'll find that your pride and your ego start tripping you up. Don't let your heart be burdened by a fool's provocation, but also be willing to receive criticism from the people who care about you.

And just like being a weightlifter, this takes intentional training. We need to be intentional about preparing our hearts and minds to resist insults while also being open to receiving criticism. It's hard work, but the end result is a life that can avoid a lot of unnecessary conflicts and problems by standing firm on what is right.

## PRIDE

Proverbs 16:18-19:

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.”

I hope you had a good chance to really reflect on the importance of humility and the dangers of pride. And here in these proverbs we get another reminder: falling into the trap of pride sets us up for failure. Arrogance can be our worst enemy.

And let's make sure we're using the word pride in the right way here because sometimes we use it to mean different things. Sometimes we use the term pride to celebrate a good accomplishment. Perhaps we work hard and achieve a great goal, and we feel pride and satisfaction in the work that we did. Or a parent can be proud of a child, a teacher proud of a student for their great accomplishments. There's joy and happiness associated with such things, and those emotions are good. We should be happy when we accomplish great things.

The pride we're talking about in this proverb is different, however. This is an arrogance, a belief that you are superior to someone else. Pride in this sense is always a comparison to others, and it's always going to make you look down on them. And that's what sets you up for failure. Like the villain who starts an arrogant monologue when he thinks he's won, only for the hero to take advantage of the moment and catch him off guard.

I love how the verse says you're better off being with the poor, the poor in spirit. And we've talked about that idea before when we went through the Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. And I can tell you, as someone who's been around both the poor and the weak, as well as the powerful and the arrogant, I would much rather be with those who are poor but know what it means to trust in God. Those who are arrogant and powerful may win some battles, and they'll fight amongst themselves about who gets to keep what's in the spoils, but it never lasts. Pride sets them against each other, it sets them against everyone.

And today, we're certainly seeing a lot of arrogant pride around us, aren't we? Competition about who can get the most followers on social media, who can have the most expensive stuff, who has the best accomplishments. For me, it's been very interesting to see arrogance in how people have responded to the pandemic. You guys know, I have quite a bit of medical background, probably close to two decades of dedicated study in science and medicine, and I know I still have so much to learn. Yet I see adults who have barely a high school level understanding of biology and medicine, convinced they know more about disease after spending a few hours googling things on

the internet than people who have devoted their entire lives to studying the field. That's arrogance.

Pursuit of knowledge is great; we should all seek greater wisdom and understanding in every opportunity, but to think that you've gained that kind of knowledge, that you know what treatments work, or that you've uncovered some deep conspiracy that no one else knows about, without any real work, that's just a self-centered pride. And we'll see more of it in the years to come. And people like that, in the end the harm they bring is all on themselves. Their pride cuts them off from the people they can really learn from, and they'll turn away from anyone who says something they don't want to hear.

So, let's not follow that path. We'll seek humility above all else, and on that path, there is great wisdom to be found. Don't let pride trip you up.

## INNER CHARACTER DEVOTIONAL

by Matt and Lara Silverman

“Certain as the sun  
Rising in the east  
Tale as old as time  
Song as old as rhyme  
Beauty and the Beast.”

I’m sure we’re all familiar with the classic tale: a selfish, arrogant prince is transformed into a terrifying monster after being cursed by a woman he refused to help. His outer appearance now reflected his ugly inner character, and he would remain this way until he actually learned to love someone other than himself.

When he first encounters young Belle at the beginning of our story, he is bitter and resentful, and there seems to be little hope that he will break the curse before he runs out of time. Yet his character slowly changes over the course of the story as he and Belle fall in love, until finally the curse is broken as his inner character transforms. No longer the self-centered prince, he’s now willing to risk his life for the sake of those he loves.

The difference between outer appearance and inner character is an important theme in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus contrasts the lives of those who are only concerned with what other people think of them with the lives of those who are concerned with walking in step with God.

Now, of course, we all want to have good reputations; we want to be trustworthy, honest, reliable, and respected. But Jesus reminds us that sometimes living righteously will make other people hate us; particularly people who love evil. The Sermon on the Mount is about fixing our hearts on the things that matter, and not settling for just the superficial righteousness that we often see around us. For instance, you’ll encounter people who insist that it’s good enough to just love the people who love you, but you don’t have to worry about the people who hate you. And as long as you don’t physically attack someone else, you’re fine, that’s all you need. But Jesus tells us that even just harboring anger in our hearts is sinful, even if it’s anger directed against our enemies.

Now, there is such a thing as righteous anger; we should hate what is evil and cling to what is good, but we’re also commanded to love our enemies and pray that they repent from evil. This requires an inner character that delights more in seeing mercy and salvation than it does in seeing judgment and condemnation. Another point Jesus makes is about marriage and purity. He challenges us by saying that purity isn’t just about what you do, but what you’re looking at and

thinking about. Even just looking at someone lustfully is the same as committing adultery, because it's a heart issue.

And marriage: that's for keeps. You're making a promise to stay faithful to someone no matter what; rich or poor, sickness or health. And you don't give up on each other just because things get tough. This is drastically different than what we see in the world around us today, where sexual immorality is celebrated, and faithfulness is seen as outdated and impractical for the modern person, who puts their own well-being and satisfaction first.

Jesus also challenges us to do the right thing even when no one is looking. We do want to be a light to the world, so we want other people to see our good deeds to a certain extent, but we don't want our goal to be to draw attention to ourselves. Sometimes that even means doing good things in secret, so no one but God sees you do them. Jesus challenges us to donate without telling anyone about it, and to pray in our own private place when no one is looking.

By doing that, we know we aren't just doing it for show, but because we really want to follow God. Contrast that with people around us, who make big donations so they can have their names on the sides of buildings or make a big show of their righteous acts so people will admire them.

Admiration is great, but if that's what we're chasing after, we're going to be left feeling empty. One of the last points Jesus touches on in this sermon is to not be judgmental. This doesn't mean that we don't make judgments and act in wisdom, but rather that we don't look down on other people. We need to remember that everything we have is ultimately from God, so we shouldn't let pride consume us. Humility is probably one of the most neglected virtues out there, and something that we need to remind ourselves to practice every day.

And ultimately that was the Beast's problem from "Beauty and the Beast." It was his pride, his attitude of looking down on other people that caused him to be cursed. The story reminds us that an ugly inner character will eventually show on the surface and cause other people to shun you. The solution to that is first recognizing that we're wrong, that we've sinned in our hearts, and we need forgiveness. And that transformation, that's what God offers us in Christ. So, remember that Jesus is calling each of us to follow Him as our King, so He can lead us down the path of righteousness.

"Tale as old as time  
Tune as old as song  
Bittersweet and strange  
Finding you can change  
Learning you were wrong."

## DEALING WITH TEMPTATION: JOSHUA DEVOTIONAL

James 1:12-15:

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

One of the most engaging parts of a protagonist’s journey is how they handle temptations. Whether it’s how Frodo resists the allure of the power of the one ring, or how Luke refuses to join the dark side with Darth Vader, the real power of a hero is not their physical strength or skills, but their ability to say no to what is wrong. A few weeks ago, we looked at the story of Achan in Joshua 7, where Achan gives in to greed and disobeys the command God gave to Israel. God told the Israelites not to steal anything from Jericho after conquering it, but while going through the city Achan sees a nice robe and some gold and silver, and decides to take it for himself. This doesn’t seem like much—we’re talking about an entire city of things here. Who’s going to care about just one robe and a little bit of money? But once he does this, God removes his protection from Israel. The very next battle they go into, they lose and are forced to retreat—all because one man gave in to greed.

One of the most important things for the Christian walk is to understand how we deal with temptations. In this passage, James wants to emphasize that we can’t blame anyone else for the temptations we fight. People might be tempted to say, “Well, God is in charge of everything, so if I face temptation or give in to temptation, it’s really God’s fault; it’s not my responsibility.” But the reality is that the source of our temptations is our own desires. For that reason, we really need to understand what our desires are, and which desires are good, and which are bad. This is especially important now, as we live in a culture that often tells us that we should pursue anything we desire: if you want it, go for it. If you desire it, it must be a good thing.

Let’s look at how Jesus was tempted after his baptism. Satan comes to Him after he’s been fasting, and offers Him three temptations. The first temptation is to supernaturally create food to eat. After all, Jesus had been fasting for quite a while and was certainly hungry. Why not take advantage of his power—the same power that created the entire universe—and just create food for Himself? But Jesus refuses, because that’s not how his power is supposed to be used. He wasn’t here to use his power for his own personal gain and comfort, but rather to use his power for the sake of others. He also knows that this is a time for fasting and seeking God; the word of God was

his food, not just bread. There would be time for feasting and rest afterward, but now was not the time.

We, too, will always have the desire to satisfy our physical needs: to sleep, to eat, to be comfortable. And there is a time for that. But there's also a time to go without comfort—to maybe not eat everything we would like, maybe not get a full night's sleep—because there's work to do. When I go to Haiti on mission trips, I'm going without comfort for a while. We don't have unlimited food like we have here in the United States; so, I don't necessarily get to eat anything I want. We make sacrifices to help those in need. Likewise in life, we need to recognize when the time is right to sacrifice and resist the desire to focus just on ourselves.

Another temptation Satan brings is for Jesus to jump off the highest building in the area, to prove to the world that his angels would always protect Him—to show off his power and his glory. This would have given Jesus great recognition and admiration; something we all want. We want people to know us, to respect us. We want love and community, and these are good things. But there's a right way to pursue them and a wrong, self-centered way to pursue them. It's true that angels were protecting Jesus, but Jesus also points out that we shouldn't try to test God like that. The whole, “Ok God, if you're real, do this for me,” or trying to conduct experiments or tests to see if God is going to protect us aren't biblical.

Now it's true that we should act with the faith that God is watching and protecting us; but those actions need to be based on obedience to God rather than just acting on our own whims. It's not a license to be foolish, but rather to take what Jesus says seriously when He talks about difficult things like loving our enemies or sacrificing to give to those in need. And when we are faithful to God in those things, we will find that we gain the love and respect and community we desire; but it's because we put others first rather than worrying about our reputation and image first.

Then of course the last temptation is that of power. All Jesus has to do is bow down and worship Satan, and He could be ruler of the whole world. Rather than going through the path of suffering to the cross, He could just be a king now. After all, isn't that what he's supposed to be? The desire for strength and power is a great temptation. And these things can be tools used for good purposes. But they should never be the goals themselves. More important than the strength to rule nations is the strength to live righteously—to do good even when it's hard.

At the end of the day, all these desires can be good, but the way we meet them is by pursuing God rather than the things of this world. A temptation is a lie that tries to trick you into thinking that the way to achieve a particular desire is to go against what God says. For Achan, maybe he had good intentions. Maybe he wanted to provide for his family. Maybe he wanted to have some extra money in case someone in his community was in need. But in his actions, he showed that he

didn't trust God to provide. God had been supernaturally giving the Israelites food and water for forty years in the wilderness, yet Achan forgot all of that and thought he could get away with stealing a little for himself.

Sometimes it's hard to believe it, but God *does* provide. And part of having faith is waiting for his timing to provide, rather than following the ways of the world. The real power to achieve our desires is found in resisting temptation rather than giving in to them. Think of these stories. As Frodo carries the ring to Mount Doom to destroy it, all the characters are faced with the temptation to steal it and try to use its power for themselves. Yet every character in the story who gives in to its power is eventually betrayed and killed by it. Frodo's real power is his ability to resist that temptation, and it's that power that allows him to prevail.

Or consider Luke as he refuses the call to join the dark side; to give in to anger. In the end, it isn't his power or strength or ability to use the force that wins the day, but his love and mercy that turns Darth Vader to the light. It's only because these characters resisted temptation that they were able to succeed. And in the same light, the more we resist temptation, the stronger we will become. Of course, there will be times we fail, and we'll turn to God for forgiveness. But we still get back up and continue to fight remembering that Jesus died to forgive each and every one of our sins.

Be honest with God. Achan giving in to greed wasn't even the biggest problem; it was the fact that he continued to try to hide it from God up until the last moment—kind of like Adam and Eve, who eat the forbidden fruit, then try to hide themselves, and later try to shift the blame when God confronts them. Properly confessing and repenting is just as important as fighting to resist falling into temptation.

So, let's not make the same mistakes as Achan: recognize when you're facing temptation, and think about what it says about the things you desire. Maybe God has a better way of meeting those desires. Maybe there are things that are bringing extra temptations into your life that you can cut out.

Spend time seeking God daily, asking Him to lead you.

Matthew 6:13:

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

## THE PARABLES OF THE MINAS AND TALENTS

Today we are looking at two parables: the parable of the minas, and the parable of the talents. As Jesus was getting closer to the end of his ministry and to his crucifixion, He started telling his disciples more parables about what kind of lives we should live once He was gone. They had seen so much from Him; so many miracles, so many sermons; what would life look like without Him by their side?

The parable of the minas and the parable of the talents have very similar themes. In both cases, a wealthy person or a ruler leaves for a while, and the servants are left in charge of things. Each of the servants are given quite a bit of money and are told to put it to good use. Their command is simple: be productive.

In the parable of the minas, each servant is given the same amount, and in the parable of the talents, they are given different amounts, with more money given to the servants who had proven more reliable and capable in the past. In each parable, the servants go out and put the money to good use, and when their master returns, they bring him the profit they made. Some doubled their money, some earned even more than that.

However, in both versions of this parable, there is one servant who decides not to do anything with the money; he buries it in the ground to keep it safe, and then returns it to the master once the master is back. In both cases, the servant has the same excuse: "I know you're a hard man, you take things that you didn't work for, I'm afraid of you, so I kept your money buried over there and here it is, I'm giving it back."

I think there's a reason Jesus gives two different versions of this parable. Each version tells us something different about how God blesses us in this life. In one, the master gives everyone the same amount; each servant gets one mina. This represents the fact that there are some things in life we all equally receive from God. We each get twenty-four hours in the day. We all have the same oxygen to breathe, and we all have a voice to share God's word with others in some way. But the other version of this parable shows us that God does give some of us more to use than others, and when much is given, much is required. If God gives me more resources to work with, like maybe more money or more wisdom, or more influence, I have an obligation to use that for God's kingdom, and not just myself.

Then there's this guy who just buries what was given to him in the ground. He doesn't use it for anything productive. This represents a person who goes through life focused just on their own wants and comfort. Today, it might be a person who uses all their intellect and skills to become wealthy, or powerful, not caring about God or others.

The servant in this parable sees this time with the boss being away as a chance for an extended vacation, just to have fun and not care about anyone else. Having responsibilities just sounds boring, and definitely too much work. Just enjoy life and get as much stuff for yourself as you can.

But in the end of these parables, we see that the one who was hurt most by this laziness is actually the servant himself. Despite the accusation from the lazy servant that the master was just going to steal whatever he had worked for, all the other servants got to keep the results of their labor, whether they earned a little or earned a lot, and were even given more rewards and promotions on top of what they worked for. Jesus is showing us that a life focused on the eternal things really does have rewards that far outweigh what we were initially given, both rewards here on earth as well as in Heaven. The lazy servant, however, doesn't get to keep anything, even the thing he was originally given.

If he couldn't be trusted to wisely use a small amount, he's not going to be given any more. He missed out on the opportunity. Jesus concludes the parable by saying that whoever has will be given more and he will have an abundance. But whoever doesn't have, even what they have will be taken away from them. For those who spend their whole lives trying to gain temporary, material things, they'll have nothing waiting for them in Heaven when they die. The little they did have will be left behind.

As Jesus is preparing to be crucified, He wants to make sure his followers know that there will be opportunities to continue the work after He is gone. They've been following Jesus for years, learning from Him. What are they going to do with the lessons they've learned, and the miracles they've seen? Are they going to go back to their ordinary lives as fishermen or farmers, or are they going to invest their lives in something greater; something with eternal significance?

Jesus doesn't expect all of us to be the Apostle Paul, or the Apostle Peter, but He wants all of us to do something with the lives we're given. Maybe it's healing the sick or the hurting, maybe it's taking care of the poor and the needy. Maybe it's going to a place you've never been to and telling people about Jesus. Maybe it's making a little YouTube video on something Jesus taught, so other people can learn. Or maybe for some of you now, it's just studying hard and learning, growing in knowledge and wisdom and compassion.

Whatever it is, do it with the mindset that God is watching, that God is providing us with the things we need to do the work He wants us to. God is eager to reward us as we use his gifts wisely. So, let's not be lazy and bury our talents in the ground to be wasted. Instead, live every day knowing that Jesus will one day bring us to Heaven with Him, and that the difficulties and struggles we go through now won't be for nothing.

By the way, if you don't mind me saying this, I think the guy who buried the money in the ground missed out on a huge opportunity. If you're going to bury something, you at least need to make a treasure map and have a treasure hunt. Right? The boss comes back, the servant says, "hey, you've been working too hard, I made this fun treasure hunt for you to have a relaxing day with the kids." Or maybe have a big contest, where everyone has to buy a ticket for a chance to find the treasure and make a little money selling tickets. I bet if he did that, he probably wouldn't have gotten in as much trouble.

## THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER

Luke 16:1-15:

Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg—I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’ “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ “‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. “The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ “‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than they are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts.

What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.

This is probably the most controversial parable Jesus taught. On the surface, it seems like Jesus is telling us to be dishonest, maybe even steal. But that’s not the point Jesus is trying to make. In this parable, we have a dishonest manager, and his boss has finally had enough of him and tells him he’s fired. Clean out your office, organize all the paperwork, and get out of here. The manager realizes he’s in trouble. He doesn’t have enough money to last very long, and no one will hire him now that he has this reputation of being dishonest. Of course, he could always try to steal money from his boss as he leaves, but chances are he wouldn’t be able to steal enough money to last very long without getting caught.

So, he has an idea. What if instead of stealing a lot of money for himself and risking getting caught, he steals just a little bit for a lot of different people, in a way that would be hard to

spot. He brings in people who owe his boss money, and one by one he changes the records for how much they owe. In this way, he hopes to get everyone else to like him, so that later when he doesn't have any money or place to live, he can have friends who will support him.

Now don't misunderstand this story; Jesus is not saying it's good to steal or to be dishonest or to try to bribe people to be your friends. That's not why this guy was smart. He's smart because he recognized that a crisis was coming, and in order to survive it was more important to have allies than to have wealth. He was better off stealing for other people than just stealing for himself. Why does Jesus choose a dishonest man to be the main character in this parable? Because Jesus wants to make it clear to everyone that even the most selfish, dishonest person can recognize that it can be more useful to have people you can depend on in a crisis than to just have a lot of money. How much more should we, as honest people who want to do what's right, recognize that it's better to be generous than to be greedy? How much more should we recognize that what we need more than money is an ally who can save us when the crisis comes?

The religious leaders laugh at Jesus, of course. For them, wealth was power; it was proof that God was blessing them, and it seemed silly to them to value people over money. But Jesus is saying we're not the owners of the wealth we have; we're the managers of it. God has entrusted us with various gifts in this life, and it's up to us to use them responsibly. One day we will each face a crisis, and that crisis is death. When that happens, our money and possessions won't help us; all that matters is if we have an ally who will save us.

There was a famous missionary, Jim Elliot, who was killed by a tribe in Ecuador he went to share the gospel with. He knew going there that there was a good chance they would kill him, but he also knew that without him they would probably never hear the gospel. When asked why he was willing to risk his life, he had a very famous response: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Even though he was killed, his wife Elisabeth continued to reach out to this tribe, and as a result they were able to hear the gospel.

There are temporary things in life, and there are eternal things. When we look at the end of everything, when everything else is gone, we have three things left: faith, hope, and love.

Let's invest our lives to build those things.

## THE PARABLE OF THE LENDER

Luke 7:36-50:

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This is a very famous scene in the life of Jesus; Jesus anointed by a sinful woman. What's interesting about this scene is we don't know any of the backstory behind either this Pharisee named Simon or this woman. They're never mentioned before this point, and they never come up again. But something happened to this woman that radically changed her life. It wasn't unusual for people to try to get close to Jesus to get something from Him, be healed, or see a miracle, but what's interesting here is this woman isn't coming to get something from Jesus, she's coming to give. Whatever Jesus did for her was so radically transformative that she's willing to interrupt a very important dinner, even embarrass herself, to give something back.

Simon, meanwhile, doesn't understand what's happening. He knows something about this woman's history that we don't; she apparently had a reputation for being sinful, but we have no idea why. And I think there's a reason why the Bible leaves her past out for us.

God is showing us in this story that when we're forgiven by Jesus, our past is left behind us. God forgets about it. As far as the east is from the west, as the line in the psalm goes, and now we're a new person. And that new life, that transformation, changes us.

Jesus uses this moment to teach Simon a lesson about love and forgiveness. In this parable, two people have their debts erased, one that owes maybe ten thousand dollars and the other that probably owes closer to one hundred thousand dollars. Jesus is helping us understand that when we're forgiven, when our debts are paid for us, there is a natural love we have for that person who saved us. The more spectacular the salvation, the greater the love we have for the savior. The love this woman has for Jesus is proof that He saved her from her sins. But there's a warning for Simon in this story; his lack of love is also proof of something, isn't it?

For most Pharisees during the time of Jesus, their pride got in the way of the messages Jesus was sharing. They didn't want to admit there was anything wrong with them; they were convinced they were going to earn God's favor by living very religious lives. When Jesus started talking about forgiving sins, they were offended. This is something we need to look out for in our own lives. It can be very easy to get so caught up in religious practices, things like going to church, having ceremonies, going through rituals, that we forget about the forgiveness we all need. When that happens, we might start to get resentful when we see someone else receive forgiveness and have their life changed. We start looking down on other people, counting their sins while ignoring our own. We become self-righteous and think we're better than other people.

Now the truth is, you don't have to be religious to become self-righteous. You will run into all kinds of people in life who are self-righteous, both people who believe in God and people who don't. Very often they'll pick one action or attitude that they'll claim is worse than anything else you could do and use that as an excuse to pretend they're better. But here's the trick, the more we realize how much we've been forgiven by God, the less concerned we'll be with trying to be better than other people. Because the more we understand God's love, the more we're changed. Another interesting fact here; this "perfume on the feet" thing doesn't just happen once to Jesus, but twice. This was the first time; the second time was right before Jesus was crucified, during a dinner that was honoring Him for raising someone from the dead.

## THE PARABLE OF THE SICK DOCTOR

Luke 5:27-31:

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Picture my lab at the university. I teach medical diagnostics here: chemistry, math, and biology. All the equipment is for doing different tests on someone's blood. All the kinds of things you need to know in order to diagnose a patient in the hospital. Our goal is to help sick people become healthy.

There were a lot of people that wanted attention from Jesus whenever He went anywhere. Some people wanted to be healed, some people wanted to just listen to what He said, and maybe other people were just bored and wanted to see something interesting. Here we find Jesus running into a tax collector.

The job of the tax collector was to collect taxes for the Roman government. Unfortunately, they weren't particularly honest people; they would often collect a lot more money from people than they needed to and would keep the extra money for themselves. As long as they gave enough taxes to Rome, the government didn't really care how much extra money they forced people to pay. You can imagine that made a lot of people angry. People didn't like tax collectors, and didn't want to be around them. Tax collectors were sinners, they were bad people, and the way you treat sinners is by being mean to them. Yet here is Jesus, telling one to follow Him. He's actually going to his house and eating with him. Not just one tax collector; Jesus is getting together with a whole bunch of them. Why would Jesus do that?

I'm sure you've noticed that we live in a world filled with people who are always trying to show they're better than everyone else. We see that all around us, don't we? People who love to point out everything you do wrong, every mistake you've made, and meanwhile they like to brag about themselves. That's kind of what the Pharisees during Jesus' time were like. It was really important to them to show that they were better than other people. They wanted to seem like they were more holy, more righteous. And sometimes they wanted Jesus around them, even though they didn't like Him.

Why? Because Jesus was becoming an admired teacher, and some of them thought they might be able to take advantage of that. They'd be able to brag to people, "yeah, I know Jesus, He came to my house. See what a righteous and holy person I am?" People are strange like that. On one hand, some religious leaders wanted to denounce Jesus and get people to stop liking Him. On the other hand, when they saw that people liked Him, they wanted to take advantage of it. It's funny how confusing people can be at times, isn't it?

Here, they might be upset because Jesus is spending time with tax collectors rather than them. Jesus is spending his time with the lowest, most rejected people in society, and not the wealthy and the powerful. With this little metaphor about doctors and health, Jesus is saying He wants to be around the people who need Him most. He wants to be teaching the people who don't have a chance to read the Bible, the people who don't know what God's word says. He wants the chance to teach them that the way they've been living their lives, stealing money from people, has been wrong, but also show them they have a chance to change their ways and start doing what's right. He wants them to repent.

Of course, the Pharisees were just as sinful as the tax collectors, full of pride and greed, but they didn't want to admit it. They wanted to keep pretending they were better than everyone else. So, Jesus tells them: if you don't want to admit there's anything wrong with you, then I'm going to spend my time with people who realize they need to change. It's a challenge to each of us not to be arrogant and claim to be perfect. If we want Jesus to change us, we need to be willing to admit that we actually have things in our lives we need to change. Maybe it's pride, or greed, or hatred. Maybe we're just discouraged, or we worry too much about the future. Whatever it is, Jesus is saying he's the doctor who can actually fix it. I may teach students here how to heal someone's body, but Jesus is the one who heals our souls.

He's waiting for us to call out to Him; all we have to do is ask.

## THE PARABLE OF THE SOWERS AND THE SOILS

Luke 8:4-8:

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.”

When He said this, He called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

At this point in the life of Jesus, He has done a lot of things. He’s preached a lot of sermons, healed a lot of people, and there are people who are following Him wherever He goes. His disciples are expecting to see even more spectacular things from Him, because they believe he’s the Messiah they’ve been waiting for. But something is starting to confuse them. Jesus will do an amazing miracle, preach a great sermon, and people will watch, and then they’ll leave and go home like nothing ever happened. The religious leaders would come, complain about Jesus, and then leave and go home. If Jesus was the Messiah they were waiting for, why were so many people rejecting Him?

Jesus is telling his disciples this parable to help them understand why some people are rejecting his teaching. In this parable, Jesus describes four different types of soil that represent four different types of people. Each type of soil gets the same seed, each person hears the same message, but all four respond to it differently.

The hard path represents those who have hard hearts. They’re full of pride, and they don’t like it when Jesus calls them out on their hypocrisy. These would be like the religious leaders during his time. They were wealthy and powerful, and they cared more about their public image than who they were on the inside. Everything they did was for show. They didn’t have room for God’s word in their hearts; it never affected them. It couldn’t even take root.

The next type is the shallow, rocky ground. These are people who like the things that Jesus says... at first. They like the miracles, they like being healed, and they’re willing to follow Jesus as long as they can get something out of it. But the words of Jesus are never really taking root in their lives; as soon as there’s difficulty or suffering as a result of being around Jesus, they quickly turn away to something else. Many of Jesus’ followers faced a lot of persecution; even just admitting that Jesus

had healed you could get you in trouble in some places. A lot of people weren't willing to face that, so they never let themselves get too drawn in to what Jesus was teaching.

The third type of soil is the one covered in thorns. These are people that like some of the things Jesus says, they'll follow Him and maybe try to apply a few things He teaches, but they're so focused on the other things in life that they can't make Jesus the priority. When something else comes up, they're off to focus on that other thing. The thorns represent the worries and concerns of life, chasing after wealth, or pleasure, and it takes priority over God's word.

The last type of soil represents those who have room in their hearts for what Jesus has to say. They hear the message, and it changes them completely. It doesn't just produce a little plant; it produces an actual harvest that impacts not only their own lives but the lives of others as well. The good soil represents the people who truly become disciples of Jesus.

I remember when I first heard this parable, I asked myself what kind of soil I was. It's important for us to examine our own lives and see if there are things preventing God's word from really growing and producing a harvest in us. Sometimes it's pride that hardens our hearts. Sometimes it's a fear of how other people will treat us, or the suffering we might face by following Jesus. Sometimes it's focusing so much on the material things of this world that we don't have time for God. When we see those things in our lives, we should pray and ask God to make more room for Him in our hearts. When we do that, God's word starts to grow in us; transforming us ultimately producing something that changes not only us but also affects the people around us. That's the harvest of eternal life.

This parable is a reminder to each of us not to be discouraged when we see other people rejecting the messages Jesus teaches. Jesus was encouraging his disciples to not lose heart just because there were hearts that weren't receptive to the messages they were sharing. Instead, we need to make room for God's word to grow in our own hearts and pray that God will equip us to share his word with others.

## SINS AND TEMPTATIONS

Today we're going to look at some advice Proverbs has about dealing with sins and temptations. It's especially challenging in today's culture, because there is no shortage of influences trying to lead us down crooked paths.

In Proverbs 9, we have a picture of two people calling out to everyone walking by, one is Wisdom, and the other is Folly. Interestingly, they're both saying the same line; "Whoever is simple, let him come here." Yet look at what Folly says.

Proverbs 9:13-18:

Folly is an unruly woman; she is simple and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way, "Let all who are simple come to my house!" To those who have no sense she says, "Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!" But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

Both Wisdom and Folly are calling out, but Wisdom is leading people to life while Folly is leading them to death. Folly tells people that there's nothing wrong with stealing and deception. Take advantage of people whenever you can. The image in this passage reminds us that we need to be on guard against influences that deceive us onto a destructive path. And to be on guard, we need wisdom to recognize truth from lies. Proverbs are great for this. Let's take a look at a few.

Proverbs 15:28:

"The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things."

One of the ways we can identify when someone is trying to lie or lead us astray, is paying attention to how they answer us. Do they stop and ponder before they answer? Are they quick to throw out insults and profanities? In the same way, a tree can't have two different kinds of fruit on it. Hearing evil come out of someone's speech can tell you not to expect too much from them in terms of good advice or good morals, or truth in general.

Proverbs 12:19:

"Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment."

Perhaps a common modern-day version of this proverb is something like: “Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.” Lying is one of the most common temptations we run into in our daily lives, and this is a reminder that lies never pay off in the long run. At some point, things fall apart, so just don’t go down that road.

Proverbs 14:21:

“Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.”

This is a huge problem in our society today: a lot of people despise their neighbors, even their own family, over things like politics, or race, or which sports team they like to root for. As followers of Jesus, we’re called to be generous to our neighbors, even the poorest ones who can’t pay us back.

In a society filled with greed and selfishness, the question in our heart always needs to be, “How can I help this person?” Sometimes we can’t help, but even then, we can still pray for them. And the more we do that, the more we can resist the call of those around us to hate.

Proverbs 16:29:

“A man of violence entices his neighbor and leads him in a way that is not good.”

We live in a culture that really does enjoy violence. Our entertainment is filled with it, and our country as a whole always seems to be fighting wars without much of a sense of why. We have cities with incredibly high violent crime rates, and a huge percentage of our population thinks it’s a fundamental right for a parent to kill their own children before they are born just so they don’t have to deal with having kids. For someone who loves violence, power is everything, so they’re always going to try to attract allies and followers who will also fight alongside them, and they’re always trying to stoke anger among others. Be on guard, because a love of violence is very contagious. There are times when we do need to fight against evil, but our hearts should never delight in it.

Then there’s the opposite end: Proverbs 21:17:

“Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.”

This is also something we see in the culture around us, isn’t it? A love of pleasure. There’s nothing wrong with being comfortable or having fun. We’re not supposed to be living in constant suffering and agony. But when that love of pleasure takes priority over everything else, we find ourselves in a dangerous trap. That’s when it becomes a sin that takes control of us. For some people, this can be

drugs and alcohol. For others, it can be expensive, luxurious things. It can also be chasing after unhealthy romantic relationships, dating, and sleeping around with whoever they can find. Now this doesn't always leave someone poor, but a lot of the time it does, and even when it doesn't, you'll find their life eventually suffers as a result when they become a slave to the thing they're chasing after.

Proverbs 20:9:

“Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”?”

It really is true that we've all committed sins and we're all going to commit sins in the future. We can't say that we've kept our hearts pure; that's why we need Jesus. We needed someone who could pay the price for our forgiveness and make us clean. And it's because of our need that we shouldn't be judgmental of ourselves or others when we fall into sin.

Instead, our hearts should always want to draw closer to Jesus, to seek forgiveness and restoration. And day by day, we'll grow in the wisdom and power to resist sin more.

## TRUE WORSHIP

This week we're talking about true worship. It reminds me of an interaction Jesus had with a Samaritan woman early on in his ministry. Samaria was a nation right next to Israel, made up of people who were kind of half Jewish, but really didn't like Jewish people, and the Jewish people didn't like them. Yet here Jesus is in this Samaritan town, and as he's talking with this woman, she realizes that she isn't talking to any ordinary man.

The Jesus guy was special, so she asks Him an interesting question.

John 4:19-20:

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

She wants to know, where they are supposed to go to worship God? What is proper worship supposed to look like?

During the times of King David and King Solomon, Jerusalem became the center of worship for the Jewish people, but the Samaritans would never want to go there. They wanted to worship God in their own way. But take a look how Jesus responds:

John 4: 21-24:

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus challenges the entire assumption of the question; there is no longer going to be a set place for worship. Instead, the important thing is to be worshipping God in our hearts and minds wherever we are, whatever we're doing. No longer will worship be about going to the right location on the right holiday to perform a particular ritual; we're now worshipping God with our lives.

Now, there are important parts of worship. As Christians, we come together every Sunday to celebrate the day Jesus rose from the dead. We join each other in song and in prayer, to encourage each other, pray for each other, and share the good things God has done for us. But you know, the early church in the book of Acts met pretty much every day. They didn't need to wait for Sundays

to gather together, and we might do that too, joining each other during the week for prayer times and Bible studies. Or maybe just getting together to spend time with each other.

A lot of people miss this though. They make worship all about following rituals; you need to do everything in the right order, sing the right song at a specific time, go through some specific motions in the right way, and wear the right clothes.

While those can be good things, we need to remember that ultimately an outer appearance isn't what God is looking for. He isn't looking for the best dressed person, or the person who's pretending they have their whole life together and doesn't have any problems. He wants people who are singing praises honestly, even during the difficult times of sickness and loss. He wants people who are praying, not to put on a show, but because they know God provides. He wants people to listen to sermons and read their Bibles because they know God's words are powerful and can transform us from the inside out. And it's when we worship in spirit and truth, even when it takes sacrifice, that God really does His most powerful work in us. When we worship God in the right way, we're the ones who walk away changed.

So don't miss out on the blessing worship is for each of us. Don't let yourself get misled by people who value rituals and outer appearance over the inner heart, and don't settle for a life where you only show up to worship at church once in a while when it's convenient for you. We gather each Sunday to honor God for the sacrifice He made so we can be forgiven and restored, and such a sacrifice is worthy of a lot more of our time each week than just an hour or two.

So, let's join together and seek everything God has to offer us. Let's worship with our whole lives.

## TRIALS OF THE KING

Many of us are familiar with the classic story of “The Lion King.” Young Simba grows up aspiring to one day become king and rule over the land but has a rather selfish attitude about it. He wants the admiration that the king has, but not the responsibility.

That all changes the day his father is killed, resulting in him running away from his home out of guilt and shame. He abandons all desire to become king, allowing his uncle Scar to take the throne and bring the land to ruin. Scar has the same problem Simba had: a desire for power and admiration, but no interest in the responsibilities that go with it.

The temptation to seek power and admiration is something we all face, and part of living the righteous life that we couldn't meant that Jesus had to face these same temptations. We saw this when Satan came to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, pointing out that Jesus could abuse his power for selfish reasons and rule over the entire earth as king. He could take whatever he wanted; why concern Himself with responsibilities and obligations?

But we see in each temptation that Jesus responds with scripture; this is a demonstration that the power of God's word allows us to resist even the greatest of temptations. And make no mistake; the extent to which Jesus was tempted was even greater than anything we will face, because his actual divine power is greater than any power we could possibly possess.

We may see people on this earth with the wealth to buy anything they could possibly want, or the military strength to conquer nations and take the spoils, but Jesus can command the very laws of nature themselves. He can miraculously multiply food, He can stop a violent storm with a word, He can even raise the dead. Just imagine the kind of temptations you would face if you had that kind of power.

Yet we do all go through temptations, and as we resist them, we find ourselves more equipped to carry out the work God has for us. And like it did for Jesus, the Bible gives us the tools to resist these temptations. Paul talks about this in Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 10:13-14:

“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.”

This passage is often misused to say that God will never give us more than what we can handle, but that's not really accurate. We face things all the time that we can't handle with our own strength, and that's when we rely the most on God's power.

God's power is what gives us a way out, either through Bible verses that equip us with wisdom or even unique opportunities God opens up in our lives. God doesn't want us to fall into temptation, and always calls us to look to Him to deliver us.

We pray in the Lord's prayer: "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." People who are convinced they can do everything with their own strength are typically the people that have the worst falls because their pride sets them up for failure.

And that's exactly what we see in the story of "The Lion King." In the end, it's Scar's pride that leads to his downfall, while Simba grows out of his arrogance during his time of exile, and instead learns to use his strength for the sake of others, eventually taking up his obligation to rule as a just king. We as Christians need to recognize that we ultimately serve a just King, one who has faced all our same temptations, yet never once used his power for selfish or arrogant purposes. Instead, He exercised his power for our sake, and through that bought salvation for all of us.

So, let's give our King honor, and stand up to temptation just as He did.

## JACOB'S CHALLENGE

### Devotional 1 – Bitterness

Hebrews 12:12-15:

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

“Everything is against me!” Have you ever felt like that? I know I sure have; in moments of despair and hopelessness, I’ve sometimes found myself believing that the whole universe is somehow working against me.

We see Jacob responding this way when he learns that Simon is being held prisoner in Egypt, and the governor there is demanding that Benjamin be brought to secure his release. In this moment, all of the pain of Jacob’s past: his conflicts with his brother, his conflicts with his uncle, and the loss of Joseph, are all coming back to him. He’s given into bitterness.

This passage in Hebrews warns us not to let bitterness take root in us because it cuts us off from the peace of God. We may have pain from our past, but that will never overpower the grace of God that works in our hearts. By reflecting on the challenges God has brought us through, the victories He has given us, we can encourage ourselves when our current situation seems too difficult to handle.

God has brought us this far, and He won’t leave us now.

## JACOB'S CHALLENGE

### Devotional 2 – Responsibility

Read Genesis 43:8-9

Then Judah said to Israel his father, “Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die. I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him.

It’s time to make a decision; stay in place and starve, or take a risk and send Benjamin with his brothers to Egypt to get grain to eat. Jacob is distraught, but Judah steps up with a promise; he will personally ensure Benjamin’s safety. With this promise, Jacob relents and agrees to send Benjamin with them.

Contrast this to Reuben’s promise earlier in Genesis 42:37, where he tells Jacob that he can kill both of Reuben’s sons if Reuben doesn’t bring Benjamin back safely. I’m not sure why Reuben thought a satisfactory outcome to the death of a son for Jacob would be to then kill two of his grandchildren, but needless to say Jacob doesn’t receive any encouragement from this promise. Judah, however, takes the responsibility personally.

There will be times in life when we need to step up and take responsibility for something. We can’t make any excuses or push the blame to anyone else. As scary as it is, be willing to step up in those moments, and trust that God will use you to do great things.

## “KNOWING EVERYTHING” DEVOTIONAL

Apparently, I know everything...

I had an amazing reaction from one of the little Sunday School kids after church today when I was explaining to her that I taught at a university.

Her - “You teach gwown ups?”

Me - “Yep, I sure do!”

Her - “But how can you teach gwown ups? Dey ahwedey know ewweeting! Dat’s kwazy!”

Ah yes, kwazy indeed. It’s funny, but I’ve actually been thinking about that exchange all day. In the eyes of a little kid, we “gwown ups” know everything; we know why the sky is blue, why it gets cold in the winter, and why it’s a bad idea to just stand out in the middle of a busy street. We have the answers to everything! It’s an amazing contrast to the little advertisement I was watching on Ph.D Comics this afternoon for “We Have No Idea,” a book about how little we actually know about the universe.

Of course, a mature, humble person realizes we don’t know everything. You could have a dozen PhD’s, centuries of wisdom and experience, and you only reach a minuscule fraction of the knowledge out there in the universe. Sadly, I find that most people don’t quite reach this realization.

More often than not, the people we encounter in life convince themselves that they have it all figured out. No one can question them. No one can challenge them. Anyone who disagrees with them is a fool, and not even worth their time.

For my Palm Sunday lesson, I covered a lot of the interactions between Jesus and the people in Jerusalem in the week before they had Him killed. But there’s one interaction in particular that I love more than any other: the reaction to Jesus chasing the money changers out of the temple.

For a little context, Jesus gets to the temple and sees all the scam artists ripping people off. Charging fees for exchanging currency, forcing people to buy overpriced animals to offer at the temple, shady stuff like that. He shouts out a verse from the Bible about making God’s temple a “den of robbers” and chases everyone away with a makeshift whip.

But the story doesn’t end there. It doesn’t take long for the priests and other religious leaders to come out and challenge Jesus. They demanded to know by what authority Jesus was doing all this. He certainly didn’t have their permission, so what gave Jesus the right to disrupt their operations at the temple? Jesus responded to their challenge with a question of his own: was John the Baptist

crazy, or was he a prophet? Jesus would answer their question, but they would have to answer his first.

Now, normally these priests and teachers and legal specialists would have no problem answering questions from people. They knew their scripture inside-out, the teachings of each prophet, the sayings of ancient rabbis; no question would be too hard. These guys knew “evweeting.” The only problem was... They ran into a little issue with John the Baptist.

John had quite a few harsh words to say against many of the religious leaders at the time. Similar words, in fact, that Jesus had. Both John and Jesus had a tendency of exposing the hypocrisy and immoral behavior found within the religious elite at the time, and the general population loved them both for it. As a result, the “all-knowing” religious elite couldn’t really challenge either John or Jesus directly; they just had to patiently endure it in the hopes that at some point these guys would get on the bad side of the Roman government and get arrested.

But now they were stuck with this question; a question they couldn’t answer. If they said John wasn’t a prophet, the people in the crowd would instantly turn on them because most of them loved John (even years after Herod had his head chopped off). If they admitted John was a prophet, however, they were also sunk, because they had clearly rejected John’s overall message and direct support of Jesus. So, the smartest legal experts in the town were left with only one safe response: “We have no idea.”

This wasn’t an admission of humility, however. They weren’t taking the position that they were mere men who had things to learn. They were simply protecting their reputations from harm; they were concerned with how the outer world saw them. And their reputation was: we know everything. Their authority couldn’t be challenged, and no one knew more about God and the scriptures than they did. They spent the rest of the week trying to trap Jesus with trick questions, and after Jesus had stumped them at every turn, they finally resorted to capturing Him when He was alone and turning Him over to the Roman governor to be killed. Never, at any point in the course of events, did they ever ask themselves the question: “Could we actually learn something from Jesus?”

Most people hate being told they are wrong. A few wise people enjoy being corrected, but I’d wager a guess that a very small percentage of folks fall into that category. Once we get to a certain place in life, we start acting like we “ahweddy know evweeting.”

In my opinion, nowhere is that better demonstrated than in the petty partisan politics I see in the news and on my Facebook feed. People, friends and family, are either “libtards” or “racist fascist idiots” or whatever political/religious slur you run into. Few people dare step foot out of their

theological or political echo chambers, and when they do it's only to insult the people who are of different opinion.

And as I've argued on multiple occasions in the past, it's apparent that we live in a society that has wholly rejected Jesus' teachings. The ravings of a lunatic Jewish carpenter from 2000 years ago have no place in modern society; a society that values instant gratification and Tomahawk missiles and little pieces of green cotton-paper with pictures of dead presidents on them.

A proverb comes to mind; after a list of all the reasons why "fools" (a complicated word in the Hebrew that involves more than just being stupid) are just hopeless people who can't do anything right.

Proverbs 26:12:

"Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

As we celebrate the week that Jesus was crucified and resurrected with chocolate bunnies and plastic eggs, I encourage you to take a few hours out of the week to actually read some of the things He taught.

Read through the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5-7. It'll take you like 20-30 minutes tops.

Read through Jesus' final teachings to his disciples as they ate dinner on his last night with Him before his death: John 13 and 14. It's only a few pages long.

You don't even need to have a Bible; everything is on the internet these days anyway. Whatever you believe about Jesus, there's no denying that his life literally split history in two, and He left behind teachings that rocked the world. For just one week, let's stop making excuses like the ancient religious elite did, stop pretending that we "ahwedly know ewweeting," and let us ask the question: "Could we actually learn something from Jesus?"

I may have a Ph.D. in chemical engineering, but I know without question that I still have a lot to learn.

## “SEEING WITH THE RIGHT LENS” SERMON

Honored to be able to share from God’s word today. The title of this sermon is “Seeing with the Right Lens.” Of course, I have a Ph.D. in chemical engineering preaching, so this sermon is going to be a little nerdy. I use microscopes in my classroom, ok? Want to know something cool?

If you look at cholesterol under a microscope, it just looks like clusters of crystals. But if you look through a polarizing microscope, the detail allows me to see actual cholesterol, not just crystals. So the bottom line is: you need the right lens. If you’re not using the right lens, you could miss something crucial.

Or say your camera isn’t quite at the right angle. You don’t quite have the right focus. Is it passing interference or not? Ok, it’s CACC (Calvary Armenian Congregational Church) here; I need to have some sports analogy in here somewhere, right? Pretty sure that’s somewhere in the bylaws; sermons must include reference to football.

The point is if you don’t have the right lens, the right angle, the right focus, you can easily miss something vital. We use a different lens or a different filter or a different angle to block out other things, so we can focus on the thing we need to see.

So, let’s talk spiritual lenses. There are physical lenses we use when we see everything around us, but we also each have a spiritual lens. When people looked at Jesus, as He was going through his ministry, they were all looking through a certain spiritual lens. And we do too.

What do you see when you look at Jesus? What do you see when you read the Bible? What’s your lens?

We’ve been going through the Book of Mark in our junior high Sunday School class downstairs, looking at Jesus’ ministry and the things that were happening back then. We’re getting up to Mark 11 now, and I thought it’d be fun to give you all a little peek into what we’re studying. Here in Chapter 11, Jesus is getting into Jerusalem for the last time. We have the whole Palm Sunday story: this really great guy with the donkey and the palm branches and everything, and then Jesus walks right in and starts flipping tables. It’s everyone’s favorite part, right? He has the whip and he’s just whipping people and chasing them out. But what’s happening here, what did Jesus walk in on? He’s going after people who had set up business in the temple. I trust most of you know this story, you know a little of what is going on, but for those of you who don’t, this had to do with the sacrifices being offered at the temple.

You know people would come to the temple to offer sacrifices, but it can be kind of inconvenient to bring an animal all the way to the temple from wherever it was people were coming from. They came from all over the world. Long way to bring a little bird, or a lamb or something. So, they were selling some sacrifices at the temple; just show up and buy one, problem solved. But people coming from all over the world had different kinds of currency.

Well, it's hard to sell stuff when everyone uses a different currency, so they had money changers there, who could convert everything into temple currency. Seems like it actually got to the point where people were practically running banks out of the temple; people were depositing money and leaving it there; you had large sums of money being exchanged, and it was a great business. And it kept things running smoothly.

From the perspective of the religious leaders at the time, this seemed like an awesome idea. They made good money from it, and the temple ran smoothly. But Jesus didn't think so. This didn't seem awesome to Him. He was looking at it not from a worldly perspective, but a kingdom perspective.

The religious leaders were looking at the temple thinking "How can we make money? How can we balance our budget? How do we make this nice and easy?"

Jesus was looking through a different lens though. The kingdom lens doesn't ask "How do we make money?" It asks, "How can we bring people closer to God?" And thus begins our final conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. Today, we're going to look at three key questions Jesus was challenged with in this last week of his ministry, and what these questions can teach us about the different lenses we might use to look at ministry and church.

We already read the first challenge; by what authority are you doing these things? These religious leaders are trying to get Jesus to stop this disruptive behavior, and their first attempt is to try to remove any authority from Him. They really saw two sources of authority in the area; political authority from Rome, and religious authority that came from them. The goal of this question is to try to show the people that Jesus had no recognized authority to chase out these businesses, no matter how much the people liked it. These guys, not Jesus, were the authority on matters of the temple.

Jesus has a very interesting response. Jesus actually gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their authority before the people. They claimed to be the authority, right? Here's their chance to prove it. John the Baptist, was his message from God, or was it from men? Basically, Jesus is asking them; was John a prophet, or was he a lunatic? Was he crazy? There are no other options here. The guy was going out into the middle of the desert, wearing camel's hair, eating locusts, and dunking

people in the water. If you're doing that, you're either a prophet, or you need to be committed. So, the simple question for the religious authorities, the religious experts, was: John "thumbs up or thumbs down?"

Notice their discussion of the question. They aren't looking at this question from the perspective of "what is true," are they? Their entire perspective is, what happens to our reputation if we answer one way or another. What will people think of us? What will people think of me? If I say John is a prophet, then I'm criticized for rejecting him. If I say he's crazy, this crowd over here, I could get in a lot of trouble with them, because they really liked him.

It's really easy to lose sight of the truth when we focus on what's popular, isn't it? When our priority is our reputation, truth is one of the first things to go out the window. Every time. And in front of everyone, they're forced to reveal that they really have no authority at all. After everything John had said and done, they couldn't say whether or not his message was true.

Now the race is on! Someone has to take this Jesus down a peg. We can't have Passover starting with Jesus flipping over everyone's tables. This is the major money season. Read what happens next. in Mark chapter 12, starting with verse 13.

"Oh Jesus, you're such a great guy, so awesome." Does anyone fall for that kind of flattering? It's obvious what they're doing, right? Look at this combination, Pharisees and Herodians. Some of you might not know, this is a really unusual combination. These are two groups that did not get along. The Pharisees were the guys who were all about religious purity. Theologically, they were actually closer to Jesus in terms of theology than any other group at the time. Herodians were more along the lines of Roman sympathizers. Think Herod. They liked Herod, they liked Roman rule.... Pharisees ...eh, not so much. More conflict there than agreement. But they both agreed, "we want to get this Jesus guy out of here." He's getting way too popular with the people. So, they ask a trap question on whether or not it's right to pay taxes to Caesar.

If Jesus says, yes, pay taxes, the Pharisees are going to go to the people and say: "Look at this Jesus guy, he's supporting Rome! He wants us to pay taxes to this pagan empire, why should we trust Him?" And nobody likes paying taxes, right? All those forms, the W2s, the 1099s the T1000-1s the blue32s; OK I'm not an accountant, I'm pretty sure I made one of those up, but that's not the point. The point is, if Jesus answers yes, the Pharisees are going to discredit Him. If He says no, don't pay taxes, the Herodians are going to report Him to Rome, and he'll be arrested for rebellion. Simple.

Look at Jesus' response. "Bring me a denarius." Pretty cool response, right? It would have had a picture of Tiberius Caesar Augustus on it, his fancy titles, maybe somewhat blasphemous titles;

they had a tendency of lifting Roman emperors up to godhood. They sell them on e-bay now apparently.

What's the lens they're asking the question from? Why don't we want to pay taxes? Hey, it's my money, right? What's mine is mine, I don't want to let someone else have my money. But what is money to Jesus? Worldly treasures don't last. Tiberius wants a bunch of coins with his face on them? Fine. Give them to him. He's not taking them with him to Heaven. Right? All the silver and gold in the world won't save him.

Let the greedy have their wealth, because we have something greater. Something eternal, that won't fade; it can't be stolen, it won't rust. Do you believe it? Do you believe you have a treasure that will last through eternity?

Ok, last challenge, are you ready? Read in Mark 22, starting with verse 23.

This is a classic gotcha question from the Sadducees. The Sadducees were looking at God through a very limited lens. They didn't believe in anything more than what you see. They put God in a box. God is limited to what we can understand.

So, a little bit about the theology of the Sadducees. No Heaven, no afterlife, nothing after you die. It's like that John Lennon song; imagine there's no Heaven. It's easy if you try. No Hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Well, we don't have to imagine. When people don't believe in Heaven or Hell, this is what you get; you get a Sadducee.

There weren't that many of them, but they held quite a bit of wealth and power, because that's what they were concerned with. The here and now. They rejected most of the Old Testament; they only believed the first five books of the Bible. They were primarily focused on the temple administration; the High Priest tended to come from their ranks, so all those tables Jesus was flipping over: that was their jurisdiction. That temple administrative stuff was all Sadducees. And here they're trying to prove to Jesus that there is no Heaven.

They are trying to prove to the Son of God, who came down from Heaven, that there is no Heaven. Let that sink in for a moment.

Look at how Jesus responds. They're in error because they don't know the scripture, and they don't understand just how powerful God is. They don't know the scripture; they throw most of it out, and what little they do keep they still don't understand. God is not limited to our expectations, is He? But look at the verse Jesus quotes; He quotes from Exodus here. That's one of the books the Sadducees DO accept as scripture. Jesus points to God's words, as proof that death

is not the end. “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Not “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” I am. I was, and I still am, because they still are. That’s Jesus’ argument here; God is referring to these ancient patriarchs as people who are still alive, which means death isn’t the end.

So, what is the lens we’re looking at in these questions? Do you evaluate things based on what’s popular, or based on what you are convinced is true? Is your life centered on the material things or the eternal things? Do you walk by faith or by sight? And I want to make something clear here; there is nothing wrong with asking questions. The problem with these leaders was not that they were asking questions; the problem is they weren’t looking for answers.

Some people think that religion means blind faith; we never question anything, never test anything, just accept it all as true. But Jesus answered questions. He may have criticized the disciples for their lack of faith, but then He turned around and gave them a reason to believe. Jesus wouldn’t have spent all his time teaching and doing miracles if He didn’t want us to go to Him with our questions.

So, ask questions. Ask us questions here. We have a lot of folks at this church who know a lot about the Bible, a lot about the history, so if you have a question, ask, and don’t think that makes you look foolish or doubtful. We’re here to seek the truth together.

OK... now is the really hard part. Some of you might not like what I have to say here, but I can’t finish this sermon without zeroing in on one key thing. The Sadducees, in particular, lost sight of the eternal. Their focus was entirely on worldly success. They became so obsessed with running the temple well, balancing their budgets, keeping things easy, that they forgot why the temple was there in the first place. Instead of a house of prayer, it was a house devoted to profit.

Whenever your focus is on worldly success, without fail your worship will die. It probably started with good intentions. Most things do. But in the end, they focused so much on running a great market, they stopped bringing people closer to God. They forgot why they were there in the first place.

Our church, Calvary Church. Why are we here? Are we here just to keep the lights running and the utilities paid for the building? As long as we balance our budget every year, is that a successful church? To have millions of dollars stored away in an endowment fund, never to be touched? Are we a church if we make really good food? Have a great food festival? Have a lot of kids coming to Sunday school, teaching the next generation about God?

Great banquets, lots of events, going from luncheon to banquet to one event to another event?

What makes a church, why are we here? You see, we're not immune to the mistakes that the Sadducees made. We can make those same mistakes too.

I wonder, if Jesus came by during our banquets or our food festival, would He start flipping tables over? Ok, I don't pretend to know the answer to that question. Don't get me wrong, I'm still here, helping out with all of this. We were here yesterday prepping for the food festival; we went out into the neighborhood across the street and passed out fliers, and we'll be setting up after church and we need some help. We're going to put on a great food festival this year.

But whether you believe me or not, I need to stress that this is very dangerous ground we're walking on. This is thin ice. In my time doing college ministry, I met a lot of folks with a variety of church backgrounds. I've met a lot of people, and when you talk to them about church, the thing that comes to their minds isn't prayer, it isn't Bible studies, it isn't serving the poor, or spiritual growth; it's "yeah, my church was always making me serve food at our luncheons," "My church was always just giving me work to do, they were just getting whatever they could out of me, that's why I don't want to go to church anymore."

I go to our church meetings, I sit in on our discussions, and I'm telling you, if the lens you look at your church activities through is the same lens the Pharisees and the Sadducees used (the lens of balancing budgets, making money, the lens of "this is how we've always done it, this is the tradition") rather than the lens of "where is God leading us? How are we bringing people closer to God? What is God's will?" you might be in trouble. That mindset doesn't end well. That temple is gone now, isn't it? As they were walking around the city, and the disciples were in awe of how great the temple was, Jesus told them that it would all be gone within one generation. And sure enough, less than forty years later, it was all gone.

I've heard a lot of you share some of your frustrations with me. You feel burnt out, and you don't know where you're going, whether it's work and career or stuff here at church, too much going on, juggling so many things. What if the reason we're feeling so burnt out is we've left behind the yoke that Jesus was offering us and have taken up all these burdens and cares we really don't need to. We're selling doves and exchanging currency and holding deposits and all this work.

Are we taking the time to pray together? Prayer time at church is next week right, first of the month? Who's going? Are we going to be so busy getting ready for a day of selling food that we won't have time to pray for each other? Is this a house of prayer or a house of sou boreg?

And I admit, I'm just as guilty in this. It's so easy for me to adjust my own lens so that I'm so busy focusing on this event or that event that I'm not there when it's time to just sit down and pray. It's so easy to lose our focus and to focus on the seen rather than the unseen.

Let's challenge each other. Let's examine our hearts, examine our ministries. I know we're in between pastors now, and it's easy to use that as an excuse to just hit the pause button, to take a step backward rather than a step forward. That's kind of what was happening to the religious leaders back then; they were waiting for the Messiah. But I'm telling you, if we step forward together, if we take that kingdom lens and look at everything we do and ask God what it is He truly desires from us, you'll be amazed at the miracles we'll see.

## NEW WINESKINS SERMON AT CALVARY ARMENIAN CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Acts 15:1-6:

“Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.” Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.” The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

“You Christians, you just pick and choose what you follow in the Bible.” Have you ever gotten that comment from someone? It usually comes up when we’re talking about living moral lives, particularly when the topic is on immorality that is popular in our culture, and the person will respond, “yeah, but the Bible also says not to eat pork, but you don’t follow that.”

So why should I listen to the Bible when it says... any number of things... To the Christian who isn’t prepared, it can often be difficult to know how to respond to such a challenge. And of course, this isn’t a new topic of discussion. We see in this passage that very early on in the Christian church there was discussion on what parts of the Old Testament still apply to us today. We hear Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, that He hasn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So, that leaves us with the question, what parts of the Old Testament have been fulfilled, and how do we know we’re no longer under these laws? After all, the Christian is no longer under law, but under grace.

In the beginning, it wasn’t that much of an issue, because all the early Christians were converting from Judaism. They were used to following Jewish customs and ceremonies; they didn’t eat pork or worship idols, so they tended to just keep doing things according to Jewish custom.

But now, a bunch of Gentiles were becoming believers, and a lot of Christians, especially the ones from Jerusalem who were Pharisees up until this point, thought that you first needed to become Jewish, then become Christian. And that meant being circumcised, which was the single most important mark of being Jewish. But Paul, who spent the majority of his ministry reaching out to Gentiles, and saw many Gentiles filled with the Holy Spirit, realized that this wasn’t the way to go.

Being circumcised meant you were no longer trusting in grace, but rather felt that you needed to earn salvation by following the law.

Pay close attention here, because there's something very important in Peter's response:

Acts 15:7-10:

“After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Here's Peter's logic. He's thinking back to when He shared the gospel with the Roman centurion, Cornelius. And He realized something. The Holy Spirit, who all Christians received as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance when we come to faith (Ephesians 1:14) came on these Gentiles who weren't circumcised. What does that mean? It means you don't need to be circumcised to receive the Holy Spirit; you don't need to be circumcised to be saved.

Then in Acts 15:12:

“The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.”

Now we have a solid demonstration from God's own power, Christians don't need to be circumcised to be saved, because the Holy Spirit comes upon Gentiles who weren't circumcised. What we have to realize is that our source of knowing what parts of the Old Testament still apply to us isn't just random feelings we come up with on our own, or just picking the things that are convenient; our source is the Bible. It's what Jesus did and taught, and what the disciples did and taught.

From that, we can see very clear divisions in the Old Testament law into three parts.

The moral law, which is tied to God's character, tied to holiness, tied to Godly living, and still applies to us. The ceremonial law, which is the part of the law that Jesus fulfilled and thus is completed for us. This includes rituals of sacrifice and ceremonies and things like that; we don't

need to complete anymore. Last, there is the civil law, which pertains specifically to the nation of Israel and has to do with the practical running of that nation.

Now the ceremonial law and the civil law have principles that we can still apply today, but we don't have an obligation to follow those laws the way ancient Israel did. The moral law, in contrast, is work the Holy Spirit does in our lives, causing us to grow in holiness and a desire to please God. And while we don't earn our salvation by living moral lives or being good enough, God does call us to live holy lives. And we see that distinction played out next as James addresses the council meeting.

Acts 15:13-21:

When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

"After this I will return  
and rebuild David's fallen tent.  
Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,  
that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things'—  
things known from long ago.

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Notice here, He isn't just going off of people's experiences: He's also looking at scripture. The Bible is the ultimate authority, and here He quotes from Amos 9, which is one of the passages in the Old Testament that speaks of a day when the Gentiles will come to faith. James is saying, look, we know from the scriptures that this time would come: when the Messiah comes, Gentile nations will start following the one true God, and we're seeing that happen.

They might be thinking of other passages, like Jeremiah 9:25-26:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh— Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant

places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.”

Here we see even in the Old Testament, God doesn't care about the outer appearance of circumcision, but rather the status of our hearts. They might be thinking about some of the things Jesus taught, such as the following.

Mark 7:14-23:

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

At the time, this was very confusing to Jesus' disciples, because they were still living in a framework of finding righteousness by following the laws of Leviticus, and the law clearly indicated certain foods as unclean. So, when Jesus first says this, they think he's speaking in a parable, because if you eat the wrong food, you'd be unclean. But Jesus is perfectly clear; focus on what's coming out of your mouth because it doesn't matter what's going in.

Now, if you analyze the foods that were outlawed in Leviticus, there actually is quite a bit of wisdom in it. The kinds of animals, like pigs or rabbits, that were declared unclean, aren't really good sources of food for a farmer living thousands of years ago, because you would be feeding them food that you could also be feeding people with.

Cows and sheep, meanwhile, will go out in a field and eat grass that can grow in areas where you can't easily plant crops to grow. So, while the ancient Jewish farmers would have benefited economically by following the laws in Leviticus, Jesus wants us to know that monitoring the food you're eating isn't really the righteousness God is looking for.

Matthew 5:17-18:

“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.”

As Jesus is teaching, He wants us to understand that his purpose is the fulfillment of the scriptures. He’s living the righteous life of following the law because we couldn’t do it. And thus, the ceremonial requirements of the law are fulfilled in Him. And that changes things. This is what Jesus meant when He gave that parable on new and old wineskins:

Matthew 9:16:

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

Jesus’ coming, his death and resurrection has changed things. The old framework of following rituals and ceremonies isn’t going to work anymore.

And Peter has such a clear statement as he’s reflecting on his ministry to Cornelius and the other Gentiles with him; why would we burden Gentiles with the requirements of the law when none of us, none of us today, and none of our ancestors, were able to follow it?

But God also calls us to holiness; we’re still called to flee from sin and run towards righteousness. Having our sins forgiven isn’t opening up some free-for-all where nothing matters, and we live following every sinful passion we have. Jesus makes it very clear; he’s setting us free from sin so we can live righteously. So, what does living righteously look like?

There are some things that are pretty obvious, even to the Gentiles. The apostles don’t need to tell them not to murder, steal, or obvious things like that. However, there were a lot of immoral practices that were considered normal for the Gentiles at the time, particularly sexual immorality and idol worship. So, in their letter, that’s what the apostles focus on.

You’re not required to follow the Old Testament ceremonial law; things like circumcision or food restrictions or things like that. But living moral lives means staying away from sexual immorality, which is equally popular today in our modern culture as it was back then in ancient Roman culture.

When people criticize Christian morality with things like, “Oh, your morality is outdated, you need to get with the times.” (You’ve heard those lines, right?) The reality is our modern-day

culture on this issue looks just like an ancient pagan Roman community. And just like the Christian views are unpopular today, they were unpopular back then, so the apostles want to make it clear: yes, we know this is counter-cultural, but this is the righteousness Christ has called us to. All of the issues the apostles bring up in this letter (idol worship, sexual immorality, drinking blood, and killing animals by strangling them to eat them) would have been things that would have been considered normal in a pagan society, so those are the issues they want to highlight.

And before you say, “Hey, isn’t the meat from strangled animals and the drinking blood thing a food restriction that Jesus said not to worry about,” the drinking of blood would have been part of a lot of pagan rituals, and generally pretty unhealthy. And the restriction on how you kill the animal also touches on the ethics of killing an animal humanely to minimize its suffering. And these commands, interestingly enough, predate the laws of Moses; they go all the way back to the times of Noah when God instructed him on how to eat animals. So, these things aren’t arbitrary, but they would have made Christians look silly in the midst of a pagan society that considered all the things in this letter as normal and fun.

So why should we as Christians care about these things? After all, this was all stuff that was happening two thousand years ago, so why do we care now? First of all, I think it’s important simply for Christians to be able to answer the question, why is the moral law still binding but not the ceremonial law of the Old Testament? As Christians, we will be asked that question, and we need to be able to answer it.

But beyond that, this also goes to the heart of what our basis for salvation is. We’re not saved by following the law, we’re not saved by following rituals, and we need to be on guard for false teachings that try to burden us with the feeling that we need to earn our salvation through good works. We’re called to live righteous lives, but it’s not our good deeds that earn our way into Heaven. So many people I’ve encountered, who live with this burden like they need to earn their way into Heaven by living perfect lives. Always questioning, “am I good enough, will I make the cut?” Or the opposite, people who put themselves up on a pedestal thinking they’re better than everyone else because they’ve been righteous enough to earn their way into Heaven.

I remember a few years ago when my old roommate was transformed. We were sitting down at the kitchen table talking theology, and I was explaining to him that we don’t earn our way into Heaven by doing good works; Jesus paid the price for us, and we’re saved by trusting in Him, and you could just see the transformation happen in Him. And He was on fire afterward; it was amazing to watch.

We also need to remember that living righteously is often going to be counter-cultural. We’re always going to be criticized for it, in the same way the early Christians were. The apostles were

very deliberate in highlighting the things believers were called to that would have made them unpopular in the pagan society they were living in, and we can find some comfort in knowing that these Gentile converts handled it by God's grace, the same grace at work in us. They didn't give in to Jewish pressure to base their righteousness in following the law, and they didn't give in to pagan pressure to continue to live lives of immorality, and here we are two thousand years later following their example.

Lastly, it highlights the importance of studying the Bible carefully. Obviously, I don't have time in such a short sermon to go step by step through everything in Old Testament law to highlight what falls under each category of moral versus ceremonial versus civil, or what principles we can pull from the ceremonial and civil laws that could be beneficial today, but ultimately the Bible itself is the authority on these things. We don't pick and choose things because they're convenient; we follow them because we trust that our Creator knew what He was doing when He gave us these words.

## BE TRANSFORMED: FORGIVENESS

Colossians 3:13:

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

We’re in week five of the Sermon on the Mount, and this week is all about forgiveness. It can sometimes make us angry when we’re told to forgive someone, can’t it?

I remember sometimes getting into fights with my brother and sister when I was younger, and Mom and Dad would tell us we needed to apologize and forgive each other. But I didn’t want to forgive; I wanted to get even.

Some people can hold grudges their entire lives, trapping bitterness inside them, hoping that bitterness will somehow one day hurt the person we’re angry with. But that bitterness becomes a prison for you, and you’re the one who ends up staying a slave and being hurt.

Forgiveness is a huge theme in “Spider-man 3.” In this movie, Spider-man finally comes face to face with the man who murdered his Uncle Ben, and he’s filled with anger and hatred. He wants to kill this man, whatever it takes, but now this guy has superpowers too; he’s made out of sand and is pretty difficult to fight. This only makes Spider-man angrier, until the point where he’s taken over by the alien suit Venom, which gives him incredible strength but amplifies his anger and his hatred even more, to the point where he almost kills his long-time friend Harry.

At the same time, Harry is holding on to his hatred of Spider-man, blaming Peter for the death of his father. So, Harry spends most of the movie trying to kill Peter, or at the very least destroy his life.

And then we have Eddie Brock, who decides to make a name for himself by falsifying some pictures of Spider-man to make it look like Spider-man was committing crimes. Peter exposes his lies, and gets him fired, and now Eddie is filled with hatred and wants revenge on Peter. Eventually, he gets taken over by the Venom suit and sets out to kill Peter Parker.

Life can be really complicated like this, can’t it? One wrong turn affects the course of one life, which hurts another, which hurts another after that. Before long, you have this tangled web of hatred that has taken control of everyone. Nobody can find peace; all they can’t think about is getting vengeance. How do we get free of that?

The apostle Paul gives us a very simple tool in this verse; we can forgive because God forgave us. We can forgive because we have promises from God that give us more than anything this life can offer. It doesn't matter how many people hurt us, because we know the Creator of the universe, and He hasn't forgotten us.

And forgiveness can be contagious. As we get to the end of the movie, Harry finally realizes his father's death wasn't really Spider-man's fault and sets out to save the life of his friend. Peter realizes that Sandman killed his uncle by accident, he never actually wanted to shoot him, and after a great deal of pain finally manages to forgive him. The only one who refuses to forgive is Eddie, and he ends up being destroyed by his obsession with revenge.

Listen to me here, because if you can understand this at a young age, you will avoid a lot of hardships in the future. Bitterness and revenge do nothing but trap you in the pain of your past, and limit the path you can take in the future. Forgiveness is what sets you free, so that the path you walk in the future is no longer defined by those who hurt you in the past. It doesn't mean the person who hurt you won't be punished, and it doesn't mean you'll let them do it again, but it means your soul is set free to focus on things other than trying to bring pain to the one who hurt you. We can trust that God will bring all things into judgment at the right time.

As I watch that final scene where Spider-man forgives Sandman, I like to think that part of his struggle is forgiving himself as well. He always blamed himself for Uncle Ben's death, and with Sandman appearing all that hatred and pain had a new target. I think that's true for us too; sometimes the anger and hatred we have for someone is really anger we have with ourselves. That's why God's forgiveness is so important. So powerful. When we're forgiven, the anger we have against ourselves is lifted, and we're able to move forward in peace. That's really what the Christian walk is all about: the forgiveness Jesus offers us by dying on the cross.

So don't hold a grudge, either against yourself or someone else. Just believe Jesus when He says: You're forgiven.

## BE TRANSFORMED: HONESTY

Matthew 5:33-37:

“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

You ever get pulled into those games where you say something and then say “Oh that didn't count; I had my fingers crossed.” Or we look for excuses to get out of something, or we make an excuse for it to be okay to tell a lie. We lie for different reasons sometimes; we're looking to steal something or take advantage of someone. Sometimes, we're legitimately scared to tell the truth. And maybe other times we're just confused; we're not really sure what the truth is. And as a result one of the biggest struggles we can go through in life is questioning whether or not we can believe something that someone says. Are they telling the truth or are they lying? If only we had some magical item that could always tell us!

And that brings us to the superheroine Wonder Woman. She's one of the most powerful heroines in her world and her reflexes can dodge anything. Bracelets that can block anything. A sword that can cut through anything. She's so strong that she teamed up with Superman to carry someone who weighed infinity. I don't know how strong you have to be to carry infinity but apparently, she could do it.

There are many different comic versions of Wonder Woman but one of the things they all have in common is the lasso of truth. A magic lasso that would force anyone caught in it to answer truthfully to any question they're asked. No crossing my fingers, no crossing my heart, no hope to die, just pure plain truth.

As Christians, one of the things we want to strive for is to walk through life as if we're always caught in this magic lasso to always tell the truth, whether or not it's what someone wants to hear. This is really hard, isn't it? Sometimes telling the truth is admitting our failures not just to others but maybe to ourselves or maybe it causes us to miss out on something we want.

My aunt was sharing a story with me the other day. Two friends of hers wanted to get their COVID-19 vaccine early. They knew they couldn't get the vaccine shots without an appointment, but they knew they couldn't schedule an appointment because it wasn't their turn yet. So, what did

they do? They went to the site anyway. And when the person there asked them if they had appointments, they lied and they said they did and they were able to get their shots.

Sometimes we justify our lies by saying they're not a big deal and no one gets hurt if I tell just a little lie, right? Except those sites that are giving out the vaccines only have enough doses for the people that make appointments. If someone goes in and gets one anyway, that means at the end of the day someone who made an appointment and needed to get the vaccine wouldn't get it. And that might have been their only chance to get the shot, so what happens to them now?

Even something we think is a very simple lie that doesn't matter might actually be a matter of life or death for someone else. Or maybe we're worried that the truth might upset someone. You guys know I was diagnosed with cancer when I was fifteen years old and that was a very upsetting truth to hear. But if the doctor hadn't told us the truth, if he had lied and said, "Oh don't worry you're fine," I couldn't have gotten the treatment that I needed to survive. I would have died unless he told me the truth.

There are consequences to lying but most importantly if the people in your life can't trust what you say, how can you have a real relationship with them? How can they even know your friendship is real? We always have excuses to lie but at the end of the day, the real reason we do is often because we don't trust God to provide for us when we tell the truth. We need to believe that our words matter to God and trust that He will watch over us when we commit to doing what's right.

So let's not make excuses. We'll trust in God and believe that He will provide.

## BE TRANSFORMED: REDEEMED

I Corinthians 6:9-11:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you.

Let's focus on not being judgmental as we look at the Sermon on the Mount. It is something that always makes us feel bad doesn't it?

When someone looks down on you and acts like they're better, it often makes us feel pretty bad about ourselves. Paul is writing this letter of First Corinthians to a church that had a lot of that going on. There were a lot of conflicts, a lot of pride, and Paul is trying to help them have the right perspective on how we should live our lives and how we should treat other people. He's giving them an important reminder here, first reminding them that our sin separates us from God and then a reminder that we were all separated from God at one point and equally needed salvation.

We all needed to be redeemed from our evil ways that used to control us. Redemption from the path of evil is always a great story and it makes me think of the plot of the movie "Megamind." The movie starts off by introducing us to a supervillain Megamind. And the superhero who always stops him is named Metro Man. It's a classic story of good and evil!

Megamind always makes evil plans and Metro Man always defeats him and sends him back to jail. No matter what Megamind does, he can never seem to win. It was always the goal of Megamind for his evil to one day win something that seemed impossible until one fateful day Megamind finally wins and defeats the hero Metro Man. His life goal was finally realized, and he gained everything he ever wanted.

Now he was in control of the city. However, it wasn't enough for him. It's funny because sin often has that effect in our lives. The belief that something bad will be our satisfaction in life and give us fulfillment. If I get this one thing then my life will be complete. We spend everything we have to get that goal and maybe we get it only to find that it doesn't give us the satisfaction we're looking for. Our lives are still just as empty. We then search for the next thing to satisfy our lives. Yet nothing we find can truly fill the emptiness we have.

Megamind achieved his goal only to find that it didn't give him the fulfillment he was looking for. The next thing Megamind tries is to create a new superhero to fight against, in the hopes that a

new enemy will give him something exciting to do. The plan backfires of course and instead of becoming a hero, Titan decides to become a villain and terrorize the city. A bad situation has now gotten much worse and that's exactly what sin does. We go from one desire to the next looking for satisfaction and never finding it. Maybe the next one, we say to ourselves.

It doesn't seem that bad at first, little things here and there. Bit by bit one temptation after another, until we find ourselves in over our heads and sin has taken complete control of our lives. What can we do in that hopeless situation?

Paul is reminding us in First Corinthians that it's in this hopeless situation that God rescues us. Jesus didn't die so that good people could become a little better. He died because we needed someone to pay the penalty for our sins and redeem us. We need a rescue, and we need redemption. As the famous writer C.S. Lewis wrote, "We aren't good people who need to become better; we're rebels who need to lay down our arms."

We're all Megamind at one point seeking an evil path hoping to find satisfaction. But Megamind finally realizes that his evil wasn't getting him anywhere and now it's up to him to save the city from this villain he created. He repents and turns away from evil and turns towards good and ultimately that's where he finds his fulfillment and satisfaction.

This path to redemption is what Paul was reminding the Corinthians about in this passage. We were all on this path of evil at some point, even if it didn't look that bad at first. And maybe God rescues us before it gets really bad, or maybe it's only after our lives completely fall apart that God steps in and restores us. Whatever our stories, whatever our path, we shouldn't be arrogant about it or think that we're better than someone else, just because their story had more hardships or worse mistakes. Instead, we should be amazed at the mercy and forgiveness of God and think carefully about the price Jesus paid for each of us on that cross.

And also, don't feel guilty because our past is left behind us. Always remember our victory is in Jesus. He is the one who makes us new. It's only because of Him that sin will always lose.

## BE TRANSFORMED: GOD CHANGING US

The truth is we can only serve one master and only make one thing the top priority in our life. So, what's it going to be? There are a lot of things in this world fighting for our attention and looking back at the Sermon on the Mount we see that Jesus has laid out a lot of difficult challenges for each of us and now we're faced with a choice: which path are we going to follow?

Romans 12:1-2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

At the end of the day that's what it's all about. We can listen to all the sermons we want, study the Bible every day, but ultimately what we need most is transformation; we need God to work in us, renew our minds, focus our hearts, and change our attitude, and God is faithful when we ask Him. When we invite God into our lives and believe that Jesus died for our sins and rose again three days later, God comes in and starts working on us and bit by bit we find ourselves transformed. Our desires change and we start to understand things about God in the world that we didn't understand before and we start having a new hope growing in us.

I want to challenge each of you to spend some time in prayer asking God to transform you and renew your mind and align your heart to His and see what happens. We're not saved or transformed by our own hard work or good deeds. We're saved by grace through faith and that salvation doesn't leave us unchanged. It transforms us.

We get a new master in our lives, someone who only wants what's good for us so don't settle for anything else.

## BE TRANSFORMED: USING OUR WEALTH WISELY

Proverbs 30:7-9:

Two things I ask of you, O Lord, do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

We live in a world where wealth is seen as one of the greatest achievements you can have in life. The one with the most expensive stuff is seen as a successful person. That's probably part of what makes Batman such a popular hero; he's wealthy beyond our wildest imaginations. His story starts with great tragedy, losing his parents at such a young age, leaving a void that no earthly treasure can fill. Yet he's a billionaire, able to afford every weapon and tool you could ever need, even building entire space stations for other heroes to use, all in the hopes of preventing crime from destroying other families. His wealth seems to allow him to do anything.

But there's a danger in having that much wealth that we often miss when we're looking from the outside. Even though we usually think wealth gives us the freedom to do whatever we want, it can often become a prison as well, taking control of our lives. We become dependent on it, and we need to protect it. What if someone robs me? What if I lose it? How can I be sure my possessions are safe?

This proverb is a warning to us that we need to avoid the extremes. Obviously, we don't want to be in poverty, because then we might become so hungry that we're tempted to steal to survive, but we also don't want excessive riches either. If we have too much treasure on this earth, we stop thinking so much about the eternal treasures. Our hearts become so engrossed in our treasures here that we start missing out on what God offers us. Our wealth actually ends up being a prison for us. Sometimes we have to get rid of some of our riches in order to really be free.

That is an interesting twist in the movie "Dark Knight Rises." The villain Bane comes to Gotham, and he knows Batman's secret. Most of all, he knows how to take Batman down, how to go after his wealth. A raid on the stock exchange allows him to fake Bruce Wayne's identification, and in a single moment, he is able to cost Batman his entire fortune. How can Batman win without his unlimited wealth?

But of course, Batman is able to win eventually, but more than win, the "Dark Knight Rises" movie gives Batman something we rarely see in any Batman story... a happy ending. After making it look like he was killed in the nuclear explosion, Bruce Wayne is finally able to retire and find

peace. No more chains from his wealth or company, no more burden of constantly protecting the city, we see him finally enjoy his reward for living a life of sacrifice. He gains the freedom Alfred always hoped he would.

It may sound strange to us, but the same is true of our eternal rewards that we're striving for. When our eyes are fixed on Heaven, we realize we can't take our wealth with us; we'll be leaving it all behind when we die. Of course, we should use our possessions wisely on this earth, and not squander them doing silly things, but we shouldn't be so attached to them that they make us a prisoner. Just like Bruce Wayne in "Dark Knight Rises," we use what we have to do good, being obedient to God as best we can, and in the end, we leave it all behind as we journey into what God has next for us.

So don't leave yourself in poverty, but also don't seek out great wealth. Everything we have on earth can be stolen or destroyed, so focus on the eternal things that last: faith, hope, and love. Because no one can ever steal that from you.

## PRAYER AND GOD'S LOVE TALK AT CAMP AREV

God's power is for us, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, but what does that mean for us? Does that mean we need to be raised from the dead too? Are we dead? We're not just talking about the resurrection in the future, we're talking about now. Maybe we don't need to physically be brought back to life, but we do need spiritual life.

Ezekiel 11:19:

"I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh."

Ezekiel 36:26:

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

What's a heart of stone? A heart that can't feel God's love and goodness: we feel dead inside; we feel like there's no purpose in life. It seeks after the pleasures of this world but is never satisfied.

A heart of flesh can actively seek after God. It's not just a change from "I don't believe in God, but now I do believe in God." It's a heart that goes from "I don't care at all about God" to "I want to be with God daily, I want my life to be guided by God's love and goodness." This is God's promise to each of us; not only does God have the power to raise Jesus from the dead, but He has the power to change our hearts.

I mentioned earlier that I became a Christian here at camp. That weekend, I realized that I was missing something crucial that I saw in others around me. They had faith. They had faith in God, that when they prayed God would hear them, and I realized that faith was the missing component in my life. I realized I didn't understand God's power. I didn't understand God's love. I didn't understand what Paul was praying about in Ephesians.

I wondered, "What if I asked for it? What if I prayed and asked for faith?" Could God answer a prayer like that? I thought about what I had been learning over that past year going to church, how I had seen the evidence for the resurrection, how I had contemplated the reasons to believe the gospels were true, and I realized the evidence was there. The most logical explanation was that God was real, and Jesus was exactly who the Bible claimed He was. So, what was holding me back?

How many of you know we can have head knowledge of something without really putting our trust in it? I can be on the top floor of a burning building, knowing there's a net out there waiting to catch me when I jump, seeing all the other people that jumped before and were perfectly safe, but in that moment, I freeze up in fear. Ok, yes, I'm an engineer, so of course there's going to be math. It can't be helped. And that's what I felt in that moment: fear. If I pray this prayer, what's going to happen?

It was a simple prayer I prayed that night. Eleven words. God, give me the faith to make a prayer of faith. That was it. And in that moment, alone on my bed in my cabin, it was like a wrecking ball crashing through a wall in my heart, and everything changed. I experienced that power, truly experienced it, for the first time.

Now, I'm not saying that every time we pray it's like this amazing, mind-blowing experience, but I am saying that prayer changes us. It gives God an opportunity to work in our hearts. And we need to have a hunger for it.

I was in Vietnam a few months ago on a mission trip. Normally I go to Haiti with a Christian group from UCLA that I was involved with in college, but this year, Haiti has been too dangerous. Rioting and general instability. So instead, we decided to go someplace safer: Vietnam, where Christians are actively arrested by the government and put in jail just for being Christian. Actually, it's much safer now, you can have a church without being arrested, as long as you aren't being disruptive. Most of the pastors I met there have spent at least some amount of time in prison for being Christian. Some weeks, some months, some even years.

What amazed me most about the churches there was their commitment to prayer. Christians would travel over an hour to join with other believers just for prayer. And I mean, just prayer. No program, no sermon, no Bible study, no youth group game, just get together for an hour or two or three and pray together.

These are people who understand what it means to be strengthened by God's power through prayer. You don't do something like that out of ritual or just because people expect you to; you do it because something is happening in your life as a result.

Now let's pivot to understanding God's love. This is more important than ever with everyone telling us we aren't good enough. Schools and tests and universities telling us we aren't smart enough; social media telling us we aren't beautiful enough, action stars telling us we aren't strong enough, wealthy celebrities telling us we aren't rich enough... all of it weighing on our hearts telling us we aren't good enough, that we don't deserve love. And it breaks my heart to see how broken families are now. In the Bay Area, I hear stories of families where the parents spend so

much time working that they never spend any time with their kids. It's all babysitters and nannies. Kids are growing up without knowing the love of a parent.

Then there's the opposite extreme in the media. There's this message out there that you're perfect just the way you are, that there's nothing wrong with you, that you deserve whatever you want. The problem is that's a shallow message, and at some level, we know it. Someone who doesn't know anything about us, not even our name, comes and says, "You're so wonderful, you're great, you're more than enough" and deep inside we say, "You don't know me at all." Two extremes: the message that we aren't good enough to be loved, always tearing us down, and this shallow message of "everything is great" that has no power to lift us out of our brokenness.

But what's God's love? God's love sees us in our broken state, it sees us in our sinfulness, and says, "I'm going to die for that person." What's Paul praying for here? He's praying that we will be filled with faith. That we will be filled with God's love. This love that transforms us and lifts us up. If we can have any hope in this fallen world, we need to be filled with this power. It allows us to resist this call that says we're not good enough to love and tells us that God values us so much that he's willing to die for us, and not just die, but suffer a death far worse than we could ever imagine.

I don't know where you are in your walk with Christ today. Maybe some of you are feeling full of this faith and power, and maybe some of you just feel broken and empty. Maybe some are confused and don't know where to put your trust. But if you want more of this power, more of this faith in your life, tonight's the night to ask for it. In your cabin times tonight, you're going to look at the story of a desperate father who sees that his faith is lacking and cries out for help. If that's your cry tonight, then during your cabin time pray for it. If you have questions about the gospel, about the evidence for Jesus and the resurrection, or anything like that, we're around. You can ask us all week.

But you can have all the evidence in the world and be standing at the edge of that burning roof, looking down at that net ready to save you, and still be too scared to move. We need God to give us faith.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES: LOOKING AT PROVERBS

James 1:5-6:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

I don't know if you guys have ever watched "Fiddler on the Roof" but one of the funny scenes is a discussion the group has early in the movie. Every time someone says something, the main character says he is right even if they contradict each other. But they can't all be right, right? I think we all know that contradictory views can't both be true but it's often difficult to tell who's telling the truth, isn't it?

Some people just give up and say truth is relative: you have your truth, and I have my truth. But let's be honest, imagine if we built airplanes or nuclear reactors or developed new medicines just based off of our own personal truth instead of the laws of physics and chemistry. They probably wouldn't work very well, would they? We would probably end up getting a lot of people killed and like James says here, if you aren't grounded in truth and wisdom and faith, you're just going to get blown back and forth by every idea that comes your way in the same way that a wave gets blown around by the wind.

For this series, we're going to be diving into the wisdom to be found in the book of Proverbs. Many of these were written by King Solomon and compiled by kings that came after him and many were written by other leaders of the past as well. This wisdom has passed down for thousands of years that has endured to this day, and you'll find the wisdom is extremely valuable.

Proverbs 3:13-18:

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.

Looking at Proverbs gives us insight into recognizing truth, having the right influences in our lives, managing our emotions, navigating conflicts, and avoiding some of the common pitfalls in life that can really bring us down.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES: WHAT'S YOUR DELIGHT

Proverbs 10:23:

Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding.

You will see this kind of pattern in a lot of proverbs: a contrast between two things. Here we see the difference between a fool and a man of understanding. Now, in the Bible, a fool isn't just someone who lacks knowledge or common sense. It is someone who lacks a moral compass. Knowledge, understanding, and morality are all connected, and a fool is someone who has rejected all of that. They don't enjoy learning or growing. What they enjoy is doing things that are wrong not because it achieves some kind of objective (say stealing a loaf of bread because you're hungry) but because it seems funny to them even if people get hurt.

But the person of understanding enjoys wisdom: they like learning and they want to apply what they've learned to live a better life. They realize there is more to be enjoyed in a life lived righteously than there is in the cheap thrill of doing something just because it feels good in the moment. Two different people, two different enjoyments, and two different paths to go down.

This proverb leaves us to ask ourselves which of these two people am I? Do I go with the fools, or do I go with the wise? What are the things I truly enjoy and why do I enjoy them? You will notice each of the proverbs we're looking through this week are really touching on our sources of wisdom and getting us to evaluate the influences in our lives: family, teachers, friends all influence us one way or another and we'll copy little pieces from each of them.

As you're going through this week, pay attention to the people you're copying and what you are learning from them. Assess what the consequences of the decisions they're making in their lives are and ask if they have the things you would want in your own life as well.

Wisdom is crying out to us if we're willing to listen, so let's find pleasure in growing wiser.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Devotional 1 – Influence

Proverbs 4:1-9:

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction;  
pay attention and gain understanding.  
I give you sound learning,  
so do not forsake my teaching.  
For I too was a son to my father,  
still tender, and cherished by my mother.  
Then he taught me, and he said to me,  
"Take hold of my words with all your heart;  
keep my commands, and you will live.  
Get wisdom, get understanding;  
do not forget my words or turn away from them.  
Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;  
love her, and she will watch over you.  
The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.  
Though it cost all you have, get understanding.  
Cherish her, and she will exalt you;  
embrace her, and she will honor you.  
She will give you a garland to grace your head  
and present you with a glorious crown."

We see a father's loving challenge in this passage: get wisdom. While we're young, our parents and teachers will probably be our greatest sources of wisdom. Having spent many more years on earth than we have, they've had more opportunities to learn, both from their successes and their failures. And the heart of a loving parent or teacher is always to pass that knowledge down to us, so we can avoid unnecessary pain in life.

Think about the people you go to regularly for wisdom. Are they reliable? Have they demonstrated a life guided by wisdom? Have you been humble enough to listen to their advice? Most of all, are you seeking wisdom from God above everything else?

In your prayer time today, ask God to give you a heart that is willing to receive wisdom from those who have it to give.

## Devotional 2 – Correction

Proverbs 13:13-14:

Whoever scorns instruction will pay for it,  
but whoever respects a command is rewarded.  
The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,  
turning a person from the snares of death.

One of the hard things about receiving corrections is admitting we were wrong. That always takes a great deal of strength; nobody likes to admit to their mistakes. Here we see two sources of correction that can steer us away from harm: the Bible and wise teachers. These things work to guide us away from death and destruction.

Proverbs is filled with this theme: foolish people hate correction and are ultimately their own source of pain and destruction, while the wise listen to advice and discern what advice is good and what isn't.

How good are you at receiving corrections? Is it hard? Does it annoy you? Maybe it came in the form of a low score on a test, or maybe a criticism from someone. In your prayer time today, ask for the humility to use these corrections to grow, rather than letting them bring you down with bitterness.

### Devotional 3 – Sharper

Proverbs 27:17:

As iron sharpens iron,  
so one person sharpens another.

Different types of metals and minerals have different levels of hardness. The harder something is, the more difficult it is to scratch and reshape. Diamond, for instance, is so hard that it can only be scratched by other diamonds. Even the hardest materials known to man can be scratched by contact with an object made of the same material.

Here an analogy is given, comparing us to iron. In the same way, you use another piece of iron to sharpen an iron sword, we humans sharpen each other. We want to be around people who “sharpen” us in the right way, challenging us to be better, and ultimately making us stronger and more effective. The process might hurt, but in the end the final product is something powerful.

In your prayer time today, ask God to put people in your life who will sharpen you.

## Devotional 4 – Discerning

Proverbs 14:6-8:

The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none,  
but knowledge comes easily to the discerning.  
Stay away from a fool,  
for you will not find knowledge on their lips.  
The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways,  
but the folly of fools is deception.

When it comes to seeking wisdom, sometimes you need to pay more attention to who you need to avoid, and not just who to listen to. We need to watch out for scoffers and mockers and fools; people are happy to distort the truth to serve their own desires. It can be discouraging to be around them because they'll go out of their way to make fun of people who are eager to do right.

It is often said that the best way to recognize counterfeit money is to know what real money is supposed to look like. In the same way, the best defense against the people who try to deceive us is to have a solid foundation in the truth. This comes from seeking God first above all else and using the Bible as the lens we look through to see the world.

In your prayer time today, ask God for greater discernment to know truth.

## Devotional 5 - Ego

Proverbs 27:21:

The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,  
but people are tested by their praise.

We all like hearing praise from someone else. Whether it's an acknowledgement of a great achievement or a compliment of our character, we always get a little ego boost when we hear something nice about ourselves. Who doesn't like to hear good things about themselves?

This proverb warns us, however, that such compliments can sometimes give us too much of an ego. Will we let it go to our head, or will we receive it with humility? In the same way the heat of the refining process exposes impurities in precious metals like silver and gold, becoming arrogant after a compliment can expose impurities in us. We should examine ourselves carefully to make sure we don't let our egos get the better of us.

In your prayer time today, ask for the humility to not get too full of yourself when you are praised, but rather have a humble attitude.

## Devotional 6 – Steps

Proverbs 20:24:

A person's steps are directed by the Lord.

How then can anyone understand their own way?

If I had a nickel for every time I needed to change my plans, I'd be pretty rich. That's probably true for most of us. We make plans, but there are hundreds of variables that are completely out of our control. If we try to wait until there isn't any uncertainty before we act, we'll find ourselves waiting forever.

This can be frustrating at first, but if we believe God is directing our steps then we can find great comfort. Our path isn't unknown to God; He's watching us and ensuring that we are reaching the necessary destination. There may be times of confusion, and there may be times of clarity, but faith allows us to press forward even when we don't understand why God is allowing certain things to happen.

In your prayer time today, ask God for the wisdom to better understand His purposes, and the faith to keep going during uncertainty.

## Devotional 7 – Image

Proverbs 12:9:

Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant  
than pretend to be somebody and have no food.

A big, expensive mansion. Fine jewelry. The driveway filled with expensive luxury cars. These are some of the things our society will put forward as evidence that someone is successful in life. Some people are so obsessed with their image that they'll literally spend themselves into poverty to show off how "successful" they are.

This proverb is a good warning: you're better off letting everyone think you're poor than pretending to be someone wealthy. Focusing on your image creates an endless game of always trying to get more than the person next to you; you're never satisfied with what you have. Not only does it deplete your wallet, it also depletes your joy.

In your prayer time today, confess any tendency in your heart to make yourself seem greater than you actually are, and ask for contentment with what you have.

## Devotional 8 – Mockers

Proverbs 15:10-12:

Stern discipline awaits anyone who leaves the path;  
the one who hates correction will die.  
Death and Destruction lie open before the Lord—  
how much more do human hearts!  
Mockers resent correction,  
so they avoid the wise.

Mockers. Scoffers. People who always look for an excuse to make fun of others. Insults and derision are their native tongue. It's painful to be around people like that, but in the end it's far more painful to be one of them. They don't like correction. They don't accept advice. They do whatever feels right at the time.

Mixed in with these proverbs is a reminder that God sees all things, even the hearts of such people. If God sees even what is in Sheol and Abaddon (terms referring to Hell and destruction), then even the hearts of these mockers are open to Him. Since God sees our hearts, let us always try to act with the attitude that God is watching us. Rather than making fun of others, let's look to see what wisdom we can gain from them.

In your prayer time today, ask God to give you a heart that chooses to listen rather than mock.

## Devotional 9 – Anger

Proverbs 15:18:

A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,  
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.

Are you someone who makes a conflict better or worse? Can you calm down escalating emotions, or do you exacerbate them? It takes a great deal of wisdom and self-control to be the person that quiets contention. It requires intentional work, and rarely happens on its own.

There is great reward, however, in being able to calm down a conflict. Whether they are conflicts involving you or not, being able to calm things down makes it easier to work with other people and accomplish difficult tasks. Resolving conflicts makes it easier to rest and relax without having the burden of worrying if things will get worse. Most of all it brings us closer to God, who desires peace and reconciliation with those who have rebelled against Him.

In your prayer time today, ask for a heart that desires peace, and the wisdom to know how to bring it.

## Devotional 10 – Jealousy

Proverbs 27:4:

Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming,  
but who can stand before jealousy?

There are many emotions that can tear us down and derail us, but jealousy has a particularly unique power. Jealousy is the emotion that tells us “things are better over there” or “they have it so much better than me” and causes us to abandon what we have to chase after something we don’t. It causes us to resent other people simply because of what they have.

This resentment festers in us and robs us of our joy and peace. The key to resisting jealousy is to regularly reflect on the blessings God has given us that we are thankful for. We need to remind ourselves that God has given us far more than we deserve already. Did you know that if you have twenty dollars in your house and food in your refrigerator, you are one of the wealthiest people on the planet? Four or five billion people don’t have that right now.

In your prayer time today, thank God for all the blessings He has given you.

## Devotional 11 – Sorrow

Proverbs 14:13:

Even in laughter the heart may ache,  
and rejoicing may end in grief.

We will all experience sorrow in life. Whether because of loss or hardships, the things we go through can leave us disappointed and wondering how we can keep going. This proverb reminds us that people might have different ways of coping with those emotions. Some people may try to put up a front of laughing and being happy. Others might try to drown out their sorrow with distractions or even addictions. Anything that takes our mind off the pain, even if it hurts us.

Sometimes a distraction to keep our mind off the sorrow can be a good thing, but we should make sure it's the right distraction. Something that empowers us, rather than something that weakens us. Something that reminds us that God has greater things for us. Jesus reminds us that we are blessed when we mourn because those who mourn will be comforted.

In your prayer time today, ask God to be your comfort in sorrow.

## Devotional 12 – Fear

Proverbs 19:23:

The fear of the Lord leads to life;  
then one rests content, untouched by trouble.

There are many things in life that cause us to back off in fear. Sometimes our fears are justified, and sometimes they can be a little irrational. Sometimes our fears can be so great, they paralyze us and leave us unable to act.

If we are to be afraid of the things that have the power to harm us, there is one fear that should trump all: a fear of God. God's power is above all things. At first, this proverb seems a little extreme, promising that we won't suffer harm if we have a fear of God. Of course, we'll still suffer pain and hardships no matter how much we fear and trust God, but when we acknowledge God's power, we also have the assurance that God will see us through toward Heaven and eternal life. We aren't abandoned. We aren't terrified of God; rather, we acknowledge that He is greater than all the things we could fear.

In your prayer time today, thank God for being stronger than your fears.

## Devotional 13 – Evil

Proverbs 24:17-20:

Do not gloat when your enemy falls;  
when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice,  
or the Lord will see and disapprove  
and turn his wrath away from them.

Do not fret because of evildoers  
or be envious of the wicked,  
for the evildoer has no future hope,  
and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.

It can be difficult to know how to respond to people who do evil. There is no shortage of evil people in this world, and if we make it our goal to follow God and do good, we're going to find ourselves making enemies with a few of them.

These proverbs give us a little balance on how to respond to this kind of evil. For one thing, don't let yourself stress too much about them because in the end evil will be destroyed. God will win the war. While we wait, however, we want to see people who do evil repent and start doing good. We want to see the salvation that God brought to us go out to others as well. So don't rejoice when you see evil people suffering; that isn't what God wants and it shouldn't be what we want. Instead, rejoice when you see evil people repent and turn to God. This is a difficult thing to do.

In your prayer time today, ask God for the strength to pray for repentance for your enemies.

## Devotional 14 – Fools

Proverbs 26:3-5:

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,  
and a rod for the backs of fools!

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,  
or you yourself will be just like him.

Answer a fool according to his folly,  
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

It can be difficult to know how to respond to a fool. In the Proverbs, a fool refers not only to someone stupid but someone immoral. They lack both knowledge and a moral compass. In this proverb, we see three potential ways to respond. The first is to just smack them. The second is to ignore them. The third is to respond to them. These can seem like contradictions, but there is balance.

First, we are reminded that immoral people usually won't respond to reason. That's why we call the police to arrest criminals, rather than try to use words. Likewise, we don't want to stoop down to their level and start arguing like they do. However, we also want to make sure everyone knows not to listen to them, so we want to make some effort to show that they're wrong.

In your prayer time today, ask for wisdom to know how to respond to these situations.

## Devotional 15 – Hopeless

Proverbs 26:6-12:

Sending a message by the hands of a fool  
is like cutting off one's feet or drinking poison.  
Like the useless legs of one who is lame  
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.  
Like tying a stone in a sling  
is the giving of honor to a fool.  
Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand  
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.  
Like an archer who wounds at random  
is one who hires a fool or any passer-by.  
As a dog returns to its vomit,  
so fools repeat their folly.  
Do you see a person wise in their own eyes?  
There is more hope for a fool than for them.

Here we have a whole list of how hopeless and useless fools are. Everything they say or do just makes things worse. But then this list finishes with a warning: fools may be hopeless, but if you are full of yourself, if you think you're wiser than you actually are, you're even more hopeless than a fool.

Ouch, that cuts pretty deep, but it's true. When we become arrogant and cut ourselves off to advice and correction, we become just as dangerous to ourselves as a fool is. We do ourselves great harm when we hide behind the excuse "You can't be the judge of me!" to ignore the advice of someone else. In contrast, the ancient philosopher Socrates is known for saying that he was the wisest because he understood that he knew nothing. And ultimately, however great we are, we know that God is greater.

In your prayer time today, ask for a healthy level of humility, so we can accept correction.

## Devotional 16 – Resist

Proverbs 25:26:

Like a muddied spring or a polluted well  
are the righteous who give way to the wicked.

You may have heard the saying “Evil triumphs when good men do nothing.” There is some truth to that; we will always find ourselves faced with pressure to compromise on what is right, and it requires great conviction to resist the temptation to give in to evil. Of course, we want to live at peace with those around us as much as we can, but sometimes we need to put our foot down and say no to what is wrong, even if it leads to conflict. Otherwise, we’re just letting evil win.

This proverb reminds us that just as muddy water becomes bad to drink, a righteous person who gives way to evil can lose their ability to be a light to this world. So, when other options have been exhausted, sometimes the answer to evil is to stand up and fight.

In your prayer time today, ask God for the wisdom to know when to stand up and fight against evil, and the strength for the days of battle.

## Devotional 17 – Sleep

Proverbs 20:13:

Do not love sleep or you will grow poor;  
stay awake and you will have food to spare.

“Just five more minutes, Mom!” Ever said those words as your mom tries to wake you up for school? It can sometimes be difficult to wake up in the morning, especially if we had a busy night. Of course we need at least seven or eight hours of sleep to function at our best the next day, but spending too much time sleeping and resting will deprive us of many opportunities.

Getting a good pattern in your life is important for good sleep. Regularly going to sleep and waking up at the same time helps your body set an internal clock (called circadian rhythm) that makes it easier to wake up, go to sleep, and keeps you healthier. Work on your schedule so you're getting enough sleep to keep you productive during the day, and don't let laziness keep you from doing great things.

In your prayer time today, ask God to help you put together a productive schedule, so you don't miss out on opportunities.

## Devotional 18 – Generosity

Proverbs 14:31:

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,  
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

One of the sad things I see here in the Bay Area is the growing problem of poverty and homelessness. Go to the right places and you'll see entire communities living in tents. Living in poverty opens people up to many dangers, like crime or exploitation, and there are a lot of people who will take advantage of that.

Our goal as followers of Christ is to be generous to those in need and help where we can. Whether it's right here in our home city or in other countries like Haiti, there is tremendous joy in helping other people get back on their feet and put their lives together. And remember, the same God who created us created others in need around us, and perhaps He puts people in our lives so we can help them with what we've been blessed with. Be wise in how you help others, but also be generous. Work hard so you can give.

In your prayer time today, ask for more opportunities to help others.

## Devotional 19 – Honesty

Proverbs 20:10:

Differing weights and differing measures—  
the Lord detests them both.

Imagine going to the grocery store and buying a pound of apples, and the store to charges you for buying two pounds. Or buying five gallons of gas from the gas station and they charge you for six. A lot of people think that cheating can be a shortcut to getting ahead in life, and dishonest business practices have been around for a long time. This proverb describes people who would sell things while lying about how much they were giving to the customer. They would use a false weight to make it look like it was more than it really was.

God warns us that He hates it when people do that. We must resist the urge to be dishonest in our work, reminding ourselves that God values honesty. People might cheat on their taxes, lie about their products, commit all kinds of fraud, but we are called to a higher standard.

In your prayer time today, ask for power to resist the temptation to lie.

## Devotional 20 – Desire

Proverbs 13:19:

A longing fulfilled is sweet to the soul,  
but fools detest turning from evil.

I'm sure we've all felt the joy of seeing our hard work on a project finally come to fruition. The moment when we finally achieve a goal we've worked very hard to reach. There may be times we want to give up, but if we keep pressing forward, we'll find the end result is worth it. Assuming we're pursuing a worthy goal.

This proverb is a reminder of the joy that comes when we finally achieve an objective, but also a warning to make sure it's a good one, and not evil. It reminds us that fools will often have very evil objectives, and they'll hate turning away from them. Sometimes they'll even achieve them, and it will make them very happy. For a while. But in the end, God always prevails, and those who pursue evil will always suffer for it. In your prayer time today, ask for help in setting the right goals, and the strength to keep pursuing them.

## Devotional 21 – Drunkenness

Proverbs 23:29-35:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow?  
Who has strife? Who has complaints?  
Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?  
Those who linger over wine,  
who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.  
Do not gaze at wine when it is red,  
when it sparkles in the cup,  
when it goes down smoothly!  
In the end it bites like a snake  
and poisons like a viper.  
Your eyes will see strange sights,  
and your mind will imagine confusing things.  
You will be like one sleeping on the high seas,  
lying on top of the rigging.  
“They hit me,” you will say, “but I’m not hurt!  
They beat me, but I don’t feel it!  
When will I wake up  
so I can find another drink?”

There are few things I’ve seen in life more tragic than a life destroyed by alcohol. It often starts with something that seems harmless: a little drinking at a party here, a little dare from a friend there. Maybe some tragedy that drives someone to just drown out their sorrows and dull their pain. These verses remind us that the end result of that is a life that’s left a slave to the alcohol, with no escape.

I’ve seen great examples of times God has rescued people from such a path, but I’ve also seen examples of lives that were cut tragically short by addiction. Ideally, we want to help people break free of things that have taken them captive because God loves saving lives. And remember, when you go through difficult times and you’re tempted to turn to something dangerous to dull the pain, God will always give you a healthy solution to turn to instead.

In your prayer time today, ask for God to protect you from addiction.

## Devotional 22 – Greed

Proverbs 11:24-26:

One person gives freely, yet gains even more;  
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.  
A generous person will prosper;  
whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.  
People curse the one who hoards grain,  
but they pray God's blessing on the one who is willing to sell.

People often think that the only way to be secure in life is to focus just on yourself, and never worry about anyone else. When taken to the extreme, focusing on just ourselves can lead us into greed, where all that matters is accumulating more and more possessions, even to the harm of ourselves and those around us.

Part of what sets us free from greed is understanding that everything in this world is temporary. Even the nicest things will decay over time, so we don't put our security in them. Instead, we put our security in God, who is faithful to provide for our needs, not just for this life but also for eternity. We will not get all the things we may want, all the things greed may drive us to desire, but God will bless us not only with what we need but also to be a blessing to others around us.

In your prayer time today, thank God for His provision, and pray for opportunities to be a blessing to others.

## Devotional 23 – Adultery

Proverbs 6:27-33:

Can a man scoop fire into his lap  
without his clothes being burned?  
Can a man walk on hot coals  
without his feet being scorched?  
So is he who sleeps with another man's wife;  
no one who touches her will go unpunished.  
People do not despise a thief if he steals  
to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.  
Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,  
though it costs him all the wealth of his house.  
But a man who commits adultery has no sense;  
whoever does so destroys himself.  
Blows and disgrace are his lot,  
and his shame will never be wiped away.

The sanctity of marriage is something that is being increasingly disregarded in our current society. As all kinds of sexual immorality are celebrated more each day all around us, the virtue of staying faithful to a single spouse for better or worse, in sickness or in health, is seen as archaic and obsolete. Why be committed to one person when there are so many other things to explore?

But God was intentional when He created the relationship of marriage, and even if it seems fun to go against it for a while, you'll find people always suffer as a result. In the same way, you can't hold fire for long without getting burned, you can't chase after bad relationships for long before you start hurting. There is great wisdom in knowing to avoid bad relationships, no matter how strong the temptation.

In your prayer time today, ask for protection against lust and sexual immorality, and the pain they cause.

## Devotional 24 – Gluttony

Proverbs 25:16:

If you find honey, eat just enough—  
too much of it, and you will vomit.

You can have too much of a good thing. Whether it's your favorite food or your favorite entertainment (maybe even your cell phone), overindulging in something can do tremendous harm to someone. In the same way eating too much of something sweet will make you sick to your stomach, or perhaps give you diabetes. This proverb reminds us that we need to be careful that our pleasures don't consume us and mess up our lives.

This is something we really need to think about here in the USA, because we have greater access to pleasures, food, wealth, and entertainment than any other place on the planet. There's a reason obesity is such an epidemic here. When I'm in Haiti, they look at us here in the United States as if we have unlimited wealth, because in their eyes we do. So, let's be careful that we don't let our cravings destroy us.

In your prayer time today, ask God to give you strength to control your cravings.

## THE FRUIT OF THE VINE

Luke 22:14-20:

“When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.’ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, ‘Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’”

The last few days, as I’ve been lying in this hospital bed with intestinal cancer, unable to eat or drink, I’ve been thinking a lot about this passage. This final meal before his crucifixion, Jesus emphasizes two points: (1) the disciples will continue to celebrate this meal in remembrance of what’s about to happen, and (2) Jesus Himself won’t taste it again until the Kingdom of God comes. We often take the practice of the Lord’s Supper for granted; it’s a tradition and ritual that we squeeze into our regular church routines—maybe every week, maybe once a month, maybe only a few times a year. Yet for Jesus it was significant. It was something He eagerly looked forward to. It was the final meal with his disciples before his earthly ministry came to a close. Simple bread and wine, forever a symbol of his crucifixion and atonement for our sins.

There is also the longing for the next time he’ll be able to eat this meal again with his students and friends. We’ll have the chance to eat it as often as we like, but Jesus is going to have to go without it for a while. Of course, there’s no shortage of food in Heaven (and we love to dream of the new tastes and sensations we will have there). And certainly, a king can eat whatever he wants. But Jesus states in Matthew’s account, in particular, that he’ll be waiting to partake in it again until his disciples have joined him in heaven.

Having not tasted anything all week, I think I’m having an easier time imagining what that would have felt like. I probably would have savored my food a little more last week if I knew I wouldn’t be tasting things again for a while, and I certainly have a great longing to taste something again one day. Yet the taste I find myself longing for this week is our simple bread and grape juice of Communion... the Lord’s Supper.

While I don’t know when that day will be, for me, it’s simply waiting for this tube that is feeding me to be taken out at some point. We’re draining my GI tract as much as we can in preparation

for surgery—and also in the hopes that it will help clear up an obstruction. I don't know how long it will take.

I won't be able to taste anything again until that suffering is complete. Yet the eagerness I have for that day doesn't compare to the eagerness Jesus has for the day when all the children of God will partake in that great supper together. So, let's not take the Lord's Supper lightly. It's a small little piece of Heaven we get to experience here on earth as we look forward to the day when we all get to partake in it together.

## MATT SILVERMAN'S FINAL WORDS TO HIS CHURCH YOUTH GROUP IN HOSPICE DYING OF CANCER, APRIL 2024

We weren't meant to live on this Earth for eternity. In fact, eternity on this Earth would be pretty lousy, with war, disease, pain and sickness. We are looking forward to a new Kingdom, a better Kingdom. And for the Christian, that is what our hope should always be in because if our hope is in the things of this world, then we're going to get disappointed time and time again. Here, the moths and vermin destroy, and thieves break in and steal. Nothing on this earth is going to last but the promises we have in Heaven and Eternity can't be taken away and that's a promise that I like to emphasize in my sermons. Salvation is something that can't be taken away from us; there is no mistake you can make and no sin you can commit that's going to cause God to give up on those who put their trust in Him.

Paul encouraged Timothy that even if we're faithless, even during those times when we forget God and when we mess up, God remains faithful because He can't disown himself and that is God's promise for all who have put their hope in His resurrection. He died on the cross for our sins so that we will have Eternal life. We have the promise that God will not leave us, nor forsake us, and He has Heaven in store for us. So, don't let things like death scare you or make you think that God has abandoned you or forgotten you. For the Christian, death is our final reward; it's the moment when we cross the finish line and say we've done it.

We each have a different length of a race. Some of us are longer or shorter than others. My challenge to you is just to run your race well, however long it's going to be. You want to hear "Well done good and faithful servant" at the end.

I did a video on the Parable of the Minas and Talents in one of the series, and everyone was given different things to be in charge of during their life. But some didn't do anything at all; they just buried it in the ground and didn't use it. For those who used what they were given, however, even if they didn't accomplish much and only increased it by a little bit, God said "Well done, come share in your Master's happiness." So don't look down on yourself if you feel like you haven't accomplished as much as someone else.

Watch out for jealousy and don't condemn yourself because you say the other person lived their life better than mine or accomplished way more, because you don't know what's next in your life. You don't know what future things God has in store for you and also because that's not how God sees it. God sees you serving in his Kingdom. And that's all that matters.