



Foundations of Faith Church-Wide Discipleship

Weekly Study Guide

Foundations of Faith **A Life *for* Liberty Discipleship Series**

For our 90th anniversary, the Church at Liberty Square is pairing the two essential cornerstones of any church, evangelism and discipleship, into this yearlong, church-wide study.

Jesus Himself specifically linked the two together as symbiotic within a healthy church (Matthew 28:19-20). And the early church repeatedly proved the point that evangelism and discipleship go hand-in-hand. Moreover, discipleship is often the direct fuel for church growth (e.g., Acts 2:42-47).

After the Gospels and the book of Acts, almost the entire remainder of the New Testament is an extended primer on discipleship – exhortation, encouragement, reproof, rebuke, and correction around *understanding* and *living* the Good News individually and as a church. Indeed, now, just as then, we often *share* the Good News by how we *live* it. Actions still speak louder than words.

In fact, the biblical record and pattern of evangelism seem to suggest that a small subset of everyday Christians evangelized with actual words of preaching and teaching – primarily the apostolic leadership, appointed deacons, and those whose ministry required them to “do the work of an evangelist.”

But the writings of Paul, Peter, James, and John demonstrate that *all* in the early church were expected to evangelize through how they lived their everyday lives, sanctified by the blood of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. In doing so, they were true to two of Jesus’s central exhortations to His church: “In the same way, *let your light shine before others*, so that *they may see your good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16), and “A new commandment I give to you, that you *love one another*: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. *By this all people will know that you are my disciples*, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

This makes sense, because the New Testament spends considerable time and energy on how to actively live a Christlike life, to be like Jesus. The Bible repeatedly admonishes and teaches us to love with *action* not just with *words*. “Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18); “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only...” (James 1:22); “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works” (Titus 1:16); “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

In short, to evangelize well – to show the world we are Christ’s by how we actively love others (John 13:34-35) – we must first disciple well within our church.

This guide will help us do just that.

How to Use This Study Guide

On the first Wednesday of each month in 2026, we will teach on a monthly discipleship focus. We highly encourage each person at Liberty Square to attend these first Wednesday night lessons. They will form the backbone of our corporate discipleship for that month and, indeed, each month will build on the previous one.

But the teaching does not stop with the Wednesday lesson. Unique to this series are follow-up materials for each component of discipleship. For each week, we will provide **additional scriptures and reflective readings about the monthly topic, as well as questions and points of prayer to consider in one’s own devotion and study time.** In addition Liberty Groups and other discipleship-oriented church groups and ministries will highlight the monthly theme.

So how does one use the guide?

First, **go at your own pace each week.** We intentionally will not provide you daily material, because we want you to take your time and linger over the weekly scriptures and questions. We would rather you repeatedly read a passage and let it sink in than superficially gloss over multiple chapters.

Second, **think practically.** For most of the series, the weekly reflections will include ways that we can internalize the monthly discipleship theme and then live it out in our lives, whether at home, at work, at church, or within the community. Remember, the overarching goal of discipleship is to make us more like Christ. This takes practice. Our salvation came freely to us by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and through our confession of His Lordship. Our sanctification, however, requires effort from us. And our submission is an invitation to the Holy Spirit to remake, reorient, and rehabilitate our lives.

Third, **use this guide with others.** Use it in your families, within your Liberty Groups, in your Sunday morning class, in any ministry within Liberty Square. We sometimes over-individualize the Christian journey, neglecting that much of the book of Acts paints the picture of a church that “had all things in common,” that prayed, worshipped, learned, fellowshiped, and “did life” together (Acts 2:42-47). The goal of

Foundations of Faith is to grow us both in our personal walk but also equip us for life within the body of Christ.

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Because we want the Church to deliberately move together, month-by-month, we will be sharing each month's focus and guide when we arrive there in the year. The order of the topics is purposeful, all with an eye to a more purposeful, more disciplined, more fruitful Christian life (individually, at home, and within the Church) and more robust personal evangelism.

I look forward to sharing this journey with you as we grow in Christ together “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Let us “grow in the grace of knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity” (1 Peter 3:18).

Amen.

In the love of Christ,

Pastor Chris
Executive Pastor, Discipleship and Community
The Church at Liberty Square

January **Studying and Reading the Bible**

We will start our journey with one of the most fundamental building blocks of our apprenticeship to Christ – interacting with the living Word of God.

Recently, after a teaching on how to read and study the Bible, I had a man come up to me, tears welling in his eyes. He grabbed both of my shoulders, pierced me with his anguished expression, and then sighed deeply, “I’ve been a Christian for decades. I’m in my sixties. Today was the first time anyone ever taught me *how* to read the Bible”

At first, that saddened me. But then it made me angry, because it speaks volumes about how we treat our relationship with the Word. We chalk it up as a “Christian perfunctory.” In fact, that is the typical discipleship advice we dispense to new Christians, old Christians, young Christians, little Christians, big Christians, all Christians: read your Bible. “Get in the Word of God,” we say.

Well, yes. But to what end? And how? And why? And where do I start? And what version? And how much? And a thousand other questions.

That man’s personal testimony made me do some hard reflection, which led me to this stark reality: I do not think we teach people *how* to read the Bible.

And, if you think about it, this makes no sense. Literature teachers explain to their classes how to approach a Shakespearean tragedy before assigning *Hamlet*. Trigonometry teachers assume a student’s strong foundation in geometry before they draw a sine curve on the board. A basketball coach drills into his team the fundamentals of passing the ball before he ever allows them on the court.

Why do we then assume that Christians naturally know how to approach a complex book, written over 1,500 years, in three languages, on three continents, by more than 40 authors?

We should never make that assumption. Even factoring in the amazing, inexplicable supernatural discernment that can flow into our lives by the Holy Spirit (“Speak Lord, your servant is listening...”), we should never make that assumption. We are to love the Lord with everything we have, including our mind, surrendering it to diligent, earnest study to become a trustworthy “workman” of his Word (2 Timothy 2:15).

Yet many reduce their intimacy with the Word to a read-the-Bible-in-a-year reading plan. On the surface, there is nothing wrong and plenty right with those sorts of plans... until it becomes a Christian chore instead of a way to draw closer to God. “Oh, I have to read five chapters today or I’ll fall behind.” So, they feverishly race through those five chapters and retain absolutely none of it, as if this were some sort of forced march of faith. Reading the Word will not be void in their life, but one wonders just how much good comes from this approach?

Others take the opposite approach, choosing daily devotional readings. Again, there is nothing wrong and plenty right with that, too. But devotions are bite-sized snippets of scripture, frequently edited or taken completely out of their original context, all to prove a point that someone else is trying to make. And the point of being in the Word is that we personally receive revelation, wisdom, truth, and life directly from the Holy Spirit.

So, then, how should we approach the Bible?

First, **we should approach respectfully**, as we would anything so organic, so pulsing with vitality and life and the power that those bring. “The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Stated differently, we wrap our reading around the truth Peter uttered to Jesus in John 6:68, “Lord, where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Second, **we should approach it personally**. God is speaking to you individually and us as a church – directly, powerfully, forthrightly. Yes, God speaks to us in many other ways, including sermons, teachings, devotions, other people, nature itself. But the Bible is explicitly clear that *scripture* is a profitable cornerstone in our lives for teaching, training, correction, revelation, worship, wisdom, and understanding.

Third, **we should approach it prayerfully**, inviting the Holy Spirit to “teach [us] all things” (John 14:26). Indeed, we should mimic Samuel and say, “Speak Lord,” and then listen.

Fourth, **we should approach it deliberately**. Reading the Word should not be an afterthought in your day. Instead, it, along with prayer, should be the very hem stitches around any day.

Over the four weeks of January, we will learn all of these approaches together. Do not rush through the weekly readings. Instead, linger in them. Slow down. Ponder. Even wrestle. Let the Lord speak and teach you about the beauty of His Word.

Week 1 - January **Treasure the Word**

Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 119
- 2 Timothy 3:14-17
- Key idea – Yes, the Word is a sword, but it must be sharpened in our lives before it can be unsheathed and wielded.

Do you open your Bible on days other than Sunday? If not, why? Is it time? Interest? Difficulty in comprehension? What stands between you and the Word?

In Scripture we are specifically urged to treasure the Bible in our hearts, to look to it frequently for training and teaching in righteousness, and to allow the Lord to speak to us through His Word. The Bible is the place where we read of the wonders of a mighty God, His covenantal promises, the stories of ordinary people being used to do extraordinary things, the good news of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing plan for our salvation and redemption.

Indeed, the Gospel contained therein is what changes our lives and our destinies.

But in order to truly explore the foundations of our faith, and be equipped to share the good news to others, we must view the Bible and its study as *essential* in and to our lives.

So, before we move onto the rest of this week, let's challenge ourselves to reflect on the place of the scriptures in our lives. Is it cherished in our hearts? Is it training us daily? Is it an integral part of who we are? Or is it something we infrequently approach, more often than not through a pastor's sermon instead of our own study?

Exercise – Explain how reading the Bible is currently situated in your life. Is it an every-day source of teaching, wisdom, growth, and inspiration? Or something different?

This week – Over the course of the week, with deliberation and purpose, read Psalm 119. (Yes, it is long, so break it into chunks. Do not rush. Linger with the Word and let it linger within you.) Observe how the writer truly relies upon – *and loves* – the Scripture.

Then, read 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

Answer these questions:

- What are these two passages speaking into your life?
- In what ways might they reshape how you value and approach Scripture?
- What new practices can you put into place to treasure the Word in your heart?

With those answers in hand, take a few minutes to define your goals related to the study of Scripture, including any new practices you want to incorporate.

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In Appendix 1, you will find a list of questions that will guide your study of the Word. We will unpack many of them in the coming weeks, but now would be a good time to read over them. We encourage you to return to them often as you build new muscle memory in your study.

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Final Thoughts – Take a few moments to consider how the writer of Psalm 119 values the word of God. Below is a place to write a reflection and prayer. Ask God to lead you to esteem the scriptures in new ways this year and beyond in your journey with Christ. Ask Him for a hunger for His precepts, ask Him for revelations that speak into your life, for His Holy Spirit to speak to you and train you up so that you may be complete, equipped for His good work to come to pass in and through your life.

Week 2 - January

The Full Counsel of Scripture, Part 1

Weekly Readings:

- Jeremiah 29:11 (then all of Jeremiah 29)
- Lamentations 3:23 (then all of Lamentations 3)
- Key idea – Yes, individual verses carry enormous weight and power, but a mature reader of the Bible will always read them in the context of the full section, chapter, and even book.

The Bible is a spiritual document, but is also a historical one, a poetic one, an apocryphal one, among many other genres. The Bible is a book of truth. It is *the* book of truth. But that does nothing to diminish the fact that it is also a book of stories, narratives of God’s power and provision, of the Jewish people, of Jesus’ life, of the early church, and so much more.

As readers of the Bible, we should approach the book with lots of things in mind – the authorship of a book, the historic setting in which it was written, how its message would have been read and understood by its initial and intended audience, and much more.

For instance, when one reads a prophecy in Amos or Hosea, one must ask, “To whom was this prophecy made? And has this prophecy been fulfilled?” If the prophecy has been fulfilled, we do not negate the book. We simply shift how we read the powerful words of the prophets and ask instead, “What does this passage teach us about God?”

In addition, reading one verse in isolation is like taking a single piece of a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle and somehow claiming that it gives us the full picture. Of course it doesn’t. That seems silly. Isolating a verse can likewise give us a distorted picture of what the Word of God is actually saying. Only by reading it in context can we truly absorb its full meaning.

So, this week and next, we are going to practice reading verses and passages in their full contexts, not separated from their supporting stories, and certainly not clichéd scriptural nuggets that paint incomplete pictures of spiritual truths.

This week, we will read two passages from the Old Testament. Next week, the New Testament. We will devote two weeks to this discipline because of just how critical it is.

Exercise 1 – Read Jeremiah 29:11. No doubt this is an extremely familiar passage.

What do you take away from this verse? How does it speak to you?

Now, read the whole of Jeremiah 29, the entire chapter. Write down a few observations about its context – to whom was it written, when, etc.? What was happening in that chapter that gave rise to Jeremiah’s writing? And, more pointedly, taken in the whole counsel of that chapter, what new understanding do you have about the eleventh verse?

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Hopefully that exercise made you think anew about reading (and even quoting/using scriptures in isolation, whether in your own life or when you hear a pastor preach). God, through Jeremiah, is telling his people to get comfortable in a foreign, unfamiliar, not-promised place. In fact, He is telling them to pray for the prosperity of those holding them in exile.

That seems far afield from how we typically proclaim Jeremiah 29:11. What should that teach us? Among other things, we should realize that the promises of God are not ineffective, but they may have terms and conditions we conveniently leave out when we do not live in that full counsel of Scripture. We may have seasons of “slow” and “grow” before we hear the word “go.”

Exercise 2 – Now do the exact same thing with Lamentations 3:23. Read that verse first, and answer the exact same questions about that *single* verse.

Then read the whole of Lamentations 3, the entire chapter, and answer the same questions for that passage. (Remember, same author.) How does your perception of new mercies every morning change in light of everything else that Jeremiah wrote around that oft-quoted verse?

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Final Thoughts – What benefits are there to reading the full Biblical context of verses, instead of smaller snippets? How can you apply the reading of full Scriptural context to your personal time in the word?

Week 3 - January The Full Counsel of Scripture, Part 2

Weekly Readings:

- John 3:16 (then John 3:1-21)
- Revelation 3:20 (then Revelation 3:14-22)
- Key idea – Yes, individual verses carry enormous weight and power, but a mature reader of the Bible will always read them in the context of the full section, chapter, and even book.

This week is a continuation of last week, but we will use two New Testament passages instead. The premise, approach, and exercise patterns are all the same.

Exercise 1 – Read John 3:16. In fact, most of us could quote it. What does that mean to you personally? What spiritual lessons and truths do you draw from it?

Now read John 3:16 and 17 together. Ask the same questions. How does your perception change after reading the two as a couplet?

Finally, read the first 21 verses of John 3 as a single unit. Think about the historic, religious, and cultural realities of that moment. See vv. 16-17 now in light of the larger narrative, and what do you discover?

Exercise 2 – Read Revelation 3:20. Again, same question. What is the imagery you see? What idea or audience does this verse conjure in your mind?

Now read the entire letter of Jesus to the church at Laodicea, Revelation 3:14-22. What changes about that verse? What jumps off the page?

By now, hopefully you see that v. 20 was not meant as an invitation to sinners, though Christians almost exclusively deploy it as such. No, Jesus was purposefully talking to Christians. To us. To the church. To his bride. What does that tell us about this passage specifically (as applied to us) and about scriptural readings generally?

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Final Thoughts – Try this with other Bible passages. Find one where a single verse takes on a different light when read in the fullness of the chapter. Bring that to your group/family to share.

Week 4 - January Meditate on the Word

Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 23
- Luke 10:38-42
- John 8:2-11
- Key idea – Slow down. Learn to meditatively read the Bible by taking your time and placing yourself in the middle of the narrative.

The Bible is fairly straightforward about the benefits of *meditating* on its truths. “But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2). “The Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it” (Joshua 1:8). “Oh, how I love your law! All day long it is my meditation” (Psalm 119:97).

But what is meditation? Here again, we find a word that we throw around (because it is in scripture), yet we rarely teach what it means spiritually. And, unfortunately in modern America, our vision of meditation is sitting cross-legged on a yoga mat humming a mantra.

Biblical meditation, though, is a purposeful act of pondering, of reflecting deeply on the Word, and then internalizing the truths within it. The goal is not necessarily the absorption of knowledge (which is what we do when we read a study Bible, check concordance references, etc.) Instead, the goal is to *think* upon God’s Word and, in the process, transfer that wisdom and truth from our *head* to our *heart*. In meditation, we want to foster a deeper connection with God and draw our heartbeat to a rhythmic oneness with Him.

Put more bluntly, secular meditation seeks to empty the mind; biblical meditation is the active *focus of the mind* on God and his character.

But it involves us shutting our mouths and listening to what the Word is speaking back to us.

One effective way to meditate on the Word is an ancient church practice called *lectio divina*. *Lectio* involves reading, meditating on, and praying with Scripture in four distinct states: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation).

At its heart, *lectio* invites us to “listen” to Scripture and respond to God’s word with intimacy. Those four stages are often relabeled as the four Rs: reading, reflecting, responding, and resting.

This week, with three passages, we will ask you to do those four stages.

The key with *lectio*, though, is that you are simply reading the passage. So, if you can, choose a Bible devoid of the clutter of study notes, cross-references, inset maps, and the like. And, by all means, do not use your phone. (Bible apps on your phone are terrific, but phones offer too much of a distraction for our minds, eyes, ears, and hearts. Sit them down for this exercise and use an actual Bible for these exercises.)

For each passage, do the following:

- Read it slowly. Very slowly. Even pause between phrases, certainly between verses. Let it wash over you. You are reading not for word-for-word textual comprehension so much as for spiritual growth.
- In fact, this exercise is optimal if someone else reads the passage, which you can accomplish in a group or family setting. Then you can close your eyes and truly meditate with full concentration.
- Place yourself in the narrative. That is a critical component to *lectio*. Put yourself in the action. Notice where you stand, what you see, even what you smell or hear. Are you a participant? Are you an observer?
- Then, pause after the first reading. What stuck out to you? What did you notice? Did you see something new about Jesus or another character? What were you actually doing? The Bible reminds us that it is living, so organically place yourself within it. That is not arrogance, but it is a response to its invitation to make it real and practical within our lives.
- Then, respond – pray something worshipful or as supplication in your own life based on what you just read.
- Then, wait. Rest. Contemplate what you just learned about the nature of God or His Son, Jesus. Think about what it means for your relationship with the Trinity.
- Finally, do it again. Read it a second time, following the same steps.

Since many of you will be new to this practice, we have chosen three familiar passages. All of these are quite well suited to meditative scripture reading. And all can be done individually, with your family (which we *highly* encourage), and within your groups.

The three passages are:

- Psalm 23 – This passage has become so familiar, almost to the point of rote recitation, that an exercise like this may prove spiritually profitable. Again, slow

down. Digest the words one by one. What is the Holy Spirit revealing to you? What can you actually *see* and *feel*?

- Luke 10:38-42 – The famous story of Mary and Martha. Same questions.
- John 8:2-11 – The story of the adulterous woman. Again, same questions.

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Final Thoughts – Reading the Bible this way is sometimes uncomfortable. Many of us do not like to see or place ourselves in the stories. And others of us see this method as conflicting with how we were conditioned to read the Bible. But for many of us, this may open up a new way to absorb the deep and exhaustless supply of truth from its pages. In a way, it makes the Bible “come alive,” which is great since scripture affirms that it actually is alive. How might you deploy meditation in your own personal devotional life? What about that of your family?

February
The Trinity: The Divine Dance of Love

The average person – and, sadly, even the average Christian – thinks a lot of things are in the Bible that simply are not there. For instance, the Bible never says that God helps those who help themselves; that is either from Aesop or Benjamin Franklin, take your pick. Charles Dickens penned the idea that cleanliness is next to godliness, not Solomon. And we will not find the thought “to thine own self be true” coming from Jesus or Paul; no, Shakespeare put the notion in Polonius’s mouth in *Hamlet*.

And even when we have the black-and-white words of the Bible staring us in the face, we tend to add to them. Jonah was swallowed by a “great fish,” not necessarily a whale. Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit of the tree, not necessarily an apple. A number of wise men sought after the baby Jesus, not necessarily three and certainly not on the actual night of our Savior’s birth. Mary Magdalene had seven evil spirits cast out of her, but the Bible never says she was a prostitute.

But what happens when the opposite is true – i.e., when something is so very clearly *in* the Bible, in fact *permeates* every page of the Word of God, yet it is never directly referenced?

Such is the case with **the Trinity**. The Triune God – one God existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit – is the very cornerstone of Christian theology. And yet the term “Trinity” is nowhere to be found within the pages of the Bible, which itself is a frequently cited criticism of Trinitarianism. How can something be so fundamental yet never explicitly mentioned in the text?

No doubt you have heard of Sir Isaac Newton and his famed Third Law of Motion, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. You believe that even though, for most of us, the only real reference point we have is observational and experiential. You see that – and painfully feel it, too – when you drop a cast iron skillet on your bare foot. You will almost certainly have a bruised, swollen, and perhaps broken foot. But you arrive at that point through experience, not via mathematical proof.

Such it is with the Trinity. Scriptures in the Bible lead us to a Triune God, but our own personal experiences are the real prooftexts. We visibly see and feel God as our good creator, loving redeemer, and empowering sustainer.

Other critics will point to the most fundamental declaration of Jewish monotheism, the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). How can the one true God now be three? (Hint: we will unpack this as we examine John 17.)

But the reality is this: you could read the Bible until Jesus returns, and you will not find a scripture that explicitly, bluntly, unmistakably says, “God exists in three distinct persons, all with the same unified essence and substance, the same divine nature, the same omnipotence and omniscience and omnipresence, all fully God, pre-existent, co-eternal.”

As true as that statement is – and it *is true* – it is a derived, or extrapolated, or revealed theology.

But it is soundly based in scripture. Jesus himself said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). Paul writes in a beautiful benediction, “The grace of *the Lord Jesus Christ*, the love of *God*, and the fellowship of *the Holy Spirit* be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Peter opens his first letter with this, “according to the foreknowledge of *God the Father*, in the sanctification of *the Spirit*, for obedience to *Jesus Christ* and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Peter 1:2).

And those are but three of many, including the scene at Jesus’s baptism in Matthew 3, which is the first public conspicuous manifestation of the Trinity, when all three persons were either audibly or visibly present.

So... if it is all right there in the Bible, why did it take so long to put the pieces together?

Put down your twenty-first century glasses for a moment, and pick up those worn by Peter and John and James. We must never forget that our church ancestors were seeking to understand this all in real time and, for those who were Jewish, also trying to reconcile the monotheistic anchor of the Shema with the fact that they had encountered the Son of God in the flesh... who explicitly told them he was “one with the Father” (John 10:30, 17:21). Show them grace. Even today, as it was then, the Holy Spirit reveals things to us as our capacities to understand them will allow.

Thus, we finally see the first direct references to Trinitarian theology appear in Greek in the writings of Theophilus of Antioch (late second century A.D.), in Latin in the writings of Tertullian (early third century), and in the apologies and teachings of the great Cappadocian Fathers, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus and brothers, Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century). In fact, Trinitarianism was not formally codified by the Church until the Council of Nicaea in 325 and not fully expounded to its present orthodox form until the Council of Constantinople in 381. Who among us today can say we fully understand the mysteries of God?

Yet nothing is more foundational to our faith. And it was all there in the Bible all along.

Is your head spinning yet? Don't worry. You are not alone. "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than the heavens—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol—what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea" (Job 11:7-9).

But just because a concept is difficult does not mean we should run and hide from it, especially one so definitional to being a Christian.

This month, we will deepen our knowledge and understanding of the Trinity. In doing so, we will hopefully become better witnesses to the roles each of its three members plays in our lives, our journey of salvation and sanctification, and the world around us.

However, there is a more fundamental – and extremely practical – reason why we should seek to know the Trinity more intimately.

Before we explore, turn your attention to this beautiful prayer from Psalm 119: "**Open my eyes that I may contemplate wondrous things out of your law**" (v. 18). Because the fullness of the Trinity is a mystery, we need to approach it in that same headspace and heartspace, even that exact prayer. So, let's pause for a moment and make that same petition: Lord, open our eyes so that we may understand *and experience* the Trinity afresh and anew. Because when we begin to grasp this next idea, our whole purpose and our whole journey come into much sharper clarity.

Now, consider these extraordinarily powerful words from C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. He writes that when people equate God and love, they:

"... seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning *unless God contains at least two persons*... If God were a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love... They believe that the loving dynamic activity of love has been going on [alone] in God forever... [But God is] a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, **a kind of dance.**"

The Trinity, at its core, is an eternal, dynamic exchange of **love, a divine dance** between and among its constituents – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we say God is love, and he is, then he must have an object of that love. Saying that humans are the primary object is both shortsighted and arrogant, because it implies that God, who is perfect love, loved nothing before he created us. That is illogical and cannot be true.

Before creation, God loved his Son. In fact, if we want to put it in the terms Jesus used, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), then we would say, “Before creation ever was, God *loves* his Son,” a simple, unmistakable present tense, ongoing now, without end.

And it is that love, characterized by joy, that is both the centerpiece and model for our lives. We were created in that love by the Father. We are redeemed in that love by the Son, whose love was so great that he came and dwelt among us. We are sustained and inspired and guided and transformed in that love by the Spirit. And that love is simultaneously unchanging, yet never static. No, it is the most dynamic force in the universe, the binding agent that holds all together.

Everything flows from that, including and especially our atonement. If Jesus were not also God, were not also love, then his sacrifice on the cross would not have been voluntary, rather something imposed upon a human by God. He put on flesh to dwell among us, because he wanted to restore us to this reality: we were created in love, by love, through love and made to be in the middle of that divine dance of love.

Think of the implications for us. **The model of Trinitarian love is revolutionary. It is limitless, always giving and forgiving, always seeking the good of the other, always offering profound peace and healing. It is the headwaters of our submission to one another, and it fertilizes our lives to bear fruit.**

Lewis later writes, “The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-personal life is to be played out in each one of us: or, putting it the other way round, each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance. **There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made.**”

In *Miracles*, Lewis summarizes, “As we draw nearer to its uncreated rhythm, pain and pleasure sink almost out of sight. There is joy in the dance, but it does not exist for the sake of joy. It does not even exist for the sake of good, or of love. It is Love Himself, and Good Himself, and therefore happy. **It does not exist for us, but we for it.**”

In short, the Trinity forms both the boundaries and the means to fulfill our purpose, given to us by Jesus himself: “And he said... ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second *is like it*: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Those two are mutually inclusive and fully descriptive of what the Trinity models for us: to love God fully and to love others fully.

* * *

This month, return again and again to that prayer from Psalm 119:18. Let it start your individual time with this material, as well as that with your family and your groups.

Let's summon our best angelic exhortation and tell each other, "Do not be afraid... of studying the Trinity!" In reality, Trinitarian truth spills forth from the pages of the Old and New Testament. We just have to do the work of a disciple. Let's unpack it together.

Week 1 - February God the Father

Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 23 (The Lord as Shepherd).
- Psalm 46 (The Lord as Refuge and Strength).
- Psalm 86 (The Lord as Mercy, Love, and Goodness).
- Psalm 91 (The Lord as Protector).
- Psalm 103 (The Lord's Forgiveness and Goodness).
- Psalm 139 (The Lord's Intimate Knowledge).
- Psalm 145 (God's Greatness, Goodness, Glory, Guarantee, and Grace).
- Key idea – God is the source of all things, including all of us. He is love and is without end. His mysteries are beyond comprehension.

We believe fully in the Trinity. But to understand Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a Triune God – completely unified, of one essence – it is often helpful to understand each distinct person first, and then piece it together. Within the Godhead, each has a role to play, and those roles directly inform our own lives and our journey of becoming like Jesus. So, we will examine each in turn and then, during the fourth week, tie it all together.

Let's start with God the Father.

Exercise – When you think of God the Father, what imagery comes to mind? Literally, close your eyes, and who/what do you see? Be honest. Now, take five minutes and just jot down on a piece of paper a list of adjectives or descriptive phrases that capture how you perceive God. Write exactly what comes to mind. Again, be completely honest.

* * *

To some, this may seem like a silly exercise, but people view God in so many complicated, stereotyped, unbiblical ways. Some see him as the cosmic sheriff, a law enforcement officer who is ready to lock us up for any infraction. Some view him as a stern judge, incapable of mercy and grace, always defaulting to punishment. Still others see him as a doddering old grandfather, always ready with a piece of candy from his pockets but not really involved in our day-to-day lives. An unfortunate number of folks think of him as Santa Claus or a genie in a bottle, someone who listens to our wish list and, if we have been good enough, grants those requests.

When it comes to adjectives, you might have written loving, smiling, gracious, or available. But you might also have written cruel, distant, angry, or even powerless or

irrelevant. And, for so many of us, we attach the imagery of our own earthly father to that of our eternal father, God.

The point is this – our view of God is often complicated and riddled with baggage. But the Bible testifies to who God really is. In no particular order, consider these attributes of God the Father:

God the Father is the **source and author of everything**. We quite literally learn this from the first ten words of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), meaning *everything*. And Jesus reinforces God as the font for all life, “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself” (John 5:26). Paul expounds upon this when he writes of God the Father, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever,” (Romans 11:36). Paul also forthrightly declares, “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6a). God is the originator.

God the Father is **love**. “Anyone who does not love does not know God, *because God is love*” (1 John 4:8).

God the Father **sends the Son, Jesus, for our redemption, all in love**. Jesus directly avows this in His conversation with Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). And that this was God’s plan from the start: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. *In love* he predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will...” (Ephesians 1:3-5).

God the Father also **sends the Holy Spirit for our sanctification**. Jesus was explicit with his disciples about this: “the Helper, the Holy Spirit, *whom the Father will send in My name*, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

God the Father is **merciful and gracious**. “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” (Exodus 34:6). “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8).

God the Father is **holy and just**. “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all His ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without inquiry; just and upright is He” (Deuteronomy 32:4). “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord” (Isaiah 6:3). “Be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44). “Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy” (Psalm 99:9).

God the Father **does not change**. “For I the Lord do not change...” (Malachi 3:6).

God the Father is **omnipotent**. “Ah, Lord God! It is You who made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for You” (Jeremiah 32:17).

God the Father is **omnipresent and omniscient**. “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from Your presence?” (Psalm 139:7). “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3). “The Lord looks down from heaven; He sees *all the children* of man; from where He sits enthroned He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth” (Psalm 33:13-14).

And God is **our Father, too**. Jesus taught us to pray not to *His* Father, but to *our* Father (Matthew 6:9), meaning we are adopted into this family, not by our own works but because of the unmerited favor of God and the unmerited sacrifice of His Son. But it does not stop here. Jesus intimately and fervently prays for that adoption, that we “may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us...” (John 17:21). And Paul testifies, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of *adoption as sons*, by whom we cry, ‘*Abba! Father!*’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit *that we are children of God*, and if children, then heirs – *heirs of God* and fellow heirs with Christ...” (Romans 8:15-17a).

And that all does not even scratch the surface.

This week – At the beginning of this week, we listed seven entire psalms. Ideally, you and/or your family/group will take a psalm a day, read it, and reflect upon what each teaches you about the character and nature of God. But you can also pick one or two psalms and meditate on those.

In your prayer time, intentionally focus on the attributes of God that the psalmist describes. Worship God for each of them, for his holiness, for his mercy and grace, for his forgiveness. And ask God to reveal more of himself to you, growing you in wisdom and knowledge but also growing your *awe* of him.

* * *

*Final Thoughts – Sometimes Christians are so focused on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, that we have an incomplete view of God the Father. John Bryan Smith wrote a wonderful book titled *The Good and Beautiful God*, which I highly commend to you.*

*But its subtitle both touched and challenged me: **Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows**. Let that be the focus of your Trinity exploration. Fall in love with the God whom Jesus calls Father... and whom we now do, too!*

Week 2 - February Jesus Christ, God the Son

Weekly Readings:

- The Seven “I Am” statements of Jesus – John 6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 9:5, 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; and 15:1.
- Matthew 16:13-19
- Key idea – Jesus is fully divine and fully human, and that matters to our ultimate salvation, sanctification, and generation. Even today, he is our prophet, high priest, and king.

God the Father is the origin and source of all things. But Jesus Christ, his Son, is the agent of that creation and, ultimately, of our salvation. He is the implementation and fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan. And he is the mediator between the Father and all of humanity.

But before we get there, let’s settle one thing in our hearts and minds. The Son of God, though a separate person within the Trinity, is God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and ***the Word was God...*** And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). “To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is ***the Christ, who is God over all...***” (Romans 9:5). “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the ***true God and eternal life***” (1 John 5:20).

Jesus is pre-existent, without beginning or end. He is eternal. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He is God. He is love. **Jesus is fully divine.**

Yet Jesus carries with him the most critical of additional attributes. **Jesus is also fully human.** He is equally a son of man, fertilized within the womb of a woman, naturally born of that woman, and subject to all the things we humans face, including a dying earthly body. In fact, Son of Man is Jesus’s favorite title for himself. It carries with it both a human meaning (Mark 10:45, Isaiah 53) and divine authority (Mark 2:10; John 5:27; Daniel 7:13-14).

In short, we can distill it to this truth – **the Kingdom of God has come and now has a human face and a human name: Jesus.**

Indeed, to confess that the eternal Word of God became incarnate is nothing less than the keystone belief of our entire faith: that Christ, our Lord, is fully God and fully

human, all united in one person, this man Jesus (John 1:1-5, 14-18). In that profound declaration, we say that Jesus, God himself, willingly left heaven and took on a full human nature to die on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8). He assumed a body, yes, but he likewise assumed a mind and soul, with all the frailties of every human. Yet he lived perfectly under God's law and, in doing so, he fulfilled the law on our behalf. The very human Jesus died as a blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins (Hebrews 2:17, 10:5; 1 John 2:2; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 Timothy 2:5). And, ultimately, because Christ united every part of our humanity with his divinity in his incarnation, then every part of our humanity can be saved (Galatians 4:4-5).

Think even more deeply upon that. Two natures, a fully divine one and a fully human one. One person, this man Jesus (John 1:1-5, 14-18; Romans 1:1-4; Colossians 2:9-10). Only a truly righteous human – one who completely shared in our sinful nature yet never sinned himself – could be a worthy sacrifice for our sins and for our corrupt nature (Hebrews 2:14-18, 12:2-4; Romans 5:18-19). If Jesus were not human, he could not identify with us in all ways, he could not suffer in our stead, and he could not understand and pity us in our manifold weakness. If Jesus were not divine, he simply could not have borne and satisfied the fullness of God's wrath (Psalm 49:7; Galatians 4:4-5; 1 Timothy 2:5). Nor could he have been resurrected from his literal death and thereby secured our own resurrection and eternal life (John 5:21-23; 1 John 5:20; 1 Corinthians 15:20). His divinity imbues his human death and resurrection with infinite worth to us (1 Peter 1:18-19; Hebrews 7:27; Philippians 3:8).

With that settled, let's consider the roles of Jesus within the Trinity. Jesus, our blessed Mediator, holds and serves in three offices. **He is our ultimate prophet, priest, and king.**

Moses foretold of one who would be raised up as a greater prophet than he (Deuteronomy 18:15), and Peter and John confirmed Jesus as that prophet (Acts 3:22-23). As the prophet of prophets, Jesus inspired and surpassed all others (1 Peter 1:10) in testifying to the truth of God and his plan for us (John 18:37). Even today, all divine revelation of the truth that leads to our salvation comes by Jesus through the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 1 John 2:27).

David wrote of an everlasting priest after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4), and the writer of Hebrews affirms that it is Jesus (Hebrews 7). As our perfect high priest, he offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice necessary for reconciliation to God (Romans 6:10; Hebrews 7:27, 9:26, 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18). Even today, he stands at God's right hand as our high priest, interceding for us (Romans 8:34-35; Hebrews 7:25).

Isaiah beautifully presaged the birth of a child upon whose shoulders every government would rest, a wonderful, mighty, everlasting prince of peace (Isaiah 9:2-7). Jeremiah told of God's promise to raise up a righteous branch for David who would reign as king (Jeremiah 33:14-16). And Zechariah foresaw the promised king riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, carrying with him righteousness and salvation (Zechariah 9:9). Whether in Gabriel's annunciation to Mary or in the shouts of the sons and daughters of Zion, Jesus is blessed as the king who comes in the name of the Lord (Luke 1:31-33; Matthew 21:5; John 12:13). As our king, he rules over all of us and all of creation, defending, directing, and sustaining his people. Even today, though we live in the present reality of the kingdom of God (Matthew 4:17, 10:7; Mark 1:15), we await its ultimate fulfillment and universal acknowledgment (Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:10-11; Romans 14:11; Revelation 19:16).

And, just as with God the Father, we have barely scratched the surface. For example, one of the most critical parts of Jesus's life is that he teaches us to be *missional* – i.e., he models for us what life in the Kingdom of God looks like. From him, we learn how to reveal the Kingdom in both word and deed, to live sacrificially and obediently, both in love.

Likewise, from him, we understand the critical centrality of the church, of community, to our journey. Jesus may be our individual, personal Savior, and that is blessedly true. But we cannot – we must not – stop there. We, *the church writ large*, are the bride of Christ, and he points us repeatedly to the importance of that blood-bought family.

When Bill and Gloria Gaither penned the wonderful song *There's Something About That Name*, she wrote a rarely-used but extremely powerful monologue to go along with it.

Jesus, the mere mention of his name can calm the storm, heal the broken, raise the dead. At the name of Jesus, I see sin-hardened men melted, derelicts transformed, the lights of hope put back in the eyes of a hopeless child. At his name, hatred and bitterness turn to love and forgiveness, and arguments cease.

I've heard a mother softly breathe his name at the bedside of a child delirious from fever, and I've watched that little body be quiet, fevered brow cooled. I've sat at the bedside of a dying saint, her body wracked with pain who, in those final fleeting seconds, summoned her last ounce of ebbing strength just to whisper earth's sweetest name: Jesus, Jesus.

Emperors have tried to destroy it. Philosophies have tried to stamp it out. Tyrants have tried to wash it from the face of the earth with the very blood of those who claimed it, yet it still stands.

And there shall be that final day when every voice that has ever uttered a sound, every voice of Adam's race, shall rise in one mighty chorus to proclaim the name of Jesus. For that day, 'every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ' is truly Lord!

Ah – so you see – it was not a mere chance that caused the angel one night long ago to say to a virgin maiden, “His name shall be called Jesus.” Oh, there is something about that name.

* * *

Exercise #1 – Again, just like the seven psalms that describe God, this week we will consider seven passages that describe Jesus, only we will use Jesus's own words. Jesus metaphorically describes himself as the bread of life; the light of the world; the door of the sheep; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; and the true vine.

Either on your own, or with your family/group, read and meditate on one of his famous “I Am” statements per day. In light of Jesus's role as our prophet, priest, and king, and also in light of his fully human and fully divine nature, what new and fresh meaning do each of those statements take on for you? In your current journey with Jesus, which “I Am” statement carries the most weight for you?

Exercise #2 – Take three minutes and, on your own, write down every name, title, or nickname of Jesus that comes to mind. To get you started, here are three: the Alpha and the Omega, the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Morning Star. (You will run out of time before you run out of names. By some counts, there are nearly 200 of them in the Bible!) Do this with your family and/or group. And share your lists aloud. In your walk with Jesus right now, which names are most resonant? (For a full list of such names and titles, see Appendix 2.)

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*Final Thoughts – In Matthew 16, Jesus asks the disciples the single most important question ever posed. “Who do you say that I am?” (v.15). No other question ever asked or imagined carries with it the same level of eternal consequence. Our lives come down to how we answer it. Who do we say Jesus is? Our answer, generated by the faith given to us by the Holy Spirit, should be resolute and resonant with the confession of Peter and of the whole church since: Jesus Christ is God's only Son, our Lord, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, died, buried, and resurrected. **So... who do you say Jesus is?***

Week 3 - February The Holy Spirit

Weekly Readings:

- John 16
- Romans 12
- 1 Corinthians 2:6-16
- 1 Corinthians 12 and 13
- Galatians 5:16-26
- Key idea – The Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, is God’s *active presence* in the world and within the lives of believers. He dwells inside of us, regenerates our lives, convicts us of sin, reveals the truth that we might grow to be more like Jesus, and equips us with spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ.

Before I entered vocational ministry, I spent a full professional life in the senior echelons of government, both state and federal. For two decades, I planned high-level events, inaugurations, funerals, meetings, international and domestic trips, and the like for presidents, prime ministers, governors, Cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, and the occasional royal. One of the hallmarks of the work was the requirement to sink quietly into the wall. In other words, people were never there to see me. My team and I were there to make sure all the conditions and ingredients for success were present, and then we were expected to blend into the background, almost as if we were wallflowers.

In 2001, Frederick Dale Bruner and William Horden wrote a theological book with a provocative title: *The Holy Spirit – The Shy Member of the Trinity*. At first blush, you might recoil. How could the very giver of life, the very one who empowers us to live like Jesus, be shy? But that misapprehends the authors’ point.

The Holy Spirit is shy, because he always points us away from him and toward the other members of the Trinity. Just like I had to be in my previous line of work, the Holy Spirit is perfectly content to guide us where we should go, give us what gifts we need to serve the body of Christ, and grow us in our Christlikeness. He is decidedly not a wallflower, but everything he does directs us to the truth he hears from the Father and the Son (John 16:13-15). He does not make things up, rather he teaches and reminds us of everything Jesus said (John 14:26). He loves them (and us) so much that he illumines our path with their true light.

As we did with Jesus, let us be abundantly, unmistakably clear. The Holy Spirit is God. Of the same essence as God the Father and Jesus Christ, His only Son. Pre-existent. Co-eternal. Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. And He is a “He,” not an “it.”

In fact, the Spirit of God makes an appearance in the Bible before Jesus is referenced. God the Father, creator of all things, is mentioned in Genesis 1:1. In Genesis 1:2, scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit brooded “over the face of the waters,” reporting to the enclosed society of the Godhead that the depth of darkness was unlike Him, devoid of life and light.

The Holy Spirit did not merely show up in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. Nor, today, does the Holy Spirit belong to the sects of Christianity that trace their lineage to Azusa Street or Appalachian revival movements. He, like the Father and the Son, is without beginning or end. And the church of any era, apart from the Holy Spirit, is impotent and lifeless.

The Holy Spirit’s function within the Trinity and, by direct association, within our lives, is unique among the three. Let’s consider a few of the primary functions given in scripture, again in no particular order:

- The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life (John 6:63; Romans 8:11; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Job 33:4).
- The Holy Spirit searches the depths of God’s mind and then reveals those truths to us and helps us to understand (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).
- The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus and declares Him to all people (John 16:14).
- The Holy Spirit is the agent of our regeneration, moving us to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ (John 3:5-6; Titus 3:5).
- The Holy Spirit leads believers into all truth (John 16:13; Romans 8:14).
- The Holy Spirit takes residence, or *indwells*, in the bodies of those who are in Christ, now the temples where the Lord lives (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; John 14:17; Romans 8:9).
- The Holy Spirit gives us *power* to live for and like Jesus (Acts 1:9; Luke 24:49).
- In conjunction with our own obedient submission, the Holy Spirit sanctifies us – i.e., He cleanses us, sets us apart, transforms our lives, renews our minds, and makes us holy (2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).
- The Holy Spirit is our Comforter, our Helper, our Advocate (John 14:16, 26).
- The Holy Spirit affixes believers with a seal, marking us as God’s very own, ensuring our inheritance in Christ (Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Corinthians 1:22).
- The Holy Spirit convicts the world of its sin and unrighteousness and points it toward Jesus (John 16:8).
- The Holy Spirit guides us in true worship (John 4:23).
- The Holy Spirit produces spiritual fruit within believers (Galatians 6:16-26).
- The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to edify the church (Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12).

And so much more. That list is hardly exhaustive, and we could write entire books on any of those functions.

Moreover, just like Jesus, the Holy Spirit is referenced by many titles, idiomatic expressions, and, particularly in his case, symbols. A few of the common ones include:

- **A dove** – Likely the most common symbol, it was a dove that signaled the end of the flood (Genesis 8:8-12) and that descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). A dove represents God’s blessing, pleasure, purity, patience, and peace.
- **A tongue of fire** – This symbol comes directly from Luke’s account of Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4), when the Holy Spirit descended and was visualized as a tongue of fire that rested atop the head of each person in the Upper Room. John the Baptist clearly prophesied that Jesus would baptize believers with the Holy Spirit *and fire* (Matthew 3:11). Fire purifies, extracting that which is valuable and consigning to ash that which is not. The Holy Spirit, as fire, fulfills Jesus’s own words, that He came to set the earth on fire (Luke 12:49). And the tongue is also symbolic of speech broadly. Believers are equipped by the Holy Spirit to speak the truth with boldness.
- **A wind** – Though invisible, the life-giving wind (or breath) of the Holy Spirit is ubiquitous. Humans owe their very lives to the breath of the Spirit, the only part of God’s creation into which He *breathed* life (Genesis 2:7). His wind blows wherever it pleases, especially in the lives of those born of the Spirit (John 3:8). Pentecost itself was accompanied by the sound of this mighty, rushing wind (Acts 2:2), but sometimes the wind of the Spirit comes as a whisper (1 Kings 19:12).
- **Oil** – This symbol of the Holy Spirit represents anointing and approval. In the New Testament, anointing with oil is a picture of the blessing of the Holy Spirit on all believers (1 John 2:20), while the Old Testament details multiple accounts of kings and priests being anointed with oil as a sign of God’s choice and blessing (e.g., Exodus 29:7, 30:30; 1 Samuel 10:1, 16:13; 1 Kings 1:39). And Jesus himself speaks of his anointing as coming *directly from the Holy Spirit* “to proclaim good news to the poor... freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18, paraphrasing Isaiah 61:1). And the oil we used to anoint the sick reassures someone of the healing and consoling presence of the Holy Spirit (James 5:14-15).

Others include rays of light (Luke 1:35), a cloud of the abiding presence of God (Exodus 13:21-22, 33:9, 40:36-38; Numbers 9:15-23, 11:25; 1 Kings 8:10; Ezekiel 10:3-4), water that quenches thirst and gives life (John 3:5, 4:14; 1 Corinthians 12:13; John 19:34; Isaiah 55:1; Zechariah 14:8); a seal (John 6:27); a seal and a pledge of God’s ownership

of us (Ephesians 1:13-14; John 6:37), and the “finger of God” (Luke 11:20; Exodus 31:18; 2 Corinthians 3:3).

Exercise #1 – Among the reading passages this week is one from 1 Corinthians 2. Read it through a couple of times and, in light of what you now know about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, what do these versions tell you about their *relationship* and, critically, *how it affects/impacts us*? What is our role in receiving and applying the wisdom that comes from the Spirit?

Exercise #2 – First individually, and then with your family/group, read the whole chapters of Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, not just the short passages on the gifts of the Spirit. Like we learned in January, put it all in a broader context. What jumps off the page to you? When the Holy Spirit gifts us, *why* does He do so? Couple this with 1 Corinthians 13 to amplify that answer. Return to who God the Father and God the Son are, and remember that is to whom God the Spirit points us. What does that say about our Christian walk together?

* * *

Final Thoughts – Sometimes we get caught up on the legalistic mechanics of what it means to be “filled with” or “baptized in” the Holy Spirit. What is exceptionally clear is that the infilling of the Holy Spirit is real, contemporary to today, and essential for living in power and victory (Ephesians 5:18).

What is remarkable about the biblical record, though, is the sundry ways in which the Holy Spirit manifests that indwelling in our lives. We see the pyrotechnics of Acts 2. And sometimes the Bible conspicuously notes that people spoke in various tongues, but not always. Sometimes people, like Saul/Paul, were miraculously healed at their infilling. Sometimes the very room was shaken. And on it goes.

Two things, though, seem ubiquitous. First, Jesus forthrightly says that those who are filled with the Holy Spirit will “receive power” to be the bold witnesses for him, both in word and in deed (Acts 1:8). And the biblical record testifies to that repeatedly. Second, the infilling of the Spirit was demonstrated time and again not by a formulaic set of manifestations, rather by the production of spiritual fruit in one’s life and the granting of spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ. Jesus said we would be known to be His by how we love one another, and the Holy Spirit was the catalyst for that transformation in the lives of the early church... and is so for our lives today. We should have the humility to allow the Holy Spirit, in his creative greatness, to vary his movement in someone’s life rather than try to make them carbon copies of us.

And never forget that every vehicle needs fresh oil to run. So do we. Pray every day for a fresh, new infilling of the Holy Spirit. (We will explore this more next month.)

Week 4 - February Life in the Trinity

Weekly Readings:

- John 17
- Matthew 22:34-40
- Key idea – The Trinity is not merely a theological theory; it is a practical guide for how we live our lives in love and with sacrifice.

Admittedly, the first three weeks of our study this month have been theologically dense – rich, to be sure, but also dense. But we hope that something has taken root in your heart and mind: our entire faith centers on the Trinity and Trinitarian love.

Yes, God is one being with three persons (Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 28:19). But confessing a triune God is more than a nifty explanation for the theological mysteries of creation (Genesis 1:26a), the incarnation (Luke 1:35; John 1:1-3), or the baptism (Matthew 3:17). No, confessing a triune God is how we understand our salvation, our life in Christian community, our worship and prayer, our very journey to become more like Christ, and our hope and assurance of life everlasting to come.

We are declaring that our God, who is love, is relational. The three persons are relational to each other in perfect love and unity, and their relationship is the blueprint for us and the essential stuff of the gospel (John 17:24; 1 John 4:7-12). The Father's love sent the Son (John 3:16), the Son's sacrifice reconciled us to the Father, and the Holy Spirit's indwelling makes us more like Jesus. Jesus employed that same model to send us out with the good news (John 20:21).

Our brother Paul gave us the beautiful model of how it all fits together: “The *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ and the *love* of God and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14).

So, to return to and paraphrase C.S. Lewis, there is a dance party going on, and we are all invited!

And no member of the Trinity has ever hidden the invitation, starting at the very moment of our creation. “And God said, let *Us* make man in our own image, after our own likeness” (Genesis 1:26). It was the whole Trinity that created man, and, at the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3, we see the whole Trinity seeming to say, “Let us save man!”

We promised a return to John 17, which is perhaps the greatest scriptural indication that we were created for *oneness*, for *unity* with the Trinity, especially since the words flow from Messiah himself. We are invited to dance right in the middle of their love.

Consider Jesus's words in His high priestly prayer:

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as you loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to see My glory that You have given Me because You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me. I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:20-26).

Whew! What a prayer! What a promise!

But beyond its beauty, do not miss what Jesus is praying. He is asking God the Father for us to be in the middle of their eternal relationship of love – to share in His glory, to be intimately unified with the Father, to know the God who He knows... which, as He says at the outset of the prayer, “is eternal life,” that we know “the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

When we begin to understand that – that Jesus wants us to be in the middle of this love with Him – our faith springs to life at a whole new level. Kingdom life, which we are to seek, is an invitation to run directly, unreservedly into this love.

We will never fully understand the mystery of the Trinity – one yet three, three yet one – until our glorification. But we can understand this: we are called to live life as they do.

This is when Trinitarianism becomes completely practical, not just theological or theoretical. Think about everything the Trinity teaches us when we observe their relationship one to another:

- We are to live in harmony with others, for this is what love does.
- We are to submit our wills to others (Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3-4).
- We are to serve others (Matthew 20:28).

- We are to live life with sacrificial love and humility, laying down what we want for others (John 15:13; Philippians 2:3-8).
- We are to live together in communion, fellowship, and with all things in common (Acts 2:42-47).
- We are to submit our diverse gifts and talents for the unity of the body (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:1-6).

We are made to live in community, both with the Trinity and with one another.

Think about the implications for marriage, family life, friendships, work, and, especially, the church. We find our true selves, who we were created to be, by giving ourselves to others, reflected the self-giving nature of the Godhead. Our relationships are meant to mirror that one – lasting commitments built on the bedrock of love.

When we understand that, we can begin to grasp even more of the beauty of God’s breathtaking design for us. Everything is relational.

Exercise #1 – Return to John 17. Read that chapter slowly, deliberately, maybe even a few times. Imagine Jesus sitting beside you, praying those very words over you. After all, our Savior makes it clear that He is praying for all believers, for all time. What do you feel? Now that we have spent a month in the Trinity, what leaps off the page? Where do you see yourself in the intimate oneness that Jesus seeks for you?

Exercise #2 – This is more practical, but it also may be more difficult. Do an inventory of your relationships. Start at home. Move to your extended family. Now your neighbors and colleagues. End at the church, but do not pay it short shrift. Think very carefully about your church community. Ask yourself (and share your answers with your family/group, if you want) the hard question – in how I relate to other people, do I mirror the Trinity? Is my love selfless and sacrificial?

* * *

Final Thoughts – Return to the words of Jesus in Matthew 22, the two greatest commandments: to love the Lord your God with everything and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said the second was like the first, and that everything in the Law and everything a Prophet ever said radiated from those two commands, mutually inclusive of one another. Do you get it now? We cannot love God fully – we cannot be in true Trinitarian harmony with Him – if we are not submitted in love to others. Keep in mind that your brothers and sisters in Christ are grafted to the same vine, baptized into the same body, and are invited to the same dance. That alone ought to condition how we speak with, work with, relate to, serve with, and love others.

March **A Christian's Journey**

Just for a moment, picture yourself back in your high school biology class. No, this is not a fun lab day where we can dissect frogs. Instead, you walk in and see that the teacher has written “Lifecycle of a Plant” on the board. You groan and yawn and then you start to squirm as the teacher explains each step.

Every plant starts as a seed. Then, when the right external conditions exist (sunlight, water, soil nutrients, season, etc.), the seed germinates, or breaks out of its seed casing. At the same time, that seed starts to grow roots downward into the richness of the soil from which it will draw the ingredients of life. Eventually, the seed produces a green shoot that bursts out of the soil and reaches toward the light.

Then, and only then, can a plant begin to grow leaves and start the process of photosynthesis, which converts solar energy into sugars. Over time, the seedling, combining the light it receives from the sun and nutrients and water from the soil, matures into an adult plant. But nary a single plant on the planet possesses deterministic growth. In other words, plants do not have an exact and particular shape or size to grow into. Instead, how big and sturdy and fruitful a plant becomes is largely determined by how the environmental conditions interact with the plant's innate biology.

Eventually a plant will reproduce itself, which is when flowers bloom and blossom. This allows for pollination, which fertilizes the plant, and additional seed production. Those seeds disperse, allowing other plants to grow and thrive. And this is all contained within a rhythm of rest (dormancy) and work governed by the seasons.

No doubt some of you are in hives right now, remembering all the traumas a biology class can wreak on a tenth grader. Hopefully, though, for most of you, a light bulb is beginning to buzz over your head. Our brains are hard-wired to find patterns, and yours is probably saying, “You know, that sounds a lot like us!” And you would be right.

All living things in God's created kingdom – bacteria, fungi, molds, protists, plants, animals, and, yes, humans – have a divinely designed life cycle that involves some variant of what we just reviewed. Life starts at some reproductive process. Life continues through some growth and maturation process. That part of the cycle repeats itself over and over. And then life ends through some death process.

But wait! There's more!

Didn't Jesus specifically say that Christians must experience two different kinds of birth, that of the flesh (or water) and that of the spirit (or blood)? Yes, he did, to Nicodemus in John 3:5-8. We are born from our mother's womb, of the flesh, from water. That is true of every human who breathes. But for those of us born of the spirit, in Christ's blood, we are entirely new: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*. The old has passed away; behold, the *new* has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So, wait, does our new life in Christ also carry this cycle of birth and growth that is so clearly written into God's creation? You bet it does. Remember, all life in God carries this familiar pattern, and your life as an apprentice of Jesus does, too.

But with one major exception – life in Christ abolishes the final stage of the cycle, or, more accurately, the point where the cycle ends: our death. As Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed *from death to life*" (John 5:24). We move from a familiar cycle of life to life everlasting after our present earthly bodies expire.

This month we will dive into our life cycle as a Christian. Together, we will explore some concepts that plenty of people know about but perhaps struggle to adequately explain from a solid biblical perspective: **regeneration, salvation, justification, consecration, sanctification, and glorification.**

These are some of the most beautiful – but loaded and misunderstood – words in all of Christianity. And our understanding of them often comes with a tremendous amount of church baggage. But, like any life cycle, they all go hand-in-hand, each building upon the previous one. What each does, through the power of the Holy Spirit, tells the story of our redemption, our reconciliation, our restoration, and our renewal.

We hope by now you are comfortable with each month's rhythm. And we also hope you are beginning to see how everything nests together. First, we learned how to better read, study, know, and live God's Word. We will spend a great deal of time in the Bible, and, as with any sword, it works better if you know how to use and wield it. Second, we learned about the most quintessential and foundational of all Christian ideologies: the Trinity. The Trinity is the fountainhead for how we love and how we live our faith, and everything else we study will flow from it.

Now, in March, we turn from the enclosed society of the Godhead to how the Father, Son, and Spirit directly, intimately, and willingly relate to us.

Week 1 – March Regeneration and Salvation

Weekly Readings:

- John 3:3-8
- Ephesians 2:1-10
- Key idea – Regeneration is the *cause*; salvation is the *effect*.

For two thousand years, Christian pastors and theologians have spilled a mind-boggling amount of ink explaining, discussing, arguing about, modifying, supporting, questioning, refuting, and recasting what the church believes about any of the doctrines we examine this month. What more could we possibly add?

But keep in mind our aims. We are not equipping you to teach in seminary, score points in a debate, or sound more clever than your friends. No, our goals are far more practical and holy. We want you to be more confident and biblically based in your understanding of the foundations of our faith. We want you to be more confident and biblically based in how you speak about your faith to others. And we want you to be more confident and biblically based in how you live your faith each day, particularly in the contexts of your family and your church.

So, let's start with the basics.

Exercise #1 – In your own words, how would you define **regeneration** and **salvation**? If you were asked by someone from another planet who knew absolutely nothing of Christianity, how would you explain it to them?

And this is not always an easy exercise. Think of it this way. What if I asked you to define the color **red** to someone who is blind? How would you possibly do that? Most of us would probably start describing an apple, a fire truck, a rose, or even blood. But the person who is without sight has never seen any of those things. They have no solid reference point. We might also describe red with feelings, like passion, anger, even love. But how can those abstract ideas actually tell a blind person what *red* actually is? Maybe in frustration we just say, “well, red is red,” but remember we cannot define a thing by the thing itself, contrary to all the times our parents bluntly told us, “because I said so!”

For this exercise, I strongly suspect that most of you will have a more complete, richer definition of salvation. Preachers certainly preach about it more. And how many times do we ask someone, “Are you saved?” versus, “Hey, have you been regenerated?” We are just more comfortable with salvation, whether or not we fully understand it.

* * *

So, what are regeneration and salvation? To start, they are not the same thing. In fact, when many Christians, particularly evangelical and charismatic Protestants, refer to “salvation,” they are likely speaking of “regeneration.”

Regeneration is instant. Regeneration is supernatural. Regeneration is the immediate work of the Holy Spirit that makes a dead person come alive, on-the-spot newness in Christ. Regeneration is our new birth, just as Jesus described to Nicodemus in John 3.

Moreover, regeneration precedes salvation. In fact, regeneration gives us the faith required for our salvation (1 Corinthians 2:14; 1 Corinthians 12; 2 Corinthians 4:13; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:8-9).

And perhaps most critically, regeneration is solely initiated by the Triune God. It is expressly the work of the Holy Spirit breathing into us. The Spirit initiates it; the Spirit nourishes it; the Spirit finishes it. Salvation, though, requires a simple but profound human response.

Therein lies the key difference. Regeneration is the *cause*; salvation is the *effect*. We are given a new heart to believe, and, when we do – when we say yes, when we confess – we are saved. Old things pass away, and we are made new in Christ.

That human response, of course, is fully empowered, enabled, and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. But it nevertheless requires us to respond with “yes” to the regenerative catalyst in our heart.

But our “yes” is not nearly as complicated as we sometimes make it. St. Paul provided the simplest, cleanest framework in Romans 10:9-10. “If you *confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

Look carefully at what Paul says about salvation. He does not mandate that a person list every sin he or she has committed. He does not suggest praying a so-called “sinner’s prayer,” and indeed, one is never mentioned in the Bible. He does not require a series of good works to earn righteousness. He does not enroll people in catechism classes.

No, our salvation is solely because of Jesus. And Paul keeps that reality beautifully unadorned, placing salvation within reach of every regenerated heart – we must only confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and we must only believe in his resurrection.

Ultimately, Paul knows that salvation – and the regeneration of our hearts that leads to salvation – is a complete gift of *grace* from God. Nothing, absolutely nothing, we do can make us righteous before God. Only what Jesus has done. (Again, we are getting ahead of ourselves, but that is a preview of justification.) Paul drives this point in so many of his letters – to name a few, Romans 3:20; Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5.

And our confession is not that Jesus was just a good man. No, we confess his lordship over all things and all people. That confession and belief may be straightforward, but they are by no means inconsequential. Stop for just a moment and think about what we are doing. We are joining our voices with the company of saints and martyrs, countless hundreds of millions over two millennia, the very bride of Christ. We make salvation an individual event in our life, and it certainly is, but we are also grafted into a nifty family.

By now, I suspect some of you are rounding up torches and pitchforks and ready to storm the gates of the church, screaming, “What about repentance?!” I can hear you all quoting Jesus, John the Baptist, John the Beloved, Peter, Paul (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:15; Luke 15:7; Acts 2:38, 3:19; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 1:9), not to mention a roll call of Old Testament prophets.

Repentance is absolutely, unequivocally a biblical concept. And repentance is absolutely, unequivocally a requisite in our lives. But... what does it really mean?

Exercise #2 – Define biblical repentance as you understand it.

For many, repentance has become a legalistic checklist of sins. We believe we must rehearse every wrong we have ever committed in order to gain the gift of salvation. The troubles with that quickly sharpen into focus. First, how in the world can we possibly remember every sin of omission and commission in our lives, every impure thought, every idle word, every moment of selfishness? We can't. It is simply impractical, and for those who do try this, they live in a perpetual state of fear that they forgot to confess something. This is especially sad since Jesus taught us simply to pray with an earnest heart, “Forgive us our trespasses,” our sins, the times we went where we ought not to have (Matthew 6:12).

More soberly, a list comes dangerously close to turning repentance into a work, a mechanical cataloguing and recitation of our wrongs in order to receive absolution. But we cannot be made righteous by our own works.

And, ultimately, this does violence to what repentance actually means. Repentance, from the Greek *metanoia*, quite literally means “a change of mind.” It is *not* that

recitation of everything we have done. And it is not simply remorse or conviction, although those feelings can be used by the Holy Spirit to spur us into repentance. Instead, it is a fundamental, internal transformation, a reorientation of one's entire life and heart. To put it in the terms said by Mary Magdalene in the television show, *The Chosen*, "I was one way, and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in between was Him." Jesus. Or, more familiarly, my grandfather often said, "I just ain't the man I used to be."

Repentance, thus understood, is a bold declaration that we no longer live our lives in sinful things that hurt us. Our entire being has been (and is being) transformed. We have walked in darkness, but we have seen a great light, and we have turned our hearts toward that light.

Yes, we acknowledge our past wrongs, but repentance is beautifully forward-looking, not backward-looking in condemnation. We deliberately choose a new direction.

This all begs the question: from *what* exactly are we saved? We will think more about this in the next two weeks (justification and sanctification), but we can certainly say we are saved *from* the penalty of sin (death and eternal separation from God), the power of sin (living empowered lives), the wrath and judgment of God, and, in the fullness of time, the presence of sin (glorification).

However, I would suggest that we think of our salvation with a different preposition. Yes, we are saved *from* something, but what if we were saved *for* something, in the here and now? In other words, what if we imagined our salvation as more than just escaping hell but living in the fullness of the kingdom... today?

Think about all the right-now benefits of salvation that Jesus and Paul list for us:

- We are saved *for* good works (not *by* good works). (Ephesians 2:10)
- We are saved *for* abundant life. (John 10:10).
- We are saved *for* the fullness of joy in God. (John 15:11)
- We are saved *for* the assignment of disciple-making. (Matthew 28:19-20).
- We are saved *for* the declaration of the gospel. (Mark 16:15)
- We are saved *for* obedience. (John 14:15-17)
- We are saved *for* empowered living through the Spirit. (Acts 1:8; Ephesians 1:13)
- We are saved *for* the fulfillment of God's will. (Philippians 4:13).
- We are saved *for* the Master's use. (2 Timothy 2:21).

And that is barely scratching the service.

We are saved to brilliantly display the wonders and powers of God's grace to others. And we are saved to look like, sound like, act like, and become like Jesus. Jesus specifically commissions us to be the light of the world reflecting him (Matthew 5:14-16). This stands as proof positive that we are saved *for* a purpose in this world, not just *from* God's wrath in the world to come.

Even the Greek word for salvation, *sozo*, is much deeper, much richer, and much more comprehensive than just rescue from judgment. *Sozo* is a word of healing and deliverance, the idea of making something whole. So, yes, salvation in the New Testament refers to spiritual rescue from sin, but it also speaks to something much more holistic – the healing of spirit, soul, and body, the (eventual) full restoration of our humanity as God initially created. Christ's incarnation, which we discussed last month, makes this kind of *sozo* possible. As St. Gregory of Nazianzus said, "What is not assumed is not healed," but Jesus assumed it, Jesus paid it all, and Jesus healed it all. And faith in him, as he told the woman with the blood disorder, makes us well (Matthew 9:22).

So, let's briefly review. Regeneration is instant; salvation is a process. Regeneration triggers our heart to believe; salvation is holistic, a comprehensive redemption of everything that Jesus assumed – our spirits, our bodies, our minds. Regeneration opens the door for repentance and salvation; salvation opens the door for justification, sanctification, and glorification, which we will explore more deeply this month.

* * *

Final Thoughts – Some of you may be tempted to think all this is nothing more than theological hair-splitting. I understand your concern. But think of it like this. When you travel to another country, you need a passport. That passport unlocks everything else – your ability to get on a plane or boat, your ability to check-in to a hotel, your ability to move around freely, etc. Without it, you are boxed into the same place; with it, you can experience more of the world around you.

Regeneration is your passport to Christianity. It is the prerequisite work of the Holy Spirit that allows us to walk the Christian journey, starting with faith to believe, a gift from the Trinity, moving to confession and repentance, our responses to this blooming faith. Accepting that there is an act of regeneration that is sovereign of God reinforces the truth that the whole salvific process is a work of God's grace, not our will.

All pieces of this journey share a common vocabulary, so it is rather easy to blur the lines between these two and also with sanctification. But God is not haphazard. He is ordered. And he has chosen to begin our journey back to him with a circumcision of our heart, regenerating our faith and pointing us to confession and repentance.

Week 2 – March Justification

Weekly Readings:

- Romans 3
- Romans 5
- Key idea – Justification is both about present peace and future hope.

When most pastors preach about justification, they set the scene in a courtroom. The word picture goes something like this.

You have committed a crime. No doubt exists about your guilt. Video cameras have captured it. Multiple witnesses will testify to it. A paper trail of evidence proves it. And, most significantly, the judge himself has seen it all. You have no alibi, no defense, nothing at all that will assuage the demands of the law and the wrath of the judge. You stand condemned, and your punishment, whatever it is, will be completely merited.

But then, just as the judge is about to pronounce you guilty and decree your sentence, an attorney – an advocate – rises from his seat at your defense table. He tells the judge that, despite your guilt, he will serve your sentence because he loves you. The judge does not even hesitate in accepting the advocate's offer, because this is what the judge intended and wanted to happen in the first place, before your case was ever called before his bench.

Therefore, without hesitation, the judge considers the advocate's substitution completely sufficient for the crime, applies it to your guilt, and, in the name of that advocate and solely on the basis of what he has done, pronounces you not guilty. The judge refuses to condemn you and, instead, pronounces you worthy to enter the fullness of a perfect society.

Whew!

We should pause a moment and just give thanks that this scene is not fiction but fact. This is *our* story. We are all sinners. We all miss the mark. We are all incapable of living a holy life on our own merit. We all face eternal separation from a righteous God because of our individual sins and the scourge and curse of sin itself. Yet Jesus stepped in and, ever obedient to the Father's will, lived a perfect life, died a sacrificial death in our stead, and applied that death as atonement for us.

That is justification. We are *justified* – made right before God – because of Jesus.

Since Adam and Eve's sins in the Garden of Eden, none of us is clean and righteous, thus nothing we could do could ever restore us before God (Acts 17:26; Psalm 53:1-3; Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:9-23; Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). And that necessarily means that God's law condemns us (Psalm 130:3; Luke 5:8).

But Jesus becomes God with us, incarnated as the second Adam, fully divine but, critically, fully human. We believe that means he could, as a perfect human, be a perfect sacrifice for all human sins. That is certainly and inviolably true. (Isaiah 45:21-25; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 1:21; Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; Titus 2:13). Upon our confession of faith in his lordship and resurrection, we are saved and thereby justified before God.

Yet we often paint that courtroom scene as one that occurs at the end of our lives, when we die and stand before God's throne. But what if we looked at it as a present and real reality? For a moment, let's shift the setting from a courtroom to a hospital.

You come into the emergency room, and, after extensive blood work and medical tests, your doctors tell you that your death is certain. They can do no more. The ravages of disease have caught up with you, and you have no hope to be cured. They pronounce your condition mortal and walk away.

But then another doctor comes in, a universal donor of blood, and says he can give you a blood transplant. Not a transfusion, which would be just a temporary boost of blood, but a transplant, where your sick and decaying blood is drained and his life-giving, breathing blood is given to you. And, he says, the results are astounding – 100% of those who receive this transplant have life everlasting, *starting immediately!*

Now, what are you going to do? I can't imagine anyone who would say no.

The analogy is the same as the courtroom – you are condemned, you (nor anyone else) can do anything to give you life, your sick blood punishes you with certain death, and only one man's blood can save you. The courtroom paints a picture of our own personal sins, the individual litany of all the times we transgressed God's holy law. The hospital paints a picture of the very curse of sin, so horrible that it infects every single person's blood with the certain decay of death, regardless of their own merit.

But the key with the hospital analogy is this –it is not set at the judgment bench of God. No, when you receive the blood, and you stand justified, you are now sent forth to flourish. One of the more remarkable aspects of justification is this – even as the Holy Spirit continues to build righteous behavior within us (sanctification, which we discuss next week), God treats us as if we were righteous now, today, able to approach him boldly, and able to live in his peace and joy.

You see it, right? Yes, justification is completely about future hope. Our account with God is settled and held against the day of our judgment because of Christ. We pass from death to life (John 5:24).

But we miss out on the whole beauty of justification if we do not recognize its present peace. All of our legal obligations are fulfilled, which means we can turn to what life unshackled truly means. Our blood has been cleansed – and is still being cleansed until our eventual glorification – by the transfusion of the blood of Jesus.

We are freed *from* the tyranny of works righteousness by justification, and we are set loose into the world *for* good works and gospel testimony born of his blood, of his love, and of his character.

In other words, our justification is a legal exchange, yes. But it is so much more, because that legal exchange opens the door for us to experience and share life in the kingdom.

Exercise #1 – How do you view justification? Is it that legal exercise in a courtroom, a transaction between God the Father and God the Son that allows you to be justified before him? Or is it the transplant in the hospital, where the blood of death is replaced by the blood of life? Or is it both?

Exercise #2 – Read Romans chapters 3 and 5 this week. Slowly, steadily, deliberately, meditatively. In light of this week’s lesson, what jumps off the page? What speaks to your heart? How are you beginning to understand the fullness and richness of justification?

* * *

Final Thoughts – Humans have a tendency to make everything about us. So, as with that trial metaphor, we see ourselves before the judge, but we forget that Jesus was, too. And that wasn’t the Trial of the Century or even the Millennium, but it was the Trial of Eternity. Throughout Holy Week, Jesus was questioned over and over by the religious leaders. Just as the priests did with the Passover lamb, Jesus was repeatedly inspected to ensure he had no blemish, no fault, nothing that would disqualify his sacrifice. And the high priest always examined the lamb that would be sacrificed for all the people’s sin, just as Caiaphas did with Jesus. Even worldly authorities (Pilate/Rome/Herod) inspected Jesus and found no fault with him. By every measurement, by every person, Jesus was perfect, which made his death perfect for our justification. Nothing else would do.

Week 3 – March

Consecration and Sanctification

Weekly Readings:

- Romans 6 and 12
- Hebrews 10
- Key idea – Consecration and sanctification are two sides of the same coin – a decision to be set apart for a holy purpose, and then growth and empowerment necessary for that purpose.

We identify one another by tribes. Yes, I am an American, but I am also a Southerner, and I am also a Georgian. And most folks who live where I live are also part of another critically important tribe to our existence: the college football team for which we root. (Clearly we are sane and stable folks, measuring our happiness each autumn weekend by the performance of teenagers and young adults during a three-hour game!)

A common football ritual is national signing day, where young, gifted athletes from all over the country announce their selection of a school. The ceremony is a big one, complete with families and coaches and a formal table for the high school senior to sign an actual letter of intent. The climax happens when the new commit pulls out a baseball cap of his new team, bends its bill, plops it on his head, and smiles at the camera.

Then he enrolls at the university over the summer and quickly learns that his mother is nowhere to be found. Coaches work him hard... then ask for more. They tear down everything he learned from high school coaches and knead into him new disciplines, new rhythms, new approaches. He has to be up early and has to clear most every part of his life with a coach, an academic advisor, a nutritionist, a doctor, and a few others.

This, brothers and sisters, is a picture of consecration and sanctification. The first is me placing my life on the altar; the second is the Holy Spirit shaping what I placed there.

Consecration is like national signing day, when you say, “Lord, I am yours,” and put on the “Team Jesus” hat. Sanctification is God’s response, through the Holy Spirit, to your decision. He says, “Great! Now, let me make you in the image of Jesus.” And then, his coaching and correcting and empowering combine with your sweat equity to produce fruit within you and for the kingdom of God.

And if that sounds a little bit different than regeneration, salvation, and justification, it should. All of those parts of our journey are centered on the work of the Triune God. The Holy Spirit regenerates our heart, preparing us for a confession of faith. Jesus saves us through his sacrificial atonement on the cross and his resurrection thereafter. And

God the Father considers us justified – and not condemned – by the work of his Son. In none of those steps do we have anything to offer, other than our obedience and response. The work is not ours.

But in consecration and sanctification, we are fully expected to be active participants. Let's start with consecration, an Old Testament centerpiece:

- “For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44).
- “Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 20:7).
- “And say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat’” (Numbers 11:18).
- “Then Joshua said to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you’” (Joshua 3:5).
- “Get up! Consecrate the people say, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, God of Israel, ‘There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you’” (Joshua 7:13).
- “And he said, ‘Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice’” (1 Samuel 16:5).
- “And [David] said to them, ‘You are the heads of the fathers’ houses of the Levites. Consecrate yourselves, you and your brothers, so that you may bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel, to the place that I have prepared for it’” (1 Chronicles 15:12).
- “And [Hezekiah] said to them, ‘Hear me, Levites! Now consecrate yourselves, and consecrate the house of the LORD, the God of your fathers, and carry out the filth from the Holy Place’” (2 Chronicles 29:5).

Exercise #1 – What jumps off the page to you about these representative verses when taken in isolation? Why did the Lord ask the people to consecrate themselves? And what role was a person expected to have in the process?

Now, pick one or two and read the verse in its larger context (i.e., the full narrative passage/chapter). Do this first by yourself and then perhaps choose a different verse to explore your group/family, answering the same questions.

* * *

Is it not striking that the Lord asked people to set themselves apart, knowing full well that we humans are incapable of living holy lives separate from the power of the Holy

Spirit? Yet there we are. Time and again, the Lord tells Israelites to separate themselves from the pagan cultures and practices that surrounded them.

What, then, do we make of this?

Perhaps this – while we do nothing to earn our salvation, God takes seriously our zeal and desire to live separately from the world, i.e., *in* it but not *of* it. The things God wants to do in, with, and through us – and the spiritual promised lands to which he wishes to take us – require us to sweep the leaven out of lives. We have to learn the discipline of saying no to unholy things and of turning away.

In plain language, we are set apart... so God is asking us to act like it.

Paul bluntly commands us to do: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, **to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship**” (Romans 12:1). Or, even more strongly, “Do not present your members [parts of your body] to sin, as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life...” (Romans 6:13).

So, what then do we say of consecration’s partner, sanctification?

Let me confess a frustration of mine. I think Christians argue too much about a lot of things, but, in particular, I think branches of our family miss the forest for the trees when it comes to sanctification. We all seem to agree that, at its core, it is something that makes us more holy, more like Jesus.

But our tribes argue whether that is a once-for-all-time sanctification, something like a single lightning bolt that strikes us pure and free from sin’s clutches. Or whether it is a lifelong process of heart circumcision, where we learn more and more to set aside the unholy, live the holy, and produce good fruit.

What if the answer were just... yes?

Scripture seems to strongly suggest that true sanctification is both, i.e., both *definitive* and *progressive*.

Exercise #2 – Read Hebrews 10 in its entirety. After reading it, in your own words, how would you describe sanctification?

* * *

That passage seems to suggest that Jesus is the definitive agent of sanctification, his sacrifice breaking once-for-all the bondage of sin in the lives of believers. But it also seems to suggest that there is an ongoing work of God's grace through the Holy Spirit, regenerating us in order to put sin to death more each and every day.

In 1647, our spiritual forefathers wrote in the Westminster Catechism this simple and beautiful definition: **“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”**

In other words, when asked to define sanctification, our brothers just said, “Yes.” In that one statement, they frame it as both a single and an ongoing work.

I think they are right.

And Jesus sets the substance and benchmark of our sanctification – the truth. Jesus specifically prayed to the Father that all of us would be sanctified: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). But who is the truth? Jesus. Jesus is the word of God. Jesus is the way, *the truth*, and the life. We are sanctified holy in him alone.

So, tying it all together, what can we say?

- We are commanded to consecrate ourselves, but the Holy Spirit must partner with us.
- Consecration is a worshipful offering of ourselves to God – our lives, our bodies, our ways, our relationships, our beliefs, etc.
- What we consecrate to God, he will make holy. He takes ownership of that which is consecrated to him.
- Regeneration, salvation, and justification must precede consecration.
- Sanctification, or being made holy, cannot begin until we have consecrated ourselves and our things to him. Consecration first, sanctification follows.

* * *

Final Thoughts – In my denominational tradition, old-timers would often say, “I’m saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost.” I fully understand their sentiment, and I never doubted their relationships with Jesus.

But you see the problem with their framing, right? Every verb is in the past sense, including sanctified. I supposed we could be sanctified once and then have to grow

into it like a hand-me-down to a twelve-year-old who has not gone through a growth spurt. The garment is just an awkward fit until we grow.

Yet that seems contradictory to so much of the New Testament's writing, particularly that of Paul, about our Christian walk. Its authors frequently deploy a verb tense common in Greek but unknown in English – present passive imperative. A verb in that tense means that the action is 1) continuous, ongoing, repeated, and decidedly not a single time; 2) accomplished through the act of another (in our case, the Holy Spirit); and 3) commanded.

So, Ephesians 5:18 transforms from “be filled with the Spirit” to “be being filled,” i.e., presently, accomplished by the Spirit, and urgently so. Every day.

That verb tense litters the pages of the New Testament. Be being... saved (Acts 2:40), transformed (Romans 12:2), reconciled (2 Corinthians 5:20); enlarged/widened (in your hearts) (2 Corinthians 6:13), separated (2 Corinthians 6:17), perfected (2 Corinthians 13:11), empowered (Ephesians 6:10), humbled (1 Peter 5:6), and, yes, sanctified (Revelation 22:11)

And when we read any of those in the present passive imperative, we begin to realize just how continuously transformative our Christian should be. Or, in the language of this week, continuously sanctified to fulfill the purposes for which we are consecrated to the One.

In the words of the old hymn, “I need thee every hour, most gracious Lord, no tender voice like thine can peace afford. I need thee every hour, stay thou nearby; temptations lose their power when thou art nigh. I need thee every hour, teach me thy will, and thy rich promises in me full. I need thee, O I need thee. Every hour I need thee. O bless me now, my Savior, I come to thee.”

Amen.

Week 4 – March Glorification

Weekly Readings:

- Romans 8:18-30
- 1 Corinthians 15
- 1 Peter 1
- Key idea – “We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

Think back for a moment to your high school graduation. Perhaps you recall all the pomp and pageantry, marching into the stadium or auditorium. A band played. Bunches of people spoke. And then, at some point, the principal stood up and said something like this to the superintendent: “On behalf of the faculty of this high school, I certify that these candidates have completed all the requirements for their diploma.”

Then, row by row, you joined your classmates in walking across the stage, receiving your diploma, shaking hands with the dignitaries, and returning your seat. Yet one final act remained – moving the tassel of your mortarboard from one side to the other, officially signifying to everyone that you were a graduate!

The finality of that moment – whether five or fifty years ago – has never changed. You reached the end of a journey that started well before kindergarten. A lifelong process transitioned in an instant, from student to graduate.

To some degree, this mirrors the biblical concept of glorification.

Glorification is the final, *future* stage of salvation. It is the last link in the golden chain of salvation – from being called and regenerated to being justified to being sanctified to being glorified (Romans 8:29-30). All of the work is complete. We are completely, wholly, and eternally saved, freed from sin and completely, wholly, and eternally transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Like Jesus, glorification necessarily means a glorified body and spirit – resurrected, immortal, experiencing unceasing, unrestrained communion with the Trinity. Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruit, or initial proof and earnest payment, of our own resurrection, and his glorified body is likewise (1 Corinthians 15; Philippians 3:20-21).

And, perhaps more overwhelmingly wonderful than anything is John’s bold witness: “Beloved, we are God’s children *now*, and what we *will be* has *not yet* appeared; but we know that when he appears, *we shall be like him*, because we *shall see him as he is*. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

Mercy. Sit back and let that sink in a minute.

We shall see Jesus as he is, fully glorified, fully transfigured, fully God, fully man. Why? Because on that day, we will be like him. We will have graduated. We will have turned our tassel to the other side – one in the presence of Jesus Christ and one where the presence of sin, suffering, evil, and their effects and influences are permanently eradicated.

Now, when John says we shall be like him, he does not mean that we will be gods in our own right. Instead, he means, quite literally, that we will be glorified – trading the mortal for immortal, the perishable for the imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:50-58) – as Christ and, through him, able to stand pure and blameless before God. The whole life cycle of our Christian faith culminates in an eternity where we have been fully conformed into the image of our older brother, our Savior, our Jesus.

Lest you think this is some pie-in-the-sky theology, this is exactly what Jesus himself prayed over us on the night of his betrayal. Quite literally, he asked the Father, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them that they *may be one even as we are one*. I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one... Father, I desire that they also, whom you “have given me, may be *with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me...*” (John 17:22-24).

And does anyone really think that God the Father will not answer and fulfill the prayers of his beloved Son?

Jesus prayed this over you and every believer for all time. And every time a follower of Christ is glorified, God the Father answers this prayer yet again.

How good does all that sound? I can promise you that the reality will far exceed whatever your imagination allows you to imagine. Paul, in Romans 8, exhorts us with this breathtaking truth – our present sufferings cannot even be held up as a comparison point for what a glorified life will be like.

An unfortunate trend within churches is to make our journey all about “getting to heaven,” which often neglects the present reality of the kingdom of God that is explicit and pervasive in Jesus’s teachings. And, building off that trend, some churches stop our journey just inside the eastern gate. We get to heaven, we simply lay it all down and are done.

But heaven is not the point. And – sit down for this – heaven was never the real goal. The goal is to be like Jesus and to be one with the Trinity (again, painstakingly read what Jesus prayed over us in John 17). **The very desire of Jesus’s heart is for our glorification.** To share Jesus’s home for eternity, we must be glorified.

Exercise – This week, we only have one exercise, but we really want you to take your time and think. Read 1 Peter 1 several times. (It is only 25 verses. Try making it your primary Bible reading this week. Work to memorize some of it, if you can.) But within 1 Peter 1, what do you notice? Identify the life cycle of a Christian in Peter’s exhortation – regeneration, salvation, justification, consecration, sanctification, and glorification. We promise, it’s all there. Reflect on this whole month. What do you more deeply appreciate about your walk with Christ? And, in light of what Peter writes, what do you think about your (temporary) problems and sufferings in this world? Within the life of a believer, what do these things do?

Look how Peter concludes that passage – “And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (v. 25).

This is the good news, the gospel – for unto us is born a Savior, Christ the Lord. He, along with the Father and the Spirit, are intimately involved in our redemption – from the regeneration of our heart... to the healing of our sin sickness through salvation... to our justification before God by the blood sacrifice of Jesus... to our impulse for consecration and the work of sanctification... and ultimately to our full transformation into Christlikeness at our glorification.

So, fear not! We shall see him as he is, because we shall be like him.

* * *

Final Thoughts – I do not know everything glorification entails, but I earnestly believe that it is far greater and far more comprehensive and wonderful than I can imagine in my feeble brain. But I also believe the church fails to add its “amen” to glorification. We talk of our resurrected bodies and of life everlasting, both true and real. Yet those are rewards. Great rewards, unspeakably wonderful rewards, but rewards nevertheless. The product of this whole journey – the magnetic north on our entire spiritual compass – is to be like Jesus. And, to reach that ultimate goal, to be like him and to see him as he is, we must be glorified. In the end, glorification is more than a promise, though it is that. Glorification is God’s final act of restoration of our full humanity into its perfect image, the same state that, on the sixth day of creation, caused God to look at us and say it was “very good.” With glorification, we can be in Eden once more, walking with our Lord in the cool of the evening.

April **The Problem of Sin**

Imagine you are in an appointment with a cardiologist. For weeks, you have dreaded this appointment, because you were quite certain the doctor was about to put the hammer down on your sedentary lifestyle and eating habits. Intuitively you know that things must change – I mean, pizza and fried chicken can't be the best options for *every* meal, right?

Then, much to your surprise, the cardiologist comes in, sits down, examines you, pores over your bloodwork, including a horrifically high lipid panel, and then exclaims, “Keep on doing what you're doing! Eat what you want, when you want, and how much you want! If it feels good to you, then, by all means, do it! We've got magic pills and magic surgeries that can fix it all!”

That may seem like a laughable, completely unrealistic scenario. But the reality is, we often treat sin in much the same way: something we know is inherently and utterly bad for us, but something we keep consuming because we view God's grace as a “get out of jail free” card applied to any and all behaviors.

So many people readily quote Romans 5:20-21 to justify this point of view – “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Amen. But hang on just a minute. Paul's *very next words*, which we often overlook because editors placed them in a new chapter, were, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? **By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?**” (Romans 6:1-2).

The grace that Christ displayed on Calvary, though free to us, was not cheap. But Paul teaches us that we treat it that way when we live in habitual, perpetual sin after our regeneration.

Notice that Paul never says we will not be tempted. When we come to Jesus Christ through faith, yes, the bonds of sin are broken in our lives. Sin no longer *reigns* in and over our lives. But the temptation of sin most assuredly *remains* in our lives.

And this is why teaching on sin is mission critical for churches today. But sin has fallen out of favor as a discussion topic in pulpits and discipleship groups. As a pastor, I can certainly see the allure. No one wants to talk about bad stuff. Sin makes us feel

uncomfortable (as it should). And no one purposefully wants to make anyone feel bad or that something is wrong. We all want the joy stuff without any of the sanctification stuff to make us stronger.

And I cannot help but think that the enemy of our soul delights in that. Think about how relative everything is these days. People are openly encouraged to live out their “truth,” seemingly oblivious to the irony that if everyone has an individual truth (which they decidedly do *not*; Jesus rightly stakes claim to being *the* Truth), then there is no objective truth at all. The word disintegrates, and we openly invite people to live lives of selfish ambition, lustful desires, and misappropriated love.

Given this introduction, you might expect this month to be a hellfire and brimstone warning against specific sins. But you would be wrong. We have no intention of turning this into a recitation of sins of commission and omission. To bluntly paraphrase the prophet Micah in the reverse, the Lord has *also* told you, O man, what is bad. We already know that idolizing, killing, stealing, adulterating, coveting, and lying are on that list (Exodus 20). We know that other works of the flesh – e.g., sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger and rage, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, etc. – make the list, too (Galatians 5:15-21). We could go on and on, but you know right from wrong.

Moreover, such a list smacks of a legalistic approach to faith, as if God were a hall monitor waiting to write tardy slips to everyone not safely in a classroom when the bell rings. When we reduce sin to a checklist, we miss the point altogether.

The point is this: sin – any sin, every sin – always starts the same way. Sin starts in the heart with misplaced love.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6), and throughout his whole ministry, stripped away the idea that sin was simply wrong acts. “For from **within, out of the heart of man**, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **All these things come from within, and they defile a person**” (Mark 7:21-23).

However, like the hapless cardiologist telling his patient what he wants to hear, we preach and teach a gospel without the teeth of conviction and refinement so manifestly evident in Jesus’s ministry. Jesus, as plain as the nose on our faces, defined sin as a condition of the heart, a symptom of inner decay and corruption. He channelled the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). So, the anger, lust, hypocrisy, jealousy,

greed, judgmentalism and self-righteousness, unforgiveness, and pride that we harbor within are the greatest evidence of our need for sanctification. And out of the reservoir of such vile will eventually spring actions that hurt, wound, and break others and ourselves.

The trouble is we are much more likely to judge the latter, all the actual actions, as sin, but rarely, if ever, the thoughts of our heart.

So, this month, we will examine sin much more clinically and holistically. What is sin in the eyes of God? Why is it so serious? What does it do to us, to others, to the church, and even to the universe? What are its consequences? The answers to these questions matter so much more than just a list of “do’s and don’ts,” because they all point to sin’s headwaters.

We will not necessarily discuss the remedy for sin or overcoming temptation. We spent a great deal of time on regeneration, salvation, justification, sanctification, and the like last month. And later this year we will work through some practices of Christian spiritual formation that will help us avoid giving “any opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:27).

Instead, everything this month will focus us on one central idea – sin is serious.

Sin is so much more than just modern Christian euphemisms – “my struggle,” “a point of brokenness,” or “the weakness of my flesh.” Despite our softened labels, sin is breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4). And that, by its very definition, means sin is gravely serious, and we will approach it with such sobriety.

Week 1 – April What is Sin?

Weekly Readings:

- Genesis 1-3
- 1 Corinthians 13
- Key idea – Sin, at its core, is the redirection of our love away from God and others and onto ourselves. Sin’s roots are pride and selfishness.

At the outset of this week and indeed this month, we need to discuss a thorny and complex issue, one that fills whole sections of theological libraries. What exactly is sin? And what is its origin?

And – surprise! – we will frame both the questions and answers in a way you might not have considered before. Let’s start with the standard answer.

As believers in Christ, we turn to the Bible for our answer. There, in the plain language of Genesis 3, we see the introduction of sin into God’s perfect creation. In the simplest of terms, eating the fruit of one tree was forbidden by God. The serpent lied to Eve about the consequences. Eve ate and offered the same to Adam. He, too, ate. And, consequently, sin, separation from God, and death immediately and cataclysmically corrupted creation. Not just humans but *all* creation.

Exercise #1 – Read the whole of the creation narrative, every word of the first three chapters of Genesis. Read it slowly, deliberately, and meditatively. What do you notice about God’s intent for humans? Why do you think he made us in the first place?

Now, think about all of his instructions to Adam and Eve, both what to do and what not to do. Why might he give those specific directions? Finally, in the fall itself, what is happening? Think beyond the simple formula of “God said don’t. The serpent tempted. Eve ate. Adam ate. God banished.” While true, think more deeply. Beyond eating a piece of fruit, what exactly was the serpent encouraging Eve and, by extension, Adam to do here? And, based on what you said was God’s reason for creating humans, why did Adam and Eve ultimately do it?

* * *

But for all the drama in the creation story, sin is only defined by inference, and then not even complexly. In fact, the definition is breathtakingly simple: doing what God told you not to do. (And, naturally, the opposite, not doing what God told you to do.)

So, sin, most straightforwardly, is transgressing against God’s law (1 John 3:4).

But that tells us nothing of sin's actual origin, only the action that encoded its curse into our DNA. If Adam and Eve were God's perfect creation, then why did they choose to do something so imperfect, so disobedient, so unholy?

Again, we could just leave it at the gift of human free will, God's intentional decision to voluntarily limit the exercise of his omnipotence so that humans could choose on their own to love him. Indeed, the scriptures are littered with examples of this, perhaps most notably Joshua's call to his people, "*Choose* you this day whom you will serve..." (Joshua 24:15). So, God gives us agency, and we misapply and misuse it.

But that still leaves something on the table. Reconsider our earlier prompt: why were we created in the first place? Because when we begin to consider sin in light of *why we were created* – i.e., the very purpose of our existence – then sin takes on a much heavier, much more jarring reality, and its true origin should petrify us.

By love and through love, God – himself, love – created humans to know him. To *know* him. In both biblical Hebrew and Greek, that knowledge is intensely intimate, close, and personal. In other words, we were created *for love*, which manifests itself in our worship, our joy, and our peace. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it thusly: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

The object of that love was to be, first and foremost, the Triune God, followed by our neighbors, i.e., all others likewise made in the image of Almighty God. In short, we were made in his image in order to reflect his image; we were made by love to reflect love.

Think of it this way. In the second commandment, the prohibition against any graven images of God, we see both literarily and historically this idea: God is free to assume whatever form God chooses in revealing himself to his people, and he is *not* to be equated with the media of clay, stone, metal, wood, etc. At the time of Sinai, God had revealed himself in two conspicuous ways. He revealed his Name, which is an intimate sharing of his essence and availability, hence the third commandment's prohibition against misusing it. But he had also revealed, at least in part, that he had chosen a living image bearer – humans themselves. And, indeed, Jesus, the second Adam, is the *ultimate* image bearer of God, the "visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

What a beautiful gem of our theology. If we want to see the beauty, loveliness, imagination, and power of God, we do not need to look at anything made by the hands of man. We need only look at one another... *never* to worship a human, but to worship

the God who knitted us together *and to reflect his love to them and share and experience it with both them and him.*

Scripture bears this out. We are made in God's image, a bond of incalculable worth (Genesis 1:26-27). Through his only son, Jesus Christ, we were deliberately, affectionately, eternally chosen to be adopted into God's family (Ephesians 1:4-5). From Jesus we were given two similar commandments upon which everything else rests: love the Lord with everything we have, and love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). And we are able to love (both him and others), because he first loved us with an everlasting love that draws us in (1 John 4:19).

Now, at this point, you might be thinking, "This was supposed to be a lesson on sin. So, why are we talking so much about love?"

I am so glad you asked. Let's connect the dots together.

If we were created by love, through love, for love – and if the objects of our love were intended to be the Triune God (again, first and foremost, above anyone or anything), followed by other image-bearers of that same Triune God – then sin becomes much easier to define. And much more startling.

Sin, at its core, is the redirection of our love away from God and others and onto ourselves. Sin takes the love that God gave us and intended for worshipping, glorifying, adoring, serving, obeying, and living for him and repurposes it to what our own flesh, hearts, and minds want. Furthermore, sin takes the love that God gave us and intended for serving others, and perverts it with our own pursuits, ambitions, and appetites.

Sin is redolent with pride and selfishness.

Do you see it now? Sin does not have its origin in Satan. Sin does not have its origin in demonic powers. Sin does not have its origin in the Garden of Eden.

Sin's origin is much closer to home – our own pride generated by our own free will. In sin, we are purposefully using our free will to tell God, "I don't care what you think is best for me. I don't care what you want me to do with your love. I want what I want when and how I want it."

In essence, we corrupt the very love in which we were created, turning it away from God and away from others and onto ourselves. This is the very antithesis of a Christlike life, where we submit and surrender self first to God and then to one another.

In that light, you can bring much more clarity to all manners of evil. Murder, theft, assault, rape, arson, extortion, and the like all have their root in a warped, perverted human heart, just as Jesus says, one that places selfish love and pursuits above those of God. But the same can be said for avarice, jealousy, lust of any sort, vainglory, gossip, innuendo, dissension, fighting, malice, and all other sorts of maleficent attitudes and actions. Every single “sin” is really just the progeny of our primal sin – i.e., turning our affections away from God and others and placing them on ourselves.

This is sin.

Yes, our “inherited sin” comes from Adam’s “original sin.” Since we are all kin to him, we likewise inherit his sinful nature, sharing in its blame and its punishment.

But we would do well not simply to blame our great-grandparents, Adam and Eve. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). All of us have chosen to place ourselves above God. All of us have chosen to place ourselves above others, too.

Ultimately, any sin you might name is all about who is in control. Is God in control or you? Does your action show love for God and others or you?

Any sin. From the irreverent use of God’s holy name to whining and complaining. From speaking ill of your parents to suing other Christians. From sexual immorality to unforgiveness. From crude joking to loving money. From laziness to gluttony. From abortion to hypocrisy. From lying to lust. And a thousand more in between.

Can you now see the folly of trying to list every act of moral turpitude? Do you now understand the extreme difficulty that even the most devout Israelite would have had with keeping all 613 commandments in Torah? And do you comprehend the silliness in trying to “tier” our sins, particularly in light of what James teaches, that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty *of it all*” (James 2:10).

We are wired with a free will nature, from the Almighty himself, that often recalibrates our love to what we want, not what is best for us, i.e., the love and law of God.

Paul says as much in his last exhortation to Timothy (and, really, to all of us). “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be **lovers of self**,” the leading sin among twenty or so others (2 Timothy 3:1-5). This kind of pride, said C.S. Lewis, is tantamount to “spiritual cancer,” that metastasizes throughout a person’s whole being.

At no point should one read any of this as being dismissive of the serious nature of heinous acts of sin. In fact, next week we will discuss the seriousness of sin. But we contend that the most serious act is vitiating the love of God through our own pride.

* * *

A brief word here about another even pricklier issue. If God created all things, did he also create sin? And if he created sin, why? Why would he create something that he knew would ensnare and ultimately destroy the apple of his eye, the pinnacle of his creation, and the object of his love?

My meager thoughts pale in comparison to the theological giants who have written and taught on this conundrum. I am not even remotely in their league. But let me share a very simple thought.

The creation story we read earlier tells us that God created all things and then pronounced the lot of it to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Sin, by any definition and especially by the definition we propounded here, is not good and can never be good. Sin runs contrary to the goodness of God’s creation and could not flow from him. And it is impossible for God to do, be, or create something outside of his character.

In Romans 5:12, Paul writes, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” The Greek word that Paul uses for “came,” *eiserchomai*, literally means “go into” or “to come into,” with the focus being on the initial act. In other words, Paul is saying that when Adam disobeyed, sin entered into the world for the first time. Sin did not exist in the world until he disobeyed.

So, could God have just created us without the ability to sin? Sure. With God, nothing is impossible. However, God wanted us to freely choose him. He never wanted us to be forced into loving him, which would necessarily be the case if our free will was removed. (Note that this is different from being forced to acknowledge his sovereignty and lordship. Every knee *will* bow, and every tongue *will* confess, but those forced into that posture are those who purposefully rejected God’s love.)

Because free will exists, sin exists. But now, we are able to experience his love and his mercy.

All that said, I believe the answer to be far less obtuse than theologians might have us believe. I believe the answer requires the most important ingredient in our relationship with God: *faith* (Hebrews 11:6). These are mysteries too great to comprehend, but I

have faith that the God I love and the God I serve helps me each day to redirect my love away from me and onto him and others. And I also have faith that the divine goodness in which God created the earth and all things in it will be vindicated.

* * *

*Final Thoughts and **Exercise #2** – Read 1 Corinthians 13. We looked at it together in February, but this time, read it in a new light. That entire chapter is about love. Paul eloquently describes the beauty and the disposition of true, unadorned, unalloyed love. In doing so, though, he gives us a comparison point with sin, which, as we have seen, is the misdirection of our love. Read the chapter in that light.*

In particular, verses 4-8a list so many wonderful attributes of love: it is patient, kind, does not envy or boast, is not arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice at wrongdoing, rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and never ends.

If you are uncertain as to whether something in your life is sin, this is a Holy Spirit-inspired litmus test. Run the action or the thought against the sieve of 1 Corinthians 13, this poignant and pointed definition of love. If that action or thought runs contrary to it, then it probably means you have redirected your love away from God and/or others and on to yourself. This is sin. Confess, repent, seek forgiveness, and move forward.

Week 2 – April The Seriousness of Sin

Weekly Readings:

- Leviticus 19-20
- Hebrews 12
- Key idea – We are set apart in holiness, but sin begins to erase and redraw those boundaries away from righteous living and toward the way everyone else lives.

When we begin to understand that sin’s root is our desire for what we want more than what God commands, then we treat the whole enterprise with much more sobriety.

Sin does some awful stuff to us. We need not sugarcoat it. We must not ignore it.

To better understand the seriousness of sin, we will turn to an Old Testament passage in Leviticus. At the outset, let me say this. The passage is difficult and covers some uncomfortable topics. If you are walking through this study with children, you may wish to consider an alternative (perhaps only read the first chapter) or at least think about how you might talk about the wicked practice of child sacrifice or the perversions of sexual immorality.

That said, when we read this passage, we will not concentrate on the specific sins. That is a pitfall into which many Christians fall. “I don’t do this or that, so this chapter isn’t talking about me.” We get into a debate over whether a levitical command was ceremonial, civil, or moral, trying to divine whether it is still applicable to us.

And we do the exact same with the New Testament. Any time Paul rattles off a litany of sins, legalistic believers go through them with a fine-toothed comb to see if he calls out their behaviors, never pausing to consider their illustrative, inexhaustive nature. Paul was never saying, “Just these things and nothing more constitute sin,” rather, “These are examples of ways your love is on yourself and not God!”

The same applies here. In the exercise below, you will read through Leviticus 19 and 20, but do not become caught up in the specific obscenities to God. We accept at face value that child sacrifice is an abomination, and we trust that you are not the purveyor of such evil. Instead, think about *why*. Think about why these (or any) sins are called out in scripture. What is God saying directly or through his messenger to us about sin? And do the same with their consequences.

This is why we will not shy away from hard passages. They drive home a critical point. Sin is serious, and for too long, the church has tiptoed around its seriousness by

applying a coat of fresh grace. Well, sure, grace abounds all the more, but grace's presence does not simply negate sin's presence in the world. That vanquishment is certain, but it is yet to come. We continue to live in a fallen world with fallen people, and, contrary to what some may teach, sin remains a present reality in our lives.

Moreover, I believe that if we understood just how serious sin is – and not a particular cherry-picked list, but all sins, from murder to complaining and everything in between – we might actually be better disciples through our ongoing sanctification.

That is where Leviticus (and Deuteronomy and, really, the whole Old Testament) comes in. The Law seems to have fallen out of favor with many. Yet to understand anything of the New Testament – especially the Gospels and the Book of Hebrews, and specifically Jesus's sacrifice and the atonement, the holiness of God, and the two great commandments – Leviticus is essential reading. Its overarching theme is a call to holiness (Leviticus 19:2): "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." In other words, we are set apart, distinct from others, and sin begins to erase and redraw those boundaries away from righteous living and toward the way everyone else lives.

Exercise – Read Leviticus 19 first. What do you notice about God's commands and statutes here? Why might God command such a seemingly disjointed list of things, from garment construction to men's grooming to dietary habits? This is important, so do not gloss over it. God specifically forbade certain practices. Why? And what connections can you make between this chapter and the teachings of Jesus?

Now read Leviticus 20. This is a much grittier, grimmer chapter. Herein, God introduces penalties for sinning with much more precision than he did in chapter 19. Without becoming too fixated on the specific sins, identify the punishments enumerated in chapter 20. Try to categorize them in this way: one possible consequence of sin is _____. Look at your list, again without specific sins attached. What strikes you about the seriousness of sin?

* * *

By now, you might be frustrated. We keep discussing sins in the abstract, but that is on purpose. So much Christian teaching focuses on concrete scriptural sins. That teaching is necessary and profitable to our souls, but, as we have seen, it often focuses on the mechanics of that specific sin rather than the underlying issue of all sin – our overall reprobate heart and our misplaced love, the reason that any and all sin happens in the first instance. Fix the latter, and the former fixes itself. Fix the former, and the latter still abides.

Moreover, when we focus on that core reason, all of the levitical punishments become crystal clear. Those punishments stand as proxy for what sin does to us. Far from being draconian, nitpicky, or vindictive, they show God to be righteous and just, jealously guarding that which is consecrated to him. And those punishments are far from abstract.

If all we had in the biblical record was Leviticus 20, here is a small sampling of what we could definitively say about just how starkly serious sin – the selfish, prideful misappropriation of our love – is to God:

- Sin separates us – cuts us off – from God, breaking the covenantal bond between him and us.
- Sin causes pain and death.
- Sin destroys our lives, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Sin brings shame upon us and our family.
- Sin brings condemnation upon us and our family.
- Sin ruins relationships with family, friends, and the community.
- Sin leaves us with a barren legacy, inhibiting our ability to bear fruit.
- Sin defiles the land and the sanctuary.
- Sin breeds distrust within the community and often leads to ostracization and/or banishment, including in religious life.
- Sin, unaddressed, dulls and desensitizes the conscience, opening the door for more sin and for laxity in our pursuit of holiness.
- Sin prevents us from inheriting what God has promised us and may even cause part of the promise to “vomit” us out.
- Sin binds us and steals our freedom.

All that and even more can be discerned from Leviticus 20. It is just incredibly disquieting to read a passage like that. And here are three more extremely unnerving spiritual realities:

- Jesus’s death and resurrection did nothing to change the truth about any of those statements. Scripture tells us that Jesus conquered death, hell, and the grave (Revelation 1:18), meaning that sin’s effects no longer have eternal hold on those in Christ. But it does not follow that the effects of sin no longer exist at all. Of course they do. If they are now non-existent, then any belief about hell suddenly collapses. So long as sin still exists (and, at the time of this writing, it most certainly still exists), then all of those repercussions and reverberations remain.
- While specific sins were enumerated in Leviticus 19 and 20, God’s disposition toward sin – any sin, all sin, any willful placement of self over him and above

others – could not be more clear. He cannot stand it. It is a stench in his nostrils (Isaiah 65:5). We can readily make logical deductions and, in fact, see the levitical punishments as types for what sin does to us, no matter the era. Under grace, God may not ask us to stone to physical death people who violate his law, but people who violate his law still experience spiritual, eternal death. Under grace, God may not ask us to turn an offender from the church, but an offender must still be reconciled and restored, because sin has upset the order of the church. Under grace, God may not strike someone as barren, but people may live fruitless, aimless lives without his Son as their magnetic north. Studying the Old Testament reveals to us the most enduring principles of God’s character, and this one is as constant as the rest: sin separates and destroys. Sin’s wages are death (Romans 6:23).

- We cannot escape the fact that these punishments were *for God’s people*. God disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6-11). That is not to say that other people’s sins are unserious; of course they are. And that is not to say that God does not love his entire creation; of course he does. And none of this precludes others from the consequences of sin; of course they will be affected. But recall last month’s lesson on consecration. God exercises a holy and jealous prerogative over those set apart for, by, and to him. In his perfect justice, he makes the consequences of sin among his people to be extreme, but “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (Psalm 19:9). The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). A holy God cannot tolerate unholiness. Yet God loves us, his elect, so much he makes a way for us to escape temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13) and overcome the consequences of sin.

* * *

Final Thoughts – Sin is gravely serious. But I hope you understand that all of God’s prohibitions and instructions in Leviticus 19 were never intended to play a game of “gotcha!” with the Israelites. Instead, God was laying down boundaries to keep his people separate and holy, distinct from the pagans and their practices. He did not want the Israelites to look, sound, act, or worship like the Philistines, Egyptians, Amorites, Babylonians, Persians, or anyone else. He wanted to fashion them into a light for all nations (Isaiah 49:6), a people from whom the Messiah would come to bless all people (Genesis 22:18). That same approach applies to us today. Jesus, though sanctioning us to go out into the world, reminds us of our responsibility not to conform to the world and its sinful nature (John 17:14-16). And Paul repeatedly adds his “amen” to that (Romans 12:2). The short of it is this: sin remains serious, and any flirtation with it damages us personally and our testimony to the world.

Week 3 – April

What Sin Does to the Body of Christ

Weekly Readings:

- Joshua 7
- Romans 11:17-24 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (together)
- Key idea – Personal sin can bring communal consequences.

In week 1, we explored what our sin does to God. Sin, a violation of God's law, denigrates his lordship over our life by redirecting our love away from him and other image-bearers and onto ourselves. In week 2, we discussed what our sin does to us on a personal level. Sin, left unrepented and unforgiven, destroys us, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and eternally.

This week we will examine what our sin does to the church, the very body of Christ.

To make any sense of this week, you must accept two biblical premises. First, if we are a Christian, then we are necessarily grafted to the true vine of Christ... and so is every other believer (Romans 11:17-24). We are baptized into the same family based on the same confession of faith. We are now blood kin.

Second, believers live in an interconnected reality, where what happens to one affects all. Paul themes much of his first letter to the Corinthians around this idea, the unity of the whole community of believers (or, more accurately for that letter, the disunity). In particular, in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Paul makes it explicitly clear that the church is *one body*, suffering together, working together, growing together, each part affected by the other. We are intricately interconnected in that one true vine, which means that the actions – including the sins – of one necessarily influence, even infect, the entire body.

You likely see where this is heading. Sin never happens in a vacuum. Our individual sins do violent harm to the body of Christ, both the local church to which you belong and the corporate bride of Christ.

But before we get there, consider this example from the world of sports.

Imagine you are a part of a championship-caliber football team. During a late-season game, your team is behind by three, but you have driven into field goal range. The coach calls a timeout with five seconds left. He elects to attempt the game-tying field goal and send the game to overtime. He sends the placekicker into the huddle with those instructions. The kicker, though, has other designs. In the huddle, he tells the tight end

on the end of the line to run a pattern into the endzone, and he will throw a fade to him to win the game.

When the ball is snapped, the holder laterals it to the placekicker, who chunks it to a wide open tight end. And the ball sails and lands just beyond his wide-open receiver. Your team loses, and your locker room is sullen and gloomy.

You see it, right? The kicker directly defied the coach, substituting his own plan for the one called by the man in charge. He knew the play, but he chose a selfish, vainglorious pursuit, and it harmed his whole team.

Now, expand that idea to something even more sobering: what if all eleven players had decided that the best course of action for the team was for them to do exactly what they wanted, all at the same time, regardless of what the coach told them? Imagine the chaos. And imagine the consequences.

The life of a church is much more serious than the life of a football team, but the principles are transferable. We have rules of engagement within the church and with the world, words of life given to us by our Savior and by his apostles. We have a head coach – Jesus, the head of the church, who signals the will of his Father via the Holy Spirit. And we have assistant coaches – pastors who have been called by the Holy Spirit and entrusted with positions of spiritual authority.

But when we get on the field and do whatever we want, contrary to God's Word and contrary to how the Spirit directs our individual lives and the life of the church, we do harm to the body. We suffer because of the dereliction of one member. We hurt because of the selfishness of one part. We are wounded because of the misdirected love of one image-bearer, away from God and the others and onto himself or herself.

And, ultimately, our witness to the world is molested.

You may be offended by such language, but the Bible is unambiguous, whether Old or New Testament.

One of the most famous examples is the cautionary tale of Achan in Joshua 7. When the Israelites conquered Jericho, God's direction was unambiguous. Destroy everything; take nothing. But Achan disobeyed, taking for his own some of the silver things devoted to pagan worship. As a result, Israel was resoundingly defeated in the very next battle, the initially ill-fated attempt to take Ai.

When God told Joshua about it, the Lord's words were astonishingly corporate: "But *the people of Israel* broke faith in regard to the devoted things... And the anger of the Lord burned against *the people of Israel*... *Israel* has sinned; *they* have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; *they* have taken some of the devoted things; *they* have stolen and lied and put them among *their* own belongings" (vv. 1, 11).

Huh? In literal terms, all of Israel did *not* take the silver; only Achan did. But in spiritual terms, God assigned and ascribed the sin of one to the whole of Israel. The entire nation. All his people.

The message is unambiguously clear. Israel operated under a covenantal, corporate identity. The actions of one affected the standing of the entire group before God. Achan's act blatantly offended and defied God's direct command and placed the whole of Israel in jeopardy... not just at the battle of Ai, but, more critically, before God. This was elevated to and treated as a national act of disobedience, a defilement of the whole camp by the whole camp.

This ought not surprise us. Replete in the narratives of the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles is the idea that as the king went, so went the nation. The king, whether good or wicked, set the spiritual direction of the kingdom. If a king was committed to God and obeyed his commands, the nation was blessed. If a king resisted God and disobeyed his commands, the nation floundered, sometimes in destruction, often in war, eventually in exile.

This is sometimes hard for modern Christians, especially Americans, to accept, given our hyper and often misguided focus on individualism even within the body of Christ. But in the theocratic monarchy that was Israel, this was standard operating procedure. Even righteous prophets and people were affected by their unrighteous countrymen, particularly those in appointed leadership. A righteous remnant never negated the national effects of the wickedness of kings like Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh, Ahaz, Jehoram, Hoshea, and many others, all of which led to national exile.

The sum of it: personal sin can bring communal consequences.

In fact, that is the entire story of humanity. As Paul so eloquently writes, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men... by the one man's disobedience, the many were made sinners..." (Romans 5:12, 19). Adam's personal sin brought the gravest judgment on all humans. A sin-nature was now our inheritance.

(Of course, “by one man’s obedience, the many will be made righteous.” We covered that last month, and this good news always bears repeating. But for this week, we are focusing on the ripple effects of our sin within the body.)

Exercise – Consider your local church. Imagine each of these scenarios. Please do this without thinking of specific people, families, or even events. These are illustrative and not meant to evoke actual situations.

- Thinking no one will notice, an usher steals a few hundred dollars from the offering one week.
- An elder is confronted with incontrovertible evidence of an extramarital affair, but he lies and denies it.
- Two folks stand in the lobby before service and complain about the songs selected by the worship pastor last week.
- A greeter tells an unmarried but co-habiting couple that they should not come to church until they are married.
- At lunch after church, an altar worker who prayed for a woman tells all the intimate details of the prayer request to those at her table.

Now consider these, too:

- A young adult who serves in the youth ministry posts photographs of her vacation on her social media. The photos, which were taken in a bar and dance club, show her in revealing clothing and are tagged with suggestive captions.
- A regular attender of the church is cut off while trying to turn into a parking spot at the grocery store. He lays down on the horn, spouts a stream of profanity with his window down, and then directs a few choice hand gestures to the other driver.
- A business executive and faithful giver to the church is dismissed from her high-paying job for inappropriate behavior.
- A faithful member is arrested for DUI.
- A father who plays an instrument in the band emotionally and sometimes physically abuses his family, frequently telling his children that they are worthless and a burden.

In each of those scenarios, a person has sinned – i.e., in transgressing against God’s law, he or she has redirected the love meant for the Triune God and for others and placed it on their own appetites and desires, from lust to gossip to greed. The first five all take place *within* the church, but the latter five all take place *outside* the church. Still church folks, but just outside the four walls of the congregation.

In each situation, brainstorm all the possible *congregational* side effects of that sin. Do not concentrate on the individual consequences, as painful and as obvious as they may be. Think only of how that sin might affect the local church, its members, and its mission. And, if you dare, list any additional side effects on the church as a whole – i.e., on the outward testimony of the bride of Christ to the world.

* * *

That was an admittedly difficult exercise. But we hope you see the point – sin never happens in a vacuum. The sin of one member of the body affects (and quite possibly infects) all other members. What a person does or says creates ripples throughout the whole community.

People are hurt, broken, and wounded as a result of any of those situations. And we know that hurt people hurt people, broken people break people, and wounded people wound people. The cycle continues.

At the very least, we can say sin harms *the church* in these concrete ways, which you can apply to some or all of the scenarios listed above:

- Robs the church of the full fellowship, gifts and talents, and financial generosity of its members.
- Deprives the church of God’s power and blessings.
- Weakens its testimony in the eyes of others, thereby eroding its spiritual potency.
- Debilitates our desire and ability to share the gospel.
- Impairs our mission beyond sharing the gospel.
- Reintroduces condemnation and judgment into our lives.
- Hinders, if not outrightly seizes and arrests, evangelism.
- Disrupts worship and hampers our prayers.
- Necessitates confession, forgiveness, discipline, reconciliation, and restoration, all of which take considerable time and energy, not to mention grace and mercy.
- Creates a stumbling block for other believers and/or for the most vulnerable and impressionable in the church, especially children and teenagers.
- Props the door open for the enemy of our church and our souls to infiltrate the congregation and wreak havoc, and, as leaven does, becomes contagious.
- Prevents people from serving.
- Sows seeds of distrust, doubt, suspicion, disloyalty, and the like.
- Brings divine judgment if left unrepentant and unaddressed.
- Destroys our unity.

And that is just a sampler platter of the horrible things that can and do happen. Which among them is the worst outcome is certainly a subjective matter, but I tend to think the

last one is. Jesus, in his benediction over his apostles and all his current and future disciples, specifically beseeches God for the blessing of unity in the church – unity with him, unity with God the Father (just as Jesus had), and unity one with another (John 17). This was heavy on Jesus’s heart in the final few hours before his crucifixion, and thus this unity ought to carry extra resonance with us, too.

Yet sin remains an ever-present threat to that unity, to those of us in a world whose final redemption is in the future. Sin no longer defines us, thanks be to God, but it surely stunts, stalls, and sidetracks us.

Even worse, when we sin, the effects transfer from us to the church. And hopefully now you are beginning to understand why we spent so much time defining sin not by individual acts but as an adulterization of the love we were given – the love meant for God and for one another. This is no more starkly evident than sin’s effects on the church. If we loved our brothers and sisters in full, then we would run from sin knowing just how toxic its effects will be on them. This is love. In fact, it is the greatest love because we are laying down our lives (not necessarily physically, but certainly what we want, desire, crave, and seek) in order not to harm God and to remain in full fellowship with Christ and his bride (John 15:13).

* * *

Final Thoughts – In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told the apostles that he would build his church upon Simon Peter’s confession. And he added that the gates of hell would never prevail against it. Jesus meant that, ultimately, the powers of death and evil would never destroy, overcome, or stop the church from fulfilling its mission (which he would more fully articulate in Matthew 28:19-20). The church will never suffer total apostasy, but that does not mean that sin and strife will be absent from the body. We know that sad reality all too well. And Jesus himself prophesied that apostasy and apathy would be with us until the end: “The love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12). And he gives the reason, too, “because lawlessness will be increased.”

Lawlessness – in other words, sin; sin causes love to grow cold. And the Greek verb used for “to grow cold” actually refers to cooling something down by breathing on it, the way you blow on hot soup so you can eat it without scalding the roof of your mouth. So, think about that in the context of the church. When you sin, love decreases, specifically your love for God and the body of Christ. That love grows cold, because you are the one blowing on it, not the Holy Spirit with fire and power. Everything returns to that initial point – sin is the pinnacle of selfishness, producing actions in us that are motivated by self-love and not love of God or other image-bearers. Our sin blows cold air over us and our brothers and sisters. It is gravely serious.

Week 4 – April

Why Do I Keep Struggling with Sin?

Weekly Readings:

- 1 John 1, 2:1-6
- 2 Corinthians 12:1-10
- Key idea – Our temptation to sin will *never* be removed in this lifetime, but the grace of the Lord Jesus gives us hope and strength.

Admittedly, this month has been heavy, but sin is no trivial topic. Not for God, the church, nor us individually. So, we should approach it with the sobriety it requires.

But, of course, the good news is that sin has no everlasting effect on those of us in Christ Jesus. Sin and all its vile consequences – namely, death, hell, and the grave, i.e., eternal separation from God – are swallowed up in the victory of Jesus on the cross and through his resurrection. We receive atonement and grace at his mercy seat.

Yet, if that's true, why do we keep struggling with sin? If we are saved, why do sinful temptations and thoughts vex us still? And why do we sometimes fall prey to them despite our best intentions?

To start, I think it is always helpful to remember you are in good company. Moses was called the greatest of all prophets; he sinned and his sins were recorded in the Bible, yet he still led Israel to the promised land. David was called a man after God's own heart and was God's anointed king; he sinned and his sins were recorded in the Bible in lurid details, including, remarkably, by his own hand (see Psalm 51), yet the Messiah still came from his house and line. Peter made the confession of Jesus's messiahship that formed the very foundation of the church; he sinned in three moments of breathtaking cowardice and his sin was recorded in the Bible, yet the Holy Spirit used him mightily in the early church.

What do we make of these examples?

So many truths. We, discouraged by the enemy of our soul, disqualify ourselves long before God does. We have a weak appreciation for the strength of God's redemptive purpose and work. We foolishly overestimate our own sanctification and spiritual maturation absent the continual, refreshing infilling of the Holy Spirit. Left to our own devices, our sin nature – i.e., our own predisposition to redirect our love from God and others to ourselves – will continue to arise and corrupt our hearts and minds and, eventually, our actions.

And, above all, this: in the words of St. John, the beloved apostle, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Easy John. Them’s fightin’ words. We are saved and sanctified. No deception here. Surely he was just talking about folks prior to regeneration and salvation, right? Once Jesus wipes it away, we have no sin, correct?

Well... yes... and no. Yes, he whom the Son sets free is free indeed. Our repented sins are now gone, and we are justified.

But the last time I looked, none of us is yet glorified. We still exist in broken human form awaiting the fullness and finality of our redemption, which necessarily means that our sin nature remains an active part of us. Rest assured – its power over us is broken, but that power is not fully manifested in our lives until our own glorification. Justification is complete; we are free from sin’s penalty. Sanctification is ongoing, freeing us from sin’s power.

So, as the kids would say, the struggle is real. The battle between our flesh and the Holy Spirit is that tug of war of sanctification to wrest us away from sin’s power.

To put it much more bluntly (and shockingly to some), a Christian is no longer a slave to sin, even though he or she may still sin. Or I really should say, a Christian is no longer a slave to sin, even though he or she *will* still sin. Find me a Christian who has never gotten angry, had an impure thought, gossipped, murmured, complained, or did anything selfish, and we can all touch the hem of their garment.

You see the difference, right? There is a marked contrast in being a slave to sin’s penalty – eternally condemned by its unrepented presence in your life – and still being affected by its power – continually drawn under its spell to go against the will of God. The former is proof that we have an unregenerate heart; the latter is proof we remain human and need to pray daily as Jesus taught us, “forgive us our trespasses...”

Go back to 1 John 1 and 2. Read three verses beyond where we stopped, into chapter 2. (And remember, biblical editors added the chapter and verse delineations. John did not separate his thoughts so discretely. This was one flowing passage meant to be read together.) In 1 John 2:1, he continues, “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you *may* not sin. But *if anyone does sin*, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

John does not write, “you *shall not* sin.” That would be an imperative: upon your salvation, sin becomes impossible (i.e., you shall not sin because you simply cannot);

your transformation is complete. Sin loses its allure, and, because of your sanctification, you shan't sin.

Instead, he writes, “you *may* not sin.” That is decidedly less certain, permissive instead of mandatory language. And it also implies that we have a choice... because we do. Our human free will is not vitiated by salvation; we are still human. Our human free will is *daily, continually surrendered* in consecration and sanctification.

And that is no minor distinction or quibbling wordplay. John knew the truth. He was in the courtyard of Caiaphas when Peter denied Christ (John 18:15-16). And yet, fifty-three days later, John was in the Upper Room when Peter received the infilling of the Holy Spirit and preached the Pentecost message at the church's inauguration (Acts 2). Notwithstanding his own sins, John saw a man proclaimed by Christ to be the rock later falter and fail – and sin – and yet find restoration and purpose.

This should **encourage** you!

Exercise – Read the whole of 1 John 1 and then the first six verses of chapter 2. In your own words, what is John saying? In particular, how does this passage address our struggle with sin?

* * *

What we should not take from John is a golden ticket to sin simply because of the grace of Jesus. In this, John echoes Paul, who writes in Romans 6:1-2, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” John explicitly says that if we walk in fellowship with Jesus, then we are cleansed of our sins. And *because of this*, we keep his commandments as a testimony to the work he has done in our lives.

But John does not bury his head in the sand. If we do sin, he says, we have grace through Jesus Christ, our advocate, the propitiation for our sins.

In other words, continual sanctification decreases the likelihood that we will sin, because our human nature is confirming into Christlikeness. The process should snuff out our *desire* to commit and live in sin; that is for certain. But it does not eradicate the temptation of sin in our lives, nor the reality that we sometimes fail and fall.

What John offers here is hope: the grace of the Lord Jesus. And it is that grace that performs a triple work: it frees us from the consequences of our sin; it conditions our hearts away from self and to the Triune God and others so that we will be less inclined to sin; and it advocates for us when we do sin. All three are operative in the life of the

believer, though both Paul and John admonish us not to abuse that grace by a purposefully sinful lifestyle.

Put all this together, and we return to where we started – the temptation to sin, to put your will above that of God’s, will be ever present in our lives. It was even with Jesus in the wilderness and even Gethsemane (“Nevertheless, not my will...”). What makes you more special or holy than Jesus?

And here the wild thing about all of this – this inertial weakness is actually reason to boast in Jesus Christ. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, details a thorn in his flesh. God permitted a messenger of Satan to vex Paul in some way. We do not know what the thorn was, and it is completely immaterial. The thorn had a singular purpose: to keep Paul from boasting in himself, his talents, and the fruits of his ministry.

Moreover, Jesus specifically and forthrightly declined to remove the thorn, despite Paul’s sincere and repeated prayers. And the reason why is central to this week’s lesson. Jesus told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9a).

Don’t you see? Our temptation to sin will *never* be removed in this lifetime. Paul tells us as much in his first letter to Corinth: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

That language could not be any clearer. We will struggle with temptation. But we have the power, through the Holy Spirit, to endure it.

And, when we do, we have the worshipful opportunity, just like our brother Paul, to boast both in our weakness and in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10b). For when we are tempted to sin, we are weak to overcome it on our own, but we are strong in Christ and can do all things, including fleeing the temptation.

This whole idea is a theodicy called *felix culpa*. A theodicy is a defense of God’s goodness and sovereignty in view of the very existence of evil, i.e., an attempt to answer why a good, just, and omnipotent God permits evils, trials, and temptations. *Felix culpa*, one such example, literally translates to “fortunate fall,” or “blessed fault,” and it simply means that a sin or fault or weakness leads to a greater good. The biggest biblical example is Adam’s fall – his sin was disastrous, but, in the fullness of time, it led to something better, a greater glory, that of our redemption in and through the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Jesus Christ.

Paul's rationale of boasting in weakness is a *felix culpa* of sorts. His frailty – indeed, our frailty – leads to the opportunity for Christ's grace to be poured into us, and, by his own words, for his power to be made perfect in us.

So, we will glory not in the weakness, nor in the temptation, nor even in the sin, but in the one who overcomes all of those through his grace, and whose power is perfected and made stronger in us in those moments: Jesus Christ.

* * *

Final Thoughts – In large part, I think we frequently misapprehend God's grace as some sort of magic elixir that will wipe away all trouble. (Hence Paul's teaching in Romans 6.)

Consider this illustration. Remember when luggage had no wheels? When you schlepped your bags out to the car, holding them by that handle strap that you prayed would not break? Or ran through the airport with the side of an overstuffed suitcase bumping into and bruising your leg? And then do you remember when luggage finally came with wheels, but only two to start? You could much more easily wheel it around, but you could not turn or pivot quickly. Now, think about when luggage with four wheels hit the market. You could practically set your bags on cruise control, easily moving through airport terminals, hotel hallways, and the like.

But in no case did the size of your suitcase or the load it was carrying appreciably change. Only its mechanisms for steering, moving, and guiding. So it is with God's grace vis-a-vis human temptation. When we are free from sin's penalty through our regeneration, salvation, and justification, we trade our handheld bags for ones with four wheels. And consecration and sanctification are the lubricants that keep the wheels moving freely, safely, and effectively. But the load has not changed at all. The reality of our human nature remains very much intact.

The only difference? Grace has now made that load easier to withstand. We can maneuver in the power of the Holy Spirit. In short, we can withstand it, because we are no longer carrying it ourselves, turning our knuckles white under its impossible weight. In fact, the weight is now carried by the wheels, i.e., the Holy Spirit who guides and directs our lives. We can overcome it and arrive safely at our destination, because we are no longer the baggage handler. And the Lord's grace in doing that, like Paul and John encourage us, is something worth boasting about.

May **Prayer and Fasting**

“Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

When I was a boy, no single verse filled me with more dread and angst than this one. And I grew up in a church that routinely had old-fashioned hell, fire, and brimstone preachers fill the pulpit. None of the apocalyptic visions they ripped from Revelation terrorized me more than the idea of continuous prayer.

I knew I could not do it. (And, at that age, I was quite sure that I did not even *want* to do it.) Moreover, my eight-year-old brain could not logically deduce how anyone at all could do it. The whole bit seemed quite impossible. For proof, I looked around at the saintliest folks I knew – my grandparents – and they certainly did not pray incessantly. They ate. They slept. They played games with me. They talked (especially my Granny!). If these hyper-Christians failed at Paul’s command, what hope did I have?

Now this may seem silly to you, but that is just how my young brain worked. I was so literal-minded that I missed the entire point of Paul’s message. And, truth be told, we often do the same today when reading and considering God’s Word. We vigorously debate whether to take a passage literally or figuratively or allegorically, and we miss the single most important way to take it: *seriously*.

So, this month, we will take **prayer** (and **fasting**, a companion spiritual discipline) seriously. Admittedly, some of this may seem harsh, but if we are to approach prayer seriously, we must tear down some “sacred cows.” Far too many Christians labor and suffer under some fairly terrible misapprehensions and bad theology about prayer:

- They see prayer as a spiritual *duty* or *burden*, rather than an invitation to interact with the Creator of the universe.
- Or, alternatively, they do not feel worthy of approaching God at all, fearful that their sins and failures have put too much distance between them and him.
- They are intimidated by others who seem to pray with more eloquence and ease.
- They believe that effective prayer only stems from long sessions burrowed into a private prayer closet. They think short prayers are ineffective and unheard.
- Or, alternatively, their prayers are rarely more than one-line requests, never bracketed with worship and thanksgiving.
- They shun prayer, because they feel like they are always asking for something.
- Or, alternatively, they approach prayer like they are sitting on Santa Claus’s knee at Christmas time, a transactional laundry list of wants and needs.
- They seek their will instead of God’s will.

- They enter into prayer with unforgiveness in their heart.
- They enter into prayer without personal repentance before God.
- They mistakenly think that the more people who pray in intercession for something will somehow be a show of force that unlocks something in heaven. (It very well may, but it is the *faith* of a righteous person's prayers that it is effective, not the mechanics or the census.)
- They see prayer as simply talking – i.e., a one-way monologue from us heavenward.
- And, perhaps most sadly, they see “yes” as the only viable answer to their prayers, not understanding that God, according to his perfect will, may answer a prayer how and when he chooses, including with a “no.” And, if that answer is different than what they expected, it does not necessarily signal a lack of faith.

At the center of all of these misconceptions about prayer is this one unfortunate truth: people grossly overcomplicate what prayer is. **Prayer is a conversation between you and God.**

That is a deeply profound statement, because it makes us confront the following – if prayer is a conversation, then that necessarily involves *listening* on our part, often in equal or greater measure than our talking.

And when we begin to think of prayer as a conversation, then we begin to understand Paul's directive to pray without ceasing. Prayer just becomes a continual dialogue. One reaches a place where their heart is perpetually open to receiving messages from and sending messages to God, which is already his natural posture, both to send messages through the Holy Spirit and receive messages from his children. We no longer feel the pressure to rope off sections of our day or week for prayer, because our life is just one rolling prayer, filled with moments of thanksgiving and worship, brief words of supplication, passing thoughts of intercession, continual invocations for help and mercy.

You see that, right? Dedicated moments of morning and evening prayer are beautiful and biblically modeled. What better way to begin a day than praising God for life; what better way to end a day than falling asleep while talking with our Father. But the reality is that treating prayer as conversation invites us to walk through each day speaking with and listening to God in the same way that we do our family, our friends, and our coworkers. The impact is certainly greater, but the mechanics are the same when your heart is open.

You talk; God listens. God talks; you listen. And only on rare occasions do you need to use words.

Moreover, prayer *can be learned*. It is *never* listed among the spiritual gifts, something that is just supernaturally given to a believer for the upbuilding of the kingdom. That means that prayer is available to all and expected of all. And, if prayer could not be learned, then Jesus would have rebuked the disciples when they asked, “Lord, teach us to pray...” (Luke 11:1). Instead, he taught them what we now call the Lord’s Prayer.

Prayer is profoundly mysterious and complicated, yet profoundly accessible and simple. Its mystery and complication rest in the idea that we as humans are given a way – and a direct way at that! – to be in communication and communion with the Lord God Almighty. Whew!

Yet he invites us to do so. He asks us to draw near to him in prayer. He wants to listen to us; he wants to talk with us; and he wants to answer our petitions. Think how pleased God is when we want to come to him. He loves us so much that no sin on our part can reduce his love for us. So, how much more so does he delight when we choose to have a conversation with him, no matter the topic, no matter the circumstance?

For three weeks this month, we will work together to build up our spiritual understanding of prayer. And during the last week we will focus on fasting, which is another misunderstood discipline. But prayer and fasting are meant to be something *practiced*, not something discussed as theological theory. I could teach you all the mechanics of freestyle swimming, draw detailed diagrams, discuss breathing and kicking strategies, show you videos of good techniques, and the like, but if I never throw you in the pool to do it, what good is it? You may rightly say you know *how* to swim, yet you will have never swam. So... what good is it?

Prayer and fasting function similarly. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he did two things. The obvious one – he gave them the Lord’s Prayer. The less obvious, more likely more impactful one – he *modeled* a life of prayer. In his praxis, we see the most critical reality of prayer: just talk with God. Stay close to him.

Week 1 – May Prayer 101

Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 25, 42, 43, and 77
- 1 Kings 3:3-9
- Acts 4:24-30
- Colossians 1:9-12
- Key idea – There is no single formula for prayer. The posture of one’s heart is far more critical than the mechanics of one’s prayer.

This week’s approach is a bit different than what we have done in the first four months of this journey. Instead of a broader lesson on one aspect of a topic, prayer in this case, we wanted to tackle some simple and straightforward questions people frequently ask about prayer. All of these questions have been posed by real congregants who are real Christians (many for a long, long time), all with real prayer lives full of real interaction with God.

But so many people have biblically unmoored concepts of prayer, often taken from bad sermons, out-of-context devotionals, clichéd inspirational quotes posted on the internet, or misguided brothers and sisters in Christ. In the corner of the foyer, well out of earshot of others, a person will whisper to me, “Pastor, someone told me this about prayer...,” followed by something that frequently makes my jaw drop to the floor. “Oh, your prayers don’t work if you don’t have enough faith.” Or, “Clearly you don’t have an answer because you are not letting go and letting God...” Or, “You’re not spending enough time in your prayer closet.”

Or, if we are attentive, we will often hear problems in our own prayers, myself certainly included. “We *just* ask that you move,” or “we *just* need you to do this or that...,” the “just” dripping with a false humility to cover the real intention of the prayer, “not thy will, but my will be done.” (And then what happens if the Lord takes the “just” seriously and does exactly that and nothing more?)

Or maybe my (least) favorite – people who ask if our prayers must be populated with the exact right formula of church language, almost as if they were searching for magic words to make their prayers more efficacious: “hedge of protection,” “travelling mercies,” “I claim it in Jesus’s name,” and the like. They lace their prayers with legalism in the hopes of covering every precise scenario. For example, they pray for someone to survive an accident, and then fall into a legalistic despair when the object of that prayer survives but has to have an arm amputated. “This is because I only prayed for their survival and nothing more,” they fret.

The point of these questions and answers is not to upset your prayer life, rather for us together to have a deeper understanding of prayer itself.

So, let's start at the beginning...

How should I open my prayers?

The posture of our heart matters to God far more than the formality of our opening. I have witnessed many, including pastors, believe that an opening recitation of Trinitarian titles somehow summons the Almighty to our prayer session. “O, Jesus our Lord, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lily of the Valley, the Rose of Sharon, the Bright and Morning Star, the One Who Is and Is To Come, the Fairest of Ten Thousand, Our Soon Coming King...” And on it goes.

You may laugh, but many times opening or closing a prayer like that is not sincere worship, rather a cultural affectation, not necessarily wrong but certainly not required. People have seen prayer modeled as such, and so they do the same, often in vain repetitions. Or, like the Pharisees, they want their prayers to be eloquent, so they signal their virtue even at the outset by how many layers they can add to God's name.

Can a name string like that be sincere worship and adulation? Of course it can! But it is neither necessary nor expected. How did Jesus open his prayers? Usually with just a simple, “Father...” Who is the better model for us in prayer? Jesus or what we see in our church?

We suggest you open your prayers simply, worshipfully, reverentially. “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). This verse, a prayer in and of itself, also invites the Holy Spirit to guide what flows from our heart and out of our mouth, which again, is biblical. “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:26-27).

We also advocate a quintessentially Jewish opening to prayer, one that Jesus no doubt would have used: “*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha'olam,*” i.e., “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe.” What a wonderful way to begin any prayer, with words of worship on our lips. We bless God, who is Lord of and over all, before we do anything else. That opening usually includes a line at the end, “... who brings forth bread from the earth” or “... who creates the fruit of the vine” or “... who brings sleep to my eyes,” so you can tailor it to your reason for prayer.

To whom should I pray?

This one is a bit dangerous to answer, because many times it is asked in a legalistic bent. “Should I pray to God or to Jesus?” I understand the sincere desire to be right, but we sometimes forget that the mystery of the Trinity is that our God is *one God* in three persons. And I cannot stress enough that *God looks at our heart* when we pray, not the formality of the names or titles we use.

That said, a standard Christian approach is that we pray to the Father. Why? For starters, Jesus taught us to do so: “When you pray, say, ‘Father...’” (Luke 11:2). And we pattern our prayer life off of Jesus’s teaching and example.

But Paul spells it out more concretely: “For through him [Jesus Christ], we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18). In simple theology, this is the distillation of the whole Christian experience and the architecture of our prayer. We pray *by the Spirit, through the Son, and to the Father*.

Jesus’s life and salvific work of atonement and justification allow us to petition the Father directly in his name. We can draw close to the throne of grace with boldness (Hebrews 4:14-16). And, indeed, God is our Father, too. As Jesus said, “And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven” (Matthew 23:9). Paul reiterated this at least twice in his letters. “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Romans 8:15). “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:6).

That said, because we serve a Trinitarian God, you can pray in assurance to Jesus, too. He says as much. “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. *If you ask me* anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:13-14). Jesus specifically says that if we ask *him*, he will do it. In fact, the penultimate verse of the entire Bible is a specific prayer to Jesus: “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

The point of this is not to get caught up in formulary. Pray in faith to our Father through the Spirit in the name of Jesus, yes. But never forget that you have a relationship with the Son and the Holy Spirit, too, and none of the three is jealous of the other two.

That relationship is part and parcel of our own spiritual formation. We cry out to Jesus, “Save me!” “If we confess our sins, [Jesus] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Moreover, when our petitions stem from human emotions, we may more often direct our prayers to Jesus because, in

addition to being fully divine, he is fully human. He suffered what we suffer. Likewise, we ask the Holy Spirit for those things Jesus promised he would do – guide us, teach us, comfort us, help us remember his words, fill us with the fruit of the Spirit (John 14:26; Galatians 5:22).

We fellowship freely with the Trinity. Why would we not pray in that same fellowship? None of the three works in a vacuum. They work everything together for our good.

In what physical posture should I pray?

All of them. No, seriously. We lived embodied lives, so it stands to reason that our prayers should likewise be embodied.

The Bible does not prescribe a posture, so we should not, either. In fact, the Bible goes well out of its way to describe a multitude of postures for prayer:

- Standing – Jesus stood before Lazarus’s tomb and prayed (John 11:41).
- While lifting one’s hands – 1 Timothy 2:8; Psalm 141:2.
- While lifting one’s eyes – Psalm 121:1; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:1; John 11:41.
- While lying on one’s bed – Psalm 4:4, 63:6.
- While being still and silent – Psalm 46:10; Habakkuk 2:20; Zechariah 2:13.
- While sitting – David *sat* before the Lord (2 Samuel 7:18; also Judges 20:26-27).
- While bowing – Though widely disfavored by western Christians, this was among the most common of all prayer postures: to name a few, Moses (Exodus 34:8); Elijah (1 Kings 18:42); Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:18); Ezra and the congregation (Nehemiah 8:6). See also Psalm 5:7.
- Lying prostrate on your face before God – Again, multiple people. Abraham (Genesis 17:3); Joshua (Joshua 7:6); John (Revelation 1:17); the angels (Revelation 5:8, 14; and even Jesus himself (Matthew 26:39).
- While kneeling – James famously became camel-kneed from kneeling in prayer (James 5:13-20), but dozens more examples exist (e.g., 2 Chronicles 6:13; Ezra 9:5; Psalm 95:6; Daniel 6:10; Luke 22:41-4; Acts 9:40; Ephesians 3:14).
- While walking – For famous examples, consider Philip (Acts 8:26-30) and Paul (Acts 20:13-14).

So, we can safely say that the only posture that matters is the ***posture of the heart***.

And that necessarily means that we do not pray for public spectacle. Jesus specifically preaches against that kind of prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6). He encourages us to go into a private room and pray privately, secretly, an intimate act solely between God and each of us individually. So, is Jesus then saying that corporate prayer is impermissible? No. Is he saying that we literally have to stow away in a closet

and secretly pray there? No again. Jesus is simply saying that if our aim is to demonstrate that we do pray rather than to sincerely and humbly converse with God, then we have missed the point altogether.

Prayer is not an act of religious theater; prayer is an act of personal discipline, devotion, and humility.

When (or how often) should I pray?

All the time.

No, seriously, all the time. Anytime, anywhere. This is where a full understanding of 1 Thessalonians 5:17 is essential, pray without ceasing. Paul does not mean – nor does God expect – that we should be constantly in verbal prayer. That is certifiably impossible (unless you have found a way to avoid sleep).

The point is that our lives simply transform into a continuous cascade of conversation with our Creator. Riding down the highway, whisper a prayer of thanksgiving for God's protection and mercy. Lathering up in the shower of a morning, worship God for giving you another day. Sitting in your living room watching a football game, offer an intercessory prayer for the persons on your mind. Waiting in line at an office, confess your sins and repent.

Anywhere, anytime, just recite the prayer the Lord taught us to pray.

We are *not* denigrating delegated time on your calendar for prayer. Nor are we dismissive of your prayer closet. Those are real and good things, and we do both, too. We should frequently submit ourselves to such intense and focused times of prayer. But do you see the difference? What if your prayer life was *rooted* not in blocked-out times on your schedule but instead in just a rolling, incessant conversation with God? What if your heart stayed open 24/7 to send and receive transmissions from the Holy Spirit?

The most important spiritual force in my life (other than Jesus, of course) was my Granddaddy. He was a humble, good, and godly man universally respected in my hometown. If you asked Granddaddy to pray for you, he did... immediately, right then and there. In the parking lot of the church. In the middle of the Catfish House restaurant. At the filling station in town. On the phone in the morning. Under his carport in the evening. Neither place nor time mattered much to him. I even saw him pray with a group in front of the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC, simply because they asked to pray.

He lived by John Wesley's famous words – if something were of the Holy Spirit, “Why not this hour, this moment?” His prayers were neither long in time nor bejeweled with eloquent words. They were just simple and heartfelt, and they permeated every moment of his day. We would drive around town, and he would just offer the words of *Blessed Assurance* as a prayer of thanksgiving. While watching a Braves game, every few minutes, he would just say aloud, “Glory be to God.” And, most special to me, many were the times (I later learned), that he would just ask Granny to come hold his hand, because I was in his heart and he wanted to pray for me.

You see the lesson of my grandfather (and of Jesus, too), right? When prayer is simply as habituated in our lives as breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping – when prayer becomes an innate part of our being rather than simply something we “must do” – then we are able to carry on a conversation with God about anything at any time.

Exercise – This week our exercise is not one of meditative reading, rather one of praying. During the second week of May, we will explore the basic categories of prayers we find in the Bible, and we will frame it within the larger context of the Lord's Prayer. So, this week, we want you to do something that may be relatively foreign to you: pray the Lord's Prayer. A lot. Pray it first thing when you wake up; pray it before you go to bed. Pray snippets and lines of it at any time – when you are stuck in traffic, when you are about to eat a meal (consider it as a blessing), when you are walking in the neighborhood, when you are sitting by yourself, when you are exercising, at any time.

But be diligent in doing it. The Lord taught us to pray this way, so it must mean something. That prayer, offered with the right heart, has to mean something to our Father if Jesus commended it to us.

As you pray, linger over each clause. What do the words mean to you in this season of life? What is the Lord revealing to you about his nature? How do the ideas within the Lord's Prayer begin to open up your broader prayer life? And how does it feel simply to meditate on this prayer throughout the day?

* * *

Final Thoughts – Prayer is a reverential mystery in so many ways. To start, how astonishing is it that we are allowed to speak with God at all (Hebrews 4:16). Just the ability to converse with the Creator of the Universe is too great to fathom.

But the Lord's interaction with our prayers is much richer than just a permission slip to talk. He bottles up our prayers of suffering (Psalm 56:8) and stores the prayers of saints in bowls to be poured before him as incense (Revelation 5:8). He listens intensely and intently (1 Peter 3:12); Psalm 18:6). He draws nearer to us during our

prayers (Psalm 145:18-19). And, ultimately, he answers our prayers (1 John 5:14-15; Psalm 34:17-18; Isaiah 65:24), which we will discuss in Week 3 of this month.

Truly, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” (Psalm 8:4).

The point is this – God so clearly wants us to talk with him. All the time. Without adornment or trapping. Just a running dialogue of sharing and listening, exactly as we would have with the most important people in our lives. And his only true prerequisite is that we approach with the right heart, one ready to earnestly share and one equally ready to earnestly listen.

So, given that, let us join our voices with that of David, “O Lord, open my lips...” (Psalm 51:15a).

Week 2 – May

The Lord’s Prayer and Types of Prayers

Weekly Readings:

- Matthew 6:5-14; Luke 11:1-4 (the prayer the Lord taught us to pray)
- Psalm 103 (a prayer of worship and adoration)
- 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (a prayer of thanksgiving)
- Psalm 51 (a prayer of confession and repentance)
- Exodus 32:9-14 (a prayer of intercession)
- Psalm 86 (a prayer of supplication)
- Psalm 13 (a prayer of lament)
- Key idea – Jesus was directly asked to teach us how to pray. Jesus taught us how to pray. Jesus specifically said to “pray then like this.” Jesus is our Lord. Thus, we should pray as Jesus taught us.

Exercise – Last week we asked you to purposefully add the Lord’s Prayer to your daily prayer life, even to the point of praying it multiple times per day. We want you to continue that this week, indeed every week this month (and beyond). Live with the Lord’s Prayer. Linger with its words, meditate on each phrase, consider why Jesus chose to include it. The prayer has such an economy of words, so each must be pregnant with spiritual meaning for Christ to specifically use it.

We cannot stress this point to you enough – when directly asked to teach his disciples how to pray, *this is the prayer that Jesus himself gave us in response*. Too many Christians, particularly in certain denominations and traditions, treat the Lord’s Prayer with a strange and disturbing dismissiveness. Some see it as ritualistic recitation. As a pastor, I caution you – what Jesus himself taught us cannot be – and, indeed, is not – vain babbling or repetition. Jesus is the Word of God incarnate; nothing he gave us can be considered as an empty phrase.

Some believe a recitation cannot be sincerely from the heart. That is misguided, if not outrightly foolish. If that were true, we must cease and desist from quoting any scripture, including Psalm 23 at funerals or Isaiah 9 at Christmas or Isaiah 53 at Good Friday, because the words would be mere rote and not powerful prayers and meditations on God’s goodness and character. This view also does violence to the psalmic entreaty to “store up your word in my heart” (Psalm 119:11), given that the only real reason to store up anything is to use it when necessary.

And, furthermore, if one blanches at the thought of repeating the Lord’s Prayer in church or life yet feigns disgust when schools do not have the children repeat the Pledge of Allegiance, then their position quickly loses its integrity.

Others still mistakenly believe that a prayer must be both more precise in its request and more personal in its tone, i.e., more individual. Neither of those is terribly scriptural. Sure, Jesus says that if we ask for anything in his name, he will do it so that God the Father may be glorified (John 14:13). And, yes, the editors of the Bible often make it seem like everyone who ever followed God was a master rhetorician. But if we are honest, the prayers of Moses, Hannah, David, Asaph, Solomon, Nehemiah, Mary, Paul, and Jesus often intimidate us.

Yet in the densest of all theological chapters in the Bible, Romans 8, Paul also reminds us that, “We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (v. 26). Those people did not pray “great prayers,” whatever that actually means, in their own power. They could not, because they, like us, did not know what to pray for. But their prayers were animated and empowered because the Spirit breathed in and through them and, critically, over them in intercession. And I can absolutely guarantee that nothing contrived in our own minds under our own power will match the intercessory power of the Holy Spirit.

So, we are right back at the starting point – maybe, just maybe, a great place to start our prayer life is in the way the Master taught us. I think the real reason the Lord’s Prayer does not take a more prominent position in our lives is simply because we do not teach it. Pastors conveniently look beyond Jesus’s preface words to the whole prayer: “**Pray then like this**” (Matthew 6:9).

Jesus explicitly said it – *pray like this*. And he even gives us a reason. In the preceding verse, Jesus could not have been more plain: “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). If that is true (and, of course, it is), then why do we feel the need to tell the Lord stuff he already knows?

A person whose heart is in the right posture for prayer has already communicated everything to the Father before a single syllable is formed. God hears them before a word is uttered. But a person whose heart is not in the right posture for prayer has nothing with which to approach God but words, entreaties formed from human thoughts and under human limitations. One is the offering of Abel, the other the offering of Cain.

The beauty of the Lord’s Prayer is that it is a gateway into all other kinds of prayers we see in the Bible. In his brilliance, Jesus distills every petition we can make into such a beautiful, simple, easy to remember, easy to say prayer.

Consider these types of prayer and how the Lord's Prayer clearly and without fuss embodies each:

- **A prayer of worship, adoration, and thanksgiving** – “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9b). In prayers of this sort, we express admiration for God’s character and power. What could be more worshipful than to simply say to God that he is holy. He is everything that is good, just, righteous, loving, ordered, pure.
- **Prayers of intercession and supplication** – “Your kingdom come, your will be done on [or in] earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread... and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:10-11, 13). Note that these are two very different kinds of prayers, one inward and another outward, but Jesus teaches the Lord’s Prayer as a corporate community prayer, a very Jewish way of thinking. We dare not overlook why. Our intercession for ourselves goes hand-in-hand with our supplication for others.
 - Intercessory prayers entreat God to act according to his will, his kingdom purpose, in the lives of others.
 - Supplicatory prayers entreat God to act according to his will, his kingdom purpose, in one’s own life.
 - Jesus purposefully and repeatedly uses the first-person plural pronoun “us” in this prayer. This petition to God is that we can and should be on behalf of everyone, both our neighbors and ourselves.
 - Couched within this are sub-types of intercessory or supplicatory prayers that seek the will of God, e.g., laments that express grief, pain, or confusion directly to God; prayers of consecration and dedication to doing the will of God; prayers for deliverance; prayers for gifts of the Spirit and mercies for each new day; on and on.
- **A prayer of confession** – “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us” (Matthew 6:12). Later this year we will examine the oft-neglected spiritual discipline of confession. But, for now, we should not gloss over its placement in the Lord’s Prayer by Jesus. His instruction to us to pray for forgiveness should be read alongside all the other types of prayer – i.e., we regularly pray in worship and thanksgiving, in intercession, in supplication, etc., we must likely regularly pray in confession and repentance. Only in this case, Jesus attaches a condition within the prayer. We ask God for forgiveness proportionately to how we forgive, which should be all the incentive we need to obey that directive, too.

Do we not unnecessarily make it more complicated? Jesus taught us how to pray, and it makes sense that he would teach us how to pray completely. Everything we could possibly pray to our Father stems from the simplicity, beauty, and power of those few

words of Jesus. So, we want to encourage you to make the Lord's Prayer the seedbed of all your prayers.

Exercise – Again, start by praying the Lord's Prayer. In this season of your life, even on this particular day, which part of the prayer leaps out at you? Is it the supplication to withstand temptation? Is it the petition for daily bread as you seek wisdom or patience or kindness or joy? Is it the need for repentance? Is it simply sitting with the awesome truth of God's holy magnificence? Is it loving someone enough to pray for God's will to be done in their lives, too?

Once you settle on a thought within the prayer that speaks to your present journey, return to this week's readings. Select one that corresponds to it, and then read that scripture as a prayer. Share that with your family and group.

* * *

Final Thoughts – When we teach the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-20), we often omit the one that binds it together simply because Paul did not make a battlefield analogy out of it. We wear the belt of truth (v. 14), the breastplate of righteousness (v. 14), shoes of the gospel of peace (v. 15), the shield of faith (v. 16), the helmet of salvation (v. 17), and the sword of the Spirit (v. 17). Amen. All are important.

But then Paul dispenses with the analogies and, in verse 18, simply commands us to be “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” and to do so with “perseverance.” He connects the efficacy of all of that armor with the power that flows from a life in constant prayer, i.e., constant and open conversation between God and us, which yields in us a boldness to live for Christ.

Prayer matters that much, and, nifty for us, Jesus taught us how to do it. The way he taught us how to pray is the material for all other prayers. In its simplicity, we find a home for every petition, every adoration, every groan and sorrow, every tear, every hurt, every doubt and uncertainty, every cry for help, every hope for deliverance. Everything is bound together in what the prayer's overarching theme is – seeking first the will, the kingdom, of our holy God. In it, we rely on him for our daily portion. In it, we confess our sins to him, and we forgive the sins of others against us. In it, we turn to his Holy Spirit to empower us to withstand life's temptations and deliver us from the evil one.

Why, then, would the Lord's Prayer not be our primary map to approach the Father?

Week 3 – May God’s Responses to Prayer

Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 55
- Matthew 7:7-11
- James 1
- Key idea – God, in his sovereignty, answers our prayers with one of four responses: slow, grow, go, or no.

I am hard pressed to think of a topic that more readily frustrates Christians than this one: “Pastor, I’ve prayed for this for a year, and I just don’t feel like God is hearing me. I don’t feel like I have an answer.”

Nothing this week will make any sense if we first do not agree on three sound, repeated biblical truths as it relates to our prayers and God’s response.

- First, God is not deaf. He hears you when you pray. (1 John 5:14-15; Psalm 66:19.)
- Second, God places a condition on hearing us when we pray: our faith (and, by extension, the posture of our heart). (Mark 11:24; James 5:16; 1 John 3:22.)
- Third, God answers your prayers. (Matthew 7:7-8; Jeremiah 33:3;; John 14:13-14.)

If you have trouble with the first truth, it puts you in great biblical company. David yelled out, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1). Job never turned his back on God, but he did question why God would not answer his pleas, even feeling like his groans were ignored or that God had somehow become his enemy (Job 13:24, 30:20). The prophet Habakkuk openly questioned God’s silence, asking, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?” (Habakkuk 1:2). And those are but three examples.

God can deal with your frustrations and feelings. I promise: they do not scare him. Bring them to him. Do not wallow in self pity as Elijah did (1 Kings 19).

But your heart must be in the right posture before him. Consider the posture of each of those biblical heroes. Their prayers did not doubt God’s ability to deliver, heal, overcome, forgive, cleanse, restore, etc. They met God’s conditional requirement – they all expressed faith and deep belief in God’s ability to do whatever it was that needed doing. Their doubts came from their perception that God was silent, not that he was impotent.

This distinction is not splitting hairs. It is not semantic argle-bargle. One can believe in the omnipotence of God Almighty and still believe that, in that omnipotence, he has chosen not to address your concerns or petitions. The lament psalms consistently read like this – the writers professed (and, indeed, held deeply) a belief that God could do whatever they asked (and whatever he wanted/willed), but for a reason they could not understand or even ascertain, he was choosing not to at this time. But they prayed believing in spite of it. (For the contrary look, examine King Saul’s prayers, which were offered neither in obedience nor faith.)

And, as an aside, praying in the right heart posture also means that our hearts are repentant and contrite before God and that we hold nothing against a brother or sister. We see both in the Lord’s Prayer (forgive our trespasses... as we forgive) and elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount (the command for reconciliation before one leaves an offering, Matthew 5:23-24).

But it is that third truth where the wheels come off. Sadly, people reflexively say that God does not answer their prayers if their own preconditions are not met:

- An answered prayer should be quickly, if not immediately, resolved.
- An answered prayer should be answered in the way I specify to God – i.e., how I think it ought to be done.
- An answered prayer should be all about what is good for me as I see it, irrespective of God’s will or how it might affect others.

In plain English, if God answers a prayer in any other way than what we have in our minds and hearts when we pray it, then somehow the problem is with God. Somehow, our prayers, will, and timing are all perfect, but God’s must be off inasmuch as we have yet to see our petition fulfilled as we expected.

This week, we want to disabuse you of those notions.

Scripture reveals to us four broad ways that God answers our prayers: **slow, grow, go, or no**. As humans, our preference is almost always the “go” option, but it seems to be the least common among the four. The “slow,” “grow,” and “no” options feel like punishment to us, because that is not what we asked or imagined. But it is in those answers that God’s purpose for us finds more clarity and definition, where we tend to grow and reap more spiritual fruit, and how we demonstrate true faith and trust in him.

And that... well, that is hard.

Let’s take each briefly in turn.

Slow – An answer of “slow” from God usually tells us two things. To start, the petition is aligned with God’s will for us. But even proper alignment in purpose does not ensure proper alignment in timing. That is the issue here. Or, put differently, the prescription. God is telling us the intent is right and noble, but the timing is off.

Let’s be clear. God answers the prayer. He just says wait. But a delayed answer is not a denial. More often than not, the delay has two concurrent functions. First, God may stir us to wait in order to build within us the spiritual fruit and spiritual discipline of patience – or, in the old-fashioned King James English, longsuffering. In the face of troubles and trials of any sort, can we be content to wait on God and do so gladly, without complaining?

Second, God may invite us to wait as other things, pursuant to his will, align in the fullness of time. If we trust God to answer our prayer, we must also trust that he knows all the necessary ingredients to effectuate his will. God may need and desire for other people to be in place, other circumstances to be resolved, other hearts to be tender, other minds to be receptive, etc., before he answers.

One of the more obvious biblical examples of waiting pursuant to prayer is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus had promised his followers that he would send the Comforter, who would guide and empower them, who would give them wisdom and understanding. But after Jesus ascended, the followers spent ten days meeting in an upper room, seeking God’s promise in prayer. The answer to this prayer was always yes... but it was yes and wait. Wait from the time of Jesus’s promise. Wait from the time of Joel’s prophecy of Acts 2. Wait from the time of the Garden. Wait. In the waiting, the believers were infused with the supernatural grace of patience while the calendar rendezvoused with a date and festival whose true meaning was known only to God at that time.

In a different context, the prophet Habakkuk wrote, “For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay” (2:3).

All of this calls to mind Paul’s exhortation, “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season, we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

Grow – This answer is akin to “slow,” but with one clear difference. God needs us to mature in one or more spiritual areas (beyond mere patience) before he can or will move on our petition. Again, here the answer is yes, but it, too, is delayed.

“Grow” responses frustrate us, because it means more than just waiting. Waiting is bad enough. But if God’s answer is “grow,” we have to wait *and* work. We have to do something, and that is frustrating for the spiritually comfortable or lazy.

The actual growth assignment may run the gamut. He may want us to discipline parts of our life, to let go of something or someone, to refuse certain things, or the like. He may want us to grow deeper in our spiritual formation through study of and meditation on the Word. He may want us to cultivate specific fruits necessary for the answer he may work, things like meekness, gentleness, kindness, generosity, etc.

A “grow” answer is not punishment. In fact, it is quite the opposite. God wants us to be ready to receive, in fullness, the answer to our prayers, so he knows what we need to do so. In many ways, an answer of “grow” is a deep and mysterious grace of the Lord, a demonstration that he cares deeply about us and our journey. He wants us to be prepared to live in his blessing and fullness, so he works within us the means to do so.

The early life of Joseph is an exercise in “grow” (Genesis 37-41). Given his piety as a young man, it seems unconscionable that Joseph would not have prayed for deliverance after his slavery and ultimate imprisonment in Egypt. Such a prayer would have been entirely within the character of Joseph, and entirely something to which a just God would be attuned.

Yet God waited. Waited for at least a dozen years. And in that time, Joseph was humiliated, stripped of his freedom, dignity, and, on the surface, purpose. Why did God answer Joseph by saying wait? Because God knew the beginning from the ending, and thus also knew that Joseph needed the most mature character, wisdom, and humility in order to govern Egypt (and eventually his own family) in righteousness rather than resentment.

As David wrote in the *emphatic* and in the *imperative*, “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Psalm 27:14).

Go – This is the answer that causes us all to shout, “Hallelujah!” When we hear go, we fully understand that the timing, the petition itself, and our hearts are aligned with the will of God. We move forward boldly, but also in humility and gratitude.

This one requires little additional explanation save for two things.

First, if the Lord tells you to go... then go. The worst thing you can do is have the Lord waving a green flag in your face, yet you pull out the yellow caution flag. In Genesis 12:1. God tells Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to

the land that I will show you...” And what did Abram do? Verse 4 says, “So Abram went.” No hesitation. Even more remarkable was God’s request to Abraham that he sacrifice Isaac, his son, his only son, whom he loved. Genesis 22:4 reveals that “Abraham rose early in the morning,” i.e., that next morning, and headed out to the mountain God would show him.

We see this exact same “go” faith in Philip the evangelist in Acts 8. After an amazing revival in Samaria, God tells Philip through an angel, “‘Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert place.’ And he rose and went” (vv. 26-27). No hesitation. No caution flag. He rose and went.

Second, we must be prepared that our “yes” and God’s “yes” may very well look different. Go is go, but God is under no obligation to answer the prayer per the details and contours in your mind. In other words, the answer may look nothing like you imagined, even when the answer is “yes” or “go.”

The greatest example of this in the Bible is Jesus himself. Jesus of Nazareth was decidedly unlike the Messiah that Jews had cast in their minds. Even for those who fervently sought and prayed for the arrival of the Messiah – and, to be sure, there were many – they did not expect such a man as Jesus.

Did God answer their prayers? You betcha. Did it look like they thought? Not even close. Jesus was not a conquering war hero who came to save the Jews from Rome. He was a lowly servant, a man acquainted with griefs and sorrows, who came to save his people, all people, from their sins.

The prayer was a noble one, but even in praying a noble prayer, we must give God the space to answer how he chooses according to his will.

No – When God says no, he is asserting his sovereignty over all things and his ownership over our lives. He knows better than we. When our prayer request is unaligned with his will, for whatever reason, he rightly and righteously denies it. This is the holy prerogative of God, and we dare not murmur or complain about it.

Bluntly, chances are high that God has long since answered many prayers we deem “unfulfilled.” We just cannot countenance that the answer is somehow no. We see it as a chastisement of our faith. Or we sit in shame and embarrassment, having asked so many others to intercede for us and yet nothing happens. Or we quickly jump on a “blame the devil” bandwagon, as if he has that much power, but we really cannot see the Lord blocking the answer we desire. In reality, it may simply be unhealthy for us, and God, in both his mercy and grace, is protecting us from ourselves.

Whatever his reasons, God owes us no explanation, and we would do well not to fill in the blanks on his behalf. His ways, even when seemingly shrouded, are higher and better (Isaiah 55:9).

So, “no” is an absolutely legitimate, authentic biblical response from God. Think about just a few of the prominent examples:

- God told Jesus, his Son, no in the Garden of Gethsemane. The cup would not pass. The burden would not be lifted. God provided strength to endure the cup, but the cup remained. (Matthew 26:39).
- Abraham asked that his son, Ishmael, be made the heir of the promise, but God outrightly denied it, reserving that distinction for Isaac. (Genesis 17:18-19).
- Moses begged God to cross the Jordan and see the Promised Land. God not only refused, but he told Moses to stop praying about it, because he would not enter. (Deuteronomy 3:25-28).
- David pleaded with God, with both prayer and fasting, to spare the life of the baby produced through his sin with Bathsheba. God did not, though he comforted them both afterward. (2 Samuel 12:16-23).
- David also desired to build God’s holy temple, but God said no, giving that task to David’s son and successor, Solomon. But God did allow David to raise the funds for the temple. (1 Chronicles 28:2-6).
- Elijah beseeched God to take his life out of despair, but God not only said no but he provided Elijah both sustenance and direction (1 Kings 19:4).
- The demoniac healed in Mark 5 asked Jesus for permission to follow him. Christ said no, instead instructing him to go home and tell others.
- Paul thrice asked God to remember some thorny impediment to his ministry, and God thrice said no. But God did say his grace was sufficient and that his strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

The Bible includes these “no” stories not to wag a finger at people. Instead, they are illustrative. God may answer our prayers, but he is fully justified and good when the answer is “no.” And we must accept that just as readily, worship just as fully, and believe that he has something better for us just as faithfully as we would if the answer were “yes.”

Exercise – This week’s exercise may make you uncomfortable, but that is healthy. Make a catalog of your current outstanding petitions before God. Then, in honest reflection with the Holy Spirit, mark each one as “slow, grow, go, or no.” If the posture of God is presently “slow” or “grow,” then write why you believe that to be true. What is God asking you to learn? What might be teaching you? Or what elements might he be aligning in the fullness of time?

If the answer is “go” and you have yet to go, why? What excuses are you making? What spiritual hindrances stand in the way of obedience?

If the answer is “no,” why do you still have the petition before God? My suspicion is we all have a prayer or two for which we hold out hope that we misheard the obvious, clearly articulated “no.” We think God may have changed his mind. But God’s no is firm. I would encourage you to repent of continually praying for something outside the will of God, and then strike the request from your list.

* * *

Final Thoughts – Sometimes I think we make the will of God some mysterious, unknowable force shrouded behind clouds on top of a holy man. Yet the Bible is replete with the notion that God has shown us what is good. We often pray for, over, or about things for which common spiritual sense gives us the answer straightaway. And we complain that God has not answered our prayers when, in reality, we know the answer before we even ask, because the answer is plainly taught in scripture.

In one part of his prophecy, Isaiah reminds us, “But he who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands” (32:8). We can trust that God if we seek first the kingdom and the synchronization of our will to God’s, then we will be making such noble plans.

Do not misconstrue me. We should pray. We need to pray. We must pray. I fully believe in the old, precious words of What a Friend We Have in Jesus. What a privilege it is to carry everything to God in prayer. What peace we often forfeit. What needless pain we bear. We have trials and temptation, trouble everywhere, yet we should never be discouraged, because we can take it to the Lord in prayer. He is a friend so faithful. He knows our every weakness, especially when we are heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care.

But there is a marked difference in praying to God versus mere dissatisfaction with his answer. And that is what we need to learn. If we pray to God believing that he can do anything according to his will, then we likewise need to be joyful when the answer is “go”... and perhaps even more joyful when the answer is “slow,” “grow,” or “no.” He loves us that much to be fully invested in everything that is good and right for our lives, even when we cannot see it.

Week 4 – May Fasting

Weekly Readings:

- Luke 4:1-13 (the example of Christ)
- Isaiah 58 (God’s chosen fast)
- Key idea – The true object of fasting is proximity to Jesus. Under the new covenant, fasting takes on an *internal reality*. Christ lives within us. So, fasting creates more room for him to dwell within us.

Fasting is often seen as a companion spiritual discipline to prayer, i.e., “prayer and fasting.” But, in reality, prayer is a companion spiritual discipline to fasting. What do we mean by that?

There are hundreds and hundreds of references to prayer in the Bible without a concomitant reference to fasting. And prayer is something we are commanded to do constantly. But we are not likewise instructed about fasting, and one would be hard pressed to find a reference to fasting without prayer as its centerpiece.

Daniel turned to God with prayer, supplications, and fasting (Daniel 9:3). Ezra proclaimed a fast to go along with prayer to God for safe travel for the Israelites (Ezra 8:23). Nehemiah wept, fasted, and prayed over the ruins of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4). David, during prayer for his enemies, humbled his soul with fasting (Psalm 35:13). Anna worshipped day and night with fasting and prayer (Luke 2:37). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in all the churches only *after* prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23). And Paul and Barnabas were called out for that ministry following the fasting and prayer of church leaders at Antioch (Acts 13:2-3).

So, what does this all mean practically?

Fasting, though an important part of our faith journey, was never intended to become a scheduled, routinized practice out of religious habit. In fact, Jesus specifically condemns such practice in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting, then, must have a purpose. So, let’s start with that.

Exercise – Write down the reasons you believe or have heard others say they believe that we should fast. What do these reasons demand from us? If someone were to ask about your fasting views or habits, what idea of God might they form based solely on your beliefs?

* * *

To unpack this exercise, we will turn to a conversation that Jesus held with some disciples of John the Baptist (Matthew 9:14-17). The baptizer's followers asked a curious question of Jesus: "Why do we *and the Pharisees* fast, and your disciples do not fast?"

One could make a whole sermon on that question alone. To start, John's disciples curiously aligned themselves with the religious leaders of the days, the Pharisees, over against Jesus and his followers. In other words, the heft of religious Israel – those who were formally in leadership and those who followed a radical evangelist out in the wilderness – stood against Jesus.

But they did not stop there. They ended their question with a statement that is striking in its exclusion. Why do we all fast... and *your disciples do not*? In other words, they failed to ask about Jesus himself. And in asking the question that way, they unwittingly provided the very answer they sought.

Jesus explained it thusly. As long as he, the bridegroom, was with his disciples, they had no reason to fast. Only when he is gone from them will fasting once again be necessary. **In this we understand that the true object of fasting is proximity to Jesus.** We do not fast out of religious compunction or cultural pressure or any other reason. We fast to draw nearer to Christ.

But we can only draw nearer if the vestiges of the old are removed from us. That is what Jesus meant in the remainder of his explanation. We do not put fresh, new stuff on or in decaying, old stuff – clothing, wine, or, the metaphor's real object, our spiritual selves.

Sometimes we miss this beautiful subtlety. John was the friend of the bridegroom, and his fasting was a part of preparing the way for the groom to receive the bride. Jesus, of course, is the bridegroom. But he does not fast when he is with his bride. Instead, he feasts (and they do, too). And the difference between John's fasting and Jesus's feasting is both eschatological and covenantal.

Jesus's very literal presence indicates the cessation of fasting. But in his absence, we still fast to draw closer to Jesus by removing the old and replacing it with the new. And the new, of course, is feasting on him.

In short, fasting in the Old Testament was necessary because the presence of God was an *external reality*. God lived in his temple, not within us. So, fasting itself took on an *external reality*, which is what Jesus criticized. But under the new covenant, fasting

takes on an *internal reality*. Christ lives within us. So, fasting creates more room for him to dwell within us.

We know that might be dizzying for many who see fasting as a ritualistic Christian practice. First of all, the practice far, far predates Christianity. And second, that misses the point. In Mosaic Judaism, fasting indeed included ritualistic elements. Everyone fasted on certain high holy festival days, whether to remember slavery and the exodus or in atonement for sins. And when the king called a fast, it was for an express purpose, maybe a battle or an impending decision or occasionally for repentance.

But what Jesus is saying is this: those are old cloth and old wineskins. When you fast in the future, it is to draw out of you what is unlike me and, by implication, draw you closer and closer to me.

Does that mean Old Testament rationales for fasting are obsolete? No, not exactly, but they just have to be viewed through the lens that Christ taught.

For instance, the prophet Joel shared God's pleas for his people to "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (2:14). Repentance and consecration are worthy reasons to fast, but we do so with an eye to Christ's salvific act on the cross and our daily life in the Holy Spirit, not through the act of temple sacrifice.

Esther and all the Jews fasted in order to plead for God's help in the face of an ordered genocide (Esther 4). But, in the light of the new covenant, Jesus says, "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13-14). He does not attach fasting as a prerequisite, just prayer.

So, what do we make of all this? At least the following:

- The only known example of Jesus fasting was in preparation for his public ministry (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2). And, indeed, this may have also been a trial of his humanity given that it culminated in Satan's completely unsuccessful temptation of Jesus. Jesus mortified his real human nature (which he shares with all of us) by choosing not to satisfy any hunger through his divine power. (He was tempted as we are, yet without sin.) He, the second Adam, starved all those fleshly, earthly desires, unlike the first Adam. Adam lost in the garden; Jesus gained victory in the wilderness. And his fast was to lean in fullness on the power of the Holy Spirit working through and in him.
- Beyond that, Jesus instructs on fasting *only twice*: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18) and the question from the baptizer's followers (Matthew

9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20). That is it. And one could even take the Sermon's instruction on fasting in private not in public ways to be equally applicable to any of our spiritual disciplines given Jesus's similar teachings on prayer, generosity (right hand/left hand), etc. Furthermore, Jesus's audiences in each instance were Jews steeped in a highly ritualized system of fasting.

- To that end, we do not know how Jesus might have addressed fasting to Gentiles. But we cannot look elsewhere in the New Testament, either. Fasting *is not mentioned a single time* in any epistle of Paul, Peter, John, etc. They never use the Greek word for fasting that appears in the Gospels. They never instruct Christians to fast or not fast. They simply do not deal with it at all.
- Religious fasting is mentioned five times in Acts, notably among both Jews and Gentiles: Acts 9:9, 10:30, 13:2-3, and 14:23. But in each case, it appears as a voluntary act rather than one borne of religious mandate. Each person is more deeply seeking wisdom, assistance, and power from Christ. They want to be close to him.

In sum, for a Christian, fasting is not something you do out of religious necessity or compulsion. Fasting is a purposeful, individual decision to grow closer to Jesus.

As theologian Richard Foster writes, "Fasting is the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity." In the act of denial itself, "fasting reveals the things that control us."

So, what controls us? In ancient days, people fasted food, because people had little else. The search for stable supplies of food and water were paramount to survival. And when someone from that time fasted something as precious as food, the fast meant something. Their whole lives revolved around food – the table, family life, and the toil of the land, etc. Yet they gave up its control over their lives in order to seek and trust God.

We default to fasting food in part because of its traditional role in fasting. But if the acquisition of food does not dominate your life, what are you really sacrificing? A few calories here and there?

When you fast something that costs you nothing, then the fast is the same sort of empty one Jesus condemned in Matthew 6. We do it for a religious aesthetic rather than for the sake of knowing God and his heart.

What if, instead, you fasted what really controls you? How many hours per day do you spend on social media or texting? (I can just about assure you, it is decidedly more than you think.) How many hours per day do you watch television or sit with your tablet or phone? Maybe you are controlled by other impulses like shopping, aimlessly lying in

bed, listening to news programs, playing sports, etc. You can be controlled by appetites, too – food, alcohol, sex to name but a few.

Or what if certain people and relationships control and drive you instead of Jesus Christ? What if you crave social contact and validation from others?

Can you see it now? We must not fast a specific thing for a specific season in a specific way. That is hyper-legalistic. We fast in order to reveal and mortify those things in our lives that keep us from intimacy with Jesus. Jesus’s answer to the baptizer’s followers placed this front and center – while he was here, the disciples need not fast; when he left, they would return to fasting. The implication could not be more clear.

Withdraw from that which would be a self-denying sacrifice. The time period is irrelevant and, again, legalistic. How long you fast is of little merit. But how you fast is of extreme merit. Replace whatever the activity is with a purposeful seeking of the Lord (like David, who, praying for the life of his infant son, did not move for seven days, and only prayed).

When we fast properly, we can be filled with fresh counsel, revelations, and deeper encounters with God that lead us out to serve others.

Exercise - What is something other than food that you could fast? How would that change your day, or your life?

Exercise - Pick one day this week to fast one meal, and replace the time of eating with Bible study and prayer. Not passive, rather intentional, *consecrated* prayer. Journal the experience. Maybe even do it as a family. Then, do likewise with one non-food fast.

* * *

Final Thoughts – God tells us directly, in no uncertain terms, what his goals for our fasting should be. Read the whole of Isaiah 58, where the Lord instructs the prophet to share with Israel the difference between a bad and a good fast. In the first few verses, God makes it abundantly clear that fasts borne from vainglorious pursuits and a haughty heart have no place with him. But in verse 6 and following, God lets us know what a humble fast before him produces – the bonds of wickedness will be loosed; the oppressed will be unyoked and freed; out of our abundance, we will share our bread with the hungry, our home with the homeless, our clothes with the naked, and our presence with our neighbor. This kind of fast will lead God to “satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.” That all sounds remarkably New Testament. And thousands of years later, this is still the fast that pleases God.

June A Life of Generosity

Not long ago, a pastor friend shared something sad with me: “I’d rather preach about horrible sin than giving and generosity,” he mused. “And you know what? I think my congregation would rather hear about it, too.”

I do not doubt him, but what an utterly depressing commentary. He would rather present the wretchedness of sin to his flock than the joy of generosity. Sin is absurd, incompatible with the order and perfection of God. Yet sin, the result of evil and the cause of suffering, is vanquished. From sin we have been delivered.

But generosity is baked into the very design of the universe. God created us in his image, and God is a giver. Look at everything he freely gives us – the air we breathe, the water that quenches our thirst and sustains our body, the land to grow crops, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the sun that warms our world, the people who brighten our lives, and, of course, his Son, Jesus. We are owed none of that. God freely gives it to us, because he loves us.

What a model! How could one not enjoy preaching about such generosity?

I think the answer is straightforward and simple: in the modern Christian church, particularly in the United States, we have reduced the concept of generosity to be mostly synonymous with the giving of tithes and offerings.

Yet biblical generosity is unequivocally meant to inhabit and define *every* area of our life – spiritual, familial, relational, ecclesial, professional, emotional, and, yes, financial. The model of Trinitarian giving includes but also transcends dollars and cents.

But many Christians live their lives in poverty because they do not practice generosity. Let me be clear: I do not mean financial poverty. I mean spiritual poverty. They live their lives closed-fisted, tight-lipped, head-strong, devoid of the joy of letting go. They withhold compliments. They withhold their sweat and skills. They withhold grace.

And if they do give, it is a perfunctory religious exercise, checking the box. “I’ve served.” “I’ve tithed.” But there is no mirth, no cheer, no joy, no thanksgiving. For example, they multiply their net income, never gross, by 10% and put a check in the plate for \$157.83 and not a penny more. How miserable!

Their relationship with generosity is the very definition of legalism – i.e., trying to please God through performance rather than trying to please God through a relationship with him and his people.

So, this month, we will return to the basics of biblical generosity, examining what the Word has to say about the following:

- **generosity of time and thought** – sacrificially and supportively giving to others in deed and in word;
- **generosity of talent** – serving, submitting, and giving in the body of Christ; and
- **generosity of treasure** – financially giving to God as worship, as an act of trust and obedience, and as an investment in his kingdom and this local church.

But, to take root in our lives, we must agree on a few simple premises about generosity:

- Biblical generosity is cheerful. Generosity necessarily flows from a heart aligned with love and God. Many can quote 2 Corinthians 9:7, “... for God loves a cheerful giver.” But, there again, if you excise and quote only that clichéd portion, you miss the totality of what Paul says. “Each one must give *as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion*, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Generosity is not perfunctory. Generosity instead pours forth from a heart that is submitted to God, whose desires are molded into those of God, and whose essence is that of God, i.e., love. In fact, later this month, we will marvel together on what we unlock in God’s own generosity when we mimic him and are generous ourselves. Paul simply calls this an “inexpressable gift!”, and, yes, he uses an exclamation point!
- Biblical generosity is an act of faith – like observing the sabbath and jubilee rest – in God’s provision for our lives. In the simplest terms, our generosity is returning to God (either directly or in gifts to others that he may bless and multiply) what is already his, and, in turn, trusting that we, like the sparrows and the flowers, will lack for nothing. (Note that this does not mean we are absolved from working. Instead, God will provide a way and a means for us to work, feed our families, meet our needs, etc.)
- And, as such, biblical generosity is first-fruits oriented. Time and again, the Bible focuses on giving from the top rather than giving from what was left over, both to the Lord and to others. If we give from the bottom of the pile, then we are not truly generous.

- Biblical generosity is kingdom-furthering. Our generosity in time, thought, talent, and treasure has a direct impact on the church, the spread of the Good News, and our corporate spiritual health. If we use generosity to spread joy, share the love of Christ, and connect communities, we sow into the kingdom

* * *

You are likely familiar with Luke 6:38: “Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over...” Amen. That is a beautiful promise.

The problem is that we decouple it from the larger teaching of Jesus that Luke records. The verse immediately preceding it is another famous one: “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

But those two verses are inextricably interlinked. Verse 38 is not really about financial giving, though we have co-opted to mean such. Instead, verses 37 and 38 together present the most fascinating picture of God’s economics, laws that are woven into the very fabric of the cosmos.

In God’s economy (aside from the free gift of grace and salvation), what you do in life will be the measure of what you receive from him. You judge... you will be judged. You condemn... you will be condemned. You forgive... you will be forgiven. You give generously... you will be repaid in kind.

That sentence, “Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over...” is *not* tied exclusively to the “give” portion of the discourse. It fits over the whole passage. For any of those activities Jesus describes, whatever you do will overflow into your lap.

So, as we begin this monthlong study of generous living, keep that in mind. Each Christian is being watched and measured against this standard. Generous living is not foisted upon us as a requirement, but it is presented to us as a standard part of a holy, Christlike life.

“One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered” (Proverbs 11:24-25).

Week 1 – June #Blessed

Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 112
- Matthew 5:2-11
- Key idea – At the core, a blessed person is someone who resides and rests in the *spiritual* favor and grace of God Almighty, not necessarily the temporal favor of worldly affects.

About a decade ago, an internet hashtag sensation turned viral and, in the process, further eroded our understanding of one of the most fundamental, covenantal concepts in the Bible: blessing.

You may recall the #Blessed movement. People slapped that hashtag on their Instagram feeds and Facebook pages, their tweets and texts, on shirts and sweaters, even in casual conversation. And so often it served as the caption to something material in their lives – a new luxury car, a kitchen redesign, a vacation to a Caribbean resort, a promotion at work, and so forth.

I can feel and hear the ice cracking underneath me, so let me explain. Yes, those things can and may be gifts from God, but our association of them as a “blessing” does violence to the deeper biblical presentation of that word.

And it also sets up quite the uncomfortable tension between #Blessed and our brothers and sisters who live in financial poverty or under government oppression or religious persecution. The modern connotation paints a starkly different picture of those who are blessed than Jesus does in the Beatitudes or elsewhere in the Gospel.

At this point, you may be thinking, “I thought this month was about generosity.” But before we ever turn to generosity, we must recapture the functional biblical definition of the word “blessed.” We must reconcile in our mind what God actually meant by blessing, because it has a direct and substantive impact on our generosity.

Perhaps an easier way to think about this is through a few word pictures:

- When asked if her infant son sleeps through the night, she smiled and said, “Oh, my, yes. He’s a great sleeper. We’re so blessed!”
- When asked if his week was a good one, a man beamed and replied, “Yes! We sold our house after only one day on the market, above asking prices! We’re so blessed!”

- When asked what universities his daughter had been accepted to, a proud father exclaimed, “Every single one to which she applied! We’re so blessed!”
- When asked about her vacation to the beach, a lady happily said, “I mean, look at my tan. We had perfect, sunny weather every day. We’re so blessed!”

By now, you should see the problem with calling any of those a blessing.

If the mother’s baby squalled through the night, would she not be blessed? If the man’s house took three months to sell and, even then, only at asking price, would he not be blessed? If the high school senior had been waitlisted at one school and rejected by two others, would she not be blessed? If the family had rain every day of their vacation, would they not be blessed?

(And just to put the last example in even more blunt terms, what if that coastal area had been in extreme drought, and its farmers, maybe just a couple of miles from that beachfront resort, had been praying for rain so they would not lose their crops? None of them would be apt to call a bone-dry week as a “blessing,” just so folks could enjoy their holiday.)

Moreover, what if a brother or sister in Christ could not see themselves in any of those portraits? If they are financially unable to take a vacation or if they have a perpetually sick and fussy baby, are they somehow devoid of God’s blessings?

Don’t you see? If the opposite occurred in any of those examples, the people involved would have an uncomfortable decision between two extremes. Option 1 – if what they described is a blessing, then the opposite of it would have to be the opposite of a blessing, i.e., a curse. Option 2 – everything is a blessing in God’s economy, no matter its perceived consequence through human eyes. No real middle ground exists when you liberally label things as blessings.

But most of us, if honest, *think* our theology is the latter option but *know* our practice is the former.

I am not suggesting that we should be anything less than grateful for any of those things – except maybe the tan, which is superficial at best. Of course we should. But our gratitude for the circumstances of our life does not necessarily transform those circumstances into blessings.

The folly is obvious. Simply put, we call those things which benefit us as blessings. And, more often than not, we tie these to direct, material, tangible benefits, too, and particularly benefits *that others can see*.

But the Bible defines *blessings* – or *to be blessed* – as something remarkably different. At their roots, both the Hebrew and Greek words used to convey blessing in the testaments relate to a condition of happiness. But not the temporary happiness that comes from stuff, rather the revelation that, no matter the circumstance, our trust is in the Lord. Such faith breeds a level of preternatural, even supernatural contentment.

Peel back the onion another layer, and something fascinating emerges. The Hebrew for blessed, *beiruch*, is directly derived from the word for knee, *beerech*. This makes sense when one considers that the traditional posture of an Israelite toward anyone bestowing a blessing upon them – God, a father or grandfather, a king, a prophet, etc. – is to kneel.

But consider this. Jewish scholar Brian Tice explains that “*blessed*” in Hebrew “conveys the idea of being strengthened, of our weakness being compensated for with God’s strength.” What is one of the weakest, most vulnerable parts of the body? The knee.

So, then, what if we saw blessings as more aligned with their etymological roots? What if, at its core, a blessing from God is a holy empowerment to do what is not within our natural capabilities to do – to go beyond, to persevere, to survive and thrive... and, critically, to be happy and content in the journey?

In this light, does Paul’s famous thorn passage in 2 Corinthians 12 make more sense? He concludes, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (v. 10). Why? Because Paul was *truly* blessed.

This all aligns with the Bible’s radical notion of blessing. The first and primary order of blessings is spiritual. All of them point to things humans cannot (or even will not) do, endure, or survive on their own.

- “And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the season, and let birds multiply on the earth’ (Genesis 1:22).
- “And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name the Lord’” (Job 1:21).
- “Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty” (Job 5:17).
- “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!” (Psalm 34:8).
- “Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!” (Psalm 40:4).

- “Blessed are those who dwell in Your house, ever singing Your praise! Blessed are those whose strength is Your praise! Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion... O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in You!” (Psalm 84:4-5, 12).
- “Blessed is the man whom You discipline, O Lord, and whom You teach out of your law” (Psalm 94:12).
- “Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!” (Psalm 106:3).
- “Blessed are those who keep [God’s] testimonies and that seek Him with the whole heart” (Psalm 119:2).
- “Blessed is the one who listens to me...” (Proverbs 8:34).

Whew. That is some tough stuff, and much of it sounds nothing like what we have come to label as #Blessed. Obedience, discipline, reproach, trust, selflessness. And we could have added dozens more passages.

For many this may bring to mind the aftermath of Jesus’s bread of life discourse. “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this?’” (John 6:60-61).

Exercise – Read Psalm 112 in its entirety. Then read the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:2-11, Based on the words of the psalmist and of Jesus, fashion your own definition of blessing.

* * *

The psalmist pulls no punches. Right out of the gate, he defines a blessed person as one who fears the Lord and delights in his ways. Then, for a brief moment, we may read verses 2 and 3 and say, “Yes! That’s the kind of blessing that I’m talking about!” And generational influence and wealth sound so much more like what we have been acculturated to believe is a blessing.

But the rest of the psalm paints a blessed man with the adjectives of a holy, godly life – righteous, gracious, merciful, generous, just, brave (especially in the face of bad news), resolute, trusting, steady... and a *second time in the span of a few verses*, generous. “He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor...” (v. 9).

Overlay that with all the marginalized people groups that Jesus calls “blessed” – those who are downtrodden in their spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek (i.e., that have power but exercise it in restraint and humility), those who hunger after the things of God, those who are generous with mercy, those who are pure in heart, those who make peace, and those who are persecuted for the gospel and for righteousness.

Jesus is *not* saying one must fit into one of those categories in order to be blessed. What he is saying is far more radical – that the kingdom of God is accessible, approachable, and available to even the least of society, those forced to the periphery by others who seek worldly “blessings,” like fame and money and power and who, once they attain, keep for their own.

At the core, a blessed person is someone who resides and rests in the *spiritual* favor and grace of God Almighty – chosen by him, belonging to him, provided for by him, strengthened by him, disciplined by him, pruned by him, living with him, trusting in him, held by him, kept in him, given mercy by him, given grace by him. A blessed person nestles into the peace of the Lord, a deep inner and sustained peace that defies human logic, especially in the face of external circumstances, material possessions, or the vagaries of life itself.

In the end, it is not so much that material, relational, and other providential gifts from the Lord are not “blessings.” But inasmuch as we have any of them, just like spiritual gifts, they are meant to be transient in our hands as we live a generous life toward others. A blessed life cannot exist absent generosity.

* * *

Final Thoughts – So what can we say about all these things? So much church mythology has grown up around the concept of blessing. But good disciples actively dispel this mythology in how they live their lives. Under no true biblical definition does blessing guarantee or signify wealth, power, good health, or the absence of problems. Prosperity gospel may be alluring, but that painted peacock is still a heresy.

Blessing is a thoroughly spiritual concept. It is the permanent and abiding state of grace that affixes to the lives of those who confess Christ. God’s blessing on us is by no means an assurance of the transitory markers of worldly success. Nor is it the absence of pain, suffering, trials, temptations, or rejection. Tell that to Peter, John, James, Stephen, or Paul. God’s sustenance through the pain and suffering was the blessing.

*The Greek for blessing – eulogia – literally means “to speak well of, a good work of praise or benediction.” A blessing is God speaking well of us through grace. Why? Because we seek after him, we strive to keep his commandments, we produce fruit, and, critically, **we generously share with others**. Blessings, throughout scripture, have always been intended by God to be given to one in order to be shared with many (Genesis 12:2). That, then, is the focus of this month.*

Week 2 – June Generosity of Time and Thought

Weekly Readings:

- Ephesians 5:15-21
- James 3:1-12
- Key idea – Redeeming both time and thought start with self-discipline and self-control.

When I was a young teenager, my father taught me a lesson that continues to influence me. He said, “Son, I can tell you what matters to most people by looking at two things: their calendar and their checkbook. Whatever they spend their time on and whatever they spend their money on is what truly matters to them.”

That remains great wisdom. Both time and money are finite commodities placed under our stewardship. How we choose to expend them speaks volumes about what we value.

Exercise – For at least four days, keep a detailed chronology of everything you do. And we truly mean everything. If you do two things simultaneously, list them both but then (honestly) choose the one you actually spent more time doing. (For example, if you watch a movie with your family while scrolling through social media, then it is almost certain that social media had your attention and thus was your actual activity.)

Then add up the amount of time you spend on each specific entry. Categorize those – e.g., put meals together, sleep and naps together, etc. Finally, do some math and figure out the percentage of your total time that you spent on each. Hopefully, 30% of your time will be sleeping. About 10% of your time should be food-related, e.g, meal preparation, eating, sitting at the table with family, etc.

Look at all your percentages. What surprises you? If you are like the average American – and, indeed, the average Christian – the numbers may shock or disappoint you. Chances are quite high that you spend an inordinate amount of time in front of electronic devices – televisions, tablets, computers, and phones.

Don't believe me? Think back to all those activities you listed and failed to include “with my phone.” People do not even realize that they sit on the back porch... and scroll on their phone. That they go to a restaurant or sit at the dining room table... and all fiddle with their phones. That they watch television... and, remarkably, still glue themselves to their phone. That they go to the bathroom... and just sit and look at their phone. That they lie in bed... blue light gleaming and look at their phone. That they sit in church... and toggle between a Bible app and text messages.

We value where we spend our time.

* * *

In 1734, the preeminent American pastor and preacher, Jonathan Edwards, delivered a sermon entitled “The Preciousness of Time and the Importance of Redeeming It.” He based the sermon on Paul’s exhortation to the church at Ephesus:

Look carefully, then, how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, *making the best use of the time, because the days are evil*. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, *addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, signing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*. (Ephesians 5:15-21)

The thrust of Edwards’s sermon rings true today. Time is a precious but finite gift from God. We are not guaranteed time, and once spent, time is irretrievable. Therefore, like any other spiritual gift, we must be a good steward of time, using it for the upbuilding of the kingdom.

At one point he asks his flock, “**And if God, that hath given you your time, should now call you to an account, what account could you give to him?**”

Exercise – Answer that question honestly about yourself. And openly share with your family or group.

* * *

Edwards criticizes any number of time-wasters but reserves a particularly strong rebuke for those who do “nothing that turns to any account, either for the good of their souls or bodies; nothing either for their own benefit, *or for the benefit of their neighbor, either of the family or of the [community or church] to which they belong*.” He bemoans those who apply their creativity and imagination to trivial pursuits, ways of wasting time, and even wicked pursuits instead of toward their fellow pilgrim on this journey.

That is the focus of this week – not just how much we waste time, but rather, how can we redirect our time to be generous to others in what we do and what we say?

And Edwards’s antidote is the one provided by Paul: to make the most of time.

But, curiously, the word for “making the most” in Greek is *exagorazo*, and its primary meaning, even here, is to *redeem*. And redemption, at its simplest terms, is to buy back or exchange something for value. Redemption is a recovery job.

Put this concept into Paul’s writings and Edwards’s sermon. To redeem time, we make wise and sacred use of every moment for the purpose of doing good. In turn, our zeal and our well-doing are the purchase price by which we make the time our own. Time, when turned into an instrument of our worship and service for the kingdom, is liberated, redeemed, and given worth. Time spent loving God and loving our neighbor is rescued from worthlessness.

Time, then, just like any other means of our generosity (thought, talent, and treasure) must be soundly invested instead of directed to the harmful pursuits of these evil days.

So, how do we do that?

This is when many discipleship manuals would give you five bullets for concrete action. And there is certainly merit in a “to do” list, but the hard, honest answer is this: **redeeming time starts with self-discipline and self-control.**

Many of us can quote the litany of the fruit of the Spirit given to us by Paul: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).

To me, love is listed first, because love is the good earth in which this entire spiritual tree is planted, the root system that anchors and steadies the tree and delivers nutrients to the budding fruit. Without love, the rest seems a far-fetched impossibility.

But self-control may be listed last for a logical reason, too. Although it is a fruit in and of itself, self-control is also the fertilizer for all the others, a necessary ingredient for them to ripen to perfection. In the Bible, self-control is a Holy Spirit-empowered restraint on our own impulses, desires, and emotions. It is the governor switch, the moderating force essential for spiritual maturity.

In other words, self-control is what allows us to lay down our own wants – lay down our lives – and seek the good of others. Without it, patience, kindness, goodness, and gentleness seem nigh on impossible.

If you want to start redeeming your time, then discipline yourself, your calendar, your appointments, and your free time. In the process, you need not sacrifice time with God or time for rest, both critical and oft-modeled biblical pursuits. However, you can take

that inventory you did at the week's beginning and to ask these questions: how might I limit distractions? How might I invest in a few things at the "best" level rather than just a "good" or "passable" level? Is my day hemmed in by conversation with God? Where am I simply choosing wasteful idleness (as opposed to genuine rest)?

Once you figure that out, redeem your time. Use it more wisely. Invest in the kingdom. Do things for others. Do not wait for a pastor or group leader to give you a list of things you could do. Open your eyes, ears, and especially your heart. Drive an elderly person to get her groceries. Cut a neighbor's lawn. Do your spouse's chores. Clean something at church. Teach a person a skill at which you excel, like cooking, gardening, or sewing.

Like Paul says at the end of that Ephesians passage, the best redemptive use of our time is to submit to one another in Christ. So, this month, go out of your way to lay down yourself and, in true Christian generosity, pick up something for someone else.

* * *

Final Thoughts – In that passage, Paul describes another way that we generously give to one another: in thought and word. He says that we should address one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Now, if we take that passage literally, then we would constantly be singing to each other, as if our lives were operas or plays and every word were part of a libretto.

But I think Paul has a different and double meaning here. First, and more obviously, I believe he is instructing us to bolster one another's faith with the truths contained in sacred verse. There we learn about the magnificence of God, the gospel of Jesus, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the hope of the church, the path of righteousness. It is altogether right that we continually remind each other of those things.

Yet I think the real thrust of what Paul is saying is this: let your thoughts toward and words with one another be as sweet, truthful, righteous, and holy as those that tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Think of how many passages in the Bible warn of the dangers of the mind and tongue working together – Psalm 34:13, 141:3; Proverbs 10:19, 15:1, 18:21, 21:23; Matthew 12:34; Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 4:6; and James 1:19, 26. In fact, pause and read James 3:1-12, and you will see the seriousness of it all.

Paul, though, offers us what to do with a controlled mind and tongue – speak to each other in all the goodness of God. Encourage, uplift, support, mourn with, pray with, love on, and be like Christ through the words you use. Let that be part of your journey this month. Pray that flowing out of you will be the living waters of Jesus, so worshipful to him and so generous to others that they sound like psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Week 3 – June Generosity of Talent

Weekly Readings:

- 1 Peter 4:1-12
- Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12
- Ephesians 4:1-16
- Key idea – When we serve – when we are genuinely generous with our gifts and talents – we skim off selfishness and replace it with the love of others.

In 1888, Oscar Wilde published a children’s book called *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. In it he included a lovingly beautiful Christian allegory titled *The Selfish Giant*.

Early in the story, a giant makes the decision to wall off his garden and exclude children from it. He wishes to preserve its beauty and serenity for himself. But by choosing to withhold his garden from others and completely segregate his life, his garden stays in a perpetual state of winter. Outside the walls, trees leaf, birds chirp, flowers bloom, and children laugh. But neither spring, summer, nor fall ever visit his garden.

One day, the giant awakens and hears the sound of life coming from the garden. He looks and sees a hole in the wall through which dozens upon dozens of children had climbed through. Spring is in full blossom as the children play, save in one corner. One tree is still covered in frost, and the littlest of boys stands at its base crying.

In an instant, the giant knows he had been wrong. “How selfish I have been!” he exclaims. “Now I know why spring would not come here.” He rushes out to the garden to lift the boy into the tree, but in doing so, all of the children scatter in fear of the unkind, ungenerous man. Save that boy, whose eyes are swollen and sore from crying.

The giant rushes up to the boy, and the boy, blind to the giant’s faults but drawn by his repentant heart, puts his arms around him. The giant lifts the boy into the icy tree, and immediately spring arrives once more. So do all the children, who now witness a kind and caring man.

From that point onward, the giant always shares his garden. He knocks down the wall, and people marvel at the joy and laughter and life that they saw in his garden. But he never saw the boy again... not until one day decades later. He sees the same boy in the same corner and runs out to find him wounded, the prints of two nails in his little hands and the prints of two nails in his little feet.

The giant immediately wants to know who did this to him, but the boy spoke and said, “Nay! These are wounds of love. You let me play once in your garden. Today you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise.”

The whole story is poignant and worth a full read. But its central theme is what draws us to it today – selfishness leads to isolation, sorrow, and suffering, while generosity brings renewal, redemption, and joy.

The giant – who, of course, is not a giant at all, rather just a regular adult – chooses to wall off his garden and exclude others. Such selfish possessiveness brings literal and continual winter to his world. Only in his generosity, which follows his true contrition, does spring return.

Let’s apply this to us. If generosity of time and thought is all about our relationship to one another on an individual or familial basis, then **generosity of talent is all about our relationship to a living, breathing, organic church.**

So, think about this story in the context of the church, and it takes on a new level of sadness. So many people are a part of the church, i.e., they live in the neighborhood, but they choose to wall off the most special gifts of their life from their neighbors.

Imagine if your garden was playing an instrument, but you never offered it in service to the church. What if your garden was teaching or leading a group, yet you never raised your hand to serve? What if you were a handyman, but you never offered to help the first elderly person with things around her home? What if you were a terrific cook, but you never cooked the first meal for a shut-in man or a grieving family? What if you enjoyed arts and crafts, yet you never served at vacation Bible school?

The list is truly endless.

Exercise – In February, when we studied the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we read parts of two classic Pauline passages, Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Read them both again this week.

The overarching message of each is that the Spirit imbues us with gifts – talents, abilities, aptitudes, skills – that are never meant to be inwardly focused, i.e., a personal garden with a wall built around it. The whole reason we receive those gifts is for the benefit of the body.

And when we read those passages, we often focus on Paul’s Corinthian admonition that every part of the body is indispensable, and what one part of the body does is no more or

less important than another part. We all have a role to play... together. One body, many parts, working in concert at the direction of the Spirit.

But this week, let's focus on how Paul concludes Romans 12 (vv. 9-21). Look at all the stuff he commands us to do *in order to carry the mark of a true Christian*:

- Be full of genuine love.
- Abhor evil and hold fast to what is good.
- Love one another with brotherly affection.
- **Outdo one another in showing honor.**
- Be zealous and passionate in our service to the Lord.
- Rejoice in hope.
- Be patient in tribulation.
- Be constant in prayer.
- **Contribute to the needs of the saints.**
- **Show hospitality.**
- Bless those who persecute – and *do not curse them*.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice.
- Weep with those who weep.
- **Live in harmony with one another.**
- **Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly.**
- Never be wise in your own sight.
- Do not repay evil for evil.
- **Think first of what is honorable in the sight of all, then do that.**

Then, look at verse 18 – “If possible, *so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*” For your enemies and your brothers and sisters alike, feed those who hunger and give drink to those who thirst.

Goodness, Paul. He sure asks a lot of us. But we cannot – indeed, we must not – forget that this section flows directly from the verses on gifts of grace that we receive with the expectation that we will share them. Biblical editors separated the two, not Paul.

So, if we read them contextually together, the interconnection becomes obvious. When we serve – when we are genuinely generous with the gifts and talents bestowed upon us – we skim off selfishness and replace it with a love of others. And vice-versa. When we see to the needs of those in the church, and when we are focused on using what we have to build up our brothers and sisters, our own lives overflow. **We give grace. We receive grace. We reflect grace. We flood the church with grace.**

We no longer even have to be asked to do something. The impetus to outdo one another in goodness becomes a holy wonder to behold. We do not do it for stars on a toteboard or jewels in a crown. We do it for the joy of serving one another as Christ served us.

The whole point of the giant story is this – when we knock down the wall and share what belongs to us, our own garden flourishes. Generosity of this sort is both redemptive and transformational.

Exercise – New Testament writers make it abundantly clear that the body of Christ broadly and the local church specifically function through a division of labor and a diffusion of talents and gifts within the body. It is decidedly *not* the biblical model for everything to be done by a single pastor or pastoral staff. So, this week, make an inventory of the ways you may serve the body. Include ways you are currently serving, if applicable. But also examine your spirit and consider new ways.

In addition, if you have been serving in one role for a long time, ask the Spirit if that is his continued will for you. Perhaps it is, but be open to the opposite. Many times we become comfortable in one area of service. But that can lead to stagnation and an inability for others to serve. It can also place a limitation on new, fresh gifts the Spirit wishes to give you. He cannot move you to anything different, because you are too cozy where you are. In those instances, you should return to the overarching reason we have gifts and talents and serve – not for our own satisfaction, and certainly not because we are indispensable, but for the betterment of the church and her people.

* * *

Final Thoughts – Good old rough-around-the-edges Simon Peter gives us some of the most lovely and profound language about what it means to be generous with one’s talents. In 1 Peter 4, he makes three bold statements in a single verse (v. 10). First, we all have gifts – “as each has received a gift,” which he writes in a definitive tense, as in, it has already happened. This form of “receive” means to lay hold of with the intent to use for a benefit, and it is the exact same verb used in Matthew 10:8, when Jesus said, “You received without paying; give without pay.” We are given a gift freely. Second, “use it to serve one another.” The expectation is that this gift freely given is then to be freely submitted to the church.

Third, and perhaps most critically, we do as “good stewards of God’s varied grace.” This is an unbelievably powerful revelation. The talents we receive are impartations of grace – again, freely given, never earned – and our sole responsibility is to steward them well by using them. We steward our families, this earth, our money, but have you ever considered that God expects us to steward the means he gives us to serve one another?

Week 4 – June Generosity of Treasure

Weekly Readings:

- Luke 6:37-42
- Malachi 3:6-12
- Matthew 23:23
- Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4 (together)
- Key idea – Grace gives more than the law, including financially. One cannot truly begin to give freewill offerings to God until one has met the more fundamental requirement of firstfruits tithing.

Now we have reached the lesson that some might be tempted to skip over. Please don't.

I am continually amazed at how uncomfortable some congregants are when it comes to sound biblical teaching on tithes, offerings, and generous giving. Perhaps people naturally recoil given the profligacy of prosperity gospel, megachurch pastors whose lifestyle looks more Hollywood than holy. Or perhaps they have seen a lack of stewardship from previous pastors, those given to frivolous and cosmetic expenditures instead of kingdom investments. Or maybe they just lean into those excuses because the real reason is their own poverty mentality, something that places imaginary boundaries around God's treasury and thus justifies them in holding on to what they have.

None of those, however, disqualify legitimate biblical direction on financial giving.

Tithing and giving offerings are all explicit spiritual practices in both the Old and New Testaments. Yet I am quite certain that some would rather hear a fire-and-brimstone message about sin than a call to giving. We give our worship. We give our time. We offer our prayers. We offer our service and talents. We do all of those things, but the bank account... well, that's off limits.

In just a moment, we will unpack the sinful silliness of that viewpoint.

First, though, we might benefit by placing a much wider lens on our heart. What if we looked at giving not as something microscopic but, instead, something macroscopic? As in, a very law of the universe.

You see, God has written the law of generosity into the very fabric of creation. Generosity is foundational to the operation of God's economy. And while it is completely true to say that it is a spiritual law, I might argue that it transcends even that, that God writes generosity into the fabric of everything. His design for the universe

is that it operates on a cycle of giving and receiving. Generosity and self-sacrificing love provide the kindling that sustains and multiplies life itself. (How much does that sound like the God of Genesis 1-2, the Creator of all things? We are made in that image.) Think of the reciprocity Jesus speaks of in Luke 6, of “giving and receiving,” or specifically of “sowing and reaping.” Jesus could not be more clear – the universe is divinely programmed so that whatever you give (time, money, grace and mercy, etc.) will be returned, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.

In other words, one of the godly laws that governs human behaviors is that what we receive is disproportionately greater than what we give. But this transcends dollars and cents. Whatever we sow, we reap. But we reap a whole lot more of it. If we give in Christian love, our lives will overflow with more love to give. Yet if we give in judgment and condemnation, we expose ourselves to such in equal or greater measure.

This, of course, does not mean God is a gamble or a get-rich-quick Ponzi scheme. We cannot give the church a check for \$10,000 and expect that God will press down and shake together \$100,000 for us in the weeks ahead. Maybe he will; maybe he won't. But that is a dangerous and foolish way to interpret that scripture.

Instead, it simply means that, no matter the exact dividend, giving to God is the soundest, surest of all investments. He sees what you do in a pure heart, in obedient service, and with a worshipful attitude, and he will reward you in greater proportion. In the fullness of time, you will neither need nor want for that which you give. And God, in his wisdom, will refill and overflow your coffers in order that you may give again.

I cannot stress enough – this notion is built into the bedrock of all creation. It is meant to be just as natural to us as breathing. And that action is such a good analogy. We freely give and freely receive breaths in regular cycles.

Thus, in this way, the law of generosity invites us to partner with God. He will supply our needs. He will multiply our resources. And he will do it all so that we can do it for others. As Proverbs 11:25 reminds us, “A generous soul will be made rich.”

Now, of course, this principle goes far beyond money. Releasing what you have, whatever it is, opens the door for God to create a different harvest in your life.

But this week we will concentrate on the financial part of it.

To start, the tithe goes all the way back to the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:3-7). And while that passage does not mention a 10% tithe, it does explicitly indicate that Abel tithed the firstfruits, the “firstborn of his flock” and their “fat portions.” In other words,

Abel tithed directly off the top, giving God the best, the earliest part of his increase rather than the leftovers.

Tithing as we have come to know it, i.e., 10%, was first mentioned in Genesis when Abram *voluntarily* gave Melchizedek, the king of Salem, a tenth of what he had (Genesis 14:18-20). Later, Jacob, again *voluntarily*, vows to give God a tenth of all he receives (Genesis 28:20-22).

This practice of a 10% firstfruit tithe was codified as a mandatory commandment in Mosaic law in Leviticus 27:30-34. The tithe had three specific purposes: to support Levites (the tribe whose inheritance was not land but the Lord himself) and the work of levitical priests (Numbers 18:21-24), to celebrate national festivals (Deuteronomy 14:22-27), and to support the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

This was the system that remained in place throughout the era of the judges and kings, and then in post-exilic Judea. Some 400 years before Christ, Malachi, the last known Old Testament prophet continued to validate the system, first accusing Israelites of robbing the tithe from God, then calling them back to a posture of giving and reminding them of their inability to “outgive” God (Malachi 3:6-12).

At this point in the narrative, though, some Christians will proclaim, “But that was the law, and we are under grace! Nothing in the New Testament commands me to tithe.”

Before we go any further, let me ask you this question – **does grace give more or less than the law?**

To be certain, neither Jesus, nor the gospel writers, nor any of the epistolary authors spend much time on the matter. Jesus’s primary interaction with tithing comes during the week of his crucifixion, when he confronted the Pharisees in the temple courts (Matthew 23:23). But a straightforward read of that passage demonstrates that Jesus was *neither abolishing nor amending* the command to tithe. Instead, he was correcting the Pharisees for their fastidious attention to the legalistic mechanics of tithing while neglecting what they should actually do *with* the tithe, i.e., things that advance “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”

And, as an aside, this is a great moment to remind ourselves that we should not read more into the text than that which sits before us. Nothing in that verse even remotely alludes to a dissatisfaction with tithing.

In reality, Jesus tacitly endorsed tithing, but, as he did so often, he laid down a new covenant principle: our tithes and offerings must flow from a heart of generosity, not from legalistic or selfish motivations (Luke 18:12).

As he did with everything else, Jesus raised the bar.

Maybe it will make more sense using a negative example. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a number of antitheses that often start, “You have heard...” and end with, “But I say to you...” So, we have heard that murder is wrong, but Jesus said if you have hatred and anger in your heart, that is tantamount to murder itself. Or, we have heard that adultery is wrong, but Jesus said if lust is in your eyes, the adultery is already occurring in your heart.

Jesus strips back the legal command in each case to its nub, its very root. No longer is sin exclusively an actual act of commission, but Jesus says the condition of the heart is dispositive. In the new covenant, obedience to the commandments, statutes, and laws of God is first and foremost determined and driven by one’s *heart*.

This principle is alive and well in giving. You have heard it said that we are to tithe ten percent of our firstfruits to God. But that is a very legalistic way of thinking of it. For a heart full of God’s grace, the goal should never be simply to hit the tenth and walk away, satisfied that we have checked the tithing box. The tithe is merely the starting point.

Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). And in an abundant life, we give. We give more of our time, thought, talent, and, yes, treasure.

We (conveniently, perhaps) forget that neither Jesus nor Paul outlined any alternative mechanism for supporting the kingdom work. Thus, absent anything countervailing, it stands to reason that just as the tithe went to support the temple, alms and charity, and levitical priests in the Old Testament, today the tithe supports the local church. And every Christian is called to be a part of a local body (Hebrews 10:24-25), which necessarily means every Christian has a Christian obligation to provide his or her tithe.

In sum, the command is still a command, not a suggestion.

And, to be more blunt, one cannot truly begin to give freewill offerings to God until one has met the more fundamental requirement of firstfruits tithing.

Before you ask, we will not engage with questions about what must be tithed – whether gross or net income, whether gifts or things we earn by our own work, whether something is refunded or rebated, or anything of the sort.

To be candid, such legalism already misses the point. (And, frankly, that feels like someone is nickel-and-diming God.)

What you give is between you and God, and we will not intervene save to say this: in a cosmic sense, the amount you give is completely immaterial to God. Everything belongs to him in the first place. It is not so much that money is no object to him, rather that money is nothing at all to him. How is money even an issue for the One who created every ounce of gold, silver, and platinum in the universe?

But what is critically important to God is the spirit in which you give it. Do you give cheerfully from your heart in worship, thanksgiving, and obedience? Do you steward well that which you are given? And, crucially, do you give sacrificially? (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4).

Everything we give – tithe and offerings – is far more about generosity and stewardship than just a requirement of the law. Every part of the Gospel asks *more* good of Christians – *more* love, *more* selfless service, *more* grace, *more* mercy, *more* compassion, *more* understanding, *more* peace, *more* gentleness. Why would we think generosity in our financial giving to be any different?

Financial generosity is a certain cure for greed and selfishness. Giving away what we have readily reminds us to whom it belongs in the first place.

Exercise – This week’s exercise is simple. If you do not tithe, start. Work within your budget and means, but we encourage you to start and make it a goal to reach 10%. If you already tithe 10%, consider this challenge. What if, for the next twelve months, you added 2% per week as a freewill offering to your tithe? Remember, freewill offerings are given both in abundance *and in sacrifice*. What might you sacrifice in your life (e.g., eating out once a week, daily specialty coffees, etc.) that could add up to an additional offering? For more principles of sound biblical financial management, see Appendix 3.

* * *

Final Thoughts – We barely scratched the surface of giving this week. But what we must never forget is that in God’s economy, tithing and giving, done in the right heart, are pleasing acts of trust and faith. We mirror him and his generosity and participate financially in his kingdom, and, by letting go of money (and not letting it control us), we tell him, “We trust you to provide.” The reason that God loves a cheerful giver is far more than the joy of giving. God loves such givers because they are simultaneously thankful for what they have to give, cognizant from whence it comes in the first place, and wholly dependent on God to continue to provide.

Appendix 1 – Questions to Ask When Reading/Studying the Bible

When you read the Word of God, try to start each encounter with a simple prayer. Perhaps just repeat Samuel’s boyhood words to God: “**Speak, Lord, your servant is listening**” (1 Samuel 3:9).

Approach each passage with these questions:

1. **Who wrote it?** Authorship matters. To test this theory, read the Beatitudes (and, indeed, the entire Sermon on the Mount/Plain) as Matthew and Luke separately record them. Notice the similarities and especially the differences. What does Matthew, the Jewish former tax collector and original disciple of Jesus, highlight versus Luke, the Gentile historian, doctor, and later convert?
2. **What is the passage’s setting?** Think of it like writing a book report back in high school. Situate the chapter in history and time, as well as on the map. Understand who the key characters are, including (and particularly) the initial intended audience for the book. In short, peg the *who*, *where*, and *when*.
3. **What is the passage’s genre?** We read poetry and wisdom (e.g., Psalms, Proverbs) quite differently than historical narrative (e.g., Exodus, 1 and 2 Kings, Acts), the Gospels, prophecy (e.g., Isaiah, Amos), or the instructional epistles (e.g., Romans, Philippians, 1 and 2 Peter). Each genre employs a different line between literal and poetic/figurative/symbolic language. And each has a different purpose for what it presents to the reader.
4. **What does this passage teach me about God?** Put differently, if this were the only scriptural witness we had, what would we learn about the Lord? When you uncover truths and wisdom about the wonders and depths of God, pause and worship him.
5. **What does this passage teach me about humans?** Not you specifically, but all of us, mankind. What might it reveal about our strengths, talents, abilities, aspirations, etc.? And about our weaknesses, failures, challenges, tendencies, etc.? Does it help you understand how God the Father, Son, and Spirit view the apple of their creative eye? And might it also help you see how the enemy of our soul sees us?
6. **How does this passage point (or point me) toward Jesus?** There is a very valid hermeneutic (way of approaching and interpreting the Bible) that says everything, from Genesis to Revelation, points to Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

the Messiah, our Savior and King. So, how might this passage fit in that hermeneutic? And, more specifically, how does this passage point me (my life, my hopes, my hurts, my desires, my strengths, my weaknesses, my sins, my future) directly to Jesus on a *personal* level? (This is particularly applicable to the Gospels and the epistolary writings.)

7. **What was the message to the initial audience?** Go back to the second question and think. What was the writer trying to transmit to the people he knew for certain would read it? Was it an instruction, a warning, an invitation, a desire to inform, a call to remember? Think of it this way – when the scroll was unfurled for the first time and read aloud, how might those gathered have received and interpreted it?
8. **Is that specific message still applicable to me?** Let's be clear – the Bible unequivocally applies to us today, especially the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers. But this question refers to things like peculiar Old Testament commands to Israel as a nation/people, prophecies that have come to pass, covenantal obligations that were fulfilled in Christ, etc. In those cases, distinct teachings, laws, prophecies, etc., shift and teach us about the nature of God, what matters to him, his justice, righteousness, mercy, grace, love, longsuffering nature, and so on. Every word of the Word is profitable, but, because it is alive and organic per the Scripture itself (Hebrews 4:12), it may simply be profitable to us in the 21st century in a different way that it was in the first or in the centuries before Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to animate the passage with the message for you and for us today.
9. **How can I apply all of this to my life, particularly to make me more like Jesus?** This is an eminently practical and deeply personal question. Turn it into a prayer. Lord, how can I take what I have read and apply it to my life to be more like you?

Appendix 2 – Names and Title of Jesus

In Week 3 of February, we ask you to write down all the names of Jesus that come to your mind. This list is comprehensive but not exhaustive. By some counts, around 200 different appellations of Jesus are used in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. These are but a few. And note, these are names and titles, not adjectives. Jesus may be described as loving, kind, compassionate, righteous, etc., in the Bible, but those are just descriptive adjectives. Additionally, we have given only one illustrative scriptural reference, though for some there are many.

Advocate – 1 John 2:1	First Fruits – 1 Corinthians 15:20
Alpha and Omega – Revelation 1:8	Friend of tax collectors and sinners – Matthew 11:19
The Almighty – Revelation 1:8	Gate of the sheepfold – John 10:7
Amen – Revelation 3:14	Glory – Luke 2:32
Apostle and High Priest of our Confession – Hebrews 3:1	Good Shepherd – John 10:11
Author and Finisher of our Faith – Hebrews 12:2	Grain of Wheat – John 12:24
Beloved – Matthew 12:18	Great Shepherd of the sheep – Hebrews 13:20
Beloved Son – Colossians 1:13	Head – Ephesians 4:15
Bread of God – John 6:33	Head of the Church – Colossians 1:18
Bread of life – John 6:35	Hidden Manna – Revelation 2:17
Living Bread – John 6:51	High Priest – Hebrews 3:1
Bridegroom – John 3:29	He Who Holds of the Keys of David – Revelation 3:7
Brother – Matthew 12:50	He who is coming amid the clouds – Revelation 1:7
Captain of our Salvation – Hebrews 2:10	Holy One – Acts 2:27
Chief Shepherd – 1 Peter 5:4	Holy One of God – Mark 1:24
Chosen One – Luke 23:35	Holy Servant – Acts 4:27
Christ – Matthew 16:20	Hope – 1 Timothy 1:1
Christ Jesus – 1 Timothy 1:15	Horn of Salvation – Luke 1:69
Christ of God – Luke 9:20	I Am – John 8:58
Christ the Lord – Luke 2:11	Image of God – 2 Corinthians 4:4
Christ who is above all – Romans 9:5	Indescribable Gift – 2 Corinthians 9:15
Consolation of Israel – Luke 2:25	Intercessor – Hebrews 7:25
Chief Cornerstone – Ephesians 2:20	Jesus – Matthew 1:21
Dayspring – Luke 1:78	Jesus the Nazarene – John 18:5
Deliverer – Romans 11:26	Judge of the World – 2 Timothy 4:1
Eldest of many brothers – Romans 8:29	Just One – Acts 7:52
Emmanuel – Matthew 1:23	Just Judge – 2 Timothy 4:8
Everlasting Forever – Isaiah 9:6	King – Matthew 21:5
Faithful, True Witness – Revelation 1:5	King of Israel – John 1:49
First and Last – Revelation 1:17	King of Kings – Revelation 17:14
Firstborn of all creation – Colossians 1:15	

King of Nations – Revelation 15:3
 King of the Jews – Matthew 2:2
 Lamb of God – John 1:29
 Last Adam – 1 Corinthians 15:45
 Leader – Hebrews 2:10
 Leader and Savior – Acts 5:31
 Life – John 14:6
 Light – John 1:9
 Light of all – Luke 2:32
 Light of the world – John 8:12
 Lion of the tribe of Judah – Revelation 5:5
 Lord – Luke 1:25
 One Lord – Ephesians 4:5
 My Lord and my God – John 20:28
 Lord both of the dead and the living –
 Romans 14:9
 Lord God Almighty – Revelation 15:3
 Lord Jesus – Acts 7:59
 Jesus is Lord – 1 Corinthians 12:3
 Lord Jesus Christ – Acts 15:11
 Lord of all – Acts 10:36
 Lord of Glory – 1 Corinthians 2:8
 Lord of lords – 1 Timothy 6:15
 Lord of Peace – 2 Thessalonians 3:16
 The Man – John 19:5
 Master – Luke 5:5
 Mediator – 1 Timothy 2:5
 Messiah – John 1:41
 Mighty God – Isaiah 9:6
 Morning Star – 2 Peter 1:19
 Nazarene – Matthew 2:23
 Passover – 1 Corinthians 5:7
 Perfecter of Faith – Hebrews 12:2
 Power for salvation – Luke 1:69
 Priest forever – Hebrews 5:6
 Prince of Life – Acts 3:15
 Prince of Peace – Isaiah 9:6
 Rabbi/Rabboni – John 20:16
 Ransom – 1 Timothy 2:6
 Redeemer – Isaiah 59:20
 Rescuer from this Present Evil Age –
 Galatians 1:4
 Radiance of God’s Glory – Hebrews 1:3
 Resurrection and Life – John 11:25
 Rising Sun – Luke 1:78
 Root of David – Revelation 5:5
 Root of Jesse – Isaiah 11:10
 Ruler – Matthew 2:6
 Ruler and Savior – Acts 5:31
 Savior – 2 Peter 2:20
 Savior of the world – 1 John 4:14
 Second Adam – Romans 5:14
 Shepherd and Guardian of our souls – 1
 Peter 2:25
 Slave – Philippians 2:7
 Son – Galatians 4:4
 Beloved Son – Colossians 1:13
 Firstborn Son – Luke 2:7
 Son of Abraham – Matthew 1:1
 Son of David – Matthew 1:1
 Son of God – Luke 1:35
 Son of Joseph – John 1:45
 Son of Man – John 5:27
 Son of Mary – Mark 6:3
 Son of the Blessed One – Mark 14:61
 Son of the Father – 2 John 1:3
 Son of the Living God – Matthew 16:16
 Son of the Most High – Luke 1:32
 Son of the Most High God – Mark 5:7
 Source of God’s creation – Revelation 3:14
 Spiritual Rock – 1 Corinthians 10:4
 Living Stone – 1 Peter 2:4
 Stone rejected by the builders – Matthew
 21:42
 Stumbling Stone – 1 Peter 2:8
 Sun of Righteousness – Malachi 3:20
 Teacher – Matthew 8:19
 True God – 1 John 5:20
 True Vine – John 15:1
 The Way the Truth and the Life – John 14:6
 The One who is, is was, and who is to come
 – Revelation 3:7
 Wisdom of God – 1 Corinthians 1:24
 Wonderful Counselor – Isaiah 9:6
 Word – John 1:1
 Word of God – Revelation 19:13
 Word of Life – 1 John 1:1

Appendix 3 – Core Principles of Christian Financial Stewardship

During June, we focused on a life of generosity. One of the central pillars of generosity is stewardship – how well we care for and oversee the resources given to us by God. These are several biblically based principles to assist you and your family live a life of generosity and sound stewardship.

(adapted from a list written by Shawn Syx)

- We must develop a Christian mindset about **money**. We must first understand that God created it and is the owner of it. “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, *for all that is in the heavens and the earth is yours*. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all” (1 Chronicles 29:11-12; 1 Corinthians 10:26).
- We do not own it. We are simply **stewards** of money. God entrusts us with the management of it. To that end, whether he entrusts you with little or much is immaterial. What matters is your sound management of it (Genesis 1:26-28; Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 16:11, 19:11-27).
- Once we understand those principles – that God owns all, including money, and he allows us to be a temporary steward of a portion – we then turn to exactly how we **manage** it. Management always comes down to one’s **priorities**. How do we prioritize our investments and expenditures? What is our plan for growth within our treasury? And does our plan combine both faith in God’s provision *and* work on our part? We are called to combine trust with sweat equity. (Proverbs 22:29; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Matthew 25:15; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Ephesians 5:15-16; Colossians 3:17).
- The Bible never labels money as evil. Paul simply says that the *love of money* is the root of all sorts of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). So, we must ask ourselves, “What does our behavior toward money say about how much we love it?” Do we hoard it? Do we spend it frivolously? Do we gamble it away? Or do we spend (and save) it wisely? Creating a budget and putting a long-term plan in place that puts God’s Kingdom first is paramount in guarding your heart against greed, selfishness, and covetousness toward money. (Matthew 6:19-24; Acts 5:1-10).
- Beware of materialism and prosperity theology. Both are against scripture, and both lead to ruin.

- Our actions speak louder than our words. Do your spending and investing habits reflect a biblical view of money and its stewardship? Or does it reflect a worldly view? We can only have one master: God or money (Matthew 6:24). An honest examination of your checkbook ledger should reflect which one is your master. (Psalm 49:16-17).
- **Generosity** rests at the center of biblical stewardship. God gives to us for us to give to others. Therefore, at the center of any principled Christian financial plan is tithing to one's local church and then freewill offerings beyond that. Giving is indicative of a heart overflowing with grace. When you build a budget, as strangely paradoxical as it will seem to the world, start with giving in Christian generosity. (Deuteronomy 12:6; Proverbs 11:24-25, 19:17; Matthew 25:32-46; 2 Corinthians 8:9, 9:6-11; 1 Timothy 5:3-4).
- **Teach** your children and grandchildren what biblical stewardship is all about. Raise them with the proper respect of God's provisions, particularly money. (Genesis 18:19; Psalm 78:3-4; Proverbs 22:6; Gen 18:19; Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 6:4).