

DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE
SUMMER 2023

**THE POWER
OF FORGIVENESS**

Loving as God Loved

KINGDOM LIVING

Life as Children of the King

A GLORIOUS CHURCH

The Body of Christ in Action



**GOD'S
WORD**
FOR LIFE

GOD'S WORD



FOR LIFE

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God's Word for Life



GWFLIFE



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DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

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36 Research Park Court
Weldon SUMMER, MO 63304
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Manufactured in USA
Summer 2023, 6942321.

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GETTING STARTED

The first page of each week's material will help you to become familiar with the Truth about God, Truth for My Life, Focus Verse, and Lesson Text to be used in your Sunday school class or small group setting.



SG
TEACHING OUTLINE

LESSON
1.1

Lesson Title: Authority to Forgive

Icebreaker: What is the most crowded place you've ever been in?

I. JESUS CAME HOME TO CAPERNAUM

- A. A Crowd Gathered to Hear Him Preach
- B. Four Friends Sought to Bring a Paralytic to Jesus
 - » How do you think the homeowner felt? What about the paralyzed friend?
- C. Jesus Saw Their Faith and Forgave the Man's Sins
- D. I Will Bring My Needs to Jesus
 - » What testimonies do you have of God's healing touch? What testimonies do you have of God giving you grace as you wait for His touch?

II. THE SCRIBES DOUBTED JESUS

- A. Jesus Confronted the Scribes
 - » How would you have responded if you were in the crowd?
- B. His Healing of the Paralytic Confirmed His Deity
- C. I Will Trust That God Forgives My Sins
 - » Is it easier to believe God for physical healing or spiritual healing? Why do you think this is the case?

Prayer Focus
Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to give us faith to believe Him for whatever we need
- For God to use us to help others receive their miracles

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SMALL GROUP TEACHING OUTLINE

The second page provides a Small Group (SG) Teaching Outlines so you can follow along with the main points of the lesson if you choose to bring your Daily Devotional Guide to church. The outline also includes the lesson's discussion questions so you can be prepared for discussion if you meet in small groups.

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Mark 2:1-12; Acts 5:29-32

When reading a novel, we often know more than the characters in the story due to the information provided by a third-person omniscient narrator. In some novels, especially detective stories, we see things from the perspective of a first-person narrator. Although this narrator lacks omniscience, readers experience the text through the characters' eyes and glean key information from the individual's perspective.

An interesting and unique mode of narration occurs in Mark 2. The chapter includes a third-person narrator with knowledge of the events, but it also includes an omniscient figure in the form of Jesus. Jesus could read the thoughts of those around him and responded accordingly.

As readers, we have the privilege of viewing things through the eyes of Jesus. Jesus could see the faith of the men who brought the man who was paralyzed for healing. Jesus also knew the thoughts of the scribes as they questioned who could forgive sins.

The viewpoint offered in the text allows us to understand that Jesus needed to do something outward to show what had happened on the inside of the man. No one would be able to see if the man's sins were forgiven. However, the man's outward healing served as proof his sins were forgiven.

Today people often want to see the outward manifestation of the power of God. Jesus, however, does not heal the sick to satisfy people's craving for a show. Jesus is not a magician, preparing to wow the crowd with another trick. Jesus' actions always have spiritual implications. Plus, they mirror the heavenly realm.

The phrase "in earth, as it is in heaven" in the Lord's Prayer demonstrates this connection between the two realms (Matthew 6:9-13). When Jesus told Peter that whatever he bound on earth would be bound in Heaven and vice versa (Matthew 16:19), He again established this link.

Whatever we read in Scriptures can be manifest on earth. When we read about healing, we can believe for the sick to be healed. Whenever we read of miracles in the Bible, we know that the story has not ended. These testimonies are not confined to a book or period of time. They can still happen today.

If we want to experience miracles and healings, we must appreciate the perspective we receive in the Gospels. If we have the mind of Christ, we can not only envision great possibilities for the Almighty to act, but we can also see these things occur through demonstration of the Spirit and power.

JESUS COULD READ THE THOUGHTS OF THOSE AROUND HIM AND RESPONDED ACCORDINGLY.

10

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

The third page of each lesson will give you a "high level" Biblical Overview of the Lesson Text. The content will explore the text, its background, and any other pertinent information to help you better understand the setting, purpose, and message of the text.

DAILY DEVOTION

The remaining pages will guide you through your week of personal devotion and study. You are encouraged to complete the Bible Reading plan for each day and explore a portion of the text with the help of a section of Biblical Insight on that part of the text. Next is a Daily Devotion to read and a prompt to reflect and pray about the principles presented.

DAY 1

Mark 2:1

And again he entered into Capernaum after some days; and it was noised that he was in the house.

Biblical Insight

Jesus spent a great deal of time in Capernaum, a village that was perfect for Jesus' entourage of fishermen turned disciples due to its proximity to the Sea of Galilee. Many people believe that Jesus stayed in the house of Peter in Capernaum (Mark 1:29), figuring the apostle and his brother, Andrew, who hailed from Bethsaida (John 1:44), had moved there.

Jesus' ministry in Capernaum, bordering Zebulun and Naphtali, fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that the people in the area who sat in darkness would see a great light. Even though they lived in the shadow of death, light had dawned on them (Isaiah 9:1-2).

Daily Devotion

In his book *March Till They Die*, Philip Crosbie recounts when he and other American soldiers were prisoners of war during the Korean War. During November of 1950, the North Koreans were being pushed north, and they forced their prisoners of war to march with them. Cold, emaciated, hungry, and suffering, the prisoners of war were forced to walk as far as twenty miles a day. Prisoners who could not keep up were executed on the spot.

Crosbie, along with other Christian soldiers, would find soldiers struggling to keep up and whisper in their ears, "God is near us in this dark hour." The knowledge that God was present, even in the shadow of death, gave soldiers the persevering courage they needed to live another day.

If you are going through the valley of the shadow of death and struggling, remember that God is with you. He sees you, knows you, and loves you. No matter how dark this valley may seem, let the knowledge of God's presence give you the courage to persevere.

Reflection and Prayer

» What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?

GOD'S WORD FOR FAMILIES



SCAN TO
PURCHASE



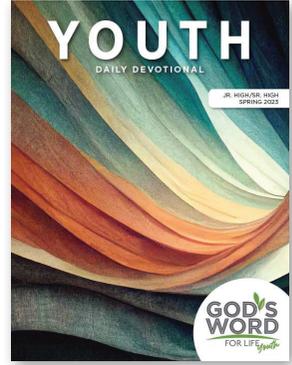
God's Word for Families is a wholly Apostolic discipleship tool designed to help your entire family grow in relationship to God and each other. By exploring a biblical passage from Sunday to Saturday, daily ten-minute activities use a variety of learning styles to engage family members to hear God's voice. Tap in to God's plan for your family by committing to daily discipleship with *God's Word for Families*.

Weekly Overview:

- Sunday — Introduction to the Bible Passage
- Monday — "Why?"
- Tuesday — Analytic Learning
- Wednesday — Worship
- Thursday — Real-life Application
- Friday — Discussion
- Saturday — Family Project

YOUTH DAILY DEVOTIONAL

God's Word for Life equips every age level of the church to study Scripture daily. This resource for youth (ages 12-18) provides a daily Bible passage connected to the week's lesson and a corresponding devotion. Each day ends with a final challenge to apply the message of God's Word with both junior high and senior high options.



PODCAST



The God's Word for Life Podcast presents portions of Scripture with fresh insight and urges adults to think deeply about how the Bible impacts their lives. Each week episodes will encourage listeners to engage with God's Word through reflection and prayer, further develop their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and live out God's Word in their lives.

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SERIES 1: THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

This series, “The Power of Forgiveness,” shows the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ on display through several accounts in the Gospels. These lessons highlight the authority of Jesus to forgive, His desire to forgive and not condemn, His command that we forgive others, and the hope that as long as we have breath, we can find a place of forgiveness. This series will help us activate the power of forgiveness in us and through us.



SERIES 2: KINGDOM LIVING

This series, “Kingdom Living,” looks closely at the Sermon on the Mount and the way Jesus calls us to live as His disciples. These lessons will investigate the life God blesses, the mission of every disciple, the disciplines of a disciple, the importance of seeking first the Kingdom, and the priority of obedience. The truths highlighted in the teachings of Jesus on the mount are crucial for the life and spiritual health of every believer. This series will encourage us to live as children of the King.



SERIES 3: A GLORIOUS CHURCH

This series, “A Glorious Church,” presents the church as one of God’s greatest gifts to His people. These lessons will show God’s plans for His church by declaring He would build His church, the purpose of the church, the church in action, and the beautiful bride of Christ. This series will give us a greater appreciation for the church and the important role it should play in our lives. Jesus is coming soon. And when He returns, He is coming for a glorious church.

APOSTOLIC BOOKS ON AUDIBLE



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1.1

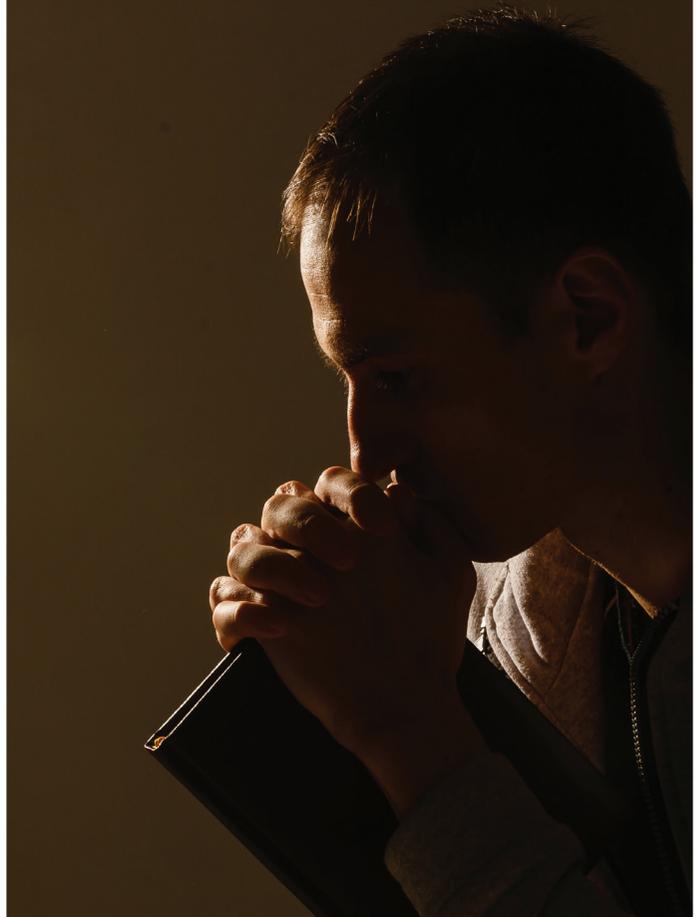
TRUTH ABOUT GOD

As God, Jesus has the power and authority to forgive sins.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will trust that God forgives my sins.

AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE



FOCUS VERSE: Mark 2:10

But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,)

LESSON TEXT: Mark 2:1-12; Acts 5:29-32



**Lesson Title:** Authority to Forgive

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DAY 1

Mark 2:1

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Daily Devotion

In his book *March Till They Die*, Philip Crosbie recounts when he and other American soldiers were prisoners of war during the Korean War. During November of 1950, the North Koreans were being pushed north, and they forced their prisoners of war to march with them. Cold, emaciated, hungry, and suffering, the prisoners of war were forced to walk as far as twenty miles a day. Prisoners who could not keep up were executed on the spot.

Crosbie, along with other Christian soldiers, would find soldiers struggling to keep up and whisper in their ears, "God is near us in this dark hour." The knowledge that God was present, even in the shadow of death, gave soldiers the persevering courage they needed to live another day.

If you are going through the valley of the shadow of death and struggling, remember that God is with you. He sees you, knows you, and loves you. No matter how dark this valley may seem, let the knowledge of God's presence give you the courage to persevere.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Mark 2:5-8

⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.

⁶ But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts,

⁷ Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?

⁸ And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts?

Biblical Insight

When healing the man who was paralyzed, Jesus strategically called Himself the “Son of man,” a phrase meaning “human” (Mark 2:10). The term reveals a key narrative device in Mark known as the Messianic Secret. Jesus attempted to keep His identity under wraps with the goal of having others receive the revelation of His true identity. Mark declared Jesus as the “Son of God” in Mark 1:1, but Jesus chose stealth mode throughout the Gospel. In Mark 3:10-12, Jesus rebuked unclean spirits who proclaimed Him the Son of God. Sadly, religious leaders like the scribes failed to recognize Jesus’ identity. But later in Mark 15:39, a centurion at the Crucifixion emphatically proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God.

Daily Devotion

During the height of the Space Race, the first human who went into space was Soviet Union cosmonaut Yury Gagarin. When asked if he prayed before his flight, Gagarin reminded people that Communists never pray. Before going into space, Gagarin had already determined God was not real. Because of his preconceived notion, Gagarin failed to see the beauty of Earth and the majesty of space as evidence of God’s existence.

When Gagarin returned from space, he reported, “I went up to space, but I didn’t encounter God. I looked and looked and looked, but I didn’t see God.” Gagarin went into space not expecting to encounter God and because of this, he did not see God.

Our preconceived ideas about God influence how we view God’s presence in our lives and situations. The reason we may feel abandoned by God, at times, is a result of how we view God.

If you feel like God has abandoned you, take time to assess your perception of God. How do you see Him?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Mark 2:1, 11-12

¹ And again he entered into Capernaum after some days; and it was noised that he was in the house.

.....

¹¹ I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house.

¹² And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion.

Biblical Insight

The man who was paralyzed lived an ironic existence. Although Capernaum means “village of comfort,” the man faced the pain of daily life with limited mobility. Without the help of the four men of faith who carried him to the top of the roof and broke through the roof, the man would never have received his breakthrough.

Although Job spoke of having “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2), the man who was paralyzed had good comforters who took him to the only one who could cure the cruel malady that plagued him. Jesus gave the man comfort, and Capernaum finally lived up to its name.

Daily Devotion

What do you do to relax?

According to a Philo poll, more than 50 percent of Americans watch “comfort TV shows” and “comfort movies” when they need to unwind due to stress, boredom, or anxiety. According to neuroscientist Dr. Natalie King, comfort movies and shows release dopamine in the brain that allows a person to feel pleasure. While this is a common way for Americans to feel comfort, Dr. King warns such comfort is short-lived and fleeting.

Another way to increase the levels of dopamine in the brain is through prayer. According to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, prayer not only increases dopamine, which makes you happier, but prayer also boosts immunity, increases coping mechanisms, increases optimism, and improves self-control. Comfort shows do not offer these same benefits.

When seeking comfort, it may be tempting to seek out entertainment. Remember that entertainment will not solve your stress, boredom, or anxiety. Only Jesus can provide true enduring peace and contentment.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Mark 2:12

And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion.

Biblical Insight

The overcapacity crowd who witnessed the man's healing first felt amazed and then praised the Lord. During Jesus' earthly ministry, amazement often preceded praise.

The script flipped in Acts. Praise often preceded amazement. On the Day of Pentecost, when the 120 spoke in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance, devout Jews heard them praising God in their own languages and felt amazed. In Acts 3, Peter and John prayed for a lame man. Upon receiving his healing, the man praised God, and the people were astonished. Today we should praise God in anticipation of being amazed by a miracle.

Daily Devotion

George Washington Carver taught southern farmers about crop rotation and encouraged growing peanuts and sweet potatoes. A surplus of peanuts and sweet potatoes resulted in Carver inventing new uses for the plants and popularizing others.

It is estimated that Carver invented more than three hundred products from peanuts alone. Because of Carver's innovation and research, he is credited with saving the agricultural economy of the rural South. When asked why he did not patent most of his inventions, Carver gave glory to God for guiding him and declared that the products belonged to God alone.

When asked what advice Carver had for young people, he said, "I want them to see the Great Creator in the smallest and the most insignificant things about them. How I long for each one to walk and talk with the Great Creator through the things he has created" (*George Washington Carver: In His Own Words*).

How much easier would it be to praise God if we learn to be amazed by even God's smallest creations?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Acts 5:29-32

²⁹ Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.

³¹ Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

³² And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

Biblical Insight

Peter and the apostles appeared at the behest of the Sanhedrin. Charged with preaching in Jesus' name despite being forbidden to do so, the apostles spoke of witnessing Jesus' resurrection. They also served as witnesses of Jesus' healing of the man in Mark 2. Peter and John witnessed a similar miracle in Acts 3 that drew the ire of the authorities.

When the apostles called themselves "witnesses," many members of the Sanhedrin wanted to execute them. Fittingly, the Greek word meaning "witness" gave rise to the English word "martyr," revealing that the apostles proclaimed their witness at their own peril. Save for John, all the apostles faced martyrdom.

Daily Devotion

Years after the Civil War ended, two Confederate veterans reminisced about their battles around Paducah, Kentucky. One veteran bragged about how they pushed the Yankees across the Ohio River and into Illinois. The other veteran quickly corrected that he was there, and it was the Yankees who drove the Confederates almost to the Tennessee line.

The bragging veteran wryly commented, "Another good story ruined by an eyewitness."

Many people make false claims about God and misrepresent the Bible. Doctrines of demons and false teachings are pervasive in society. These stories and claims can easily be refuted by your testimony though. If you have the Holy Ghost and have been healed, delivered, provided for, or protected by God, then you are an eyewitness that the Bible is true.

Your testimony will ruin the lies of the enemy and demonstrate that you have the better story.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

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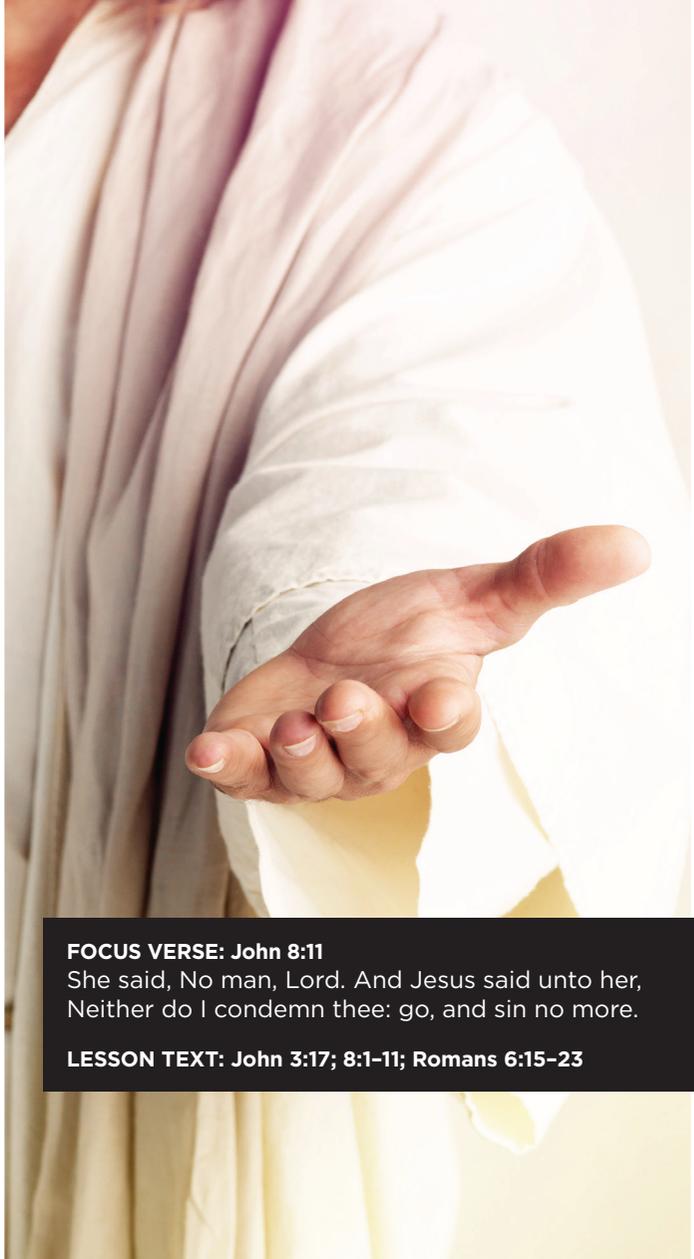
GO AND SIN NO MORE

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God desires to extend grace instead of condemnation.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will receive God's grace and choose not to continue in my sin.



FOCUS VERSE: John 8:11

She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

LESSON TEXT: John 3:17; 8:1-11; Romans 6:15-23



Lesson Title: Go and Sin No More

Icebreaker: Can you think of a time when you did the right thing with the wrong motive?

- I. JESUS TAUGHT THE PEOPLE IN THE TEMPLE
 - A. The Scribes and Pharisees Brought a Woman Caught in Adultery
 - » *Does this situation seem suspicious to you? What do you think the scribes and Pharisees were after?*
 - B. Jesus Ignored Her Accusers
 - » *What do you think Jesus wrote on the ground?*
 - C. I Will Listen to Jesus Instead of My Accusers
- II. AFTER CONTINUAL QUESTIONS JESUS FINALLY RESPONDED TO THE ACCUSERS
 - A. “He That Is Without Sin . . . Let Him First Cast a Stone”
 - » *How does this wisdom help to confirm Jesus’ deity?*
 - B. Jesus and the Woman Were Left Alone
 - C. “Go, and Sin No More”
 - D. I Will Receive God’s Grace and Choose Not to Continue in My Sin
 - » *How does this story present the perfect balance of justice and mercy?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us live to show mercy to those who sin
- For God to help us live above the power of sin

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: John 3:17; 8:1-11; Romans 6:15-23

The Bible provides an explicit command concerning the sin of adultery: the adulterer and adulteress shall be put to death (Leviticus 20:10). However, one of the Bible's most famous cases of adultery reveals that both parties lived.

When we look at the story of the woman taken in adultery in John 8, one key question looms over the entire story: where was the man if the woman was caught in the very act of adultery?

The de facto judges, jury, and executioners made up of scribes and Pharisees seem to have either let the adulterous man escape or chose not to charge him with the crime. We can even speculate that the man was one of their friends or family members, or he held such a high rank that they let him go. Nepotism and cronyism may have saved him from judgment. This man appeared to get away with the sin. But just like the prophet Nathan in David's case, Jesus saw to the rendering of a just verdict in this case. Nevertheless, many issues remain unresolved.

We could go on and on with the questions and speculations. The question of what Jesus might have written on the ground has intrigued readers of the Bible for centuries. But perhaps we should put aside that question and others and take a look at Jesus' question and command.

When Jesus asked the adulterous woman who condemned her, she answered that no one did. As a result, Jesus refused to condemn her. Then Jesus told her to go and sin no more.

Perhaps we should set aside questions, speculation, the rumor mill, and the gossip machine and appreciate the power of forgiveness. Without question, Jesus forgives.

PERHAPS WE SHOULD SET ASIDE
QUESTIONS, SPECULATION, THE RUMOR
MILL, AND THE GOSSIP MACHINE AND
APPRECIATE THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS.

DAY 1

John 3:17

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Biblical Insight

Jesus saves us from sin and unspeakable judgment. When we look at the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the *Septuagint* and cross-reference the specific Greek verbal form translated as “saved” in John 3:17, we discover something very significant. Ironically, several verses use this same verbal form to refer to the impossibility of escape. Job 20:24 speaks of fleeing from an iron weapon only to be struck by a bronze arrow. Jeremiah 39:4 adamantly proclaims that King Zedekiah would not escape the Babylonians. Jeremiah 48:8 prophesies of no town escaping. Without Jesus as our Savior, we will not be delivered.

Daily Devotion

Harry Houdini is known for his escape acts. Houdini began his professional career known as “Harry Handcuff Houdini” because he would challenge police to keep him locked up. Houdini boldly declared, “No prison can hold me, no hand or leg iron or steel locks can shackle me. No ropes or chains can keep me from my freedom.” He spent his life proving his claim. Eventually, escaping police handcuffs was no longer challenging for Houdini. He began escaping from ropes on the side of skyscrapers, from straitjackets under water, and from being buried alive.

The impossible predicaments Houdini escaped thrilled audiences. Houdini’s predicaments became a metaphor for the insurmountable situations the audience was facing in their personal lives. Houdini’s escape was a reminder they could also overcome adversity.

Hopefully, we will never find ourselves in straitjackets underwater, but at times we will find ourselves in situations where escape seems impossible. While relying on ourselves, escape will be impossible. Only Jesus can deliver us from impossible situations and free us from bondage. Ask Him for deliverance from anything that entangles you.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

John 8:1-4

¹ Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.

² And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

³ And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

⁴ They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

Biblical Insight

The Bible offers some accounts of human sexuality that generate complex questions. In addition to John 8's adulterous woman, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked her father-in-law, Judah, into sleeping with her (Genesis 38). David's daughter Tamar experienced the horrors of rape by her half-brother Amnon (II Samuel 13).

Although some challenged Song of Solomon's canonical status, others have argued the book's constructive portrayal of sexuality defends its place in Scripture. Since the Fall humanity has grappled with the negative consequences of sin. Sadly sexuality, the gift God created, has been misused and perverted. We should look to God's original plan.

Daily Devotion

Since the 1970s, the Allentown Art Museum in Pennsylvania has displayed the 1632 *Portrait of a Young Woman*. Considered to be the work of an unknown artist from Rembrandt's workshop, the painting was often overlooked by curators and museum visitors until 2018.

When the painting was sent for a routine cleaning, conservationists discovered that beneath the layers of thick varnish and overpainting were undeniable traces of a master's skill. X-ray, infrared, and electron microscopy revealed that the overlooked painting was an authentic Rembrandt van Rijn piece.

After this discovery, a curator declared, "The painting has this incredible glow to it now that it just didn't have before." The way in which people viewed, appreciated, and treated the painting changed once it was seen as the work of a master painter.

Every person is a workmanship made by the Master Creator. This knowledge must govern how we treat others. We should never overlook or ignore people because of their past, their reputation, or their shortcomings.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

John 8:4-6

⁴ They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

⁵ Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

⁶ This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

Biblical Insight

Religious authorities often tested Jesus. In addition to the confrontation in John 8, the Pharisees and Sadducees tempted Jesus by asking for “a sign from heaven” (Matthew 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16). The Pharisees tempted Jesus with a question about divorce (Matthew 19:3; Mark 10:2). A teacher tested Jesus about the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34-40). Jesus consistently went beyond providing the correct answer. In fact, Jesus left the Pharisees so speechless in John 8 that they all walked away. Of course, Jesus had already faced the temptation of Satan in the desert for forty days (Luke 4), and as omnipotent God, these groups proved easy to defeat.

Daily Devotion

Out of fear that the Prince of Granada would aspire to claim the Spanish throne, the Spanish king imprisoned the young prince. While in solitary confinement at the “Place of the Skull,” an old and run-down prison, the young prince only had one companion, a Bible.

After thirty-three years of imprisonment, the prince was released from his living tomb. Inside his cell were these phrases, along with others, etched with a nail on the wall: “In the Bible, the word Lord is found 1,853 times.” “Each verse of Psalm 136 ends alike.” For thirty-three years, studying the Bible was the only pastime that kept the Prince of Granada sane.

Yet, while the man covered his walls with Bible trivia, there is no record of the prince having a relationship with God. His experience is recorded in early twentieth-century sources for acquiring trivia but not for knowing Jesus.

There is a difference between knowing about the Bible and knowing the God of the Bible. Take some time to pray you will know God more deeply as you study His Word.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Romans 6:15

What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.

Biblical Insight

Many scholars believe Paul used a rhetorical format similar to a lawyer asking a question and answering it to prove a point. Sometimes the apostle employed absurd questions before offering a reply variously translated as “God forbid” or “no way!” or “by no means!”

Sadly, many ludicrous questions reflected actual arguments by Paul’s opponents. In Romans 6, Paul referenced some people arguing that believers should consistently sin so they could experience the grace of God (Romans 6:1-2). In Romans 6:15, Paul addressed some people wanting to sin more since they were not under the Law but under grace. We can couple Paul’s answer of “God forbid” with Jesus’ answer of “go, and sin no more.”

Daily Devotion

One of the main principles of Switzerland’s foreign policy is neutrality in both armed and political conflicts. Yet even with its intrinsic neutrality, Switzerland’s military has been involved in incidents regarding its neighbor country of Liechtenstein.

In the middle of the night on August 26, 1976, seventy-five members of the Swiss army entered Liechtenstein without permission. In 1992, Swiss recruits crossed the border and set up an observation tower. In 2007, 171 Swiss soldiers entered Liechtenstein unknowingly when they were disoriented by the weather.

Why have there been so many incursions?

Switzerland and Liechtenstein have open border policies that have resulted in no clear boundaries between the two nations. The defined boundaries only exist as a sign on main roads.

Boundaries that are not clearly marked are easily overlooked and crossed. The same happens in our own lives. When we do not have clearly established boundaries to protect our hearts, minds, integrity, and relationships, we will find ourselves in places we were never supposed to be.

Do you have clearly defined boundaries in your life?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Romans 6:20–23

²⁰ For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness.

²¹ What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death.

²² But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.

²³ For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Biblical Insight

We might find it odd to read in Paul's writings about people offering themselves as slaves. Why would anyone voluntarily enter a life of servitude? A look at the Old Testament provides answers.

Debtors unable to provide remuneration offered themselves or their children as slaves. Although the Torah only required these individuals to engage in servanthood until they could pay off their debt or receive release in the year of Jubilee, the Bible speaks of the rich exploiting the poor (Jeremiah 34:8–16; Nehemiah 5:5). Similarly, sin exploits a debt of sin we cannot ever pay and enslaves us in ways we could not have imagined. Thankfully the blood of Jesus delivers us from the exploitation of sin.

Daily Devotion

On the first day of class, the history professor asked her class, "When did enslaved people begin to fight for their freedom?"

Students mentioned famous revolts and insurrections, such as Tacky's Revolt, Stono Rebellion, and Nat Turner's Rebellion. Other students mentioned slave ship mutinies, such as the Amistad mutiny. The professor declared that every student in the class was wrong.

She declared, "Enslaved people began to fight for their freedom the moment their freedom was taken away. When their freedom was taken, they were willing to fight back." It seems that over time as more generations of people endured the unspeakable atrocities, escape seemed so far away that fighting back became rarer and seemingly futile.

In our lives today, sin can enslave us and, when we do not stay intentional about living a life of freedom, we may find ourselves mired in bondage. Instead of fighting, we may find ourselves going deeper into sin.

A life of bondage is not God's desire for us. He desires for us to live in liberty and freedom. A life of freedom is only possible when we are willing to do whatever it takes to flee from the shackles of sin.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

1.3

SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

A forgiving God requires us to forgive others.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I must forgive others as Jesus has forgiven me.



FOCUS VERSES: Matthew 18:21–22

²¹ Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

²² Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 18:21–35



Lesson Title: Seventy Times Seven

Icebreaker: How would you describe forgiveness to someone who has never heard of it?

- I. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A CERTAIN KING
 - A. The King Had Compassion and Chose to Forgive His Servant
 - » *How would you respond if you were forgiven of a debt you knew you could not pay?*
 - B. God Will Forgive Our Debts
 - » *Why do we see our sins as small but others' as great? How does God see our sins compared to others' sins?*
- II. THE KING'S SERVANT WAS UNGRATEFUL
 - A. The Servant Refused to Forgive
 - » *How would you have felt if you were this second servant? What if you were the other servants witnessing this ingratitude?*
 - B. The King Condemned This Unforgiving Servant
 - » *Do you feel this response by the king was just? Are you surprised the king rescinded his forgiveness and required his servant to pay the debt he previously forgave?*
 - C. We Must Forgive Others as Jesus Has Forgiven Us
 - » *What benefits have you felt from forgiving others?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us forgive others
- For God to heal us from the hurts others have caused

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Concepts of forgiveness and debt feature prominently in ancient Israel's history. Joseph forgave his brothers for his enslavement. Joseph, however, used the seven years of famine to accumulate wealth and land for the ancient Egyptians. Some would argue Joseph should have shown more compassion instead of taking advantage of the situation to make the house of Pharaoh even greater.

Joseph had two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim means "fruitful" and represents another name for the northern kingdom of Israel. The term fits because the region produced plentiful crops as well as more expensive commodities like olive oil and wine. Land formerly used for wheat and barley crops that could sustain the poor became olive groves and vineyards. Many northerners became impoverished.

The Lord commissioned Amos to decry the sins of the rich northerners. He chastised them for selling out the poor because the less fortunate were their brothers.

Even the southern kingdom of Judah had problems with selling their own kin into debt slavery. The people of God, however, almost succeeded in correcting this troubling issue. Right before the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the elite of Judah decided to release their slaves in the hope that the city could escape judgment (Jeremiah 34).

Sadly, the leaders of Jeremiah's day proved fickle by neglecting their promise. They quickly changed their minds and brought their former slaves back under subjection. The decision sealed their fate.

The Babylonians destroyed the Temple and the city and exiled many of the people. Therefore, the Parable of the Two Debtors in Matthew 18:22-35 may represent the way the people of Israel treated their own brothers and sisters. The Almighty used Nebuchadnezzar to punish them for their lack of forgiveness.

Additionally, we can observe a key connection between personal liberty and freeing others from bondage. The decision to release the slaves may reveal that the elite of Judah recognized they had not followed the Torah's teachings on years of Jubilee. In the Jubilee year, those in debt slavery were to be granted their freedom (Leviticus 25:39-46). Some have conjectured that the seventy years of Exile equated to the years of the neglected Jubilees. The Israelites traded years of blessing for years of subjugation because they did not rejoice in the goodness of God and trust in the Almighty.

Jesus taught Peter a great lesson about forgiveness in a short parable with enormous historical and personal consequences.

CONCEPTS OF FORGIVENESS AND DEBT
ARE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL'S HISTORY.

DAY 1

Matthew 18:21-22

²¹ Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

²² Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

Biblical Insight

When Peter suggested that an offender be forgiven seven times, he likely thought he had gone beyond the requirements. The Old Testament sets the limit at three times in Amos (2:6) before the fourth time yielded punishment. Job 33:28-29 shows that God reaches out two and even three times to deliver someone from the pit.

Jesus, however, hearkened back to Genesis 4:24 when Lamech killed a man in self-defense. Lamech reasoned that if Cain were avenged seven times, then Lamech should be avenged seventy times seven. Cleverly, Jesus turned the number of times for vengeance into the number of times for forgiveness, making it limitless.

Daily Devotion

Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1858), one of the first senators from Missouri, was a colorful figure in Congressional history. Before becoming a senator, Benton practiced law and edited the *Missouri Enquirer*.

During a court case in 1817, Benton accused the opposing attorney, Charles Lucas, of lying. Lucas, in turn, accused Benton of lying. To determine the liar, the two men agreed to a duel on Bloody Island located in the middle of the Mississippi River. During the duel, Lucas was shot near the heart.

After being shot, Lucas declared boldly, "I do not or cannot forgive you." Yet, as Lucas' breathing became shallower and death approached, he softly told Benton, "I can forgive you. I do forgive you."

At times forgiveness seems impossible, but when we consider our own mortality, forgiveness no longer seems impossible. In the face of death, forgiveness becomes a necessity.

We are not promised tomorrow; let us forgive today. Ask the Lord if there is someone you need to forgive and for the grace to do so.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 18:23

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

Biblical Insight

Because only Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in addition to “kingdom of God,” some have argued that the two phrases have different meanings. However, a closer look at Matthew reveals that the author used the phrases interchangeably.

In Matthew 19:14, Jesus spoke of the little children and the “kingdom of heaven” before encountering the rich young ruler. After the young man went away sorrowful because of his attachment to his possessions, Jesus noted that a camel could more easily go through the eye of a needle than a rich man could enter the “kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24), indicating the phrases have the same meaning.

Daily Devotion

Yo-Yo Ma is a world-famous cellist who began his career in 1961. At the age of four-and-a-half, Ma played the cello for President Eisenhower, and at the age of seven, he performed for President Kennedy. Since then, Ma has graduated from the Julliard School and Harvard University, performed as a soloist around the world, recorded more than ninety albums, and received nineteen Grammy Awards.

In a 1986 interview, Ma claimed that “the professional musician should aspire to the state of the beginner.” Ma explained that during a concert, if a person thinks about the years of training, criticisms, or people’s judgment, a musician will play terribly. To play wonderfully, one must “constantly remind oneself to play with the abandon of the child who is just learning the cello.”

As adults, we can become encumbered with bitterness, resentment, fear, and other strong emotions that can make us forget to approach life like children. We must constantly remind ourselves to become more like children who can forgive quickly, love deeply, and believe easily. Journal about why you think Jesus asked us to become like little children.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Matthew 18:23-25

²³ Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

²⁴ And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

²⁵ But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

Biblical Insight

The potential for the debtor's wife and children to be sold into slavery will be deemed cringeworthy by most readers. Slavery was a sad reality in ancient Israel. The Torah attempted to protect slaves by freeing them in the seventh year (Exodus 21:2) and offering some protections for females (Exodus 21:7-11).

None of these verses of Scripture nor any others justify slavery. In fact, slavery occurred because the wealthy benefited from a land flowing with milk and honey but did not share profits with others. The rich produced cash crops like olive oil and wine, starving out those who needed wheat and barley for food. The rich used God's blessings to curse others.

Daily Devotion

During job interviews, recruiters ask a myriad of questions to gain insight into a person's skills and personality. One potential question is: "What would you do if you won the lottery?"

The interviewer is not interested in knowing what type of car you would buy or where you would like to live. Behind this seemingly benign question is an interviewer's desire to understand your values, commitments, and motivations. Recruiters understand that what a person does with an abundance of money reveals what is in a person's heart.

According to the National Endowment for Financial Education, 70 percent of those who receive large cash windfalls lose them within just a few years. Of the 70 percent, more than half declare bankruptcy within the first five years because they view the sudden wealth as "play money" instead of a responsibility. Instead of investing the money or paying off debt, many recipients splurge on vehicles, vacations, homes, and clothing.

Financial blessings can easily become a curse. It all depends on a person's heart, values, and commitments.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Matthew 18:28-30

²⁸ But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

²⁹ And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

³⁰ And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

Biblical Insight

The idea of putting a debtor into prison seems absurd given that the offender would not have the freedom to work or engage in business transactions to pay off the amount owed. Roman law, however, allowed such a punishment for a defaulter on a loan. This legal reasoning arose from the potential that some people might hide assets to avoid full repayment.

Debtor's prisons proved very harsh. The Romans allowed torture. Given the full details of the parable, perhaps the master threatened the original debtor's wife and children with slavery to see if he were hiding any assets.

Daily Devotion

Charles Dickens is a famous author who wrote a total of fifteen novels in addition to short stories, essays, and novellas. A common theme that emerges among many of Dickens' works is imprisonment for debt.

Dickens' obsession with prison and the plight of the poor began in 1824 when his father, John Dickens, was arrested for debt and imprisoned in Marshalsea Prison. At the young age of twelve, Charles had to work in a bottle factory to support his family. To have a family member imprisoned for debt was considered a familial disgrace.

Charles grew up feeling shackled to the disgrace and shame until he used his family's story as the basis of the novel *Little Dorrit*. Through writing, Charles discovered that disgrace was not his identity.

The actions of family members can make us feel shackled to feelings of shame and disgrace. If this is something you struggle with, remember that the actions of your family do not define you. Take a moment in prayer to seek the Lord for a correct understanding of your identity in Him.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Matthew 18:31-35

³¹ So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.

³² Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me:

³³ Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

³⁴ And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

³⁵ So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

Biblical Insight

Although people argue that the Law provided harsh punishments for disobedient Israelites, we observe a great deal of fairness in the system, especially regarding debt. Lenders to the poor could not exact interest from them or take their garment in pledge (Exodus 22:25-27). The garment represented shelter, a basic human need.

Creditors also could not take implements for making food because that would be like taking a person's life in pawn (Deuteronomy 24:6). Those who loaned money could not even enter the house of the debtor to seize the pledge (Deuteronomy 24:10-15). The Law exhibited a mercy the original debtor in the parable did not.

Daily Devotion

One hundred twenty-six years after Jamestown was founded, James Oglethorpe approached King George with a utopian experiment. For decades Oglethorpe had been concerned with the increasing number of men and women in prison for debt. Oglethorpe proposed to establish a new colony populated by debt prisoners based upon the biblical principle of second chances.

King George approved Oglethorpe's proposal, and the Georgia colony was founded. Imprisoned debtors were given the choice of remaining in prison or going to the Americas and becoming farmers in an untamed land. For debtors who agreed to travel to Georgia, they were given fifty acres of land, tools, equipment, and passage paid for by the Georgia Company.

For some debtors, Georgia was both freedom from debt and a second chance. For most, Georgia seemed too difficult, so they chose to remain in debtors' prison.

Unforgiveness is a prison. Forgiveness releases us. Some will view forgiveness as too hard and not worth the effort. They fail to realize that freedom can only be achieved through forgiveness. Ask Jesus to give you the strength for the daily journey of forgiveness.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

1.4

THE TALE OF TWO THIEVES

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God is always ready to save.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I can call on Jesus and find a place of repentance.



FOCUS VERSE: Luke 23:42

And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 27:39-43; Luke 23:32-43



Lesson Title: The Tale of Two Thieves

Icebreaker: If you have ever stolen anything, what is the least valuable item you stole?

I. JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED BETWEEN TWO THIEVES**A. Jesus Was Mocked on the Cross**

» *In understanding Jesus died so we can live, how should that make us feel toward Him?*

B. The King of the Jews

» *How does God use the cross, a symbol of shame, as a symbol of hope for us?*

C. I Will Choose to Worship Jesus as My Savior and King**II. THE UNREPENTANT THIEF****A. “If You Are the Christ, Save Yourself and Us”****B. We Must Choose Humility When Approaching Jesus for Forgiveness****III. THE HUMBLE THIEF**

» *How can multiple people hear the same message or encounter Jesus in the same way, yet one believes in Him while others remain hardened in unbelief?*

A. He Admitted His Own Guilt and Turned to Jesus for Mercy**B. “Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise”**

» *Some are offended that a thief could be with Jesus after only praying near the end of his life. Why do we feel like people need to earn their right to be saved?*

C. We Can Call on Jesus and Find a Place of Repentance

» *Have you already responded in this way to the gospel of Jesus Christ? If not, are you ready to turn to Jesus?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us always have a repentant heart
- For God to help us minister to those who need Him

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 27:39–43; Luke 23:32–43

According to Luke, Jesus made appearances to the duo on the road to Emmaus and to the disciples. In each case, Jesus told them the ways He fulfilled prophecies in Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus also demonstrated fulfillment of prophecies concerning Himself on the cross. In Matthew 27:39–43, we can clearly see that Jesus thought of Psalm 22 and even quoted it during the Crucifixion.

People passed by, reviling Jesus and wagging their heads. The chief priests mocked Him. The scribes and elders spoke of Jesus saving others but being unable to save Himself. They said, “He trusted in God; let him deliver him now” (Matthew 27:43).

The terrible actions of these leaders connect directly to Psalm 22. Verse 4 speaks of the ancestors of the Israelites trusting in God and being delivered. Verse 5 speaks of them crying out, being delivered, and avoiding being confounded. But the Holy One chose not to be delivered on the cross.

Jesus chose to become the lowest of the low. His appearance fit the description in Psalm 22:6 of being “a worm, and no man,” whom everyone reproached and despised. Verse 7 shows the leaders playing their part by laughing and scorning. This verse prophesied, “They shake the head,” and the wagging of their heads at the cross in Matthew 27 confirmed it.

Psalm 22:8 gets to the crux of the matter, prophesying the very words the people would speak, “He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him.” The scribes, elders, and those who passed by perfectly played their part as though unwittingly reading from the script of Psalm 22.

Therefore, Jesus responded by quoting the first part of the first verse of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Only those with an open mind and an understanding of the Word would have recognized the full significance of the scene.

No wonder the religious leaders in Jesus’ day failed to recognize the Messiah. If any of them truly possessed knowledge of the Word, the quotation of Psalm 22 would have shocked and horrified them. They would have immediately fallen at the foot of the cross and begged Jesus for mercy. Thankfully, one person who probably did not know the Scriptures as well as a scribe or priest recognized Jesus as the Son of God. That thief hanging beside Jesus received the reward of being with Jesus in Paradise.

PEOPLE PASSED BY, REVILING JESUS AND
WAGGING THEIR HEADS. THE CHIEF PRIESTS
MOCKED HIM.

DAY 1

Matthew 27:39–40

³⁹ And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,

⁴⁰ And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

Biblical Insight

Jesus faced the wildly contradictory question of whether He was the Son of God or a devil. The Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out devils through Satan's power (Matthew 12:22–29). Jesus spoke of His opponents as Satan's children (John 8:44).

In Matthew 27:39–40, we discover who had truly assumed Satan's mantle. Passersby mocked Jesus, telling Him to come down from the cross if He was the Son of God. Similarly, Satan tempted Jesus to make stones into bread (Matthew 4:3; Luke 4:3) and to cast Himself down so the angels could save Him (Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:9–10). Satan began both tests by saying, "If thou be the Son of God."

Daily Devotion

Success is often portrayed as the path to happiness.

In 1922, soon after receiving the 1921 Nobel Prize for his contributions to theoretical physics, Albert Einstein was on a speaking tour in Tokyo. When a Japanese courier delivered a message to him, Einstein realized he did not have enough change to tip the messenger. Einstein decided to give the courier life tips.

One of the life tips was: "A quiet and modest life brings more joy than a pursuit of success bound with constant unrest." Einstein went from being an unemployed graduate in 1900 to giving lectures on electrodynamics and relativity principles and earning a professorship by 1909. Upon becoming a professor, Einstein continually taught, published, and pursued higher positions within the sciences that culminated in his 1921 Nobel Prize.

Einstein knew success and the unrest that success requires.

It is important for us to remember that joy is not something we can achieve through worldly successes. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit that gives us peace and contentment. Only when joy grows in our lives does success follow.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 27:39-43

³⁹ And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,

⁴⁰ And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

⁴¹ Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,

⁴² He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.

⁴³ He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.

Biblical Insight

Many scholars believe Mark wrote his Gospel first. Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source and added new material. Because of the similarities between these Gospels, scholars call them the Synoptics.

John wrote later and had more time to consider key issues in Jesus' life. Although we see one of Matthew's hallmarks in the way he pointed to Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecy, Matthew did not explain a key saying of Jesus. Thankfully, John provided the answer. When passersby mocked Jesus for having claimed He would rebuild the destroyed Temple in three days, they did not realize Jesus spoke of the temple of His body (John 2:21).

Daily Devotion

For centuries the symbols of birds, snakes, kings, and plants seen on ancient monuments, tombs, and walls in Egypt have intrigued humanity. Once the Egyptian temples closed in the fifth century, the knowledge of hieroglyphic writing was lost. Hieroglyphics were considered a lost language until the eighteenth century.

In July 1779, a stone inscribed with the same text in Demotic, hieroglyphic, and Greek was found in the city of Rosetta. Immediately, the Rosetta Stone was seen as the key to unlocking the meaning of hieroglyphics. Within decades, hieroglyphics were deciphered. What were once unknown symbols are now understood and taught to others.

For people raised in other religions or raised with no religion, the Bible can be as difficult to understand as hieroglyphics. Words we take for granted like *sin* or *salvation* are foreign to them. It is important to remember we must know the Word of God not only so we can live it, but also so we can explain it to others. Pray that God would help you share His Word with someone today.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Luke 23:32-34

³² And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.

³³ And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

³⁴ Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

Biblical Insight

Many great ironies exist in Pilate's decision to release an insurrectionist and murderer while allowing Jesus to be crucified. The criminal's guilt should have confined him, but Jesus' innocence set the criminal free. Some deemed Jesus guilty of insurrection because He spoke of the kingdom of God. However, the world's mightiest kingdom of the time known for its warring power condemned the Prince of Peace to death. Perhaps most ironically, Jesus received the sentence of crucifixion because the religious leaders and the people claimed He was the Son of God (Luke 22:70), while Barabbas escaped death (Matthew 27:16).

Daily Devotion

Yi Sun-sin (1545-1598) became a military officer in 1576 and was posted to the Northern Frontier Army where he spent years defending the border against Jurchen marauders. On the frontier, Yi became known for strategy and leadership. His accomplishments and reputation made his superiors jealous.

Yi was falsely accused of desertion during battle and was stripped of his rank, tortured, and imprisoned. Eventually, Yi was allowed to reenlist as an enlisted soldier. Once again, Yi rose through the ranks swiftly, becoming a commander of a naval province.

During the Japanese Invasions of Korea (1592-1598), Yi became one of the greatest naval soldiers and tacticians in world history with twenty-three victories. Though Yi died in battle, his legacy of kindness, gratitude, military genius, and resilience is applauded in world military history.

In his war diary, Yi revealed that revenge was never an option because "virtue, integrity, and courage are my priorities." When we prioritize virtue and integrity over revenge, we will leave behind a victorious legacy instead of a legacy of victimhood.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Luke 23:39-41

³⁹ And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

⁴⁰ But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

⁴¹ And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

Biblical Insight

One of the crucified criminals joined the others who were mocking Jesus. The other (apparently in a last-minute change of heart; compare Matthew 27:44) reminded him that they deserved their punishment but that, as Pilate before him had also insisted (Luke 23:4, 13-15, 22), Jesus was innocent. Fearing God is a principle from Scripture that teaches healthy and holy reverence of God. Jesus sensed from the criminal's reference to fearing God a desirable condition of the heart.

Daily Devotion

From 1875 to 1883, newspapers from San Francisco to New York recounted tales of a professional thief who terrorized the Wells Fargo stage line throughout the Sierra Nevadas. The robber concealed his appearance with a flour sack with two holes so no victim would ever see his face and there was no way for an artist to sketch his features.

During his reign of terror, the thief robbed twenty-nine different stagecoaches without firing a shot or taking a hostage. The thief's name was Black Bart, and his weapon of choice was his reputation and intimidation. Out of fear, no one tried to fight back.

As it turns out, Black Bart was prospector Charles Boles. People realized that without the mask, the bandit was not someone to fear. Instead, Boles was weak and could have been easily overpowered.

Fear in today's context is almost always a negative, as in the example of Black Bart and how he manipulated people through fear. However, as much as we may tend to shy from the idea of fear, we should search out what Scripture has to say about the idea of fearing God. Understood as reverence and deep respectful recognition of who God is, we can see that fearing (reverencing) God is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10) and part of our pursuit of holiness (II Corinthians 7:1). Ask God today to renew your reverence for Him.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Luke 23:42-43

⁴² And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

⁴³ And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Biblical Insight

After one of the criminals crucified with Jesus admitted his wrongdoing and asked Jesus to remember him, Jesus proclaimed that the man would be with Him in Paradise. The word *paradise* comes from the Persian language and refers to an enclosed garden.

The Persian origin of the word reveals the significance of outside influences on Jewish ideas since the Old Testament offers very little information about the afterlife. *Sheol* refers to a shadowy existence. The Persians, however, spoke of concepts like Heaven and Hell. As Jesus reached the end of His undeserved physical pain, He thought of an undeserving man and took Him to a place of eternal peace.

Daily Devotion

Many places in the world have been called paradise. In the United States, twelve cities are named Paradise. Some of those cities are found near oceans, lakes, and within mountains.

In the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, Paradise, California, was once a forest with homes sheltered among tall pines and oak trees. However, in 2018, wildfires ravaged Paradise and its surrounding communities. Because wildfires burned for three weeks, 90 percent of Paradise was destroyed, and eighty-five people lost their lives.

One year later, only two thousand residents had returned to Paradise with the hope of rebuilding, whereas the other twenty-four thousand chose to live elsewhere.

While there are many beautiful places on Earth that seem like paradise, they are all finite. Paradise on Earth is a pale comparison to the new Heaven and new Earth we will one day experience.

Like Paradise, California, earthly paradises will come to an end. Thankfully, we can look forward with hope and anticipation to an eternal Paradise with Jesus.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

2.1

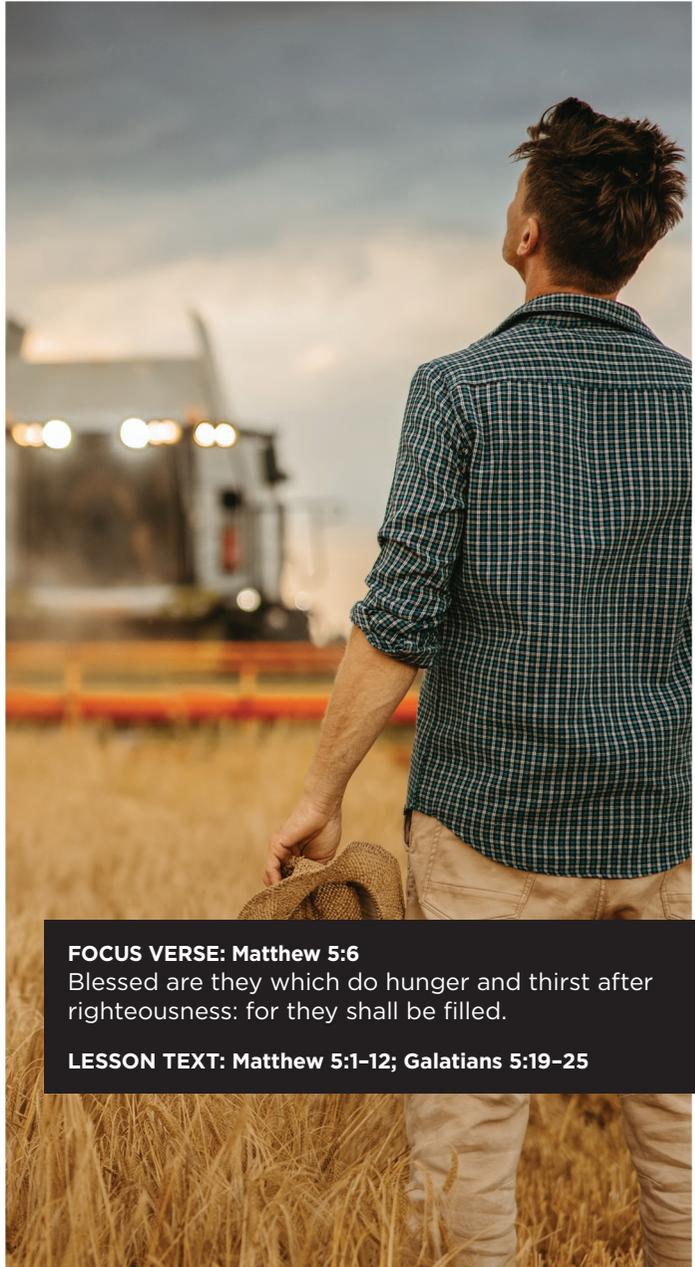
THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God desires to pour out His blessings on those who recognize their need of Him.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will acknowledge my need of God.



FOCUS VERSE: Matthew 5:6

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12; Galatians 5:19-25



Lesson Title: The Life God Blesses

Icebreaker: What is the strangest craving for food or drink you have had?

I. BLESSINGS ON THE EMPTY

A. Those Empty of Hope, Happiness, and Pride

» *This sermon was Jesus' first as a new rabbi in Galilee. How do you think the crowd responded to His sermon that the poor are blessed?*

» *How is meekness different from weakness? How do we exercise meekness to the glory of God?*

B. I Will Trust God to Fill My Emptiness with Good Things

II. BLESSINGS ON THE FULL

A. Those Full of Mercy, Purity, and Peace

» *Have you ever noticed there is a connection in the Bible between purity and peace?*

B. I Will Share God's Blessings in My Life with Others

» *How can you bless someone with the blessings God has given you?*

III. BLESSINGS ON THE PERSECUTED

A. For Righteousness' Sake

B. For God's Sake

» *What experiences have you had with ridicule or even persecution for your faith? How has that shaped your faith?*

C. I Will Acknowledge My Need of God

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to empty us of what we don't need in our lives
- For God to fill us with all we do need in our lives

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 5:1-12; Galatians 5:19-25

The Beatitudes feature strong role reversals. The poor in spirit should not expect to inherit anything due to their poverty. Mourners feel about as far away from comfort as possible. While the merciful might hope to obtain mercy, they might have doubted it, even to the point of thinking someone could take advantage of their mercy and use it against them.

As we move to the end of the Beatitudes, we see that Jesus set up His listeners to more fully see the great reversals that occur in serving the Lord. Situations where people revile us, persecute us, and speak all manner of evil against us do not seem like times when we should feel blessed. Nevertheless, we should rejoice and even be exceedingly glad due to our great reward in Heaven.

Jesus ended this section of the Sermon on the Mount by comparing the persecuted to the prophets who also faced terrible circumstances. Most of Jesus' listeners would have understood the horrors the prophets faced.

Amos championed the cause of the poor. The elite northerners scorned his words. The priest Amaziah insulted him by acting as though Amos only prophesied to get food. Amaziah told Amos to return to Jerusalem to get his bread there.

Jeremiah, believed to be the writer of Lamentations, mourned without receiving much comfort. He faced terrible imprisonment. At one point his jailers lowered him into a muddy cistern and left him there before finally sending down rags to pull him up by his arms.

Jeremiah suffered hunger, only receiving a small amount of bread to eat. God told the exiled prophet Ezekiel to eat a miniscule amount of bread to be in solidarity with Jeremiah and others still living in Jerusalem.

These prophets all faced persecution. Although tradition tells of the execution of Amos, we cannot confirm it actually occurred. Nevertheless, many prophets faced death decrees, such as Elijah. In the days of Jeremiah, King Jehoiakim killed a lesser-known prophet named Urijah. Urijah's prophecies were very similar to Jeremiah's.

The lives of these prophets and the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes reveal the blessings of speaking the Word of the Lord. Although we may face persecution, we are ultimately blessed. Although challenges prove difficult, we have a great reward awaiting us.

JESUS SET UP HIS LISTENERS TO MORE FULLY SEE THE GREAT REVERSALS THAT OCCUR IN SERVING THE LORD.

DAY 1

Matthew 5:1-3

¹ And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:

² And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

³ Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Biblical Insight

The poor in spirit recognize their need for God. Like the physically poor, they lack resources. In a fascinating reversal, Jesus stated that the kingdom of God belongs to them.

Jeremiah 5 helps us understand this situation because we see the prophet looking for one honest person to prevent Jerusalem's destruction, much like Abraham pleaded for Sodom. Jeremiah ignored the poor due to their lack of knowledge and looked to the leaders who should have possessed knowledge. The Lord did not spare the capital of the Davidic kingdom in the Old Testament; but in the New Testament era, the Kingdom belongs to those who know their need of God.

Daily Devotion

One of the most well-known photographs of the Vietnam War is Nic Ut's "The Terror of War." The photograph shows nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running down a road with a cloud of smoke and debris in her wake. Smoke, debris, pain, nightmares, and anger were all that was left after a napalm bomb was dropped on Kim's village.

Contrary to the doctor's prognosis, Kim survived being covered in third-degree burns. For years, Kim struggled with anger, and hatred became her prison. Soon after discovering the Bible in a library, Kim visited a church for a Christmas service. By the end of the service, Kim said she felt peace in her heart and could not wait to depend upon the Lord.

Fourteen years after becoming a Christian, Kim met the man responsible for approving the air strike on her village. Freed from the prison of anger and hate, Kim hugged him. Peace and forgiveness are possible when we depend on the Lord.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 5:4

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Biblical Insight

Jesus consistently used the word *blessed*, also translated as “happy,” in the Beatitude portion of the Sermon on the Mount. This practice reveals a key action of Jesus as our High Priest.

Numbers 6:24–26 records the familiar Priestly Blessing, beginning with “the LORD bless thee, and keep thee.” Whenever the rabbis pronounced this blessing on people, they made the sign for the Hebrew letter Shin to refer to Ha-Shem, “the Name.” They used this hand sign to avoid speaking the name of God. In Matthew 5, we see the one named Jesus proclaiming a blessing as our Savior and High Priest.

Daily Devotion

During the Korean War, some US Marines ran out of mortar rounds and radioed for more mortar shells using the code name “Tootsie Rolls.” When the airdrop arrived, the marines found actual Tootsie Rolls and no mortar shells.

At the time, approximately fifteen thousand US soldiers were fighting one-hundred-twenty thousand Chinese soldiers. Instead of giving in to despair, the US soldiers found out the Tootsie Rolls were something they needed. Since it was December, the Marines discovered they could use warmed Tootsie Rolls to seal bullet holes as the Tootsie Rolls refroze in the December cold.

After two weeks of incessant fighting, the Marines accomplished their goal and destroyed several Chinese divisions. The surviving soldiers began referring to themselves as the “Tootsie Roll Marines” and credited their survival to Tootsie Rolls.

There are times in life when situations seem impossible. Instead of giving in to despair and hopelessness, it is important to take a step back and look at what we have been given. God’s blessings come in many different forms. Spend some time today giving God thanks.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Matthew 5:5

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Biblical Insight

Studying the same word translated as “meek” in both New Testament Greek and the *Septuagint* reveals Jesus did not simply derive new sayings for the Beatitudes. He relied heavily on the psalms. For example, Psalm 37:11 also declares, “The meek shall inherit the earth.”

Other verses reveal Jesus’ concern for the humble (Psalm 25:9; 75:10; 146:6-9; 149:4). The psalms played an important role in the ministry of Jesus in specific ways, such as His teaching on the meek, and in general ways because several passages of the Book of Psalms, including the opening verse of the biblical songbook, describe those who are “blessed.”

Daily Devotion

An invention we benefit from daily is the domestication of animals. Domestication is the process of adapting wild animals for human use. As animals such as dogs, cows, chickens, camels, and donkeys were brought under control, humans established permanent civilizations based around farming and husbandry. Domestication also allowed for animals, such as horses, to be trained for war.

In Ancient Greece, war horses were referred to as “meeked” horses. In the Greek understanding, “meek” was strength under control. Horses were trained to yield control to their rider and trust their rider even if it meant running into the fray. War horses were trained to be strong while under control and powerful while submitted.

Meekness is not weakness. Meekness is surrendering our free will to God’s authority and trusting God with every aspect of our lives. It is allowing Him to train us, change us, lead us, and command us.

The strongest we will ever be is when we are fully yielded to God. Journal about an area of your life where you feel God calling you to greater surrender and submission to Him.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Matthew 5:6-12

⁶ Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

¹² Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Biblical Insight

Some may think the Beatitudes represent random sayings of Jesus collected by Matthew; however, we observe intentionality in their ordering. For example, Jesus discussed peacemakers before talking about being persecuted for righteousness. Many may not realize a key connection exists between peace and righteousness.

James 3:18 states that the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. We sow in peace to reap a harvest of righteousness. While many would not immediately associate peace with righteousness, the Beatitudes and the Book of James reveal a key truth: we must be peacemakers to be righteous.

Daily Devotion

On December 20, 1943, twenty-one-year-old Charlie Brown flew his first combat mission as an aircraft commander with the 179th Bomb Group. Brown's B-17 quickly took damage as the plane's nose was shattered, the number two engine was knocked out, the number four engine took heavy damage, and many of his controls stopped working.

Lieutenant Brown was unable to stay in formation and became a straggler. The lone B-17 became an easy target and sustained life-threatening damage. The situation seemed hopeless when suddenly Brown saw a German Bf-109 flying beside him. The pilot waved for Brown to follow him. The German enemy escorted Brown's B-17 out of the battle.

On that day the enemy was willing to risk a Nazi court martial to extend mercy.

Decades later, while Charles Brown never received medals from the war, the enemy, former Oberleutnant Franz Stigler, received military honors from Canada and Great Britain for showing mercy.

Similarly, God honors us when we extend mercy to others. When we show mercy, God shows mercy to us.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Galatians 5:19-25

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,

²⁰ Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,

²¹ Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

²³ Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

²⁴ And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.

²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

Biblical Insight

Paul's lists in the closing portion of Galatians present various vices and virtues known as the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. In II Peter 1:5-7, Peter shared his grouping of virtues. In both ancient philosophy and present-day ethics, scholars present similar collections.

We can compare biblical lists with Aristotle's twelve virtues. Although some, like temperance and patience, align with godly values, others like ambition (pride) do not fit. Paul knew that all the virtues known as the fruit of the Spirit worked because he stated there was no law against them.

Daily Devotion

On December 26, 1776, a loyalist spy arrived at the headquarters of Hessian commander Colonel Johann Rall with an urgent warning. The spy had discovered that George Washington and his small Continental Army had crossed the Delaware River and were approaching Trenton where the Hessians were encamped. When trying to enter Rall's headquarters, the spy was told to just write down the message because the colonel had given strict orders that no one was to disturb his liquor or cards.

Not wanting to disturb his gambling, the Hessian colonel put the note into his pocket and never read the warning. While Colonel Rall was still playing cards, musket fire from General Washington's army ripped through the camp. The entire Hessian army was captured, and the colonists won their first major victory of the Revolutionary War.

During the battle, Colonel Rall was killed. Vices often masquerade as entertainment. While being entertained, we do not realize we are being distracted from important warnings. There is always a price when we give in to vices. Seek the Lord today for His help in seeing any areas of your life where greater vigilance is necessary.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

2.2

THE MISSION OF A DISCIPLE

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God's design for the church is to embody His glory.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

In every aspect of my life, I will demonstrate God's glory.



FOCUS VERSE: Matthew 5:16

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

**LESSON TEXT: Matthew 5:13-16; 28:16-20;
II Thessalonians 1:11-12**



Lesson Title: The Mission of a Disciple

Icebreaker: Share about a time when you lost electricity for days and had to be creative, living without artificial light.

I. METAPHORS OF MISSION**A. Salt**

» *Who in your life would you describe as a salt-of-the-earth child of God? How has this person's life helped bring flavor to yours?*

B. City on a Hill**C. Lamp in Darkness**

» *Who was a light for you when you were making your way toward Jesus Christ? To whom are you being a light?*

D. I Desire God to Be Present in Every Aspect of My Life**II. MY ROLE AS A WITNESS**

» *Share an example of a time when you witnessed to someone of the goodness of God in your life.*

A. The Witness of Evangelism**B. The Witness of Separation**

» *How can we live righteously without falling into the sin of self-righteousness?*

C. The Witness of Incarnation**D. In Every Aspect of My Life, I Will Demonstrate God's Glory**

» *What areas of your life do you need to surrender to God for His glory? How will you do that?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us be salt, light, and a city on a hill
- For God to give us boldness to share our testimony as His witness

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 5:13-16; 28:16-20; II Thessalonians 1:11-12

The biblical concept of discipleship represents very specific expectations, but the heart of the term harkens back to groups like the “sons of the prophets” in the Hebrew Scriptures. The idea of rabbis or teachers having followers around them like Jesus did can also be seen in the connection between Elijah and Elisha as well as the sons of the prophets associated with both of these individuals.

Elijah and Elisha had a mentor-apprentice relationship. Like the fishermen disciples who left their nets to follow Jesus, Elisha left his oxen and plow to accompany Elijah in his ministry (I Kings 19). Although the successful creation of a disciple usually ends with the mentor telling the disciple to “go,” the beginning of discipleship often starts with the command to “leave.” Disciples must leave behind their old lives in order to accept their new calling.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Elisha desired the mantle of Elijah, but he knew he would need to faithfully serve in order to receive it. Elisha needed to stay near Elijah. Some disciples may be closer to their mentor than others. During the days of Elijah, the sons of the prophets did not follow Elijah as closely as Elisha did. Elisha saw Elijah taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire, but the sons of the prophets thought the Spirit of the Lord had cast Elijah onto some mountain or some valley. Elisha knew the truth. Similarly, Peter, James, and John served as the inner circle for Jesus during His earthly ministry and experienced wondrous things, such as being on the Mount of Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah appeared. Peter, James, and John knew things the other disciples did not.

Mentors also inspired their disciples to do greater things. Elijah saw the Lord work seven miracles through him. Elisha prayed for a double portion of the spirit of Elijah to be upon him. God granted fourteen miracles through Elisha, although the final one occurred after his death.

Jesus also believed His disciples would accomplish more. In John 14:12, Jesus told His disciples they would do “greater works.” Healing, miracles, signs, and wonders accompanied the ministry of the disciples. Others followed them, and the apostles made their own disciples.

LIKE THE FISHERMEN DISCIPLES WHO LEFT THEIR NETS TO FOLLOW JESUS, ELISHA LEFT HIS OXEN AND PLOW TO ACCOMPANY ELIJAH IN HIS MINISTRY.

DAY 1

Matthew 5:13

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Biblical Insight

Salt represents permanence. Leviticus 2:13 speaks of seasoning all offerings with salt. Numbers 18:19 states that the priesthood would receive a perpetual share of the offerings as a covenant of salt. Second Chronicles 13:5 describes the promise of a Davidic descendant ruling over the kingdom as a covenant of salt.

Although an area of salt often referred to a place deemed uninhabitable (Judges 9:45), the right amount of salt possessed curative properties. In II Kings 2:20-21, Elisha put salt into a cruse and cast it into a spring to cure death and barrenness. As salt, we can bring healing and life to a world poisoned by sin.

Daily Devotion

What do secret government documents, hospital X-rays, records of international corporations, and original prints from Charlie Chaplin have in common?

If you guessed they are preserved in a salt mine, you are correct.

Located 650 feet beneath the Kansas prairie, the company Underground Vaults and Storage turned a salt mine into a high-security cavern. The company chose the salt mine because of salt's ability to protect and preserve.

Because the walls and ceilings are thick shelves of salt, floods are not able to permeate the warehouse and destroy the artifacts. Not only does the salt prevent flooding, but the salt regulates the temperature making it ideal for preserving paper and film.

The most precious treasures in this world are souls. As the salt of the earth, we can protect souls through intercessory prayer, evangelism, and discipleship. We also help preserve our own souls through edification; correction; and extending love, mercy, and grace.

In what ways do you protect and preserve others?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 5:14

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

Biblical Insight

Jesus compared the light of believers to the inescapable ability to notice a city set on a hill. Ironically, many cities did not appear on naturally occurring hills in Israel. Rather, they sprung up and became mounds because people often built on various layers of previous destruction.

People chose locations for villages based on ease of access to water and ability to raise crops and tend livestock; therefore, people continued to build in the same areas. Such mounds were known as *tehs*, a word that appears in the present-day city name Tel Aviv. Jesus would raise up believers from past destruction to shine as lights.

Daily Devotion

Chang Shen was known as Wu so pu wei te, meaning “one without a particle of good in him.” Shen was a gambler, adulterer, thief, and member of a violent gang. Soon after selling his daughter into prostitution, Chang was stricken blind.

Desperate to see again, Chang traveled hundreds of miles to a missionary hospital where he gave his life to Christ. After learning about Christ, Chang returned home and began sharing his testimony of transformation. He traveled from village to village sharing the gospel and winning hundreds to Christ.

When the Boxer Rebellion occurred, the Boxers captured fifty Christians in Chang's community. After hearing of Chang's influence, the Boxers promised to free the Christians if Chang would surrender himself. He did, and when he refused to worship Buddha, the Boxers executed “Blind Chang.” Although they executed Chang, they could not execute his testimony. Because of Chang, fifty Christians were freed and spread the gospel throughout China.

One of the greatest testimonies you have is your story of transformation. Share it.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Matthew 5:15-16

¹⁵ Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Biblical Insight

Jesus spoke of the way light shines by using several Greek words that have impacted the English language. The names Luke, Lucas, and Lucy are connected to *lux*, the Greek root for “light,” which Jesus used to speak of a lampstand. The word *lampas* is obviously the cognate for “lamp.” The word for “house” referring to the family is *oikos*, providing the English prefix “eco-” as in “ecology” and “economics.” The word for “others” is *anthropos*, meaning “human,” giving English the word “anthropology.” The Greek word *ergon* means “work” as in ergonomics. While we may be tempted to say, “it’s all Greek to me,” it is helpful to consider the tremendous impact of Greek on the English language.

Daily Devotion

A mesmerizing aspect of Renaissance and Baroque paintings is the interplay between light, shadows, and darkness. Artists such as Rembrandt and Caravaggio painted using the chiaroscuro technique that utilizes a single light source or intense illumination in an area of the painting to demonstrate the strong contrasts between light and dark.

Because part of the painting is lit and the rest of the painting is encapsulated in darkness, your attention is drawn to the light. Because there is a light, what happens in the darkness of the painting can be seen. A master artist understands that where there is a single source of light, illumination, understanding, and revelation will follow.

Today, when we have the Holy Ghost, we are called to be the light in the darkness of the world. We are to be a source of illumination in the darkness, which draws attention not only to our lives but to Jesus.

If Rembrandt or Caravaggio were to paint your life, would you be represented as the light source in your home, neighborhood, and community?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Matthew 28:16-19

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them.

¹⁷ And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Biblical Insight

The question of who had authority features prominently in Matthew 21:23-27. The chief priests and elders of the people asked Jesus by what authority He did things. Instead of answering them, Jesus asked whether the baptism of John was from Heaven or of men. Jesus painted them into a corner. They would have to proclaim the validity of John's baptism or deny his prophetic office. When they refused to answer, Jesus refused to tell them about His authority.

After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples that all power was given unto Him in Heaven and in Earth. The All Powerful One revealed Himself and empowered the disciples to be witnesses.

Daily Devotion

Jose, also known as Papa Trikey, was one of the most powerful witch doctors in Cuba. A third-generation witch doctor, Jose grew up learning curses while never hearing of Jesus. Out of fear and the belief that Jose was beyond redemption, no Christian had ever tried telling him about Jesus.

One day a nine-year-old boy placed a church flier into Jose's hand and invited him to come to a church service to experience God's power. Jose, wanting this power, went to church that night. Though most people moved away from him out of fear, the pastor and the little boy showed Jose love and acceptance.

At the end of the sermon, Jose expressed his wish to begin living for Jesus. Delivered from the darkness in him, Jose destroyed all his idols and altars. Now, Jose leads a house church because of a little boy's invitation.

Never underestimate the power of inviting someone to church. Even if you hear a hundred refusals, one acceptance can alter a person's eternal destination. Pray about someone you could invite to church this week.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Matthew 28:20

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Biblical Insight

The apostles often focused more on the end of the world than on reaching a lost world. In Matthew 24:3, the disciples asked about the end of the age. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus told them He would be with them until the end of the age.

Such assurances did not stop their questions about last things. In Acts 1:6-7, the apostles asked about the restoration of the kingdom. Jesus told them it was not for them to know the times or the seasons. He quickly moved their focus from witnessing the end of the world to witnessing to all the world. We too should be more evangelistic than apocalyptic.

Daily Devotion

Between the Middle East peace deals, the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem, a pandemic, and a 27 percent increase in natural disasters, many people have become fixated on the end of time. This fact has become evident on Twitter where #RaptureAnxiety has trended multiple times since 2017. Throughout the different tweets are stories of people who believed the Rapture would come so soon that they neglected to plan for an education, did not buy a house, resigned from a job, or maxed out their credit cards. For others, the fear of the Rapture has influenced their decisions to marry or have children. One young mother shared that she lived in fear of never seeing her son grow up.

As saints, the Rapture should not be a source of anxiety for us. The apostle Paul said the return of the Lord is to be a source of encouragement (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Does the Rapture fill you with anxiety or encouragement?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

2.3

DISCIPLINES OF A DISCIPLE

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God expects us to have the right motives when we give, pray, and fast.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will seek to honor the Lord through my daily spiritual disciplines.



FOCUS VERSES: Matthew 6:4, 6, 18

⁴That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

.....

⁶But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

.....

¹⁸That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 6:1-18



Lesson Title: Disciplines of a Disciple

Icebreaker: Besides the devil, who do you see as the biggest villain in the Bible?

I. GIVING

A. The Importance of Giving

» *Why is the topic of giving sometimes difficult to address in our twenty-first century culture?*

B. The Proper Motive for Giving

C. I Will Honor the Lord through Giving

» *How can we properly see giving as a privilege, not a burden or obligation?*

II. PRAYING

A. The Importance of Prayer

B. The Proper Motive for Praying

» *What has been your experience with prayer? Is prayer difficult or a joy for you?*

C. I Will Draw Close to the Lord through Prayer

III. FASTING

A. The Importance of Fasting

B. The Proper Motive for Fasting

» *How often should we fast? If we cannot fast meals because of medical conditions, what other ways can we fast?*

C. I Will Honor the Lord through My Daily Spiritual Disciplines

» *Which spiritual discipline helps you feel closest to God?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see our spiritual disciplines like He sees them
- For God to help us to be faithful in our spiritual disciplines

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 6:1-18

Many people devote a great deal of attention to the commandments of the Bible, attempting to ensure they follow them. While such practices prove essential to our walk with God, we must also pay attention to our motives. In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus carefully addressed proper motivation in discussing prayer, fasting, and giving. In doing so, Jesus reflected a long tradition of seeking proper motivation from the Old Testament while foreshadowing what happens to those whose motives remain less than pure.

A number of people in the Hebrew Scriptures became very caught up with offering sacrifices. They examined a sacrifice to make sure it was without spot or blemish. However, these individuals often neglected to examine their own hearts.

In Matthew 15:8-9, Jesus quoted the words of Isaiah 29:13, “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” Jesus spoke these words about people who prayed for show instead of piety. Anyone listening to the prayers of these individuals might have viewed them as solid examples of righteousness, yet their hearts told a very different story.

Jesus addressed this issue again in John 12. Although He quoted different verses from Isaiah, the message remained the same. Some of the chief rulers believed on Jesus, but they did not confess Him because they feared the Pharisees might put them out of the synagogue. John clearly stated the problem with their motivations, “For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:43).

The apostle Paul addressed this issue in Ephesians 6:6-7. He said we should not be men pleasers, but we should do “the will of God from the heart.” With good will, we should do service “as to the Lord, and not to men.”

Our intentions are very important, but they can be difficult to determine. Therefore, we must examine ourselves and make sure we are not simply going through motions of obedience. Although we respect pastors, other church leaders, and saints, we must ensure we are not worshiping or engaging in acts of righteousness simply to please them or curry their favor. Motives matter.

JESUS REFLECTED A LONG TRADITION OF SEEKING PROPER MOTIVATION FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT WHILE FORESHADOWING WHAT HAPPENS TO THOSE WHOSE MOTIVES REMAIN LESS THAN PURE.

DAY 1

Matthew 6:1

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

Biblical Insight

The King James Version of the Bible translates Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:1 with a focus on giving. Although Matthew 6:2 also refers to giving, this verse provides a specific example of a much larger problem. Jesus encouraged His listeners to exercise caution by not practicing acts of piety before others. The chapter goes on to reveal that those who are showy through giving, prayer, fasting, or any other means will lose out on their reward by putting the focus on themselves rather than drawing attention to God.

Daily Devotion

In Genesis chapter eleven, we read of the people finding an area and settling down. As days progressed, their discontent grew. They began attempting to reach Heaven on their own. They also started constructing a tower in hopes of gaining recognition.

A great way to be seen is to go up higher, so that is what they endeavored to do. They began to construct a fortress that would elevate them. "Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name" (Genesis 11:4). Their efforts were a means of being seen and known. As you can imagine, this attempt failed. What originated as a group project soon became a confused mess because God was not the center.

We can change the world in positive ways by working together God's way. Unity is part of what will help us grow toward glory. Taking control that belongs to God and serving for our own recognition will have us lost and confused. We are called to bring Him glory.

What we do daily should be a part of constructing His kingdom and not one of this world or for ourselves. Make a list of the way you will spend your time today and reflect on if God is glorified through your life.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 6:2-3

² Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

³ But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.

Biblical Insight

In Greek, the word *synagogue* means “to gather together.” Many believe we can trace synagogue origins to the Babylonian exile. Despite the reasonableness of this argument, we have no concrete evidence for this assertion—although some point to Ezekiel’s meetings with the elders as potential confirmation (Ezekiel 8:1).

The New Testament provides clear evidence of the synagogue. Historically, Judaism required a *minyan* or a group of ten men to form a synagogue. The number ten derives from the ten faithless spies who did not believe the Hebrews could conquer the Promised Land (Numbers 13). Synagogue members should have remembered the faithlessness of these men rather than focusing on prideful flashiness.

Daily Devotion

From the time we were toddlers, our guardians and many other choice adults have pushed the concept of the importance of sharing. Sharing really is significant, but let’s spin the worldview just a bit. Picture a society where in some instances we did *not* share.

Take a step back and observe this concept in light of how simple things used to be. If you were alive at the time, try to remember what life was like before smartphones, social media, and filters. You likely did not have the same worries. People did not reveal and spread news, good or bad, as quickly. Though there were still problems everywhere, it wasn’t as readily accessible.

There also was not room for flaunting one’s accomplishments or good deeds. Media is not evil in and of itself; it has its place and benefits. Nevertheless, if it is used to show your goodness and “selflessness” to those on the other side of the screen, that recognition is likely where the reward ends. You can serve God and make a difference without anyone knowing. If others do know, let it because someone else shared of your kindness and generosity.

It has been said that “sharing is caring,” but sometimes it really is not. Pray today about your social media presence and if a time of quiet is in order.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Matthew 6:5-8

⁵ And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

⁶ But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

⁷ But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

⁸ Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

Biblical Insight

Jesus' charge to pray secretly to the Father, who is in secret (hidden), may not seem like a prohibition against idolatry. However, idolatry occurs when someone or something other than the one true God receives praise. Devout Jews so despised idolatry that they forbade making images of the divine. God did not want to be depicted because people might worship an image, turning their attention to something created rather than to the Creator. Therefore, those desiring to be seen of others had transformed themselves into living idols because they attempted to steal worship from God. Humble acts like praying, fasting, and giving turned to prideful pandering for praise.

Daily Devotion

The Word of God instructs us not to serve in an effort to be praised by men. Though we are called to answer to those in leadership, we ultimately serve the Creator, not His created. Their acknowledgment is not what we should seek.

Platforms are not negative in and of themselves, but they can be if someone makes an idol of them. Remember, what we do for God's kingdom does not need to be acknowledged by men for it to be meaningful. We can change the world without ever publicizing it or having people know our name.

Humility is precious in God's eyes. We can rest assured that He sees, even if He is the only one who does. There is a lot to be said about those inconspicuous victories—ones the public eye may never see, but God is pleased with. What we do in those quiet places is very telling of the kind of life we live out loud.

What does your quiet time with God look like?

What are some ways you can connect with Him and serve Him that the world may never know about?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Matthew 6:9-13

⁹ After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

¹⁰ Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Biblical Insight

Some people quoting the Lord's Prayer speak of forgiving debts as we forgive our debtors, while others speak of forgiving trespasses as we forgive our trespassers. The difference in translation may reflect the contrast between a ruling class and a merchant class. Aristocrats owned land and despised trespassing. In contrast, the merchant class owned businesses and had clients indebted to them.

Most Greek scholars argue that the debtors translation more fully reflects Jesus' intentions, especially considering the Parable of the Debtors (Matthew 18:21-35). However, trespasses can also work based on the idea of defining sin as missing the mark. So both renderings may have some merit.

Daily Devotion

Forgiveness is a funny thing. It is something believers are called to do, but it can be extremely difficult. What can you do when forgiveness makes absolutely no sense? How are you supposed to forgive when you are so betrayed, slandered, hurt, and angry that you feel you can never let it go?

Jesus did, and He still does. We are to mirror our lives to His. Though it is beyond comprehension, we are to forgive, even in the harshest of emotional climates.

Forgiving a person does not excuse the person's wrong or even make all your sorrow subside. However, forgiving the person frees you, and that is a beautiful feeling. God and the right people will stand with you as you navigate whatever your pain looks like as you heal and move forward.

Whatever the correct semantics of debtors or trespassers may be, mercy is more than necessary. Take an inventory of your heart. Are there any people you need to forgive? Perhaps they have passed away or are unsafe to contact. Remember, you do not always have to face them to release it.

Can you recall any ways you have been forgiven that remind you how important grace truly is? Pray and write down some ways you can let go of offenses.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶ Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

¹⁷ But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

¹⁸ That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Biblical Insight

The English cognate of the Greek word *hypocrite* refers to the practice of actors wearing large masks to play different parts. Pretending to be somber while fasting seems like a very hypocritical thing to do, but it took several hundred years before the English word took on this meaning. Jesus' words about hypocrites and fasting possess a certain irony. People trying to draw attention to themselves for fasting put on a mask of somberness. Jesus encouraged those who were fasting for the right reasons to mask their practice by applying oil and washing their faces to avoid giving any hint that they were fasting. One mask is acceptable; the other is not.

Daily Devotion

Have you ever met people who are way too open about their fasting? They let you know they cannot eat the cake you are eating or drink a coffee like you are enjoying because they are ever so holy and want everyone to know. If you have experienced this, you understand what Jesus was referring to in this passage of Scripture.

Since the year 2020, people around the world have become accustomed to masks. Masks are used as a mode of protection from sickness. However, in the metaphorical sense, masks are nothing new. Some people use the wrong ones often, even in church circles, without ever having their faces physically covered.

Jesus encouraged fasting and sacrifice in whatever capacity people feel led. He also admonished people to do so in a manner that does not draw attention or bring them glory. Fasting is not easy, but it also should not be treated as a chore or used for self-recognition.

Choose your mask wisely. One day you will trade in the correct one for a crown.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

2.4

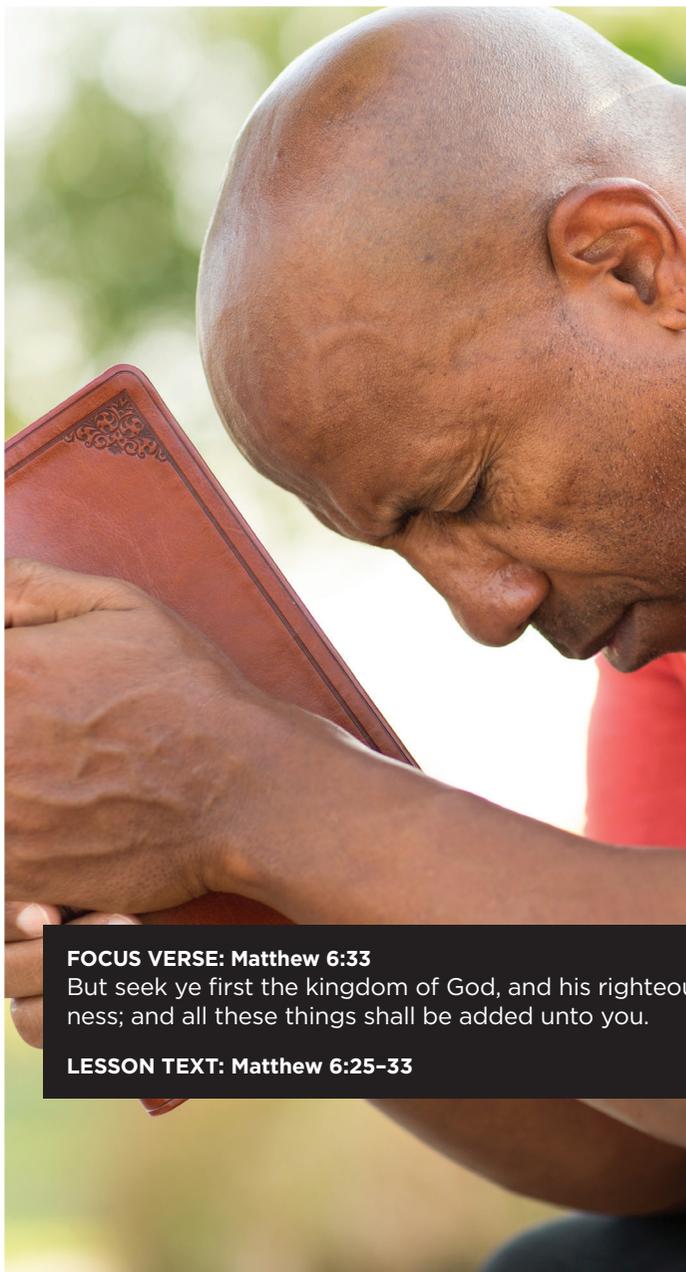
THE KINGDOM FIRST

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God has promised to take care of all our needs.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will make the kingdom of God the first priority in my life.



FOCUS VERSE: Matthew 6:33

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 6:25-33



Lesson Title: The Kingdom First

Icebreaker: What were you worried about most as a child? What about now?

I. A WORLD OF WORRY

» *What are some things you believe create frustration and worry in people today?*

A. The Worries of the Inner Life

» *What are some ways we can compensate for painful or abusive experiences of our childhood?*

B. The Worries of the Outer Life

» *Why are human relationships often challenging to manage? Can you think of some approaches to relationships that can help us navigate the difficulties they create?*

C. I Will Not Let Worry Control My Life

» *Why is it our responsibility to determine the kind of life we live? What are some positive actions we can take to counter stress and worry?*

II. THE CURE FOR WORRY

A. The Premise of the Kingdom of God

B. The Priority and Promise of the Kingdom of God

» *How does a focus on adoring and worshiping God minimize or eliminate worry, stress, and challenges from our lives?*

C. I Will Make the Kingdom of God the First Priority in My Life

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us make Him and His kingdom our priority
- For God to help us trust Him to provide for our needs

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 6:25-33

When we read the Gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus demonstrating several different teaching styles. In the Sermon on the Mount, He acted as a rabbi. The Great Teacher of the Law used a rabbinic formula when He said, “Ye have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you” (Matthew 5:21-48). This setup allowed Jesus to address some very serious issues and take His teaching and our thoughts and actions to new levels.

Jesus also employed pedagogical tactics from the Wisdom Tradition when speaking about the kingdom of Heaven. This choice of genre worked well because the courts of kings often featured short wisdom sayings that taught protocol and decorum. At the same time, wisdom has far-reaching practical applications. Many wise sayings often arose from the common people. Women likely taught important life lessons to their children through these proverbs. Quick and easy-to-remember proverbs could be readily recalled during various life situations. Therefore, Jesus used proverbs to connect His points about God’s kingdom with every day, ordinary speech that appealed to His listeners.

Proverbs often use animals to prove points. One of the most famous examples appears in Proverbs 6:6, where the ant represents a good work ethic in the face of laziness. Birds present an interesting contrast with ants in the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 6. They neither sow, nor reap, nor gather in barns, yet the Lord feeds them (Matthew 6:26). Jesus was not encouraging idleness, but He wanted His listeners to appreciate how the Lord provides for them.

Jesus also gave a shout out to Solomon, the king of Proverbs, in His wisdom teachings. Jesus compared the lilies of the field to the wise monarch’s clothes. Even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed so magnificently (Matthew 6:28-29).

Although Jesus used proverbs to teach the people, He went beyond mere pithy sayings and explained their meaning to the audience. Proverbs often stood alone, and speakers stated them with the goal of listeners understanding them and applying them. Jesus did something extra to help the audience understand the kingdom of God. If they sought God’s kingdom first, then everything else would be added. They had no need to worry.

WHEN WE READ THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW,
WE SEE JESUS DEMONSTRATING SEVERAL
DIFFERENT TEACHING STYLES.

DAY 1

Matthew 6:25-26

²⁵ Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

²⁶ Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

Biblical Insight

An optimistic Jesus challenged the pessimism of His audience, who not only had personal reasons for feeling down but also were influenced by Greco-Roman culture. The Greek poet Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer, believed humanity's best days had passed, replaced by trouble, hard work, and sorrow. People quarreled, dishonored their parents, and believed in the survival of the fittest instead of true justice.

Pessimism also related to the way time ravaged the body. The Greek word *chronos* provided English with "chronology," referring to time. Tellingly, Chronos, the personification of time, devoured his offspring. Only one, who promised eternal life, could defeat both pessimism and death—Jesus Christ.

Daily Devotion

If you have ever attempted to return a product, you know it is not always the easiest process. Limits and qualifications must be met in order to receive a refund or credit. Clothes, shoes, furniture, some food items, and other goods can, in certain cases, be compensated.

Even with Amazon's creation of "hassle-free" returns, there are still things we can never get back. Words are non-refundable and likewise is time. Once our words and time are spent, there is nothing we can do to get them back. It is essential to use both wisely.

When we give our lives to Christ, there is, however, a fantastic element allotted to us. We get the promise and anticipation of eternal life, where time will never be a concern again. When we reach Heaven's streets, we will worry no longer about what we felt we might have missed out on here on Earth. Goodness is there. Life everlasting is awaiting us. Time is fleeting here, but on the other side, there will be goodness and glory forevermore.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 6:27

Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

Biblical Insight

In Matthew 6:27, the word translated “taking thought” or “worry” can also mean “to be anxious” or “distracted.” While we have all felt the anxiousness created by worry, perhaps we fail to realize the distraction caused by worry. Worry prevents us from focusing on the things of God.

Worry can rob us of the assurance that the Lord cares for us. It can also rob us of precious moments in life by the distraction it causes. Even though we have no power to add a single hour to our lives, we can redeem time by avoiding worry.

Daily Devotion

In our finite humanity, we may find ourselves struggling with anxiety—the debilitating, heart-pounding, plan-canceling kind. What if the plane crashes? What if my friends betray me? What if I cannot pay my bills? Did I say the wrong thing? Will my family be okay? Will the world ever improve?

So. Many. Questions.

These questions are just snapshots of how anxiety and worry can manifest. Maybe you or a loved one have experienced anxiety in a different way. You are not alone, but you also do not have to live in that place. There is a better way.

The Scripture poses the question in Matthew 6:27, “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?” In other words, who among us can make our situations any better by worrying? The answer is none of us can. If we worry about what God already has control over, we are simply giving our non-refundable time and energy to something we cannot change anyway.

Trust God. He feeds birds. He dresses lilies. He takes care of what belongs to Him.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Matthew 6:28-29

²⁸ And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

²⁹ And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Biblical Insight

Despite Solomon's extensive wealth, his royal robes could not compare to the flowers of the field, and the renowned king created some of the greatest worry over finances in the history of the nation of Israel. Because Solomon taxed the Israelites so heavily during his reign, the people asked his son Rehoboam to reduce their tax burden (1 Kings 12). When Rehoboam refused, he found his territory greatly reduced as the northern tribes split off and created the kingdom of Israel, leaving Rehoboam with the smaller kingdom of Judah. Jesus assured people in the kingdom of God that they could avoid the financial worries that led to division.

Daily Devotion

Money and taxes have been issues of contention from the time they were created. First Timothy 6:10 reminds us, "The love of money is the root of all evil." While money pays the bills and buys groceries, the truth is more money does not equal more happiness.

In the economy of God, there is great wealth simply in knowing Him and being part of His kingdom. He takes care of His people and loves to provide for them. While serving Him does not exempt us from financial woes or troubles of any sort, it does provide peace in knowing He will be there when we do walk through those valleys. He does not want us to fret and lose sleep over the problems He has already solved.

In what ways do you need to trust God with your finances?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Matthew 6:30–32

³⁰ Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

³¹ Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

³² (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

Biblical Insight

Some of Jesus' listeners might have remembered Ooheleth's words in Ecclesiastes 2:24–26. Ooheleth spoke of people eating and drinking and finding satisfaction in their labor. Many people identify Ooheleth as Solomon, so the words of a mighty king with an opulent palace might not have convinced people who had struggled to find their next meal.

Therefore, we see the power of Jesus' identity as fully God and fully man. Those who realize Jesus' identity feel empowered by the assurances of the King of kings and reassured by the encouragement of one who has experienced the struggles of humanity.

Daily Devotion

A saying often used when referring to one's character is: to know them is to love them. When we truly understand a person, we realize the person's likes, dislikes, and personality. We know who the person is at the very core.

When we recognize Jesus for who He truly is, it changes everything. He becomes the father we may have never had. He becomes the gentle friend we are longing for. He turns out to be the one who is familiar with our grief and suffering because He has faced it too. He shows Himself as the strong, capable provider we are seeking. He is everything we need, and we can experience that closeness with Him.

When we are in a meaningful relationship with someone, we relish time spent with that person. Little conversations are a big deal because simply being in that person's presence brings joy. When it comes to our relationship with the King of all kings, we get that opportunity daily. The more we know Him, the more we want to know and the better we are for it. To know Jesus is to love Him.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Matthew 6:33

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Biblical Insight

In the Bible we read of a couple instances where kings offered to give women up to half of their kingdoms. Ahasuerus made Esther such an offer in Esther 5:3. In Mark 6:23, Herod made the same promise to the daughter of Herodias. While Esther wisely chose to save her people, Herodias's daughter requested the head of John the Baptist—much to Herod's consternation.

Wisely, Jesus never made such promises when talking about His kingdom. Instead, Jesus told followers to seek His kingdom first as well as righteousness. Doing so would open the door for other desires to be added.

Daily Devotion

God loves to give His children good gifts. Many times He grants us the desires of our hearts, but He will never do so to the detriment of our souls, our well-being, or that of others. Our requisitions need to align with His will and purpose for our lives and for His kingdom.

In the seasons when God does not give us what we want, He teaches some of the greatest lessons we will ever learn. Only our gracious Savior knows the future. He knows where our choices would lead us.

What you are seeking may, no doubt, look appealing. You may think your life would be perfect and complete once you've achieved that goal or received that answer. But God sees the full picture.

In His infinite kindness and wisdom, God might just be using a necessary no in order to give you His best yes in the future. If your hands are closed tightly, holding what you think you need, you cannot obtain what He actually has for you, which is always better than you could imagine or plan. Contrary to popular belief, sometimes it is essential to take no for an answer.

Seek God's kingdom, His glory, His face above all else. The rest will follow exactly as He has intended.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

2.5

THE PRIORITY OF OBEDIENCE

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God's Word is the only sure foundation for the Christian life.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will rely on God and not on myself.



FOCUS VERSES: Matthew 7:24; 25:24-25

²⁴ Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.

.....
²⁴ Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed:

²⁵ And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 7:21-27; 25:14-30



Lesson Title: The Priority of Obedience

Icebreaker: Where would you live if you could live anywhere in the world?

I. THE WISDOM OF OBEDIENCE

- A. The Insufficiency of Just Hearing God's Word
 - » *Why do you think God was so upset over Saul's disobedience? Was this Saul's first instance of disobeying God's word?*
- B. The Necessity of Obeying God's Word
- C. I Will Demonstrate Faith through My Obedience
 - » *What are some ways our faith in God and His Word are demonstrated through obedience to God?*

II. THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

- A. A Blessing for Obedience Not Outcome
 - » *How can you use the gifts and abilities God has given you for His glory?*
- B. Self-Reliance, the Enemy of Obedience
 - » *How can self-reliance lure us away from obedience to God? Why must we be certain to keep our talents dedicated to the call of God?*
- C. I Will Rely on God and Not on Myself

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us hear and obey His Word
- For God to help us use the gifts He gave us for His glory

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 7:21–27; 25:14–30

Some people in today's world do not like to follow laws or principles because they find them arbitrary. Although we know that the Bible provides us with a firm foundation from an all-wise King, history reveals many capricious kings and other leaders who created rules without good reasons behind them. Thankfully, the Parable of the Talents reveals a leader who acted with intentionality, not on a whim.

When we read about kings in the Bible, we see many of them acted in their own self-interests, without regard for the facts. Pharaoh decided to enslave the Hebrews, not because they had done anything wrong, but because he feared their growing numbers. Although examples from Egyptian history reveal that groups rose up against the Egyptians, the Hebrews had not behaved in such a manner.

Since the Parable of the Talents focuses on money, King Rehoboam's unwise actions come to mind. During the days of Rehoboam's father, King Solomon, the people of Israel faced a heavy tax burden to support Solomon's building projects, palace, and wealthy status. The people begged Rehoboam to reduce their financial obligations. Rather than listening to the wise elders, Rehoboam heeded the advice of his contemporaries and spoke threateningly to the people. As a result, the kingdom divided into Israel and Judah.

Despite these examples from the Bible and others that appear in history, the leader in the parable acted very wisely. He apportioned assignments based on the varying abilities of the various servants. Some might think the leader was unfair, but he clearly created opportunities for advancement based on success.

The leader gave the least servant a wonderful opportunity. Then he judged the unwise servant according to his own words. When the servant said he knew his leader reaped where he had not sowed, the leader quoted the servant's own words to condemn him.

Perhaps most striking, the leader would have accepted the bare minimum from the one talent servant. The servant could have invested the money and at least earned interest. The leader in the parable represents our Lord, who treats us fairly based on our abilities, will judge us according to our own words, and is willing to forgive us for less-than-adequate work. We serve a very intentional God.

WHEN WE READ ABOUT KINGS IN THE BIBLE, WE SEE MANY OF THEM ACTED IN THEIR OWN SELF-INTERESTS, WITHOUT REGARD FOR THE FACTS.

DAY 1

Matthew 7:21-23

²¹ Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

²² Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?

²³ And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Biblical Insight

Jesus revealed a key truth about the power of His name and entering the kingdom of Heaven. Only those who do the will of the Father will gain access. Although some have prophesied, driven out demons, and performed miracles in His name, they will not enter because Jesus never knew them.

Jesus will “profess” that He never knew them, a word meaning “tell plainly,” “acknowledge,” and “confess.” The specific Greek form also appears in Matthew 10:32 as “confess,” where Jesus promised to acknowledge those who acknowledge Him. In Revelation 3:5, Jesus will not blot out the names of overcomers but will “confess” their names.

Daily Devotion

As technology and modernization progress, distinct and visible change comes too. Social media provides easier and quicker access to the good deeds people do. Do you want to post a picture of you feeding the homeless? Facebook has a platform for that. Did you help an elderly lady cross the street while your buddy took a video? Instagram is there for you. The list is lengthy of ways people can share the positive things they do “on behalf of Jesus.”

Even with these avenues available, many people are not seeking recognition when they do good deeds. Their acts of kindness will never be seen by eyes aside from the eyes of God. But no matter how many helpful endeavors you embark on, prophesies you share, or ways you serve in His name, those things do not make up your ticket to Glory.

God loves and longs for us to do these things, but His main purpose and goal is for each of us to know Him fully, deeply, and unapologetically. On the road to hear “well done,” we hope He will not say, “I never knew you.” Rather, we want to hear Him say, “Welcome home.” In order to get there, we must know Him here.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 7:24-27

²⁴ Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

²⁵ And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

²⁶ And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

²⁷ And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

Biblical Insight

Although Jesus talked about building literal houses on rock and sand, the word translated “house” in Matthew 7:24-27 also refers to the family. In fact, rereading this passage and replacing the word *house* with *family* would be a good exercise for seeing a significant part of Jesus’ intent.

Every house will face the ravages of the weather. Every family will face outside forces that can damage or destroy it. Many of these challenges arise from naturally occurring issues that can happen in any family. Although the weather and situations can change, the Rock Christ Jesus remains firm. We must build our families on the Rock.

Daily Devotion

There is a fascinating story of a home in Gilchrist, Texas, that was left standing after a massive hurricane years ago. This house was the only one remaining at the end of the storm. Destruction had wreaked havoc all around, but this house endured because of the way it was created.

The foundation and materials matter.

When it comes to building your life, what you use to sustain it makes all the difference. A house built on the sand will wash away when the floods come. A dwelling that is not undergirded with durable pillars and sturdy walls can crumble when strong winds blow.

The same rings true regarding our spiritual existence and our families. We must have solid foundations, meaningful structures, and lives that are built upon the solid Rock of our salvation. When the storms of life blow, we will stand if we are fortified on the foundation of the Father.

Are there any areas in your life that need reconstruction and remodeling?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Matthew 25:14-15

¹⁴ For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.

¹⁵ And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

Biblical Insight

Just as the master in the parable departed, even so Jesus would ascend. Like the servants using their talents, Jesus' disciples needed to use their abilities for their Lord. We all have God-given gifts that reflect our abilities; however, Jesus goes beyond our natural talents.

The word translated "ability" in Matthew 25:15 comes from the Greek word *dunamis*. While the context of the parable shows the appropriateness of the translation "ability," *dunamis* can also be translated as "power" and even gave rise to the English word "dynamite." In Acts 1:8, Jesus told the disciples they would receive power through the infilling of the Holy Spirit. The Lord enhances our innate abilities through the "dynamite" of the Holy Ghost.

Daily Devotion

People in the medical field understand extreme adrenaline rushes. There have been cases when a car was crushing someone after a car accident, and a person ran in and lifted the vehicle in superhero fashion. These examples and others portray the realities that can occur, but these scenarios are outside of natural, everyday human abilities.

When it comes to our walk with God, when we are filled with the Holy Ghost, we receive supernatural power that could not be possible by any other means. With that power comes a great source of strength. Never underestimate the power and peace that come with His presence.

When you are born again, you are given a gift. You can move mountains and vanquish enemies. You are a warrior, and you are not in the fight alone. In every situation, you can conquer and bring the light and love of Jesus.

"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you" (Acts 1:8).

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Matthew 25:23-27

²³ His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

²⁴ Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed:

²⁵ And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

²⁶ His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed:

²⁷ Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

Biblical Insight

A reckoning occurred in the parable when the lord returned. Some translations state that the lord came back to settle accounts. The word translated “reckoning” or “accounts” comes from the Greek word *logos*, which can also mean “word” as in “preach the Word.”

Therefore, we see an interesting double meaning in the text. God has given all of us the Word to bring increase to His kingdom. One day the Lord will return, and all the servants must give an account for how they have used the Word. We cannot bury the Word or hide it. We must proclaim it.

Daily Devotion

How beautiful it must have been to have walked with Jesus in the flesh. He was tangible and accessible. He was able to respond to questions and give answers in real time. For a person who appreciates immediacy, that must have been delightful.

When Jesus ascended to Heaven after His resurrection, His fleshly, palpable exterior went with Him. However, He left His Holy Spirit and His ever-accessible connection to abide eternally. He also made us to be His hands and feet here on Earth. While He is still in control, we have the opportunity to spread His gospel the way He did, minus the walking hundreds of miles through the desert heat part.

We are called to share His Word in whatever way we have been entrusted to do so. Perhaps it is in evangelizing, singing, writing, or teaching. Perhaps it is in being kind to those who are not kind to us or any number of positive avenues.

How are you using your giftings to reach this world?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Matthew 25:28-30

²⁸ Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

²⁹ For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

³⁰ And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Biblical Insight

Matthew wrote in Greek, but Jesus spoke Aramaic and knew Hebrew. The Greek word translated “unprofitable” or “worthless” in Matthew 25:30 may be associated with the Hebrew word *Belial* rendered as *Beliar* in Aramaic. The word literally means “without worth” and refers to wickedness.

Numerous verses of the Old Testament speak of the sons of Belial when talking about people who behaved wickedly. While the servant in the parable seems lazy instead of wicked, the association between the two words reveals a key message that Jesus’ original audience likely understood. Even English connects wickedness and worthlessness in the saying “an idle mind is the devil’s workshop.”

Daily Devotion

Rest is important to the Lord. There is, however, a difference between rest and idleness. A person who is resting has designated time to rest, being intentional and knowing it serves a purpose.

In contrast, by some definitions, idleness is knowing there are things that should be done and blatantly ignoring them. In those situations, our minds are tired and uncrowded. That is when the enemy can whisper in ways he otherwise would not be able to.

Perhaps it is time to inventory how you are using your quiet intervals. Are you listening to the voice of the Lord and refilling your cup, or are you using that time for selfish gain or activities that are not pleasing to Him?

God encourages sabbath but likely is not a fan of frivolous idleness. How are you using your restful seasons?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

3.1

I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

Jesus calls disciples to follow Him.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will be a disciple of Jesus.



FOCUS VERSE: Matthew 16:18

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 16:13–20; Luke 5:1–11



Lesson Title: I Will Build My Church

Icebreaker: What are your favorite outdoor hobbies?

- I. JESUS WENT LOOKING FOR DISCIPLES
 - A. Jesus Entered Peter's Boat and Taught the People.
 - B. Peter Launched Out into the Deep and Let Down His Net
 - C. The Miracle of Fish Revealed Jesus' Identity
 - » *Have you had an encounter with God like Peter did? What feelings or thoughts did it evoke within you?*
 - D. I Will Worship Jesus for Who He Is
 - » *What have you left behind to follow Jesus?*
- II. JESUS CAME LOOKING FOR US
 - A. Jesus Came to Build His Church
 - » *What does it mean to be called out and called together? How do you practice faith as a community of believers rather than an individual attending church services?*
 - B. His Church Is Built Upon the Revelation of Who He Is
 - C. We Are His Church; It Is Not a Building
 - » *How can you intentionally share church with others besides inviting them to your local place of worship?*
 - D. I Will Be a Disciple of Jesus

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us follow Him with our whole heart
- For God to help us make other disciples for Him

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 5:1-11

The speculation surrounding the identity of Jesus in Matthew 16:13-14 proves significant in understanding how many people perceived the actions of Jesus. The disciples' answers—John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets—revealed the countercultural nature of Jesus. Jesus ran into trouble with the authorities similar to the way these prophets faced difficulties with leaders.

John the Baptist faced the challenge of dealing with King Herod. John criticized Herod for his unlawful marriage to his brother Philip's wife. Herod imprisoned John but did not execute him because he feared the great multitude that counted John as a prophet. When the daughter of Herodias danced before Herod, the king promised to give her anything to the half of the kingdom. After consulting with her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist in a charger. Although sorrowful, Herod had to respect the oath he had made before so many witnesses.

The Bible connects John the Baptist with Elijah, and the New Testament prophet dressed and acted very much like his Old Testament predecessor. Elijah also had his contentions with kings and queens. Elijah criticized King Ahab for having Naboth killed so the king could steal Naboth's vineyard. Queen Jezebel played a large role in setting events in motion that led to the killing of Naboth. She enacted a death warrant on Elijah and attempted to have the prophet killed. The Lord preserved the prophet, but Elijah found life difficult due to loneliness during his time on the run. He struggled with depression. Then God told Elijah of others who had not done the popular thing; they had remained steadfast, refusing to bow to Baal.

Jeremiah also challenged the status quo. When other prophets predicted the Babylonians would not destroy Jerusalem and the city would be saved due to its inviolability, Jeremiah countered their prophecies and spoke of the coming exile. He even predicted the death of one of his opponents. Jeremiah also wrote a letter to those already living in exile, telling them they would prosper. Jeremiah's actions led to his imprisonment and to many hardships throughout his life.

In Matthew 16:14, in looking at the various responses to the identity of Jesus, we see He stood in good company with faithful prophets who faced persecution. Jesus, however, was much more than a prophet. By revelation, Peter knew Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God.

JESUS RAN INTO TROUBLE WITH THE
AUTHORITIES SIMILAR TO THE WAY THESE
PROPHETS FACED DIFFICULTIES WITH
LEADERS.

DAY 1

Matthew 16:13-16

¹³ When Jesus came into the coasts of Cæsarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

¹⁴ And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

¹⁵ He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

¹⁶ And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Biblical Insight

Jesus' question, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" seems like an opportunity to affirm faith. However, the question could have been dangerous. While answers like John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets might be acceptable, Peter's proclamation of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" could have spelled trouble.

Caesarea Philippi was named after Caesar, and Romans practiced emperor worship. The area included a sanctuary for the Greek god Pan and several temples devoted to Baal worship. Peter affirmed one God while standing in an area strongly associated with false gods.

Daily Devotion

In the days when Jesus, in the flesh, walked the earth, there were quite a few "rulers" with inferiority complexes. They had heard of the Messiah and felt threatened by Him. They were concerned about the chatter they heard around town.

When Jesus asked the question, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" the response could have gone really well or really poorly, depending on whom He asked. Some said He was a prophet, priest, King, and the long-awaited Savior. Others labeled Him as a heretic, one who healed when He was not supposed to, a rule breaker, and a misfit.

Peter proclaimed Jesus to be "the Son of the living God," which was and is true. Certain leaders and followers found that to be incredibly offensive and off-putting. Some did not grasp the authority that was in their midst. They exchanged the truth for a false, watered-down version of power and completely missed the identity of who was right in front of them.

Who do you say Jesus is? Is He the main source of authority in your life, or do you give away His seat at His rightful throne to someone or something else?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Matthew 16:17-18

¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

¹⁸ And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Biblical Insight

Most readers of Jesus' proclamation that the gates of Hell would not prevail against the church may not realize the significance of the location of Caesarea Philippi for such a statement. A cave at Caesarea Philippi had a very ominous reputation. Many people viewed this cave as the gateway to the underworld. They even thought some gods resided there during the winter.

When Jesus boldly made His affirmation about the church, many of His listeners might have thought they were literally near the gates of Hell. Even today Jesus stands with the church at the gates of Hell and beyond. And the church prevails.

Daily Devotion

The Word of God is solid and unchanging. What was written in the days of Jesus' earthly tenure is still applicable today. The church was being added to daily in those days, but still much sin abounded. Doesn't that sound familiar? In the middle of the good, there were and still are shadows of the Fall.

In Bible times, there were literal locations that when spoken of could strike fear into the hearts of the people. They believed only Jesus could deal with those locations and circumstances. At one of those locations, Jesus declared the church would prevail.

It is vital to remember that the gates of Hell, in any circumstance, will not prevail. Evil may come against our homes, our minds, our marriages, our health, politics, the sanctity of life, or any other element of life. The gates of Hell still cannot prevail against God and His church.

Stand strong in knowing that when you are in the body of Christ, you will triumph.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Matthew 16:19–20

¹⁹ And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

²⁰ Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.

Biblical Insight

Some translations of Matthew 16:20 record Jesus telling the disciples not to let anyone know He was the Messiah. Others record Him informing them not to tell anyone He was the Christ. The words are interchangeable. The Hebrew root for *Messiah* means “to anoint,” and the Greek root for *Christ* means “to anoint with olive oil.”

We read of kings and priests being anointed in the Old Testament. Isaiah 45:1 even refers to the Persian king Cyrus as anointed. Although Cyrus ushered in a kingdom that would allow the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple, Jesus was the true Messiah from the line of David.

Daily Devotion

Thousands of names refer to the deity, holiness, and perfection of God. He remains the anointed One. His interchangeable, yet completely solidified nature allows Him to be whatever is required in that present moment.

In the Book of Exodus, we find the story of Moses and the burning bush. First of all, seeing a plant on fire might have caused some concern. Hearing a voice coming from it could have easily intensified the terror. However, Moses approached with reverence and removed his sandals, understanding the holiness of the encounter. He was given commands by the voice of God. When Moses asked what name to use when he spoke to the children of Israel, the response was simple and sure: “Say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:14).

He was the deliverer. He was the defender. He would be the God who freed them.

His attributes are still indisputable. If you need a healer, He is. If you need a Father, a friend, a provider, a sustainer, He can be that and more. He is the only one who can meet all your needs. Everything you are searching for, the I AM is.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Luke 5:1-3

¹ And it came to pass, that, as the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he stood by the lake of Gennesaret,

² And saw two ships standing by the lake: but the fishermen were gone out of them, and were washing their nets.

³ And he entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's, and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land. And he sat down, and taught the people out of the ship.

Biblical Insight

The Lake of Gennesaret has other names, including the Sea of Galilee, Lake Tiberias, and Lake of Kinneret. The last name refers to the shape of the lake as a lyre or harp, although present-day Israelis think of it as a violin. The body of water is a lake and not a sea. The lake has the distinction of being the lowest situated freshwater lake in the world. Among all lakes in the world, only the Dead Sea is lower. Capernaum and Bethsaida, cities associated with the apostle and former fisherman Simon Peter, are located near the Sea of Galilee.

Daily Devotion

In the beginning of Luke chapter five, a scene is set of Jesus standing at the water's edge. He spotted two boats nearby and invited Himself into the boat of Simon. Then Jesus asked Simon to push away from the safety of the shore.

Can you picture yourself in that situation? In present-day terms, let's say you're driving in your car. A man you have never met, without warning, approaches your car, slides into the passenger's side door, buckles his seatbelt, and then tells you where to drive. You may not instantly agree to these circumstances, right? It was certainly unorthodox. But Jesus defied normal. He embraced different in a way that changed lives.

He has a way of inviting Himself into the middle of where we are and what we are trying to control. He draws close and directs His children into open waters, sometimes for the sake of feeding us, other times for the sake of teaching us. Whether He crawls into your "boat" unannounced, or you extend an open invitation, always make sure to leave room for Him to lead the way.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Luke 5:4-7

⁴ Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught.

⁵ And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.

⁶ And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake.

⁷ And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink.

Biblical Insight

When Jesus encountered Simon Peter and the other fishermen, they had experienced a tough evening, having fished all night with nothing to show for their labors. Galilean fishermen chose nighttime to cast their nets to avoid the heat of the day. Plus, they could gather their fish and take them to the market so the morning customers could buy food for their daily meals.

The fishermen were not the only ones affected by their catch. The poor depended on more economical fair like fish for their daily caloric intake. Jesus would teach the fishermen He called to be disciples to feed the souls and spirits of the people.

Daily Devotion

When Jesus stepped onto the scene, He asked the fishermen to kick their daily routine up a notch. No longer would they simply be fishing for food. He was requesting them to traverse the open waters of the spiritual world to bring in humans. Imagine what it would have been like to be a fly on the wall when that idea was presented. More than likely it did not make sense to them at first. It possibly even caused them to question the sanity or criminal history of the Man standing before them.

Jesus encouraged them to drop their nets and to lay down their perceptions alongside them. Instead, He wanted them to “catch men” (Luke 5:10). They were to seek the lasting, fully attainable life of welcoming people to the pathway of eternal life.

That type of lifestyle is still what Jesus wants of His people today. It may be messy. You may fish all day with not much to show for it. You may feel like you are drowning sometimes or spending hours on end with nothing to show for it. But beauty comes in the waiting and the consistency. Keep casting your line. It will be worth it when we rejoice together in Heaven someday.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

3.2

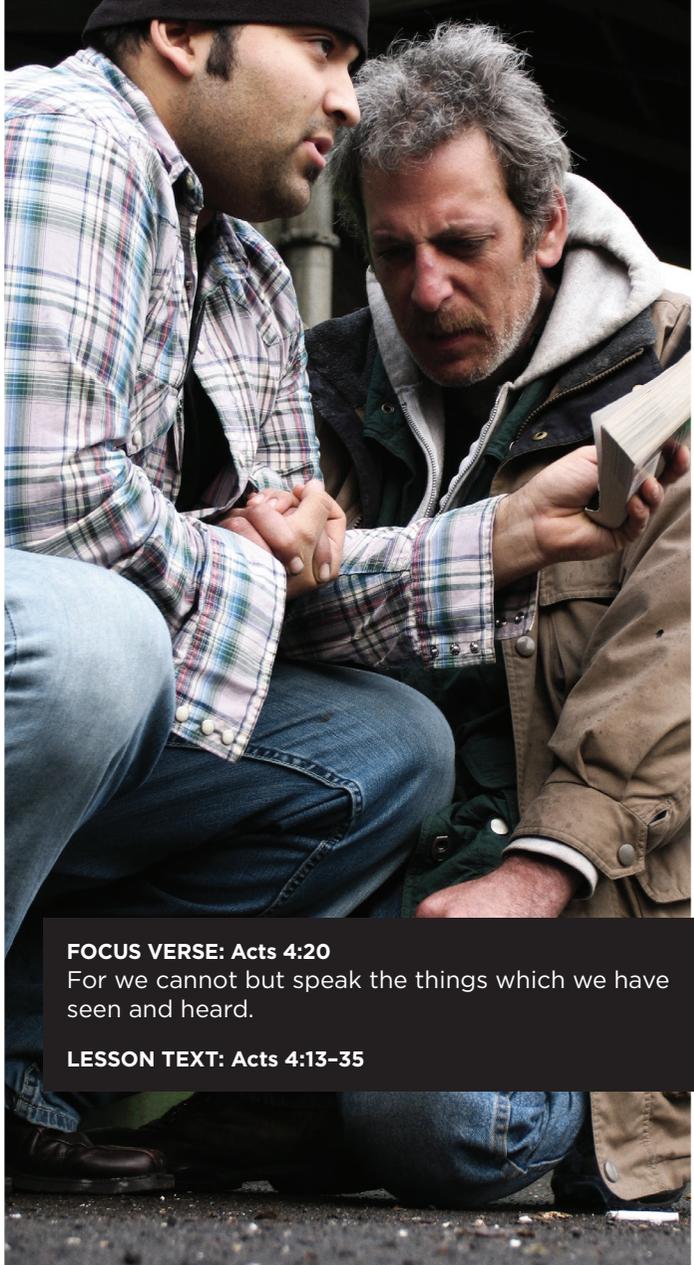
THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God established His church to come together and reveal Him to the world.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will testify to others about the things I hear and see God do.



FOCUS VERSE: Acts 4:20

For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

LESSON TEXT: Acts 4:13-35



Lesson Title: The Purpose of the Church

Icebreaker: If you could witness any miracle, what would it be?

I. THE BOOK OF ACTS CHURCH

- A. The Disciples Ministered to Others and Operated in the Miraculous
 - » *What is the connection between church unity and church growth? How can a church grow in unity and extend that unity to those outside the faith community?*
- B. The Disciples Were Determined to Testify of Jesus
- C. The Church Prayed Together and Cared for One Another
 - » *How does your church see itself? How does that affect the behavior of the church?*
- D. I Will Testify to Others about the Things I Hear and See God Do
 - » *How is your church encouraging a culture that values community despite the heavy cultural emphasis of individualism in the world?*

II. THE CHURCH TODAY

- A. The Miraculous is Still Available to the Church Today
 - » *How does your church intentionally construct an atmosphere where the miraculous can happen at any time in any place?*
- B. We Are Not to Forsake Gathering Together for Worship and Prayer
- C. We Are Called to Care for One Another and Minister to Others
 - » *How is your church currently ministering to the most vulnerable groups in your community? If your church is not providing a ministry to any vulnerable groups, identify the vulnerable groups and discuss a plan to effectively minister to them in their greatest need.*
- D. I Will Help to Fulfill the Purpose of the Church
 - » *How can your local congregation intentionally build a community of faith that equally values the contributions of every member?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to unify us as a church
- For God to use us to minister to our community together

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Acts 4:13-35

The church existed as a new creation in the Book of Acts. As such, the body of believers encountered problems with established religious leaders. Despite the leaders' desire to stop the church, they failed to find any means of legal wrangling whereby they might punish the apostles. Plus, everyone in the city of Jerusalem had heard of the miracle of the lame man's healing (Acts 4), so it could not be denied. They had no choice but to set the apostles free.

When the apostles left and returned to their own company, they gave a testimony of all the things the Lord had done for them. They also engaged in collective prayer, speaking to the Lord in one accord. They began with the words, "Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is." These words proved very crucial in the history of Israel.

While we can easily point back to Genesis 1 and the Creation story, we also see this proclamation in Exodus 20:11 in the Ten Commandments. The verse refers to God resting on the seventh day after Creation and forms the basis for honoring the Sabbath Day and keeping it holy. By ushering in the Torah, God created something new.

We also see a statement about the Creation of the heavens, earth, and seas in Nehemiah 9:6. God was also doing something new during this time. During the Persian period, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls, Ezra reestablished the Torah, and the Jews rebuilt the Temple. The Lord used the people of God for these actions of recreation.

Psalms 146:6 also praises the Maker of Heaven, Earth, the sea, and everything in them, revealing that anytime is a good time to praise the Lord. But we see special times in Scripture that remind us God is always doing something new. The early church certainly knew about God's creative powers as they continued to experience the wave of revival that started on the Day of Pentecost.

The power of the Holy Spirit kept on moving beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, even reaching to the uttermost parts of the earth. The revival not only traversed space, but also time. A great awakening of the Holy Spirit occurred at Azusa Street in the early twentieth century and continues unto this day due to the Maker of Heaven, Earth, the sea, and everything in them.

PSALM 146:6 ALSO PRAISES THE MAKER OF HEAVEN, EARTH, THE SEA, AND EVERYTHING IN THEM, REVEALING THAT ANYTIME IS A GOOD TIME TO PRAISE THE LORD.

DAY 1

Acts 4:13

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.

Biblical Insight

The Sanhedrin's description of the disciples as "unlearned and ignorant men" seems harsh, but it sounds even worse in the original Greek. The word translated "ignorant" provided the English language with the cognate "idiot." The word literally means "unskilled" or "ungifted."

The Sanhedrin expressed great surprise in their dealings with Peter and John and must have considered Jesus an extraordinary teacher to have created such boldness in these men. However, the court was wrong on multiple counts. Peter and John had not only been with Jesus, but Jesus dwelled with them as the Comforter through the gift of the Holy Ghost. They were not ungifted.

Daily Devotion

Have you ever felt misunderstood or rejected? Has someone said something hurtful about you or your ministry? If so, you are in good company. Jesus and His closest followers knew what it was like to be ridiculed, especially when it related to their faith. When you walk closely with Jesus, odds are, you will face those who do not understand and who have cruel things to say. There is hope in the midst of this situation, however. When you live your life according to God's will and His Word, your character and your light will speak for you and outshine whatever negativity you face.

The battle belongs to the Lord, and He will fight for you. Keep doing the right thing, even when it seems difficult. The way you react to how others act is important to how they may view Jesus Christ. No matter what the world says, remember what the Word says.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Acts 4:14-16

¹⁴ And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.

¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves,

¹⁶ Saying, What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it.

Biblical Insight

No testimony is more powerful than a miracle standing in one's very presence. The Sanhedrin were unable to refute the miracle, but still sought to prevent the disciples from spreading their teachings. Seventy-one elders formed the Sanhedrin. Jesus' statement about the stone the builders rejected becoming the head of the corner proves particularly important given the location of the judicial body's meeting place in the Hall of Hewn Stones. Hewn stones could not be used in the Temple because they came in contact with iron (Deuteronomy 27:5; 1 Kings 6:7). This prohibition may have arisen from the potential for graven images to be created with iron, even unintentionally. Others have argued that the use of iron for weapons prevented the metal from being used in a house of peace. Jesus faced iron nails on the cross, but still He served as the Chief Cornerstone.

Daily Devotion

In a heartrending interview, Holocaust survivor Victor Farkas described his days in a concentration camp. He recounted being so hungry that it became one of his main focuses of survival. "When you are hungry, everything else becomes secondary." His statement was simple, but incredibly profound. The notion of being ravenously famished can drive people to do things they would not otherwise do.

Though it does not equate to the atrocities the people faced during the Holocaust, it is certain that hunger needs must be met. In today's passage, we can imagine the desperation the man with the infirmity must have felt. His life was likely filled with unthinkable hardships until he encountered the goodness of God. Everything else became secondary in that moment when he received his healing.

When it comes to your life, are there situations that have led you to desperation or spiritual hunger? Perhaps it is something that makes everything else in life a distant second in comparison—an all-consuming need for which you must have a solution. The good news is that Jesus Christ is the solution, and He never fails. Spend time today confessing your need to Jesus and asking for His help.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Acts 4:23-26

²³ And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them.

²⁴ And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is:

²⁵ Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things?

²⁶ The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.

Biblical Insight

The collective prayer in Acts 4 quotes Psalm 2:1-2. Use of a psalm is not surprising since Jesus spoke to the two men on the road to Emmaus from the psalms. Many prophecies of Jesus can be found in the psalms.

The choice of Psalm 2 proves interesting both for what is said as well as for what is not said. The nations conspired and the rulers rose up. Various kings named Herod tried to stop Jesus and the church. Verse 4 of Psalm 2, not quoted in Acts 4, records that the Lord laughs and scoffs at these conspirators. They could do nothing to stop the Almighty.

Daily Devotion

The introduction to Psalm 2 begins with a question: “Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?” It not only shows the attempts of the ungodly, but it also begs the question of why in the world they were even trying. God very well may have a sense of humor. Can you see Him, looking down from His throne, shrugging His shoulders and wondering what they were doing? He knew their endeavors were frivolous.

When it comes to God fulfilling His plans, nothing can stand in His way. There may be armies of thousands, walls high as the sky, giants taller than we can imagine, or miles standing between. Still God will prosper.

You may be facing your own giants today. Perhaps you are facing a mountain that seems too colossal to climb or problems that feel as though they may bury you. One thing you should be reminded of today: God is still in control. He is not bothered by what bothers you.

What are you wrestling with or worried about today that you need to relinquish to His power?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Acts 4:27-31

²⁷ For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together,

²⁸ For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.

²⁹ And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word,

³⁰ By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.

³¹ And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.

Biblical Insight

Herod and Pontius Pilate conspiring against the holy Servant Jesus proves highly significant, not only in the prayer in Acts 4, but also in human history. Sadly, many people have chosen to blame all Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus. Clearly, the early church did not.

When we examine the prayer, we see Herod as the first culprit. Herod was an Idumean (Edomite) king. Herod was a descendant of Esau.

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea. Pilate gave the order for Jesus to be crucified. In a modern world where some people choose Anti-Semitism over love, we must look at the full picture.

Daily Devotion

Herod and Pilate had wickedness in their hearts. They were, along with others, in favor of crucifying Jesus. But this was part of God's plan.

One of the most powerful portions of Acts 4 can be located in verse 31. "And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness." Even in the midst of their recollection of the cross and the ills of what took place in those days, the people of God were met with great power when they began to pray.

What those false rulers meant for evil, God used for the greatest good. Though they killed the physical body of Jesus Christ, He did not stay down. He shook the ground, rose again, and did so with a power and authority that still ricochets throughout the world.

Whatever vices or enemies are rearing their heads in your life, God can use it all for something far greater than you could ever dream. This miracle happens when you trust His authority, pray, and put Him and His kingdom first.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Acts 4:32-34

³² And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.

³³ And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.

³⁴ Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold.

Biblical Insight

The statement in Acts 4:34 about no one in the church having need shows the power of unity. The situation also reveals the correction of a problem in ancient Israel. Throughout the history of God's people, wealthy landowners had exploited the poor. Prophets, like Amos and Isaiah, and leaders, like Nehemiah, had decried the practice. Now the church had corrected an ancient wrong.

However, the unity would not last due to the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. Plus, the church might have forgotten Jesus' words about the poor always being in the world. Perhaps Jesus also allowed division to occur so the church would leave Jerusalem and spread the gospel.

Daily Devotion

In our present-day world, where material possessions seem to abound, there is significance in the communal care that took place in Acts 4. The church was doing what the church was supposed to do. They were loving one another and meeting the needs of the less fortunate through the blessings God had bestowed upon them. This mission still remains in place. The church is still called to love the broken and be there for others who are in need.

We are a body, made up of diverse parts, all working together to move God's kingdom forward. Much like when we get a cut or an injury, our cells work in unison to create recovery. It has been said that the body heals the body. This statement is true in the physical and within the framework of the church. We are called to bring peace to the pain, whatever form that takes.

How can you use your gifts and blessings to bless others and help heal the body?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

3.3

THE CHURCH IN ACTION

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

Jesus commissioned His disciples to take the gospel everywhere to everyone.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will proclaim the gospel to everyone I can.



FOCUS VERSES: Matthew 28:19–20

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44–53; Acts 1:1–8



Lesson Title: The Church in Action

Icebreaker: Besides the gospel, what is the best news you have heard in your life?

- I. BEFORE HIS ASCENSION, JESUS REMINDED THE DISCIPLES OF HIS PURPOSE
 - A. He Had to Suffer, Die, and Rise from the Dead
 - » *What does it mean to live your life intentionally and purposefully for Jesus?*
 - B. He Was the Gospel That Was to Be Preached
 - » *What does it mean for God to uphold justice and also show mercy? Why did God choose to do this?*
 - C. I Will Remember Jesus' Purpose
 - » *How does God's Spirit heal the harm caused by sin and evil in our world? What hinders us from performing such ministry?*
- II. JESUS DECLARED TO THE DISCIPLES THEIR PURPOSE
 - A. Preach the Gospel to Every Creature
 - » *What are some ways you could extend the good news to all creation in your community?*
 - B. Teach All Nations
 - C. Baptize
 - D. I Will Proclaim the Gospel to Everyone I Can
 - » *What social or political issues can limit us and how often we share the gospel with others?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to give us gratitude for the gospel
- For God to use us to share the gospel with others

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44–53; Acts 1:1–8

The name of the town of Bethany has dual meaning in Hebrew. Bethany can be translated as “house of affliction” or “house of figs.” The place had definitely served as a house of affliction because Mary and Martha experienced the death of their brother Lazarus there (John 11). Yet we can also see the fruitfulness of the place because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus served as a walking testimony of the power of God.

We can also glean key insights from viewing Bethany as a house of figs. Figs can represent fruitfulness because they produce two crops each year. In Matthew 21 a hungry Jesus cursed a fig tree because He found nothing on it. Despite being in the house of figs, the tree did not bear any fruit. Jesus’ words caused the tree to wither. Jesus used the situation to teach the disciples about speaking a word of faith as well as making claims. Just because a fig tree is in Bethany, the house of figs, does not mean it is fruitful.

A scene in Matthew 26 reveals the power of both meanings of Bethany. When Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman brought an alabaster box of very precious ointment and poured it on his head. The disciples found the act very wasteful and criticized the woman for her seemingly lack of fruitfulness, but Jesus praised the woman because of the good work she had done for Him by anointing His body for burial. Jesus knew He was heading to the house of affliction at Golgotha.

When we read in Luke 24 that Jesus took the disciples as far as Bethany before ascending into Heaven, we also may think of the two translations of Bethany. Jesus had led the disciples as far as the house of affliction. Now it was their turn to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Him. But Jesus had also led them to the house of figs (fruitfulness). He would give them Holy Ghost power to reap a great harvest of souls (Acts 1:8). Jesus endured the house of affliction so the church could live in a time of fruitfulness. Jesus was the seed that fell into the ground and died (John 12:24). But through His death, burial, and resurrection, much fruit would be produced. So let us not despise the house of affliction, for it may yet turn into the house of fruitfulness.

JESUS’ WORDS CAUSED THE TREE TO WITHER. JESUS USED THE SITUATION TO TEACH THE DISCIPLES ABOUT SPEAKING A WORD OF FAITH AS WELL AS MAKING CLAIMS.

DAY 1

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them.

¹⁷ And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Biblical Insight

Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations might have amazed the apostles. Their actions in the Gospels and the beginning of Acts show they focused on Israel. Thinking of reaching Samaritans or Gentiles might have proven quite surprising to them.

History reveals that God had an interesting plan. When the Babylonians defeated the Jews, many likely viewed the Babylonian deity Marduk as superior. However, the Jews knew that only one God existed, so they recognized that God was ruler over everything. As a result, they knew they should reach all the earth. In fact, the prophet Zechariah spoke of Gentiles seeking out the Jews for salvation (Zechariah 8:23).

Daily Devotion

If you are a student, or can remember being one, you know the brevity of assignments. Moreover, if you are working in a career, you also understand the importance of deadlines and tasks. Although tests, targets, and late nights are sure to come, let today be a reminder of an assignment greater than all of those.

Matthew 28:19 instructs, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." We are called to reach more than just the people who look like us, act like us, and talk like us. The Word of God teaches that the gospel is available for all.

The way we live our lives can be a witness. If we are kind, loving, and live in a way that honors God, we will not have to force religion on anyone. Rather, we can let our relationship with Christ speak in a way that draws people closer to the Cross.

"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Luke 24:44

And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.

Biblical Insight

Jesus referenced fulfillment of prophecies in the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. By doing so, He was teaching His followers about the messianic focus of the Old Testament. This delineation of books also supports the idea that the Old Testament Canon was established in the first century.

Jews call their Scriptures TaNaK, which consists of twenty-four books. The Torah contains the first five books of the Bible, known as the “Law.” The N in TaNaK stands for *Nevi'im*, meaning “Prophets.” Oddly enough, the Prophets begin with Joshua, but Daniel is not included among them. The Prophets consist of several historical books, as well as the Major and Minor Prophets. The K in TaNaK is the *Ketuvim*, meaning the “Writings.” Psalms is included in this section, as well as other late books like Esther.

Daily Devotion

The Bible is a beautiful collection of various types of books—some easy to pronounce, others a little more complicated (looking at you, Habakkuk). Theologians, along with those who are interested in studying, will never lack content and profundity. Aside from the magnificence that springs forth from its content, one of the best things about the Word of God is that, though it contains such depth, it can still be relatable to any level of understanding. If we have a problem with finances, desire marriage advice, want help making a decision, need instructions on fasting, or are in search of peace and security, the Bible contains passages for all those topics and more.

God speaks through various avenues. Sometimes He speaks through a person or through a thought or a still, small voice. One thing is sure: even when we do not feel like God is speaking in the ways we are familiar with, we can trust that God’s Word—His God-breathed pages and declarations—will not change. If you are searching for an answer, run to *the answer*—the infallible, steadfast, immovable Word of God.

To what situation are you needing to apply sacred Scripture today? Take some time to really dig into the Word. Write down a verse that speaks to you and why.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Luke 24:45

⁴⁵ Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures.

Biblical Insight

The apostle Paul spoke of the blindness that had happened to Israel in Romans 11. He based this observation on two key Old Testament verses: Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10. Although Jesus had explained fulfillment of prophecies about Him by looking in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms, the two on the road to Emmaus still needed their minds opened.

When the apostles heard the final words of Jesus in Acts 1, we see them not quite understanding everything Jesus told them. They still focused on an earthly kingdom rather than a heavenly one. But Jesus opened their eyes, minds, and hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Daily Devotion

Though the internet often gets a bad rap, some positives have come from it. One is viral videos of sweet children, including babies, getting their first pair of glasses. These videos remind us of the good in the world. The expressions of these tiny ones seeing clearly for the very first time is priceless. Their expressions change from emotionless to full of sheer joy, some even shedding tears at the clarity they have been missing out on. There is something special about that sort of transformation.

When we receive the Holy Ghost and become new creations in Christ, we have a similar experience. We see more clearly than before. Our eyes are opened, and our focus gets redirected.

When we encounter Jesus, He changes everything. There is a catch, however, though it is a good one. We have to live fully surrendered to Him to understand the transformations.

He has a brand-new pair of glasses, just for you. Once you see life the way He intended, even the mundane seems satisfying. His prescription changes your mind, heart, spirit, and life.

In what areas do you need a checkup? In your Bible, you can find a passage to help with just about anything you are dealing with. Take time to find a few and jot them down.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Luke 24:46–53

⁴⁶ And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day:

⁴⁷ And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

⁴⁸ And ye are witnesses of these things.

⁴⁹ And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.

⁵⁰ And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them.

⁵¹ And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.

⁵² And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy:

⁵³ And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen.

Biblical Insight

In addition to the Gospel of Luke, Luke wrote the Book of Acts. We can recognize a key connection between the end of the Book of Luke and the beginning of the Book of Acts.

Luke 24 ends with Jesus ascending into Heaven and the disciples continually praying to God in the Temple. Acts 1 features the disciples beholding the ascension of Jesus and the one hundred and twenty tarrying for the Holy Spirit in the upper room. At the end of Acts 2, we see the people regularly meeting in the Temple and continuing to praise God.

Daily Devotion

It can be challenging to imagine God in the flesh walking around and experiencing the busyness of daily life. Can you picture that happening in this day and age—the real, live King Jesus, roaming the streets of downtown Chicago or having a coffee or deep-dish pizza with His buddies at a local shop? Though the setting was vastly different, and the delicacy of pizza was likely not invented yet, He was here on earth. He felt like we feel. He was sinless, but He experienced life. He was familiar with pain, rejection, joy, and many other emotions in-between. He was here, in the flesh, and then one day, He wasn't.

When He ascended into Heaven, the people lost the skin that made up human Jesus. But He left behind something wonderful and so very powerful—His Holy Spirit. Though He does not walk with us in the same manner, He is still steadily and consistently near.

Do you remember the day you were filled with the Holy Ghost? Take some time to write down your story.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Acts 1:1-8

⁵ For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.

⁶ When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

⁷ And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

⁸ But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Biblical Insight

Saul and David fought over Israel before David united the tribes. Solomon reigned over a complete kingdom before division in Rehoboam's days. The Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and deported its people. Later, the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and exiled God's people.

The Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home. The Jews then lived under Greek rule before overthrowing the tyrant Antiochus IV. Jewish kings again sat on the throne, but the Romans eventually installed an Idumean (Edomite) named Herod as ruler. The disciples wondered if Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel, but they soon learned they were looking for the wrong kind of power.

Daily Devotion

Jesus often works in ways our finite minds could never comprehend. We assume things should be a certain way. Meanwhile, He is working behind the scenes, orchestrating even better outcomes.

The disciples probably felt this way in the passage we read today in Acts. They assumed Almighty God would sweep in and restore in a manner they were expecting. They knew the odds were stacked against the people of Israel, so they could have been seen deliberating how they thought God should fix the issues.

The great but oftentimes frustrating part about depending on God is: He does not owe us any answers or explanations, but His way is assured. He remains God when worldly kingdoms fall. He remains God when nations rise against each other. He remains God when you lose your job, your family is in disarray, or you feel alone. He is God, and He is really great at being God. He is omnipotent. He is the all-powerful answer the disciples were longing for and the one who belongs on the throne of your life as well.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

3.4

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

Jesus is coming for a church without blemish.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will prepare myself to be part of the bride of Christ.



FOCUS VERSE: Ephesians 5:27

That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 24:45-67; Ephesians 5:25-27



Lesson Title: The Bride of Christ

Icebreaker: What is the most humorous wedding story you have heard?

I. A BRIDE FOR ISAAC

- A. Abraham Sent His Servant to Find a Bride for Isaac.
- B. Rebekah Came to the Well
 - » *If you have ever prayed a prayer to know God's plan, how did God answer your prayer? Did you believe the answer as it came?*
- C. Rebekah Was Willing to Leave Her Home for Canaan
- D. I Will Leave the Familiar to Pursue a Relationship with the Lord
 - » *Did you have to leave behind something familiar and safe to go where Jesus was calling you? What was that experience like for you?*

II. THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

- A. Jesus Came to Find a Bride for Himself
 - » *How can a healthy marriage be a way to display the love of Jesus to others?*
- B. The Church Will Be Glorious, Without Spot or Wrinkle
 - » *How does your relationship with Jesus help the church grow as a body of believers?*
- C. This World Is Not Our Home
- D. I Will Prepare Myself to Be a Part of the Bride of Christ
 - » *How does your faith serve as a lamp to help you find your way to Jesus in a spiritually dark world? How does it serve as light to guide others?*

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us live as the betrothed bride of Christ
- For God to help us be ready for His coming

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Lesson Text: Genesis 24:45-67; Ephesians 5:25-27

Many singles in today's world create dating profiles in hopes of attracting a mate. They list their best qualities, champion their abilities, and share their interests. Those seeking a "perfect mate" likely have a list of key attributes they are looking for, and they hope to meet someone who checks all the boxes. Some may even include pictures that show their good looks or athleticism.

In the ancient world, men often met their future wives at wells. Since most young women did not leave home for other reasons, young men seized the opportunity to meet them as they performed a daily chore. Men, however, needed to catch the eye of a potential bride.

When we read the Bible, we see men performing heroic feats at wells to impress women. Jacob removed a heavy stone without the help of anyone else because Rachel inspired him. Moses drove off brigands who were troubling Zipporah and her sisters.

In Genesis 24, we see a key role reversal—a woman, not a man, performed an amazing act. Rebekah accomplished the herculean task of getting water for Abraham's servant and his camels. She made many trips down to the well. The trips back up would have proven difficult given the weight of the water she had to carry.

Rebekah not only fit the bill as a strong woman capable of drawing water, but she also matched the prayer of Abraham's servant. When he asked for water from her pitcher, she could have simply complied. However, Rebekah went above and beyond by also offering to water the man's camels.

Still, the servant wondered whether the Lord had made his errand successful. The servant asked her identity and if her father's house could serve as a place for lodging. Her response fulfilled another one of Abraham's parameters, his desire for Isaac to marry an industrious woman who was not a Canaanite.

The story of Rebekah's strength was not a one-time occurrence. Throughout her life she proved to be extremely capable. The Lord spoke to her about twins in her womb, and she gave birth to two struggling babies. She supported her husband, Isaac, through difficult times. Isaac dug many wells, and his enemies kept seizing them. Rebekah proved herself to be a good wife because a man who can dig wells needs a woman who can carry water.

IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, YOUNG MEN SEIZED THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET THEIR FUTURE WIVES AS THEY PERFORMED A DAILY CHORE.

DAY 1

Genesis 24:45-49

⁴⁵ And before I had done speaking in mine heart, behold, Rebekah came forth with her pitcher on her shoulder; and she went down unto the well, and drew water: and I said unto her, Let me drink, I pray thee.

⁴⁶ And she made haste, and let down her pitcher from her shoulder, and said, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: so I drank, and she made the camels drink also.

⁴⁷ And I asked her, and said, Whose daughter art thou? And she said, The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bare unto him: and I put the earring upon her face, and the bracelets upon her hands.

⁴⁸ And I bowed down my head, and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham, which had led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter unto his son.

⁴⁹ And now if ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me: and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand, or to the left.

Biblical Insight

On the day Rebekah served as the answer to the servant's prayer for a bride for Isaac, she went to the well just like she always did. Rebekah probably had made countless trips down to the well, bringing back water for her family. Her pitcher held life, but she probably saw little promise in yet another trip down to the well and back.

Even if she hoped to meet a young man at the well, she might have felt disappointed when she saw Abraham's servant. He was not a potential groom. Little did she know that her meeting with him would change her life through the power of prayer.

Daily Devotion

It was a hot Middle Eastern day, and Rebekah was going about business as usual. She laced up her sandals, picked up her pitcher, and headed to the well. From the distance she saw a man appearing exhausted from the heat. As she inched closer, something inspired her to offer water to the man and his camels.

Little could she have known a trip to the well would have resulted in an entirely new life. That kind of marriage proposal, especially through a third party, isn't as common anymore. However, Rebekah understood the gravity of the will of the Lord, and she was about to embark on her God-ordained, out-of-the-ordinary journey.

Our heavenly Father often works in ways our finite minds do not. We may have plans, dreams, goals, spreadsheets, and details all lined up for the way the future should look, but as the saying goes, "We make plans, and God laughs." Your future is waiting on the other side of your control. Keep doing the things you are called to do daily, and let God orchestrate the rest.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 2

Genesis 24:53-58

⁵³ And the servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah: he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things.

⁵⁴ And they did eat and drink, he and the men that were with him, and tarried all night; and they rose up in the morning, and he said, Send me away unto my master.

⁵⁵ And her brother and her mother said, Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go.

⁵⁶ And he said unto them, Hinder me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master.

⁵⁷ And they said, We will call the damsel, and enquire at her mouth.

⁵⁸ And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go.

Biblical Insight

The bridal negotiations for the hand of Rebekah in Genesis 24 prove quite telling concerning Laban's character. When Laban and his father heard the servant's story of divine intervention, they immediately told the servant to take Rebekah and go. The family's tune changed when the servant brought out gold, silver, and jewelry for Rebekah and costly gifts for her brother and her mother. Rebekah's mother might have wanted additional time with her daughter, but the scheming Laban desired more. He wanted the servant and Rebekah to remain for ten more days, likely hoping to cajole additional presents from the servant. How quickly materialism reveals one's depth of spirituality!

Daily Devotion

We live in a materialistic world. People go to great lengths to attain possessions they may not be able to afford. Credit card companies make a fortune on the high hopes and lofty goals of those individuals. "Don't have the money for it? That's okay, just charge it." This type of mentality has left millions of people in debt.

Can you imagine the confusion Rebekah must have felt? She was willing to go wherever the Lord led, but her exit toward her new life likely felt transactional. Her mother appreciated the importance of communing with her family, while her brother focused on the earthly treasures that fade.

Belongings are not bad in and of themselves, but we must remember they are corruptible. They cannot love us back. They cannot hold conversations or cherish little moments. Perhaps it is time to reevaluate your priorities. Do not sell your soul at the expense of your relationships and self-worth.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 3

Genesis 24:59–61

⁵⁹ And they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his men.

⁶⁰ And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.

⁶¹ And Rebekah arose, and her damsels, and they rode upon the camels, and followed the man: and the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

Biblical Insight

As Rebekah prepared for her journey to meet Isaac, her family blessed her. They prayed that she would be fruitful and her descendants would possess the gates of their enemies. Such sentiments for family life also appear in the Book of Psalms.

Psalm 128 speaks of a bride being a fruitful vine and children being as numerous as olive plants around their father's table. Psalm 127 combines the ideal of fruitfulness with might by referring to children as arrows in the hands of a mighty man. It compares having many children to having a quiver full of arrows. It continues by saying the mighty man's children will "speak," i.e., contend, with the enemies in the gate.

Daily Devotion

Children are blessings, very loud and very cute blessings. The Lord loves these blessings dearly. In fact, He urges us to come to Him with the faith and sweet naivety of one of these little ones.

It makes sense that the process of life begins with the family. Though none are perfect, mothers are made to provide the nurturing and caretaking. They carry the infant in their womb, and that closeness is not easily matched.

It is important to note that when a woman does not or cannot bear children, she is no less important in God's eyes. The point is simply that since the first child came into being, without a woman, there can be no life. Strong women and strong families—whether immediate or in the church—make for strong children.

How are you helping to be a positive influence on the children God has blessed you with—whether your own or those you encounter around you?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 4

Genesis 24:62-67

⁶² And Isaac came from the way of the well Lahai-roi; for he dwelt in the south country.

⁶³ And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide: and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, the camels were coming.

⁶⁴ And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel.

⁶⁵ For she had said unto the servant, What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us? And the servant had said, It is my master: therefore she took a vail, and covered herself.

⁶⁶ And the servant told Isaac all things that he had done.

⁶⁷ And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Biblical Insight

Before he met Rebekah, Isaac had suffered through a difficult season of life. He had faced his own imminent death at the hands of his father before the angel of the Lord intervened and stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. The ram caught in the thicket took Isaac's place. Isaac had also dealt with the passing of his mother.

When Isaac first saw Rebekah, he had just come from Beer-lahai-roi, meaning "the well of him that liveth and seeth me." Perhaps Isaac felt as though the Lord had forgotten him, but God saw him and provided Rebekah to comfort him.

Daily Devotion

When we walk through a dark valley, it is easy to lose hope and become discouraged. Isaac likely felt the heaviness of despair. He lost a pillar in his life and had dealt with some harshness throughout his journey, yet He still trusted the Lord.

Perhaps you have been hurt and felt discouraged as well. Hurt can make your heart ache in almost a physical way. It can be debilitating. You may feel forgotten and unseen by God, but you are not.

A wise pastor once said, "Out of great pain comes great ministry." God does not waste pain; rather, He uses it to grow us, to teach us, to help others, and for His purpose and glory. One way He helps bring comfort is through others. That is why the body of Christ is so important. Comfort is also a vital part of marriage. It is a beautiful gift.

Is there anything you can do differently when it comes to your closest relationships?

How can you help others who are going through difficult seasons of loss?

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

DAY 5

Ephesians 5:25-27

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

²⁶ That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

²⁷ That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Biblical Insight

Although holiness has specific requirements, we should not always think of it as an exhaustive list of rules for the bride of Christ. Paul stated that the bride of Christ should be without spot or wrinkle, be holy, and be without blemish. Paul added “any such thing” to show there could be some areas we might not consider.

Paul’s use of the phrase brings to mind the psalmist’s request for the Lord to provide cleansing from secret faults (Psalm 19:12). We also see Paul expanding the list of the works of the flesh to include “and such like” (Galatians 5:21). These additions show us we should be on guard even in gray areas.

Daily Devotion

Marriage is a commitment, one that should be honored and upheld. When a couple says their vows, there are no clauses stating they will not love or honor the other when they get hangry or have a bad hair day. They are committed, even on those days.

Spouses should do things their spouse enjoys. They should go places they like, talk with them daily, walk closely with them in every area of life, and honor their promises, come what may. Spouses do the little and the big things because they care deeply for their spouse.

The same goes for our relationship with God. We should strive for daily closeness with Him. We do things we know bring Him joy, and we should avoid things that may be a disappointment or make Him sad.

Perhaps it is time to do an inventory of your soul and your motives. Could you consecrate any area of your life to Him to draw closer? We are the bride of Christ, and we should strive to honor Him in all regards.

Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

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