

October 2018
Readings, Reflections, Prayers

Who We Are
Being the People of Jesus



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Monday, October 1: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

When Paul writes this letter to Timothy, his cultural context was remarkably like it is today. Paul's diagnosis of his times is eerily appropriate for 2018. He writes, "*You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly*" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Sound familiar?

How do we live as God's people in evil times? We need wisdom. We need **God's** wisdom.

We can learn much from godly mentors. Paul wants Timothy to learn from his example (3:10-13). Notice, Paul's life has not been a bed of roses; he has been through suffering and persecution. Hardships happen. We should not be surprised by tough times. However, Paul wants Timothy (and us!) to know that, with God's Spirit, you can live through those with purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance (3:10).

The other great source of wisdom is God's Word, Scripture (3:14-17). Scripture:

- gives us the "*wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus*" (3:15)
- "*is inspired by God*" (3:16). Literally it is "*in-spirited by God*" or "*God-breathed*." Scripture is **GOD'S** wisdom for us. These are not merely human ideas, but God's wisdom for real life.
- "*is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right*" (3:16). One of Scripture's roles is to teach us right ethics, values, and priorities, and to correct us when we're wrong (e.g. see Galatians 5).
- "*God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work*" (3:16). Scripture equips and instructs us to live our faith in practical ways: sharing our faith in word AND living it out in deed.

In crazy times, we need God's truth and wisdom. We need godly, trustworthy foundations to build upon.

- Who are some godly mentors you can learn from? (or have learned from in the past?)
- How can Scripture help us know what is right and wrong? How is God speaking to you?
- What "good works" might God be preparing and equipping you for? Who can you share your faith with? Who can you help in practical ways? Pray about this ...

*Give us, Lord, a steadfast heart,
which no unworthy affection may drag down.
Give us an unconquered heart,
which no difficulty can wear out.
Give us an upright heart,
which no unworthy purpose may tempt into moving aside.
Lord our God, help us understand how to know you,
diligence to seek you,
wisdom to find you,
and faithfulness to embrace you.
May your Spirit speak to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Tuesday, October 2: 2 Peter 1

The good news is this "*By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life*" (2 Peter 1:3). Through Jesus' death on the cross, "*he has given us great and precious promises ... that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires*" (1:4). We are saved by faith in Jesus. That's awesome.

Peter, like Paul in his letter to Timothy (yesterday), is a realist. Life can be hard. 1 and 2 Peter talk more about suffering, struggle, and temptation than any other books in the New Testament. Following Jesus can be a struggle. There will be many temptations to compromise or simply do downright wrong things. We need wisdom from God's Word, *"to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right"* (2 Timothy 3:16).

Peter encourages us to supplement our faith with, *"a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone"* (1:5-7).

Peter, like Paul, sees us having a purpose here and now: *"The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1:8). We are invited both (1) to share the good news about salvation in Jesus, AND (2) to provide practical care for people in need. Throughout the Bible it is never a case of EITHER tell people about Jesus OR care for their practical needs. Scripture always presents these as a task of BOTH telling people about new life in Jesus AND caring for their pain.

This all sounds good, but why should we trust people like Peter who wrote our Bible? Why should we trust the Bible?

- Peter was an eyewitness of these things (1:16-18). He is telling us firsthand what he saw and experienced. This is not second-hand information or "fake news."
- *"No prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God"* (1:20-21). Scripture is God's Word, inspired by His Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16).

How are you doing cultivating qualities like moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love for everyone? What do you need to work on?

How can you be more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Who can you share your faith with? Who can you help out, encourage, or care for in a practical way?

How can Scripture help you grow in your faith?

*Lord, help us to see in your crucifixion and resurrection
an example of how to endure
and seemingly to die in the agony and conflict of daily life,
so that we may live more fully and creatively.
You accepted patiently and humbly the rebuffs of human life,
as well as the tortures of your crucifixion and passion.
Help us to accept the pains and conflicts that come to us each day
as opportunities to grow as people and become more like you.
Enable us to go through them patiently and bravely,
trusting that you will support us.
Make us realize that it is only by frequent deaths of ourselves and our self-centered desires
that we can come to live more fully;
for his only by dying with you that we can rise with you.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Wednesday, October 3: Exodus 20:1-20

Sometimes God dictates to human authors what they are to write down. This is how we received books like the guidelines in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and the visions of the prophets. We can clearly see passages such as the Ten Commandments as God's direct commands to us.

Passages such as this were foundational to the faith community in Israel and are still vital to us, today. We “get that” with passages like the Ten Commandments. We struggle a bit more when God speaks to us directly through the prophets. For instance, in Micah 6:8, Micah quotes God: *“The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”* This is also God’s Word to us today. We find some of their words more difficult to contextualize.

In the New Testament, passages that directly quote Jesus’ words are similar. We believe Jesus is fully God, so when Jesus speaks, we hear God speaking directly to us. So, when Jesus was asked, *“Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?”* and He replied, *“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments”* (Matthew 22:36-40) we know we are hearing God’s truth for us.

As you read Scripture, try to always notice WHO the author is. Sometimes it is God/Jesus Himself. Often it is another author (like Paul or Peter). Does it matter? Actually it does (more about this over the next couple of days). When God speaks directly, we really need to take note of God’s/Jesus’ clear teaching. When another speaks, we have to appreciate some of their personality and experience will colour their words.

It also matters WHAT KIND of literature a passage is. The Ten Commandments are clearly direct teaching for all people, for all time. Some of the other bits in Exodus (like Exodus 19) are more specifically for ancient Jewish people: teachings about the tabernacle, Temple, and Jewish purity laws. The prophets spoke to specific people in their own specific circumstances. While the general principles of teachings are timeless (like Micah 6:8), many of the details of their message is contextual to their time and place.

- How is God speaking to you through His Word?
- How can you know God better through His Word?

*Glorious God, give me grace to change my life
and to see, but not fear, death,
which, for those who know you, is the gateway to an eternal life of wealth.
Good Lord, give me a humble, lowly,
quiet, peaceable,
patient, charitable,
kind, tender, and loving mind,
in all my words and all my thoughts,
to be filled by your Holy Spirit.
Good Lord, give me a full faith,
a firm hope, and a fervent charity,
a love for you that cannot be compared to my love for myself.
Good Lord, give me a longing to be with you,
not to avoid the misfortunes of this world
or simply to be in that joyful place called heaven,
give me that longing to be with you,
simply because I love you.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535 [executed by Henry VIII])

Thursday, October 4: Acts 28:16-28

Throughout most of Scripture, it is assumed that the Spirit spoke to and through human authors. Their words are what God intends us to hear (the Bible is infallible – without fault). But it is told in THEIR words: the unique personality of the author (like Isaiah, Paul, Peter, or David) also comes through. Paul clearly believes *“the Holy Spirit ... spoke to your ancestors through Isaiah the prophet”* but, when you read the book of Isaiah, you see his unique experiences and personality coming through (e.g. Isaiah 6:1-8).

Authorship and type of literature are important. For instance, when we read some of Paul’s (or other) letters

in the New Testament, we believe they are the inspired and true words of God, as well, even though they are clearly letters for specific people in specific places. The truths they communicate are infallible – without fault, true, no deceptive, entirely trustworthy, dependable. But the exact words through which these perfect truths are communicated reflect their authorship are both fully human and fully divine.

For instance, Paul share much about his own personal life and struggles (Philippians 3), shows genuine emotion (2 Corinthians 11:1), and even swears (Philippians 3:8). Peter shares his experiences (1 Peter 5:12-14). David's Psalms – poems of worship, struggle, and deep emotion – emerge from his personal experiences (e.g. Psalm 22). God gives authors freedom to express their unique personalities and experiences.

The wonderful thing about the "personality" of Scripture is that we can relate to people like David and Paul because their struggles and feelings reflect our own. If the Bible were all propositional truth (like the Ten Commandments, it would simply be a rule book. As it is, Scripture connects better with our humanness.

Yes, the Bible is entirely trustworthy in matters of faith, religion, and ethics. This perfect truth is wonderfully expressed through the unique personalities, experiences, and character of different human authors. The Holy Spirit can speak through unique people like Paul, Peter, Isaiah, and David in unique ways.

Enjoy the unique voices we read in Scripture. Relate to the various personalities. And be confident that this ***IS*** all God's Word!

*Creator God,
Give us a heart for simple things:
love and laughter,
bread and wine,
tales and dreams.
Give us your Word of truth
to teach and correct us
and show us your Way.
Fill our lives with green and growing hope;
make us a people of justice
whose song is Alleluia
and whose name breathes love.
Amen*

South African prayer

Friday, October 5: Jeremiah 1:1-10

Some people give us eyewitness accounts of their encounters with God. Moses meets God in a burning bush (Exodus 3). Isaiah encounters God in a heavenly vision (Isaiah 6:1-5). Jeremiah is called by God (today's reading). Paul meets God on the road to Damascus (Acts 9, 22).

Personal experiences are VERY personal. None of us is likely to encounter God in a burning bush or lightning from heaven on a road to Damascus. However personal stories are very powerful. They remind us God is active in our world and our experiences in unique – real – ways.

The calls people like Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Paul are unique, too. But their calls – to share God's good news and love – are for all of us, too. We are all invited to be God's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5).

When God says to Jeremiah, "*I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb; before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations,*" this is truth also for us. God knew us before we were born and cares for us throughout our lives (see Psalm 139).

When God says to Jeremiah, "*Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you; and don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you,*" this is truth for us, as well. He has called us to be His bearers of good news, too. And He is with us always (Matthew 28:19-20).

Scripture records truth as people experienced it. When they saw God, they recorded it. When they saw the sun rise and set, they described the sun as rising and setting, even though we know the Earth rotates on its axis and the sun is stationary. When they witnessed a battle, they estimated the sizes of armies (they did not count every single soldier). They wrote what they saw, whether or not it is "scientifically" accurate. Scripture is not intended to be a science/history textbook with scientific details about the solar system, natural systems, or incredibly accurate details of historical events. As Galileo write, *"The Bible shows the way to go to heaven, not the way the heavens go."* The Bible tells us how things appear to be.

The Bible is "inerrant" – without error. "Inerrancy" means the Bible is accurate when we read it from the point of view of the author, rather than from the point of view of a modern scientist or historian. Inerrancy also takes into account the type of literature a passage is: we expect different kinds of truth in poetry, letters, narrative, prophecy, or wisdom sayings. The Bible is true and without error when we read it recognizing the purpose, perspective, and point of view of the author.

The Bible is totally without error on its own terms: in terms of *"the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus ... useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives, correcting us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right, to prepare and equip us to do every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:15-16). The Bible does not claim to be **the** authority on scientific and historical knowledge. God assumes we can figure those truth out for ourselves, using our God-given skills and abilities.

- Has God ever "spoken" to you? If so, reflect on that experience. If not, that's OK. Through prayer, we can always speak to God.
- Thank God for Scripture: we hear Him speak to us through His Word. What is He saying to you?

*Like your disciples at the Sea of Galilee,
we are so often incapable of seeing that you, O Christ,
are our companion on the way.
But, when our eyes are opened,
we realise that you were speaking to us,
even though perhaps we had forgotten you.
Then the sign of our trust in you is that, in our turn,
we try to love, to forgive with you.
Independent of our doubts or even our faith,
O Christ, you are always there:
your love burns in our heart of hearts.
Amen.*

Roger Schutz

Saturday, October 6: 1 John 5

"I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life," says John (5:13). The great purpose of Scripture is to lead us to know Jesus.

The Bible is our authority for faith and conduct. It is God's inspired Word. Its authority comes from God Himself, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the biblical authors. *"Only the Bible,"* writes theologian Stan Grenz, *constitutes the written record of the revelatory historical occurrences, together with the prophetic interpretation and application of these events. Only the Bible directs our attention to God in Christ, thereby bringing us face-to-face with the loving, Saviour God"* (*Theology for the Community of God*, p. 403).

Scripture is about more than just coming to saving faith in Jesus. As the Holy Spirit's Word to us, the Bible gives us a comprehensive vision of all of reality. We understand the cosmos as God's good creation. We understand ourselves as beloved people within God's creation. We appreciate the gravity of sin and the wonder of salvation through Jesus. We appreciate we are called, again, to be *"a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9).

John clearly sees that we have a calling and a purpose as God's people – to help people know Jesus and follow Him faithfully. We have a whole new worldview in which God is supreme, is actively engaged in His creation, and desires us to be part of His mission to bring His love and grace into the world. We see the entire cosmos – and our own lives – in divine perspective. *"The Bible's authoritative status,"* Grenz continues, *"radiates outward from any narrow conception of 'faith and practice' until it encompasses all of life ... Scripture must saturate all of life"* (p.404).

- *"And now we live in fellowship with the true God because we live in fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only true God, and he is eternal life,"* John says (5:20). How does it change how we see our own lives when we live this way? How do we see the world and other people differently?
- Wouldn't it be great if more people knew the love of Jesus? How can you live it? How can you share it?
- *"Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts"* (5:21). What can take the place of God in our hearts? How can I work to ensure that doesn't happen?

*I thank you for anything that happened to me today
that made me feel life is really and truly worth living.
I thank you for all the laughter that was in today.
I thank you, too, for any moment when I saw the seriousness and the meaning of life.
I thank you very specially for those I love, for those who love me,
for all the difference it has made to me to know them,
and for all the happiness it brings me to be with them.
May I love them as you love me.
I thank you for your truth revealed to me.
May I live it with integrity and joyful determination.
Amen*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Thanksgiving Sunday, October 7: 1 John 4

What is the "gospel"? The word "gospel" is an old English word for "good news." It is a translation of a Greek word used throughout the New Testament: *"euangelion"* which literally means "good" ("*eu-*") and "*news/message*" ("*angelion*" – the same word from which we get "angel," literally "messenger").

So, to use non-Shakespearean English, we could simply ask, "What is the 'good news'?"

John gives it to us in a nutshell: *"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins"* (4:9-10).

This week, Thanksgiving week, we are thinking about some of the big-picture truths the Holy Spirit teaches us through Scripture, including the truth that all have of us have sinned, BUT God offers us all salvation through Jesus.

John, like Paul and Peter, is a realist. He knows that life in the real world can be difficult (4:1-3). But John also knows that, through the presence and power of the Spirit, we can not only survive, but thrive (4:4-6).

John, like Paul and Peter, also knows that this amazing good news is too good to keep for ourselves. We are to live lives of love that reflect God's love: *"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God"* (4:7).

- As you read through 1 John 4, what do you have to be thankful for? How do you express that?
- What challenges you in 1 John 4? How can you live it out?
- How can you be "good news" to someone else today?

*Stay with me, Lord,
 and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, to be a light to others.
 The light, Jesus, will be all from you.
 None of it will be mine.
 No merit belongs to me.
 It will be you who shines through me upon others.
 Let me praise you, in the way which you love best,
 by shining on all those around me.
 Give light to them as well as to me;
 bring light to them through me.
 Teach me to show forth your praise, your truth, your will.
 Make me preach you without preaching
 – not by words but by my example and by the sympathetic influence of what I do –
 by my visible resemblance to your saints,
 and the evident fullness of love which my heart bears to you.
 Fill my heart, Lord, with overwhelming love for you.
 Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Monday, October 8: 1 John 1

Do you want the good news first or the bad news?

It's Thanksgiving – let's start with good news: *"This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all ... if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin ... if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."*

Here's the bad news: *"We are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth ... If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth ... If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts."*

He begins by reminding us that the greatest thing we need to be set free from is the burden of sin and guilt that we carry. We all feel it. We all know it. The answer is not to try to convince ourselves that our sense of guilt is just a figment of our imagination. The answer is not to try to numb our consciences so we feel everything is OK and our sense of guilt is just an unhealthy and irrational delusion. Explaining or blaming it away is not the answer. Attempts to bury it, explain it away, or avoid it only compound our despair and pain. We are created with a deep-seated sense of justice that convicts us; we need help!

The real answer is to be forgiven. Completely. Absolutely. Eternally. Without qualification. That is what Jesus offers (1 John 2:1-2). And that is what we really need.

Are there things you need to talk about with Jesus today?

*Grant to us, O Lord, the royalty of inward happiness,
 and the serenity which comes from living close to you.
 Daily renew in us the sense of joy,
 and let the eternal spirit of the Father dwell in our souls and bodies,
 filling every corner of our hearts with light and grace;
 so that, bearing about with us the infection of good courage,
 we may be diffusers of life,
 and may meet all ills and cross accidents
 with gallant and high-hearted happiness,
 giving you thanks always for all things.
 Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Tuesday, October 9: 1 John 2

We know what we ought to do. We struggle to do it. I find it a constant challenge to do the good I know I ought to do and to not do the not-so-good I know I ought not do.

John is blunt: *"If someone claims, 'I know God,' but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did"* (1 John 2:5-6).

John goes on to help us see what this looks like:

- we show the same kind of unconditional love that Jesus did (2:9-11).
- We love God, first, with all our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies: *"the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions."* God offers so much more (2:15-17)
- We hold on to the truth. People will deny Jesus. They will mock our faith. But we need to keep faith and hold firmly to Jesus (2:18-27).

2:12-14 are a wonderful encouragement to us to hang in there!

- your sins have been forgiven through Jesus.
- you know Christ, who existed from the beginning.
- you have won your battle with the evil one (by coming to faith in Jesus).
- you know the Father; you are His child.
- you know Christ, who existed from the beginning.
- God's word lives in your hearts.

"You have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you," John adds, *"so you don't need anyone to teach you what is true. For the Spirit teaches you everything you need to know, and what he teaches is true – it is not a lie. So just as he has taught you, remain in fellowship with Christ"* (2:27). Lord, help us to live up to these wonderful promises!

*Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
grant that we may hear them,
read them,
mark them,
learn from them,
and inwardly digest them,
that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word,
we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Book of Common Prayer

Wednesday, October 10: 1 John 3

John writes this letter in circles. He comes back to the same themes again and again – from a new perspective each time.

- He talks about the incredible love God has for us again (1 John 3:1-3)
- He talks about the importance of obedience and the reality of sin again (3:4-10).
- He talks a lot about how we should model the same unconditional love Jesus has for us in our relationships with one another – again (3:11-20).

What is God saying to you through these verses?

*Spirit of God,
present with us,
living in us,
revealed through us,
wisdom,
guidance,
power
and peace.
Spirit of God,
fill us anew
each day we ask,
that our lives
might overflow for you.
Amen*

faithandworship.com

Thursday, October 11: Romans 3:21-31

Like John, Paul recognizes that we all have “issues” – specifically sin issues. None of us is perfect. None of us is pure. On a spectrum from pure white (God) to pure black (the devil), we are all shades of grey, somewhere in between. So how can we – imperfect, grey people – ever relate to a holy, pure, white God?

The solution is that God, in Jesus, takes upon Himself all the evil, all the sin, all the greyness and blackness of the world. He takes the blame for all our sins. He takes the punishment for all our evil. He pays the price to set us free from bondage to sin. God, in Jesus, destroys the power of sin and death.

Our sin costs Him the abuse and agony of the cross. Our sin is the reason for His excruciating death.

The good news? Through faith in Jesus, our sin is completely forgiven. Through faith in Jesus, the power of sin and death is broken forever. Through faith in Jesus, our relationship with God is totally restored.

God is BIG enough, and the sacrifice of Jesus (God) awesome enough, that this good news is for EVERYONE who puts their faith in Jesus – not just one ethnic group, one people group, or one nationality. When God in Jesus dies on the cross, the redemption He provides is for ALL people.

What is our part? We simply accept God’s amazing grace by faith. We have nothing to boast about. We dare not claim that we are good enough for God; as John reminded us time and time again, we all sin. We cannot claim that we have earned even the tiniest part of our salvation.

Read these verses through a couple of times.

- Give thanks for the gracious love of God, the astounding sacrifice of Jesus, and the blessing of new life that comes through His cross.
- *"God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight."* How then should we live?

*O God, Giver of Life,
Bearer of Pain,
Maker of Love,
You are able to accept in me what I cannot even acknowledge;
You are able to name in me what I cannot bear to speak of;
You are able to hold in your memory what I have tried to forget;
Reconcile me through your cross to yourself,
and to all that you have created me to be,
That I, myself, may be made whole in Christ.
O God, make me a new creation in Christ.
Amen.*

Janet Morley

Friday, October 12: Romans 5:1-11

In the 1993 movie, *Dave*, the President of the United States suffers a stroke. In hopes that he will soon recover, his key aides hire an impersonator, Dave, to "act" (literally) as president. As time goes on, the real President doesn't recover and Dave – the owner of a small temporary employment agency – essentially becomes the President.

One night Dave is making himself a sandwich, talking with a Secret Service guard:

Dave: *"You know, I've always wondered about you guys. You know, about how you're trained to take a bullet for the president?"*

Guard: *"What about it?"*

Dave: *"Is that really true? I mean, would you let yourself be killed to save his life?"*

Duane: *"Certainly."*

Dave (with a grin): *"So, now that means you'd get killed for me too."*

Who would you take a bullet for? Who would you give your life for?

The amazing news of the gospel is *"God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for **US while we were still sinners**"*(5:8). We take this good news for granted. We say it glibly. Do we ever stop and reflect on the sheer wonder of God's grace?

*Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found
T'was blind but now I see.*

*T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

We don't deserve God's love. But God, in His amazing grace, chooses to give His all, His everything, His life – in the most excruciating way – for us! That IS amazing! This is why Paul says, *"So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"*(5:11).

More than that, *"We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love"*(5:3-5).

God doesn't guarantee us an easy, happy, stress-free life. He does promise to be with us through the downs, as well as the ups, of life.

If you are going through tough times, know God is with you. Know He loves you. Know He understands. He empathizes. He has been there. Allow God to form and shape your character through the tough times.

*Through many dangers, toils and snares
We have already come.
T'was grace that brought us safe thus far
And grace will lead us home.*

*Oh Lord, give us yourself above all things.
It is in your coming alone that we are enriched.
It is in your coming that your true gifts come.
Come, Lord, that we may share the gifts of your presence:
come, Lord, with healing of the past,
come and calm our memories,
come with joy for the present,
come and give life to our existence,
come with hope for the future,
come and give a sense of eternity,
come with strength for our wills,
come with power for our thoughts,
come with love for our hearts,
come and give passion to our souls.
Come, Lord, give yourself above all things
and help us to give ourselves to you.
Amen.*

David Adam

Saturday, October 13: Romans 7:4-25

- There are good things I want to do, and I don't do them.
- There are bad things I don't want to do, but I do them.
- There are good things I want to say, and I don't say them.
- There are bad things I don't want to say, but I say them.

Is that ever your experience? It was Paul's experience. It is my experience.

It's easy to get discouraged, down, and even depressed. We do and say the very things we don't want to do or say. And we fail to do and say the things that are good.

It is good to reflect and be aware of our shortcomings. The challenge is what do we do about it?

The key to Romans 7 is 7:25: "*The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.*" Think about all the good news we have read in 1 John and so far in Romans 3 and 5? Our sin is completely forgiven through the cross of Jesus! All we have to do is to have faith and to confess our sins to God: He will forgive us (1 John 1:9).

Don't allow yourself to wallow in self-loathing or self-pity. Jesus offers you a way out. His death was more than sufficient to deal with all of your sin. It is His will – His command – that we repent and be restored.

After this rather depressing diatribe, Paul goes immediately on to say, "*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death*" (Romans 8:1-2). (Sometimes chapter breaks – added in the 1200's – disrupt the author's train of thought).

When Martin Luther King spoke his famous words, "*Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty I'm Free at Last*" he had a dream of racial equality. It's wonderful dream. But King and we know there is an even greater dream: new life in Jesus through His Spirit. This is what God is offering to you today: to be free at last, in Jesus. Will you accept the gift? It has been paid for by the body and blood of Jesus. Will you live in that freedom, allowing His Spirit to continue to forgive you, restore you, and renew you?

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
 in you we live and move and have our being.
 From you we have received tender mercy and compassion.
 To you we owe our safety in days past,
 together with all the comforts of this present life,
 and the hopes of the life to come.
 We praise you, O God, our Creator;
 to you we give our thanks, for you are our joy and crown.
 You daily pour out your good gifts upon us.
 We humbly pray that Jesus, our Lord, the hope of glory,
 may be more fully formed in us,
 that we may grow in humility, meekness, patience, contentment
 and absolute surrender of our whole lives
 - body, soul, and spirit -
 to your will and pleasure.
 Do not leave us or forsake us, our Father, but lead us safely
 through all the changes of this present world,
 with an unchanging love for you,
 and with a holy peace of mind which comes from an assurance of your steadfast love for us,
 until we come at last to see you face-to-face,
 be with you where you are,
 behold your glory and worship you forever,
 through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
 Amen.*

Simon Patrick (1626-1707)

Sunday, October 14: Romans 8:1-14

In Romans 7, Paul despaired, *"I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. ... Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"*(7:15-24). Thankfully, he adds, *"Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord"*(7:25).

In Romans 8, Paul celebrates the good news we have in Jesus: we are saved by His death and filled with His Spirit. In modern culture, shaped by the Enlightenment, we personalize all of this. We make it all about **me**.

This is great news for each of us, individually, of course. It is essential that each of us, personally, put our faith in Jesus. However, Paul's entire teaching is written in the plural – we/us/you (plural – Greek has different words for "you"-singular and "you"-plural; this is all written with "you"-plural).

Why does this matter? It matters, because one of the big themes in the New Testament is the BOTH/AND of individual freedom and unity in the Spirit. At times in church history, the "Church" has been all powerful and stomped on individual freedoms and rights. Now, in church history, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme: it's all about individual choices and freedoms with no responsibility for/to the larger body of Christ. This week and next we will wrestle with the biblical tension of BOTH/AND (not either/or) of personal freedom and community life/responsibility within the church.

Our "sinful natures" (8:12) lead to behaviours like: *"sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these"*(Galatians 5:19-21). If you think about them, most of these relate to a me-first, get-what-I-want, highly individualized approach to life. Notice that actions that some Christians practice for "spiritual" reasons – hostility, quarreling, dissension, division – are in this list.

In contrast, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!"*(Galatians 5:22-23). These all reflect a God-first, you-second, community building approach to life. These values – from Spirit – build unity, build up the church, AND build us up as individuals in the process as well.

Jesus prayed for us, His people, that we would be as united in the Spirit as Jesus and His Father are (John 17:11). His yearning for us is that (1) we personally have faith in Himself and are led by His Spirit AND (2) live in unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is who we are called to be.

How can I be led by His Spirit today? How can I live a life that is more loving, joyful and joy-giving, peaceful and peace-giving, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled?

*Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, our Salvation:
we praise you and we give you thanks!
We pray your loving kindness supply for our weakness,
though we are unworthy to be your guests,
though we cannot offer you a fitting devotion.
Before you, Lord our God, all our desires are known,
and whatsoever our heart rightly wills is a result of your grace.
Grant that we may attain a genuine love of you.
Don't let your grace be unfruitful in us, Lord.
May the fruit of your Spirit blossom in our lives.
Make perfect that which you have started.
Give us a deep yearning to be led by your Spirit.
Convert our lukewarm hearts to fervent love of you,
for the glory of your holy name.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Monday, October 15: Romans 8:12-25

We are family. All of us who have faith in Jesus are God's children, brothers and sisters in Christ, united by His Spirit (8:13-15). You are not a Lone Ranger Christian, facing the world on your own.

In the Roman Empire, a wealthy man (or even the Emperor) could adopt someone as his child (typically a slave). That person would become as legitimate a child and heir as any natural born child might be. Their old status as a slave is completely erased and forgotten. They are, in every sense, sons and daughters of their new Dad. For instance, the emperor Julius Caesar adopted Octavius (Augustus) as his son and heir.

When John writes, *"to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn – not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God"* (John 1:17), he is talking about our new identity in Jesus, just as Paul is here.

What does it mean that we are family? It means we are united by more than just mere friendship, common interests, compatibility, or shared beliefs: we are blood relations. We are united by common blood: the blood of Jesus shed for us and His body given for us. We are one in Christ. How, then, ought we to treat our brothers and sisters in Christ? How ought we to care for one another? To love one another? To seek unity (not hostility, quarreling, dissension, division) with one another?

Children can go through hard times. We live in a world marred and scarred by human sin. It can be tough going. A wise parent is always there for their kids, but allows them the freedom to learn and grow through struggles, and through making good – and not-so-good – choices. God gives us that kind of freedom. But we are never really alone. God's Spirit is always with us. And we are part of God's family. We can encourage, support, care for, and love one another.

Jesus prays for us: *"I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world"* (John 17:15-18). We are sent into the world by Jesus, to be His body – together – to bring His good news.

*Lord, I am selfish,
but you are all about serving others in the name of your Father.
I am doubtful,
but you trusted your heavenly Father to the very point of dying for him.
When it comes to temptation, I am weak,
but you were a perfect picture of strength when the devil came to tempt you.
I am prone to anger when I feel someone is misjudging me,
but you were our example of "turning the other cheek."
In all these things and others, Lord, make me more and more like you every day.
"Here am I, Lord. Send me."
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Tuesday, October 16: Romans 8:18-30

The Bible says, "God causes all things to happen" – right? (Romans 8:28). So if I get sick from cancer, God is causing that, right? Or if a child dies in an accident, God caused that to happen, right? After all, disasters are all "acts of God," right? Does Romans 8:28 actually say that?

Romans 8:28 literally says: "We know that to those who love God, God works together all things for good, to those called according to His purpose." A couple of things to note:

1. ***This is directed to believers*** (who love God, who have been called into His family according to His purpose – which is that we have faith in Him and are led by His Spirit)
2. ***God does NOT work/cause all things to happen.*** When things – good or bad – do happen, God can work good out of those circumstances. In a world where people have free will, sin is rampant, and bad things happen – we suffer. God does not cause it. He can bring good from it.

We can really get a messed-up theology of God if we think somehow God causes all things (like the Humboldt bus horror). However, we can see how, out of unspeakable tragedy, God can actually bring out some good things, from the words of the chaplain, to the testimony of the coach, to the people who benefited from organ donations. None of these "good" things outweigh the awfulness. It is not even a draw. But out of a circumstance that should have had absolutely no positives, God can bring out some small blessings.

When we go through tough times, we are not alone. The family of God/body or Christ/church is for – to be there to help us through. And, as part of the family, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, too. Notice how "family-ish" Paul describes God's care for us: "*the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words., and the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will*" (8:26-27).

Don't go it alone! Pray. And be part of the community. You need us. And we need you.

*This morning, as I kindle the fire upon my hearth,
I pray that the flame of God's love may burn in my heart,
and the hearts of all I meet today.
I pray that no envy or malice, hatred or fear may smother the flame.
I pray that indifference and apathy, contempt and pride,
may not pour like cold water on the fire.
Instead, may the spark of God's love light the love in my heart,
that it may burn brightly through the day.
And may I warm those that are lonely, whose hearts are cold and lifeless,
so that all may know the comfort of God's love.
Burn in me, glorious Father;
burn in me, beautiful Jesus;
burn in me, Holy Spirit of power.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Wednesday, October 17: Romans 8:31-39

These are some of my favourite verses in Scripture. When times have been toughest, these verses remind me that I am always part of God's family. This means BOTH:

1. God is my Father/Jesus is my brother/His Spirit is always with me, AND
2. I am family with other brothers and sisters in Christ, who can help me through.

Being a follower of Jesus is always BOTH a personal relationship with my Father/Jesus/the Spirit, AND a corporate belonging to the family of God/body of Christ/the church.

We have some core beliefs that unite us as Christians – across the denominational spectrum. These are "salvation issues" – basic beliefs that define us as the people of Jesus. Our church uses the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's Statement of Faith to articulate these (many other statements of faith are good too):

1. *The Holy Scriptures as originally given by God are divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy, and constitute the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.*
2. *There is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
3. *Our Lord Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh; we affirm His virgin birth, sinless humanity, divine miracles, vicarious and atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, ongoing mediatorial work, and personal return in power and glory.*
4. *The salvation of lost and sinful humanity is possible only through the merits of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, received by faith apart from works, and is characterized by regeneration by the Holy Spirit.*
5. *The Holy Spirit enables believers to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ.*
6. *The Church, the body of Christ, consists of all true believers.*
7. *Ultimately Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all persons: either to an eternal presence with God or to an eternal separation from God.*

These basic beliefs – like the wonderful truths in Romans 8 – unite us across denominational lines. In a world that looks at a fragmented church, divisions and discord, and is suspicious of the Christians, celebrating our unity on these essentials is a good thing.

- How can a passage like Romans 8 encourage you?
- How can Romans 8 unite us, as believers?

*Sweet Saviour Christ,
in your undeserved love for us
you were prepared to suffer the painful death of the cross.
Let me not be cold or even lukewarm in my love for you.
Lord, help me to face the truth about myself.
Help me to hear my words as others hear them,
to see my face as others see me.
Let me be honest enough
to recognize my impatience and conceit.
Let me recognize my anger and selfishness.
Give me sufficient humility
to accept my own weaknesses for what they are.
Give me the grace – at least in your presence – to say,
"I was wrong – forgive me."
God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
increase in us faith and truth and gentleness.
Amen.*

Thursday, October 18: Acts 15:1-31

As Christians we have some basic essential doctrines (yesterday or on our church's website: firstb.net/believe). Each of us has lots of *other* things we believe about all sorts of issues ... but are these other beliefs ESSENTIAL Christian doctrines? Can we agree to disagree on some of these other issues? Can we accept that we can have a variety of opinions on other issues and still be brothers/sisters in Christ?

The earliest Christians had a variety of opinions on all sorts of issues. One of the biggest was the relationship between Christianity's Jewish roots – "*Circumcision is taught in the Bible. If you're a Bible-believing Christian, you (men) should be circumcised*" – and the freedom that comes through Jesus, simply through faith. For us this seems silly, but, if you think about it, those who insisted upon circumcision had a point: if we take the Bible as infallible, inerrant, and authoritative, then ...??? If we are "soft" on biblical teaching on circumcision, are we on a slippery slope that leads us who-knows-where??? This is a BIG deal.

How is this controversy resolved?

I suspect there were still lots of Jewish-background believers who were not convinced and not happy about the decision that was made (the issue keeps resurfacing in many New Testament writings). But Peter, James and the others could distinguish between essentials – faith in Jesus – and non-essentials – circumcision.

One of our sister denominations emphasizes these values:

- *In Essentials Unity: We are called to embody and proclaim the essential truths of Christianity as articulated in the Word of God, expressed through the centuries in the great creeds of the church and defined for us in our Statement of Faith ...*
- *In Non-Essentials Charity: We are called to a generosity of spirit that frees us to embrace a wide variety of Christian brothers and sisters — "simply believers" — some with whom we will not agree in matters that are outside our Statement of Faith. Our spirit is one of warm welcome to all believers who share our commitment to our Statement of Faith and who seek to follow Jesus' command to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.*

I find that helpful. Some of the things that divide us as believers are really not essentials at all. We can agree to disagree, respect one another's' differences, and still be family.

- How can we have unity on the essentials, with grace and integrity?
- How can we have charity of the non-essentials?

*Oh Lord,
I reckon I'm not much by myself.
I fail to do a lot of things I ought to do.
But Lord, when trails are steep and passes high,
help me to ride it straight the whole way through.
And when in the falling dusk,
I get the final call
I do not care, how many flowers they send.
Above all else,
the happiest trail will be
for You to say to me,
"Let's ride, my friend, let's ride."
Amen*

Roy Rogers (1911-1998)

Friday, October 19: Philippians 4:1-9

Paul encourages the believers in Philippi to "*Stay true to the Lord*" (4:1). He wants us to stay united on those essentials of faith we talked about a couple of days ago:

1. *The Holy Scriptures as originally given by God are divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy, and constitute the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.*
2. *There is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
3. *Our Lord Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh; we affirm His virgin birth, sinless humanity, divine miracles, vicarious and atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, ongoing mediatorial work, and personal return in power and glory.*
4. *The salvation of lost and sinful humanity is possible only through the merits of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, received by faith apart from works, and is characterized by regeneration by the Holy Spirit.*
5. *The Holy Spirit enables believers to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ.*
6. *The Church, the body of Christ, consists of all true believers.*
7. *Ultimately Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all persons: either to an eternal presence with God or to an eternal separation from God.*

You'd think that in a young, vibrant church like Philippi – started by a successful businesswoman, a dramatically converted jailer, and a saved-from-a-demon girl (Acts 16:11-40) – staying true to the Lord would be easy. But almost immediately there is a squabble. We don't know what Euodia and Syntyche were spitting about, but the cancer of their disagreement was endangering the health of the entire church.

How does Paul respond (Philippians 4:1-3). How ought Christians handle disagreements?

Paul tries to put things in perspective by reminding Euodia, Syntyche, and us of the glorious BIG truths of our faith: things that can unite us, despite our different opinions.

- *"Be full of joy in the Lord"* – rejoice in your salvation and those essential things.
- *"Let everyone see you are considerate in all you do"* – obey Jesus' command to love one another.
- *"Remember, the Lord is coming soon"* – we are part of God's family, together eternally.
- *"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done"* – find your purpose, joy, and strength in Jesus.
- *"Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus"* – God's desire for us is peace, not conflict.
- *"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise"* – just do it!
- *"Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me – everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you"* – Paul handled differences of opinion with grace, compassion, and in the love of Christ – can you?

*Come, Lord Jesus, and remain in my heart.
How grateful I am to realize that the answer to my prayer
does not depend on me at all.
As I quietly remain in you and let your life flow in me,
what freedom it is to know that the Father
does not see my frayed patience or insufficient trust,
rather only your patience, Lord,
and your confidence that the Father has everything in hand.
In your faith I thank you right now
for a more glorious answer to my prayer that I can imagine.
Amen*

Catharine Marshall (1914-1983)

Saturday, October 20: Acts 17:1-12

Right after Philippi, Paul travelled to Thessalonica and Berea ...

- How do the Thessalonians respond to Paul's teaching about Jesus? (Acts 17:4-7)
- How do the Bereans respond to Paul's teaching about Jesus? (Acts 17:11-12)

The people of Berea "*searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.*" This was more noble than the jealous, angry, violent Thessalonians.

My encouragement is that whenever you read a Christian author, listen to a Christian podcast, or hear a Christian pastor, you search the Scriptures to see if they are teaching the truth. If they are telling the truth, it will be consistent with the whole Bible, not just one or two verses yanked out of context.

Our challenge is to be biblically literate enough to know truth and error. One of the down sides of the internet is that anyone can start their own website and appear to be an authority on just about anything – including the Bible and Christian doctrine. Having a website does not make you an expert on anything (I have two!).

One of the keys to Paul's and Silas' credibility was also their lives. They lived what they taught. They lived what they believed. People could see integrity and consistency between their doctrine and their lives.

The difficulty with internet "teachers" is we cannot see that integrity. Just because a teacher claims to be Christian or has a good statement of faith on their website, does not mean they are walking with His Spirit. Warning: if a website is really negative on the "church," is full of conspiracy theories, has lists of authors NOT to read, tears down the body of Christ, encourages you to separate from your church, and condemns certain Christian people ... that runs contrary to the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). In fact, it smacks of those things that characterize those NOT in the Spirit (hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, dissension, division) (Galatians 5:19-23).

The counter argument is true too: just because someone has the fruit of the Spirit does not mean they have the right beliefs. However, the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit suggests that person is on the right track; it is unlikely a non-godly person would demonstrate such fruit. Supposedly "right beliefs" – expressed with hostility, anger, and division – concern me. The devil has all the right beliefs, but doesn't live them.

Be wise. Be discerning. Think. And be part of a good community you can talk things through with.

*Lord God who is all in all to me,
Life of my life and Spirit of my spirit,
have mercy on me and fill me with your Holy Spirit
and fill me with love
that there may be no room for anything else in my heart.
I ask not for any blessing,
but for you, who is the giver of all blessings and of all life.
I ask not for the world and its pomp and glory, nor for heaven,
but I need you yourself, for where you are, there is heaven.
In you alone is satisfaction and abundance for my heart;
you yourself, my Creator, have created my heart for yourself,
and not for any other created thing.
Therefore my heart cannot find rest in anything but you:
only in you, Father, who has made this longing for peace in my soul.
So now take out of this heart whatever is opposed to you
and abide and rule in it yourself.
Amen.*

Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)

Sunday, October 21: Galatians 1:1-9

This week we're thinking about the "church." We'll read Paul's letter to one particular church in Galatia, Turkey. Galatia was named for the Gauls who conquered the area in the 3rd century BC. Galatia was a cornucopia of people – people worshipped Gallic gods, Greek gods, Roman gods, local gods, the emperor ... still others practiced a quasi-religious hedonism with orgies and temple prostitution. Most people were quite comfortable with a synchronistic religion – a bit of everything – whatever felt good. There was also a sizable Jewish minority who held to a much stricter ethical code.

Paul had been instrumental in starting Christian churches in the area. As a Christian, he had emphasized there is only one God, the creator of the universe (Jews would have accepted that no problem; other people wouldn't have been so sure). This one God had fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies by sending the long-awaited Messiah: Jesus (the Jews would have had questions at this point). Jesus is the King of Kings – He was executed, but He rose from the dead (this got everyone's attention!).

Paul goes on to say that God is now building a new Kingdom – one, unified Kingdom of all who have faith in Him, regardless of ethnic heritage, language, or religious background. It's a Kingdom that does not have separate Jewish and non-Jewish (Gentile) communities: everyone who has faith in Jesus is one big happy family. For Jews this created a problem. They were sure the Messiah was only going to come for **them** – to save **them**: the rest of the world didn't matter. If God did care about non-Jews, it would be to a second level of salvation: there would always be a Jew/non-Jew distinction. Even then, many Jews-who-became-Christians argued that non-Jews needed to keep all the Old Testament laws, including circumcision for men, if they hoped to be saved. After all, that's what the Bible says, and you don't want to go down a slippery slope ...

In the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), the church leaders concluded that it was not necessary to follow all the old laws of Moses – that burden, which no one could live up to, was finished. Faith in Jesus is what is important. *"You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality,"* was all the Council commanded (Acts 15:29). In other words, stay away from other gods, practice healthy dietary habits (for the time), and maintain high sexual standards (important in an age of widespread, culturally acceptable prostitution and an anything-goes culture).

Some of the Jewish Christians who argued that you-have-to-be-Jewish-to-be-Christian had come to Galatia. They were questioning Paul's authority. And they were teaching that you **did** have to become Jewish – and follow all the Jewish laws – to be a Christian. In other words, the church is all about being Jewish.

Paul is having none of this! He emphasizes that he, Paul, is *"sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead."* (1:1). He is not alone in this: *"all the brothers and sisters (are) with me"* in this (1:2) – referring to the consensus of the Council in Jerusalem. The "gospel" (literally "good news") that these become-a-Jew teachers were teaching was really not good news at all. It would put you back under the ball and chain of Old Testament law. You would go back to being "saved" by keeping the law perfectly ... but because you could never do that, you really had no hope.

Paul wants us to know we are saved by faith in Jesus. We don't earn our salvation by doing all sorts of good things or religious things. The church is Jesus' people, **saved by faith**. This is counter-intuitive to most of us. We like to think we earn our way through life. But God loves because He created us. He loves us whether or not we do anything nice or good. God loves us unconditionally. We are saved by accepting His love and mercy. We do nothing but receive this as a gift. Why is that so hard for us to accept?

We may do good deeds, but these flow **from** our new life in Jesus. In fact, we are called to do good deeds (Ephesians 2:10), but these are results of our salvation, not precursors to it. Why is this so hard to grasp?

We – people who believe in Jesus – are His church, His body. We are the body of Jesus – His hands, His heart, His feet, His arms, His mouth, His eyes, His head for our world.

How can we live as His people today?

*How poorly we repay you, my Lord, for all the good things you have given us!
In your majesty you seek all kinds of ways and means
by which to show us the love you have for us.
Yet we hold this in low esteem because we are so inexperienced in loving you.
Because we haven't practiced loving you as we should,
our thoughts follow their usual pattern
and we do not bother to ponder the great mystery of the ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us.*

*Majestic King, forever wise, you melt my heart,
which once was cold,
and when your beauty fills my eyes,
it makes them young, which once were old.
Christ, my Creator, hear my cry;
I am yours, you can I hear, my Savior, Master, yours am I;
my heart to yours be ever near.
Whether in life or death's last hour, if sickness, pain or health you give,
or shame, or honor, weakness, power –
thankful is the life I live.
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Monday, October 22: Galatians 1:10-24

Do we put any extra expectations on people who come to faith in Jesus? In the past, there have been assumptions that to be a Christian you didn't dance, didn't go to movies, didn't play cards, didn't drink, didn't ... the list went on and on. If you did any of these things, you must not be a Christian. Are those genuine "tests" of faith in Jesus? What about today? Do we have expectations/rules/restrictions/tests-of-"faith" that really are not biblical (have nothing to do with authentic faith in Jesus)?

At the other end of the spectrum are those who say that we are "free in Christ" – anything and everything goes. Paul will have lots to say about these folks, too (Galatians 5). We are not free to go crazy.

The "other" teachers – those who taught you had to be Jewish to be Christian – accused Paul of wanting to be liked. If you let the non-Jewish men off without the whole circumcision thing with salvation by faith alone, of course they would be more likely to become Christians. That's too easy: make them suffer like we had to.

Paul is adamant that if he had wanted to be liked in life he wouldn't be teaching about Jesus at all. He talks about how liked he was before Jesus: he was on the fast track to Jewish super-stardom. But then God got a hold of him (read the full story in Acts 9), by His **grace** saved Him (Galatians 1:15), and commissioned him to teach that same **grace** to non-Jewish (Gentile) people. Paul goes on to talk about the time he spent in Jerusalem with Peter, James, and the other Christians leaders. He refers again to the Council in Acts 15, where Peter had said, "*We believe it is through the **grace** of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they (non-Jews) are*" (Acts 15:11). We are saved by God's **grace**. The church is God's **grace**-full people.

Note: Paul is adamant that it is God who saved him – it was not his initiative; it was not his choice. Salvation is God's gift of grace to us: it is not something we earn or deserve.

We are saved **by** faith. We are saved **FOR** a purpose: we, the church, are God's good news in our world. We are people of good news: God invites everyone to repent, and accept His gift of new life in Jesus, by faith in Him. We are not saved to go crazy and indulge ourselves. We are not saved to hide away until we die. We are called to God's ambassadors of good news for all people (Luke 2:10-12, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

Paul was saved for a particular task. But he begins simply by telling his story. All of us are saved so that we can tell our story, too. **You** have a unique story! How did you come to faith in Jesus? Or have you always had faith in Jesus? That's great! How has Jesus made a difference in your life? How is He making a difference in your life? That's fantastic! Don't be afraid to tell your story. People can argue theology and philosophy, but no one can argue what God has done in your life.

*We have a call,
To be loved,
and to love,
To be shown mercy,
and to show mercy,
To be forgiven,
and to forgive,
To receive hope,
and to offer hope,
To know joy,
and share joy,
To feel peace,
and bring peace,
To be made whole,
and offer wholeness.
We have a call,
Listen ...
Do you hear?
Amen*

faithandworship.com

Tuesday, October 23: Galatians 2:1-10

Who is a Christian? Who isn't? How do you know? Can you tell by the clothes they wear? Whether or not they go to church? How they talk? Not really ... But we want to know our family members/friends are saved. How do we really know?

For some people in Paul's world it was easy. If you were a Christian (man), you would also be (or become) a Jew: therefore (as a man) you would be circumcised and follow all the Jewish Law. After all, it had been so in the Jewish world since the days of Abraham and the Bible told them so (in the male-centric world of the first century, women – interestingly – don't figure into these debates).

Paul, however, is having none of this "you're-saved-because-you're-circumcised-and-therefore-Jewish" nonsense. He makes the point, over and over, that we are saved by faith in Jesus. God does not love one nationality more than another. In the Kingdom of God – in the family of God – in the church – there are no divisions based on nationhood or race. We are one in our faith in and love for Jesus.

Today we probably understand that. Our own congregation is multicultural. But do allow other divisions to get between us? Do we think of other Christian denominations different from our own – Roman Catholics, Orthodox, charismatics, something else – and allow differences to separate us? Certainly, in the past, these tribal boundaries have caused many, many problems in the church and in our witness to the world. Can we move past our diversity and celebrate our unity, our common faith in the grace and love of Jesus?

What was the one command that Paul says came out of his meeting in Jerusalem? *"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along"* (2:10). Probably "the poor" referred to the church in Jerusalem, which seemed to be the most persecuted and the most in need (see Romans 15:25-27, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Who are the "poor" churches today – those most persecuted and most in need? How about the churches in the Middle East? How about churches in North Africa? In regions stricken by drought, war, and AIDS?

As the church, we are part of a global body. We praise God together. We suffer together. We worship together. We ache together. Pray for our family members – brothers and sisters in Christ – who are living in very difficult situations ... and dying as martyrs for their faith around the world.

This Christmas, consider supporting CBM mission projects in Lebanon, Kenya, Rwanda, and other countries that seek to care for refugees and those who suffer so much for their faith (visit www.cbmin.org or pick up a *Hopeful Gifts for Change* booklet at the church).

*Father, I abandon myself into your hands:
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do with me, I thank you.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures –
I wish no more than this, Lord.
Into your hands I entrust my soul.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord,
and so I need to give myself and to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve, and with unlimited confidence,
for you are my Father.
Amen.*

Charles de Foucauld (1856-1916)

Wednesday, October 24: Galatians 2:11-21

Why does the church believe in Jesus? Why is Jesus so important to us? Paul is adamant that we, His church, are Jesus' people, saved by faith.

To emphasize this, Paul talks about Peter. Peter is a complicated guy. On the one hand, Peter has been the champion of salvation by faith: "*We believe,*" Peter had said, "*that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 15:11). On the other hand, in the incident Paul refers to here, Peter seems to cave to Jewish-Christian peer pressure, and slides back into teaching that people have to follow all the old Jewish laws to be saved. Perhaps this is why Paul deliberately calls Peter by the Aramaic (the common Jewish language at the time), "Cephas" – Peter was reverting to his old Jewish ways.

Paul has no problem pointing out Peter/Cephas' hypocrisy (it's kind of refreshing to see Peter is very human – he makes mistakes/gives in to peer pressure/blows it, just like I do). Paul goes on to say: "*We know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law*" (2:16).

Paul goes on: "*When I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law – I stopped trying to meet all its requirements – so that I might live for God. My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*" (2:19-20). The Jewish system didn't work! Following rules perfectly cannot save anyone! But through faith in Jesus, we have new life – real life!

"*So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die*" (2:20-21). If the old Jewish order of things could save you, why did Jesus come? Why did He die? There was no need for Him to make the amazing sacrifice He made.

God's invitation is to discover that when ***Christ lives in me***, I really, truly begin to live for the first time. This is why the church is all about Jesus: Jesus changes everything

*I praise you for the life that stirs within me.
I praise you for the bright and beautiful world into which I go.
I praise you for earth and sea and sky, for scudding cloud and singing bird.
I praise you for the work you have given me to do.
I praise you for all that you have given me to fill my leisure hours.
I praise you for family.
I praise you for my friends.
I praise you for music and books and good company and all pure pleasures.
I praise you for the mission you give me to be good news in the world.
Amen.*

John Baillie (1886-1960)

Thursday, October 25: Galatians 3:1-14

C.S. Lewis writes, *"The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become – because He made us. He invented us. He invented all the different people that you and I were intended to be ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own."* How can I turn over more and more of my life to Jesus?

Paul wants to make sure the Galatians really get it! *"This way of faith is very different from the way of law ... Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing ... Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith"*(3:12-14).

There is no longer any smug ethnic superiority for the Jewish people. Through Jesus, God has saved the whole world. Through Jesus, God has created one Kingdom, one family, one church. Through Jesus, all who have faith are saved. We aren't saved by following rules or rituals. As we shall see, there are things we do and don't do **because** we are saved: these are results of our salvation; they are not preconditions.

Paul does want us to get the truth that we are "one in Christ" as His church. We are family. We accept, love, and care for one another as family. Whatever our ethnic heritage, age, gender, ability, income, genetic code ... we are one in Christ. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all equally precious to God.

One of the realities of family life is that when one member of the family hurts, everyone hurts. When we hear of the sufferings of Christians, we should take it personally. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Christian churches in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and India are among the oldest churches in the world: they were founded by apostles like Paul, Peter, James, Mark, Philip, and others. These Christian communities are our spiritual ancestors. They have been brutally terrorized in recent decades. The Syrian conflict has now resulted in the most refugees in history. Pray for ALL of the Middle East and North Africa – especially for our brothers and sisters in Christ, their witness, and martyrdom.

We are part of a global church and a global family of faith.

As we approach Remembrance Day, pray for peace in our world. Pray for persecuted Christians around the world. Pray for refugees and victims of war around the world. Continue to consider Canadian Baptist Ministries [Hopeful Gifts for Change](http://www.cbmin.org) as a Christmas alternative this year (www.cbmin.org) ...

*O God listen to my prayer; my earnest petition to come to you
for I know that you are hearing me
as surely as though I saw you with my own eyes.
Anything that is amiss in my soul, anything that is wrong in my life
may you, O God, sweep it from me and may you shield me in your love.
Let no thought come to my heart,
let no sound come to my ear,
let no temptation come to my eye,
let no fragrance come to my nose,
let no fancy come to my mind,
let no ruffle come to my spirit,
that is hurtful to my body or my soul this day or this night.
May you, yourself, O God of life,
be in front of me and behind me,
may you be my guiding-star,
may you be my Lord,
from my life's beginning to my life's end.
Amen*

Celtic prayer

Friday, October 26: Galatians 3:15-29

Freedom is one of those fundamental realities Canadians take for granted. It is hard for us to really comprehend what it would be like NOT to be free. But the political and social reality for most of the people to whom Paul was writing was anything but freedom: slaves, Jews, non-Romans, women, and the poor.

Paul is reminding the Galatians (again) that spiritually they were once imprisoned by the Old Testament Law. They were slaves. They had no freedom. In order to please God, you had to follow all the picayune rules and regulations in the Law. If you blew it, you would have to follow more rules and regulations about offering sacrifices in order to (hopefully) be forgiven. You were always walking on eggshells, hoping you didn't mess up and get "zapped" in judgment. And you hoped you did enough good things to atone for your sins.

But through Jesus we are all free from that spiritual – and social – oppression: *"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (3:26-28). Of course, they may still be slaves in the eyes of their Roman masters ... but in the eyes of God we are all His precious children. We are free from the straightjacket of the Law. And we are free from any sense of inferiority/superiority based on ethnicity, gender, social status, ability, or age.

This is the good news of authentic, life-transforming freedom we celebrate today: *"We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins ... Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law ... There is only one God, and he makes people right with himself only by faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles."* (Romans 3:22-30).

Let us celebrate our freedom – politically and spiritually!

*You, eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are a deep sea,
and the more I enter into you the more I find,
and the more I find the more I seek.
My soul cannot be satisfied without you,
for it continually hungers for you, the eternal Trinity,
desiring to see you with the light of your light.
As the hart desires springs of living water,
so my soul desires to leave the prison of this dark body and see you in truth.
Eternal God, what more could you give me than yourself?
You are the fire that burns without being consumed.
You consume in your heart all my soul's self-love and sin.
You are the fire that takes away the cold and darkness in my soul.
With your light, I pray that you might illuminate me
so that I may know all your truth.
Clothe me with yourself, eternal truth,
so I may run this mortal life in true obedience,
guided by the light of your most holy love and truth.
Amen.*

Catherine of Siena (1347-1386)

Saturday, October 27: Galatians 4

Who is the church? Peter says, *"You are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple ... you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2, 5-9). Paul has just told them they are saved by faith in Jesus and now there is no *"Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (3:28). We are all free through faith in

Jesus! Even more than that, God brings us into His family as His children! *"Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir"*(Galatians 4:6-7). We are princes and princesses in the Kingdom of God.

So, if we are God's children, why would we listen to teachers who try to convince us we are really slaves and we have to grovel and try to earn God's favour so He doesn't destroy us? Those who were emphasizing the importance of the Jewish law were doing just that! They were presenting God as a vindictive tyrant, out to find fault with us and – if at all possible – blast us into eternal punishment. Some recent Christian teachers try the same hellfire and brimstone strategy to terrify people into faith in God: if you disobey any of their "Thou shalt nots ..." (from reading certain authors, to using certain phrases, to ...) God is only too sadistically pleased to send you directly to hell! Or, if you don't agree totally with me, you are doomed.

Is that what God is really like? In Galatians 4, Paul draws on Jewish history to help his readers understand that they are truly free through Jesus. Writing to the Romans, Paul makes the same point more clearly: *"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"*(Romans 5:6-11). This is the good news of grace Paul wants us to grasp!

We are "Royals" – God's family. The "best" Royals (the members of the Royal Family we respect the most) invest their lives making a difference for those most in need: victims of violence, the sick, the poor, those who cannot speak up for themselves ... As God's royal priests/children, how do we live that out? Nelson Mandela wrote that, *"To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."* Our challenge is to live as God's sons and daughters in such a way that the world is a better place because we are here. How can we make a difference for those in need?

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Sunday, October 28: Galatians 5:1-15

Our good news is that we are saved by faith in Jesus. *"So Christ has truly set us free,"* Paul writes. *"Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law"*(Galatians 5:1). None of us are in danger of that, are we? We don't believe in circumcision and all that anymore!

And yet we do, sometimes, create our own rules and regulations: to be a Christian you have to do (and not do) certain things, wear (or not wear) certain types of clothes, follow (or not follow) certain rules, like (or not like) certain music, read (or not read) certain authors, believe (or not believe) certain non-essential doctrines ... We very easily slip into new legalisms – our new legalism may even be, *"You cannot really be a Christian if*

you do (or don't do) things the way previous generations used to do things ..."

And we do, sometimes, create our own little rituals and superstitions: we have to pray in just such a way at just such a time or else; we have to read so much of the Bible at a specific time or else. We give some ritual a magical power so that, if we break the routine, we're doomed.

And, sometimes, we try to bargain with God. *"God, if you help me get through this, I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life/read my Bible every day/never say another swear word ..."* We think that God will be impressed by our acts of devotion – which (like the Old Testament Law) we cannot keep!

"We who live by the Spirit," Paul says, *"eagerly wait to receive **by faith** the righteousness God has promised to us. For when we place our **faith** in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is **faith** expressing itself in love"*(5:5-6). It is about faith – not works.

"You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters," Paul emphasizes (5:13). But as Nelson Mandela said, freedom is not a gift we are to use for our own self-centered self-indulgence. It is a gift we have been given, so that we can make a difference in the world. Just as some of the Royal Family have caught a vision that the blessings of influence and wealth they have been given are gifts they can use to improve the lives of others, the freedom we have in Jesus is a gift we can use to bless others: *"Don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"*(5:13-14).

Martin Luther King Jr. challenges us *"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."* None of us is likely to stand in front of tens of thousands and give a speech like King's *"I have a dream."* But each of us does have opportunities to make a difference in the lives of people around us ... *"Faith,"* King said, *"is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."* We may not see a staircase of things we can do that will change the world ... but we can find one small step of love that will improve one person's life ...

*Loving heavenly Father, thank you for your Holy Spirit
who fills our hearts with a serene assurance that we belong to you forever.
How wonderful to be a child of the great King over all the earth,
a God of love who does not desire that any should perish.
Take away doubts and fears when we become estranged to you
or experience a dark night of the soul.
When suffering strikes or injustice happens,
let us not blame you but understand that all things
inevitably work for the good for those who love God
and are called according to his purpose.
Grant us the things that lead to assurance –
greater faith, greater trust, and greater hope.
As we grow in assurance, than lead us to endurance,
knowing that we can overcome any obstacle, even death itself.
Amen.*

James S. Bell Jr.

Monday, October 29: Galatians 5:16-26

The sordid tale of human history is one of violence, greed, brutality, intolerance, hatred, and war ... and the positive story of human history has been the determined resistance to uphold honour, peace, freedom, mercy, and love. On a large scale we have seen this battle played out around the globe.

This same battle between good and evil is fought within our own souls. Paul says, *"Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions ..."*(5:16-17). How do you find that to be true in your life?

Paul goes on: *"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God"*(5:19-21). Paul bluntly says these things are not morally neutral: they are from the Dark Side. Being "in Christ" does not mean go crazy and indulge your passions! Just because it seems to "feel" good and you are "free" doesn't mean it really is good for you!

In contrast, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"*(5:22-25).

In the battle between good and evil in your life, don't give in to the Dark Side! Fight the good fight to follow the Spirit's leading in every part of your life!

Ultimately this is not a battle of equally matched forces: God has already decisively won the war when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. The power of the Spirit, the power of the resurrection – within us – is greater than any power in the world. So be confident!

Pray through the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). How can you become more loving? More joyful? More peaceful? More patient? More kind? More good? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled?

*Lord, when I read your word,
I can't help but see how unable I am to live out what it says.
Remind me every day that, in my own power,
living and talking the way you call me to live and talk
is utterly impossible.
Remind me that it is only through the power of your Holy Spirit
that I can even come close to being all that I can be in you.
Show me every day areas in my life that I haven't given over to you,
areas where I am not relying on you
to do through me what I can't do for myself.
And help me change.
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Tuesday, October 30: Galatians 6:1-10

Yesterday we read that, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"*(5:22-23).

Paul carries on with the gardening metaphor: *"You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone – especially to those in the family of faith"*(6:7-10).

Paul gives some practical examples (6:1-6) of what that might look like.

"Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" Paul writes (5: 25). Paul is emphasizing – in a positive way – that we are saved by God's grace; we are empowered by God's grace; we truly live by God's grace. We don't do good things so God will like us. We do good things because God's Holy Spirit is at work in us. Anything good we do is not something we do because we're so wonderful: it is the consequence of God's Spirit working in and through us, inspiring us, guiding us, and empowering us. It is all about God. Not us.

"The Holy Spirit illuminates the minds of people, makes us yearn for God, and takes spiritual truth and makes it understandable to us" writes Billy Graham – He is the One who deserves all the credit, not us.

Expressing this negatively, Corrie Ten Boom writes, *"Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you."* J.I. Packer explains it this way: *"The Christian's life in all its aspects – intellectual and ethical, devotional and relational, upsurging in worship and outgoing in witness – is supernatural; only the Spirit can initiate and sustain it. So apart from him, not only will there be no lively believers and no lively congregations, there will be no believers and no congregations at all."*

If we try to explain everything, accomplish everything, and be everything on our own, we can never be anything more than a shadow of who we can be when we allow the Spirit freedom to move in our lives. Try walking with the Spirit today. Ask Him to lead you. Ask Him to open your eyes to see possibilities. Ask Him to guide your conversations. Ask Him to give you a deeper appreciation of the beauty around you. Ask Him to help you see how you can help His Kingdom come and His will be done today ...

A Workday Prayer (adapt to your own circumstances ...)

*Lord Jesus, as I enter this workplace, I bring your presence with me.
I speak your peace, your grace, and your perfect order
into the atmosphere of this office.
I acknowledge your lordship over all that will be spoken, thought,
decided and accomplished within these walls.
Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gifts you have deposited in me.
I do not take them lightly, but commit to use them responsibly and well.
Give me a fresh supply of truth and love on which to draw as I do my job.
Anoint my creativity, my ideas, my energy
so that even my smallest task may bring you honor.
Lord, when I am confused, guide me.
When I am weary, energize me.
Lord, when I am burned out, infuse me with the light of your Holy Spirit.
May the work that I do and the way I do it bring hope,
life, and courage to all I come in contact with today.
And, Lord, even in this day's most stressful moment,
may I rest in you.
Amen.*

Author unknown

Wednesday, October 31: Galatians 6:11-18

What is the most important thing in your life? Why?

This is how Paul answered that question: *"As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died. It doesn't matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation"* (6:14-15).

For Paul, his relationship to Jesus was the important thing. Nothing else came close. His identity, as a follower of Jesus, was first and foremost. His occupation – as a tentmaker – was way down the list of ways in which he defined himself. His education – a doctorate in Jewish theology – was irrelevant. His dress/appearance – he never talks about it. What Paul really wants us to know about who he is, is that his life only finds meaning, purpose, and identity as a person whom God loves, for whom Jesus died, and in whom the Spirit lives ...

How do you define yourself? In terms of your job? Your education? What you wear? What you own? Does any of that really matter? Does any of it make you unique? Millions of other people have a similar job, education, clothing, and other stuff ...

But God loves **you**. He died for **you**. His Spirit fills **you**. **You** are His precious child – a prince or princess in the Kingdom of God. That is who you really are! God wants you to know this, not so that you become arrogant, self-centered, or spoiled ... but so that you know who you are. Because it is only from that strong sense of self-identity, as God's child, that you can effectively reach out in love to others. When we know who we are, as God's beloved, we have the ability to share His love with those around us. God wants us to know His love so His love can then overflow our lives to be a blessing to people near us. Paradoxically, the more we appreciate God's love for us, the more love we have to share with others (conversely, the less secure we are about God's love for us, the more self-absorbed and less loving we tend to be).

Scottish theologian, William Barclay, wrote, "*Love always involves responsibility, and love always involves sacrifice. And we do not really love Christ unless we are prepared to face His task and to take up His Cross.*" May the Lord help us to love Him and love our neighbours in simple – and profound – ways ...

*Lord, help us to see in your crucifixion and resurrection an example of how to endure
and seemingly to die in the agony and conflict of daily life,
so that we may live more fully and creatively.
You accepted patiently and humbly the rebuffs of human life,
as well as the tortures of your crucifixion and passion.
Help us to accept the pains and conflicts that come to us each day
as opportunities to grow as people and become more like you.
Enable us to go through them patiently and bravely,
trusting that you will support us.
Make us realize that it is only by frequent deaths of ourselves and our self-centered desires
that we can come to live more fully;
for his only by dying with you that we can rise with you.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Thursday, November 1: Acts 2:40-47

These verses give us the first real picture of "church":

1. There is teaching and learning (inspiring people to grow in faith, knowledge, and wisdom);
2. There is fellowship (enfolding people into a community of care, compassion, grace, and love);
3. There is breaking of bread (worship and celebration of "being together" as the people of God);
4. There is mission (talking about their faith AND providing tangible help to those in practical need);
5. There is prayer – lots of prayer ('nuff said!).

I suspect most of us know all about church. Over the generations it has morphed and changed, but these five basic elements remain. The church may have become more than this, but it cannot be less.

1. Constant, lifelong **learning** is critical – so that we remain true to the teachings, values, and principles of Jesus so we can speak relevantly in and to our culture, and not just absorb the latest cultural craze ...
2. **Fellowship** – deep caring for one another (modeled in the early church in very practical, financial ways), in which we live God's Kingdom values of mercy and compassion – defines who we are;
3. **Worship** – symbolized by the ordinance of Communion, but so rich and deep as we give thanks, celebrate, and stand in awe of our Creator, Saviour, and the Spirit who is with us – shapes us;
4. **Mission** – we care for people outside and inside the community. We want them to know Jesus. And we want to alleviate pain and suffering, seek justice, and see God's Kingdom come and will be done ...
5. **Prayer** – listening to God speaking to us and lifting our **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication (needs) to God (note the helpful acronym **ACTS**, to help us have balanced prayers) – is fundamental. In prayer we open ourselves up to God's will for us, and we bring our issues to Him.

It's interesting that "evangelism" is not listed and yet "*each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*" As the early Christians simply lived their faith, others were drawn to the church.

Evangelism or mission was not a programme. It was integral to who they were. It was who they were. They lived their faith, and by their words and example, people were drawn to Jesus as to a magnet.

How can we live our faith in such a way that people see our faith? *"They'll know we are Christians by our love ..."* Do they? How can we model that love? How does this description of the church challenge you?

Pray for our church, that we might be this kind of a missional, loving, worshipping, learning – and PRAYING – community. Pray for yourself, that you might be the person God created you to be ...

Abraham Lincoln once said, *"I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had absolutely no other place to go."* When you face more than you can handle – and you will! – pray: you have no other place to go! Pray for power equal to your task!

*Lord, for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
keep me, my God, from the stain of sin, just for today.
Let me both diligently work, and duly pray;
let me be kind in word and deed, just for today.
Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
help me to sacrifice myself, just for today.
And if today, my tide of life should ebb away,
give me the assurance of your presence divine, sweet Lord, today.
So for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
but keep me, guide me, love me, Lord, just for today.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Friday, November 2: Acts 8:4-40

When Peter and John laid hands on people and prayed they would receive the Holy Spirit, Simon wanted that power to add to his bag of tricks. He sensed a great entrepreneurial opportunity. He pulled out his wallet excitedly, *"Sell me your secret! Show me how you did that! Name your price!"* He wasn't concerned about God, he sensed a chance to turn a few quick drachmas!

Peter answered: *"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!"* or, we could literally say (as Eugene Peterson translates it): *"To hell with your money! And you along with it! You can't buy God's gift!"* Simon completely side-stepped Peter's challenge to repent. He asked Peter to pray that nothing bad would happen, but he did not do the one thing which could prevent it – repent! He didn't see the error of his ways. Simon was still in charge of Simon. He said he believed, but he received no joy and no blessing from his supposed "faith." He wouldn't allow Jesus to change his heart. He was left the same old Simon in a city which now saw him as the charlatan he really was.

It is possible to have an intellectual belief in Christ as Lord and Saviour and allow His Spirit any control. It is possible to believe all the right things about Jesus and not know Jesus, personally. It is also possible to want His Spirit's power for our own purposes, but not be willing to allow Him to change us. Knowing and believing all the right stuff, leaves us empty if we don't invite the Spirit to fill our hearts and shape our souls ...

The second person we are introduced to in Acts 8 is an Ethiopian eunuch. Luke tells us a great deal about this man. He was the Minister of Finance for Queen Candice of Ethiopia. Somehow, he had come to believe in the one true God (an African convert to Judaism). Now he was returning home after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship. Apparently, however, the services at the temple had not met his spiritual hunger; as he was rode along he was reading and trying to make sense of a passage from Isaiah.

This Ethiopian, like Simon, apparently knew a lot about religion. He had studied the Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) enough to be convinced God was real. He had come to love God because he believed what he had read and studied was true. But he felt there had to be something more. It had no "life" to it.

"They came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And Philip said, '**If you believe with all your heart, you may.**' The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him." What the Ethiopian understood was what Simon never did. Belief is not just a matter of the head – it's also a matter of the heart. Simon went away as the same old Simon; the Ethiopian, who believed with all his heart, "*went on his way rejoicing*" – a new person.

For faith to be real, yes, you do have to know, intellectually, that Jesus Christ came, lived, died for our sins and rose from the grave. It is important to know He is coming again. But for faith to be real you also have to know that Christ came for **you**; He died for **you**; He will come again for **you**. More than that, you need to experience the power of His Holy Spirit at work in your life **today!** It's a matter of letting Him into your heart, not just your head ... How can you live that way today?

*Forgive them all, Lord:
our sins of omission and our sins of commission,
the sins of our youth,
and the sins of our riper years,
the sins of our souls
and the sins of our bodies,
our secret and our more open sins,
our sins of ignorance and surprise,
and our more deliberate and presumptuous sins.
Forgive the sins we have done to please ourselves
and the sins we have done to please others,
the sins we know and remember,
and the sins we have forgotten.
Forgive the sins we have tried to hide from others
and the sins by which we have made others offend.
Forgive them, Lord, forgive them all
for the sake of the one who died for our sins,
rose for our justification,
and now stands at your right hand to make intercession for us,
Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
Amen.*

John Wesley (1707-1788)

Saturday, November 3: Acts 16:6-15 (Time Change – Fall Back tonight!)

We know we are supposed to share our faith. We know we ought to be "missional." But practically what does that mean? How do we share our faith?

Look at what happened just outside of Philippi. Paul and his companions join a group of people. Someone probably asked who they were and where they had come from. So, Paul begins to talk. What does he say? He would have filled them in on his story – how he was a leader in the Jewish community, how he had persecuted Jesus but now he believed and followed Him, how God led them to come to Macedonia, and how they expected God would do things in Greece. Undoubtedly his honest enthusiasm and sincerity would have come through.

One woman, named Lydia, listened intently. "**The Lord** opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." She listened to Paul talking about what God had done in his life. How he had come to believe. How God had kept him safe and guided him. The **Holy Spirit** impressed upon her heart that this same God wanted to be her Saviour. And she believed. She and others who believed were baptized.

All of us have some experience with God. We can tell stories about how we came to believe, and how God has protected, guided us and cared for us. We can talk about what God means to us today. We can say God is **the most important** person/thing in our lives. Like Paul, our natural response to all this experience ought to be to share God's grace in a very natural, ordinary way.

Notice what did NOT happen in this account:

- Paul was not preaching. Lydia and her companions became Christians when someone took the time to speak with them on-on-one or in a small group. They became Christians when individuals who knew God shared their personal experiences of what God meant to them. This is humbling for preachers ☺.
- Paul and his friends spent time with them. This was more than a five-minute conversation.
- Paul did not convert anyone. The text makes it clear that Paul's words did not lead these people to faith in Jesus. *"The **Lord** opened her heart ..."* The Spirit of God is the One who led people to faith in Jesus.

Jesus, quoted in John 16:7-11, says *"When the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment ..."* It is the Holy Spirit who does the convicting and the converting.

Talking about sharing our experiences with Jesus assumes we have had some experiences with Jesus. If we have not yet made that choice to believe, or we have not invited Jesus to journey with us, we may not have much to talk about. This may be the time to listen to that small voice (the Spirit) who is inviting you to trust in Jesus and make a new start.

We may know Jesus and have experiences with God, but we're hesitant to talk about them for lots of reasons. (What are your reasons?) Pray. Perhaps we don't know when it's appropriate to share our faith – pray. We don't know who to share our faith with – pray. We don't know what to say – pray. It sounds trite, but prayer really helps. C.S. Lewis comments, *"I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time – waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God – it changes me."*

After you have prayed, do it. We can always find reasons not to speak to someone else. But when you find yourself starting to think of excuses ... DON'T. Talking about our faith in Jesus can be difficult at first, but it becomes more natural with time. As you share your experience of God with someone, your words become part of that person's life. They may believe right away – or not. It may take a long while to sink in. That's God's responsibility. You have made an eternal contribution to someone's life.

Your words may make all the difference in the world to that person. And then they tell two people. Who each tell two people. Who each tell two people ... you get the picture. Pray that God would give each of us the wisdom, courage, and opportunity to share His love and grace ...

*Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come.
May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.
For yours is the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Sunday, November 4: Acts 16:16-34 (Did you remember to set your clock back last night?)

We want our friends, our family members, our neighbours, our colleagues to know Jesus as their Saviour. And we try, by the way we live, our gracious words, and our prayers to make a difference. But what is it we're trying to communicate? What is the "gospel"? What is the "good news"? What do people need to believe?

Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century (and author of many books hundreds or even thousands of pages long) was visiting the University of Chicago. The eminent scholar was asked, *"Dr. Barth, what is the most profound truth you have learned in your studies?"* Without hesitation, he replied, *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."* That's the good news right there – *"Jesus loves you."*

During a conference on comparative religions, leading experts debated what, if any, belief was unique to Christianity. They began eliminating possibilities. Other religions had versions of gods appearing in human form. Other religions believed in life after death. The story goes that C.S. Lewis wandered in, "*What's the rumpus about?*" When he heard their dilemma, Lewis responded, "*Oh, that's easy. It's grace.*" Grace is simply love, free of charge, no strings attached – Jesus loves you, just as you are. That's what Paul shares (Acts 16:31).

It is nice to say that God loves me, but He doesn't know me, does He? That may have been what the jailer was thinking. Jailers in those days were **not** known for being "good" or "nice" people – rather the opposite. But Paul has credibility. He knows, first hand, about God's grace. Paul was one of those responsible for the murder of Stephen. Paul was responsible for Christians being beaten, thrown into prison, and worse. God's grace had come to Paul, with all his violent, intolerant, cruel, and merciless past. Paul could share that with the jailer.

Paul's message to the jailer in Philippi (and our message to the world around us) is that God loves each one of us no matter our past. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. There is also nothing we can do to make God love us more. This may be more difficult for some of us to accept.

We can turn the good news into bad news by adding all sorts of rules and regulations to it: people have to believe specific doctrines or do particular things in order to be saved. AFTER we are saved, the Spirit does challenge us to deal with lots of issues in our lives. These are changes we make in obedience to God's Spirit, AFTER we put our trust in Jesus. The good news is simply this – "*Jesus loves you.*"

Paul writes: "*I used to scoff at the name of Christ. I hunted down his people, harming them in every way I could. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how kind and gracious the Lord was. He filled me completely with faith and the love of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life*" (1 Timothy 1:13-17). That's the good news. God loves you.

God loves _____ (you fill in the blank with someone (or several people) you know). Pray for them.

*Lord, help us not to forget that we are in a battle with enemies in the heavenly places.
We don't wage war with human weapons
but with the weapons of the Spirit.
Let us put on the armor of light,
depending on your mighty power to make the enemy flee from us.
We thank you that you have given us this authority through the precious blood of the Lamb.
In the powerful name of Jesus we can overcome all spiritual opposition.
We have your promise that if we resist the devil he will flee from us.
Keep us from opening ourselves to his influence by allowing temptation to turn into sin.
Help us to repent of any sinful habits that create strongholds for the enemy.
May we examine our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

James S. Bell Jr.