



January 2020

Learning Life From Jesus

**Readings, Reflections, and Prayers
from the Gospel of Matthew**

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Monday, January 6: Matthew 3:1-12

Do we have any sins to confess? Only BAD people have anything to confess. And we're not bad people. We're (mostly) good people, aren't we?

What may surprise us is so many people – from Jerusalem and all Judea – came to confess their sins. Bad people. And (mostly) good people, like us. If John were to come to Lethbridge, today, would it be similar? What would the (mostly) good people do? Would we acknowledge our sinfulness?

Isaiah writes, *"All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own"* (53:6). Paul agrees, *"Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard"* (Romans 3:23).

We have:

- Sins of omission: things we ought to have done or said but didn't;
- Sins of commission: things we did or said we shouldn't have;
- Sins of ignorance: things we did or said we didn't know were wrong at the time;
- Sins of intent: things we knew very well were wrong, but we did anyway;
- Sins that are very public: whether we are aware of them or not, others see our shortcomings;
- Sins that are private: secrets only we know; but they are very real to us – and to God;
- Sins of our bodies: things we have actually done that are wrong;
- Sins of our minds: things we have never acted upon, but thoughts which poison our minds.

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8, 10).

We all need to join John the Baptist at the Jordan River; we all need to confess our sins; we all need to repent ... If you are a visual person, imagine you are at the river: what would you confess to the Lord?

"Repentance is not just saying sorry publicly to save face after being caught doing something wrong; it is a real change in one's thinking. True repentance is an inward reorientation affecting the whole of one's thoughts, but it expresses itself in outward acts. In repentance one turns away from idolatry, sin, evil, wrongdoing and any other way of life that is contrary to God's word, preferring instead to treat the word of God as a 'lamp to my feet and a light to my path'" (Joe Kapulyo, *Africa Bible Commentary*)

The good news is this: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

The prayers this month are from several sources including www.sacredspace.ie, *The Ancient Christian Devotional* (Thomas Oden), and *Celtic Prayers* (Robert Van de Weyer).

*"Be still and know that I am God."
Lord, Your words lead me to the calmness and greatness of Your Presence.
Everything has the potential to draw forth from me a fuller love and life.
Yet my desires are often fixed, caught, on illusions of fulfillment.
I ask that God, through my freedom,
may orchestrate my desires in a vibrant loving melody rich in harmony.
I exist in a web of relationships - links to nature, people, God.
Some links are twisted or broken:
I may feel regret, anger, disappointment.
I pray for the gift of acceptance and forgiveness.
I pray for the courage to bring healing and reconciliation.
I pray for love.
Amen.*

Tuesday, January 7: Matthew 3:13-17

For us, baptism represents our conversion to faith in Jesus. The old, pre-Jesus self symbolically dies (as you go under the water) and the new, living-for-Jesus self rises anew from the water (Romans 6:1-14).

But what about Jesus? He didn't need to be "*baptized with water for repentance*" – He was sinless (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15). John didn't want to baptize Jesus, protesting he (John) needed to be baptized by Jesus – Jesus is God (see John's words in 3:11-12). John is flabbergasted. What is this about?

Jesus is full of surprises. He doesn't do what we expect. He challenges us to think: What does baptism mean for Jesus? What did baptism mean for people at the river that day? What does baptism mean to us?

Jesus was

- Endorsing and affirming John's message: he is emphasizing we need to come, humbly, before God and commit ourselves completely – heart, mind, soul, and strength – to Him;
- Demonstrating that pride, arrogance and self-righteousness have no place in the kingdom of God – Jesus was willing to submit to John, even though John was of lesser stature than Jesus. Are we ever too proud to serve someone, to admit we are wrong, to ask forgiveness, to forgive ...?
- Setting an example to follow – from the resurrection of Jesus on, baptism is the outward sign of being part of God's people, just as circumcision was the mark of being Jewish (Matthew 28:18-20). Baptism is not an option; it is a key part of our relationship with Jesus; as we follow His example, we outwardly express our complete commitment to Him. If you have been baptized, reflect on what that complete commitment means in your life. If you have not been baptized, why not?
- Publicly beginning His ministry. The voice of the Father and the appearance of the Holy Spirit – with Jesus, completing the Trinity – publicly announce who Jesus is – Immanuel, God-with-us.

As we aim to walk in faith and obedience to God – if we listen – we will hear the same voice of God leading and affirming us, we will find the same Spirit ministering to and empowering us, we will find the same Jesus walking with us, as our Guide, Coach, Mentor, Example, Tutor, Friend – and Lord.

No, Jesus had not sinned. He was setting an example for us to follow. What is He saying to you?

*Lord Jesus, think on me.
Do not let me go astray;
Through darkness and perplexity,
You point the heavenly way.
Lord Jesus, think on me.
When the flood is past,
May I see Your eternal brightness,
and share Your joy at last.
Let me therefore not cling to fleeting things,
which slip away and depart,
but to those which are enduring and immovable.
May I hold to these through the grace and loving-kindness of my Lord, Jesus Christ,
Through whom and with whom be glory
to the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.
Amen*

Synesius of Cyrene (370-414) and Chrysostom (344-407)

Wednesday, January 8: Matthew 4:1-4, Deuteronomy 8:1-5

Temptation happens. We all experience it. What do we do when temptation comes?

Jesus has just been baptized by John; the Father has spoken; the Spirit has appeared as a dove; Jesus' ministry is now public. It's an "emotional high." Immediately Jesus faces temptations. It is not uncommon for Christians who have just experienced a spiritual blessing – coming to faith, summer at camp, baptism, marriage, new baby, great concert, etc. – to undergo real struggles and temptations directly afterwards. When the Holy Spirit works in great ways in our lives and we get excited about Jesus, Satan is not amused. And he often tries to derail our spiritual growth by any means possible, as soon as possible.

It is also not uncommon for temptations to come when we are physically and emotionally spent. It was AFTER forty days of fasting that Satan came to Jesus. Satan often tempts us to doubt, get angry with God, walk away from His people (the church), stop reading the Bible, give up on prayer, etc. when we are having hard times – when we have lost a loved one, we are unemployed, our investments have dropped, our health is failing, our family is disappointing us, we're struggling with depression ...

This story reminds us Satan is real; he is actively trying to get us away from God. We do ourselves no favours by pretending he doesn't exist, or he isn't working against us. It is good to know your enemy.

But this story also reminds us Jesus is stronger than Satan. We don't need to be afraid. When Jesus is with us, as the Holy Spirit empowers us, we have the power and authority to say "No" to temptation.

The first temptation Jesus experiences is the temptation to think that life is all about physical things like food (and we might add, clothing, housing, games, cars, TVs, vacations, mutual funds, ski trips, etc.). It is so easy to spend 99.9% of our time and energy worrying about, working for, and thinking about stuff, and NOT remembering all we have is a gift of God. His promise is that He will provide for us.

Jesus challenges us to remember some things are more important than stuff. The verse Jesus uses to rebuke the devil is Deuteronomy 8:3. What is God teaching you, today? What does that mean for you?

"In our desire to serve God and to live as Jesus did, there will be temptations, as there were for him. He was tempted to abandon his chosen mission, to use all his power for himself, to trust in himself alone. Our temptations may be different, but the reality is the same. Attractions other than the way of Jesus will demand our focus and activity. We know Jesus as one who knows the reality of temptation. The side of ourselves which wants to follow Jesus faithfully can be strengthened in prayer" (Frank Doyle).

*God is with me, but more, God is within me,
giving me existence.
Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence in my body,
my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.
What most often trips me up is my tendency to be caught up
in fears and expectations about what I 'ought' or 'should' be.
My usual automatic responses tie me down
and inhibit me from exploring new areas of growth.
I ask and pray for a greater sense of inner freedom
and that I might reach the fresh and challenging possibilities
that God wishes me to realize.
I thank you, God that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with you.
And I thank you for the insights you have given me from your word.
Amen.*

Thursday, January 9: Matthew 4:5-7, Deuteronomy 6:10-13 (Psalm 91, too, for background)

The devil's second temptation comes directly from Psalm 91:11-12.

Isn't it interesting that Satan uses **Scripture** to tempt Jesus? A person can pull a Bible verse out of context or ignore the form of literature (such as prophecy, poetry, letter, etc) to make the Bible appear to say what it doesn't actually mean. By taking verses on their own, without context, a person can come up with bizarre

interpretations of Scripture, twisted rationale for endorsing (or prohibiting) certain behaviours, support for strange doctrines, and so on. That is exactly what Satan does here. Be careful only reading one verse at a time, out of context. When you read Scripture ...

- Always read the context (it's always good to read a whole chapter or close to it);
- Think about the historical or cultural context – what influence does that have?
- Think about the type of writing – poetry, history, letter, etc. – how might that shape the meaning?
- Ask, "What did this mean to the first people who read this?"
- Then ask, "What does this mean to me today?"
- If an "interesting" or controversial issue arises in your passage, look for other passages of Scripture that deal with the same topic, so you get a bigger concept of what the whole Bible says.
- If you have questions, talk to a wise person: a *mature* Christian friend or family member, or pastor.

Following those guidelines, we know Psalm 91 is a poem and prayer about God's protection. As a poem, it uses imagery to describe God (He is not literally a bird. [v.4]; we are not literally to walk on poisonous snakes or lions [v.13]). It does NOT promise God's presence and protection if we do stupid things like jumping off a building.

It does state, with brutal honesty, that there are a lot of evils in the world we cannot avoid. But God will be with us, He will be our refuge and strength, through these difficulties. We will be attacked – by illness, enemies, violence, accidents, etc. – but God will get us through. In fact, the salvation God promises may not be physical and temporal (that is, he may not deliver us from every enemy, illness, accident, or attack), but He will be with us through all our suffering. And in the end, He will welcome us into His presence – the ultimate place of safety, security, and peace.

Jesus responds to the devil with words from Deuteronomy 6:13-19. The background for this passage ("Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah") is found in Exodus 17:1-7. God had already led the Israelites out of Egypt miraculously (the Passover, crossing the Red Sea, providing manna and quail). But the people still grumbled: "*the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'*" (Exodus 17:7). The Israelites had seen miracle after miracle; they knew God's care. Moses, in Deuteronomy 6, reminds the Israelites of how quickly they had forgotten God's loving provision in the past and urges them to continue to be faithful.

This context helps us understand Jesus' words in Matthew 4:7. Satan is tempting Jesus to put God's loving care to the test by doing something stupid. But there is a huge difference between the potential situation Jesus would be in if He jumped off the temple (personally choosing to do something dumb to test God or to show off) than the situation Moses and the Israelites were in (having been led into the wilderness **by God**).

This Old Testament background helps us understand what Jesus is saying: yes, God has and will care for His people when we are living for Him and doing His will (as in Psalm 91), but not when we are being dumb or trying to get everyone's attention.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, do you ever ask a question like: "*Is God really there?*" "*Does He really care?*" "*Does He hear my prayer?*" "*Why isn't He answering?*" "*Is the Lord with me or not?*" "*Lord, give me _____.*" We have each experienced enough blessing, we should probably know better, too ...

Do you ever try to "test God" to get Him to do something for you? Why? We probably know better, too ...

God calls us to an unwavering commitment to him, believing the promises of Psalm 91 – He will get us through. But we are called to trust Him. "*Do what is right and good in the LORD's sight, so that it may go well with you ...*" the Lord says.

Do I believe that? Do I need to just get on with life and trust Him?

*Lord, our God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,
who keeps covenant and promises
for those who love you with their whole heart;
who is the life of all, the help of those who flee to you,
the hope of those who cry to you;
cleanse us from our sins, secret and open,
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.
Cleanse our bodies and souls, our hearts and consciences,
that with a pure heart and a clear soul, with perfect love and hope,
we may venture confidently and fearlessly to live for you.
May the power of God preserve us.
May the wisdom of God instruct us and the way of God direct us.
May the hand of God protect us,
and the host of God guard us against the snares of evil
and the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Basil (330-379) and Patrick (389-461)

Friday, January 10: Matthew 4:8-11, Deuteronomy 6:1-13

Satan's third temptation is the lure of power. What if I were King of the World? What if I had unlimited wealth? Or Power? What if I could DO what I want, when I want? What if I could HAVE whatever I want? What if I won the lottery? What if I could live in a mansion on a tropical island with people waiting on me hand and foot? Sounds great, doesn't it?

This is the temptation Satan is putting before Jesus. He could have it all. But it's a foolish offer. Jesus is God! Even though the devil is very powerful in our world, "*prowling around, looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8), God – Jesus – is more powerful. As God, everything is really Jesus' anyway, isn't it?

"*Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely*" wrote Lord Acton in 1887. As we look at issues in national and international politics and business, Acton's observation rings true, doesn't it? Yet subtly, most of us still desire power. We love control – despite the headaches and stress that go with it. Why? We may think we know all the answers – everyone else is wrong. Or we don't want someone else telling us what to do. Or we think it would simply be great to have the top job. Or we just want more stuff.

Jesus replies to Satan's temptation with a quote from Deuteronomy 6. Deuteronomy records Moses' words as he reminds the Israelites of all the miracles God had done for them – delivering them from Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness. He is reminding them of how quickly they can forget God's blessings.

Yesterday we read part of Deuteronomy 6 – the Israelites had put God to the test, ignoring His faithful provision and loving kindness. In these verses, Moses is warning the Israelites how easily they can forget God, the Lord, their Savior. It will be easy for them to think that they did it all by themselves – getting out of Egypt, taking over the Promised Land (they are SO smart, SO brave, SO strong ...). It will be easy to forget God, once they have their basic needs met – they don't need Him anymore – life is good.

Jesus is reminding us that we need to "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*" – in bad times and in good times. God is the centre of our being. We need to see our lives, continuously, in terms of who He would have us be and what He would have us do. We need to keep focussed on what is most important – God and His mission to save His creation – rather than material goals that will rust, rot, and fade away.

Jesus is also reminding us – again – that wealth, power, "success" are real temptations in our lives. We continuously need to be soul-searching ourselves, asking ourselves who – or what – is shaping our decisions, motivating our lives, and governing our goals.

*What I'm trying to do here is set aside time to focus on my life –
both temporal and spiritual.
I try to imagine that Jesus is sitting here beside me,
and I talk over with Him what has been going on for me.
I attempt to understand that in a myriad of ways, Jesus,
you enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.
But life is fast and full.
Often, pressures and commitments drown out the little voice at my core.
I know that.
And I want to do something about it.
For now, I try to become still and receptive
to what Your Presence might want to impart to me.
At any time of the day or night I can call on You.
You are always waiting, listening for my call.
What a wonderful blessing.
No phone needed, no e-mails, no texts, just a whisper.
I try to let go of concerns and worries
that may be dragging me down at this present moment.
I place any concerns I have in God's hands –
at least for these few minutes of prayer.
Amen*

Saturday, January 11: Matthew 4:12-17

Imagine being a tunnel; it's pitch black. Suddenly, you see a distant light. The light gets brighter and brighter. Then you hear the noise. It's an oncoming train. What do you do?

Mark's Gospel has no Christmas story, no stories of Jesus' birth or infancy. Mark begins with John the Baptist baptizing Jesus, then Jesus announcing, "*The time promised by God has come at last. The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!*" (Mark 1:15). The train – God's Kingdom – is coming. It's right here. What are you going to do? Just jump out of the way or get on board?

In Matthew 4:12-17, Matthew picks up the same story: "*Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.*" (Matthew prefers the phrase "heaven" to "God," a regular Jewish way to avoid saying the name, "God," out of reverence and respect; Mark and Luke, non-Jews, prefer the word "God"). The Kingdom of God/Heaven is coming. What will you do? Just jump out of the way or get on board?

The Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven refers to the new reality that comes with the arrival of the Messiah.

The Jewish people were waiting for the Messiah. They wanted a radical, military revolutionary. They wanted a powerful political leader who would rally the troops and lead a violent revolution, slaughtering their Roman oppressors. They wanted revenge. They wanted blood.

Jesus is the Messiah. But the first thing He does is call people to repentance. To "repent" means to change direction, to turn around and go the other way, or to stop doing what you're doing and do the opposite. Violent revolution is not the answer. God's Kingdom doesn't come by fighting the powers of darkness with the weapons of darkness – guns, protests, and power. Of course, we're not violent people. But sometimes we still think the Kingdom of God will come by power: if only **we** controlled government, corporate offices, the media ... If only we could legislate everyone had to be "Christian" ... How has that worked in the past?

Jesus will demonstrate that real revolution comes through changed hearts and transformed lives. In the Sermon on the Mount, which begins in Matthew 5, Jesus describes the Kingdom of God in radically different terms than the Jewish people expected. It's a Kingdom of people whose hearts love God – regardless of their nationality – not a Kingdom of Jewish ethnic pride. It's a Kingdom built on compassion, forgiveness, mercy, and love rather than violence and might. It's a Kingdom that comes through prayer not politics.

The train of God's Messiah is coming. He calls us to repent of our pride, power, position, and status. He calls us to change our hearts. He calls us to a new identity as sons and daughters of God. He calls us to discover life, love, and purpose through Jesus. He calls us to pray. What will you do about it?

*"This is the day the LORD has made.
I will rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)
I need to close out the noise,
to rise above the noise;
the noise that interrupts, that separates,
the noise that isolates.
I need to listen to God again.
I remind myself that, as I sit here now,
God is gazing on me with love and holding me in being.
I pause for a moment and think of this.
I ask how I am within myself today?
Am I particularly tired, stressed, or off-form?
If any of these characteristics apply,
can I try to let go of the concerns that disturb me?
In this expectant state of mind,
help me listen to what God is saying to me.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present
and may reveal whatever the passage has to say to me.
Lord, speak to my heart.
Amen.*

Sunday, January 12: Matthew 4: 18-22

- Why did George give up a comfy medical career in Canada to become a doctor with a faith-mission in Africa, supported through the hard work of soliciting personal donations?
- Why does Paula volunteer in the church nursery?
- Why does Sam, a retired businessman, give over 20% of his income to his church, and THEN gives more to missions on top of that (forgoing the vacations and lifestyle he could enjoy)?
- Why does Jane volunteer cutting the grass at her church (no one even knows she does it)?
- Why does Zach help out at the Soup Kitchen?
- Why did Susan give up a lucrative career as a petroleum engineer to become a pastor?

Why did Simon/Peter, Andrews, James and John – and the other disciples – give up comfortable, secure livings as small businessmen to follow Jesus? It will mean personal financial hardship. It will mean tough times for their families. It throws their entire futures into chaos.

There was something about Jesus that motivated people to follow Him. Despite the cost.

It was not about reward. There was nothing to suggest there would be tangible benefits to following Jesus. Quite the opposite, in fact. Financially, none of His disciples will have anything but just enough to get by. Most of them will suffer for their faith: Peter and Andrew will be crucified. James will be beheaded on Herod's orders. Of the twelve apostles, only one, John, will die a natural death. But those who knew Jesus literally followed Him to the ends of the earth. And never regretted their choice.

There is still something about Jesus that motivates people to follow Him. Despite the cost.

"Sometimes his call comes slowly, starting like a faint murmur and growing until we can no longer ignore it. Sometimes he calls people as suddenly and dramatically as he called Peter and Andrew, James and John. When that happens to you, by whatever means and at whatever pace, you will know; Jesus has a way of getting through and whatever we are engaged with- whatever nets we are mending or fish we are catching

– somehow we will be sufficiently aware of his presence and call to know what it is we're being asked to do.

"At least, we will know we're being asked to follow him. We won't necessarily know where it's all going to lead ..." (Tow Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p. 32).

Jesus is asking each of us to follow Him. There may be a cost. We all have a choice. Will I follow?

*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 (1850-94)

Monday, January 13: Matthew 4:23-25

Why did people follow Jesus?

For one thing, Jesus did remarkable things. He healed a lot of people. Jesus touched the lives of all sorts of folks whose lives had been blighted by every kind of illness and disease. But Jesus was never simply just a healer. For Jesus, healings were signposts of the coming of God's Kingdom. They were bright lights, showing the world the Messiah had come. God had come. One of the inevitable consequences of the God's reign and rule coming into the world was healing. Crowds flocked to follow Him.

Wouldn't it be great if we had the same power to heal and do miracles today? Wouldn't people flock to see?

The sad tragedy of Jesus' life is that, while many people followed Him because of His miracles, when times got tough, most fell away. Many stayed with Him for the good times, miracles, and perks (an occasional free meal of bread and fish), but their hearts were not changed. They didn't love Him. Most people didn't stick with Him even through the normal days when nothing spectacular happened, let alone the hard times.

If Jesus were to do lots of miracles today the same would be true. Human nature is such that they would crowd around for the show, but then quickly forget, move on, and leave Jesus on the sidelines.

Why do I follow Jesus? Will I be faithful, even when times are tough? Will I follow even on the days when there is no miracle? Will I follow even when I don't know where He might lead?

*O God, whose ways are all mercy and truth,
carry on your gracious work in us,
Lord, by your grace, help us become what we,
in our own human frailty, cannot attain;
give us the faith, that in our own strength we cannot manage to find;
shine forth conspicuously through our lives
despite our all too obvious weaknesses.
We ask, O Lord, in your compassion,
that you increase our faith in you and your faith in us.
We believe you will not deny the aid of your loving-kindness to those who love you:
give us your help and strength, O Lord.
Amen*

Leonine Sacramentary (7th century)

Tuesday, January 14: Matthew 5:1-3

Matthew 5 begins: *"One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them. 'God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs'"* (Matthew 5:1-3).

If you want to shock an audience, starting with, *"If you're destitute, celebrate!"* is a good way to get their attention. Or inspire them to walk away. The word "poor" which Jesus uses is not a word that simply describes someone who has just enough but no extra. He uses a word which means abject poverty – having nothing at all, being totally destitute.

Jesus is talking about the world of our spirits – our souls, our inmost beings. If you think about it, spiritual health is really most important in our lives. There are wealthy people who are fundamentally miserable and there are poor people who are miserable. The old adage, *"You can't buy happiness"* is true. Real happiness, joy, bliss, and peace are qualities which exist independently of our material circumstances. True wealth comes from relationships: with people we love, friends, family ... and, most importantly, with God.

True happiness, true joy, real bliss and peace come when we recognize that we need something more than money can buy – we need the power and touch of the living, personal God in our lives. We need more than a dream; we need real spiritual Presence. We need more than someone else's spirituality – we need an authentic relationship with God in **our** souls. We desperately need to know God, personally and powerfully. To be poor in spirit is to recognize our spiritual poverty – our spiritual bankruptcy – before God. We have nothing to offer, nothing with which to plead, nothing with which to buy the favour of heaven.

Jesus is telling us that recognizing our dependence on God is not a sign of weakness, but tremendous strength. Strong people can admit we need God. And strong people can acknowledge we can't conjure up faith and authentic spirituality on our own. Truly mature people recognize we need help when it comes to spiritual "wealth" – finding real true satisfaction, contentment, and joy. Real spiritual life is God's gift of grace. We need His gift of unconditional love.

Jesus is challenging us to recognize truly mature people are not satisfied with who they are: they want to be changed. They are those who come to God in faith, accept His love, and allow Him to transform them.

William Barclay writes, *"O the bliss of the man who has realized his own utter helplessness and his own utter inadequacy, and who has put his whole trust in God; for then he will humbly accept the will of God, and in so doing he will become a citizen of the kingdom of God. And that is precisely the origin of bliss, for in doing His will is our peace."* What is Jesus saying to you?

*"Come to me all you who are burdened and I will give you rest."
Here I am, Lord.
I come to seek your presence.
I long for your healing power.
Lord grant me the grace to have freedom of the spirit.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
Where do I sense hope, encouragement, and growth areas in my life?
By looking back over the last few months,
I may be able to see which activities and occasions have produced rich fruit.
If I do notice such areas,
I will determine to give those areas both time and space in the future.
What is stirring in me as I pray?
Am I consoled, troubled, left cold?
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side, and share my feelings with him.
Thank You that You delight to hear my prayers – and You love me.
Amen*

Wednesday, January 15: Matthew 5:4

Eugene Peterson's translation reads: *"You're blessed when you've lost what you feel is most dear to you."* It's seems upside-down. Wrong. What did Jesus mean?

We need to think about this verse in context. Jesus speaks this beatitude directly on the heels of the first. He has just emphasized that the first stage in spiritual blessing is to recognize and acknowledge that spiritually we are desperately poor; we need help. Now, in Matthew 5:4, Jesus adds that our response to being "poor in spirit" – to being lost – is to grieve. It is one thing to recognize you need help (to be poor in spirit). It is another to be so emotionally moved you are motivated to do something about it.

Jesus is talking about a grief, a sorrow as deep as what we experience when we lose a loved one. This sorrow comes as the result of a loss of innocence, righteousness, and self-respect. Just as we are "poor in spirit" without God, Jesus is saying that we need to grieve that our lives are a mess.

An early missionary to North America, David Brainerd, wrote in his journal, *"In my morning devotions my soul was exceedingly melted, and I bitterly mourned over my exceeding sinfulness and vileness."* Have you ever been emotionally moved by your own sin? When was the last time we even recognized we had any sin in in our lives? When was the last time we confessed something to God? Maybe it's good to do some self-examination ... not so that we are miserable, but so that we can deal with it and get on with our lives.

Real personal growth comes not only when we realize we have a problem, but when we own it and take responsibility for it. When we are passionately dissatisfied with who we are and where we are. Then God can work in and through us. The sorrow of repentance, Jesus is saying, is what motivates us to change our lives ...

"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you," Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' words, because *"Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you."* What is often most dear to us is our sense of self-confident, self-reliant, self-made pride. We love to feel we are in the driver's seat and masters of our destiny. We love to think we're alright. Our lives are just fine. Our houses are all in order. But Jesus says, *"Blessed are you when you open your eyes and realize that's not the way it is, when you realize that in fact things are a mess; you've botched things; you're not in control. But only then will you allow the really perfect one, the one who really is in control to come into your life."*

Blessed are you if you are dissatisfied with life as it is. Because it is only when we lose what we always thought was most dear to us – our own self-righteous pride and independence – that we really begin to know the One who really is most dear to us ... God Himself. And it is when we realize that God really is most dear to us that we begin to discover true happiness, true joy, true peace, and true hope.

*O Lord, we draw near to you, acknowledging our unworthiness,
and we ask that all the defeats and defects of our past may be freely pardoned and entirely done away,
through the precious blood of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Rouse us, O Lord, from the sleep of apathy
and from tossing to and fro in our thoughts,
that we may no longer live as in a troubled dream
but as people awake and resolved to finish the work you have given us to do.
By your humble birth, root out of our hearts all pride and haughtiness,
that humble ways may content us,
so that we may serve the humble.
By the life of compassion for those who labour and are heavy laden,
teach us to be concerned one for another and bear one another's burdens.
By your holy and most bitter anguish on the cross,
help us to worship you, and love you, and follow you, O Christ.
Amen*

Brigid (460-528)

Thursday, January 16: Matthew 5:5

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." What does the word "meek" mean?

Sometimes we equate meekness with being spineless: some people are so agreeable we wonder if they have any mind of their own. We may equate meekness with weakness. Being meek, we think, means making peace at any price, preferring compromise to confrontation, always passively giving in. A person who is meek, we assume, is one who says, *"Let's just all get along and live happily ever after. Whatever else, let's not fight."* It is not a very attractive "virtue."

What does Jesus mean? This beatitude follows from what has gone before. First, Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit: how happy we are when we realize we need help spiritually. Second, Jesus talks about how that realization ought to move us to mourn our sinfulness: then we're motivated to make real changes in our lives. Third, that sense of profound dissatisfaction, leads to meekness.

Meekness in this sense means humbly recognizing we need God's wisdom in our lives, **and** we're prepared to live by it. The Hebrew word for "meek" is a favourite word in the psalms, describing a person who accepts the guidance of God **and** lives faithfully under His laws. The one who is meek is certain God's way is best, even when it seems hard. The meek person has enough confidence in God to have faith that, in the long run, the wisdom of every one of God's truths will be proven true. So the meek person lives faithfully.

Mary is meek. When the angel tells her she would bear a child (a disaster for an unmarried woman), she says, *"I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said"* (Luke 1:38). She hears. She obeys.

Jesus is meek. As He anticipated His crucifixion, He prays, *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."* He is willing to obey, no matter what.

Meekness is not weakness but tremendous strength. Our natural tendency is to manage our lives completely by ourselves. In contrast, it takes tremendous personal strength to allow someone else – even when that person is the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise God – to make decisions for you and then to act upon them. It is completely non-natural to place our lives in God's hands. Only someone who is so dissatisfied with life as it is and knows they need God (beatitudes 1 & 2) will do it.

Meekness is also an attitude which influences our relationships with other people. We often take a dim view of one who is meek in relationship with others. Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, talked a lot about "meekness." Aristotle observed people often go to extremes on things, when the wisest path is right in the middle. When it comes to anger, for example, Aristotle observed that some people are always angry and bad-tempered, while other people always concede defeat or always avoid conflict. Between those two extremes, said Aristotle, is meekness. The person who is meek, he said, *"feels anger on the right grounds, against the right persons, in the right manner, at the right moment, and for the right length of time."* The person who is meek is *"neither too hasty nor too slow-tempered. He does not become angry with those he ought not to, nor fail to become angry with whom he ought. Those who are meek are able to bear criticism and insults calmly; they do not retaliate quickly; they do not lose their tempers easily; they are not bitter people or people who love to argue; they are calm, peaceful, dependable, even-tempered people."*

A meek person has perfect self-control and always does what is best. Meekness has been defined as *"absolute power under perfect control"* – that is the epitome of Jesus. The promise of this beatitude is that those who learn the lesson of meekness will discover a quality of life here and now that other people cannot know. The meek have a peace and power that comes from dependence on God and self-control.

The final meaning of this beatitude might be something like this: *"O the bliss of the person who has so committed himself to God that he is entirely God-controlled: this person will be right with God, right with himself, and right with others. He will enter in to the peace and strength which God alone can give. He will have a quality of life unrivalled on the earth."*

*You, O Lord, who commands us to ask, grant that we may receive.
 You have put us on a journey, seeking; let us rejoice in finding you.
 You have bidden us to knock; we pray you open the door of your heart to us.
 Be graciously pleased to direct and govern all our thoughts and actions,
 that for the future we may see you and entirely devote ourselves to obeying you.
 Accept us, we ask you, and draw us to yourself.
 May we always be yours by obedience and love.
 We are already your own as your creatures, your precious creations –
 be our Lord in all things.
 O Lord, who lives and reigns forever and ever,
 fill our souls, guide our hearts, and direct our steps.
 Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Friday, January 17: Matthew 5:6

- Have you ever been hungry? No, not just casually hungry, but really, really starving?
- Have you ever been thirsty? Not just wanting a drink of water, but really, really parched?

Jesus is saying these words in a culture where famine – real famine – was a genuine fear. He speaks in a desert culture where water was scarce, sometimes even impossible to find. He was speaking to people who may well have experienced real hunger and thirst. And He says, *"Blessed is the man who longs for righteousness as a starving man longs for food, and as a man perishing of thirst longs for water."*

Jesus is asking about our passion: *"Do you desire righteousness with the sort of intensity with which a starving person desires food? Or a person parched with thirst desires water?"* Following Jesus is not for the half-hearted or the casually interested; it is for those who desire righteousness as a matter of life and death.

This begs the question, though, "What is righteousness?" What is it for which we are to hunger and thirst?

Righteousness has three facets:

1. In a **legal** sense, righteousness means a right relationship with God. Through Jesus' life and death and resurrection – His love – we are forgiven. Our relationship with God, once decimated by sin, is completely restored. God accepts us and loves us and forgives us just as we are. But, of course, He loves us too much to leave us as we are ... Do we desire this renewed relationship with God?
2. In a **moral** sense, righteousness refers to the conduct and character which pleases God. Most of us have a sense of what is appropriate biblical moral behaviour and what is not. Jesus is encouraging us to live our lives by the highest moral standards because then, and only then, will we have peace of mind knowing that our values and actions are consistent. Do we desire to live holy lives?
3. In a **social** sense, righteousness is more than a personal and private affair. Throughout Scripture, pursuing righteousness also means holding to and working for the best in society. It means having integrity in business. It means having compassion for the less fortunate. It means correcting social injustice. It means expecting the best – and insisting on integrity and justice – from our leaders. Do you have a passion for justice in society?

The promise for pursuing righteousness is: *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* It is also quite accurate to translate this, *"for they shall be stuffed"* (in the sense of eating a huge, wonderful meal). If we hunger and thirst for the righteousness that comes from God, God does not send us away empty. God fills us. He give us His complete forgiveness and a profound sense of His peace and presence. He gives us a new desire to pursue the highest moral values consistently. He gives us a passion for justice in society. As the Holy Spirit works those things in our lives, we discover a joy, a peace, a contentment – a sense of blessedness – that fills us to overflowing.

God's invitation is, *"Taste and see that the Lord is good."* The question for each of us is: *"Will I?"*

*How do I find myself today? Where am I with God? With others?
 Do I have something to be grateful for?
 Then I give thanks.
 Is there something I am sorry for?
 Then I ask forgiveness.
 Dear Jesus, today I call on you in a special way.
 Usually I come asking for favours.
 Today I'd like just to be in Your presence.
 Let my heart respond to Your Love.
 Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
 Teach me to recognise your presence in others.
 Fill my heart with gratitude for the times Your love has been shown to me
 through the care of others.
 Amen*

Saturday, January 18: Matthew 5:7 and Luke 10:25-37

In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus responds to a question about one of the two greatest commandments ('*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.*' And, '*Love your neighbor as yourself.*'). The questioner wanted to know, "*Who is my neighbour?*" Jesus tells the familiar story. In the end, the neighbour is "*the one who had mercy.*" Jesus concludes: "*Go and do likewise.*"

Mercy. It's one of those words that is rather out of fashion of late.

In December 2013, James Moore, Canada's then industry minister, commented on rising child poverty rates in Canada: "*We've never been wealthier as a country than we are right now. Never been wealthier. Certainly, we want to make sure that kids go to school full-bellied, but is that always the government's job to be there to serve people their breakfast? Is it my job to feed my neighbour's child? I don't think so.*"

Paula Simons, in the *Edmonton Journal*, responded: "*Hardly the sort of sentiment a canny politician ought to express just before Christmas. When the barrage of Scrooge and Grinch jokes started on social media, Moore sought vainly to defend himself, claiming he'd been lied about or misquoted or quoted out of context, making out that he was the victim of bullying. Unfortunately for Moore, the reporter had the entire exchange recorded. When the raw audio was posted online, Canadians could hear for themselves the minister's ugly and uncharitable words, in their full context, and make their own judgments.*

"*Finally, late Monday morning, Moore issued an abject apology for his 'insensitive' comment. 'Caring for each other is a Canadian ethic that I strongly believe in – always have and always will,' Moore's statement read. 'Of course poverty is an issue that concerns me, and concerns all Canadians. All levels of government, indeed all members of our society, have a responsibility to be compassionate and care for those in need.'*

"*Very nice. Moore had his epiphany without benefit of the assistance of Christmas spirits or the pathos of wee Tiny Tim. He didn't need to haul a sleigh to the top of Mount Crumpet. Apparently, all he required for his Christmas redemption was a vigorous round of public shaming on Twitter. So should we just bring out the roast beast and bang our gar-dinkers and rejoice that Moore's heart grew three sizes this day? In real life, not Christmas fairy tales, things aren't quite that simple.*

"*Am I my brother's keeper?' That was Cain's sneering, snide question for God, when the Lord asked about Abel, Cain's murdered brother. The answer, of course, is that we are all our brothers' keepers. We all, whatever our religious faith, or lack thereof, have an ethical duty to help feed our neighbours' children.*

"*Sometimes, that's a literal duty – whether we're helping out an actual next-door neighbour during a family emergency or donating to the snack program at a nearby high-needs elementary school. Sometimes, that*

duty is more metaphoric – whether we're talking about donating to refugee relief in Lebanon or supporting child welfare programs with our tax dollars." Simons goes on to challenge all of us – including all levels of government: "These aren't problems you can solve with one turkey dinner or holiday hamper. Instead of caring about child poverty once a year in sentimental fashion, we need an honest discussion of the challenges we must confront together, as a nation, province, city and community."

Jesus' parable haunts us: the one who truly loves God and loves his neighbour ... is the one who has mercy. "Go and do likewise," says Jesus. For, if you want to receive mercy, then you should show mercy. Yes, you are your neighbour's keeper ...

How does that affect my politics? My values? My actions?

*O Lord, holy and true, who opens doors which none can shut;
as you have set before your church an open door into the world,
strengthen your servants boldly to enter into the world and to declare your Name,
that those who oppose you may come to worship you
and may know that you love your church and the world.
Grant your people patience and strength to keep your Word with diligence and integrity,
and keep them from the hour of trial which is coming upon the whole world
to try them and all who dwell on the earth.
Encourage all Christians in every land to hold fast to the faith which you have given them,
that they may stand before you as pillars in the temple of God
and bear the name of the heavenly city and your name, O Christ our God.
Father, we give into your care all who are joined to us by natural ties and bonds of love:
the children dear to our hearts, our parents and friends,
our church family, and all who for our sakes daily deny themselves.
May all we love, having the Holy Spirit as their helper,
be at peace and have unity and love amongst themselves.
Grant us, O Lord, sufficient for the needs of this present life,
and the assurance of eternal life for those who love you.
Amen*

Columba (521-597)

Sunday, January 19: Matthew 5:8 and Philippians 4:1-9

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis suggests we may fall into one of two equal and opposite errors concerning the devil. Some people become obsessed with the devil; they see him everywhere. Other people completely ignore his existence. Lewis' point is that the devil is alive and well. We do need to take him seriously even though we don't want to become preoccupied with him and his temptations.

The devil's business is to do anything he can to keep people like you and I from relating to God. He is the one who, when we feel like praying, distracts us with all the trivia we have to do. He is the one who, when we decide to read the Bible, reminds us how tired we are. He is the one who – if he cannot convince to stay home from church – when we get to church, encourages us to think, "How dare they sit in my seat." "Why don't they sing the songs I like?" or "I really didn't like the sermon today." He is the one who, when the offering plate comes by, encourages us to think, "Somebody else will give."

But the devil is also the one who tempts us in less overtly spiritual ways.

- When the driving force behind most of our decisions is our own personal financial success or our own pleasure ... he has tempted us.
- When we find the surreal world of TV or the internet so titillating we begin to fantasize about what life might be like if we could be part of that world, or we get caught up in YouTube or FaceBook, or we become obsessed with games or sports to the point it affects more important parts of our lives ... we have been tempted.
- When we compromise any of the highest ethical standards, even just in our thoughts ... we have been tempted.

We will be tempted – that’s reality. But we can choose how to respond to those temptations ... Martin Luther, commenting on temptation, once said, *"You cannot stop birds flying around your head, but you can stop them from building a nest in your hair."*

And so we come to the sixth beatitude, *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* Notice, Jesus didn't say, *"Blessed are those who look pure ..."* He is deliberately making a distinction between inward and outward purity. This is an important distinction for two reasons:

1. It means that we ought not to judge someone by appearances. Martin Luther, a very down to earth fellow, wrote: *"Christ wants to have the heart pure, though outwardly the person may be a drudge in the kitchen, black, sooty, and grimy, doing all sorts of dirty work ... though a common labourer, a shoemaker or a blacksmith may be dirty and sooty or may smell because he is covered with dirt and pitch ... and though he stinks outwardly, inwardly he is pure incense before God if he ponders God's word in his heart and obeys it."*
2. It means we need to be careful not be fooled by a fine exterior, either. Throughout Scripture emphasis is placed on the state of a person's heart. As David prayed in his psalm for forgiveness: *"Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place ... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"* (Psalm 51:6, 10).

The Bible encourages us to:

1. **Flee temptation.** The instant a bad idea comes into your mind, turn your back on it immediately. Don't entertain it for a second. Because the instant you do, you're hooked. Today, whenever a thought crosses your mind you know is wrong, don't give it a chance to build a nest in your hair. Turn your back on it. Put it out of your mind. Distract yourself. Get out with godly friends.
2. **Fight back.** When Jesus was tempted, He quoted Scripture back at the devil ... do the same thing. Memorise one verse of Scripture (Matthew 5:8? Psalm 23? John 3:16? Romans 8:28? 1 John 1:9?). Run it over and over in your head – meditating on it – until the temptation is gone. Or sing a chorus or a song. Or think about Jesus. Anything wonderful and good. But don't allow the temptation to get a foothold in your mind, or like a cancer it festers, grows, and spreads.

In Philippians 4, right after dealing with a church spat (we don't know what Euodia and Syntyche's issues were, but they were splitting the church), Paul writes, *"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. 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."* (4:8-9). What good things can you think about?

*Dear God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself.
The fact that I **think** that I am following Your will
does not mean that I am actually **doing** so.
But I believe this:
I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You.
I hope I have that desire in everything I do.
I hope I never persist in anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it at the time.
Therefore I will trust You always,
for though I may be lost, and in the shadow of death, I will not be afraid,
because I know You will never leave me to face my troubles all alone.
Amen.*

Thomas Merton

Monday, January 20: Matthew 5:9

James writes, *"The wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness"* (James 3:17-18). Hungering and thirsting for righteousness, showing mercy, being pure in heart ... these all lead to being people who love peace and – more than that – actively **make** peace.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God," says Jesus. Children have a habit of copying the behaviour that they see in their parents – for good or for bad. If parents react to situations with anger and foul language, their kids will do the same. If parents model self-control and grace, kids will often do the same, too. As children of God, we are challenged to be peace-makers, just as our loving heavenly Father is a peacemaker:

- God gave us the gift of peace with Himself. Through the death of Jesus our sins are forgiven and we are fully restored as God's own children – loved, honoured, and blessed;
- God challenges us to make peace with other people: *"Forgive us our trespasses AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US ..."*

Here are a few thought-provoking insights into this beatitude to ponder today:

- *"Being a peacemaker is part of being surrendered to God, for God brings peace. We abandon the effort to get our needs met through the destruction of enemies. God comes to us in Christ to make peace with us; and we participate in God's grace as we go to our enemies to make peace."* (Glen Stassen and David Gushee)
- *"Many Christians demand the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings ... I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon?"* (Kurt Vonnegut)
- *"The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When he called them they found their peace, for he is their peace. But now they are told that they must not only have peace but make it. And to that end they renounce all violence and tumult."* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)
- *"Now peacemaking is a divine work. For peace means reconciliation, and God is the author of peace and of reconciliation ... It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the particular blessing which attaches to peacemakers is that "they shall be called sons of God." For they are seeking to do what their Father has done, loving people with his love."* (John Stott)

*For a few moments, I think of God's veiled presence in all things:
in the elements, giving them existence;
in plants, giving them life; in animals, giving them sensation;
and finally, in me, giving me all this and more,
making me a temple, a dwelling-place of the Spirit.
If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations and open to what God may be saying to me.
Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.
Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.
Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you.
Amen*

Tuesday, January 21: Matthew 5:10-12

Some people say, *"Blessed are those avoid conflict at all costs."* Jesus says, *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for standing up for what is right."* We say, *"Blessed are those whose religion is a private thing that never offends anyone."* Jesus says, *"Blessed are you ... when you are persecuted for my sake."*

When we practice the beatitudes, we find ourselves living differently than many of those around us. One consequence of living may be that other people are challenged by our ethics and example. This is NOT saying we attack other people. We are NOT "in-your-face" and obnoxious about our faith (in California, a Christmas display featured Jesus shooting Santa Claus and running over Rudolph. His neighbours complained. The homeowner claimed he was being persecuted for expressing his Christian faith. Really? I think this is just being stupid, not persecution. We are called to live our beliefs, values and ethics in our own lives. We are not called to belittle other people's beliefs and values). It is saying we just live Christianly.

By choosing to live by the highest standards we may find ourselves on the outside of things looking in. We may not get ahead as quickly as we might if we compromised our principles. We may find people think us odd because of our moral choices.

However, by living as consistently godly lives as possible, we will be at peace with ourselves and with God. We will know the inner peace that comes when our lives are consistent with our beliefs and our consciences. There is an inner peace and joy that comes from living consistently ethical lives. Ultimately this is far more valuable than living with the stress of knowing what is right but doing what is wrong.

Is the cost worth it? Some people don't think so. And so they walk away from Jesus. Other people try to live as Christians in private but hide their faith in public. Unfortunately, that kind of double life doesn't work very well. It's a miserable existence when you have to wear a mask most of the time. It's certainly not a "blessed" life by any stretch of the imagination. Inevitably your faith will come out in public at some point: then you have to face the consequences, anyway. And you have to explain why you have tried to hide your faith all this time ...

We are better off deciding to try to live lives that are consistent with the beatitudes. None of us will ever be perfect, but we try to live as authentic Christians at home, with our friends, and at work. That may mean people will think us odd or make snide comments about our beliefs. But we will know the blessings of God. We will know the peace of being consistently faithful. We will know the joy of being a blessing to others. We will have a quality of life that really is second to none.

And what we will discover is that over time people will notice that our lives are different. They will begin to respect us. And, in time, they may even begin to enquire about what it is that makes us tick, because it is something they are desperately seeking for ...

*Lord you became human to communicate with us.
You walked and worked on this earth.
You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.
All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.
You healed the sick, you raised the dead.
Most important of all, you saved me from death.
Lord Jesus, Your death on the cross has set me free.
I can live joyously and freely without fear of death.
Your mercy knows no bounds.
Knowing that God loves me unconditionally, I can afford to be honest about how I am.
How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
I share my feelings openly with the Lord.
Lord, grant me the grace to have freedom of the spirit.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
Amen*

Wednesday, January 22: Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus moves on from the beatitudes to talk about how we can see God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven ... by living His word.

"*You are the salt of the earth.*" Salt was so valuable in the ancient world, soldiers were paid, in part, in salt (Latin "salis" – from which we get our word "salary"). Salt had two main purposes in Jesus' day:

1. It was the only means of preserving meat. It was essential to keeping good things good. What does this say about the role of the people of God in society?
2. It added flavour to food. It made average food taste much better. What does this say about the role of Jesus' followers in the world?

"*You are the light of the world.*" Think about the importance of light in a pre-modern world – without street lights, electricity, or headlights. At night it was very dark (you only had the stars and the moon). In your house it would have been pitch dark, unless you lit a candle or a lamp (which were costly).

1. Light allows you to find your way. How can God's people help others find the way?
2. Light keeps you from getting hurt. How can we help others avoid bumps and bruises?
3. Light helps destroy shadows and helps us see things as they really are, rather than what our imagination thinks things might be. How can Jesus' people help others see the truth?

"*You are the salt of the earth.*" "*You are the light of the world.*" What do those images mean for you today?

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,
I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence,
He desires me to know and feel His love.
With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
"A thick and shapeless tree-trunk would never believe that it could become a statue,
admired as a miracle of sculpture, and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor,
who sees by her genius what she can make of it." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to let myself be shaped by my loving Creator.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.
Amen.*

Thursday, January 23: Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus has set us free. We are free indeed. So we can just stop talking about rules like the Ten Commandments, right? Right and wrong are just personal preferences, right?

Some people get so excited about their "freedom" in Christ that they think it's a license to live any way they choose. Jesus is pretty direct, however: freedom is really found in living the values of the Kingdom – living by God's principles. It's a paradox – we are most free when we are most faithful to God.

Jesus is moving on from the beatitudes to talk about how we can see God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven ... by living His word. As we shall see in the passages of the Sermon on the Mount coming up, Jesus takes God's Word very seriously. In fact, rather than dispensing with God's truth, He often intensifies it. He is not only concerned with outward actions (e.g. not actually murdering someone) but also inward attitudes (e.g. hatred), whether or not we actually act on them.

When God's word transforms us from the inside out, we are living the way God created us to live. Jesus wants us to live in ways that honour Him in our deeds, and also in our thoughts, beliefs, and feelings.

When our inner life – our attitudes, values, and emotions – are right with God, then right behaviour follows. We are content, joyful people whose inner and outer lives are in sync and in harmony with God.

However, if our *inner* life is filled with anger, lust, and selfishness – but we are trying to live good *outer* lives – we are in conflict within ourselves. We're miserable. We lack joy, peace, and contentment. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were often this second kind of person: looking good on the outside, but rotten on the inside. Ultimately, they were joyless, loveless, bitter, and judgemental.

Jesus wants us to be people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). When we live like that, we are living as He created us to be. When we live like that, we discover His love, His joy, and His peace.

*We beg you, divine Master, be our help and strength.
Save those among us who are suffering,
have pity on the lowly and lift up the fallen.
Heal the sick,
bring back the wandering,
and feed the hungry.
Release those unjustly imprisoned,
lift up those who falter,
and strengthen the fainthearted.
Let all nations come to know that you are the one God,
with your son Jesus Christ,
and the Holy Spirit.
Help us to be your people and the sheep of your pasture.
I give thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit,
because in his great love for us he took pity on us,
and when we were dead in our sins, he brought us to life with Christ,
so that in him we might be a new creation.
Help me to throw off my old nature and all its ways
and, as I have come to birth in Christ, may I renounce the works of the flesh.
Amen*

Clement (92-101) and Leo (c.400-461)

Friday, January 24: Matthew 5:21-26

The Pharisees were all about outward appearances. But Samuel reminds us, "*the LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). Outward appearances are not enough. Our hearts matter.

Is Jesus then saying that what we do doesn't matter? As long as we think our heart is in the right place, can we do whatever we want? No ...

*"Jesus is in fact inviting his hearers to something much more radical: an anticipation of what we might call 'eschatological authenticity.' Yes, there will be a time when God's people will serve and love him, and live out the genuine humanness of which the ancient Law had spoken, 'naturally' from the heart. But this will be a God-given 'second nature,' a new way of being human. **And you can begin to practice this now,** difficult though it will be, because Jesus is here, inaugurating God's kingdom. It won't happen 'automatically,' precisely because God wants you to be human rather than a puppet. You will have to think about it, to struggle with it, to pray for grace and strength; but it is at least now within reach. You can't collapse the whole question of 'how to behave' into the command 'it must come naturally; otherwise it isn't authentic.' The authenticity that really matters is living in accordance with the genuine human being God is calling you to become. What the ancient Law really wanted – genuine human life, reflecting God's glory in the world – will start to appear."¹*

Jesus is inviting us to see the end, the purpose, the future – what we want to be, could be, should be as the people of God one day, some day – and to work on becoming that person here and now. It begins in the

¹ N.T. Wright, *After you believe: Why Christian character matters*, pp. 107-108.

heart. But then it extends outward, like ripples on a pond, affecting all of our relationships in profoundly practical ways. Jesus is not giving us outward rules that, if we keep them all perfectly, make us righteous. Rather He begins in our heart and then moves outward. **If** we get our heart right – if it is filled with a passionate love for God and genuine love for neighbour – **then** right actions will naturally follow.

How does this play out in terms of anger?

Are you an angry person? Do harbour bitterness or resentment? Is there someone you cannot forgive or don't want to forgive? By holding on to anger are you actually hurting the other person? Probably not. But what is it doing to you? Are you losing sleep? Are you getting an ulcer? Are you grinding your teeth? Anger/lack of forgiveness/bitterness rarely hurts the other person ... but it can destroy our own mental, physical, and spiritual health. Anger and resentment shrivel our own souls. So check your heart. Let the anger go. Forgive. Life's too short to hold on to grudges (no matter how justified they seem).

The language of life – real life – is faith, hope, mercy, and love. When these virtues fill our hearts, life works so much better. We discover joy. We experience peace. We transform the faceless concrete of our homes, neighbourhoods, and communities into places of faith, hope, love, fulfilling relationships, and genuine life. What's in your heart? What do you need to turn over to God?

*Help us, O Lord, to know you, and love you, and rejoice in you.
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life,
let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,
till we come to know, love, and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.
May our love for you grow every day more and more.
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence each day.
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, world without end.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Saturday, January 25: Matthew 5:27-30

Jesus challenges the rabbis' interpretation of Old Testament laws. He is not saying the Old Testament (including the Ten Commandments) does not apply anymore. Far from it. What He is saying is the interpretations of those principles which the rabbis taught were not good enough. They focused entirely on outward behaviour. As long as you didn't actually kill someone, you fulfilled the command "*Do not murder.*" As long as you didn't actually have sexual relations with another person's spouse, you honoured the command, "*Do not commit adultery.*" The state of your heart and your thoughts were irrelevant.

Jesus is concerned about the attitudes that precede the action. Murder is the result of anger and broken relationships (you only murder someone you hate). Anger is the root problem. Jesus uses the same principle – looking at the attitude – to consider adultery. The issue is not just the **action** of infidelity. The issue is the **attitude** that lies behind it. Lustful feelings cause sexual immorality. Whether or not those feelings ever lead us to actually do anything, those emotions (thoughts, fantasies, lusts, etc.) are a problem. Even if we don't act on them, they make us miserable. And they affect our relationships.

What is adultery? Technically it's being unfaithful to one's spouse or having sexual relations with another person's spouse. In Scripture the term is used for all types of sexual relations outside of marriage.

Jesus challenges us to look at **feelings** of sexual lust, not just the **actions**. Why are those feelings a problem? First, if we allow ourselves to live in a fantasy world, we hurt our relationships. Like it or not, the objects of our fantasies tend toward perfection. The manly heroes of romance novels and the Barbie beauties of James Bond are not real. They don't live in the real world. But we may think, "wouldn't it be

nice if we were with that person.” And if our spouse doesn't match up with the fantasy, we blame our them and it affects our relationship. Second, when we lust after someone, we are reducing the other person to simply a sexual object. They have no personality. They have no value as a person. They are simply a physical object. We need to see all people as whole people.

So what do we do? Jesus seems to offer extreme advice. Don't worry. He is NOT talking about literal surgery. Because the real culprits aren't our eyes or hands. Our eyes are just how the information gets in; our hands are how we act things out. They're just tools. The real problem is in our heads and hearts.

Jesus wants us to be aware of is where temptation begins – our heart and mind. They're the root of the problem. So the instant you are aware of inappropriate thoughts – do something. If pornography or fantasy romance novels/movies are an issue for you, distract yourself. Remind yourself what is really important. Pray. Cut out the sources of temptation. It is much, much easier to deal with temptation before it starts than once a cycle of lust has begun. Get out with friends in the real world. Being alone we can give in to temptation much more easily than when we're with godly people.

Our hearts and heads need God's transforming power. David, confronted by his own adulterous thoughts and deeds, prayed: *"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"* (Psalm 51:10). What we need is for God to re-create us. Unfortunately, as hard as we try, we just cannot change ourselves as fundamentally as we need to. But God can. Paul writes that if anyone accepts Christ as his Saviour, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Holy Spirit works within us to leads us and guide us (John 16).

We will ever be perfect. We may always struggle. But when we pray for help, the Holy Spirit will help us have more self-control and be more holy than we ever thought possible. But we have to take action. We have to try. And we have to get up time and time again ...

*At this instant, as I come to prayer, God is present waiting for me.
God always arrives before me, desiring to connect with me even more than my most intimate friend.
I take a moment and greet my loving God.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
How do I find myself today? Where am I with God? With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.*

Sunday, January 26: Matthew 5:31-32

Wouldn't it be great if every marriage were wonderful? If spousal abuse never happened? If infidelity never occurred? If people always got along? If divorce never happened?

In practice, life is messy.

Jesus sandwiches these verses on divorce between teachings on anger, lust/adultery, and integrity and truth-telling. Think about it: *if* people could manage their anger/violence, *if* they could control their lusts and passions, and *if* they were committed to complete honesty and integrity, divorce would be much less common than it is. Divorce often happens when anger/violence, and/or lust, and/or lies have grown like weeds and choke out the beautiful garden that marriage is meant to be.

Keys to strong marriages and reducing the possibility of divorce, then, are dealing ruthlessly with anger and lust, and being absolutely committed to honesty, transparency, and truth-telling.

The New Testament tackles divorce and remarriage in several places: see also Matthew 19:3-9, Mark 10:2-12, Luke 16:18, and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. Divorce is never portrayed as a good thing. But in cases of infidelity, marriage to an unbeliever – and, I would add, personal danger from anger and violence – divorce is reluctantly acknowledged as a possibility on a fallen world. However, just as (in the words of traditional wedding vows) marriage is not to be entered into lightly, neither is divorce. It's a last resort.

"Perhaps the most important thing to say here," comments biblical scholar, Tom Wright, *"is that Jesus certainly didn't want his hearers, or the later church, to get embroiled in endless debates about what precisely is allowed. Far, far more important to think about is how to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth! And in the area of sexual behaviour, the answer is clear, bracing and just as challenging today as it was to the wider pagan world of the first century. Sexual desire, though itself good and God-given ... needs firmly keeping in place. Saying 'no' to desire when it strikes inappropriately – in other words, outside the context of marriage – is part of the most basic Christian discipline."*

Marriage can be tough: pray for the marriages of people you know. Singleness can also be a real challenge in our highly sexualized culture: pray for single people you know.

*For each step that I might take
Be my guide, O Lord of life.
For each load that I might bear
Be my strength, O Lord of life.
For each mountain I might face
Be my power, O Lord of life.
For each river that might impede
Be my safety, O Lord of life.
For each place where I might rest
Be my peace, O Lord of life.
For each sunrise and sunset
Be my joy, O Lord of life.
Amen.*

www.faithandworship.com

Monday, January 27: Matthew 5:33-37

How truthful do we have to be? Jesus is talking about a popular summary of several passages (Exodus 20:7, Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, and Deuteronomy 5:11, 6:3, 22:21-23). The essence is that one must not make irreverent oaths, use the Lord's name in vain, or break a vow. In particular, once you attached God's name to an oath or a vow it was absolutely binding and became a debt that had to be paid to God.

By Jesus' time, the rabbis had come up with elaborate schemes to figure out how binding an oath or contract actually was. For them, the issue was whether or not it mentioned God's name. So, they reasoned, if you swore an oath *"by heaven"* or *"by earth"* or *"by Jerusalem"* it wasn't binding. But swearing *"toward Jerusalem"* (Jerusalem being the location of the temple, where God's presence resided) was binding. Jesus contends the real problem is not whether a person made an oath *"by Jerusalem"* or *"toward Jerusalem."*

Whether we swear on one Bible or a whole stack of Bibles or on no Bible at all really isn't the issue. More fundamental than the words we use when we make a promise or swear an oath are issues like ...

1. **Honesty:** all oaths and promises ought to be taken seriously. The real point of all the Old Testament passages is that we always ought to be completely truthful. Our word always ought to be binding. We always ought to be honest. People should know our word is always trustworthy. Whenever we make a vow, a promise, or a contract, Jesus says we make it in the presence and sight of God because He is always present in our lives. So it is just as binding if we invoke His name or not. Whether we swear on the Bible or just give our good word, God is present and involved in the process. Our no is no. Our yes is yes. Period.

2. **Respect for God:** for the rabbis, the binding oaths, the ones you didn't dare break, were ones in which you invoked God. What the rabbis were saying was that you could live most of your life more or less oblivious to God's existence – He didn't care what you did or said. But, when you really wanted someone to take you seriously, you could call upon Him to witness your vow. God was like the genie in *Aladdin* : He stayed in a lamp until you wanted Him, then you brought Him out at your convenience as your witness. The problem is God isn't like that. He is always present in our lives.

The challenge of this Scripture is to be truthful, always. Why? We are always honest because we want to honour God. We live with integrity because we want to please Him. We live truthfully, not out of a fear of judgement or existential dread, but because we love God. After all, God is always with us. He never leaves us. That's the best news we can ever hear. It's also why we live as pure and holy lives as possible, all the time. *"As God is our witness ..."* is always the truth of the matter. So we live truthfully, always.

*Make us glad, Lord God, in speaking boldly of your mercies;
help us rejoice, O Lord, in adoring your Holiness;
and may our chief joy be to glorify and proclaim your holy Name.
Almighty, everlasting God, dwelling in love and power in our souls,
bring people to your light through us,
make yourself known to the world in us,
that all might know the true Light, the bright and morning Star.
We pray that you would fill the world with your glory
and show yourself by the radiance of your light to all nations.
To you be the glory forever and ever.
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (c.593)

Tuesday, January 28: Matthew 5:38-42

What do you do when you really want to get even with someone? When you've been hurt?

The first few laws Jesus talked about came from the Ten Commandments (found in Exodus 20). Today's command comes from Exodus 21, in which Moses spells out how the Ten Commandments should be lived out. In our day and age this law seems rather brutal, but its intention was to clearly define justice and to limit retaliation and vengeance.

In a time when a family feud could mean brutal bloodshed for generation after generation, this law ensured justice was done immediately and reasonably – with a strong deterrent factor. Through Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, alternatives to this principle are encouraged, including adequate financial compensation or (if the injury was done to a slave) granting freedom from servitude. Working with a judge, parties could work out suitable alternative compensation, much in the way insurance claims are settled today. The principle brought law, order and justice into a rough and tumble society.

Against the background of the popular Old Testament principle of "an eye for an eye," Jesus goes on to say, *"But I tell you, don't resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn to him the other also."*

Is Jesus saying we are to be doormats? A doormat is one thing; an anvil another. Charles Spurgeon, a pastor from the 1800's, commented, we *"are to be as the anvil when evil men are the hammers."* Jesus' illustrations and example don't depict a doormat who offers no resistance, but an anvil. Jesus is stronger than His enemies: His strength of character leads to an iron-solid self-control and love for others so powerful retaliation is not an option. Jesus is "meek" in the sense of *"absolute power under perfect control."*

In Romans 12:14-21, Paul describes the attitude we are to have like this: *"Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!"*

"Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the Lord (quoting Deuteronomy 32:35).

"Instead, 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads' (from Proverbs 25:21-22). Don't let evil conquer you but conquer evil by doing good."

How do I need to put this wisdom into practice today?

*Dear Lord, as I come to you today fill my heart
and my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.
It is so easy to get caught up with the trappings of wealth in this life.
Grant, O Lord, that I may be free from greed and selfishness.
Remind me that the best things in life are free: love, laughter, caring and sharing.
In Your loving presence I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me, seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Amen*

Wednesday, January 29: Matthew 5:43-48

Hate. Fear. Worry. Those are currencies of contemporary politicians. They know people are more likely to vote for them if people are afraid and stressed. So they will create a sense of "crisis" – related to immigration, the economy, or social problems. Then, when they have manipulated us to be good and scared, they come to our rescue with their solutions. Maybe.

The challenge for us, as followers of Jesus, is that we are continuously told, *"Don't be afraid"* – God is with us! Don't give into fear. And, Jesus tells us, *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

When Jesus was arrested, the Jews spat on him, blindfolded him, and struck him in the face. Roman soldiers rammed a crown of thorns on his head, mocked and jeered at Him, spat at Him, and beat Him. And Jesus held His peace. He lived His denunciation of retaliation by allowing them to continue their cruelty until they had finished. *"Christ ... suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps ... when He was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but He trusted to Him (God) who judges justly."* (1 Peter 2:21-23). Absolute power. Perfect control.

There is a fundamental principle here. The principle is love – the selfless love of a person, who, when injured, refuses to satisfy themselves by taking revenge, but considers instead the highest welfare of the other person and society, and acts accordingly. He does not return evil for evil. But he demonstrates a principle Jesus' Himself modelled: returning good for evil, blessing for insult, hope for hatred.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who died in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote: *"By his willingly renouncing self-defence, the Christian affirms his absolute adherence to Jesus and freedom from the tyranny of his own ego. The exclusiveness of this adherence is the only power which can overcome evil."*

Consider Martin Luther King. At King's funeral, Dr. Benjamin Mays said, *"If any man knew the meaning of suffering, King knew. House bombed; living day by day for thirteen years under constant threats of death; maliciously accused of being a Communist; falsely accuse of being insincere ... stabbed ... slugged ... jailed over twenty times, occasionally deeply hurt because friends betrayed him - and yet this man had no bitterness in his heart, no rancour in his soul, no revenge in his mind; and he went up and down the length and breadth of this works preaching non-violence and the redemptive power of love."*

One of Martin Luther King's sermons was written in a Georgia jail. Wrestling with why and how Christians are to practice Jesus' love, he described how *"hate multiplies hate ... in a descending spiral of violence"* and causes just as much pain to the person who hates as to the victim. But above all, *"love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend,"* for it has creative and redemptive power. He went on to talk about the transformation that happens when we *"meet hate with love."* For blacks in the U.S., they saw the possibility of a double victory – freedom for themselves and changed hearts and minds (and freedom) for their oppressors as well. Meeting hate with love is a double victory for us all. What about you?

*Open my heart, O Lord, and enlighten me by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that I may seek what is well pleasing to your will;
help me to order my doings after your commandments
that I may live a life that pleases you.
May God the Father bless us.
May Christ the Son take care of us.
May the Holy Spirit enlighten us all the days of our life.
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul
both now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

Thursday, January 30: Matthew 6:1-4

In 1931, Mahatma Gandhi said, *"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."* He was paraphrasing American novelist Pearl Buck (1892-1973), winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature. She wrote, *"the test of a civilization is the way that it cares for its helpless members."* The daughter of a Christian missionary, she spent a large part of her life in China. When she returned to the United States, she became a passionate advocate for mixed-race adoption, minority groups, and women's rights. She lived her Christian principles.

To the Jews in Jesus' day, giving money to God was one of the most sacred of all religious duties. The true motivation ought to have been care for the poor. However, by Jesus' day, giving had become a means of atoning for sin and gaining favour in the sight of God. One rabbinical writing says, *"Giving will save you from death and purges away all sin."* So if a Jewish person wished to be right with God, they would make substantial offerings. Theoretically giving was supposed to be low key and not ostentatious. But like so many other things, pure motives often got twisted. Some people gave with great fanfare. They made sure everyone knew how much they gave.

The problem was not the act of giving. Every part of the Bible emphasizes that generous, gracious giving – to the poor and to God's work – is a privilege and responsibility of God's people. It's a basic aspect to we are called to be. The Old Testament starting point was a 10% tithe (the first 10%).

- Giving is practical way that God's Kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as in heaven. Poor, vulnerable people are cared for. Justice and mercy are done.
- Giving helps us appreciate God as the one who enables us earn income: He created us with abilities, sustains our health, provides employment, etc. Generosity means we take control of our finances rather than being controlled by our pocketbooks. We choose to give.
- When we give to the church, we give to the work that goes on there. We make an investment in youth, children, those who cannot get out, sharing the gospel, and caring for others. Beyond our local church we invest in camps and new churches. Overseas we invest in street children in Brazil,

- youth in Nairobi, educating pastors in Bolivia, digging wells in Rwanda, etc. Giving changes lives.
- Some people need our help. It is easy to be patronising and give out of sense of superiority or power. What we need is a humility that recognizes that *"There, but for the grace of God, go I."*

The issue is not giving, but the motivation behind it. There are a variety of reasons we may give.

- We may give out of a sense of duty. We may not want to give an offering at all, but we feel it's an unpleasant duty we can't easily avoid. And so, grumpily, we give ... as little as possible.
- We may give from motives of prestige. There are some people who, if no one was to know about it, if there is no publicity attached to it – or at least if it weren't a nice tax deduction – would not give at all. Unless we are thanked and praised and honoured, we are disgruntled and grumpy.
- OR, we can give because we know how gracious and loving God has been to us. We want to give back to God; it's one way we express our love to Him. We have a sense of the need in our church and in our world, and, out of our love for the work and ministry of our church, we give to God ...

Jesus calls us to is a spirit of generosity that spontaneously and naturally grows out of our relationship with God. It is not a legal thing – we don't give just 10% because we are obligated to. It is not a patronising thing – because we've "made it," we'll condescend to help out others. It is a relational thing. Because God loves us so much, giving all of Himself to us ... we want to give generously back to God, His work, other people, and His creation. We give because we love God, His creation, and His people.

"For you know the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ," Paul writes, "that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Generosity is the instinctive outflow of the loving heart. It is us giving back to God, as He has given to us. It is being a blessing to others as God has blessed us. It is love.

*O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us, we pray,
to be grounded and settled in your truth,
by the coming down of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.
That which we do not know, reveal to us;
that which is empty or insufficient in us, please fill us up;
that which we know which is true, confirm in us;
that which is evil and sinful, forgive and remove from us;
that which is beautiful, cause to shine through us for your glory;
and keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Clement of Rome (1st Century)

Friday, January 31: Matthew 6:5-15

I was talking with a friend about prayer. The subject of the "Lord's Prayer" came up. I mentioned that it's interesting that the last phrase, *"For thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory"* is not in the Bible. His reply? He didn't even know any of the Lord's Prayer was in the Bible. (By the way, that final phrase appears to be a later addition to the text of Matthew, borrowing language from 1 Chronicles 29:4-19).

Several scholars suggest we should rename it "The Disciple's Prayer." After all, it is not a prayer Jesus (the Lord) prayed Himself (like John 17); it is prayer He taught us (His disciples) to pray. Interesting.

The specific words and phrases serve as headings or topics about which we can pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed (or holy) be your name – reminds us who we are praying too. We are praying to the God who loves us and welcomes us as His beloved children, but also the God who is holy and almighty, infinitely beyond and above us. We always need to remember WHO we are praying to.

May your Kingdom come. your will be done on earth as it is in heaven – is an invitation that God's will and way is done in and through our lives. We are praying that God's truth becomes real in us. And that we live it out as we seek to be His followers moment by moment, day by day.

Give us today the food we need - we ask God to provide for the NEEDS of life, not necessarily all our WANTS in life. God will provide the essentials. He is not necessarily in the business of providing for the luxuries of life.

Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us – Sin separates us from God. All of us have sinned and fall short of God's glory. We all need to be forgiven. It's good to be honest about our shortcomings with God so that our relationship with Him can be restored. As we have experienced God's forgiveness, we are then called to just as gracious in forgiving other people. This is not easy. Interestingly, this is the one phrase Jesus chooses to elaborate on: *"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

And don't let us yield to temptation but rescue us from the evil one. Temptation is real in our lives. It is so easy to put other things ahead of God. To focus on ourselves and our own wants. To excuse bad behaviour. To give into anger, lust, and lies. Jesus encourages us to be diligent and on guard.

It is certainly not harmful to add the phrase, *"For Yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory"* (even though it's not in Matthew). It brings us full circle, re-reminding ourselves that the number one priority in our lives ought be God and His Kingdom. We are also reminding ourselves that only through His power can we be about the business of seeing His Kingdom come, His will being done, forgiving others, and resisting temptation. His Spirit is the One who empowers and equips us to live faithfully.

How can Jesus' reflections on prayer shape your prayers today?

*Our Father in heaven,
may Your name be honoured.
May Your Kingdom come,
and Your will be done,
as in heaven, so on earth.
Give us today the bread we need.
Forgive us the wrongs we have done
as we too forgive the wrongs done to us.
Don't bring us into temptation,
but rescue us from evil.
For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory,
forever and ever,
Amen.*

Saturday, February 1: Matthew 6:9

We're going to spend a few days working through the Lord's/Disciples' Prayer phrase by phrase. The prayer is not some magic formula which, if we get words just right (preferably in the King James translation), guarantee a blessing from God. But, if we get a word wrong or add to it or change the order, dooms us to disaster. It is a framework of helpful themes that we might want to pray through ...

The first part of the prayer is all about **God**. When prayer doesn't start with acknowledging God, there is always the danger of concentrating only on ourselves. Our "prayer" can simply be personal reflection time, collapsing into random thoughts, fears, plans, and desires, completely separate from God.

It is prayer to God, our **Father** – an intimate, personal name for the almighty God. Prayer is a conversation with the One who loves us, cares for us, gave Himself for us, and desires the best for us. He loves you and wants to relate to you as His beloved child. That's great news in an impersonal, hard world.

It is prayer to God, our Father **in heaven**. God is not a man-made idol. He is the living God, Creator of the universe, infinitely personal, but also infinitely beyond us. God is all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful.

That's great news in a troubled, dangerous, difficult world.

God's name – His Person and identity – is **holy and pure**. God is not some capricious trickster or an unpredictable emotional whirlwind. He is altogether trustworthy, true, honest, loving, constant, and dependable. He NEVER leaves us or forsakes us. He NEVER changes the rules. He NEVER deceives us. In a turbulent, insecure, and uncertain world, we can depend on His character and His constancy. This is great news.

As you pray today, reflect on the truth that

- God is your **Father**
- He is your **heavenly** Father. He is **all-present, all-knowing and all-powerful**.
- Your Father in heaven is holy: He is a solid rock, **always dependable**.

*O Lord, who willing gave us your body and your blood,
Come into my life and put me back together as you created me to be:
Come into all my body, my emotions, my soul, and my heart.
You, who are fire, burn up the thorns of all my sins.
You, who are holy, purify my soul, clean my mind.
You, who are almighty, strengthen my knees and bones.
You, who are wisdom, enlighten the simplicity of my five senses.
You, who alone are worthy of worship, fill me completely with reverence and awe.
Always protect, guard, and keep me from every soul-destroying word and act.
Sanctify, purify, forgive, cleanse, and rule me.
Teach me, give me understanding, and enlighten me.
Make me a dwelling place of Your Spirit and only your Spirit – no longer a place of sin.
Just as every evil spirit, temptation, and passion flees before you,
May the presence of Your Spirit in my life protect me and cause evil to flee from me.
Make me, I pray, a child of light.
Take me, I pray, as Your servant.
You alone are our Saviour, O Jesus.
You are the radiance of glory that shines in our souls, O Spirit.
You alone are my Master and King, O God.
Three-in-one, One-in-three, I give my life to you.
And to You, as our Lord and God, as is right, we all give glory, day and night.
Amen*

Adapted from Symeon the Translator (10th century)

Sunday, February 2: Matthew 6:10

Some people pray to be snatched away from earth to heaven. The sooner they're out of this mess the better. The earth is going to hell, so if only God would take them – now! As a result, they withdraw from the world around them. It's all going to burn anyway. And they don't want to be "polluted."

The Lord's Prayer, however, is a prayer for the Kingdom of God to become fully present here on earth. It's a prayer for the glory and beauty and perfection and holiness of heaven to be turned into earthly reality, right here (in Lethbridge), right now (on February 2, 2020). This prayer is a prayer of action. Of engagement.

How is God's Kingdom going to come? How is His will going to be done on earth as it is in heaven? When His people start living, in deed, the words they believe. Drawing on 1 Corinthians 12, Teresa of Avila says, "*Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*" How does that make you think differently?

One wise mentor once told me, "We pray, 'Thy Kingdom come and Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' and then we get up off our knees and get busy to make that prayer come to pass."

Rather than being a prayer to escape the world, the Lord's Prayer is a prayer to engage the world. It's a prayer that God would help us be His salt and His light in the world. That we would be His hands and His feet in the world. That we would be people of action ... just as Jesus was.

So when we ask God why He still allows evil and injustice to exist in the world, this is a prayer that may challenge us to hear God saying, "**You** tell me why there is evil and injustice. **You** tell me why you allow this to happen. After all **you** are my body, my hands, my feet." Are we ever culpable of just being bystanders rather than helping make a difference?

How can we make a difference in the lives of those around us, today?

*Dear God, I come to You today to praise and glorify Your name.
You have showered us with wonderful gifts.
The best gift of all is giving Your Son to save us from our sins.
There is no worse grief for a father than to lose his child, but You gave Your Son for us.
You have been unselfish and very giving even to those who have turned their backs on You.
I pray that they come back to Your welcoming arms.
I pray for those who need someone to call on to when the days get rough and the nights are worst.
Give them the strength and courage to come back to You, Father.
Being with Jesus has ultimately changed my life.
Let it be for them as well.*

*Crucified God, we wear beautiful crosses around our necks, and hang them on our walls.
We have made your "triumphant sign" of suffering decorative,
when what it really needs to be is defining.
So make us cruciform Lord,
in our weekly remembrance of Christ's death on the cross in our breaking of this bread.
Let us show by the offering of our hearts and hands
the depth of our commitment to live for Him who died for us.
In lives of sacrifice and service, empower our witness to Jesus Christ,
whose cross so powerfully proclaims Your love.*

*In lifting this cup of remembrance here this morning,
Oh God of sacrifice, we are lifting high the cross of Christ and proclaiming Your great love.
We partake, with gratitude, all the gifts that are ours in Christ crucified –
new life, real unity, eternal life, and a meaningful purpose.
Fill us now again with the power of your Spirit
that we might be bold in our witness to Jesus Christ,
till all the world adores His sacred name.
Amen*

www.prayers-for-special-help.com