



February 2020

Learning Life From Jesus

**Readings, Reflections, and Prayers
from the Gospel of Matthew 2**

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Monday, February 3: Matthew 6:11

A certain person bought a house with a nice yard. She diligently worked hard clearing away the stones, pulling weeds, tilling the soil, planting, watering, fertilizing and caring for the garden until it produced glorious flowers and bountiful crop of vegetables. One evening she was showing a friend around and her companions aid, "It's wonderful what God can do with a yard like this, isn't it?" The owner said, "Yes, but you should have seen the yard when God had it to Himself."

When we pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread,*" we are recognizing that without God we can do nothing **and** that without our effort and cooperation, God can do nothing. We cannot make a seed grow into wheat by our own effort: it grows because of God's perfect design, provision, and care. However, wheat does not plant itself in enough quantity and in neat enough fields to feed the world; human effort and care is required. Like our prayer, "*Your Kingdom come and will be done,*" this is a call to action. That we would be His hands and His feet in the world.

We often pray this as a personal prayer. I pray that God would provide for **my** needs. But interestingly, Jesus does NOT teach us to pray, "*Give me this day my daily bread.*" He DOES teach us to pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread.*" This is a corporate prayer. For ourselves. For others. And for our world.

The problem of food security isn't that there is not enough food or resources to go around. Within our city, nationally, and globally, there is more than enough food. The problem is distribution. Regions like North America have too much food, while parts of Africa and Asia have too little. Even within our own city, the grocery stores are loaded with food, but many people cannot afford to access it. How can we create a more just world? A better community? How can we help this prayer come to pass?

Jesus prayer is a call to action. How can we help make sure all people the basic resources they need to survive and thrive? God cares for our basic physical needs. How can we help ensure everyone has enough?

The prayers this month coming from several sources including *Celtic Prayers* by Robert Van de Weyer.

*This day, as I rise and prepare for the morning,
I pray that the flame of God's love may burn in my heart,
And in the hearts of all I meet today.
I pray that your Word might speak to my soul,
Kindle the spark of love in my breast,
and help me live faithfully for your glory.
I pray that neither indifference nor apathy;
neither contempt nor pride will pour water on the fire of my faith.
I pray that neither envy nor ill-will;
neither hatred nor fear may smother your Word's light in my life.
Amen.*

Tuesday, February 4: Matthew 6:12, 14-15

Various translations read, "*forgive us our trespasses*" or "*debts*" or "*sins.*" Which is it? To us, each seems to have a different meaning ...

The challenge is the New Testament has five different Greek words for the concept of "sin."

1. The most common word literally means "*missing the mark.*" Sin is the failure to attain perfection. We aim at a target and miss. Try as we might, we fall short of the perfect glory of God.
2. Another word meaning "*stepping across the line.*" We may deliberately cross from right to wrong, from honest to dishonest, from good to evil. We can choose to sin.
3. A different word means "*slipping across the line.*" Rather than deliberate acts of disobedience, slip ups just happen: words slip out; we slip into temptation; or we slip up in our self-control.

4. A fourth word means "*lawlessness*." You know the law and you deliberately flaunt it. You delight in your rejection of all moral principles and purposely choose a "lawless" lifestyle.
5. The fifth word, used in the Lord's Prayer, means "*a debt*," but not in the financial sense. It means the failure to do your duty to God and other people. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; we fail. We are called to love others with the same sacrificial love with which God loves us; we fail. So we pray for forgiveness for being less than Christ-like in our ways.

All of these fall under the English word "sin." God forgives them all when we confess them to Him.

God forgives us freely, completely, and without conditions. When He forgives us, He sets us free. Our debt is then to forgive others just as freely, completely, and unconditionally. As we have experienced God's love, mercy, grace, and freedom, our debt is to extend His love, mercy, and grace to others. We often fail.

One wise pundit observed that peace-making and forgiveness demand the most heroic labour and the most difficult sacrifice. They demand greater heroism than hatred and war. Anyone can hold a grudge. Anyone can get angry. Anyone can lash out. Really strong people – heroic people – godly people – Christ-like people – are able to forgive. "*The glory of Christianity is to conquer by forgiveness*" (William Blake).

For what do you need to be forgiven? Who do you need to forgive?

*Lord of my heart, give me vision to inspire me,
That working or resting I may always think of You.
Lord of my heart, give me light to guide me,
That home or aboard, at work or at play, I may always walk in Your ways ...
Lord of my heart, give me wisdom to direct me,
That thinking or acting, I may always discern right from wrong.
Lord of my heart, give me courage to strengthen me
That among friends or enemies, I may always proclaim your justice.
Lord of my heart, give me faith to console me
That hungry or well-fed, I may always rely on Your mercy.
Lord of my heart, save me from great wealth or great poverty
That I neither trust in my riches nor be tempted to steal.
Lord of my heart, save me from empty knowledge
That I may always find true wisdom in Your Word.
Lord of my heart, save me from pride
That I may always and only boast of You.
Lord of my heart, whatever befall me
Rule over my thoughts and feelings, my words and my actions.
Amen*

Wednesday, February 5: Matthew 6:13

When you think about this verse it seems strange: does God really lead us into temptation??? Is that who God is – the tempter? Isn't the "tempter" who the "evil one" is?

It's helpful to know that that the Greek word usually translated "temptation" is the same word used for "testing." For instance, when Jesus is "tempted" by Satan in Matthew 4:1-10, these were tests to prove Jesus' loyalty and faithfulness to God. In the same way, in Genesis 22:1, "*God tested Abraham*" (older translations said "tempted") by asking Abraham to take his son Isaac into the wilderness as a sacrifice; this was not a temptation, but a testing of Abraham's loyalty and faithfulness.

So this is a prayer that

1. God protect us from the temptation to do evil
2. God save us from hard testing and trials
3. God would save us from the evil one.

Jesus reminds us again that evil is very real in our world. He also reminds us that the “tempter,” “tester,” “accuser,” “devil,” “Satan,” is very real, too. There is a malevolent power that actively seeks to test us, discourage us, trip us up, tempt us, deceive us, and run us down. When we find ourselves beating ourselves up, obsessing about our failures, feeling too discouraged to carry on, that’s the devil talking.

We need to remind ourselves that we are God’s beloved children. He does forgive us. He does give us new beginnings. He does give us the strength to become more Christ-like in our thoughts and actions.

Don’t be discouraged. Don’t be afraid. Don’t give up. Rather than being led into temptations or testings, pray the words of Psalm 23:1-4, *“The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.”*

When are you most vulnerable to temptation?
How can you prepare yourself for those moments?

*“The world is charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerard Manley Hopkins).
I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
I will take refuge in your loving heart.
You are my strength in times of weakness.
You are my comforter in times of sorrow.
Lord God I thank you for the gift of freedom.
Help me to use this gift with integrity.
I am free to make choices.
Help me to choose to follow you, to live in a Christian way by caring for others.
Remind me to consider always those less fortunate than myself,
the oppressed, the prisoner,
those who are not free to worship in public.
Guide me always to seek your holy will in all the events of my life.
Amen*

Thursday, February 6: Matthew 6:16-18

Some people fast from shopping malls or online retailers (e.g. Amazon) to keep consumerism at bay. Some people fast from media (especially social media, like Twitter or Facebook) to regain perspective on themselves and on life. Paul talks about sexual fasts between spouses for a specific length of time (1 Corinthians 7:5). In this passage, Jesus is talking specifically about fasting from food, and only drinking water, while we spend time with God in prayer.

The core principle in fasting is that we give up something in order to spend focused time in prayer to God. It is intended as a practice of self-sacrifice and self-discipline that brings us into closer relationship with God.

In Jesus’ day, however, some people, wanted to boast about how super-spiritual they were. So they would purposely feast on market days, when as many people as possible were in town. They would parade through the streets with disheveled hair, dirty clothes, and rub ash on their faces so they looked gaunt and pale: everyone knew they were fasting for the day. Of course, this was all about putting on a show and had nothing to do with drawing closer to God. It did have everything to do with pride.

Jesus emphasizes that fasting, undertaken for the right reasons (to pray to God) and in the right spirit (in humility and in private) does have value. But it’s a personal thing between a person and God. Fasting is not a spectator sport the way some people in His day practiced it.

It is always good for us to want a closer relationship with God. It is always good for us to find spiritual practices that help us draw closer to Him. For some of us, taking time from normal activities – like eating, social media, YouTube, TV, whatever – to spend more time in prayer really can help us. Try it. For others of us, spending time in God’s creation, reading a challenging book, studying Scripture deeper, having a deep theological discussion, or volunteering in a Soup Kitchen work better for us. The specific spiritual discipline is not important. The goal, to draw closer to God, is what is important.

Whatever you do to grow spiritually, be humble and low-key about it. We are not in the “look-at-me-I’m-so-spiritual” business. Thankfully.

In humility, and in private, how can you draw closer to God today?

*My soul’s desire is to know God,
and to rest in His presence.
My soul’s desire is to study God’s Word,
and to learn His ways.
My soul’s desire is to be freed from fear,
and to share Christ’s risen life.
My soul’s desire is to imitate my King,
and to sing His praises always.
My soul’s desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
and to gaze upon His glory forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires,
and you alone can satisfy those desires.
Amen.*

Friday, February 7: Matthew 6:19-24

What are your priorities for today? Often our lives are really busy with ... well, to be honest, it’s to say what exactly we’re busy with. We’re always busy, but it’s hard to actually itemize what we’ve been spending our time (and money) doing. Life just happens. Days go by. We’ve little to show for it.

Jesus wants us to live more intentionally and purposefully. He encourages us to take stock of what is really important and to invest our time, energy, and resources on what really matter. What matters most, of course, is God and the Kingdom of God.

Jesus wants us to think about “treasures in heaven.” This is not just about looking forward to life with God one day, some day, after death. It is about living intentionally right now, investing our lives in things that matter to God right now: caring for other people, helping those in need, working for justice, opposing evil, caring for God’s creation, loving those who are struggling. These treasures last: they endure in the lives of people touched by God’s love through us, and in our own lives and families as well.

Make sure your lamp is shedding light, not darkness. First, Jesus wants us to keep our eyes fixed on God. Second, He literally means we should be careful what we look at: this is a warning that where our eyes wander, our minds and hearts can easily follow. Third, can we see where we are going? Like headlights on a dark night, eyes focussed on God can help us navigate the dark places of our world.

Finally, recognize that we cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve God and “Mammon” – an old-fashioned word for money, property, and all that stuff. Jesus warns us that wealth can be god-like in its pull on our loyalties and power over our lives. We make the same point when we talk of “the Almighty Dollar” (almost like “Almighty God”) or we say, “Money talks,” suggesting it has the power to control our behaviour.

What are your priorities today? Jesus encourages you put God, first and foremost in your life. In practice, what will this mean for you today?

*Can I abandon, O King of Creation, all the comforts I depend on?
Can I put myself wholly at the mercy of God –
willing to let go of silver, horse, fame and honour?
Can I throw myself wholly on the King of kings
without sword or shield, food or drink, without a bed to lie on?
O King of Glorious Heaven, I trust myself to you.
O Jesus, my Saviour and Lord, I put my trust in You.
Amen.*

Saturday, February 8: Matthew 6:25-34

Psychologist Wayne Dyer observes, *"You could take the ten best worriers in the entire world, put them in the same room for the rest of their lives and allow them to worry and worry only. And you know what would happen? Absolutely nothing."* Worry is something few of us value (I assume), but many of us tend to do far too often. Jesus wants us to get past our worry to live rich, meaningful – peaceful – lives.

It's helpful to keep this passage in context. What does Jesus talk about immediately before this passage? *"Stop storing up treasures for yourself on earth, where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. Instead, store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust don't destroy and thieves don't break in and steal. Your heart will be where your treasure is No one can serve two masters. He will hate the first master and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and wealth."* Now in Matthew 6:25, Jesus says, *"THEREFORE I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink ..."*

Jesus immediately puts His finger on what many of us value most (and worry about most) – money/wealth/financial security – He says, *"Don't worry."* Many of us do worry about financial things. We worry about paying our bills. We worry about finding a job. We worry about the security of our job. This month we'll be told to worry more – are we maximizing our RRSP contributions? Our TFSAs? What about the Canada Pension Plan? Will interest rates start going up soon?

These verses are a call to trust God. They talk about the security we can have in a relationship with God. We can trust Him for our needs. We can be secure in His grace. They are intended to be an antidote for our tendency to worry too much.

Jesus is NOT saying we should abandon all common sense and not take responsibility for our basic welfare. He is not saying we should sit back and expect manna to drop from heaven. He is not saying we should stay home, pray, and expect other people to take care of us. He is saying that to **worry** about material things – to spend time and energy simply fretting – doesn't get us anywhere. He is saying that we can have confidence that, if we really are seeking first the Kingdom of God – if loving and serving Him are our true goals – if He is the master to whom we are devoted – then we can look to Him for our care and trust Him for our well-being. God is the Creator of heaven and earth. He is the sustainer of the universe. He is the one who knows everything and can do anything. He is our loving heavenly Father who knows our basic needs and delights to provide them. We may still have to work hard to see that prayer answered.

So what do we do? Very simply, instead of worrying, we put our trust in Him. We live one day at a time (*"Give us this day our daily bread ..."*), seeking first the kingdom of God – making loving Him our first priority ... and the promise of Scripture is that He will provide for our basic **needs** (but not necessarily our **wants**).

It's sounds simple – just trust Jesus. It's not always easy actually to live this way. Very practically, Jesus says, *"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need"* (6:33). Moment by moment, step by step, seek to do what is right and what honours God ... and you will discover that God will care for you. That can be difficult to genuinely put into practice.

Begin with little steps of trust and obedience ... and then just keep trying to do the right thing with each next step. And you will discover that God is more than faithful in caring for you ...

*Lord, sometimes when I read, I see the words,
but I do not feel or think them.
Sometimes when I read, I feel the words,
but do not think them.
Sometimes when I read, I think the words,
but do not feel them.
An act of the will cannot make me feel,
nor keep my mind from wandering.
An act of the will can only make me read.
So I shall read the words, Lord,
And invite Your Holy Spirit to do the rest:
Guide my mind and my heart as You will.
Amen.*

Sunday, February 9: Matthew 7:1-6

When we lived in Nova Scotia we had a lady in our church I'll call Miss Smith. Long before I ever met her, I knew her. I knew she was opinionated. I knew she criticized everyone and everything. I knew she was cantankerous. When I first went to visit her (with trepidation), I knew what to expect – a grumpy old lady. What did I find? A very pleasant person. Once you got used to her, Miss Smith was actually a sweetheart.

During that time, I also wrote a weekly newspaper column. One week I wrote about a ministerial meeting I attended at which several denominations (from Roman Catholic to independent Pentecostal) were represented. I commented on how encouraged I was that people from such diverse church backgrounds could come together, meet for two hours, and after all was said and done the air was not blue, no furniture was broken, and no teeth were missing. I thought the community needed to know that their clergy, although we all held firmly to our own convictions, could cooperate and work together on various projects from a food bank to a Good Friday service.

Well! A Baptist minister in a neighbouring town read the column and hand wrote me a long letter which almost spontaneously combusted in my hands. "*Light has no fellowship with darkness.*" he blasted. If I was associating with Roman Catholics and charismatics I had not read the scriptures (which scriptures he did not specify), and my soul, if not already lost, was in grave peril. I ought to re-examine my ways and shun such sinful associations. As for him, he wanted nothing to do with me or others in league with the devil.

I almost wrote back (but I didn't), actually quoting one Scripture: "*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.*" (Matthew 7:1-2)

There is something about human nature that loves to judge other people. Whether it be pre-judging someone (as I did with old Miss Smith), or being sure we have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and no-one else has the truth (as my colleague did), we find it easy to judge others.

Jesus bluntly says to us: "*Don't do it.*"

His point is that we should be considerate and understanding of others. All of us fall short of the perfect standard God sets for us. None of us is all-knowing, all-perfect, and all-infallible as God is. We all have issues. So, as we deal with others, we need a sincere humility and grace for fellow strugglers. Jesus' concern is we accept other people who stumble as graciously and lovingly as we wish to be accepted by God. God models such grace, mercy, and love to us. So we also ought to love one another.

He is speaking against an attitude that sees ourselves as perfect while others are second-class citizens. My suspicion is some people criticize others because it makes them feel better about themselves. It can be good for our egos to highlight others' shortcomings. Such self-righteousness, Jesus argues, is not godliness.

Jesus, as a master teacher, uses humour and an illustration to make his point. Verses 3-5 are funny. We can imagine someone with a great big 2X4 sticking out of his eye trying to pick a speck of sawdust out of someone else's eye. Try to picture it. This illustration would make a great *Mr. Bean* episode.

His point is how absurd we look when we judging are others when our own lives are a mess (even if we cannot see how messed up we are, other people can).

This does not mean that, by an attitude of acceptance toward others, we are saying that what people do – how they choose to live their lives – doesn't matter. Far from it. It does matter. How we live our lives is very important. Just because we are not to judge sin does not mean that sin is trivial.

Jesus' point is that it's not **our** business to nit-pick about the sawdust in the other person's eye. Their sin is their problem which they need to deal with before God. And God will deal with it. **Our** business is to deal with that great big 2X4 sticking out of **our** own eye. Yes, God takes sin very seriously – our sin. And He wants to deal with us about our own issues.

Reflect for a moment on your own life ... what things might God need to deal with? (Resist the urge to compare with anyone else ... *"Yes, I know this a problem for me, but it's nothing compared to poor, ol' Peter's issues"*).

With honest confession, come to God, and ask for his forgiveness. God will forgive you. But also hear His challenge, *"Go, and sin no more"* (including sinning no more by judging other people).

*Lord, preserve the fire, as Christ preserves us.
May the warmth of your Spirit remain in our midst
as Christ is always among us.
May I warm those who are lonely,
whose hearts are cold and lifeless,
So they, too, may know the comfort of God's love and mercy.
Amen.*

Monday, February 10: Matthew 7:7-12

Have you ever been in a store when a clerk greets you and says, *"If you need any help, please ask,"* but when you do ask, the person seems miffed you actually took them up on their offer? Sometimes we say, *"If you need anything, just ask,"* and don't really mean it; we say it just to be polite. But when Jesus says it, He means it.

Jesus says, *"Ask and it will be given to you."* This is a command but also an invitation. Each of these words (ask, seek, knock) is in a Greek verb tense implying continuous action: *"Ask – and keep asking."* Jesus is inviting and encouraging people to ask. He wants us to ask, seek, knock. He wants to answer.

In John 15:7, Jesus says: *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."* There is a key phrase in this last quote: *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you."* In other words, our asking ought to be within the will of God.

Much of God's will we do know. The Scriptures give us a good understanding of much of God's general will for us and our lives. We know basic godly ethics and understand core biblical principles. Asking to be in God's will is always right. There is no point in asking God for something which is contrary to Scripture.

Some specifics of God's will of for our lives we don't know. Scripture does not give us a blow-by-blow outline for every decision we have to make. Specific guidance is more challenging.

As we get to know God better, however, we become more attuned to His priorities. We get better at understanding the kinds of choices God would have us make. We know God; we choose more wisely.

"Seek, and keep on seeking," Jesus urges. What are we to seek? A few sentences before this passage Jesus encouraged his disciples (Matthew 6:33): *"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness ..."* In other words, we are to seek God's Kingdom; we will find it. As we seek for His will – His general will – we will find it in Scripture (implying we actually have to seek them in – read – Scripture). As we seek His guidance – His specific will for other, less clear-cut decisions – we will find it as we ask, in prayer.

"Knock, and keep on knocking." Don't be afraid to come to God with your needs, concerns, and requests. God does not turn people away. In fact, He is always willing to open the door. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, *"Here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."* In context, Jesus is saying this to Christians. He invites us to come into His presence, talk with Him (pray), and learn from Him.

Jesus also talks about our relationships with other people: *"Do to others what you would have them do to you ..."* God treats us like His precious children. We ought to love one another in the same way. Jesus has invited us to ask for good things for God; He will give them. Now, He says, if people ask good things from us, even we (who are "evil" [V.11]) ought to give to as generously as God blesses us (Give what? love? kindness? benefit of the doubt? forgiveness? mercy? honesty? friendship? respect? care? grace?).

Jesus invites us to knock on the gates of heaven and discover His blessings. He reminds us that He is knocking on the doors of our lives, calling us to a life of holiness, hope, joy, peace, and love. Many people today are "knocking" their heads against walls looking for meaning and hope in their lives. We have discovered genuine life and love in and through Jesus. Who can we encourage with His good news?

Keep on asking, seeking, knocking ... AND keep on blessing others as they ask, seek and knock.

*Anyone who hears and does not heed God's voice
is like a leaking ship on a stormy sea ...
an eagle caught in a trap ...
an apple tree that never blossoms.
Anyone who hears and obeys God's voice
is like the golden rays of the summer sun ...
a silver chalice overflowing ...
a handsome groom ready for the wedding.
Lord, help me hear and obey.
Amen.*

Tuesday, February 11: Matthew 7:13-14

Two gates, two roads ... **The "highway" gate/road looks great.** Lots and lots of people are there. And if what matters to us is fitting in with the crowd, being like everyone else, being popular, and living the "Canadian dream" (whatever that is), then this is the road for you.

Living the popular dream, you don't have to think. You just look around you and do what everyone else is doing. You go along for the ride. But at the end of the day, so what? You're just another nameless, faceless passenger on the conveyor-belt of life. Millions of people in middle age (and above, and below) are going through the motions, fitting in just fine, and looking back – looking around – and asking themselves, *"So what? What's it all about?"* Is this really what life is about? Is this all there is?

Who wants to go through life that way? And yet most people do ...

The "narrow" gate/road isn't nearly as appealing. But ... if you want to think. If you want to struggle. If you want to stand out from the crowd. If you want to stand up for justice and what is right. If you want your life to matter. If you want the journey – day to day, moment by moment – to make a difference. If you want your choices – hard choices about what is *"true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and*

admirable, excellent and worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8) – to count. If you want your character to be important – if it really is important to you to become more and more like Jesus – to model qualities of *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22). If you really want the Kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven, then try the narrow, bumpy road ...

When we make that choice, Paul's experience is that:

1. You learn to trust God – REALLY trust God. *"We stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. And rescued us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us."* (2 Corinthians 1:9-10)
2. You learn the power of prayer – the REAL power of prayer. *"And you are helping us by praying for us. Then many people will give thanks because God has graciously answered so many prayers for our safety."* (2 Corinthians 1:11)
3. You learn to live with integrity – in good and in hard times: *"We can say with confidence and a clear conscience that we have lived with a God-given holiness and sincerity in all our dealings. We have depended on God's grace, not on our own human wisdom. That is how we have conducted ourselves before the world, and especially toward you."* (2 Corinthians 1:12-13)

Two gates. Two roads. Two choices ... It is in the bumpy roads of life that we really grow the most. So, in the words of Ms. Frizzle (of 'Magic School Bus' fame): *"Take chances, make mistakes, and get messy."*

As a follower of Jesus: *"Take chances, make mistakes, and get messy."*

OK, what Jesus really said is: *"You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate ... the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it."* Go for it.

*God help my thoughts.
They stray from me, setting off on the wildest journeys.
When I am in church, they run off like naughty children, quarrelling, making trouble.
When I read the Bible, they fly to a distant city, filled with distractions.
My thoughts can cross an ocean with a single leap;
they can fly from earth to heaven, and back again, in a second.
They slip from my grasp like tails of eels;
they swoop hither and thither like swallows in flight.
Dear Jesus, who can see into every heart and read every mind,
please take hold of my thoughts.
Bring my thoughts back to You,
and hold me close to Your heart.
Amen.*

Wednesday, February 12: Matthew 7:15-23

There is a thorn bush in the Middle East, the buckthorn, which has little black berries which, from a distance look like grapes. While not poisonous, they taste awful. There is a thistle in the Middle East whose flower, from a distance, looks like a fig. They are inedible. There are prophets, teachers, and leaders, says Jesus, who look and sound great, but upon closer inspection their character and message don't measure up.

The basic fault of the false prophet," writes William Barclay, *"is self-interest. The true shepherd cares for the flock more than he cares for his life; the wolf (false prophet) cares for nothing but to satisfy his own gluttony and his own greed. The false prophet is in the business of teaching, not for what he can give to others, but for what he can get for himself."* Have you ever known any teachers/leaders like that?

Some teachers/authors/bloggers/leaders only care about making a name for themselves (I always get a bit concerned when a teacher names their ministry after **themselves**, personally).

Some teachers/authors/bloggers/leaders simply promote their own ideas. They have new truth that's only been revealed to **them** and them alone. Everyone else who has come before is wrong. They're special.

Some teachers offer religions focusing on rites or rituals, emphasizing external appearances or actions, teaching "Thou-shalt-nots" without love or grace, promising untold health and wealth, separating religion from real life, or claiming a faith that results in pride and judgment. Those are not the faith of Scripture.

Jesus, instead, encourages us to recognize that genuine biblical teaching leads to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23). If we see these fruits growing from a teacher's ministry, we can see its truthfulness. Authentic spirituality results in inward transformation that leads people to be passionately in love with God (with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength) and passionately devoted to loving their neighbour as themselves.

In 7:21-23, Jesus emphasizes that a genuine relationship with God changes us from the inside out. We don't just say the right things, believe the right doctrines, obey the right rules, or repeat the right words. In the deepest part of our hearts, souls, and minds, we know Jesus, and we desire to follow Him.

Pray God would help us love Him more. Pray we would be transformed from the inside out. Pray we would live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me, and be so in me
so that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul.
Let me look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus.
Amen*

Thursday, February 13: Matthew 7:24-29

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with this familiar illustration. It's easy enough to be a Christian "in our heads" – "believing" the right things and having good intentions. But an old question finds us out: 'If you were charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?'

In a Scripture Union reflection, the author comments: "*Jesus applies a single test to his listeners' response: will they do it? Will they 'walk the talk'? This is a very Jewish approach, treating soul and body, thought and action, as a whole. Our faith will be judged by what we actually do (Matthew 25:35,36) and not by fine words alone.*

"Jesus' example is of two houses, which are both subjected to storm and flood. The houses may look identical, and the deluge is the same for both; but it is the house built on rock which remains standing. For Jesus, it is the person who hears and does his word, who will have a firm place to stand in the testing times to come.

"The Sermon on the Mount ends as it began. Being a Christian means living as a disciple and follower of Jesus. That doesn't mean just showing up at church on Sundays (though it includes that). It means a wholehearted commitment to Jesus and the kingdom of heaven. It means loving God and our neighbour with everything we've got – including people outside our circle of friends. It means depending on our Father in prayer. It means forgiving other people. It means not being preoccupied with money and not worrying about material security. Those who build their houses on rock are those whose trust is in Jesus, who love his company and his direction, who obey him from the heart and know an indescribable joy."

Is there a "credibility gap" between your faith and your life? If so, ask for God's forgiveness and help. None of us is perfect. We all falter and fail. Jesus encourages us to be honest about that. He also encourages us

to keep getting up again and trying to do a little better next time ...

Hugh Latimer (1487-October 16, 1555) was Bishop of Worcester before the English Reformation, and later Church of England chaplain to King Edward VI. In 1555 under Queen Mary he was burned at the stake, along with his friend Nicholas Ridley. As they were about to die, he said to his good friend, *"Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out."* Latimer and Ridley lived their faith. How about us?

*Change requires honesty:
Honesty with myself to acknowledge my sins.
Honesty with God to confess my sins.
I know that the most common sin in my life is lying --
Lying to myself, ignoring my sins.
Lying to others, denying my sins.
Lying to God, not acknowledging my sins.
If I am lying to myself – if I need to see things in my life that need changing ...
God open my heart so I may see myself as you see me.
May I repent. May I change. May I grow.
Amen.*

Friday, February 14: Matthew 8:1-4

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus says, *"You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."*

As Jesus comes down from the hillside, He dramatically illustrates how God's love actually is salt and light in the world. Salt was used for a variety of purposes: as a meat preservative (before refrigeration), as a seasoning, and even as a fertilizer. God's love can preserve and prevent moral and social decay, it can add spice to life, and it grows God's Kingdom. As Jesus heals (1) an untouchable leper (8:1-4), (2) a despised Roman officer's servant (8:5-13), (3) a woman of no real consequence (8:14-15), and (4) demon-possessed people (8:16-17), Jesus is demonstrating that that Kingdom of God not only *preserves* life, but Jesus embraces, restores, and actively *grows* life in the most surprising places.

A light, shining in the darkness, is a symbol of hope, warmth, and security. Light also helps us see things as they really are – the beautiful and ugly, good and bad, truth and error. And light helps us find our way to where we need to be; light helps us recognize the right path. Like a fire blazing on a hilltop, God's love is not limited to a few (Jewish men were pretty sure the Messiah would just come for healthy Jews – in particular, healthy Jewish *men*). None of the people Jesus heals initially fit this category. God's love is for ALL people, especially those who are physically ill (like the leper), culturally on the outside (a slave of a Roman), marginalized people (women), and forgotten ones (demon-possessed/mentally ill folks).

The challenge Jesus gives us is we are to be salt and light, the hands and feet of the Kingdom of God by living His principles and His love day in day out. Like salt, our lives are invaluable for the preserving/seasoning/fertilizing effect they can have in our neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools, and homes.

Like light, we can help our world see things as they are: the good and the bad. And, like light, we can help people find direction, hope, warmth, and security. We can help people discover truth – about God, ethics, values, life – and hope in a crazy world. The good news the love, light, mercy, and grace of God is for ALL people, not just a select few.

How do you think the people who experienced Jesus' touch responded? The good news of God's Kingdom changes people's lives. It has changed mine. Why do I hesitate to share what God has done in my life with other people? Lord, give me the courage to share your love with someone who needs your touch, today ...

*Teach me your way of looking at people:
the way you glanced at Peter after his denial,
the way you touched the heart of the rich young man and the hearts of your disciples.
I would like to meet you as you really are,
since you change those who really know you.
If only I could hear you speak as when you spoke
in the synagogue of Capernaum or on the Mount of Beatitudes.
Yet you do speak to me, if I take time to listen ...
You do meet me, if I take time to notice ...
Give me grace to live my life, within and without,
the way you lived your life, O Lord.
Amen*

Pedro Arrupe

Saturday, February 15: Matthew 8:5-13

Lepers were outcasts. They were officially "unclean." They had to stay out of town. You certainly NEVER touched them. But Jesus did (8:3). The Kingdom of heaven breaks down walls and barriers.

Roman centurions were the enemy. Jewish rabbis also taught they were "unclean." You could not go into their homes or dine with them. You were not to talk with them. True, many Roman soldiers were harsh and brutal. Others were good people. The Rabbis didn't discriminate; they wanted all foreigners sent back to where they came from. If they could have built a wall along the border of Israel, they would have.

What is Jesus' attitude toward this Roman? What ought our attitude to be to people from other countries? The Kingdom of heaven breaks down walls and barriers. It doesn't build them.

What is it about the Roman's faith that is different than the Jewish leaders' faith?

What is Jesus' warning to the religious Jews? What is His warning to us?

How can we demonstrate genuine love for ALL people, regardless of their ethnicity? How can we live with authentic faith in Jesus?

*O Lord, I need your help today.
I want to care for those you've sent into my life,
to help them develop the special gifts you've given them.
But I also want to free them to follow their own paths
and to bring their loving wisdom to the world.
Help me to embrace them without clutching,
to support them without suffocating,
to correct them without crushing.
And help me to live joyfully and playfully, myself,
so they can see your life in me and find their way to you.
Amen.*

Sunday, February 16: Matthew 8:14-17

Lepers were outcasts. Roman centurions were the enemy. Both groups were people the rabbis taught were "unclean." You should have NOTHING to do with them. You shunned them. But Jesus touched them, spoke with them, loved them, and healed them. The Kingdom of God breaks down walls and barriers.

The rabbis were also sure that MEN – specifically Jewish men – were the really important members of society. Women had no rights. They received no formal education. They were possessions more than people. Certainly anyone claiming to be the Messiah would know that he should spend his time with the

important MEN of Jewish society.

So why is Jesus spending time with a fisherman's mother-in-law? An unimportant WOMAN?

At least as shocking, Jesus spends time with sick and demon-possessed people. These are social outcasts, marginalized beggars. Jesus meets them. He loves them. He heals them. Why is Jesus doing this?

The consistent message of the Bible is that the Kingdom of heaven breaks down walls and barriers. It doesn't build them. In fact, God has a special place in His heart for those facing the hardest times – orphans, widows, foreigners, the poor, sick, lonely, refugees, and hurting. As we read through the Gospel of Matthew, try to notice how often Jesus reaches out and cares for those society judges or ignores.

James writes, "*Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you*" (James 1:27). Authentic Christianity cares for ALL people. People who desire to live for Jesus care for ALL people, too.

How is God challenging the social norms of our world in these passages? How can we live our faith today?

*Lord, teach me your way of treating others –
sinners, children, Pharisees, Pilates, Herods, and John the Baptists.
Teach me your way of eating and drinking,
how to act when I'm tired from work and need rest.
Teach me compassion for the suffering, the poor, the blind, and the lame.
You who shed tears in your grief, show me how to live my deepest emotions.
Teach me your ways, O Lord, that I may truly live and love.
Amen.*

Monday, February 17: Matthew 8:18-22

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus had said, "*But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*" What does He mean? Actually salt (sodium chloride) is a very stable compound: it cannot be made unsalty. People have suggested some ideas: maybe He is referring to (1) rock with salt crystals in it – once the salt is washed away, the rock is useless, (2) salt mixed with gypsum – they look similar, but gypsum is useless as a preservative or spice, or (3) salt blocks used as the floors of ovens, which, due to extended exposure to heat can change their composition.

Or maybe this is hyperbole (like a camel going through the eye of a needle)?¹ There is an old Jewish proverb: "*Can a mule bear young? Can salt lose its flavor?*" A mule, sterile by definition, cannot bear young. That's fact. The parallel implies that salt, by definition, cannot lose its saltiness. It's impossible for salt to lose its saltiness. That's fact. That's Jesus' point. Once salt, always salt.

What is Jesus' message, then? Once a genuine follower of Jesus, always a genuine follower of Jesus. Just as you cannot change unsalt salt, you cannot change a person who loves Jesus into something else, either.

In Matthew 8, those who are listening to and interested in Jesus face some real challenges. He challenges them to think about their priorities. What is important to them?

- A teacher wants to study with Jesus (to "follow" him), probably expecting Jesus to settle down and teach at a prestigious school. It isn't going to be that way. He needs to rethink his expectations.
- Another person wants to put family obligations above following Jesus, but even that comes second. He needs to put Jesus first.

¹ Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration as a figure of speech. It may be used to evoke strong feelings or to create a strong impression but is **not** meant to be taken literally.

If you are going to follow Jesus – the promised Messiah, the One who heals – then *you will be changed* into salt and light. An irreversible, fundamental transformation occurs. Nothing and no one can ever turn you back into a mere mortal again. That changes your priorities. It changes your life. Forever.

If we have been transformed by God, do our priorities and our lives show that? Do we live differently than those who live by the adage, *"Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die?"* Do your lives count for something? Do we live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Are God's priorities, our priorities? Are we salt? Are we light?

*May all I do today begin with you, O Lord.
Plant dreams and hopes within my soul, revive my tired spirit:
be with me today.
May all I do today continue with your help, O Lord.
Be at my side and walk with me:
be my support today.
May all I do today reach far and wide, O Lord.
My thoughts, my work, my life: make them blessings for your kingdom;
let them go beyond today, O God.
Today is new, unlike any other day, for God makes each day different.
Today God's everyday grace falls on my soul like abundant seed,
though I may hardly see it.
Today is one of those days Jesus promised to be with me,
a companion on my journey,
And my life today, if I trust him, has consequences unseen.
My life has a purpose.
Amen*

Tuesday, February 18: Matthew 8:23-27

Donald McCullough has a great book entitled *Say Please, Say Thank You: The Respect We Owe One Another*. While not writing for a Christian audience, he argues for a more civil society. He has great chapters such as, *"Hold your wind: trying not to offend with bodily grossness," "Leave a tip worth working for: noticing those who serve,"* and *"Kneel down to speak with children: meeting others at their own level."*

He writes, *"I'm more interested in the little things, such as remembering to say 'thank you' and to call your mom on Mother's Day. These things may not seem important when compared with the major problems facing our culture. Yet they may be the best place to begin, they may be the only honest place to begin. If a person can't remember to say thank you to her housekeeper, it probably won't matter much if she writes a major philosophical treatise on kindness, if a person is rude to his family, the angels probably won't give a holy rip if he preaches soaring sermons on the nature of love."*

Crossing the sea, those who are checking Jesus begin to appreciate who He really is. They are being invited to follow "the Son of Man" (8:20) – a phrase which means little to us, but which – to people who knew the Old Testament – referred to the promised Messiah of the prophets (Daniel 7:13-14).

As we mentioned yesterday, if you are going to follow Jesus – the promised Messiah, the One who heals – then *you will be changed* into salt and light. An irreversible, fundamental transformation occurs. Nothing and no one can ever turn you back into a mere mortal again.

We are challenged to live **as** salt and light in the world, as well. The old adage, *"actions speak louder than words,"* is helpful. That probably doesn't mean we'll be calming storms and smoothing out the seas anytime soon. It does mean that the God who CAN calm storms is at work in our lives. He can help us, in big and small ways, become more and more the people God desires us to be. Nice people. Godly people.

When we try to live the Sermon on the Mount, we begin to see – and those around us begin to see – Jesus

makes a difference in our lives. In the ordinary day-to-day relationships and experiences of life we try to live wisely and well, bringing God's salt and light to our everyday world. (Are we ever NOT like that? Why?)

As God's people we are challenged to be kind, merciful, peace-making people who make the world a better place. We are called to small steps of godliness and grace. Be salt. Be light. Make a difference.

*I lay my head to rest, and in doing so,
lay at your feet the faces I have seen,
the voices I have heard,
the words I have spoken,
the hands I have shaken,
the service I have given,
the joys I have shared,
the sorrows revealed,
I lay them at your feet, and in doing so
lay my head to rest.
Amen*

Wednesday, February 19: Matthew 8:28-34

Jesus is continuing to be salt and light – bringing the preserving/seasoning/fertilizing/enlightening/guiding/warming love of God into the lives of people who desperately need it. Think about the loneliness and suffering of the two men filled with demons ... What does it mean for each of them that Jesus comes into their lives? What does it mean to these people that Jesus reaches out to them? What does it mean to each of them that Jesus changes their lives?

Note these men are in "*the region of the Gadarenes/Gergesenes/Gerasenes*" – also known as Decapolis, a region with pigs – non-Jewish territory. Not only were these fellows demon-possessed, they were non-Jews.

According to the rabbis, Jesus should not be in this country: He has left God's country, Israel. He should not be speaking with non-Jews, let alone demon-possessed ones. He certainly should not be in a graveyard (an "unclean" spot to the rabbis). Definitely he should be nowhere near pigs (incredibly "unclean").

Why do you think Jesus is here in the first place?

What is Jesus' attitude to non-Jews? To people with "issues"?

We continue to see that the Kingdom of God builds bridges. Jesus breaks down walls. He reaches out in love across all sorts of social barriers people create. To Jesus, ethnicity doesn't matter. Country-of-origin doesn't matter. Health doesn't matter. Mental health doesn't matter. Religion doesn't matter. Jesus loves ALL people. He wants ALL people to experience God's love, grace, mercy, and healing power.

What is Jesus saying to us, His church, today? What He saying to me, today?

*O Lord, we bring before you the distress and dangers of peoples and nations,
the pleas of the imprisoned and the captive,
the need of the refugee,
the weariness of the despondent,
and the diminishment of the aging.
O Lord, stay close to them all.
Help me to find the opportunities to encourage those in my path, today.
O Lord, help me to be Jesus to those I meet.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Thursday, February 20: Matthew 9:1-8

When we bought the desk, it looked great. But within a couple of years of normal use, the surface was heavily scratched. After a couple of moves and a bit of wear, it was falling apart. The veneer made the desk look like solid oak. It was actually poor-quality pressboard that deteriorated quickly with use.

Some people's faith looks great, too. But when push comes to shove, tough times come, or they face some hard choices, their religion deteriorates pretty quickly, too. Their faith isn't "solid-oak faith," but "pressboard" faith. It can't withstand the bumps and bruises of real life. It falls apart in the real world.

Jesus emphasizes again and again that God is concerned with the inner state of our hearts, not just our outward appearances or actions. People, like some of the Pharisees, can put on brilliantly polished exteriors – observing all the details of the Law, doing all the right things – but inside be hateful, hurtful, and unloving. In contrast, some of those with rough exteriors, given the opportunity to experience God's love, have hearts of gold. As Samuel said of David, "*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).

The teachers of religious law had issues with Jesus' actions. Consider this in light of Jesus' earlier teaching: "*Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven*" (Matthew 5:17-19). Jesus doesn't disagree with the authorities at one level. At another level He is challenging them that, while they are obsessed with superficial compliance, He is searching their souls for genuine love, authentic spirituality, and true grace. He is looking for hearts of oak, not pressboard.

We can all drift toward a religion that is defined by legalism, rules, dogma, and judgment. Jesus challenges us to find a genuine faith based on love, grace, compassion, and mercy. Hearts of oak, not pressboard.

Which kind of spirituality makes a difference in the life of the paralyzed man?

How can we learn from Jesus in this passage?

Real love is when someone else's life becomes more important than your own.

This is the love of God:

for God's love for the world is such that he gave up his Son.

*The love of God is a power and an example for human love,
and it is an active help to sustain human love.*

Can human love really last without love for God?

*People – married and single – whose love for God is alive,
find a motivation and a strength from Him to love others.*

Love isn't born just of itself; it is like a child of God, alive in each of us.

*Love is what makes each of us most a person, just as in the Trinity,
love is the person we call Jesus, Son and Word of God.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, while on earth you had close and devoted friends
such as John, Lazarus, Martha and Mary.*

You showed in this way that friendship is one of life's great blessings.

*Thank you for the friends that you have given me to love me
in spite of my failures and weaknesses,
and to enrich my life after your example.*

Let me ever behave toward them as you behaved toward your friends.

*Bind us close together in you and enable us to help one another
on our earthly journey.*

Amen

Friday, February 21: Matthew 9:9-13

Introducing Matthew, the author of our gospel. Finally, we get to meet him. Unlike some contemporary authors/teachers, Matthew isn't trumpeting his credentials, flying his own flag, or naming his ministry after himself (he doesn't entitle this book "the Gospel of Matthew" – later editors did that).

It's interesting that Matthew waits so long to introduce himself. When he does so, it's after he has talked about Jesus' mercy on a person with leprosy, a Roman centurion, a non-descript woman, several demon-possessed people (including non-Jews), and a paralyzed fellow. It's almost as if Matthew is saying, Jesus loves ALL these unusual, untouchable people – and Jesus loves even me, worst of the worst, a tax-collector.

Tax collectors were Jews. But they worked for the Romans. They were considered traitors by other Jews. Outcasts. Tax-collectors could charge whatever "service charges" they wanted, gouging their fellow countrymen, driving many into bankruptcy. Crooks. Abusers. Thus they were even further despised. Their only friends would be other tax-collectors and "notorious sinners" like them.

Here is Jesus, again where we would least expect Him to be. Not surprisingly the Jewish powers-that-be are not impressed. This is not where a self-respecting Jewish teacher should be, let alone one claiming to be the Messiah. These are not good people. These are the worst of humanity. Jesus should know better.

What is Jesus' response?

As you think about who Matthew will become (the author of our Gospel), what effect did Jesus' ministry have on Matthew's life? On the history of the church? After all, Matthew is the one who records for us the Sermon on the Mount. Without Matthew, we may not have had that teaching of Jesus preserved.

No one is beyond God's love. No one is beyond God's redemption. Pray for those you know who need the loving touch of God in their lives. Only God knows what their lives might become.

*O Lord, teach me to seek you,
and reveal yourself to me when I seek you.
For I cannot seek you unless you first teach me,
nor find you unless you first reveal yourself to me.
Let me seek you in longing, and long for you in seeking.
Let me find you in love, and love you in finding.
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397)

Saturday, February 22: Matthew 9:14-17

Do you know joyful, pleasant, happy Christians? Do you know Christians who are anything but?

The teachers of the Law, the Pharisees, and even those who followed John the Baptist, had problems with Jesus. They understood religion to be about rigorously keeping rules. As a result, to be religious often meant to be dour, miserable, and generally unpleasant. If you were religious, you were not usually a happy person. In contrast, how does Jesus understand our relationship with God? Which do you prefer?

There have been many times since the 1st century when Christians have been just as dour, miserable, and unpleasant through rule-keeping as some of the religious folks in Jesus' day. What might Jesus say to them?

Jesus is not arguing for some kind of hedonistic, go-crazy, no-moral-limitations insanity. Quite the opposite in fact (see Matthew 5:17-20). But His contention is that if we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and if we love our neighbour as ourselves, we will follow the principles of God's law from our hearts. We will discover that life in God is actually joyful. The Kingdom of God is a party.

If we make God's ethics, morals, and principles into a legalistic straightjacket that makes us miserable, we

are getting it wrong. Yes, we are invited to live by the highest ethical and moral standards, but we do this because we love God. Out of our love for God, we desire to honour and glorify Him in our lives – and so choose to live by His ethics, morals, and principles. Not surprisingly, the world and our lives work best when we live by God’s wisdom. We experience true freedom and great relationships when we live like according to God’s principles. It’s a joy to ourselves ... and we are a joy to others.

The two images Jesus uses – patching old clothes and using old wineskins² – underline the point that the old system of checklists of rules, duties, obligations, laws, prohibitions, injunctions, and everything else just doesn’t work. When religion is all about what you must NOT do, it’s miserable. It’s dead. It’s broken.

In contrast, when our faith is about what we do do – loving God with all our being and loving our neighbour – our lives and our faith comes alive. We find ourselves doing (and not doing) all the same things, but from a completely different starting point (out of love for God/neighbour), with a far more compelling passion, and with real joy. We do right because we love God. We discover joy. We bring joy to others.

Try living today by these two great principles: in everything you do or say try to live as one who really, really loves God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and as one who loves genuinely loves their neighbour as themselves. Really try it. And rejoice.

*O Lord, give us a mind that is humble, quiet,
peaceable, patient and charitable,
and a taste of your Holy Spirit in all our thoughts, words, and deeds.
O Lord, give us a lively faith, a firm hope, a fervent charity, a love of you.
Take from us all lukewarm-ness in meditation and all dullness in prayer.
Give us fervor and delight in thinking of you, your grace,
and your tender compassion toward us.
Give us, good Lord, the grace to work for the things we pray for.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Sunday, February 23: Matthew 9:18-34

The dead have life. The blind have sight. The mute have voice. The chronically ill are healed. Ironically, the crowds get more vocal. And the opposition gets more nasty ...

Evil is real. It was real back in the first century: illness, death, oppression, opposition to God’s hope and healing. And evil is still real: illness, death, oppression, opposition to God’s hope and healing.

Jesus comes with a message of deliverance. Hope. Healing. Love. Almost immediately He faces brutal opposition. The Romans don’t bother Him. Other foreigners don’t bother Him. But His own people reject Him. The most religious people oppose Him.

The Jewish powers-that-be are annoyed that Jesus shows God’s love and care to people who are on the outside of mainstream Jewish society. The Jews in Jesus’ day believed that non-Jews were little better than dogs. They believed that even Jews with chronic diseases – bleeding, paralysis, leprosy, blindness, deafness, and demon-possession – were suffering because they or their parents had sinned. They were being punished by God’s judgment. They were beyond redemption. Therefore, they were beyond care.

The leaders are annoyed Jesus emphasizes love, grace, and compassion for outcasts. Rather than insisting on dogged obedience to picayune laws and judgment on the sick, Jesus simply loves and heals. Sometimes He does so while also announcing the forgiveness of sins. But there is no insistence upon rule-following or

² A new piece of cloth patched onto an old piece of clothing will shrink in the wash, creating a worse tear. Old leather wineskins get brittle over time; new wine, which expands as it ages, will burst old wineskins. Both images highlight that Jesus is not just trying to patch together the old Jewish sacrificial-legal system; He is bringing something radically new.

meriting forgiveness by first doing all the right religious things first. He knows we can never do it.

Jews in that day believed salvation only came through (1) ethnic purity as Jews, (2) meticulous obedience to the Law, and (3) physical purity – thus, for instance, you would never touch a sick or dead person if possible (they are under God’s judgment). Jesus appears to be deliberately flaunting their fundamental beliefs. Faced with determined opposition, Jesus could become bitter and hardened. But He doesn’t. Despite the opposition, He continues to show compassion. He continues to reach out physically, emotionally – and, of course, spiritually – to touch those in need. He continues to model God’s love.

As salt and light in an evil world we cannot get rid of all evil. It is there. It is real. Our challenge is to continue to show compassion – to reach out physically, emotionally, and spiritually to touch the lives of the people around us, at their points of need. God’s plan is not to share His love through leaflets dropped from the sky, through mysterious emails in people’s inboxes, through miraculous posts on social media, or through magical tweets ... but through the relationships of His people who share His love with those closest to themselves: neighbours, friends, family. We don’t want to become bitter and hardened. In Jesus’ name we keep on loving other people. How can we love others in Jesus’ name?

*From our rising in the morning to our lying down again,
you are with us every hour of the day,
our reassurance when storms assail
and strength when courage fails.
From our rising in the morning to our lying down again,
your light illumines every step of the way,
our comfort when darkness falls
and peace that calms our souls.
From our rising in the morning to our lying down again,
you are with us.
Amen.*

Monday, February 24: Matthew 9:35-38

Outside of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), Jesus gives us little specific instruction about how to pray or what to pray about. But this time He does.

Go to the farmer (God), Jesus says, and beg Him to send workers to bring in the harvest. And, as we, His followers, pray that prayer, the answer comes back: we ourselves, are to be the answer to our own prayer. We are the workers. What we have seen Jesus doing over the past few days – touching in love, reaching out in compassion, caring for in mercy, providing for in generosity – we are to now do in His name. God is not going to send angels from heaven to share His love; He is sending us.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “*Your Kingdom come, and Your will be done.*” Then we get about the business of seeing His will and His way come to pass in our own lives and through our care for others. In the power of His Spirit, we go about answering our own prayer.

We are called to be His harvesters. Where are the fields today ready for harvest? What should our prayer then be? How can we be the answer to our own prayer?

*Stay with me, and then shall I begin to shine as you shine;
so to shine as to be a light to others;
the light, O Jesus, will be all yours;
none of it will be mine; it will be you, shining on others through me.
Let me thus praise you in the way you love best, by shining on those around me.
Let me preach you without preaching, not by words but by my example,
by the influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to you.
Amen.*

Tuesday, February 25: Matthew 10:1-16

For years my family and I had driven from Vancouver to the Rockies for summer vacation. I had travelled the road dozens of times – as a passenger, in the back seat. Dad did the driving. Now, as I was setting off on my first solo drive to the mountains and beyond (I was moving from BC to Nova Scotia), I was rather apprehensive. It's different when you're the one driving than when you're a passenger.

Up until this moment, Jesus has been doing the driving and his disciples have been along for the ride as observers. They have seen Him share God's love, do wonderful things, break down cultural barriers, embody God's grace. But He's been making all the decisions and navigating all the challenges. Now, as He has just encouraged them to pray that the Lord of the Harvest send out workers into the fields (9:38), He is sending them out to be His good news. It's different when you're no longer just the passenger.

Jesus is making it "easy" for these first missionaries on this first journey (this is the first time Matthew calls them "apostles" – literally "sent out ones"). He is only sending them to Jewish communities, their own culture and kin. God urgently wants ALL people of every culture, ethnicity, and race to come to know Him, but He knows it's easiest to start with our own family, friends, and neighbours – people just like us. It is more challenging to share God's love cross-culturally. The skill to do that comes with experience.

Jesus gives them practical instructions that are relevant to their culture. The key is that He wants them to share God's love. Freely they have received God's grace; freely they are to share it.

Jesus is also realistic. Not everyone will welcome God's good news. Don't sweat it. Keep on loving other people in the name of Jesus regardless. Don't get discouraged. As Jesus perseveres, so we are to keep on.

We are the workers in the harvest field (9:37-38). How can we be God's good news to our family and friends? Simply share God's love, mercy, and grace. Some people will respond well. Praise God for that. Others won't. Don't be discouraged. Keep on keeping on ...

*O God, be all my love,
all my hope, all my striving ...
Let my thoughts and words flow from you,
My daily life be in you,
And every breath I take be for you.
Amen.*

John Cassian, 360-435

Wednesday, February 26: Matthew 10:16-31

Q: What's the most common command in Scripture?

A: Don't be afraid (see 10:26, 28, 31).

Up to this point, Jesus has been the One saying everything, doing everything – and taking all the flak. Now Jesus is (metaphorically speaking) throwing the keys to the bus to His disciples and telling them to say what He has said, do as He has been doing ... and expect some flak along the way. How do you think the disciples felt?

In our tolerant Western culture, as we live and share our faith, we might get some funny sneers, jeers, and rude comments. But we probably never feel in real physical danger. In Jesus' day, however – like in many other countries and cultures today – following Him can be very dangerous. In many places, to follow Jesus can mean physical abuse, discrimination, imprisonment, and even death. The first disciples, like Christians in many places today, have lots to fear. Jesus came to begin and establish a new way of being God's people – not surprisingly those who were happy with the status quo didn't like it being disturbed.

No wonder Jesus says – three times – "*Don't be afraid.*"

What reasons does Jesus give not to be afraid? Not what we might expect.

- v. 26: *"Don't be afraid of those who threaten you. For the time is coming when everything that is covered will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all."* Our patience, perseverance, and faithfulness will come to light. What might look like stubbornness or obstinacy will be revealed for what it is – a resolute determination to follow God faithfully. Those who live with integrity will be vindicated. Ultimately good wins and evil is uncovered for what it is.
- V. 28: *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* We don't need to fear God (see vs. 29-31). We don't need to really fear other people, either. But we dare not underestimate the evil forces driving evil people. Ultimately, He who is in us is far more powerful than any power of evil so we can be confident of victory through the power of Jesus. We are always safe and secure in His hands.
- V. 29-31: *"What is the price of two sparrows – one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows."* Nothing is too great for God to do. And nothing is too small for Him to care about. God cares for even the smallest part of His creation.

Jesus does speak about some of the great challenges that may come along the way as we follow Him. But He also emphasizes the amazing blessings that come from loving and serving Him, too. Ultimately, we will be vindicated and welcomed, joyfully, into God's presence.

"You are worth more than a great many sparrows; so rest assured that God knows and cares about the details of your life, even as you face the temptations and dangers which so easily surround you. Followers of Jesus are bound to expect attacks at all levels. But they should also learn that the One they are serving is stronger than the strongest opponent they will ever meet" (Tom Wright). That's great news.

*Jesus, you came as one bringing peace,
and told us to greet people with a word of peace, not hostility, or judgment.
May your blessing flow through me, so that when I leave people,
they may feel approved of, contented and tranquil.
Who can tell what a day may bring forth?
Cause me, therefore, gracious God, to live every day as if it were to be my last,
for I know not but that it may be such.
Cause me to live now as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.
Amen*

Thomas à Kempis

Thursday, February 27: Matthew 10:32-42

What are the seven last words of the church?

"We've never done it that way before."

Jesus has come to inaugurate and establish a new way of being God's people. To the Jewish establishment, being a godly person meant being ethnically Jewish, following every jot and tittle of the Old Testament law, making all the right sacrifices at the Temple, saying all the rights prayers and liturgy, and doing all the right spiritual activities, from fasting to praying to even dressing the right way.

Jesus is emphasizing that being the people of God means being God's good news is a broken and hurting world: loving with compassion, caring with mercy, and welcoming without reservation. The religious-powers-that-be had never done it that way before. They weren't about to start now.

Not everyone welcomes change. Most people prefer the status quo to change. People will often push back – sometimes violently – when they feel the way-they-had-always-done-it-before threatened.

The challenge of Jesus' practical demonstration of the love of God (for lepers, demon-possessed people, the lame, the blind, the foreigners, the outcasts, and more) and His sayings is matched by the remarkable promises He makes to those who accept His call and choose to live by His ways.

- He will "own" us before His Father in heaven.
- Those who "lose" their lives will actually "find" more meaningful, purposeful life in Jesus.
- And, in a remarkable chain reaction, there is tremendous blessing for those serve others in the name of Jesus. When we give something as small as a cup of cold water in Jesus' name to someone else, it is as if we are serving Jesus Himself. We serve God Himself by loving other people.

How might Jesus be inviting us to do things differently?

Who might be the person in our lives who needs a cup of cold water? What does that look like, practically?

*O God, I am in your hands.
You know me from my mother's womb.
O Wise Creator, soothe my pain; heal my body and soul.
O Good Jesus, you went doing good and healing many.
Once your hands raised the dead to life:
restore my health to me.
Once your hands gave sight to the blind:
take me from the darkness of my fears.
Once your hands made the paralyzed walk:
let me walk again with my family and friends.
Once your hands were nailed to the cross:
strengthen me in sickness and pain.
O Holy Spirit, Giver of Life, Helper and Friend, Source of all good gifts,
bring peace and comfort to me and through me.
Amen.*

Friday, February 28: Matthew 11:1-15 (and Isaiah 35 for context)

John the Baptist expected the Messiah to come like Elijah. Elijah was a firebrand in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 11), taking on King Ahab, his evil wife Jezebel, and the prophets of the pagan god, Baal. So John's expectation was that Jesus would come with a message of fire and brimstone, take on King Herod (who had imprisoned John) and the Romans, and blast the foreign religions that were invading Israel. Jesus would violently overthrow the forces of evil, calling down fire from heaven.

Through the prophet Malachi, God had said, "*The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. On that day the arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw. They will be consumed – roots, branches, and all ... I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers*" (Malachi 4:1-5). That is what John expected from Jesus.

Jesus was not living up to John's expectations. What Jesus was doing – reaching out to the poor, healing the blind, lame, deaf, lepers, demon-possessed people – was not what John was anticipating.

Jesus' response is that this new Elijah was actually John the Baptist, himself. If you look back at who John was and how he preached (Matthew 3), he really was very Elijah-like, taking on the evil practices and rulers of his day, including King Herod. John the Baptist had done his job well. The prophet of judgment and doom had come and prepared the way. People had recognized their sinfulness. But, while John expected the Messiah would take the hellfire and brimstone message to an even higher level, Jesus was moving on.

In the Old Testament prophets there are certainly harsh words of judgment on those who are evil. But

there are also amazing promises of blessing *after* judgment. Isaiah 35 is one of several Old Testament passages that celebrate the return from exile and the restoration after punishment.³ Jesus is challenging John the Baptist, John's disciples, other Jewish leaders – and us – to not just read the judgment bits in our Bibles, but to read the blessing passages, too. It's not that Jesus is soft-peddling on sin – He isn't. But He is reminding us that with repentance and confession comes the blessing of healing and new life.

Evil people don't like a message of judgment because they think – quite rightly – that it is addressed to them. But sometimes good people don't like a message of mercy because they think – quite wrongly – that evil people are going to get away with all sorts of wickedness. This isn't what Jesus is saying. He is saying that when we confront the brokenness, evil, and sin in our lives and our world – when we bring them to God and allow Him to deal with them – we receive God's blessings in unexpected ways. He brings life.

Some Christians have presented the good news as bad news: people who sin go to hell (that was John the Baptist's message). That's true. But that's not a fair representation of *all* of Jesus' teaching and ministry. It's only part of the truth. Jesus' good news is that if you come to Him, He can deal with all the issues in your life and give you an amazing new beginning and new life. That's good news. He has more than enough authority and power to deal with anything in your life. And He has more than enough mercy and love to bless you with a new start. And everyone else. That is good news.

Jesus doesn't want simple outward compliance to laws and principles. He wants to change us from the inside out. He wants to change our hearts. Will we allow Him to really work a miracle in our lives?

*Lord, I need your special care.
Like your earthly father, Joseph, I want to do God's will,
even if I may not always understand.
Make me gentle and selfless in the care
of my family and children or of those around me;
help me guide them in the toils and troubles,
the happiness and wonders of this life.
Like my Father in heaven, make me strong
in love and forgiveness for those you entrust to my care.
No one can do these things rightly, Lord,
without your constant help and boundless mercy.
Be with me always, and may I come to you in heaven,
and all my family with me.
Amen.*

Saturday, February 29: Matthew 11:16-24

I saw a 4x4 pickup truck the other day with the back-window sticker, "I'm the one your mother warned you about!" I guess that's supposed to make the driver attractive to a potential "friend"? I'm not sure ...

Most societies have warned good people about some of those who are potential threats. Jewish culture, in Jesus' day, was no exception. They warned people about fraternizing with foreigners – Romans, Greeks, Samaritans ... anyone non-Jewish. They warned people about false prophets. They warned people about blatantly immoral people, like tax collectors. They warned people about being around lepers, demon-possessed people, ill people, and people with disabilities.

Jesus, however, chooses to spend time with many of those people Jewish mothers (and fathers) warned their kids about.

³ The blind receive sight (Isaiah 29:28, 35:5), the lame walk (Isaiah 35:6), lepers are cured (Isaiah 53:4), the deaf hear (Isaiah 29:18-19, 35:5), the dead are raised (Isaiah 26:18-19), the poor hear good news (Isaiah 61:1). Sounds exactly like what Jesus is doing!

He warns them about another kind of person. He is warning about people who had met Him, heard His message, seen His miracles, and rejected Him. He warns them about judgmental "religious" people.

Many people in Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum would have been law-abiding, outwardly very religious, Jewish folks. According to people like Pharisees they would have been in God's good books: they were Jewish and were doing all the right things. But Jesus sees deeper than genetics and superficial compliance with rules. Most of the people in these towns were doing what they were doing out of a sense of legalism and obligation. They didn't really love God. They probably didn't love their neighbours either.

They had witnessed the love and power of God firsthand, through Jesus. But they rejected Him.

Of course, they should have known better – they had the Law and the prophets. They should know the Messiah would come to bring salvation, hope, and love. The people of Tyre, Sidon, and poor old Sodom (non-Jewish cities) didn't know any better so they can hardly be blamed for their wickedness. God hadn't revealed His truth to them. But these Jewish folks had the Scriptures. They should have known better. They hadn't understood.

Jesus is warning us about people who LOOK religious. People like the teachers of the law and Pharisees do lots of religious things. They are "good" people at one level. They believe the right things. They do the right things. They are also judgmental, bitter, legalistic, joy-less people. But they don't actually know God's love in their hearts. They don't actually love their neighbour in word and deed. Their faith changes nothing for the better in their own lives or in their communities. What might this kind of religion look like today?

In contrast, Jesus is inviting us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. He is challenging us to love our neighbour as ourselves, just as He has been doing. What might this kind of faith look like today? What changes might this make in my life? In my community?

What is Jesus saying to me?

*Jesus said: "Take up your cross."
It is not something you go looking for in faraway places.
Sooner or later the Lord hands us a cross, and our job is to recognize it.
For each of us there are events that made a difference.
No two of us experience the same joyful or sorrowful mysteries.
Maybe it was a meeting with a friend, a family member, or an enemy.
Maybe it was a sickness, or a triumph.
We try to see our life through the eyes of faith,
with a confidence that God in his grace
can draw good out of the most awful and unwelcome happenings,
as well as out of the moments of joy.
It is not that we have all the answers,
but we have enough to sustain our faith and love.
Our faith is based on God's faithfulness.
Living one day at a time;
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.
Amen.*

Reinhold Niebuhr

Sunday, March 1: Matthew 11:25-30

Paul encourages us to "*speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ*" (Ephesians

4:15). Truth is important. But it must always be communicated with love. Yesterday we read Jesus' hard words to the people of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. They were law-abiding, outwardly very religious, Jewish folks. According to people like Pharisees they would have been in God's good books: they were Jewish and were doing all the right things. But they rejected Jesus' They rejected God's love, which he demonstrated through His healings, His grace, His mercy, and His compassion.

The hard truth is, these "good" religious folks didn't love God; they followed legalistic rules. They didn't love their neighbours as themselves: they isolated themselves, refusing to cross cultural barriers with mercy and love. Their religion made themselves miserable. And made their community hard and graceless.

However, Jesus' harsh words of judgment immediately turn to mercy: *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."*

Jesus may take people through some hard moments of intense self-examination, tough honesty, and the challenge of change, but He never leaves us in despair. His last words are never words of condemnation, but words of love and hope.

When two oxen are yoked together, one is the leader. The other is the follower. The leader is the stronger one. It does the majority of the work. It sets the pace. It sets the direction. The "junior partner" is learning the trade. It learns to follow. And, while it pulls its weight, ultimately the older, stronger, wiser animal is the leader. The stronger animal guides and pulls the team forward.

When Jesus invites us to come, in faith, to Him, He invites us to take on His yoke. He will be the leader; we will be the follower. He will do the majority of the work; we help out as best as we can. He is the (infinitely) older, wiser, and stronger one. He doesn't stand over us like a battle-axe of a schoolteacher or a cynical police officer, waiting for us to mess up. He walks beside us, teaching us, pulling with us.

It's not all up to me. In fact, it's not up to me at all. It's all up to Jesus. My task is to be willing to follow my Leader. Part of me would like to grumble about that: I am an intelligent, capable, competent person. But honestly, I am not nearly as intelligent, capable, or competent as Jesus. Following His lead, there will still be lots of opportunity for me to use my gifts, talents, and abilities. But when it comes to the BIG issues in life, it sure is nice to know I am yoked together with the God of the Universe. I can certainly "pull" a lot more working with Him than working on my own.

"Jesus is the head of his body, the church" Paul goes on to say. *"He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love"* (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Will I allow myself to follow Jesus? To trust Him? To love as He loves?

*Awake in the morning, and the first thing you do ...
Thank God for it –
even if you don't feel particularly happy about the day which is to come.
Come to God again with two convictions:
The one is that you are God's own,
and the other is that this day is also God's own;
it is absolutely new, absolutely fresh.
This day is blessed by God, it is God's own, and now let us go into it.
You walk in this day as God's own messenger;
whomever you meet, you meet in God's own way.
Amen*

Anthony Bloom