



**February 2022**

**Real Faith**

**Real Life**

**1 Corinthians, Part 2**

**Readings, Reflections,  
Prayers**

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## Monday, February 7: 1 Corinthians 4:6-13

Once upon a time, the "Christian Church" (or at least a version of it) was **THE** Power. Bishops, priests, and pastors were highly respected members of society; they wore fine clothes; lived in nice homes (even palaces) and were kingmakers of their day. Countries in Europe (and some might argue Canada and the United States) were "Christian countries." Some people mourn for that (highly romanticized) past.

Let's be honest about two things. (1) In practice, some "Christian" countries were not so Christian: they were intolerant, oppressive, and corrupt. (2) Neither the U.S. nor Canada has ever officially been "Christian" – both were founded as secular states, with intentional legal separation of religion and government. Several of the influential "founding fathers" of both countries were humanist agnostics, NOT Christians.

The people in Corinth think the Christian church should be **THE** power, too. In their minds, if the Roman Emperor were to come to town, the local Christian pastor should ride with Caesar in his golden chariot.

Not so fast, says Paul. Paul challenges us to see things differently. He describes a royal parade, but the pastors/members of the church are not riding with Caesar. They are the exhausted, bedraggled slaves at the tail end of the procession, shoveling up the horse manure, receiving the abuse of the crowd. In 2021 terms, they are not the premier's closest advisor; they are the janitors cleaning his office.

Paul is suggesting that we – as the people of God – ought to expect to be more manure shovelers than power players in society. We are the servants not the elite. Think about it: Jesus never stood at the right hand of Caesar (or Herod). He never legislated His Kingdom into being. Instead, He was rejected, abused, forced to carry His own cross, mocked, and crucified. Yet through His servanthood, He changed the world.

Jesus says, "*If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me*" (Luke 9:23). This is a call to humility, service, and self-sacrifice, NOT power. That's NOT how I want it to be. But this is who Jesus calls us to be. How do you feel about that?

In Hebrews 11, the author talks about some of those who kept the faith: "*Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword. Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated ...*" Led by God's Spirit, these saints marched to the beat of a different drummer. As a result, they were not super-successful, honoured, and powerful. But, through servanthood, they changed the world. The conclusion? "*They were too good for this world ...*" (Hebrews 11:38).

Being a real community of God's people means we may not be super-successful, hyper-honoured, power-players either. But when we authentically live and serve like Jesus, we change the world – one life at a time. One conversation at a time. One act of service at a time. One generous gift at a time.

*You are God and I praise you; you are the Lord and I acclaim you.  
You are the eternal Father; all creation worships you.  
To you all angels, all the powers of heaven, cherubim and seraphim sing in endless praise,  
'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory.'  
Throughout the whole world the holy church proclaims you:  
Father of majesty unbounded,  
Your true and only Son, our Saviour, worthy of all worship,  
and the Holy Spirit, our advocate and guide.  
You, Christ are the King of glory, the eternal Son of the Father.  
When you became man to set us free, you did not abhor the virgin's womb.  
You overcame the sting of death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.  
You are seated at God's right hand in glory; we believe that you will come and be our judge.  
Come, Lord, and help your people, bought with your own blood.  
Bring us with all your saints to glory everlasting. Amen.*

Te Deum, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

## Tuesday, February 8: 1 Corinthians 4:14-21

In generations past, if a man was a farmer, it was assumed his son would be a farmer, too. A son learned how to farm from watching Dad, spending time with Dad, learning at Dad's elbow. Girls learned to be women by watching Mom, spending time with Mom, and learning at Mom's elbow. It was education-by-example or, as we might call it today, mentoring or apprenticing.

Today, most of us don't follow in our parents' occupational footsteps. Many jobs have changed so much that, in lots of cases, younger people could probably teach older ones a few things (about technology, anyway).

But some things are still learned well from parent-to-child, by spending time together, and by careful observation. Many important life lessons – like how to be a “successful” human being, the keys to good relationships, the essentials of Christian faith – are not lessons kids learn well through the internet, schools, iPods/iPads/iPhones, or from their peers. These are values, principles, and skills kids learn by observing the significant adults in their lives. (By “successful” human beings, I don't mean having lots of money or things. In biblical terms, a “successful” life is one which is centered on God, in a relationship with Jesus, is lived by His principles, contributes to His Kingdom, and, through the Holy Spirit, knows God's love, hope, joy, and peace ... and lives and share God's Kingdom with people around you).

Kids still observe and learn from older people in their lives. Do you realize you're someone's “hero”? Someone looks up to you as a role model. Whether you are a teen, single, married, senior, younger, older, male, female ... someone looks up to you. Your kids, nieces, nephews, younger kids at the church or school, neighbours, grandkids, friends ... look at you and to you for guidance and wisdom. How does that make you feel? Uncomfortable? It scares me. But it's true. That challenges us to reflect, seriously, on how we live.

*“I urge you to imitate me,”* Paul says to his “children in the faith” – people who have come to know Jesus through his words and example (4:16). Paul is not perfect. But he does model a way of living that is centered on Jesus and that – even when he blows it – seeks to grow closer and closer to His Lord.

*“The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power,”* Paul concludes (4:20). He's talking to people who are **saying** all sorts of spiritual things, but, in their religious arrogance are in fact **acting** in less-than-Christian ways. As we think about our lives, it's good for us to remember that “actions do speak louder than words.” May God help us to live our faith. And when we fail (and we will.) may the Lord help us model how to confess (and enjoy being forgiven), get up again, and continue to aim to live for Jesus.

*You who called me to hope in your name, which is the first of all creation.  
Open the eyes of my heart that I may know you,  
who alone remains highest among the highest and holiest among the holy.  
Lord, I pray that you would give me a complete knowledge of Your will,  
spiritual wisdom  
and understanding.  
Lord, may the way I live always honour and please You.  
May my life produce every kind of good fruit.  
Lord, may I grow as I learn to know You better and better.  
Lord, I also pray that I may be strengthened with all Your glorious power  
so I will have all the endurance and patience I need.  
Lord, may I be filled with joy, always thanking You, my Father.  
Thank You that I share in the inheritance that belongs to Your people, who live in the light.  
Thank You that You have rescued me from the kingdom of darkness  
and transferred me into the Kingdom of Your dear Son.  
Thank You that He has purchased our freedom and forgiven our sins.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> Century) and Colossians 1:9-14

### Wednesday, February 9: 1 Corinthians 5:1-8

This story reads like a soap opera or a tabloid talk show. One of the congregation is sleeping with his stepmother, and everyone seems to be OK about it (5:1-2). It was an outrageous, incestuous sin. Even though Corinth had a reputation for sexual promiscuity (the great temple of Aphrodite had no less than a thousand temple prostitutes), the sin of incest was universally abhorred in the entire Roman world. This behaviour would not have been tolerated by non-Christians in Corinth. But the church is OK with it.

In fact, church people actually seem proud of this. Perhaps they believe that, now they are living life in the Spirit, they are free from all moral laws, including this one. Perhaps they want to be socially and culturally on the ethical "cutting edge." Perhaps they think this *avant garde* approach will attract people to Jesus? Whatever the rationale the Corinthian Christians use to excuse this sin, Paul is not amused.

We all sin. It happens. When we are aware of it, though, we confess it, repent, and move forward with the intention of trying to do better. That's the biblical process. We don't come up with excuses, let ourselves off the hook, or claim we are "free" to do whatever. Instead, we are honest with ourselves and God: *"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth; but if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness"* (1 John 1:8-9).

Sin always separates us from God. When we feel guilt or shame for things we know are wrong in our lives, we cannot have a free and open relationship with God. However, when we do deal with that guilt – when we know the freedom of God's forgiveness – we experience a peace, joy, and a renewed open relationship with God. That satisfies the deepest spiritual yearnings in our soul. Spend some time in reflection, in self-examination, in confession, and in repentance. Jesus forgives you. It is good to cleanse our souls.

*Lord you have called us to hope in your name.  
Save those of us who are in affliction,  
have mercy on the lonely,  
raise up those who are fallen,  
be present to those who are in need,  
heal the sick,  
bring back those of your people who have gone astray.  
Feed the hungry,  
redeem the captives,  
lift up those who are weak,  
comfort the faint hearted.  
You are the highest among the highest, and the holiest among the holy.  
We hope in your name.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> century)

### Thursday, February 10: Micah 1:1-2:11 (you may want to skim bits, that's OK)

1 Corinthians is about being God's people in challenging times. But the early church was not the first group of people who loved God and who struggled to live for God, were surrounded by temptation, and blew it.

Micah speaks to the people of Jerusalem, hundreds of years earlier, with the same message. God's challenge through Micah is basically that, if we are the people of God, we ought to live like it.

Micah 2:1-5 and 8-11 speak of injustices at the time – wealthy people get richer at the expense of the poor. Greed and dishonesty are rampant. Does God take these issues seriously? Absolutely. While we may struggle with some of the harsh expressions of judgment in the prophets, we also must come to terms with the issues that precipitate them. When people mistreat or take advantage of the poor, the vulnerable, the less fortunate – when people sin – God does not turn a blind eye. He takes it very seriously. *"God's judgment,"* says Alexandre Kalomiros, *"is nothing else than our coming into contact with truth and light."*

The prophets encourage us to look at ourselves. It's easy to see sin in others' lives. But when we come into God's light, what do we see? What issues in **our** lives need to be dealt with? Through God's Spirit, sin in our lives is seen for what it is – sin. God shows us our shortcomings. Our problems may not be the same as those in Jerusalem or Corinth, but are there things in our lives God needs to deal with? Of course ...

God has a special place in His heart for the poor. As a church, we are involved in several ministries to help those less fortunate – Soup Kitchen, food banks, Salvation Army Community Services. Individuals in our church work and volunteer with the Alzheimer's Society, youth shelter, crisis line, cancer clinic, school reading programmes, school councils, etc. Through our benevolent fund we help individuals and families.

Pray that we, as a church, would be people who model God's holiness. And that we are people who act with justice and make a difference, in the name of Jesus, in our City. May we, as individuals, have compassion for others, too. May we be people who care for others as compassionately as Jesus did.

*Lord of the ages, you are our beginning and our end.  
Everlasting God, we place our days within your care.  
We trust you and praise you for your faithfulness in the past,  
and for your constant care.  
We put ourselves into your keeping,  
to guard and guide us this day and every day.  
We offer our lives for your service.  
Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that, while we have life and breath,  
we may serve you with courage and hope;  
through the grace of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
May the blessing of the God of Eternity –  
the God who calls time into being and marks its passing –  
the God who enters human history in Jesus –  
the God who gives the gift of his Spirit to all, for all time –  
be upon us this day.  
May He empower us to live our time in faithfulness to the gospel, now and always.  
Amen*

Baptist Union of Great Britain

### **Friday, February 11: Micah 2:12-13, 7:14-20**

God does take sin seriously. It always needs to be acknowledged, confessed, and dealt with. When sin is not confessed, we are in trouble. We feel guilt and shame. We're separated from God and one another.

But judgment is never God's last word for His people. As we shall see in Corinth, the church – and people in the church – have serious problems. But there is always hope. God is patient. He continues to help us see our problems, teach us His truth, and help us become the people He wants us to be. That's good news. So after the harsh words of Micah 1:1-2:11, verses 2:12-13 are rays of hope and light. The book ends with a wonderful picture of God as the Good Shepherd, guiding and guarding His sheep: us (7:14-20).

Most scholars think the most likely context for these verses was the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from King Sennacherib and the Assyrian army in 701 BC (read about it in 2 Kings 19). When God's people do recognize their sin, repent, and seek to live by His ways, God blesses them.

Life goes better if we live by God's values, ethics, and commands. It's not surprising that, if we follow the wisdom of the One who created us and the world, in general, things go better than if we don't obey our Creator. We know that. But we struggle to live that out, in practice. We continue to think that we know best. Or we think God's ethics are great for everyone else, but in our case, God is making an exception. Or we think it really will be better for us to go our own way and ignore God.

When we believe our Creator knows best, listen to Him, and choose to act on it – life just does go better. That's not to say there will be no problems (there always are). But we will have better resources to deal with those challenges when we follow Jesus than when we blunder ahead on our own.

Our God is a loving Father and Saviour who pardons sins (more than that, stamps them into the ground, grinds them into the dust), forgives transgressions (more than that, drowns them in the deepest ocean), delights to show mercy, and loves to be compassionate. These are powerful metaphors to reflect on.

Lord, give us ears to hear your Word. Lord, give us the will to live it out.

*Your Glorious Name, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
is worthy of praise from every mouth,  
of confession from every tongue, of worship from every creature.  
For you have created the whole world in your grace.  
By your compassion you have saved the world.  
To your Majesty, O God,  
ten thousand times ten thousand angels bow down and adore,  
singing and praising without ceasing, and saying,  
'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your praises.  
Hosanna in the highest.'*

*May my heart and my voice worship you in Spirit and in truth today, too, O my God.  
Jesus, thank you that you do have all authority in heaven and on earth.  
Help me to be your servant and ambassador, sharing this way of life.  
May I bless those I meet by practicing all you have commanded us.  
Thank you that You are with me as I do this, right up to the end of the age.  
Amen*

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) and Matthew 28:19-20

### **Saturday, February 12: Micah 3**

Back to God's case against His people. Their leaders have failed. Their politicians are dishonest. Justice is politicized to favour the wealthy. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer. Their priests tell people what they want to hear. Religious leaders don't speak God's truths or challenge people to holiness and integrity. Cynics might say not much has changed.

In the New Testament, Paul again and again contrasts how we often live (without God) with the righteous/godly/just life we are called to live (with God). In Galatians 5, for instance, Paul reminds us that our sinful nature leads us down a self-destructive road of sin and injustice. In contrast, "*Keeping in step with the Spirit*" helps us live holy, righteous, and just lives that empower us and the people around us. "*The reason for not going out and sinning all you like is the same as the reason for not going out and putting your nose in a slicing machine: its dumb, stupid, and no fun,*" writes Robert Farrer Capon. "*Some individual sins may have pleasure still attached to them because of the residual goodness of the realities they are abusing: adultery can indeed be pleasant and tying one on can amuse. But betrayal, jealousy, love grown cold, and the gray dawn of the morning after are nobody's idea of a good time.*"

**Other** people need to hear that message. We can sure see the problems **others** have. It is easy to judge **them**. But **we** live good lives, right? Jesus, of course, warns us to be careful. We may see the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and be blind to the log sticking out of our own ([Matthew 7:1-5](#)).

Isaac the Syrian (Bishop of Nineveh, died AD 700), wrote, "*Do not judge the sinner. For we are all laden with guilt. If, for the sake of God, you are moved to oppose someone, weep over him. Why do you judge him? Hate his sins and pray for him, that you may imitate Christ who was not angry with sinners but interceded for them. Do you not see how He wept over Jerusalem? We, ourselves, are tempted by the devil in many instances, so why should we judge the man who is tempted by the same evil one who tempts us*

*also? Why, O man, do you judge the sinner? Perhaps because he is not so righteous as you? But where is **your** righteousness if you have no love? Yes, love him. Pray for him. Be as Christ to him."*

What do you need to pray about today? Who can you pray for, today?

*Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth:  
You know heartache and loss – I need you.  
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God:  
You know all about pain and suffering – I need you.  
Holy Spirit, breath of the living God:  
Fill me with your peace and presence – I need you.  
Father-Son-Spirit, you alone are my strength and shield – I need you.  
In you, and you alone I place my hope, my heart, my life.  
Amen*

### **Sunday, February 13: Psalm 84**

Life can be difficult. People can be ornery. Friends can let us down. The weather can be dreadful. The news can all be bad. Even church – the people, music, sermon, devotional(!) – can disappoint us.

This psalm reminds us that life, this side of heaven, will always be imperfect. This world is marred by sin. Bad things do happen. BUT we look forward to life with God, hereafter. This is not all there is. Thank God.

The "temple" – the church, our church – here on earth, will always be imperfect, too. After all, the church is people. People fall and fail – even people who are saved by Jesus, who love God, and who seek to be filled by His Spirit. Christians struggle with sin like everyone else. (One pundit said, "If you find the perfect church, don't join it; it won't be perfect anymore"). We do have the Spirit to help us. But none of us is perfect ... yet. There are times when we blow it. The good news is that, through Jesus, we can be forgiven. With the help of the Spirit, we work towards being better people. But it's a long, slow process ...

When you're on a long winter drive, reminding yourself of your destination (being with friends or family, being warm and cozy) is what you need to keep going. The journey of life can seem long and hard, too. We can get frustrated with our failures, pain, irritations, and aggravations. It helps to remind ourselves periodically that we are on a journey – toward eternity with the Lord. Reminding ourselves that one day, some day, we will be in God's presence may be the motivation we need to keep going, too.

We never want to be "*so heavenly minded we're no earthly good.*" At the same time, it is good to remind ourselves of the ultimate destination of our lives. This life is not all there is. There will come a time when we will be with the Lord, and our problems and imperfections will be done away with.

C.S. Lewis was fond of saying, "*This is just the land of shadows; real life hasn't begun yet.*" Spend some time with this psalm. Allow God to encourage you through it.

*We want for nothing if we journey with our God,  
his footsteps leading, his hand to steady if we should fall.  
We want for nothing if we listen to our God,  
his gentle whisper breaking through the storms of life.  
We want for nothing if we rely upon our God,  
his grace enough to bring healing into broken lives.  
We want for nothing in the service of our God,  
in blessing others, through our lives, so we are blessed.  
We want for nothing in the worship of our God,  
his Holy Spirit, the comforter, will satisfy our souls.  
Amen.*

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## Monday, February 14: Micah 4

Good news again. Even in the bleak midwinter, God never leaves us without hope. Micah 4 looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. When the Messiah comes ...

- The temple (God's presence among His people) will be central (4:1)
- God's reign will be over all nations (4:2)
- There will be peace (4:3)
- We will know security and prosperity (4:4)
- People will be devoted to God (4:5)
- Those who are now poor, ill, and outcasts will have places of honour (4:6-7)

We can look at our world and say, "OK, Jesus came over 2000 years ago – we believe He is the Messiah – where is the fulfilment? The proof? Is it real?" Of course, this prophecy is not complete **yet**, because we are waiting for Jesus' return. When He returns, this vision will finally be completely fulfilled. But consider:

- The temple represents God's actual presence on earth. Through the gift of Holy Spirit – God is present within each of us – we are all temples of God. God's temple – His presence – **IS actually here**, through His Spirit **in us**. As Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians, **we** are His temple in our world.
- In Micah's time, Israel was God's only nation – today, there are Christians in every country. At the Lausanne Conference on Evangelism in Cape Town, over 4000 leaders from 198 nations gathered. God's Kingdom **is** actually present in every nation in our generation.
- Peace? Through Jesus' gift of grace, God forgives us, restoring peace with Him. God's grace and love give us the greatest peace of all. God's people are peacemakers around the world: sharing the good news of peace with God, peace within ourselves (knowing His forgiveness and love), AND peace with one another (the gift of forgiveness). "*The glory of Christianity is to conquer by forgiveness*" (William Blake).
- In nations where God's principles undergird the legal framework (e.g. western Europe and North America), security and prosperity are as good as they have ever been in world history.
- The kingdom of God is larger than it's ever been. More people follow Jesus today than ever before in history. Especially in Asia, Africa, and South America, the church is growing very quickly.
- Again, in countries with a Christian cultural heritage (like Canada), the poor, ill, and disabled are treated better than in any other culture or at any other time. Justice is better established than in other nations. Many of the great social reformers – from William Wilberforce to Tommy Douglas – were motivated by their Christian faith.

We are FAR from perfect in all these things. But, globally, we are moving forward on each of these. The bases of Canada's justice and social welfare system are the legal, social justice, and values that were shaped by Christian leaders in Europe and, later, in North America. Our sense of justice and compassion are the direct result of the coming of the Messiah. Without Jesus, none of this would be.

Be encouraged, the Spirit of God is at work in our world and within our own lives. He is quietly, but relentlessly, changing the world – one heart at a time. Eugene Peterson reminds us, "*The gospel message says: 'You don't live in a mechanistic world ruled by necessity; you don't live in a random world ruled by chance; you live in a world ruled by the God of Exodus and Easter. He will do things in you that neither you nor your friends would have supposed possible.'*"

Pray for someone you know who needs to know Jesus. Pray that the Spirit would open that person's heart to His amazing grace and love.



*May I be no man's enemy,  
 and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and lasts forever.  
 May I never quarrel with those nearest me, and if I do, may I be reconciled quickly.  
 May I love, seek, and attain only that which is good.  
 May I wish for all people's joy and envy none.  
 May I never rejoice in the ill-fortune of one who has wronged me.  
 May I win no victory that harms either me or my opponent.  
 May I reconcile friends who are angry with one another.  
 May I, to the extent of my power, give help to all who are in need.  
 May I never fail a friend who is in danger.  
 When visiting those in grief or suffering,  
 may I be able to soften their pain, by gentle and healing words.  
 May I always keep tame that which rages within me.  
 May I never discuss who is wicked and what wicked things he has done,  
 but may I know good men and follow in their footsteps.  
 Amen.*

Eusebius, 3<sup>rd</sup> century

## **Tuesday, February 15: Micah 5**

Micah 4 talked about the coming Kingdom of God. Micah 5 talks about the coming King, the Messiah. This is the prophecy that mentions, specifically, that He will come from Bethlehem – a humble, out-of-the-way, backwater town. Reflect on the “Christmas Story” (Luke 2): isn’t it amazing how God arranges things so Jesus is born in Bethlehem, despite the fact that his family home was in Nazareth? God really is the King.

As the Good Shepherd (remember [Psalm 23](#)), the Messiah will shepherd His people – us. He will protect and guide His people – us. We are His people. He cares for us.

In the prophets, present and future events often get shuffled together. So along with the description of the coming Messiah (Jesus) is a description of the destruction of Assyria. In Micah’s time, Assyria had been Israel’s mortal enemy for 150+ years. Sorting out this conflation of events – Micah’s present-day destruction of Assyria and the future birth of the Messiah – makes the prophets challenging for us to understand.

God’s point is that, ultimately, His people overcome their enemies and obstacles not by military might but by their faith in Him. As we live in an increasingly complex world, where Christian faith exists alongside competing religions, ideologies, and political agendas, we need to remember God is God. He is the One who fights our battles. He can defend His honour and church quite well. He doesn’t need us to be His vigilantes.

We can be encouraged:

- God will protect us and He will guide us. We do not need to be afraid.
- God will win the victory over evil in the world. He is more than capable of building His Kingdom. We are not to be passive: He does want us to be His hands and feet, making a difference, moment-by-moment. But, ultimately, He takes the final responsibility. We simply do our best.
- Our calling is to be faithful, to live holy lives, and to trust Him (we will never be perfect, but we never give up. We keep on trying ...)

*"Yes," writes Paul, "Everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead.*

*"I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection.*

*But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us” (Philippians 3:8-14). What is Jesus saying to you?*

*Be kind to your little children, Lord.  
Be kind to me, Lord.  
Be a gentle teacher, patient with my weakness and stupidity.  
And give me the strength and discernment to do what you tell me,  
and so grow in your likeness.  
May I live in the peace that comes from you with all people.  
May I journey towards your city,  
sailing through the waters of sin untouched by the waves,  
carried along by the Holy Spirit.  
I give you praise and thanks, night and day  
because you have shown me that all things belong to you,  
and all blessings are gifts from you.  
To you, the essence of wisdom, the foundation of truth, the fullness of love,  
be glory forever more.  
Amen.*

Clement of Alexandria, 150-215

### **Wednesday, February 16: Micah 6**

Imagine you are in a courtroom. God is listing the shortcomings of His people – us. In Micah 6, He is making His “case” against His people. As the crown prosecutor, God asks a rhetorical question: *“What have I done to make you tired of me?”* God goes on to talk about all He has done for His people: He delivered them from Egypt; He has always cared for them. Yet the people have ignored and rejected Him. *“I, the LORD, did everything I could to teach you about my faithfulness,”* He concludes.

A nameless representative of God’s people asks the court, in response, *“What can we bring to the LORD? What kind of offerings should we give him?”* He goes through the usual Jewish answers: offerings of calves, rams, olive oil?

The person representing humanity then shows how far people have drifted from God. He asks about a pagan offering: *“Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for our sins?”* This has nothing to do with their Jewish faith – it’s straight out of the religion of their pagan neighbours. But the people seem to have forgotten WHO they are and in WHOM they believe. They have wandered so far from God and His truth they are willing to slaughter their own children to make peace with God. They are totally lost.

Micah 6:8 is one of the great statements in Scripture: *“No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good”* – if they would remember – *“and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”*

- **Do what is right** – obey God’s commands. See [John 14:15-21](#). *“In the spiritual life only one thing produces genuine joy and that is obedience”* (Richard Foster).
- **Love mercy** – be people of justice and compassion. As God has shown us His mercy, we are called to be merciful to others. We love others in the same way God first loved us ([1 John 4:7-21](#)).
- **Walk humbly with God** – God is God, we are not. So ... listen to His truth. Obey what He says. Follow His ways. Don’t think you know it all. *“Let no one imagine that he will lose anything of human dignity by this voluntary sell-out of his all to his God. He does not by this degrade himself as a person; rather he finds his right place of high honor as one made in the image of his Creator. His deep disgrace lay in his moral derangement, his unnatural usurpation of the place of God. His honor will be proved by restoring again that stolen throne. In exalting God over all, he finds his own highest honor upheld”* (A.W Tozer).

*"Christ did not appoint professors, but followers. If Christianity ... is not reduplicated in the life of the person expounding it, then he does not expound Christianity, for Christianity is a message about living and can only be expounded by being realized in our lives" (Søren Kierkegaard).*

In what area of my life do I need to follow Jesus, today?

*God of healing, God of wholeness,  
we bring our brokenness, our sinfulness, our fears and despair,  
and lay them at your feet.  
God of healing, God of wholeness,  
we hold out hearts and hands, minds and souls to feel your touch,  
and know the peace that only you can bring.  
God of healing, God of wholeness,  
this precious moment in your presence and power  
grant us faith and confidence that here broken lives are made whole.  
Amen.*

faithandworship.com

### **Thursday, February 17: 1 Corinthians 5**

In 2016, Police in Richmond, BC, stopped a driver after she nearly crashed into a police cruiser. She was texting. The driver had 12 prior convictions for distracted driving. That's just how many times she'd been caught. Imagine how often she had actually been driving while texting (or whatever) and not been caught? Many of us personally know people seriously injured or killed by distracted drivers (over one quarter of road fatalities in Canada are now caused by distracted driving). One unfortunate decision to text and drive can be disastrous. But to be a serial offender ... really? What part of stupid does this lady not get?

1 Corinthians 5 is specifically about ***deliberate, intentional, ongoing*** sin. These people know what they're doing. They know it is wrong. But they keep at it. They feel no guilt. They refuse to repent. The church actually celebrates this relationship. Like the serial distracted driver who boasts about their alleged superpower to text and drive, these folks celebrate their "freedom," while everyone else looks on in disgust.

As Paul speaks about the problem of intentional sin, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the Jewish custom of getting rid of every crumb of yeast before the Passover. The way ancient Jews normally made bread was that they saved some of the previous dough and working it into the new batch (like making sourdough bread today); the old yeast would work through the new batch of dough. At Passover, however, as the Jewish people remembered the Exodus from Egypt and how they ate unleavened (non-yeast) bread in their haste to leave Egypt, they would remove every speck of yeast from their homes. They would move pots, pans and dishes that might have had yeast in them outside the house. At Passover they would use special dishes that never, ever touched yeast. In this way they made their homes "pure" from yeast at Passover.

In the same way yeast works through dough, Paul says, sin can work through a church community. Insidiously, sin can taint the entire community. Paul's challenge is that, because Jesus saves us from slavery to sin, we need to try to keep ourselves pure. As Christians we are called to a higher standard of morality than Jews under the law, not a lower one (see Matthew 5:20).

This raises tricky issues around the issue of dealing with people who are intentionally sinning who are part of a church community. How do we deal with that?

- How do we reconcile this with passages that prohibit judging others ([Matthew 7:1-2](#), [Romans 14](#))?
- How do we deal with the truth that *"everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard"* (Romans 3:23)?
- We are interconnected in the church: how do my lifestyle/choices/values affect others (for good, as well as for bad)?

- How am I affected by the way others in the church live (for good, as well as for bad)?
- How do we "*love the sinner and hate the sin,*" in practice?
- People living in sinful ways need to hear the good news and need to be challenged to repent – that happens in the church – how will they change if they are pushed outside the church?

These are not easy questions. They require much humility and self-reflection. The demand godly wisdom.

We must do the hard work of self-examination and repentance in our own lives. We need to examine **ourselves**, confess **our** sin, and repent of **our** failings. We must ensure **our own** hearts and minds, words and actions, thoughts and motives are pure before the Lord before we dare speak into others' lives.

We need tremendous wisdom, humility, and prayer to speak into the lives of others. There may be a time and place to speak to a brother/sister-in-Christ about ongoing issues in their lives. But we do so very humbly, recognizing we are far from perfect, too. We do so in private, not public. We always speak the truth **IN LOVE**, emphasizing God's truth **and** His mercy, grace, compassion, and forgiveness.

When we are dealing with someone who is intentionally doing wrong, we make sure we are not led astray by others. As one wise pundit once said, "*Just because 5,000,000 flies hang out in the outhouse all day doesn't mean you should hang out in the outhouse all day.*" It is easy to compromise our integrity. But just because someone else is making poor ethical choices does not mean we should.

May the Lord give us the humility, honesty, and clarity of heart and mind to see the issues in our own lives. Then, may we confess, repent of, and move forward from them. May God give us the grace, mercy – and courage – to share His love, mercy – and truth in love – with those we genuinely care for. And may he help us (all) to live by the highest of standards.

What is God saying to you? What do you need to confess? What do you need to change?

*O Lord, my God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,  
Life of all, Help to those who flee to you,  
Hope of those who cry to you,  
I confess all my sin to you, secret and open.  
Through your Holy Spirit, cleanse me from my sins  
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.  
Cleanse my body and my soul,  
my heart and my conscience.  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
create within me a pure heart and a clean soul.  
With perfect love and calm hope,  
may I venture confidently and fearlessly to live this day and every day for you,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Basil, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

### **Friday, February 18: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11**

"*Go ahead – sue me.*" Ancient Rome was famous for litigation. Courts would be open into the wee hours of the morning. Litigation was part of the Roman and Corinthian lifestyle. The words '*sue them*' would spring into people's minds before the words '*talk about it*' or '*work it out.*' Sound familiar?

Roman law also allowed the Jews a lot of freedom to administer their own domestic business. So people in the church – many former Jews – were used to managing their own internal affairs. Unlike secular courts though, Jews managed their internal disputes along the lines of conflict management and mediation, not litigation or harsh punishment. "Alternative measures" – conversation, mediation, conciliation, cooperation, redemption – were the way Jewish communities traditionally functioned.

Would you prefer to be part of the Roman ("sue them!") or the Jewish ("let's work it through") culture?

Sadly, members of the Corinthian church were more concerned about their personal rights than Christian responsibilities. They would take each other to Roman courts to assert their rights (v.6). They had no qualms suing brothers/sisters and demanding justice. Jewish conversation or conciliation? No thanks.

Paul is not saying that Christians shouldn't appeal to the law when legitimate injustice needs to be addressed in civil society. He did so himself ([Acts 22:22-29](#)). But when it comes to Christians struggling with one another, there has to be a better way to work things out. Paul challenges the Christians to function at least as well as the Jewish community did – or better.

As much as possible, our disputes should be worked out by conversation, mediation, conciliation, and cooperation within the Christian community. Civil legal recourse should be last of all possible options.

This principle has a wider application. On occasion, some Christians publicly criticize, ridicule, or belittle other believers. If another Christian doesn't agree with them on some issue or point of doctrine, they attack them on social media. If another Christian blows it, they publicly shame them. We tear one another down. No wonder those outside the church shake their heads at us. Perhaps, in humility, we need to remember we're not perfect. We're not saints either. We need to recall what **we** have been saved from (vs. 9-11).

In 6:9-11, Paul goes back to some of the moral issues raised in Chapter 5. He says the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom, and he gives a list of inappropriate behaviours. Then there is a wonderful twist – *'And that is what some of you **were**'* (v. 11) – past tense. Each of them/us **had** their/our problems, too. Now, Paul implies, they/we are different. They/we are now better than that. Unfortunately, the Corinthians were in danger of not being a pure, gracious, loving community anymore. Are we?

Today, when people with "issues" come to church, they should be inspired by the purity, integrity, grace, mercy, humility, and love of the saved, forgiven believers. We are different than we used to be. God has changed us. Then, through the example of our lives, the Spirit can work to convict them. Then they, too, are forgiven and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. This **should** be how churches work.

Thankfully our church is not as problem-filled as that in Corinth. How can we be a church of grace? Of love? Of holiness? How can we connect with those who need Jesus and bring them to Him? How can our church be the kind of church Jesus wants us to be? How can **I** be the kind of person God wants **me** to be? What issues do **I** need to deal with? How can **I** live with grace? How can **I** live out God's love?

*How is it God, that you have given me this hectic busy life  
when I have so little time to enjoy your presence?  
Throughout the day people are waiting to speak with me,  
and even at meals I have to continue talking to people about their needs and problems.  
During sleep itself I am still thinking about the multitude of concerns that surround me.  
I say I do all this not for my own sake, but for yours.  
To me my present pattern of life is a torment.  
I only hope that for you it is truly a sacrifice of love.  
I know that you are constantly beside me,  
yet I am usually so busy that I ignore you.  
If you want me to remain so busy,  
please force me to think about and love you  
even in the midst of such hectic activity.  
If you do not want me so busy, please release me from it.  
Show others how they can take over my responsibilities.  
Lord, help me be the person you want me to be.  
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

## Saturday, February 19: Matthew 5:21-26 and 5:38-42

What does **Jesus** have to say about disputes between Christians? He has some pretty radical – and blunt – counsel. If at all possible, avoid serious disagreements. If that's not possible, work it through and deal with it OUTSIDE the court system. If you get caught up in the courts, no one wins. Jesus' counsel is that we need to find ways to solve our differences outside the legal system. Even if that means using professional mediators or counsellors, it's better than getting into a legal battle in the courts.

Of course, this works if both people are willing to work it through in a civil, Christian way. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. When one (or both) people will not, or cannot, work things through in this way, legal action may be necessary. It happens. But Jesus' warning is that there is often a personal cost to both parties. And to the church. There are no winners. Though it may be necessary, it will not be "good."

A challenge for us, as the church, is to recognize the pain and suffering that some people have experienced in the legal system. People who have been through a separation, divorce, custody battle, bankruptcy, lawsuit, or other legal experience are often badly hurting. How can we care for them? How can we love them and encourage them? How do we handle it if we know both individuals who may be involved in these painful circumstances? How do we be the people of God to both parties?

How do I handle **my** pain if I have been hurt through legal experiences (or other painful situations)? Jesus walks with us through the good – and the hard – times. In Psalm 23 we read, "*Even though I walk through the darkest valleys, you are with me ...*" We can bring all of our emotions, feelings, concerns, frustrations to Jesus. Let Him deal with them. Ask His Spirit to comfort and speak to us. We can find some Christian friends who can be positive encouragers and helpers.

*You are holy, Lord, the only God,  
and Your deeds are wonderful.  
You are strong.  
You are great.  
You are the Most High.  
You are Almighty.  
You, Holy Father are King of heaven and earth.  
You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.  
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good,  
Lord God, living and true.  
You are love.  
You are wisdom.  
You are humility.  
You are endurance.  
You are rest.  
You are peace.  
You are joy and gladness.  
You are justice and moderation.  
You are all our riches, and You suffice for us.  
You are beauty.  
You are gentleness.  
You are our protector.  
You are our guardian and defender.  
You are our courage.  
You are our haven and our hope.  
You are our faith, our great consolation.  
You are our eternal life, Great and Wonderful Lord,  
God Almighty, Merciful Saviour.  
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi

## Sunday, February 20: Psalm 47

The Bible repeatedly warns us about false teachers. These are teachers who simply don't tell the truth. For instance, through Micah, God speaks harshly to false teachers who are dishonest. They excuse injustice. They tell (the rich, amoral) people what they want to hear. They rationalize helping the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. They flatter politicians so they get power. This is not God's way.

Other teachers DO speak God's truth. Unlike the false teachers in Micah, Paul, a GOOD teacher, is teaching the Corinthian Christians God's truth. The members of the church in Corinth don't like what they hear.

This coming week we'll be thinking about leadership in the church – pastors, deacons/elders, teachers, etc. It is challenging being a volunteer or a staff leader these days. We want to think about how we can help, support, and encourage our leaders. How can we help them use their gifts? How can we help our leaders be the people God created them to be? How can we all work together to build His kingdom?

Today, thank God for our pastors, Church Council, and other church leaders. Pray for them. They need it.

Pray that God would:

- Give them wisdom.
- Encourage them.
- Guide and inspire them.
- Teach them.
- Help them stay close to God, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and follow Jesus.
- Give them rest.
- What else ...???

As we gather to worship, Psalm 47 reminds us to celebrate God in all His glory. Praise Him. Worship Him.

*O Lord our God, the Father of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ,  
I give you thanks, yes, more than thanks,  
for all your goodness at all times and in all places.  
O Lord, you have shielded, rescued, helped, and guided me  
all the days of my life and brought me to this hour.  
Merciful God, I pray that, in your goodness,  
I may spend this day and all the days of my life  
without sin,  
in fullness of joy, health, safety,  
holiness, and reverence of you.  
Drive me away from me, and from your church  
all envy, all fear,  
all temptation, all the influence of Satan,  
all the snares of the wicked, O Lord.  
Please, pardon whatever sin I do commit in thought, word, or deed.  
Do not leave me, O Lord, while I hope in you.  
Do not lead me not into temptation,  
but deliver me from the evil one and from his works.  
I pray that you would bless your church, O Lord,  
with what is good and right.  
Through your beloved son, Jesus, our glorious Savior,  
be glory and power to you,  
in your most holy, good, and life-giving Spirit,  
now, from this day forth, and forever more.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Mark, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century

## Monday, February 21: 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

Sometimes I add a quotation to these reflections that I agree with. Sometimes I include a quotation that I do NOT agree with, in order to make a point. In today's Scripture reading, Paul is quoting a dubious quotation popular in Corinth. Paul QUOTES one of the short, pithy, mantras **popular among the Corinthians**: "*Everything is permissible for me.*" This is what **the Corinthians** are saying. Paul is not condoning this. Paul does add, "*But not everything is beneficial*" (6:12).

In one sense, the Corinthians' comment is true. There was a group of Jewish Christians who insisted believers had to keep all 613 commandments from the Jewish Law, from circumcision to dietary restrictions. Paul emphasizes that we are "free" from those sorts of nit-picky, unattainable laws (Romans 5-7). Yes, compared to the smothering legalism of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism, everything is now permissible.

But taken out of context, the slogan invites people to do anything they feel like. Apparently, the Corinthians were doing just that. Paul explains that Christians still must follow basic moral principles. We live holy lives because many behaviours can be downright hurtful to us. They can hurt others. They can affect our ability to worship God and relate to Him. We are not bound by the law, but we do obey God out of love for Him. "*All things are in my power,*" he says, "*but I shall not be overpowered by anything.*"

The Corinthians had another saying – "*Food for the stomach and the stomach for food*" – which apparently meant they could eat whatever they wanted. Again, compared with the oppressive dietary laws of the Old Testament, this was true. But we know that eating whatever we want, whenever we want, however much we want isn't always best for our bodies, don't we? (I had too many pieces of pizza the other night ... I felt badly and slept poorly). Some things are downright bad for us. We need balance. And wisdom.

They also applied this "*everything is permissible*" adage to sexual ethics. It was OK to have any kind of sexual relationship (in a town with 1000+ prostitutes there were all sorts of possibilities). After all, our bodies are only around for a little while, so why not eat, drink, be merry, and have as much sex as possible? Both eating and sex seem to be limited to this life, so does it really matter what we do here and now?

It **DOES** matter, says Paul. We may not need food in the resurrection, but we will have resurrection bodies that will somehow reflect our earthly bodies. This is a mystery we don't fully understand.

Sexual promiscuity affects one's whole being. It's more than a physical act. It's an emotional and spiritual union with another person. So sexual promiscuity affects our relationships with other people, our spouse (if we have one now or will have in the future), our own minds and souls, and our relationship with God.

We need to get our priorities straight and recognize that our bodies are the Lord's. For the sake of our relationship with God – and our own peace and contentment – we need to treat them in holy ways.

Some religions teach that our bodies don't matter (they are just physical): what's really important is our spiritual "souls." Christianity doesn't teach that. It is significant that, in Jesus Christ, God took on a human body. Scripture speaks of our bodies as wonderful, unique precious creations of God: God loves them. One day, our bodies will be resurrected. We will be physical beings with Jesus, not disembodied souls. And when God's Holy Spirit lives within us – as He does in all of us who believe (John 14-16, 1 Corinthians 6:19) – our bodies become holy temples (In biblical terms, a "temple" is where God dwells. In Jewish thought, God's was actually (and only) present in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul is saying that now God actually dwells in each of us – we are all his holy temples – now. Isn't that incredible?).

A temple (your body) is not something you worship. You worship the **God within** the temple. But you do treat God's temple with great respect because the One who is in it – God Himself. Since God is holy, you treat His temple (your body) as holy, as well. God loves you – including your body (He created it – good). God dwells within you through His Spirit. Reflect on those amazing truths. Thank God for His presence in your life. Pray that He would help you to live in ways that honour Him today ...



*Christ has no body now, but yours.  
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which  
Christ looks compassion into the world.  
Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.  
Let nothing trouble you.  
Let nothing frighten you.  
All things are passing.  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things.  
He who possesses God lacks nothing:  
God alone suffices.  
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

## **Tuesday, February 22: 1 Corinthians 7:1-7**

Sex. We don't often talk about it in church. But our sexuality is an important part of our humanity. The believers in Corinth were struggling to understand how their sexuality and their faith in Jesus came together. Paul is going to help them (and us) think about how we can bring these two together. After all, **GOD** did create us as sexual beings, so we should expect that sex is one of His good, healthy gifts ...

Note carefully how this section begins. *"Now regarding the questions **you** asked in your letter ..."* or *"Now for the matters **you** wrote about ..."* Remember, 1 Corinthians is **a letter** Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, in response to a letter they had written to him. What we call Chapter 7, verse 1, is just a new paragraph in his letter. It is one of several times where he picks up on an idea in **their** letter and addresses **their** issues (see also 7:25, 8:1, 15:1, 16:1).

What was the matter they wrote about? The KJV says **they** said, *"It is good for a man not to touch a woman."* The original NIV says, *"It is good for a man not to marry."* The NLT goes, *"It is good to abstain from sexual relations."* Those are very different translations. Which is it? Most Bibles have footnotes at this point. Literally the Greek (original) text reads, *"It is good for a man not to touch a woman."* However. ... the Greek idiom *"to touch a woman"* means to touch a woman in a **sexual** way.

Who said, *"It is good for a man not to touch a woman in a sexual way"*? Was it Paul? Or was it the Corinthians? Some Christians assume this is **Paul** saying don't get married and/or any form of sexual contact is bad. But if we read this whole section, Paul is not anti-marriage or anti-sex-within-marriage. In fact, he calls our sexuality a gift from God (7:1). The Corinthians, however, had some warped views on marriage and sex (7:2-16). Paul is quoting from the letter **the Corinthians** wrote to him. They were the ones saying, *"It is good for a man not to touch/have sexual relations with a woman."* **The Corinthians** are promoting complete abstinence for all, including married folks.

Why? Previously we noted one group in the Corinthian church has no sexual morals. Anything goes. Paul speaks firmly to them, emphasizing that sexuality is a core part of who we are, and is only properly expressed in the context of marriage. Another group in the church teach the exact opposite – an ascetic group was teaching celibacy as essential for everyone, even those who are married. They are telling married people not to have normal sexual relations (7:2-7). As we shall see tomorrow, they are even counselling married people to separate or get divorced (7:10-11). They are telling unmarried people not to marry (8-9). They are telling Christians married to non-Christians to divorce them (12-16).

Paul takes these people on, and says, **"No!"** In 7:2-7, Paul argues sexual relations are a normal part of marriage. He never suggests that married people give up sexual relations. If, as a kind of fast, they want to do so for a short time, that's ok. But it's an exception, not an expectation.

Somehow some Christians have similarly developed the idea that sex (within marriage of course) is evil, sinful, and "dirty." I recently read a book (by a Catholic priest) about the Catholic doctrine that Mary remained a virgin throughout her entire life ... the implication being that if she ever did have sex with her lawful husband, Joseph, even after Jesus was born, she would no longer be holy and pure. Sex would have made her unholy. Therefore, she remained a virgin. Nowhere does the Bible say that. In fact, God created us as male and female and declared that good (Genesis 1:27). He established marriage and sexuality (Genesis 2:24). One entire biblical book, the Song of Solomon, celebrates married/sexual love.

May we develop a healthy, holy, godly perspective on our sexuality. May God help us to be healthy in our sexual and relational lives as in all aspects of our lives as His people ...

*O Holy Spirit of greatest power,  
come down upon us and rule over us.  
May Your light show us the way and guide our paths.  
Father, beloved by all your creation, from whom all gifts and goodness come.  
Shine your mercy into our hearts and shield us from all harm.  
Saviour Jesus, without your grace there is nothing in us that is worthy of merit.  
Through your mercy we know the Way, the Truth and the Life.  
Your wisdom is what we need most.  
Your Word is the counsel we would best obey.  
Your presence alone makes life worth living.  
When our hearts are hard,  
make them soft and open to Your Spirit.  
When our ways are wandering,  
guide and welcome us home as our loving Father.  
When we stumble and fall,  
forgive our sins through Your Son, our Saviour.  
When we hurt,  
hold us close, O loving God, one-in-three and three-in-one.  
We put our trust in you, Father, Son, and Spirit.  
Amen.*

### **Wednesday, February 23: 1 Corinthians 7:7-16**

Sex. How often do we talk about it in church? Not too often. Why not? It is very personal. We feel awkward. We may turn red. Somehow, we have this (totally nonbiblical) idea that it is "dirty."

And yet God did create us as male and female: sexual creatures. God did establish marriage as a safe relationship in which (among other things) we can express our sexuality in healthy ways. Sex and marriage were created as "good," fundamental aspects of God's pre-sin, pre-Adam-and-Eve-ruining-it-all creation.

One of the realities of Adam's and Eve's sin, however, is that all of God's creation – and especially human beings' self-understanding and self-expression – was fundamentally marred by sin. Among other things, what God had created good (like sex within marriage) became seen as evil. And what God created to be a blessing within marriage came to be abused and tainted outside of marriage ...

Paul is (at least in this point in his life) single. It appears God has called him to be single. For Paul (given his crazy life) that may be a good thing. He sees it as a gift. In 7:8-9, Paul turns from the currently married to those who are unmarried and previously married. In Corinth, the ascetic group is saying they should never marry. Paul says it's good if they stay single, but it's also good if they marry. Marriage is a good gift from God for some of us (hopefully most of us who are married see it as a gift). Singleness is also a good gift from God for some of us. Neither is better. Neither is worse. They are both good callings from God.

The Roman Catholic tradition has used this passage (all of 1 Corinthians 7) to insist on celibacy as a requirement for priests and various religious orders. But Paul doesn't teach that, does he? He says "*I wish*

*all men were like me* (we assume that means single), **but** ... " (7:7).

Those of us in the Protestant tradition can overreact in the opposite extreme: we can imply marriage is the ideal for **everyone**, so if a person is single there's something wrong. Some churches are so geared to married people that singles can feel like second class citizens. Or, uncomfortable with single people, married folks desperately try to "marry them off." Paul emphasizes that each of us has our own *"gift from God; one has this gift, another has that."* Marriage is a gift from God. Singleness is also a gift from God.

Paul's missionary conviction is that he wants everyone to know Jesus. So married or single, who can you introduce to Jesus? That's what's important. How can we live our lives so that – in our singleness or in our marriedness – people see our love for Jesus? Rather than being chronically dissatisfied with our lot in life, God wants us to bloom where we are, as we are, single/married/widowed ...

*O God, be all my love, all my hope, all my striving ...  
Let my thoughts and words flow from you.  
May my daily life be in you.  
May every breath I take be for you.  
The objective of my life, Lord, is the kingdom of God.  
And so I offer you, continuously, my heart.  
May my heart be perfect and truly pure, kept free of all temptation.  
Help me to be disciplined.  
Help me to discern truth from error.  
Help me to be humble.  
I cannot do this without your help.  
Help me, by your grace, O God.  
Amen.*

John Cassian, 360-435

#### **Thursday, February 24: Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2:23-24, Ephesians 5:21-33**

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is addressing a group of people who are saying, *"Marriage is bad. Sex, within marriage, is bad. Even if you're married, live a celibate life. Or better yet, get divorced."* That may sound strange to us. But we have inherited vestiges of their thought ...

Some Christians have viewed sex as inherently "dirty." But a biblical theology of human sexuality recognizes that from the very beginning God created us as sexual beings. Our sexuality is part of how we were created – and created "good" – by God. It is a gift from God. Our sexuality is not some evil thing that came as a result of Adam and Eve's sin. As part of God's perfect creation, sex was created to be expressed as a good, beautiful part of the marriage relationship between a man and a woman.

Of course, like all good things God created, sin has affected our sexuality. We struggle to express it in healthy, God-honouring ways. Single and married people wrestle with lust, guilt, faithfulness, and other difficult emotions. We battle with the truth that our sexuality can only be expressed, in a healthy way, in marriage. We may make mistakes. We may reject God's principles. But these struggles do not undermine the biblical truth that God created us as sexual beings – and that sex, within marriage, is good.

For many of us, God has called us to be married. That is a good gift from God, too – but it is not always paradise. Richard England writes, *"Our most intimate relationships can be the most rewarding, but also the most difficult. Negotiating intimacy, security and significance in close relationships can be extraordinarily painful. Few of us do so without receiving wounds in the process."* We struggle to live up to the high ideals of mutual, sacrificial love which Paul calls us to in [Ephesians 5:21-33](#).

Paul also strongly affirms that singleness is God's good gift to many people, too. Marriage (and sex) are not the be all and end all. They are not the ideal for everyone. In our hyper-sexualized culture, we can get the impression that if we are not in a sexual relationship (and, thus, in a Christian context, married) we are

impoverished people. But Paul is quite clear that God can give us a gift of being single, too. It's all good.

Life is complicated. That is reality. And living with our sexuality can be complicated. Reading these passages reminds me of the pain many people carry from these close relationships. Today, God wants to minister to you if you carry such pain. What does he say? In the novel, *The Shack*, by William Young, God says: *'I especially love **you**.'*

- In the midst of relational pain: *'I especially love you.'*
- Where frustrations and longings drag you down: *'I especially love you.'*
- When you feel a failure, alone and unloved: *'I especially love you.'*
- In all things: *'I especially love you.'*

Do you need to hear that today? God says to you, 'I especially love you.'

*O God of infinite mercy and boundless majesty,  
whom no distance from nor length of time can part from those for whom you care;  
I trust in you –  
be with me everywhere,  
and through all the ways in which I am to go.  
May you be my constant guide and my companion.  
May no adversity harm me.  
May no overwhelming difficulty oppose me.  
May all situations in my life turn out to be blessed by your Spirit.  
I pray that I might gratefully receive whatever I truly need.  
And I pray that, whoever I need to be,  
I may be shaped by your guiding hand.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Gelasian Sacramentary, 5<sup>th</sup> Century

### **Friday, February 25: 1 Corinthians 7:17-31**

The movie *Cool Runnings* is based on the unlikely story of the Jamaican bobsled team that competed in the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. It's the story of four frustrated Jamaican track stars who fail to qualify for the 100-metre dash in the summer Olympics because they fell in the qualifying heat. So, wanting to compete in the Olympics – any Olympics – they take up bobsledding. Their coach is Irving Blitzer, an American living in Jamaica, a former two-time gold medalist for the United States. But in 1968, after one race, judges found extra weights in Blitzer's sled; his team was disqualified. His Olympic medals were stripped from him. Blitzer was expelled from the bobsledding world in disgrace.

On the evening before their final run in Calgary, Darice Bannick, captain of the Jamaican bobsled team asks Blitzer about his past, *"Why did you do it?"* Why did Blitzer cheat back in 1968?

After a long pause, Blitzer answers, *"It's quite simple really. I had to win. You see, I'd made winning my whole life. And when you make winning your whole life, you have to keep on winning, no matter what. Do you understand that?"*

*"No, I don't understand, Coach,"* Bannick responds. *"You had two gold medals. You had it all ..."*

*"Darice,"* Blitzer concludes, *"A gold medal is a wonderful thing. But if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it."*

We may look at life and think, *"If only ..."* or *"When this happens ..."* or *"Once I get ..."* Paul reminds us that, whatever that thing we're hoping for might be (a degree, spouse, job, retirement, vacation, income level, recognition, or gold medal): *"if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it."*

The Lord cares about who we are, right now. He cares about how we live, right now. In His economy, it is less important what we have, where we live, and what we've accomplished than **who we are**. What our relationship with Him is. What motivates us. How we live where we're at: *"Each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them."*

*"We never keep to the present,"* writes Blaise Pascal. *"We recall the past; we anticipate the future as if we found it too slow in coming and were trying to hurry it up, or we recall the past as if to stay it's too rapid flight. We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; so vain that we dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only one that is."*

*"The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us, and if we find it enjoyable, we are sorry to see it slip away. We try to give it the support of the future and think how we are going to arrange things over which we have no control for a time we can never be sure of reaching."*

*"Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus, we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so."*

God may well move us to new places, relationships, jobs, opportunities – that is all good. But He is more concerned that, wherever we are, right now, we love Him with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength and that we love our neighbour as ourselves. Live today for God ... as if this were the only day you had.

*Almighty God, before whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden ...  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.  
May we love you, perfectly.  
Help us glorify your Name, worthily.  
Bless us with gifts of forgiveness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.  
And help us to forgive others as completely as you forgive us,  
that they may be blessed,  
and your peace may fill our lives.  
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary, 6<sup>th</sup> Century

### **Saturday, February 26: 1 Corinthians 7:25-40**

Imagine if someone were to pull a couple of phrases or sentences willy nilly from an email or letter you wrote recently? **Out of context**, someone could twist your words to say things you didn't intend to say. Or they could make you look very foolish. **In context**, however, those passages make perfect sense. When we read a Scripture passage, especially a portion of a letter, **context is important**.

As we have seen, Corinth was what Tom Wright describes as *"a moral cesspool of a place in which to live."* People had come into the church from different backgrounds. Some, possibly Jewish-background folks, taught that marriage was bad: sex – even within marriage – was evil. Others, possibly from Greek or Roman backgrounds, thought "anything goes." They came out of a world of religious prostitutes (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). Now they were even more "free" in Christ. No wonder the church had problems.

This was a difficult time to be a Christian. In Corinth, the Jewish establishment were out to get them ([Acts 18:12-17](#)). The Roman authorities at the time officially tolerated Christianity (the emperor was Claudius, predecessor of the infamous Nero), but, in practice, brutally persecuted both Jews and Christians. So Paul's advice about *"remain as you are in this present crisis"* (7:26) makes some contextual sense.

Many people (particularly those emphasizing celibacy) were sure that Jesus was going to return any day. The believed end times prophecies were about to be fulfilled (this helps explain their lack of interest in marriage, having children, etc.). Paul seems to think Jesus' return is imminent in this passage, too. Throughout Paul's writings, we get a sense he believes Jesus could return within his lifetime. It has been almost 2000 years and Jesus still has not returned. He may return in our lifetimes. He may not return for centuries. We don't know. How do we live in light of this? Do we live assuming He could return – today – and put our lives on hold? Or do we live assuming He may not return in our lifetimes (get an education, career, marry [or not], have kids, etc.)?

Again, Paul emphasizes marriage – for those who are called to it – is great. And singleness – for those who are called to it – is great. The key to keep in mind is: *"Each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them"* (1 Corinthians 7:17).

How we live – right here, right now – is Paul's primary concern. We get on with life – determined to live the full life for which God has created us (John 10:10). We get on with life living fully for Jesus, today. Yes, we keep in mind that Jesus could return any time. But in the meantime, we live every moment of every day with Jesus. We live in relationship with other people, modelling Jesus' love. We live with holiness and justice. How is God speaking to you today? How can you live – fully – for God, right now?

*Lord, may I understand the incredible greatness  
of Your power for us who believe you.  
This is the same mighty power that raised Christ  
from the dead and seated him in the place of honor  
at your right hand in the heavenly realms.  
Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else –  
not only in this world but also in the world to come.  
God, you have put all things under the authority of Christ  
and have made him head over all things for the benefit of the church:  
Lord, may I understand the incredible greatness of Your power  
for us who believe you.  
Amen*

Ephesians 1:18-23

### Sunday, February 27: Psalm 139

You are God's wonderful creation – soul, spirit, mind, and body. Psalm 139 reminds us of this.

Reflecting on this psalm in relation to 1 Corinthians 6, remember that:

- **Our bodies are good.** Most of us probably have something we don't like about our bodies – God has nothing at all He doesn't like about your body. Before you were ever born, He created you. You – even your body – is His good creation.
- **Our bodies are meant to be enjoyed.** God gives us the ability to enjoy eating, hugging, wearing nice clothes, smelling nice, feeling the warmth of the sun, splashing under a hot shower, listening to music, running, holding hands, etc. God could have made us in such a way that those sorts of things mean nothing to us. But He didn't. He wants us to enjoy our bodies.
- **Our bodies are where God dwells.** Some people may say we can do what we like with our bodies because we own them. They're ours. If we feel like abusing them by overeating, smoking, using drugs, etc., that's our business. If we want to be sexually promiscuous, that's up to us. But Christians believe something different. Our bodies are God's temple. Even though God has given us the ability to enjoy our bodies in all sorts of wonderful ways, He also gives us warnings that some things are not in our best interests. They may "feel" good in the short term (like that white chocolate bunny or that secret liaison), but indulgence has long-term consequences. Wherever we

are, whatever we do, wherever we go, God is there, within us (Psalm 139:7-12). We are His temples. We should treat our bodies accordingly.

- **Our bodies should be treated with care.** God wants us to be in control of our bodies, not be controlled by them. So ... we ought to be careful about what we eat (long before **we** knew the dangers of cholesterol and trans fats, **God** knew). So ... we ought to be careful about our sexual relationships. Our sexuality is to be expressed in marriage. What else?

Psalm 139 reminds us we are God's precious creations. He is within us – always, everywhere. Do you treat your body like God's temple – in terms of what you eat, how you live, what you watch? *"You are not your own,"* Paul reminds us, *"You were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your body"* (6:19-20).

*Jesus said, "I am the way he and the truth and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me."  
Jesus, you are the way; I trust in you.  
Jesus, you are the truth; I trust in you.  
Jesus, you are the life; I trust in you.  
Come quickly to help me, O Lord God of my salvation,  
for the battle is great and the adversaries are powerful.  
The enemy is hostile,  
the invisible foe fighting through visible forms.  
Come quickly, therefore, to help me.  
Assist me through your holy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
through whom you have redeemed us all,  
through whom be glory and power to you forever and ever.  
Amen.*

Origen of Alexandria, 185-254

## Monday, February 28: 1 John 1

There's now an "App" for Roman Catholics to confess their sins through their mobile device. *"The App leads you through an 'Examination of Conscience' to help you figure out what your real sins are – and not just by retreading your run of the mill 10 Commandments. The sinful suggestions the app offers are inventive and even age appropriate."*

*"In all seriousness,"* Father Edward Beck, a Catholic priest, says, *"I think this app may be a boon for the sacrament. While confession (or the Sacrament of Reconciliation as we professionals are wont to call it) may be on the decline, I can attest that it remains a powerful venue for grace and healing. Some of my most poignant and transformative moments as a priest have occurred in a confessional, on both sides of the screen. I'm all for whatever makes it easier for others to take that cleansing plunge."*

The truth is that we all do make mistakes – especially when it comes to relationships. We all stumble, fall, and fail. We all say and do things we regret afterwards. John is very honest – none of us is perfect. And if we think we are, we're sadly deceived. Thinking we're perfect is a clear indication we are not yet perfect. Confession and repentance are powerful tools for grace and healing for all of us. We all need that cleansing of heart, soul, and mind that only comes through honest confession.

We don't have to confess our sins to a priest. We can confess them directly to God. I encourage you to do that – regularly. It's not some legalistic ritual. It is a way to honestly deal with issues from the past, and, once and for all, put them behind us. We can move forward. With a new start. Confession and repentance are good for us: they contribute to our spiritual, mental, relational, and physical well-being.

Guilt, pain, anger, resentment – lots of dirt and pain from the past – can pile up like a heavy load on our backs that drag us down. Confessing our sins and failures, our deliberate disobedience, and casual mistakes to God, allows us to let go of all that baggage ... and move on. We're all-around healthier people for it.

Spend a few minutes with God. What do you need to confess to Him? Do it.

Enjoy His forgiveness and the freedom that comes from starting again ...

*O eternal God, King of all creation,  
who has brought me to this hour,  
forgive the sins which I've committed this day  
in thought, word, and deed.  
Cleanse, O Lord, my humble soul  
from every stain of flesh and spirit.  
Help me, O Lord, to pass through the sleep of this night in peace.  
Help me to rise from my lowly bed  
and to please your holy name, all the days of my life.  
Help me to overcome the enemies that contend against me  
both bodily and spiritually.  
Deliver me, O Lord, from the vain thoughts that stain me,  
and from all the temptations and evil desires that assail me.  
For yours is the kingdom and the power, and the glory,  
of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
now and forever and unto the ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Macarius of Egypt, 300-390

## **Tuesday, March 1: 1 John 2:1-11**

Twice in the past two days people have said or done things that were rather odd. One person, out of the blue, snapped at me before a community meeting. Another person cut in front of me in the line at Tim Horton's. Whatever. Neither incident bothered me – much. You just have to let such things go.

What was surprising is that, in both cases, the individuals came up to me afterwards. The person in the committee meeting (whom I know only a little bit), apologized – he'd just been in a car accident, is in a lot of pain, and is having a hard time dealing with it; the slightest thing makes him snap. The fellow at Tim Horton's also came up to apologize – he thought they had directed him to my till to collect his order. Two genuine apologies in two days. Wow. Maybe we are becoming a more civil society.

When it comes to relationships, we all make mistakes. We all stumble, fall, and fail. We all say and do things we regret afterwards. It is good for us to apologize and to ask for forgiveness from other people, too.

It takes a **big** person to be willing to say to someone else, "*I'm sorry ... please forgive me.*" Try it. You'll appreciate the freedom that comes from that.

Isn't it wonderful when someone apologizes to you?

But even if the person who hurt you doesn't apologize, let it go. Our challenge is to model the love and grace of God: To love unconditionally. To forgive. To forget. It's an unearned gift of grace for the other person. It's a blessing. And holding on to resentment and hurt doesn't inflict any punishment on the person who hurt you ... it only hurts you. Not forgiving someone else only makes you miserable. You get the ulcer; you grind your teeth; you're the one who loses sleep. The other person goes on with life as normal, oblivious to your injury.

John continues his reflection on God's love ... and ours. What is God saying to you through these verses?



*May God the Father,  
the eternal High Priest Jesus Christ,  
and the Holy Spirit,  
build us up in faith and truth and love.  
May God, our Saviour, grant us a place among the saints  
with all those who believe on our Lord Jesus Christ.  
We pray for all saints (those who believe in Jesus) around the world.  
We pray for kings and rulers (premiers and prime ministers).  
We pray for the enemies of the cross of Christ.  
And for ourselves we pray that our fruit may abound  
and we be made perfect in Christ Jesus, our Lord.  
Amen.*

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna 69-155 (martyred for his faith)

### **Ash Wednesday, March 2: 1 Corinthians 8 (Lent begins today)**

Paul is dealing with another issue the Corinthians had asked about in the letter they had sent Paul. The issue was this: part of the everyday social life in a Greek city, like Corinth, was going to meals in the various pagan temples – they were the Rotary Clubs, Arts organizations, community associations, restaurants of the day. Could Christians go or not? To not go would be like not going to weddings, funerals, or social outings today (in non-Covid times). That would be odd. And how do we reach people with the good news of Jesus if we completely withdraw from society?

A further issue was this: when a person made an offering at a pagan temple, their offering (say, a lamb, goat, or even cow) would be divided into three parts: one part would be burnt as an offering to the god; one part would be given back to the offerer; and one part would go to the priest. If the priest did not need the meat for his personal use, it would be sold in the marketplace, with the money going to maintain the temple. What if a Christian were to buy *that* piece of meat in the market? They would not know it had been offered to a pagan god – what happens if they eat it? Has it been tainted? Would it be harmful?

Paul agrees that idols are nothing. And therefore, food offered to idols is just fine. But out of consideration for others – those new to the faith, for instance – if we know it has been offered to an idol, we may not want to eat it. Doing so might be offensive to our weaker cousin in the faith.

This is one of those issues that may seem irrelevant to us and is hard to correlate with contemporary society. What may be more helpful is to think about the attitudes Paul encourages us to cultivate:

- **Stronger believers:** we know we are “free” from many picayune rules and regulations, BUT don’t get “puffed up” with our knowledge/maturity and look down on those who still struggle with things we’ve gotten over. Others aren’t there yet. So we don’t flaunt our freedom in such a way that newer believers stumble. We are to act in love – looking out for what is best for other people – at all times. What are some situations/issues today about which those of us who are stronger in our faith know we are free but others don’t? Can flaunting our freedom cause others to stumble? How?
- **Weaker believers:** keep working through what it means to be “free” in Christ. We need to take time and pray. We must be cautious not to rush to judge others who see things differently, forcing them to meet our criteria. We need to accept that others may come to different conclusions than we do on some issues. And we need to act in love, too, looking out for what is best for other people. What are some areas in which I struggle to understand why other Christians see things differently than I do – in which I need to be graceful to others? How can I be less judgmental?
- **Leaders/teachers** (including pastors): We need to help all believers search the Scriptures to work through what is right, to help people cultivate a “Christian mind” so we can thoughtfully and prayerfully deal with new challenges. We need to help people respect one another: we can have

unity in Jesus, even with a diversity of opinions on many different issues. We need to help discern wisdom in all circumstances. We need to help us all speak truth, in love.

"*Knowledge puffs up while love builds up ...*" I can **know** something (that's great.) ... but what is more important is that I **live** something ... the love of God. How can I "*live the love*" – of God – today?

*Your light is the only light I need as I travel through life's mystery.*

*Lead me, Lord Jesus.*

*Your word is the only voice I need to hear, that still small voice  
that leads me to the place where I should be.*

*Teach me, Lord Jesus.*

*Your presence is the only company I need as I walk this narrow road.*

*Guide me, Lord Jesus.*

*Your fellowship is the only warmth I crave to help me on my way.*

*Be with me, Lord Jesus.*

*Your call to love others is the purpose I need to live my life.*

*Inspire me, Lord Jesus.*

*Amen.*

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### Thursday, March 3: Ephesians 2:1-10

I'm a "good" person. I don't sin (much). Therefore, I'm saved by God, right? How might Paul respond?

We are actually saved by our faith in Jesus – NOT by our good works or by following rules (like what we eat or don't eat, drink or don't drink, etc.). Every other religion (and some variants of Christianity) emphasizes that we earn our way into God's favour (or to a better incarnation next time round) by what **we** do. Other religions teach that **we** earn our salvation. Only Jesus teaches that salvation is **God's** free gift to us. We don't deserve it. We can never be good enough to earn it. In His love, He just gives it.

However, Christian freedom does not mean "anything goes."

I read a story of a psychiatric patient who had destroyed his life exercising his "freedom." In his freedom, he chose to do drugs, abuse alcohol, get involved in several relationships that were destructive both to him and to other people. A counsellor helped him work through some of these issues. His big breakthrough came when he said to his counsellor, "*You mean I don't have to do what I want to do?*"

We can think "freedom" means I can – I even must – do whatever I want to do. Freedom means not only listening to my every desire, but acting on each impulse, too. But my wants may be self-destructive. Robert Farrer Capon writes, "*The reason for not going out and sinning all you like is the same as the reason for not going out and putting your nose in a slicing machine: it's dumb, stupid, and no fun. Some individual sins may have pleasure still attached to them because of the residual goodness of the realities they are abusing: adultery can indeed be pleasant and tying one on can amuse. But betrayal, jealousy, love grown cold, and the gray dawn of the morning after are nobody's idea of a good time.*"

True freedom – freedom in Christ – recognizes that what **I want** may not be the best thing for me – or for others. So, in my freedom, I **choose** to follow God's commands, to live with the love of Jesus, to listen to the Holy Spirit, and to love my neighbour as myself.

Christian freedom means I **choose** to do what is best for me and for others ... by opting to live by God's way, His will, and His wisdom. In complete freedom, I **choose** to be a servant of Jesus. I do "good works" – not because I have to, but because, in freedom, I **choose** to. My good works are my loving response to the grace and love God has already shown me, through Jesus.

- What does it mean to you that you God saved you by his grace when you believed? It is God's gift.

- What does it mean to you that you are God's masterpiece? He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. How then should we live?

*My eternal Savior, you alone are Almighty.  
 You, Lord, are merciful, compassionate,  
 long-suffering, and rich in mercy.  
 To you every heart is opened.  
 To you every secret thought is revealed.  
 My soul cries out to you.  
 My hope rests confidently in you.  
 Yet you have also opened to me, and to all, the gate of mercy,  
 and made clear that, just as the possession of riches is not everlasting  
 and just as beauty will not last;  
 my own strength and power are likewise easily gone.  
 Only the fruit of true faith will last.  
 The only thing that will last and bring us into your Presence  
 is your Spirit and your strength.  
 Lord, strengthen my faith.  
 This world is a battlefield where my faith is stretched and pushed to the limit.  
 Lord, hear my prayers as I battle on.  
 You know, too, the prayers I have not spoken,  
 for your Spirit reaches even into my heart,  
 and your all-seeing gaze searches my thoughts, Lord.  
 Lord, have mercy on me.  
 Amen.*

Apostolic Constitutions, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

#### **Friday, March 4: Colossians 2:6-23**

Last month we read Paul's letter to the Galatians – some teachers were insisting that to be true Christians they had to follow all the Jewish laws and legalistic regulations. The church in Colossae, just down the road from Galatia, was struggling with some of the same issues.

What does Paul have to say about such things?

We can celebrate that, *"we were dead in our sins .... but God made us alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross"* (2:13-14).

So how do we live? Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translates 2:6-7: *"My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now live him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well-constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it. And let your living spill over into thanksgiving."*

*School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it. Now **do** what you've been taught."* Sometimes we need this kind of practical "kick in the pants." "Most of "know" a lot more about Jesus and how we ought to live as His followers of Jesus than we actually "do" by putting it into practice.

Billy Graham, speaking to people who already had faith in Jesus, said, *"God's business now is to mold you into the image of Christ so that you will love like He loves, have peace like He has, joy like He has, gentleness like He has."* God wants us to LIVE out our faith through our daily lives.

- In what area of my life do I know what I should do, but I just don't do it?
- Lord help me to be a "do-er" of the word.

*Lord, thank you that I can bring all my concerns into your presence ...  
 We can never match your perfection, Lord.  
 Try as we might, we stumble and fall,  
 grasping for that which is unobtainable.  
 We are nothing if not consistent in our falling from your grace.  
 You are perfect love and we most certainly are not.  
 Perfect love casts out fear and we are fearful -  
 fearful of the unknown, fearful of failure.  
 Yet you say, "Son, I never ask for the impossible.  
 I never set a goal that cannot be reached,  
 a mountain that cannot be climbed  
 even by those of a nervous disposition."  
 You say, "All I ask is that you come to me as you are at this moment in time  
 and that you accept me as I AM."  
 You add, "There is no part of you that cannot be made clean, renewed, restored.  
 Don't stumble. Hold out your hand instead.  
 That's not too much to ask, is it?"  
 Lord, thank you that I can bring all my concerns into your presence ...  
 Amen.*

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### **Saturday, March 5: Colossians 3:1-17**

"School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it. Now **do** what you've been taught." Great advice, but practically, what does that look like? Paul fills us in ...

He has some very practical advice: *"Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, worshiping the things of this world ... Get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other ... Clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful."*

WHY we do this is also important: *"Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God ..."* We don't live for Jesus to earn our salvation. God's love and mercy are His gift to us. We do choose to live faithfully as our response to God's amazing grace. We desire to honour Him in our lives.

Important, too, is the underlying conviction that we, who follow Jesus, are new people: *"Put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you ... Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us."* You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. Christ lives in you. The Holy Spirit is within you. How does that shape how you think? How you live?

Therefore, *"Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father."* What is Jesus saying to me?

*"Becoming a Christian is the work of a moment; being a Christian is the work of a lifetime,"* says Billy Graham. Living it out is challenging. Lord, help me live as a representative of Jesus, today.

*Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings:  
 you have power over life and death.  
 You know even that which is not clear, but hard to understand.  
 Even what I think and feel is not hidden from you.  
 Therefore, cleanse me from my hidden sins,  
 for you have seen the wrong I have done.  
 Keep me in the fellowship of brothers and sisters  
 Who can encourage me and help me walk with you ...  
 And whom I can encourage to walk with you.  
 Give me people to care for.  
 Give me people to forgive.  
 Give me people to love.  
 So that I may be able to put feet to my faith,  
 and hands to the hope that is within me.  
 May my faith not just be words,  
 but words embodied in deeds of love and mercy,  
 In the Name of Jesus, my Lord.  
 You, Lord, my Creator, know how feeble I am.  
 In my weakness, strengthen me.  
 When I suffer, uphold me.  
 And I will glorify you, my Lord and my God.  
 Amen.*

Based on Ephraem of Syria, 306-373

### **Sunday, March 6: Psalm 119:97-112**

When it's pitch black, even the smallest light is very welcome. Light helps us see rocks we could stub our toes on and roots we could trip over. Light helps us find our way to the place we want to go. If we're stressed or worried, light gives us comfort, hope, and joy. Light leads us home.

In a world where there is much darkness – physically, morally, and spiritually – God's Word is a light to our path. God's Word helps us see the pitfalls. Through reading Scripture, we recognize good and bad, right and wrong, truth and error. The Bible helps us find our way as we seek to follow Jesus, showing His truth and His path. And, if we are stressed or worried, God's Word brings us comfort, hope, and joy. Jesus, God's Light, the Light of the world, leads us home.

Theologian, D. A. Carson challenges us, *"People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not naturally gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. Instead*

- *We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance.*
- *We drift toward disobedience and call it freedom.*
- *We drift toward superstition and call it faith.*
- *We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation.*
- *We slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism.*
- *We slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated."*

OUCH. Do you agree? Do you notice any of these trends in your life?

Psalm 119 reminds me to keep walking in the light. To keep working on the disciplines that build a life that is truly free – lived in the light of God's wisdom, grace, and love.

- What phrases or ideas from Psalm 119 speak to you, today?
- How can you, practically, put some of these ideas into practice?

*Who do we follow ... a teacher?  
Jesus, You were a good teacher,  
full of wisdom, a moral compass, guidance for the journey.  
Who do we follow ... a prophet?  
Jesus, You were indeed a prophet,  
bringing God's word of love, justice, and freedom for the journey.  
Who do we follow ... a friend?  
Jesus, You were certainly friend to outcast and sinner,  
feeding the weak, lightening the load for the journey.  
Who do we follow ...?  
All of these.  
None of these.  
For as this world's Saviour, Jesus, you are all of these and so much more,  
As you take the very least of us and make the very most of us.  
Who do we follow?  
We follow You, Jesus, our Saviour.  
Amen*

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