

Sermon Journal



May 20–June 30



July 1–7



July 8–August 4



August 5–September 8

Asbury
United Methodist Church

Ekklesia

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Asbury's Vision Statement:

Developing all generations for significant lives in Christ.

This defines our specific and unique calling.

Asbury's Marks:

Worship and obey Christ

Learn and live out Scripture

Influence and invite others to follow Christ

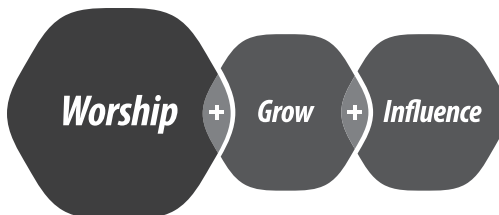
Steward time, skills and resources

United with the Body of Christ

These are outward signs of spiritual growth for a Christ-follower at Asbury.

Asbury's Map

Worship +2. This is what we want people to do to connect at Asbury.



Prayer and Priority List

- Every Sunday, come to worship, grow and influence.
- Every Sunday, communion and prayer are available at 9:00 am in Mason Chapel.
- Every Monday, Celebrate Recovery, Celebration Station and the Landing meet.

May

- Sun, 5.24 "Ekklesia" sermon series begins
Pentecost Sunday
- Mon, 5.25 Memorial Day, Asbury closed (Celebrate Recovery will meet)

June

- Thurs, 6.4–8 Disciple camp (incoming 7–9th graders)
- Sun, 6.7 Communion in all services
- Tue, 6.9–12 "Diggin' It" Vacation Bible School and prayer watch
- Sat, 6.13 2nd Saturday, serving the community 8:15 am–noonish
- Sun, 6.21 Father's Day
Joining Asbury luncheon, 12:15–2:00 pm, CLC
New member Sunday
- Sun, 6.28 Patriotic concert

July

- Sun, 7.5 "In God We Trust" sermon
Communion in all services
- Thurs, 7.9–13 Dayspring camp (incoming 10th–graduating seniors)
- Sat, 7.11 2nd Saturday, serving the community 8:15 am–noonish
- Sun, 7.12 "Hidden" sermon series begins

August

- Sun, 8.2 Communion in all services
- Sat, 8.8 2nd Saturday, serving the community 8:15 am–noonish
- Sun, 8.9 "Wrestling with God" sermon series begins
Joining Asbury luncheon, 12:15–2:00 pm, CLC
New member Sunday

September

- Sun, 9.6 Communion in all services
- Mon, 9.7 Labor Day, Asbury closed (Celebrate Recovery will meet)
- Sun, 9.13 Day of Service (replaces 2nd Saturday this month)

“The church” can be perceived as a building (at 6767 S. Mingo), a destination (“I go to Asbury”) or a denomination (The United Methodist Church), but the original idea in the book of Acts shows the church to be an imperfect group of people living-out being disciples of Jesus Christ.

We tend to idealize Jesus’ earliest followers. This is a false narrative. Certainly, Acts described incredible success. Miracles and missions were almost the norm after the church started. The church was accused of “turning the world upside down.” However, the church had enormous problems. It was flushed out of its nesting place in Jerusalem after the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Others were beaten and imprisoned. James was beheaded. Saul, before he became the Christian Paul, was ravaging the church. Yet, the problems weren’t just external. Two believers, Ananias and Sapphira, lied about their generosity and paid dearly for their deceit. Injustice complaints were made about the daily distribution of food. They argued about whether a Gentile had to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. They had doctrinal quarrels. They disagreed upon personalities (i.e. Paul refused to take John Mark on missionary journey #2 after the young man had quit on the first missionary trip; Barnabas insisted on him going). The birth of the church resulted in a beautiful “baby,” but it was truly laborious. It didn’t come easy. The New Testament letters anguish with distorted beliefs, self-centered attitudes and sinful behavior.

While not one of the original twelve disciples, Paul became a dominant figure in Christian history. History and biography are fascinating. Paul is a remarkable study. We will look at him in this sermon series.

The “church” literally means “the called out ones.” We will look at who they were called out to be and what they were commissioned to do. Though the times are very different today than 2,000 years ago, our mission hasn’t changed at all. We’re going to be looking at the book of Acts with an eye for application.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a prominent horizontal stroke above the 'T'.

Dr. Tom Harrison, *Senior Pastor*

How to Use the Journal

Congratulations on your decision to engage the Word of God on a daily basis! You have chosen the best approach to spiritual growth available.

Pastor Tom developed the journal several years ago to offer a structured daily reading plan because he wants people learning how to feed themselves spiritually. He places tremendous value on personal study and exposure to the whole Bible. There are many reading plans available, but he thought it best to provide one connected to the sermon series.

Journaling is typically a personal or “inward” discipline. How you relate to the Lord depends largely on your personality and the nature of your relationship. Some may prefer a more academic approach of word-study and cross-references while others may carry on intimate dialogues with Jesus using the Scripture as a springboard for conversation. However you approach journaling is OK.

While journaling is an inward discipline, the journal itself can be used as a guide for group discussion or family devotionals. Think of it as a tool for spiritual growth. Asbury puts time and expense into creating these because it is one of the best ways we can help develop all generations for significant lives in Christ.

To begin, you will need a Bible you can understand; the New International Version is a safe bet and the version Pastor Tom and Pastor Todd use for preaching. The New Living Translation is a little more “user-friendly” for beginners.

1. Pray first. Ask for wisdom and understanding and for the Lord to speak to you through the text.
2. Read the scripture referenced at the top of the page. If you have trouble locating passages, use your Bible’s table of contents. References are always listed in this order: book, chapter, verse(s).
3. Respond to the scripture text by answering these three questions in your own words: What does the passage say? What does the passage say to me? How can I apply it to my life? (These guiding questions may be used every day.)
4. The margin notes offer insight to the text, and the questions are there for group discussion or personal application. You may use the blank lines to write or “process” your responses.
5. Consider everything you write as dialogue with God—a casual, informal prayer conversation that helps you grow into knowing Him (and yourself) better.

Finally, be sure to bring your journal every Sunday to take notes.

A Guide to Journal Symbols



context clues or background information about the passage



extra application or activity beyond reflection and prayer



EKKLESIA

Understanding the Liturgical Year

The church identifies six distinct periods of Christian observances with each one focusing upon a different aspect of the Christian experience and tradition. These periods or seasons do not necessarily occur on the same dates from year to year, but are related to the dates of the two principal Christian celebrations of Christmas and Easter.

1. Advent season begins four Sundays before Christmas.
2. The Christmas season includes the twelve days from sunset Christmas Eve (December 24) through Epiphany (January 6).
3. The season after Epiphany begins January 7, lasts until Ash Wednesday, and is called ordinary time.
4. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and lasts until Easter. The exact dates of the Lenten season depend on the date for Easter Sunday.
5. Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after March 21. The Easter season is 50 days long and goes through the day of Pentecost. Because the date for Easter moves between March 22 and April 25, the length of the season after Epiphany and the season after Pentecost varies.
6. The second season known as ordinary time begins immediately after Pentecost Sunday and continues until the beginning of Advent.

Pentecost is this Sunday, after this Sunday "ordinary time" begins.

*Hebrews 12:1–3***WEDNESDAY**

MAY 20, 2015

Faithful living as members of Christ's holy church is edgy, unpredictable, adventuresome and scary. It requires us to repeat a measure of Abraham's faith who "went out without knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). We are wise to lean back on the experiences of those who came before us, while kicking forward into the future that Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, has for us.

"As a historian of Christianity, I want the church to lean back—not just back to the 50s, but all the way back through 2000 years of history, all the way back until we're, in the words of that Sunday School song, 'Leaning, Leaning, Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.' But at the same time, and I do mean simultaneously, we must use that energy and power that comes from 'learning to lean' to kick forward into the future and Carpe Manana [seize tomorrow]."

—Leonard Sweet,
paraphrased

*Hebrews 11:17–31***FRIDAY**
MAY 22, 2015

Yesterday, we read Hebrews 11:1, “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*” It was this sort of inner assurance that gave Abraham the strength to sacrifice what meant most to him and that allowed Isaac, Jacob and Joseph to bless their sons with an inheritance of land that would provide an identity to God’s people and birthplace for the future Messiah. It was this deep confidence that made Moses proud of his heritage and unafraid of Pharaoh as he led the people out of their enslavement in Egypt, that made Rahab so convinced the God of the Jews was the one true God that she risked the life of herself and her family to help their spies, that made Joshua certain that simple obedience to God would win the battle of Jericho.

If a litany of your faith-inspired deeds were to be written someday, how might it read?

By faith, (insert your name) _____
(insert description of your faithful acts):

As we move through this sermon series on living into a high view of the church, or ekklesia, you might use this portion of "A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition" as a way of confirming your commitment to and your role in Christ's body:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

1 Peter 1:3–12

MONDAY
MAY 25, 2015

“He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

—1 Corinthians 1:8

Consider 1 Peter 1:10–12. We have an advantage the prophets of old didn’t have—we have assurance of a secure future in God’s kingdom through Christ Jesus, our Lord. And yet, these verses say “they” (the prophets) were serving “us.” How might God be calling “us” to serve those who will come after us?

“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

—Matthew 13:16–17

TUESDAY
MAY 26, 2015

1 Peter 1:13–25

“So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world.”

–1 Peter 1:13 (NLT)

Have you ever considered it your job to “stay prepared” for holy living?

For your role in ministry as a member of Christ’s church?

For Christ’s return?

“Be dressed in readiness, and keep you lamps lit.”

–Luke 12:35 (NASB)

Lined writing area for reflections and notes.

Prayer was never intended to be a monologue but a dialogue with God. Scripture is God's way of initiating a conversation; prayer is our response. If we begin with what God has already said in Scripture and then prayerfully interact with Him by listening to, thinking on, responding to Him as we go, not only will our prayers take on new life but the Word will come to life. At the end of each week of this series, we will be using a section of Scripture as a prayer.

A closing prayer:

I can't impress this on you too strongly. God is looking over your shoulder. Christ himself is the Judge, with the final say on everyone, living and dead. He is about to break into the open with his rule, so proclaim the Message with intensity; keep on your watch. Challenge, warn, and urge your people. Don't ever quit. Just keep it simple.

You're going to find that there will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching, but will fill up on spiritual junk food—catchy opinions that tickle their fancy. They'll turn their backs on truth and chase mirages. But you—keep your eye on what you're doing; accept the hard times along with the good; keep the Message alive; do a thorough job as God's servant.

You take over. I'm about to die, my life an offering on God's altar. This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause! Depend on it, he's an honest judge. He'll do right not only by me, but by everyone eager for his coming.

–2 Timothy 4:1–8 (MSG)

Prepare to go as a people sent by God: leaning back on the rich heritage of our faith—remembering the example of those who have gone before and kick into the future that God has for you and His holy church. Prepare to go and make disciples in the strength and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord is with you. Now, get ready to go.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a phrase used to describe the principal factors John Wesley believed illuminated the core of the Christian faith for the believer. Wesley did not formulate the succinct statement, but building on the Anglican theological tradition, Wesley added a fourth emphasis, “experience.” The resulting four components or “sides” of the quadrilateral are (1) Scripture, (2) tradition, (3) reason and (4) experience.

Scripture

John Wesley said he was a man of one book—the Bible. In thinking about our faith, we put primary reliance on the Bible. It’s the unique testimony of God’s revelation, or self-disclosure, in the life of Israel; in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ; and in the Spirit’s work in the early church.

As disciples, we study the Bible both as individuals and within the believing community. We interpret the texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole. We use concordances, commentaries, and other aids prepared by scholars. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we try to discern both the original intention of the text and its meaning for our own faith and life. We understand that people who do not know the Bible cannot fully live out the will of God.

Tradition

This is the role of the church. Between the New Testament age and today stand countless witnesses on whom we rely. Through their creeds, hymns, discourses, prayers, music and art, and courageous deeds we discover what Christians through the ages have taken the Scriptures to mean, and we gain insight by which our own study of the Bible is illuminated.

Reason

Reason engages the brain in the application of Scripture. Our own careful use of reason, though not exactly a direct source of Christian belief, is a necessary tool. We use it in relating and connecting Scripture and tradition to our experience. It helps us organize our theological beliefs and form our worldview in a way that is coherent and consistent with Scripture.

Experience

The final source of our theology is our experience. This means our faith is our own—we each must experience it for ourselves. By experience we mean especially the “new life in Christ,” which is ours as a gift of God’s grace; such rebirth and personal assurance gives us new eyes to see the living truth in Scripture. We interpret our life’s experiences in light of the biblical message.

As disciples, we must beware the danger of following the culture’s standard and guard against the tendency to base decisions on reason and experience while ignoring Scripture.

Source: “*United Methodist Member’s Handbook, Revised*,” George Koehler (Discipleship Resources, 2006); this excerpt taken from: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/reflecting-on-our-faith>, accessed on February 24, 2015.

See also: Pastor Tom’s sermon on March 29, 2015 at www.asburytulsa.org in the Sermon Archives.

John 1:45–49

THURSDAY
MAY 28, 2015

“Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.”

–1 Peter 1:10–11

“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”

–John 5:24

“Then Jesus said, ‘When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled.’”

–Luke 24:44 (NLT)

2 Timothy 3:10–17

MONDAY
JUNE 1, 2015

“Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD.”

–2 Kings 23:1–2

“For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

–Ezra 7:10 (NRSV)

When you read a passage that is difficult to understand—don’t shrug your shoulders and move on. Stop and ask the Lord to help you understand it. You wanting to understand Scripture will delight Him. And when the Holy Spirit gives you that “aha!” moment, you will get the thrill of discovering it.



A closing prayer:

And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting, you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

–Ephesians 6:10–18 (MSG)

Prepare to go as a people sent by God: You have the Word of God. You know how to read. The Holy Spirit will help you understand, if you make the effort. The Word of God will never cease to exist. So use it as you prepare to go and make disciples. The Lord is with you. Now, get ready to go.

*John 5:16–30***THURSDAY**
JUNE 4, 2015

Who sent Jesus to earth?

By whose authority does He speak and act?

Who does Jesus seek to please?

"Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, 'Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.'"

—John 7:28–29

"The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him."

—John 8:29

*Acts 13:1–5***SATURDAY**

JUNE 6, 2015

The first church in Jerusalem began with about 120 people. After the Holy Spirit was poured out and the disciples were empowered, the church began growing by leaps and bounds. Persecution caused the church to disperse, and soon the disciples began traveling to visit the saints who were scattered abroad. Furthermore, the sending of missionaries such as Paul and Silas caused the gospel to spread rapidly across the Roman Empire.



“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’”

—Romans 10:14–16

“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

—Matthew 10:40

*Acts 15:1–4***MONDAY**
JUNE 8, 2015

Local churches are established by people who are sent to new places, but they continue to exist because of people who stay in one place. We see both types of commitment in today's reading.

Commitment is defined as a state or quality of being dedicated to a cause, activity, etc. When the church sends people out—they must be as committed to supporting the efforts of the go-er as the go-er is committed to achieving that for which he or she was sent. It also takes commitment to stay in one place (especially a neighborhood, job, city, church or marriage) for many years. But we must realize, it takes time to build relationships and it takes even more time to establish trust and credibility in a community.

A closing prayer:

So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites.

But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven! We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.

—Philippians 3:15–21 (MSG)

Prepare to go as a people sent by God, fully committed to where God is calling you to be. Go and put down deep roots so that you can earn trust and establish credibility for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and the work of His kingdom. The Lord is with you. Now, prepare yourself to think long term and fully commit to where He is sending (or has already sent) you. Now get ready to go (and to stay).

*Matthew 9:35–38***SATURDAY**
JUNE 13, 2015

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.”

—Matthew 4:23–24

Take time to experience the prayer walk located on the sidewalk that surrounds Asbury’s main building. The signs provide prompts to lead you in praying for the “spheres of influence” that most affect our nation. With the help of God’s Spirit, these prompts will help you see some common things in a new way.

+1

SUNDAY
JUNE 14, 2015

Acts 17:16–23

*“Therefore, as God’s chosen
people, holy and dearly
loved, clothe yourselves
with compassion, kindness,
humility, gentleness and
patience.”*

—Colossians 3:12

Lined writing area consisting of 24 horizontal lines.

*Acts 3:1–16***MONDAY**
JUNE 15, 2015

Sometimes we don't want to see what's needed because we feel we don't have what it takes to respond. What did Peter give the beggar (verse 6)?

What did this small act of compassion cost Peter (verse 12)?

What difference did it make in the beggar's life?

Have you ever considered God may want to work through you to bring healing to another person? Hope? Comfort? Encouragement? Wise counsel? Nourishment? Physical or financial help?

We never know what affect or effect a small act of compassion will have in the life of another person, or even in the eternal scheme of things—but we do know that little is much when God is in it.

A closing prayer:

So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.

Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ.

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

—Colossians 3:1–4, 12–17 (MSG)

Prepare to go as a people sent by God, seeing and responding to those who are lost, hurting and in distress. Ask God to help you see people, really see them, so that you can respond in the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord is with you. Now, get ready to go.

Luke 4:14–21

THURSDAY
JUNE 18, 2015

"But he said, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.'"

–Luke 4:43

Jesus was sent to proclaim the good news about God’s kingdom—in what ways do you think His actions demonstrated the truth of His message? (See Luke 7:18–23).

During His ministry, do you think Jesus was better known for His words or His actions? Why?

Why are words and actions both important? (See James 2:14–26).

Acts 8:26–40

SATURDAY
JUNE 20, 2015

How do you think Philip was able to explain the Isaiah passage to the other man?

Why is trying to understand Scripture important?

“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.”

—Hebrews 5:11–13

We all start as spiritual infants and that’s OK. Over time, however, it is necessary to grow in our understanding of God’s Word. It is not only for our benefit but for the benefit of others.

“Mostly, the church spread as ordinary people accepted it and then shared it with their families and friends, and the faith was carried from one community to another in this same way—probably most often by regular travelers such as merchants.”

—Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*

Acts 18:24–28

MONDAY
JUNE 22, 2015

“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”

—Luke 24:27

What can you learn about Apollos from this passage?

What can you infer about Priscilla and Aquila from this passage?

We sometimes put pressure on ourselves thinking we must be Bible scholars and have a perfectly polished gospel presentation before we can share Jesus with others. But God doesn't ask that of us. It seems sufficient to start where we are, learn all we can, and simply share what we know.

TUESDAY
JUNE 23, 2015

Acts 22:1–16

The church proclaims that God has raised Jesus from the dead and made Him Lord over all. The church proclaims in word and deed what God has proclaimed in His Word and in His mighty acts.

Most often, Paul’s way of “proclaiming” was simply to tell his story. Paul identified with the Jewish audience, speaking in their native language and relating to their religious zeal. In this way he “saw” the situation and responded to it appropriately.

If we are in a relationship with Jesus Christ, then we have an experience to share—we have a story to tell. We are different people today because of Jesus. We can put that in our own words, and demonstrate it in our daily lives.

“Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return home and tell the story of what God has done for you.’ So he went throughout the city proclaiming what Jesus had done for him.”

–Luke 8:39 (CEB)

A closing prayer:

You'll remember, friends, that when I first came to you to let you in on God's master stroke, I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified.

I was unsure of how to go about this, and felt totally inadequate—I was scared to death, if you want the truth of it—and so nothing I said could have impressed you or anyone else. But the Message came through anyway. God's Spirit and God's power did it, which made it clear that your life of faith is a response to God's power, not to some fancy mental or emotional footwork by me or anyone else.

We, of course, have plenty of wisdom to pass on to you once you get your feet on firm spiritual ground, but it's not popular wisdom, the fashionable wisdom of high-priced experts that will be out-of-date in a year or so. God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of his purposes. You don't find it lying around on the surface. It's not the latest message, but more like the oldest—what God determined as the way to bring out his best in us, long before we ever arrived on the scene. The experts of our day haven't a clue about what this eternal plan is. If they had, they wouldn't have killed the Master of the God-designed life on a cross. That's why we have this Scripture text:

No one's ever seen or heard anything like this, never so much as imagined anything quite like it—what God has arranged for those who love him.

But you've seen and heard it because God by his Spirit has brought it all out into the open before you.

–1 Corinthians 2:1–10 (MSG)

Prepare to go as a people sent by God, proclaiming and explaining what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for you. Be ready to explain what the Scriptures mean to you—life, true life! Prepare to go and make disciples in the strength and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord is with you. Now get ready to go.

*Acts 6:1–7***THURSDAY**
JUNE 25, 2015

The church welcomes those who respond to the good news about Jesus. The gospel breaks down barriers that divide us—therefore, the church is not a community determined by race, ethnicity, nationality, sex or social status but by the grace of God. The church is a church who welcomes because God is a God who welcomes us.

The church began as a movement inside Judaism. It was essentially a community of Jews who believed in Jesus. Yet even among the Jews, there was diversity of backgrounds, language, and social status. These differences led to tension and required the attention of people who were full of the Spirit and wisdom as we see from today's reading.

When the book of Acts begins, the church primarily consists of the apostles and about 120 others. Within the group there are already a few who are ready to become leaders, among them are “the seven.”



*Acts 19:8–22***SATURDAY**
JUNE 27, 2015

As the gospel went global, the early church leaders had to wrestle with how to respond to the challenges it presented. The most fundamental boundaries of the Jewish society had to be examined as they questioned how their laws about food, circumcision and Sabbath applied to Gentiles which the Council of Jerusalem attempted to resolve in Acts 15:1–21. Much of the New Testament attempts to deal with the tensions between believers from all different backgrounds.

Think carefully about the implications of Acts 19:18–20. What types of people would you least expect to see in church today? Write a prayer for them, and if necessary, also pray for God to give you the grace to welcome them when the opportunity arises.

“Since its inception, when the church has proclaimed the gospel, people have joined them; pagans have become believers, outsiders have become insiders, guests have become hosts, and unknown strangers have become known leaders. Since its beginnings, the first church was a welcoming church; it was a community that relied on welcoming others to the table.”

—Jason Jackson,
Director of Adult Discipleship

*Acts 16:1–5***MONDAY**
JUNE 29, 2015

Paul multiplied leadership by mentoring a young disciple named Timothy. It seems Timothy's circumcision (a long-standing traditional Jewish rite) was not for Timothy's sake but to make him a more effective minister to the Jews. Titus, who was also a Greek, refused circumcision simply because some were claiming it was necessary for salvation (Galatians 2:3).



Why was observing this tradition helpful in one situation but not in the other? How do you think Paul helped these men discern which was which?

Why are the Holy Spirit and wisdom so important for us to be a church that welcomes and multiplies?

Asbury's vision statement is: Developing all generations for significant lives in Christ. In what ways are you and your family living in this vision? (Be as specific as you can.) Is the Lord leading you to do something more, or perhaps, something different?

A closing prayer:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

—Romans 12:1–3 (MSG)

Go as a people sent by God, seeing and responding, proclaiming and explaining, welcoming and multiplying the number of people and the number of places where Jesus Christ is Lord. Go and make disciples in the strength and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord is with you. Now, go!



AMERICA

IN
GOD WE
TRUST

S

DOLLAR

History of "In God We Trust"

The motto IN GOD WE TRUST was placed on United States coins largely because of the increased religious sentiment existing during the Civil War. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase received many appeals from devout persons throughout the country, urging that the United States recognize the Deity on United States coins. From Treasury Department records, it appears that the first such appeal came in a letter dated November 13, 1861. It was written to Secretary Chase by Rev. M. R. Watkinson, minister of the Gospel from Ridleyville, Pennsylvania, and read:

Dear Sir: You are about to submit your annual report to the Congress respecting the affairs of the national finances.

One fact touching our currency has hitherto been seriously overlooked. I mean the recognition of the Almighty God in some form on our coins.

You are probably a Christian. What if our Republic were not shattered beyond reconstruction? Would not the antiquaries of succeeding centuries rightly reason from our past that we were a heathen nation? What I propose is that instead of the goddess of liberty we shall have next inside the 13 stars a ring inscribed with the words PERPETUAL UNION; within the ring the allseeing eye, crowned with a halo; beneath this eye the American flag, bearing in its field stars equal to the number of the States united; in the folds of the bars the words GOD, LIBERTY, LAW.

This would make a beautiful coin, to which no possible citizen could object. This would relieve us from the ignominy of heathenism. This would place us openly under the Divine protection we have personally claimed. From my hearth I have felt our national shame in disowning God as not the least of our present national disasters.

To you first I address a subject that must be agitated.

As a result, Secretary Chase instructed James Pollock, Director of the Mint at Philadelphia, to prepare a motto, in a letter dated November 20, 1861:

Dear Sir: No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in His defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins.

You will cause a device to be prepared without unnecessary delay with a motto expressing in the fewest and tersest words possible this national recognition.

It was found that the Act of Congress dated January 18, 1837, prescribed the mottoes and devices that should be placed upon the coins of the United States. This meant that the mint could make no changes without the enactment of additional legislation by the Congress. In December 1863, the Director of the Mint submitted designs for new one-cent coin, two-cent coin, and three-cent coin to Secretary Chase for approval. He proposed that upon the designs either OUR COUNTRY; OUR GOD or GOD, OUR TRUST should appear as a motto on the coins. In a letter to the Mint Director on December 9, 1863, Secretary Chase stated:

I approve your mottoes, only suggesting that on that with the Washington obverse the motto should begin with the word OUR, so as to read OUR GOD AND OUR COUNTRY. And on that with the shield, it should be changed so as to read: IN GOD WE TRUST.

The Congress passed the Act of April 22, 1864. This legislation changed the composition of the one-cent coin and authorized the minting of the two-cent coin. The Mint Director was directed to develop the designs for these coins for final approval of the Secretary. IN GOD WE TRUST first appeared on the 1864 two-cent coin.

Note: This excerpt provided by <http://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>, accessed on March 3, 2015.

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We carry in our pockets, our purses and our wallets a constant reminder: The Almighty is the source of all our hope, and in Him we place our trust. Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD.

*Jeremiah 17:5–10***THURSDAY**
JULY 2, 2015

"Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always."

—1 Chronicles 16:11

Pray that God would increase our belief in His ability to intervene supernaturally and do the impossible. Pray for a desire to fast as we seek the face of God.

Psalm 20

SATURDAY

JULY 4, 2015

"Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, 'Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few.'"

—1 Samuel 14:6

"Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, 'LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. LORD, you are our God; do not let mere mortals prevail against you.'"

—2 Chronicles 14:11

Pray that God would raise up an army of prayer warriors who are willing to persevere in prayer and wage war on their knees.

Pray also for a spirit of prayer to spread like a wildfire across our land and world until every church becomes a house of prayer.

1 Samuel 17:45-47

MONDAY
JULY 6, 2015

“He said: Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.’”

—2 Chronicles 20:15

“I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame.”

—Psalm 44:6-7

Pray that a healthy fear of God would permeate our hearts and minds. Ask God to deliver us from the fear of man.

Pray also that God’s people would not be self-sufficient. May we see our dire need for help from God.

A closing prayer:

Almighty God, you are our Mighty Fortress, our refuge and the God in whom we place our trust. As our nation faces great distress and uncertainty, we ask your Holy Spirit to fall afresh upon your people — convict us of sin and inflame within us a passion to pray for our land and its people.

Grant the leaders of our country an awareness of their desperate need of wisdom and salvation in you until sin becomes a reproach to all and righteousness exalts this nation.

Protect and defend us against our enemies and may the cause of Christ always prevail in our schools, courts, homes, and churches. Lord God, send a spirit of revival and may it begin in our own hearts.

Remember America, we pray. Remember the foundations on which this country was built. Remember the prayers of our nation's fathers and mothers, and do not forget us in our time of need.

In the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

—Joni Eareckson Tada

Note: This prayer provided by <http://nationaldayofprayer.org/a-prayer-for-america-by-joni-eareckson-tada>, accessed on March 3, 2015. All other prompts used this week are excerpted from "Pray!" Magazine, issue 34 as provided by Life Action Ministries, 2002.

HIDDEN

Introduction

Hiding is a skill we learn early in life which many of us have perfected through determined practice. When I think of hiding, I immediately remember childhood games of hide-and-go-seek. In this game a group of people hide and then one person who is “it” has to try to find all who are hidden and the last one found wins. Another related game was called “sardines.” In this game one person hides, and then everyone else tries to find that person and the last person to discover the group loses.

But as kids, hiding wasn’t just a skill for silly childhood games—hiding was a skill for childhood survival. At a young age, we begin learning the difficult lessons of failure, of not measuring up and the fact that we are all different. We become subjected to the judgment of others and learn the pain of other people determining when we do not quite measure up. So we learn how to hide. Our adventurous and daring spirit gets quashed, and the energy we used to put into finding joy in trying new things and expressing our creativity gets redirected to trying to cover up our faults and to convince ourselves and others we don’t make mistakes and that we really are good enough. We do not dare try anything new because we may fail and others will be ready to shame us. And, we do not dare express ourselves because our creativity will certainly be judged and may not measure up. We learn it is risky or painful to reveal too much of ourselves—so we hide.

As adults we become consumed with hiding. For many of us, hiding ceases to be a skill and becomes a lifestyle. And, ironically enough, a skill that was intended for survival begins to rob us of the life it was meant to protect. Our felt-need to stay hidden begins to interfere with real needs such as productive living, relationships with others, and our relationship with God.

But, what if we could quit hiding? What if we weren’t compelled by shame and condemnation? What if the words, *“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1) were true? What if we were freed to live life creatively? What if we were freed to be vulnerable and transparent with others?

God’s desire that we be freed from the power of shame and condemnation is found throughout the Bible. This series will explore stories of real people wrestling with real failures (some of them epic) along with real shame and condemnation. We will see how God responds to these people and how God responds to us when we wrestle with our own failures and shame.

–Todd Craig, *Pastor*

“My imperfections and failures are
as much a blessing from God as
my successes and my talents, and I
lay them both at his feet.”
–Mahatma Gandhi

Opening Thoughts

Matt was caught shoplifting as a teen. With every subsequent mistake, his dad reminded him that he was a liar and a thief. Later, Matt realized that he would sometimes catch himself being happy and then revert to depression because someone as worthless as him did not deserve happiness.

Brad's law practice was thriving, and his wife Lisa devoted herself to raising their two sons and volunteering. It seemed like the perfect life, but while Brad was working hard to meet the needs of others and reach the elusive feeling of success, Lisa realized that she and the boys were not important to Brad. Lisa became bitter and dejected. When Christian friends didn't understand or offered shallow advice, she began to think she deserved and was incapable of having anything but an unhappy marriage.

Kathy's clothes, hair, work, car, even her boyfriend had to be perfect at all times. Rob, however, was not a detail-guy. He was easy-going, but over the three years they dated, Kathy met Rob's passivity with increased intensity, and Rob responded by withdrawing and pulling away from Kathy until the strain became unbearable.

Stacy got pregnant at seventeen and gave up her baby for adoption. When she married, she could not bring herself to reveal this secret shame to her husband until she couldn't handle it anymore. He responded with forgiveness, compassion and love, but Stacy just couldn't accept it. She eventually left the husband who loved her in spite of her past because she couldn't let go of her past and forgive herself.

Do you...

- Believe your past failures doom you to an unhappy future?
- Feel compelled to work hard and be perfect in order to be accepted and respected?
- Feel guilty when things go your way or do you start waiting for the other shoe to drop?
- Set goals and chase successes relentlessly just to make sure "you've still got it?"
- Give up easily when you're afraid successes might elude you?
- Try to convince God you deserve to have your prayers answered?
- Hold back from God lest He unleash His disappointment on you?

—Adapted case studies and other references from
The Search for Significance: Seeing Your True Worth through God's Eyes
by Robert S. McGee, Thomas Nelson, 2003

*Genesis 3:1–13***WEDNESDAY**
JULY 8, 2015

Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God and His creation until they rebelled against Him by breaking His rules. This act separated them from God, and, for the first time in human history, they knew what it meant to be afraid.



Humans have been trying to hide from God since Adam and Eve sewed the first fig leaves. God created us to live in close fellowship with Him and each other but we live in fear instead. Afraid of being judged and punished for our failures, we blame others for our faults or condemn ourselves. We hide who we really are and may even doubt God's love for us. This raises the question—which is more reliable, our doubts and fears or God's words and actions?

Their fear of punishment caused Adam and Eve to withdraw from God (verse 10) and to blame others for their personal failures (verses 12–13).

In what ways are you like Adam and Eve?

Isaiah 53:4–12

FRIDAY
JULY 10, 2015

Today's reading is a Messianic prophecy written approximately 700 years before Jesus' birth. It is "Messianic" because it foretells events surrounding "the Messiah," who is Jesus Christ.



Go through today's reading and circle all the descriptive words, phrases and verb phrases that predict what the Messiah would experience.

For what purpose did He suffer? Why was He crushed?

"For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

—Romans 3:22–26 (NKJV)

"Propitiation means that the wrath of someone who has been unjustly wronged has been satisfied. It is an act that soothes hostility and satisfies the need for vengeance. Providing His only begotten Son as the propitiation for our sin was the greatest possible demonstration of God's love for man" (McGee).

*Romans 8:31–39***TUESDAY**
JULY 14, 2015*"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you."*

—Psalm 56:3

Adam and Eve sinned so they hid from God. The Lord came looking for them and graciously provided a covering for them; the first animals were sacrificed to make clothing for the humans who were frightened and ashamed. By His love and grace, our sin has been completely covered.

Does it make any sense that God would punish Jesus for our sins—and then punish us for them too?

Why aren't we condemned? Then what right do we have to condemn ourselves or others?

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

—Romans 5:8

Liberated

Bishop Robert Hayes asked me on the night of my ordination, “Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?”

Carter and I graduated from college debt-free, but by the time I completed two master’s degrees, we had a mortgage, student loans and a small mountain of medical bills. We both served modest ministries, and at one point I’d even requested a significant reduction in my pastor’s salary due to the strain it would put on my new church. After all, we knew Jehovah-Jireh (“the Lord provides”) would take care of us. So we plugged away and kept our eyes on the Lord.

However, over time, our gaze shifted from the Lord to our friends who took more lucrative jobs and lived bigger lives than we did. We became jealous. Even worse, we became ashamed. Let’s be honest. Some of our debt was a good investment, some was unavoidable, but some of it was a result of trying to make ourselves feel and look better, a result of impatience and selfishness.

We layered sin upon sin: owing more than we could repay in a reasonable time, resenting the sacrifices we had made, blaming one another, being angry at unfortunate or unfair circumstances, coveting the blessings of others. All of that brought even more shame because we knew those attitudes didn’t represent love of God and love of others, and we knew it was not God’s will for us.

Then God showed us something: we wanted to be extraordinary servants, but we made ordinary decisions. We had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). *“The payoff for a life of sin is death, but God is offering us a free gift—eternal life through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, the Liberating King”* (Romans 6:23). When we believe and trust God enough to confess the failures and secrets we are most ashamed of, “he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). As a pastoral family, we hid our ugly truth until we felt God urging us to be transparent with Him and others. When we allowed Him to heal us of our shame and move us toward righteousness, not only did He present ways for us to be liberated from our debts far faster than we could ever do on our own, but He is using our journey to encourage others.

—Gloria McGee Denton, *Pastor*

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*“We do not make requests of you because we are righteous,
but because of your great mercy.”*

—Daniel 9:18b

2 Samuel 11:10–15

WEDNESDAY
JULY 15, 2015

King David led an exemplary life, but he was not perfect or sinless. David slept with Uriah's wife while Uriah was off at war. When Uriah's wife became pregnant, David went to great lengths to hide his sin. To keep his failure a secret, he callously forfeited Uriah's life. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David repented and confessed his sin. There were consequences, but God forgave David and extended love, grace and mercy to him. We know this because David married Uriah's widow, and through that union, they had a second child whom the Lord ordained to be Israel's wisest, wealthiest and most powerful king: Solomon.



We all fail—but we don't want to be known as failures. We often tolerate other people's failures but not our own. We want to be seen as successful so we hide all the stuff that makes us look bad. We attempt to cover up our short-comings and strive to meet certain standards because we believe this is the only way we can feel good about ourselves. But is this the right basis for our self-worth?

When have you gone to great lengths to hide your sin?

How does (or did) that particular sin (or sins) affect your self-worth?

THURSDAY
JULY 16, 2015

Joshua 7:19-23

"The effects of sin are all around us, yet many continue to indulge in the sex, status- and pleasure-seeking, and rampant self-centeredness that cause so much anguish and pain. Satan contradicted God in the Garden when he said, 'You surely shall not die!' (Genesis 3:4). Sin is pleasant but only for a season. Sooner or later, sin will result in some form of destruction" (McGee).

Sin's destructiveness is manifest in a variety of ways; which of these are true for you:

- I have experienced the pain of guilt and shame.
- I have been afraid of punishment.
- I have experienced the anguish of flashbacks.
- I have given enormous amounts of time and energy to thinking about/justifying/rationalizing it.
- It has resulted in loss of property or life.
- It has caused me to become alienated.

One thing that happens to all of us when we sin is we grieve the Holy Spirit and our fellowship with God is broken.

"My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear."
-Psalm 38:4

Romans 3:21–31

FRIDAY
JULY 17, 2015

Now here's the good news:
We are not defined by our failures or by our sins.

"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you 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."

—Colossians 2:13–14

"Justification is the doctrine that explains the judicial facts of our forgiveness and righteousness in Christ. . . . We have been justified and placed in right standing before God through Christ's death on the cross, which paid for our sins. But God didn't stop with our forgiveness; He also granted us the very righteousness of Christ!" (McGee).

Justification means we have worth apart from our ability to perform. Neither our success nor failure is the proper basis for our self-worth—we are pleasing to God in spite of our failures and irrespective of our successes.

"For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, 'Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.'"

—Romans 10:10–11

MONDAY
JULY 20, 2015

Psalm 32

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

—1 John 1:8–9

"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."

—Hebrews 10:17

Today is a good day to confess your sins and receive God's forgiveness.

Because of Christ's payment for us on the cross, our sins are forgiven and forgotten. We have escaped eternal death and punishment. However, our actions will be judged on the judgment seat of Christ and rewards will be given for deeds that reflected a desire to honor Him. It should be noted that deeds performed in an attempt to earn God's acceptance, the approval of others, or to meet our own standards of righteousness will be rejected by God and consumed by fire (2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:12–15).

Lined writing area with 20 horizontal lines for notes.

*Psalm 119:9–16***TUESDAY**
JULY 21, 2015

There is a difference between punishment and discipline, though the two are often confused.

Punishment: Comes from God's wrath to *avenge* a wrong. It results in alienation from God.

Discipline: Comes from God's love to *correct* a wrong. It results in reconciliation with God.

God's commands are given to protect us from sin's destructiveness and to direct us into a life full of joy. We should seek to obey His commands not only because they are good for us, but because they help us avoid the need for God's discipline, they help us earn eternal rewards and—if for no other reason—because Christ is worthy of our love and obedience.

"If you love me, keep my commands."

—John 14:15

To Be or Not to Be

Fear. That's something I know about. I used to be afraid all the time. Nobody knew it because I was good (too good) at faking it and/or avoiding situations that put me at risk. I've learned that "playing it safe" may keep me from failure and embarrassment, but is also keeps me from being the person God has called me to be. God began coaxing me out of my fear and into my potential several years ago when I took a Roadmap Bible study class on the book of Romans, led by Pastor Dick Read. I managed to stay "invisible" until we started talking about righteousness. *How can we "be" righteous if we don't "act" righteous? How can we "be" righteous if we still sin?* Our class was struggling with this so I did what I always do—I prayed (silently), asking the Lord for understanding. My brain thinks in metaphors and the moment I prayed, a metaphor popped into my head. Suddenly I understood righteousness in terms of motherhood: When I had my first child I became a mother. Henceforth, I will always "be" a mother. However, I didn't actually know "how" to be one—I had to learn how. Now regardless of my performance, my "status" as a mother doesn't change.

I responded to this answered prayer with, "Oh! I get it. Thank you, Lord!" Then I heard a voice in my head—one of those wonderful, rare moments of God speaking directly. He said, "Now share it. It's not for you alone." Gulp. Instantly, my heart started pounding and my face flushed because I was *terrified* to speak in front of the class. But the instruction was so clear I committed myself to the task by shooting up my hand. Pastor Dick called on me, I shared the revelation and the discussion continued along that vein. Linda Marshall leaned over and said, "I've never understood that passage until now. Thank you for sharing." I was encouraged. The Lord gave me something I was supposed to share, and then He gave me the courage to share it.

The Lord has shown me being afraid works *against* me when I let it rule me—causing me to actively avoid situations where I might fail or look foolish. But being afraid works *for* me when I use it to draw closer to God—knowing the only way I'll get through a situation is with prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit. I've discovered the more I allow God to get me out of my comfort zone, the larger my comfort zone actually becomes. The things that terrified me a few years ago don't seem so bad now. And every time I "take a risk" for God—whether I succeed or fail—I get a little braver and my light shines a little brighter. I am a new creation in Christ—at my core being, that's who I am and with God's help, slowly but surely, that is shaping who I will be.

—Stephanie Hurd, *Journal Coordinator*

Matthew 25:24–27

WEDNESDAY
JULY 22, 2015

Scripture tells us all good things come from above. What we do with those good things is up to us. When we're afraid we can't rise to the challenge, we play it safe and hide what God intends us to use for His glory. We allow the past to shape our future, and we doubt the potential God has given us to faithfully and courageously manage what He's entrusted to us.

"So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it."

—2 Corinthians 5:9

As followers of Jesus, we understand we don't own anything but we are charged with management (also called stewardship) of that which God puts under our care, specifically the Kingdom of God. This goes far beyond material blessings and environmental concerns; it includes our very lives and the opportunities laid before us. The servant in today's reading was operating from a place of fear which affected his decision-making, and ultimately he was held accountable for his failure to act faithfully.

"Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful."

—1 Corinthians 4:2 (NLT)

Titus 3:3–7

FRIDAY
JULY 24, 2015

Our past and present can hold tremendous power over our future if we let it. Past mistakes and failures, things done to us, things we've done to others, the way we look and act—can lead us to believe “we are what we are” and “we will never change.” When we hold to these false beliefs, then our self-esteem is characterized by fear and shame instead of the tremendous value and glorious potential we have as God's children.

Here's the good news: *Nothing is forcing us to stay stuck in the past or to always remain the same.* By God's grace and the Holy Spirit's power, we can change. This is possible because of regeneration—the God who created the universe in a week is able to recreate us in a moment; He can and does make us new.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

—2 Corinthians 5:17

“Regeneration is the renewing work of the Holy Spirit that literally makes each believer a new person at the moment trust is placed in Christ as Savior” (McGee).

SATURDAY
JULY 25, 2015

Luke 19:1–10



As a tax-collector, Zacchaeus, was considered among the worst sinners of his day. Zacchaeus climbed a tree to get a glimpse of the One who reportedly loved sinners and society's losers, but he got more than a glimpse, he got to experience the unconditional love and acceptance of Christ. Zacchaeus became a different person, and his self-concept was radically changed from someone who was loathed and rejected to someone who was loved and accepted. Today's reading is a beautiful illustration of God's work of regeneration in a person's life.

Regeneration is not about "cleaning-up our act" or getting on a "self-improvement program." It is about being transformed at the very core of our being. It is the instantaneous imparting of new life brought about by spiritual rebirth.

How do you think Zacchaeus' experience with Jesus changed his outlook on life?

How do you think it changed his hopes for the future?

"Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.' 'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!' Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.'"

–John 3:3–6

Matthew 25:24-27

SUNDAY
JULY 26, 2015

Blank lined writing area for journaling or reflection.

*"This is to my Father's glory,
that you bear much fruit,
showing yourselves to be my
disciples."*

—John 15:8

*Matthew 5:13–16***TUESDAY**
JULY 28, 2015

Because we are new creations in Christ, we have a light to shine. We each will shine in our own, unique way; but we can take courage in the fact that God has done a transforming work in us and that transforming work will continue to manifest itself as our character grows and changes to be more like Christ.

God recreates/regenerates us for His glory, not for our own. Realizing the potential and the responsibility that comes with our new, core state of being should motivate us to please God with our actions and our deeds (see margin note on July 20).

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

—Ephesians 2:10

What have you been managing poorly, that you will begin (with God’s help) to manage faithfully?

The Voice of God

John Ortberg tells this story in *The Me I Want to Be*: “My friend Danny went spelunking in the caves of Iowa...The passageway was small enough that Danny had to stoop at first. Then as it grew still smaller, he had to get on his hands and knees. Eventually the only way to go forward was to lay on his back and push his body forward with his feet. Then the ceiling was so low that when he inhaled he could not move at all! He had to stop, inhale, and exhale, and only then was his chest low enough to allow him to move. By this point it was physically impossible to back out. If the passageway had gotten any smaller he would have lain there and died in that cave.

Danny is a sky-diving, mountain-climbing, hang-gliding thrill-seeker, but there in that cave he felt sheer panic. He was terrified. He tried fighting his fear, but he kept picturing his dead body...Finally, he told his guide he was about to lose it, and the guide said, ‘Danny, close your eyes and listen to my voice. I will keep talking, calmly, and will guide you through this. We will be okay. I have been there before. I will get you to the other side. But you must listen to my voice. It will not work if you let your thoughts run wild. Just focus on my voice.’”

Neuroscientists have discovered that when neurons fire together they wire together, meaning default pathways are created as a result of repeated patterns of thought, giving remarkable credence to Paul’s advice: *“Summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies”* (Philippians 4:8–9, MSG).

We all know criticism and rejection, but we can minimize their power by replacing lies with truths, replacing words that destroy with words that give life, replacing the voices of others with the voice of the God who loves us unconditionally and who will never leave us nor forsake us. We don’t have to hide our true selves from Him; instead we can let Him reveal our true selves to us.

—Gloria McGee-Denton, *Pastor*

Colossians 3:1–4

WEDNESDAY
JULY 29, 2015

Life is often shaped by earthly desires and bound by fear. We hide from God and from relationships; we hide our failures and shortcomings; we hide and hoard God's gifts—because deep down we're afraid of loss and rejection. But Christ died and rose to free us from our fears and make us right with God. Instead of *hiding* from our Creator we should be *hiding* in the One who gives us unconditional love and complete acceptance.

Believing that we must be approved by certain others to feel good about ourselves causes us to act in ways that “please” them, or “protect” us. Which of these (if any) are true for you:

- I avoid certain people.
- I often cave into peer pressure.
- I try to please others, no matter the cost.
- Most of my relationships are superficial.
- I must maintain control of situations and the people involved.
- I continue to repeat hurtful messages, long after the person who delivered the message is gone (maybe even dead).
- I worry about what other people think of me, even total strangers.

Romans 5:1–11

FRIDAY
JULY 31, 2015

As you read today's passage, answer these questions:

What replaces our shame?

How has the debt of our sin been paid?

How are we saved from God's wrath?

How does God demonstrate His love for us?

Think about it this way: When we base our self-worth on the approval of others (or even our performance), we are saying our ability to please people holds higher value than God's love for us and what Jesus did for us. Or to put it another way: If we allow other's opinions of us to affect our self-esteem, we are ascribing more power and authority to another human than we ascribe to God. *That* is setting our minds on earthly things, not things above (Colossians 3:2).

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

—Galatians 2:20–21

Colossians 3:1-4

SUNDAY
AUGUST 2, 2015

“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

—Galatians 1:10

2 Corinthians 5:11–21

TUESDAY
AUGUST 4, 2015

We often refer to this passage because of its richness; looking at it in the context of this week's readings makes it even more powerful. Knowing we were once God's enemies (Romans 5:10) and we are now His friends, being made right with Him through Christ, we can better understand the state lost people are living in and the Lord's desire to have them reconciled to Him.

"Setting our mind on things above," means we begin looking at other people through God's eyes. Instead of "needing" someone to approve of us, we have the opportunity (and the authority) to help them discover the unconditional love and acceptance of God that is offered through Jesus.

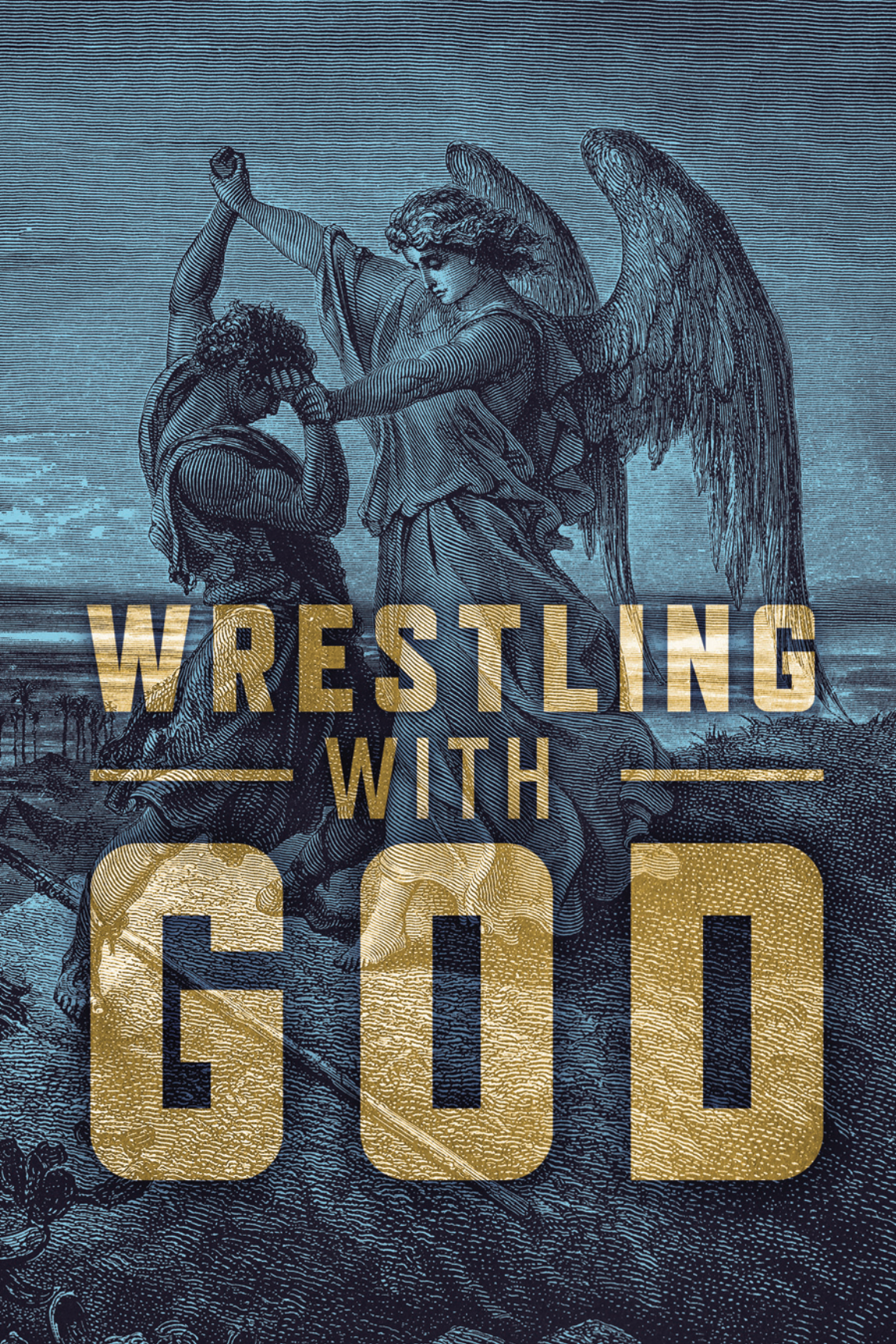
When we base our self-worth on God's love for us as demonstrated by what Christ did for us, then our lives are hidden in Him and protected by His Spirit. From that safe place, that firm foundation, we can begin to live in new ways—free from fear and motivated by a love that comes from above and flows through us to a world that is aching for God's touch.

How has this sermon series changed the way you view yourself?

How has it changed the way you view other people?

"My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

—Colossians 2:2–3



WRESTLING

WITH

GOD

Introduction

We are embarking on a series that will push us to think more deeply about God and His kingdom. We'll be examining five paradoxes from Scripture—paradoxes that reveal just how complex and transcendent our mysterious God is. A **PARADOX** is a statement or concept that seems contradictory but is actually true. For the journal we'll be using the ancient rabbinic method of interpreting Scripture called **HALAKIC REASONING**. This is the approach Jesus used, and it requires us to hold both strands of the riddle in tension and balance—knowing, by faith, that with God both sides must somehow be true. "It's the process of firmly grabbing *both* ideas in a paradox and then merging the two into a greater understanding of the character and nature of God" (James F. Lucas). Instead of "either/or" thinking, we'll embrace "both/and."

There's a curious story in Genesis 32 about Abraham's scrappy grandson, Jacob. After swiping his brother's blessing, he fled to a distant land where he lived and prospered for many years. Then one day he "skipped town" and headed back to the promised-land with his large family and much wealth. When he learned his estranged brother was coming to meet him, he sent everyone and all his things ahead and spent the night alone at the river ford. Then, the passage says, "a man" wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. Jacob held the man in his iron grip and said, *I won't let go until you bless me*. As we continue reading, we learn "the man" was God Himself. Jacob wrestled with God. Jacob's willingness, along with his faith and stubbornness, resulted in a blessing.

Scripture tells us, "*It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings*" (Proverbs 25:2). This is our chance, if we are willing, to wrestle with God through Scripture. This is our opportunity to search out hidden matters, hidden treasures—hidden complexities about the Lord God Almighty.

We'll need to be curious and tenacious. We'll need to use all the resources available: The Bible, our faith, prayer, halakic reasoning, our thoughts and our emotions (because understanding God takes the head and the heart), we'll need each other (so we can talk through the complexities with other believers), we'll often refer to our source, *Knowing the Unknowable God* by James R. Lucas, and of course, we'll need the help of God's Spirit. You will see many additional Scripture references provided—take the time to look them up because they will add clarity.

This series won't be easy—in fact, it will be very hard. But the challenge is worth the effort.

"The good thing—the really jump-up-and-down-exciting thing about all of this—is that you and I can know a whole lot more about God than we know today" (Lucas). So let's grab ahold of our mysterious God, let's wrestle with His seemingly contradictory statements—and let's not let go until He blesses us.

“Those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless.”

–Saint Augustine

“We value most the knowledge we must struggle to acquire.”

–James R. Lucas

Side A of the paradox: The Bible presents God as a Being with vast knowledge beyond anything we can imagine. Anything that can be known—He knows. *“Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed”* (1 Samuel 2:3).

No one can teach God. He is not a receiver of knowledge—He is the source of all knowledge and all understanding. *“Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?”* (Isaiah 40:13-14; see also Psalm 147:5).

Since God is all-knowing, no secrets can be kept from Him. He not only knows our thoughts but also the motives of our hearts. *“...Would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?”* (Psalm 44:21; see also Psalm 139:1-4; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Jeremiah 23:24).

Jesus has all the knowledge that God has, and even our knowledge of God comes as a gift from God. *“All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him”* (Matthew 11:27; see also John 16:30; Matthew 16:13-17).

None of our sins are hidden from God’s sight or escapes His knowledge. We are foolish to think we can keep anything from Him. *“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account”* (Hebrews 4:13; see also Psalm 90:8; Isaiah 29:15; Hosea 7:2).

“My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes” (Jeremiah 16:17).

“Since God knows much more about us than we can ever know about ourselves, we find that it’s important to confess even the sins we have committed unintentionally and unknowingly” (Lucas). *“But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults”* (Psalm 19:12; see also Leviticus 4).

“The bottom line? It’s a clear truth of the Bible, a truth that led to the creation of the doctrine of omniscience, that God has no external limitations on his knowledge. If it happened, it didn’t slip past him. If it is going to happen, it’s already on his radar screen... There is nothing outside him or within him that prevents him from knowing. We can be sure that God knows” (Lucas).

To only embrace side A of this paradox is to crush any chance of relationship with God. “Since relationships involve a two-way dynamic, with give and take, action and reaction, we can’t be involved in a real relationship with God...with a Being who already knows everything we will say or do and therefore feels no emotion in response to our words and behavior...At the end of this path, God becomes a victim of his all-knowing nature. He doesn’t want to think about certain things, but he can’t help himself. He’s omniscient, so he has to know these things. What else can he do?” (Lucas).

Side B of the paradox: The Bible presents God as all-knowing while simultaneously presenting Him as a Being with an amazing ability to forget what He once knew and it seems He can even choose not to know about certain things. *“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more”* (Isaiah 43:25; see also Job 11:6; Hebrews 10:17).

God says “I will forgive” and “I will forget” which indicates that although He knows all things, through an act of His will—He can choose to forgive and to forget some things. If a thing gets in the way of our communion with Him, He is capable of pushing it aside. *“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”* (Jeremiah 31:34b).

It seems God can even choose not to know about evil, and refuse to look at it until it reaches a point of requiring intervention. *“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing...”* (Habakkuk 1:13).

“Then the LORD said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know’” (Genesis 18:20–21).

Perhaps He enjoys being truly delighted by our love and commitment to Him, so He chooses not to know how some things will turn out. *“Do not lay a hand on the boy, he said. ‘Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son’”* (Genesis 22:12; see also Deuteronomy 8:2; 13:3).

“In one of the most astounding statements in a book full of astounding statements, Jesus—God in the flesh—tells us that he is content to have another member of the Trinity, the Father, know things that he doesn’t know” (Lucas). *“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”* (Matthew 24:36).

“God has some internally imposed limitations on his knowledge—limitations chosen by him. This is a clear truth of Scripture: If it has happened, God can choose to forget about it. If it is going to happen, he can choose not to think about the details if doing so will spoil his relationship with us or cause him to ‘look on evil.’ Although God is without external limitations or internal disabilities, apparently he can choose to limit himself. He intentionally doesn’t know some things, and he can choose to forget others” (Lucas).

Choosing only side B of this paradox leaves us with a God who is blissfully “unaware” of what’s happening down here on earth. Or One who forgives us by forgetting or “overlooking” what we’ve done without us being repentant. If “none” of our sins will be remembered then we’re off the hook, right? “Perhaps worst of all, we can convince ourselves that God won’t make us face the consequences of our actions. He won’t make us reap what we sow, even though Scripture makes that principle clear. God is just way too nice for that. Come to think of it, this God is just like us, lacking the backbone to confront us and hold us accountable for our misdeeds” (Lucas).

Luke 13:1–9

SATURDAY
AUGUST 8, 2015

Both/And: The all-knowing God who chooses to forget.

In ancient times it was often assumed the worst calamities befell the worst sinners—today's reading is pointing toward two such calamities. But Jesus used the topic to explain all people are sinners and all must repent or face a terrible fate. Jesus reinforced His statement (verses 3 and 5) with a parable of a fig tree that was unproductive and about to be permanently removed from the vineyard (verses 6–9). The bright side of Jesus' teaching is the fig tree was given a second chance. So we see that God is patient with the wicked, but His divine patience has its limits.



Look closely at verses 8–9. The man is saying: *Let's wait a little longer and see if there's a change.* If God chose always to know what we will do before we do it, then there's no need for Him to give us second chances.

What difference does it make to you, knowing God is willing to give you another chance?

And that He gives you the freedom to choose repentance so that He can choose to forget?

The mystery of both/and: “We see that God has access to all knowledge. He has no limitations imposed on him from outside forces or from internal disabilities. But God is not a victim of his knowledge, somehow forced to know what he doesn’t want to know or to remember what he wants to forget...God can choose to limit his knowledge. It is a limitation to be sure; but it’s a voluntary, self-imposed one. It takes a lot of power to keep an all-knowing God from knowing, and it shouldn’t surprise us that only God has that much power. No one can stop God from knowing—except God. We discover in this halakic conclusion that his knowledge and power are his attributes and tools, not his masters.” (Lucas).

God can go beyond “not-knowing” and choose to forget things that would damage our relationship with Him. When we truly repent: He forgets. This is really good news for us because when we confess our sins, then we are forgiven and the sins are forgotten. Our sins are totally washed away, and God won’t be dragging them out at a later date to use against us. We are purified and get to start over with a clean slate. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

“None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them...” (Ezekiel 18:22; see also Ezekiel 33:16; Hebrews 8:12).

“...As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12).

But the sequence is clear: “God doesn’t just forgive us and then hope we’ll change. It is first a change of direction (repentance) on our part, next he forgives, and then he forgets. But how can he forget? Because he is God. He has the power, and he chooses to use it on our behalf” (Lucas). *“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’* (Isaiah 1:18).

There will be a judgment day and we will have to give an account for all our words and deeds. *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad”* (2 Corinthians 5:10; see also Matthew 12:36; Revelation 20:12). **But according to the both/and principle—God will only judge us for the sins we have not asked Him to forgive.** He will have forgotten all the sins of which we’ve repented. “There is no stronger encouragement for Christians to keep the ‘open’ list of sins short, even empty” (Lucas).

“We are told that ‘God is love.’ but we are never told that ‘God is knowledge’ or that ‘God is power.’ God can subordinate knowledge and power to each other, and he can subordinate both of them to love. This halakic argument teaches us that this is exactly what he does. Knowledge and power are attributes of his nature, but they are fully under his control. He is able to further his ‘core,’ which is love” (Lucas).

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

TUESDAY
AUGUST 11, 2015

How this paradox applies to me.

We can learn to follow God's example by choosing to forget our own sin and guilt. "We can remember God's goodness in forgiving us and helping us with the consequences, but we let the sin and guilt and shame go once and for all. We're careful to remember the traps so we can avoid them, but not so we can live our lives in regret. . . . When we are reminded about past forgiven sins, we can be sure it is not God who is reminding us. It could be the Evil One, other people, or our own sinful nature, but it can't be God—because he just doesn't remember" (Lucas).

What sins have you confessed but continue to beat yourself up about?

Ask the all-powerful God to help you release the past and embrace the future as you begin to truly see yourself as a "new creation" in Christ Jesus.

"Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me."

—Philippians 3:13 (CEB)

Side A of the paradox: Psalm 5:5 proclaims that God hates everyone who does wrong.

Wait. Does that include you and me? We may think we're exempt because we haven't committed any "major" sins. But does God abide "minor" sins?

How many of us enjoy violent movies and/or video games? *"The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion"* (Psalm 11:5).

At least we haven't shed blood, right? Or have we? Even our words can perpetrate violence. *"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit"* (Proverbs 18:21).

How many of us think we are better than someone else? Or think more highly of ourselves than we ought? *"The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished"* (Proverbs 16:5).

Who has never told a lie, even a "white" lie or sought to deceive another person through words, lack of words, or actions? *"The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy"* (Proverbs 12:22).

Even our thoughts are an affront to God. *"The LORD detests the thoughts of the wicked, but gracious words are pure in his sight"* (Proverbs 15:26).

Lest we fool ourselves into thinking we are still somehow excluded, the Apostle Paul assures us we aren't. *"As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one'...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."* (Romans 3:10, 23).

Not only does God hate the wicked, but the Bible demands we do the same. *"Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?"* (Psalm 139:21; see also Matthew 12:30, Luke 11:23 and Revelation 2:2 NLT). And yet, "Our age reverses the idea of tolerance for everyone. But God reserves his praise for those who are intolerant of wicked people, who know that tolerance of difference and tolerance of evil are two very different things" (Lucas). It seems tolerating wickedness is part of what makes us wicked.

So, "if we choose side A of this paradox and say simply that God hates wicked people, we end up with a hard and unforgiving God. If we see God as the supreme hater, it's easy to blame him for everything bad that happens...If this is the complete picture, then we'll struggle with trying to have a relationship with this God who very probably can't stand us. And we develop in our lives a harsh attitude toward others...pledging allegiance to the A side of this paradox will likely produce Christians who won't lift a finger to help guide those who are spiritually misled or to help those who are losing their grip on their souls" (Lucas).

Side B of the paradox: John 3:16 proclaims that God loves everyone. Even a cursory reading of the Bible reveals God is love, and what's more—He has an intense love for sinners. *“And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them”* (1 John 4:16; see also 1 John 4:8).

One of the biggest complaints about Jesus was how He preferred the company of sinners to the religious leaders of His day. *“When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Matthew 9:11–13; see also Luke 15:2, Luke 19:1–10, Matthew 11:19 and John 4).

Not only did Jesus love sinners, welcome them and eat with them, He laid down His life for them. *“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends”* (John 15:13).

Jesus laid down His life not only for His friends but also for His enemies—proving His love is greater than the greatest love. *“‘Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.’ Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him”* (Mark 15:32).

“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.” (Luke 23:34; see also Luke 23:39–43).

We are commanded to be like Jesus and love the wicked. *“Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”* (1 Peter 3:9; see also Luke 6:27–28; Proverbs 10:12 and 25:21, Romans 12:20 and Acts 7:60).

“But, if God really is love, as the Bible proclaims, doesn't he have to love us no matter *what* we do?...Choosing the B side...does much more than give us license to throw off moral limits on our own behavior. It also strips God and his followers of any power to overcome evil. In place of the power over evil, it delivers a blanket tolerance of wickedness...Churches who align themselves with the B side of the paradox demand very little of their members. Just come around once in a while, contribute some money and time when you can, and claim to be a Christian. We can easily create a pseudo-Christianity that is easier to market; a collective, religious self-esteem movement that is completely disconnected from confessed sin, genuine repentance, or God's work of redemption” (Lucas).

Jonah 3

SATURDAY
AUGUST 15, 2015

Both/And: God loathes the wicked enough to destroy them, but loves the wicked enough to save them.

“And then there is the extreme application of ‘unconditional love,’ the belief that God will accept everyone into heaven. After all, a loving God could never really send anyone to hell, could he? We can blithely say, ‘We’re all God’s children,’ ignoring the fact that we only become a child of God when he decides to adopt us” (Lucas).

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’”

—Jonah 1:1–2

How does today’s reading illustrate God’s simultaneous loathing and loving of the wicked?

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

—2 Peter 3:9

The mystery of both/and: It is clear from Scripture that God loathes and loves the wicked—at the same time. *“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”* (Ezekiel 18:23).

God can loathe and love us at the same time because we are both good and bad—at the same time. People are created in God’s image and since we bear His likeness, we are basically good (Genesis 1:27, 31). Simultaneously we are sinners, which makes us inherently bad—we are “accustomed to doing evil”; we are “skilled in doing evil”; and we “invent ways of doing evil,” (Jeremiah 13:23; Jeremiah 4:22; Romans 1:18–20; Romans 3:10; see also Genesis 6:5–7).

As such, God has two ways of dealing with people. He is both kind and stern, and it seems He is comfortable with both courses of action. *“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off”* (Romans 11:22).

“Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.” (Deuteronomy 28:63; see also Psalm 37:12–13).

“Any thoughtful person can see immediately that our sin is what puts the barrier—an inescapable judgment, a fierce enmity—between us and God. This halakic forces us to give up the notion that God loves the sinner and hates the sin. We see that God makes no distinction, at least with truly wicked people. When we spit in God’s face, he takes it personally. He blames us. People and nations can come to the point where they are past hope, where they deserve and will receive God’s loathing” (Lucas).

The Bible hints that sin and wickedness have a “tipping point,” a moment when sin reaches its full measure and God’s loathing becomes irreversible. *“In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”* (Genesis 15:16; see also Luke 13:24–27).

But it isn’t God who dooms the wicked. *“Evildoers are snared by their own sin”* (Proverbs 29:6). “Amazingly, God offers kindness to the wicked in the hope that they will repent... **We see that our willingness to be forgiven is the key.** If we keep our hearts hardened against all of God’s overtures, we leave him no option but to loathe us” (Lucas).

“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4; see also 1 Corinthians 16:22).

“Although God goes a long, long way with us, we can exhaust his patience and become a stench in his nostrils. ‘My Spirit will not contend with man forever,’ he says, sounding weary as well as frustrated... His love keeps hanging in there, waiting, watching, hoping, acting, intervening. Unless we close the door forever, he never gives up, never forgets us, never stops scheming and plotting to entice us to find him. We see that God isn’t gentle with sin. But he is, indeed, gentle” (Lucas).

Psalm 5:5
John 3:16

SUNDAY
AUGUST 16, 2015

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

—Romans 5:6–8

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Side A of this paradox is clear—Jesus came to bring peace. *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”* (John 14:27; see also John 20:19; Isaiah 66:12).

According to Scripture, Jesus brought us peace—that’s past tense—He already did it! It is not something we will receive in the future. *“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5). Whatever punishment was due to us, He took it on Himself and earned a peace for us which we did not deserve. *“...And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross”* (Colossians 1:20).

“God is able to give us peace every moment of our lives, for the rest of our lives. Spiritual peace? Mental peace? Emotional peace? Peace about decisions and career paths and relationships and service and ministries? Yes. God’s peace touches on every area of life” (Lucas). *“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you”* (2 Thessalonians 3:16).

Jesus can bring us peace because He, Himself, is our peace. *“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier...”* (Ephesians 2:14 and 17).

We live in a dangerous world with diseases and disasters, incidents and accidents—but we can find peace in the healing touch of the Great Physician and the safety of our Great Protector. *“LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us”* (Isaiah 26:12; see also Isaiah 57:19; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50; Leviticus 26:6; Psalm 147:14; Psalm 91; Haggai 2:9; Acts 10:36; Romans 14:17; Romans 15:33; Galatians 5:22).

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).

Jesus is often characterized as a lamb—lambs don’t attack or abuse anyone. Lambs are peaceful, gentle animals. *“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”* (John 1:29; see also John 1:36; Revelation 7:17). *“Put your sword back in its place,’ Jesus said to him, ‘for all who draw the sword will die by the sword’”* (Matthew 26:52).

Thinking of Jesus as the “Prince of Peace” makes us feel good. Such a Savior would never be harsh or combative, would He? *“See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey...He will proclaim peace to the nations”* (Zechariah 9:9–10).

We can have a peace that “passes understanding,” even in difficult circumstances, because of the shed blood of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s good news! However, we must be aware: “Embracing the Jesus who is peace and only peace can leave us feeling justified in inactivity and guilty about our challenging relationships. Churches that focus on this side of the paradox can easily end up as mushy, feel-good havens for people who are in denial about the God of swords and whips” (Lucas).

Side B of this paradox is also clear: Jesus did not come to bring peace. *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword”* (Matthew 10:34).

Our childhood image of Jesus is a man in a bathrobe who cuddles lambs and gently blesses children. *“The story about clearing the temple is underplayed, as if it were some sort of aberration”* (Lucas). *“In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’”* (John 2:14–16; Jesus cracked whips to drive people out of their place of worship on more than one occasion—see also Matthew 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–16; Isaiah 10:26 and John 2:17).

“He drove them out, wrecked their trade-show booths, called them robbers. And then he stood there, alone, glaring at them, blocking their paths, an unstoppable and unrelenting foe. Whatever else this is, it is not a picture of peace” (Lucas).

Jesus openly insulted people and criticized the religious leaders in front of their followers, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”* (See Matthew 23:27–28, 33).

“One of the experts in the law answered him, ‘Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.’ Jesus replied, ‘And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them. Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them’” (See Luke 11:45–47).

A sword divides things—it splits things in two. The Jews hoped the Messiah would conquer their conquerors, but Jesus had other plans. *“He came to break up relationships, to cut friendships in two, to divide people who are closely related, to create warfare inside of homes. His sword was for families, not for Romans”* (Lucas). *“For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household’”* (Matthew 10:35–36; see also Luke 21:8–19).

“From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Luke 12:52–53).

He doesn’t just turn people against each other but He came to set the whole world ablaze. *“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division”* (Luke 12:49–51).

In Scripture, Jesus is characterized as a lion. Lions are ferocious predators who devour their prey. *“For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them”* (Hosea 5:14; see also Revelation 5:5).

Jesus forces people to decide and to take sides. He’s not wishy-washy and He’s not a push-over; His message is demanding. Focusing on the Jesus who is perfectly comfortable causing disruption and division may cause us to be fearful or anxious. We might use it as an excuse to avoid attempts at reconciliation in estranged relationships, to not love our enemies, or even to pick fights with them. “Limiting our view of Jesus to the Son of God who brings a sword instead of peace can leave us feeling insecure, justified in fighting over insignificant points, and feeling guilty if we fail to challenge any wrong of which we’re aware. Churches that focus on this side of the paradox can easily become hard, comply-or-else citadels for people who would gladly trade in their plowshares for swords” (Lucas).

James 4:1–12

FRIDAY
AUGUST 21, 2015

Both/And: Jesus is the Prince of Peace but He didn't come to make everybody feel good.

In fact, *"there is no peace for the wicked"* (Isaiah 48:22; 57:21). And if you recall from week two, without Jesus we're all wicked (Romans 1:18–20; Romans 5:1–11).

But, *"we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand"* (Romans 5:1) Thank God!

There are two kinds of peace and two kinds of war. Today's reading captures the mystery of this paradox fairly well.

Write James 4:4 here:

The mystery of both/and: We know Jesus is the Prince of Peace who bears a sword—so is it possible there are different kinds of peace and different kinds of war? Genuine peace is peace with God, but that puts us at war with evil. And phony peace is peace with evil, but that puts us at war with God.

Genuine peace is purchased at a price. First by Christ for us, “...And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20; Isaiah 53:5). And also by our own suffering, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). “But if we are trained by suffering, if we learn the lessons that God is allowing discipline to try to teach us, the peace will come in a bountiful harvest” (Lucas).

Peace comes as a result of our choices. The way of peace is not automatic—it is learned, loved and offered to others. “Therefore love truth and peace” (Zechariah 8:19b; see also Romans 3:17). Jesus instructed His followers like this, “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you” (Luke 10:5–6).

We must work for peace in all our relationships. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). We avoid unnecessary division but not to the point of compromising on character or convictions.

“When faced with a choice between relational peace and loyalty to Christ, we have to side with Christ and separate from the person who pushes us to downplay our relationship with God,” even if they are our family, friends, neighbors, bosses, coworkers or fellow church members (Lucas). “King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, ‘You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.’ Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray” (1 Kings 11:1–3; see also Ezra 10:10–12).

We must avoid false peace, “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14; see also Ezekiel 13:10–16; 2 Timothy 4:2–4; 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3).

Especially if it requires us to “make peace” with God’s enemies. “He took away the Sabbath canopy that had been built at the temple and removed the royal entryway outside the temple of the LORD, **in deference to the king of Assyria**” (2 Kings 16:18, emphasis added).

And finally, we realize peace is not unconditional; there are terms for peace with God (here are ten, but there may be others):

- 1. First and foremost, we must belong to the Prince of Peace;** we must live in allegiance to Him. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).
 “...The LORD blesses his people with peace” (Psalm 29:11).
- 2. We must “seek peace and pursue it”** (Psalm 34:14; quoted in 1 Peter 3:11). “We have to want it and go after it and not stop until we get it” (Lucas).

3. **We must know the connection between righteousness and peace.** According to Isaiah 32:17 peace is the fruit of righteousness—the two are intimately connected. Therefore, to remain in God’s peace we must avoid peace-destroying sin. *“I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly”* (Psalm 85:8–10).
4. **We must consistently walk in God’s ways.** *“Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death”* (Isaiah 57:2). The added benefit of walking in faith with God is that He takes the “fight” out of our enemies—giving us more peace! *“When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone’s way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them”* (Proverbs 16:7).
5. **We must do good.** This is one of Christianity’s first/last principles—by doing what is good for others, we gain peace for ourselves. *“...But glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good”* (Romans 2:10).
6. **We must be meek.** *“But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity”* (Psalm 37:11). *“Ironically, there is no peace for the arrogant and braggarts and pushy people”* (Lucas).
7. **We must be controlled by the Holy Spirit.** *“The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace”* (Romans 8:6). The Holy Spirit helps us think, want and do the right things—if we don’t submit our minds to Him we will live in spiritual turmoil.

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).
8. **We must present our requests to God.** *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”* (Philippians 4:6–7).
9. **We must keep trusting in God no matter what comes our way.** *“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast because they trust in you”* (Isaiah 26:3). Jesus demonstrated this perfect peace as He slept through the storm on the Sea of Galilee (see Matthew 8:23–27). His perfect peace is available to us—which brings us back to condition #8 (above). Use Psalm 91 and Psalm 23 to pray for this.

In this life, we will experience suffering, persecution and hardships—but our trust is in the One who overcame it all. *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”* –John 16:33 (see also 2 Timothy 3:12; Acts 14:22).
10. **Finally, we must love God’s law.** Following God’s law is the “path” to peace and it is not burdensome to those who love God (1 John 5:3). *“Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble”* (Psalm 119:165).

In fact, when we walk according to God’s laws we don’t get a trickle of peace, we get rivers of it. *“This is what the LORD says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea’”* (Isaiah 48:17–18).

John 14:27
Matthew 10:34

SUNDAY
AUGUST 23, 2015

*"I have told you these things,
so that in me you may have
peace. In this world you will
have trouble. But take heart! I
have overcome the world."*

—John 16:33

1 Thessalonians 5:12–28

TUESDAY
AUGUST 25, 2015

How this paradox applies to me.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

—Matthew 5:9

First we pursue God’s peace in our own lives, then we imitate God by extending peace to others through our words and actions. We hold to the conditions of peace—this means we’re not promoting false peace by smoothing over wrongs, accepting sin, or aligning ourselves with evil. We only offer peace on God’s terms. We understand that peace is not always possible in our relationships, but, as representatives of the Prince of Peace, we know what brings peace and can work toward it.

“As you approach a town to attack it, you must first offer its people terms for peace.”

—Deuteronomy 20:10 (NLT)

Side A of the paradox: “Fleeing evil makes sense, because a Christian is to have nothing to do with the deeds of darkness” (Lucas). *“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret”* (Ephesians 5:8–12).

When in doubt about whether to fight or flee, it is best to run away. Humans are limited. God is not. *“The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe”* (Proverbs 18:10).

Jesus escaped from danger, and He taught His followers to do the same. *“When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes”* (Matthew 10:23; see also Luke 4:28–30; John 8:58; John 10:39; Acts 8:1). *“Jesus is assuming persecution will come if our belief in him becomes known. But he is also assuming that we will wisely move away from that persecution. If a college class or workplace or neighborhood has become intolerable, it’s all right to drop the class, change jobs, or move to another area”* (Lucas).

We will face some temptations that are so dangerous to our souls that we are given the biblical directive to flee. Flee from sexual immorality. Flee from idolatry. Flee from evil desires (1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Corinthians 10:14; Colossians 3:5; 2 Timothy 2:22–23).

We are also instructed to avoid certain kinds of conflicts. *“Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels”* (2 Timothy 2:22–23; see also 1 Timothy 6:4–11, 20; Titus 3:9; 2 John 1:10–11).

The good news is, when we’re attacked by temptation—God always provides an escape route. *“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it”* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Sometimes we should do more than run away from evil—we should actually hide from it. *“Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings”* (Psalm 17:8; see also Psalm 31:20; Psalm 55:7–8).

Scripture instructs us to avoid putting ourselves into temptation’s way. Recovering alcoholics shouldn’t hang out with alcoholics. People with anger issues must learn their triggers and avoid those things. “In the end, if we don’t run, hide or avoid evil, we can’t expect to be protected. But if we do these things we can ask for complete deliverance. ‘O LORD my God, I rake refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me.’ There is just no substitute for fleeing and for finding a good place to hide” (Lucas; Psalm 7:1; Psalm 27:5; Psalm 32:7; Psalm 143:9).

THURSDAY
AUGUST 27, 2015

1 Samuel 17:45–50

“...Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”
 —1 Samuel 17:26

Side B: We must fight evil.

We are called to fight evil. This requires us to discern between “our” enemies and “God’s” enemies. It also requires us to flee to God first, and then go in His strength and not our own.

“Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes.”
 —Psalm 44:5

David was probably a teenager when he fought Goliath, but this pattern would characterize his whole life. When facing God’s enemies, David not only stood his ground—he ran toward the fight (verse 48). David became a famous warrior who fought the Lord’s enemies with ferocity, but when facing his own enemies—he chose, instead, to flee and hide (see 1 Samuel 19; 1 Samuel 27:1–4; 2 Samuel 15:13–16).

“One who is wise can go up against the city of the mighty and pull down the stronghold in which they trust.”

—Proverbs 21:22

Side B of the paradox: “If we pick side B and say simply that we should fight evil, we might think it is our job to defeat the devil” (Lucas).

We may forget the battle is the Lord’s and begin to feel responsible for the safety of God’s kingdom. *“All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands” (1 Samuel 17:47).*

We may put too much value on our own will power to overcome evil, sin and temptations. But the results can be disastrous. Saying, “I’ll never do that again!” doesn’t mean we won’t. In fact, Paul warns us, *“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment...” (Romans 12:3).*

Or we may come to depend on programs or adherence to a higher standard as a means of fighting evil. We may even look down on other Christians who don’t adhere to the same programs and standards. Again this can lead us to put our faith somewhere other than God’s power to overcome the temptations we face. *“Fighting evil. We can overestimate our ability to do it. We can go out to fight with inadequate weapons and not even see that we’re about to be captured—or killed” (Lucas).*

But the Bible does instruct us to fight evil. *“Fight the good fight of the faith...”* With wisdom and intentionality, *“Not like a boxer beating at the air.” (1 Timothy 6:12; 1 Corinthians 9:26).*

We can’t remain isolated, content in our little world—pretending that evil doesn’t exist. We have to wage war on evil by fighting it and destroying it. *“A wise person fought a city of warriors and brought down the stronghold in which they felt safe” (Proverbs 21:22, CEB; also the Israelites were*

instructed to wipe out the Canaanites when they came to possess the promised-land, see Joshua 9:24).

Jesus said we have authority to overcome all the power of the enemy—not just to stand our ground, but to advance against it. *“I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you” (Luke 10:19; see also Nehemiah 6:10–11; 1 Samuel 17:48).*

By trusting in God, we can even cause the devil to run away from us, *“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7; see also Matthew 4:1–11).*

We demolish strongholds with divine power and the weapons of righteousness. *“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4–5; see also 2 Corinthians 6:4–7; Ephesians 6:17).*

“As we prepare for battle, we need to make sure we are fighting against true evil and not just human incompetence, ignorance, or pettiness. Too much of what Christians have called fighting evil is really a battle over personal preference (for example, trying to get a city council to open each meeting with a prayer) than it is with a biblical imperative” (Lucas).

The battle between good and evil is not even. The devil is not equal to God. When we trust God, when we go out in His strength, when we approach our fight with wisdom and we don’t give up—we will overcome evil.

FRIDAY
AUGUST 28, 2015

Nehemiah 6:1–15

Nehemiah is an excellent example of someone who used wisdom and prayer to decide his course of action.

Both/And: There is a time to flee and a time to fight.

What enemy or evil was Nehemiah facing (verses 1–2)?

What tactics did Nehemiah's enemies try to use against him? Look at the whole passage and list as many as you can:

How did Nehemiah respond? Again, look at the whole passage and list as many as you can:

Is there any application of his story to yours?

"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

—Romans 12:19

The mystery of both/and: It's clear we are supposed to flee evil and fight evil—so the key to this paradox is knowing when to do what. “We have to study any situation closely and trust the leading of the Holy Spirit to know if fight or flight is the best option” (Lucas).

The Bible is clear about fleeing temptations that appeal to our sinful nature and seek to destroy us. When we flee to God and hide in Him, He can deliver us from our sin along with its penalties, its pain, its power over us, its persistence in enticing us, its pervasiveness, and its constant presence.

“You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory” (Colossians 3:3–4, CEB).

Fleeing is also the first step in fighting evil—we run to God where we can then stand firm. This puts us under His protection and in the company of other believers. There is strength in numbers! *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”* (Matthew 18:19–20; see also Hebrews 10:25; Ecclesiastes 4:12).

The Bible indicates sometimes we must proceed from fleeing to fighting. The Israelites did this on a number of occasions, per the Lord's instructions. “To fight God's battles in God's way, we first flee to God in prayer, then we listen and do exactly (and only) what he tells us to do. If we find ourselves in a situation where we are being drawn into the wrong, we leave, even abruptly if necessary” (Lucas; see also Joshua 8:3–8; 1 Samuel 7:5–11; 1 Chronicles 5:20; 2 Chronicles 13:14; Psalm 37:39–40; Isaiah 37:21–38).

We take the offensive against God's enemies—people or things that seek to destroy the helpless, the poor, the abused, orphans, widows or children. These are the fights we should run toward. Remember, we only do this if they do not put us in a position to be destroyed by our own temptations. We must keep our souls safe from our own enemies while fighting God's enemies. *“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow”* (Isaiah 1:17; see also

Jeremiah 5:28; 1 Samuel 17:45–50; Galatians 2:5).

“God is so much in favor of us not fleeing in the face of his enemies that he encourages us, in effect, to do things that could cause others to persecute us. ‘Everyone who wants to lead a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,’ we're told. If we're not persecuted, this might be a clue that we're not really all that serious about living a godly life” (Lucas; 2 Timothy 3:12).

We must fight with the right weapons. We should “pray continually,” but also remember prayer is not a substitute for fleeing a situation that tempts us. Neither should we employ the human arsenals of anger, judgment, criticism and so forth. Also, we must recognize many of God's weapons are counterintuitive, such as turning the other cheek (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Matthew 6:7; Luke 6:29; Romans 12:21).

We must recognize and fight only the right enemies. There is real evil in the world and it is unwise to waste energy fighting with other Christians (people, churches or denominations) whose preferences are different from our own. Other Christians may be ignorant, immature or just plain quirky, but that doesn't make them enemies. *“Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters”* (Romans 14, see whole chapter).

“We learn from this halakic study that a bad fight is the one we fight in our own strength, while a good fight is a fight of faith. God's name is a strong tower; we run to it in faith and we are delivered from the enemy. We fight by letting God fight for us—‘The battle is the Lord's’” (Lucas, Exodus 14:14; Deuteronomy 1:30; Deuteronomy 3:22; Joshua 23:10; 1 Samuel 17:47; Nehemiah 4:20; Psalm 35:1).

Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time for peace and a time for war. Timing is everything here! When God tells us to flee, we better flee. When God tells us to fight, we better fight. Whether fleeing or fighting, as long as we're acting in obedience to God—we will always win (Ecclesiastes 3:8).

Psalm 55:7–8
Proverbs 21:22

SUNDAY
AUGUST 30, 2015

“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

—1 Timothy 6:11–12

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”

—Matthew 10:16

Ephesians 6:10–18

TUESDAY
SEPTEMBER 1, 2015

How this paradox applies to me.

How does today's reading help your understanding of the concepts we've study this week?

Fleeing-

Hiding-

Fighting-

Standing firm-

Using weapons of righteousness-

Utilizing wisdom and prayer-

Fighting the right enemy-

Trusting in the strength of the Lord-

If you were mentoring a new believer in Christ, how would you summarize this important paradox for him or her?

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”

-1 Peter 5:8–9

Side A of the paradox: “If there is one clear theme in all of Scripture, it is that we are saved by God’s grace through faith. Period. Nothing else can be added” (Lucas). Romans 4:4–5 claims we are “declared righteous”—or made ready for heaven—by our faith. We can “*be found in him, not having a righteousness of our own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith*” (Philippians 3:9). That seems pretty simple: claim to have faith, or believe, and you’re safe?

Faith is the only way to God—always has been and always will be. “*He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household’*” (Acts 16:30–31).

Faith is a decision to believe, to accept something as true. It’s a commitment to the life we want but cannot see. “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for*” (Hebrews 11:1–2). “*Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die’*” (John 11:25). “*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*” (John 1:12).

God’s special favor (his grace) is a free gift that is activated by our faith (Lucas). “*God saved you by his grace when you believed*” (Ephesians 2:8a, NLT). “*And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace*” (Romans 11:6).

Salvation is a gift from God and not a salary paid or reward for work we have done. We could feed the poor, house the orphans, share the gospel and write checks all day every day but it still would not earn our way into heaven... “*so none of us can boast about it*” (Ephesians 2:9).

Works do not save us. They can’t save us. They are not the vehicle of salvation that God has provided (Lucas). “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). “*I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?*” (Galatians 3:2). “*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life*” (John 5:24).

“Without faith, it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6a). “*What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone*” (Romans 9:30–32). “*For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law*” (Romans 3:28).

“If we choose side A of this paradox and say that people are saved by faith plus nothing, we can end up with a “head” faith that relies on mental assent to the message of the gospel, but with no “heart” component that governs how we live our daily lives. We can easily reduce faith to nothing more than agreeing with a proposition, creed or statement of faith (Lucas). There is no impetus for giving time or money, for seeking or granting forgiveness, for living any differently than those who do not believe in or even oppose Christ because behaviors and deeds would have no bearing on salvation. There is no expectation, requirement or cost to discipleship on this side of the paradox, so people can live for self rather than God. “We can end up with a flawless statement of faith and a badly flawed life” (Lucas).

Side B of the paradox: James 2:24 says a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. Let's face it—lots of people profess faith in Jesus, attend worship and study the Bible, but don't do God's will in their daily lives. *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 7:21). *"Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work"* (1 John 3:7–8).

Faith without works is not just useless; it could be dangerous. Consuming Christianity without evidence of a changed heart and life can actually push others away rather than draw them to Jesus. *"Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned"* (Hebrews 6:7–8). *"Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!'"* (Matthew 21:18–19; see also Matthew 7:16).

Talk is cheap, but actions speak much louder than all the right words in the world. *"They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good"* (Titus 1:16). *"This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister"* (1 John 3:10).

Do nothing good, get nothing good. Do righteous deeds, get eternal life. *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your*

inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'... 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'... 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:31–36, 40–43, 45–46).

"It is clear in the Bible, faith without works is dead. Not anemic, not incomplete, not limping along. But lifeless, an empty shell—dead. In fact, without works there is no faith... *'As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead'* (James 2:17). When a body is without the spirit, we put it in the ground and cover it with dirt. So we see that a faith without works belongs six feet under" (Lucas).

If we choose side B of this paradox and say that people are saved by works rather than by faith, we still have problems. We can easily end up with a performance-based religion that measures our inner life by our outward results. This can lead to a rules-based system that gauges the validity of a person's faith by how much good they appear to do. If we are saved by works... how many good deeds are enough to get a person into heaven?... What if we arrive at heaven's front gate only to find that we're two good deeds shy of enjoying eternity with God? And what if bad actions cancel out good works? How can we ever keep the ledger straight? (Lucas).

James 2:14–26

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 5, 2015

“Good works finish what faith begins.”
–Lucas

Look back at the lists of good works you wrote on Thursday and honestly ask yourself these questions:

Are there enough of them, quantity-wise, to constitute proof of your faith in Jesus?

Are they impactful enough, quality-wise, to bet your eternal future on?

How did your faith prompt you to live as you have been, if it has at all?

What end goal do you have in mind when you do good things?

How does your way of life pay tribute to, or glorify, the Lord?

The mystery of both/and: Are we saved by faith or works? The biblical answer seems to be “yes.” Once again, we can't solve a both/and paradox with an either/or response. It's not faith or works. It's faith and works. It is clear from Scripture that faith leads to works and works signify faith.

Faith is more than mere agreement with an idea or mental assent. “Something has to change deep inside us, deep inside our souls, where convictions are formed and allegiances are solidified. We must adhere to the truth that ‘Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.’ Faith is absolutely essential” (Lucas).

When we are changed within, it shows. “There is no question that we have to act on our faith. Something has to change on the outside, where others will see it, out where relationships are built and lives are changed and things are done to advance the kingdom of God. There is no escaping the need to ‘produce fruit in keeping with repentance.’ Works are absolutely essential” (Lucas).

Halakic reasoning shows that there is an order to the relationship between faith and works. Faith comes before works. Works flow from faith. It's not a matter of faith alone. It's more accurate to say faith first. If the works don't come, then the faith is not real. If action doesn't happen, the faith is pretty much dead. Works have everything to do with the Christian life and play the most significant part in distinguishing whether someone is a real Christian, but we have to get the starting point right.

There is only one way of getting to heaven, and it involves faith that is authentic enough to produce good works. “Genuine, saving faith can't help but produce good works. Works show that we're truly part of God's kingdom. ‘Therefore...be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure,’ urged the apostle Peter. Prove it, he's telling us. Make it real. Show it's real. Works are an important way, he is telling us, to be ‘sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see’” (Lucas).

Doing good is an act of love and obedience. It is our response to Jesus' goodness, love and example. *“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well”* (1 John 5:1). *“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love”* (Galatians 5:6b). *“Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth”* (1 John 3:18). *“We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

It is tempting to assume that saying “yes” to Jesus is enough or to do just the opposite and feel as if the “burden is really on our shoulders to get good ‘grades’ on earth so we'll earn a scholarship to heaven.” Or we might “think that we came to Christ by faith but that from here on we have to depend on our own efforts.” In reality, the entire Christian life is lived by faith, from “first to last,” the moment of salvation until the end when we finally see Jesus (Lucas). Faith and works *must* go together to live a life pleasing unto God. Believing produces right action. Right action can only be sustained by real belief. Growing *in* Christ makes us want to grow to be *like* Christ, and doing good for Him only makes us want to know Him better.

Ephesians 2:8–10
James 2:24

SUNDAY
SEPTEMBER 6, 2015

“Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes”

—Romans 10:4

“It’s a beautiful, cyclical cause-and-effect relationship: the works of others inspire faith in us, which leads us to do good works, which inspire faith in others, which leads to more good works. Because it hinders this cycle, a faith without works is short-sighted and unsustainable.”

—Gloria McGee-Denton

John 15:5–8
John 14:12

TUESDAY
 SEPTEMBER 8, 2015

A paraphrase of Mark 4:14–20 offers a few scenarios: The farmer sows the word. Some people are like: 1. seed sown along the path, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them; 2. seed sown on rocky places where people receive it with joy, but since they have no root, they last only a short time and fall away quickly; 3. seed sown among thorns where worries, deceitfulness of wealth, desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful; 4. seed sown on good soil where people hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.

There is almost a symbiotic relationship between faith and works. “Real faith demands real fruit and, at the same time, provides the only ground in which that fruit can grow” (Lucas). Neither one can properly stand alone, nor is sufficient alone, in the Christian life. Thus it is up to us to cooperate with what God wants to do in and through us by remaining in Him through daily spiritual practices and then acting obediently to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Then we’ll produce fruit in the form of good works that not only bless others but that makes others interested in the God who inspired such goodness.

“Your fruitfulness comes from me.”

“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

–John 15:8

–Hosea 14:8b

God's depth and breadth cannot be contained by only one side of any of the many paradoxes in the Bible, so approaching Scripture with the desire and ability to see the "both/and" of God is helpful and appropriate.

As James R. Lucas said, "God is full of mystery, overflowing with mysteries. And yet he is also the revealer of mysteries. . .

So this is my closing invitation to you. Together, let's celebrate our mysterious Companion. Let's welcome a God so wise and brilliant, so intimate and loving, that he wants to walk with us and talk with us the whole way."

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