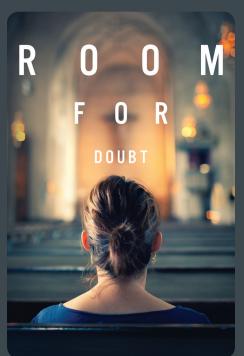
# Sermon Journal



February 10– March 29



March 30– April 26



# Following Jesus page 7

# Room for Doubt page 67

# Asbury's Vision Statement:

#### Developing all generations for significant lives in Christ.

This defines our specific and unique calling.



Worship and obey Christ

Learn and live out Scripture

Influence and invite others to follow Christ

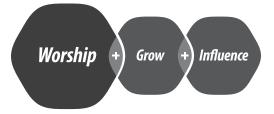
Steward time, skills and resources

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 available at 9:00 am in the Mason Chapel.
- Every Monday, Celebrate Recovery, Celebration Station and the Landing meet.

#### February

Fri, 2.5–6	IF: Gathering, Asbury's Venue, begins at 7:00 pm
Sun, 2.7	Communion in all services
Wed, 2.10	Lent begins today. Ash Wednesday service, Sanctuary, 6:00 pm
Sat, 2.13	2nd Saturday, serving the community, 8:15 am–noonish
Sat, 2.13-20	Monterrey, Mexico mission team
Sun, 2.14	"Following Jesus" sermon series begins

#### March

Thur, 3.3	Q Commons, Asbury's Venue, 7:00– 9:00 pm			
Sun, 3.6	Communion in all services			
	Spring Break missions commissioning			
Sun, 3.12	2nd Saturday, serving the community, 8:15 am–noonish			
Sat, 3.12–19	Spring Break missions and on-site prayer watch			
Thur, 3.24	Maundy Thursday service, Mason Chapel, 7:00 pm			
Fri, 3.25	Good Friday service, Sanctuary, 7:00 pm			
Sat, 3.26	Family Easter event, 10:00 am–1:00 pm			
Sun, 3.27	Easter Sunday			
April				
Sun, 4.3	"Room for Doubt" sermon series begins			
	Communion in all services			
6.1.4.0				

- Sat, 4.9 2nd Saturday, serving the community, 8:15 am–noonish
- Sat, 4.16 50+ Marriage banquet
- Sun, 4.17 Marriage recognition
- Sun, 4.24 Confirmation service, Sanctuary, 6:00 pm

# How to Use This 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 studies 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 effort into creating these journals 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 our pastors 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 by answering these three questions in your own words: What does the passage teach me about God? What does the passage teach me about people? What does this passage teach me about myself? (These guiding questions may be used every day.)
- 4. The daily reflections offer insight and can be used for personal application. You may use the blank lines to write or "process" your own thoughts and reflections. Discussion questions have also been provided for small group use.
- 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 from the sermon.

# Following PESUS #

by Stephanie Hurd

# Following Jesus

There's an old story about a street evangelist who was asking people if they were willing to follow Jesus. A passerby had this retort: "I don't know. Where's he going?" Honestly, the question and response are both legitimate. Jesus asked people to follow Him. Some dropped everything and followed without hesitation. Others couldn't (or wouldn't).

Luke 9:46–62 shows a whirlwind of activity:

- The disciples argue about who among them is the greatest.
- The disciples try to stop an unknown exorcist driving out demons in Jesus' Name.
- The disciples get pumped about calling fire down from heaven on the Samaritans (permission denied).
- Jesus' invitation to new disciples is rejected because of family matters.

In the middle of this text is a candid assessment of what it means to follow Jesus. The Master Himself said to a guy who pledged to follow Jesus wherever He went: *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."* 

The next chapter (10:1–24) describes the joy that comes from following Jesus. "Prophets and kings" yearned for but never saw what Jesus revealed to His disciples.

Simon Peter wrestled with the street evangelist's question, too: "Are you willing to follow Jesus?" This concludes John's Gospel: Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" (John 21:17–19)

We don't know where following Jesus will take us in this life. My pathway is different than yours. Sometimes we get the short end of the materials stick. Even Jesus sacrificed for His purpose. But He also insisted that life is far more than acquiring stuff: "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?" (Matthew 16:26) Who can forget His words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" (Matthew 6:25) As the Apostle Paul said about following Jesus: "I've learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:11)

"Why should I follow Jesus?" Because He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the True Vine. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Light of the World. He is the Bread of Life. He is the Resurrection and the Life. As the Beatles sang, "Money can't buy me love." Materialism won't give you abundant or eternal life. Jesus will. Only Jesus can. That's why I follow Him.

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-Dr. Tom Harrison, Senior Pastor

P.S. The new format has been well received so we are continuing with it, and we've added a page of discussion questions each week for small groups.

Following Jesus is both inviting and challenging. We are invited into relationship but challenged in significant ways. These two dynamics working together create an environment for people to grow in their life with God. Following Jesus is an intentional pursuit that takes time, effort and commitment, but it results in the fullest kind of life.

# Following

Eternal life in God's kingdom is both present and continuous. Following Jesus is also present and continuous. It is not a one-time decision but a daily sacrifice and on-going commitment that begins with repentance and belief. Then, in the context of this life-giving relationship with Jesus, we are challenged to surrender our lives and follow Him.

# Discussion Questions:

John the Baptist and Jesus both preached repentance as the first step to living in God's kingdom. Communal repentance precedes revival, and repentance is the first step in our personal Lenten journeys toward Easter. Why do you think repentance is such an important starting place in our spiritual lives?

Share with the group how you first entered into relationship with Jesus. What does your commitment to following Jesus look like today?

One challenge to following Jesus is not the people or the stuff in our lives, it is our attachment to them. Refer to Paul's words in Philippians 3:7–11. To what in your life are you most devoted? What competes with Jesus for your priorities? What is standing in the way of complete surrender?

Following Jesus is high stakes/high rewards. In what ways do you feel following Jesus is worth the risk?

Now glance at Matthew 7:21–23. What is the danger of deceiving ourselves into thinking we're Christ's disciples when we are not?

The greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. In what ways is this commandment more about "being" than about "doing"?

How will you increase your level of commitment to Jesus this Lenten season?

#### WEDNESDAY / FEBRUARY 10, 2016

## Matthew 4:17, 23, 25

It is customary for Christians to begin the Lenten season by receiving the imposition of ashes on their foreheads. Ashes represent two important aspects of Lent. First, they remind us of our humanity and consequently, our mortality—we were formed from dust and to dust we shall return (Genesis 2:7, 3:19). Abraham acknowledged this when he interceded for Sodom, *"Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes…"* (Genesis 18:27) Second, ashes demonstrate repentance and sorrow over sins committed. Jesus rebuked the towns of Korazin and Bethsaida for not repenting in sackcloth and ashes and said they would be judged for it (Matthew 11:20–24). On the first day of Lent, we come before God to acknowledge our humanity and repent of our sins. No matter how far along we are in our spiritual journeys, we are still sinners in need of forgiveness (Romans 3:23). It may seem fatalistic, but it is our first step toward the day we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and the future renewal of all things. Today we remember "what we are" while anticipating what we will someday be.

Your prayerful reflection:

Note: Today is Ash Wednesday on the Christian calendar. This marks the beginning of Lent.

#### THURSDAY / FEBRUARY 11, 2016

## Mark 1: 1–20

"Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means 'spring.' The forty days represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin his ministry. Lent is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. In the early church, Lent was a time to prepare new converts for baptism. Today, Christians focus on their relationship with God, often choosing to give up something or to volunteer and give of themselves for others. Sundays in Lent are not counted in the forty days because each Sunday represents a 'mini-Easter' and the reverent spirit of Lent is tempered with joyful anticipation of the Resurrection."

#### FRIDAY / FEBRUARY 12, 2016

## Luke 14:15-35

Who does Jesus think He is? In this passage Jesus is telling us that to follow Him we have to make Him our *highest priority*. He's saying we must love Him more than we love the most important people in our lives, and even more than we love ourselves! When He says a disciple must "carry his cross," Jesus is saying a disciple must deny himself to the point of *complete surrender*. Jesus is Lord, and we may not like it, but He has set the standard for discipleship: "Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple." (Luke 14:33, MSG) We can choose to follow Him or not follow Him; what we can't do is halfway follow Him. To halfway follow is to deceive ourselves into thinking we're His disciples when perhaps we're not.

#### SATURDAY / FEBRUARY 13, 2016

## John 6:22–66

This scene comes the day after the feeding of 5,000—the crowds are in hot pursuit of Jesus, who (as always) turns it into a teachable moment. He challenges the crowd, *if you are willing to go to such great lengths for a free meal, how far then are you willing to go for Me*? He uses bread as a metaphor for Himself because He is the only One who can satisfy completely and permanently our human needs. But the level of commitment He is asking for stuns many of His disciples, and they begin to grumble. Jesus asks, *"Does this offend you?"* He continues, *"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."* But many only wanted the free meal, so they turned back and no longer followed Him.

SUNDAY / FEBRUARY 14, 2016

## Matthew 4:18–22

Sermon notes:

#### MONDAY / FEBRUARY 15, 2016

### Matthew 8:18–22

Again we see the radical demands Jesus places on discipleship. It was rare for a "teacher of the Law" to respond positively to Jesus, but Jesus doesn't lower His standards to gain acceptance. Jesus shoots the guy straight. Similarly, first century Jews placed great importance on the duty of children to bury their parents, but Jesus says the spiritually dead can bury the physically dead. The cares of life can crowd out and compete for our devotion to Jesus. He wants true disciples— those who are deeply committed, not stragglers and tag-a-longs. And why shouldn't He? Isn't that what every coach, employer, military commander, teacher and leader wants? Why would Jesus be content with less?

#### TUESDAY / FEBRUARY 16, 2016

## Luke 18:15-30

This man was most likely a synagogue ruler. As Jesus runs down the list of commandments, He purposely omits the tenth which prohibits coveting. The ruler can honestly say he has kept this list since he was young. Then Jesus delivers the zinger, then "sell everything" and give it to the poor. This specific command is found only in this interaction and is not intended to impoverish the ruler but to help him realize his covetous attachment to his wealth and possessions. The disciples are confounded by Jesus' words in verse 24. The rich were considered the most blessed and the most favored by God because their wealth was associated with keeping the commandments (Deuteronomy 30)—so if "the rich" were not "in", then who could be? Keeping the commands perfectly does not merit eternal life because only God can save; we are saved by His grace. And being a disciple? Again, it is not about rule-keeping; it's about child-like faith in God and singular devotion to His Son.



## Learning

The word for "disciple" in Greek is *mathetes* and means "learner." Followers of Jesus orient their lives around becoming life-long learners of Him. With the help of God's Spirit, we can learn, over time, to do the things Jesus did while becoming the same type of person He is. Learning from Jesus is not merely academic—it is also practical and pragmatic and creates the strongest foundation for life.

# Discussion Questions:

What is your honest opinion of Jesus as a teacher?

With what life issues are you currently trying to learn from Him?

What is one thing you have learned from Jesus that you have recently put into practice? What was the outcome?

For some of us "learning" is the easy invitation while "doing" is the challenge. For others "doing" is the easy part but taking time to "learn" from Jesus is the challenge. Which best describes you and why?

What are some dangers of "learning" without (or with minimal) "doing" and vice versa?

During this Lenten season, what steps can you take to bring your "learning" and "doing" into balance?

In Scripture, applied learning is compared to "producing fruit" and "yielding a harvest." Look at Matthew 6:33. How do you think "good fruit" would be a natural by-product of pursuing God?

#### WEDNESDAY / FEBRUARY 17, 2016

## Matthew 5:1–2; 7:7–29

These two scriptures bookend the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus gives criteria for faithful living in God's kingdom. The Law given by Moses is retained, and further extended and expanded by One greater than Moses. When Jesus finished His discourse, the crowds were "amazed" at His teaching. The knowledge, intelligence and authority of the Teacher makes all the difference for His disciples because what Jesus teaches is not only doable, but powerfully practical. And Jesus ends there, saying, *Now put these words of mine into practice! This is how to enter through the "narrow gate," how to bear "good fruit," and how to build on a "firm foundation."* Jesus knows better than anyone the practices that lead to a good life, so when we want to make improvements why do we look to magazines, blogs, Oprah and Google more than to Him?

Your prayerful reflection:

Note: The preaching text is Matthew 5:1–2; 7:24–27.

#### THURSDAY / FEBRUARY 18, 2016

### **Deuteronomy 4:1–14**

Before the incarnation of Jesus and the outpouring the Holy Spirit, God taught His people through the "Law and the prophets." Deuteronomy is a series of sermons and/or farewell addresses from Moses before transferring leadership to Joshua, his successor. Moses repeats the Laws which God gave to him directly for the people of Israel. The Law served (and continues to serve) Israel in several ways: teaching what God requires of them, establishing behaviors that protect them from harm, creating an environment where all people have dignity, setting them apart from other nations, and providing a life-giving heritage that passes from generation to generation. But the Law is only beneficial when they "keep" it; that is to say, when they "follow" God's good instructions.

#### FRIDAY / FEBRUARY 19, 2016

## Matthew 13:1–23

One of my favorite Old Testament passages is Isaiah 55, and verses 10–11 in particular help illuminate Jesus' teaching in today's parable: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Jesus talks about His Word producing a crop, and using the same kind of language, God says He sends His Word out for a purpose and it will not return to Him empty. It makes sense that He would pour into those who are receptive and seek understanding (good soil) because those are the ones who will be spiritually productive.


#### SATURDAY / FEBRUARY 20, 2016

## 2 Timothy 3:1-4:5

John Wesley believed every use of Scripture should show people the way to heaven. The Apostle Paul taught the twofold purpose of Scripture is to initiate believers into salvation and to equip them for the work of God. Paul warns about the dangerous outcome of learning without applying what is learned, things such as evil behavior, looking religious but denying God's power, and always learning but never arriving at an understanding of the truth. In contrast, Paul exhorts Timothy to keep using what he's learned. Paul uses "action" verbs and verb phrases such as "preach," "be prepared," "correct," "rebuke," "encourage," "keep your head," "endure," and "do the work." Because Timothy has seen it lived in Paul's life, he knows what a godly life should look like. Paul confirms it: when Scripture is applied, it equips the person of God for every good work.



#### SUNDAY / FEBRUARY 21, 2016

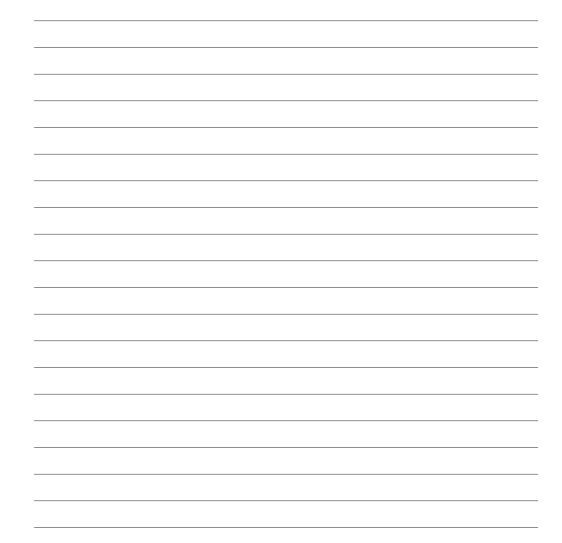
## Matthew 5:1–2; 7:24–27

Sermon notes:

#### MONDAY / FEBRUARY 22, 2016

### Matthew 11:16-12:14

We could call Matthew chapters 11 and 12, "Adventures in Missing the Point." My paraphrase of Jesus' rebuke: You people don't even know what you're looking for and then reject it when it arrives. You criticize things you don't understand. You personally witness the coming of God's kingdom (with power) then shrug your shoulders and go back to what you were doing. And you Pharisees, you're so concerned with the letter of the law that you completely overlook the spirit of the law—the Sabbath is for resting, but not to the point of neglecting! In the middle of these misadventures Jesus says, I praise you Father for confounding those who think themselves wise and intelligent, while enlightening those who are humble. Then Jesus extends a wonderful invitation to those who really want to follow Him: Learn from me. Do as I do. My teaching is not a burden, it is not heavy or ill-fitting. Rest in me, and I'll teach you how to really live.



#### TUESDAY / FEBRUARY 23, 2016

## Hebrews 5:7–6:12

This passage, tucked within the author's exposition of Jesus as God's high priest, urges readers to give renewed attention to making progress in discipleship. *"By this time you ought to be teachers..."* (Hebrews 5:12) indicates the writer is not addressing recent converts. To reach spiritual maturity requires us to put to use the gifts we receive from God. The writer also provides a sobering warning against being mentally and spiritually lazy, and against allowing ourselves to drift away, especially to the point of no return. I sometimes tell my teenagers, "I can't care more about your [fill in the blank] than you do," whether it's in regard to their laundry, their homework, cleaning their bathroom, etc. They have learned how to do these things; if they don't care enough about them to actually do them—then why should I? This passage suggests Jesus looks at my spiritual growth in the same way—He isn't going to force me to grow or force me to care about growing. I can learn from Him what is required for growth, but it still takes caring and action on my part to make it happen.



# Practicing

Disciples are learners. Discipleship is the process of learning from Jesus, and then repeatedly putting into practice what we learn. It is only through practice, putting our beliefs into action, that we make progress in our spiritual growth. If we trust Jesus, our Teacher, and truly believe His message—it will show in what we do.

# Discussion Questions:

How willing are you to allow Jesus to multiply Himself through you?

What is the difference between trying to do the right thing and trying to be the right kind of person?

As a group, experiment with "practicing" holiness or Christ-likeness this week. Agree to realistic parameters (days, times, length, etc.) and focus on "being holy" or "being Christ-like" during that time. Be prepared to discuss next time you meet.

Since we are being renewed into the image of our Creator, what automatic responses (old habits of thoughts, feelings and actions) might need to be disrupted to make way for new habits, those that fit with living in God's kingdom?

The Apostle John, near the end of his long life, said *"This is the message we heard from Jesus..."* As a student of Jesus, how would you finish that sentence? Share your answers, then look at 1 John 1:5 to see how someone with firsthand experience of Jesus did. Now, all things considered—would you change your answer? Why or why not?

Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, used to say, "You are going to be what you are now becoming." Based on your current daily practices, what kind of person are you becoming? What kind of person do you want to be one, three or five years from now?

What specific thing(s) will you do this Lenten season to improve the practice your faith?

#### WEDNESDAY / FEBRUARY 24, 2016

## Matthew 10:1–16

Jesus' 12 disciples were real people with real names, living real lives. They were full-time students of Jesus who learned practical faith by watching Jesus in action and by doing what He did. For three years, they were apprenticed by Jesus and Jesus was, in a sense, multiplying Himself. As they were sent out, they followed the same pattern as their Teacher: Proclaim the kingdom of God—explain that His rule and righteousness are freely available to all; then back it up with action. Where would we be today if the disciples had been content to learn from Jesus without actually putting into practice what they learned? Who might be depending on us to do the same?

#### THURSDAY / FEBRUARY 25, 2016

### Luke 6:39–49

"Jesus gives us urgent warnings about failing to actually do what he calls us to do in his teachings and mentions the specific things that are most likely to trip us up in this regard. Dietrich Bonhoeffer forcefully states, 'The only proper response to this word which Jesus brings with him from eternity is simply to do it.' Remarkably, almost one sixth of the entire Discourse (fifteen of ninety two verses) is devoted to emphasizing the importance of actually doing what it says. Doing and not just hearing and talking about it is how we know the reality of the kingdom and integrate our life into it. This final section therefore concludes with the well-known images of the wise man who builds his house upon the rock (he is the one *doing* the words of Jesus), as compared with the other man, who does not." —Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* 

Your prayerful reflection:

Note: Willard refers to the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' "Discourse." Today's reading is Jesus' similar teaching from a different occasion.

#### FRIDAY / FEBRUARY 26, 2016

## Ezekiel 6:1-7:9

Whatever we put into practice, whether by conscious choice or absent-minded habit, that is the thing we become good at doing. They say "practice makes perfect," so if we are practicing detestable things, then we'll become perfect at being detestable. What we learn from this passage is that detestable practices have consequences; most often they are natural but they may be issued by the Lord as a means of discipline, and eventually judgment and justice. But actions don't emerge from nothing or nowhere. Our actions reveal what's in our hearts. The Lord says, some of His people will remember *"how I was crushed when their roving hearts turned away from me."* (Ezekiel 6:9, CEB) Idol worship angers the Lord, but it's our roving hearts (the attitude behind the action) that crushes Him.

#### SATURDAY / FEBRUARY 27, 2016

## Colossians 3:1–17

So what are detestable practices for Christians today? The Apostle Paul helps us identify some in this passage—his list is gleaned from the Ten Commandments as viewed through the lens of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. "Since" our lives are hidden in Christ, we are called to put to death the practices of our old lives—the things which bring God's wrath. Instead we are called to put on our new *nature*—the values, attitudes and desires that are determined by Christ and reflective of Him. When our hearts are characterized by rightness and holiness, then right actions will naturally follow.

SUNDAY / FEBRUARY 28, 2016

## Matthew 10:1–16

Sermon notes:

#### MONDAY / FEBRUARY 29, 2016

### Matthew 5:13–20

Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount can be a little confusing. On one hand, He says to let our light shine so others may see our good deeds and praise God. In Matthew 6, however, He warns against making a show of our religion. He calls out the Pharisees for keeping the Laws externally but breaking them inwardly. But He also tells us unless our righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, we will never enter God's kingdom! Jesus "knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the *kind of person* from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow. The apple tree naturally and easily produces apples because of its inner nature. This is the most crucial thing to remember if we would understand Jesus' picture of the kingdom heart given in the Sermon on the Mount. And here also lies the fundamental mistake of the scribe and the Pharisee. They focus on the *actions* that the law requires..." (Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*).



#### TUESDAY / MARCH 1, 2016

## Luke 8:4–21

We see in this reading a multiplication of efforts. Through the parables, Jesus is teaching that those who receive His message with open and willing hearts will be the kind of people who allow others to receive Jesus' message *through* them. It is the same principle we see in action in Matthew 10:1–16. Following Jesus is a two-fold endeavor: Orthodoxy (belief) + Orthopraxy (right action) = two wings of the same airplane. Both are essential! We may also think in terms of: Invitation and challenge. Learning and serving. Hearing and doing. Jesus punctuates this critical teaching when He redefines His family according to those who receive His teachings *and* put them into practice.

# Enduring

As followers of Jesus, we must know what threatens our faith and be ready for it. We can expect pressure, but we can also anticipate God's abundant resources. We must be on our guard but not live in fear. Endurance is Jesus' call to stand firm in our life with God, throughout life's challenges. If we don't endure to the end, then the beginning doesn't really matter.

# Discussion Questions:

If your group experimented with the practice of "being holy" or "being Christ-like" last week, discuss those experiences first.

In our culture and in our time, "acknowledging" Jesus before others will look different than it did in the days of Roman rule. It might be as exciting as being baptized. As scary as talking to unbelievers about our faith. As disappointing as missing a sports tournament that conflicts with worship. As humiliating as taking an unplanned pregnancy to term. As difficult as staying in a loveless marriage. As risky as calling what's wrong "wrong" in spite of public opinion. As challenging as trusting in Jesus more than in wealth, possessions, jobs or people. It might make us unprofitable in business or unpopular among our peers.

Share a time that you acknowledged Jesus before others either through words or actions. How would you describe the experience?

Share a time that you neglected a clear opportunity to acknowledge Jesus, either in word or deed, before others. How would you describe that experience?

In 2 Timothy 2:3–7, Paul exhorts Timothy to endure hardships like a good soldier who wants to please his commander, a victorious athlete who plays by the rules, and the farmer who works hard to produce a crop. What do these examples illustrate and how do they relate to your current endurance challenge?

How can your suffering help another?

Refer to Romans 5:3–5. How does daily practice of your faith help prepare you to endure?

According to 1 John 5:1–5, who overcomes the world and how?

#### WEDNESDAY / MARCH 2, 2016

# Matthew 10:16-33

Here's a hard truth: following in the footsteps of Jesus will lead to trouble. It will bring division and disintegrate families and land Christians in court. Jesus already knows this. He's says, *Hey- if people treat me (the Master) like dirt, then you can be sure they'll treat you the same way*—so be on guard! Be shrewd and cunning but remain innocent of wrongdoing. And don't be afraid of those people; fear God, not them. Later Jesus prays for His followers, saying, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name...While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me...My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it...As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." (John 17:11, 12, 15–18)

Your prayerful reflection:

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#### THURSDAY / MARCH 3, 2016

# 2 Timothy 2

Paul wrote this letter during his harsh imprisonment, while in a dungeon and bound by chains. He wrote to Timothy, his fellow worker and spiritual son, out of loneliness and concern for the welfare of the churches under the persecutions of Emperor Nero. In this passage, we have pictures of people at different stages of endurance: Paul knows his work is done and death is imminent but continues to stand firm. Timothy is in the middle of it, in the day-to-day struggle of keeping the faith. Hymenaeus and Philetus have fallen away and are teaching heresy. It is interesting how each man's endurance (or lack of it) affects other people (note verses 2, 10, 17–18, 25–26). We could spend several days on this dense passage (there's so much to process!). So here's my bottom line: Do your best (in the strength of God's grace) to present yourself to God as a tried-and-true worker who doesn't need to be ashamed and correctly handles the Word of Truth. Not just for your sake, but for the sake of others.

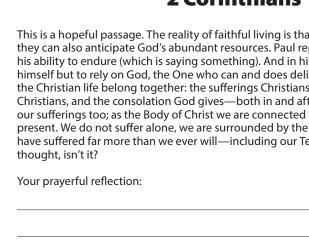
Your prayerful bottom line:



#### FRIDAY / MARCH 4, 2016

# 2 Corinthians 1:3-24

This is a hopeful passage. The reality of faithful living is that disciples can expect pressure, but they can also anticipate God's abundant resources. Paul reports that he suffered hardships beyond his ability to endure (which is saying something). And in his sufferings, he learned not to rely on himself but to rely on God, the One who can and does deliver us. John Wesley said two things in the Christian life belong together: the sufferings Christians would not experience if they were not Christians, and the consolation God gives—both in and after the affliction. There is a universality in our sufferings too; as the Body of Christ we are connected to all who have faith in God both past and present. We do not suffer alone, we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses, many of whom have suffered far more than we ever will—including our Teacher, Himself. Now, that is a comforting



#### SATURDAY / MARCH 5, 2016

# **Hebrews 12**

Francis of Assisi, one of the most influential Christians in the past 2,000 years, broke with his family in a very dramatic way. As Francis grew more passionate about his relationship with Christ and less interested in his father's lucrative business, the tension grew until it climaxed in the following scene:

The father [dragged] the son before the local bishop in the hopes that the town's religious authority could talk some sense into the young man. But the plan backfired. There in front of God and everybody, Francis stripped off his clothing and handed it to his father. Standing there naked as the day he was born, Francis said, "Until now I called you father, but from now on I can say without reserve 'Our father who art in heaven." Francis' father carried his son's clothes back to a large house that was now strangely quiet. Francis on the other hand, went on his way rejoicing, suddenly freed from the encumbrances of wealth, family and social esteem.

Francis of Assisi represents one of the "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in Hebrews 12. He literally "threw off everything that hindered him" and was launched by God into an extraordinary life and destiny. His life continues to speak to us today.

-Adapted from a devotional by Peter Scazzero, Day by Day

**SUNDAY** / MARCH 6, 2016

# Matthew 10:16-33

Sermon notes:

#### MONDAY / MARCH 7, 2016

## Matthew 24:1–14

"The fundamental problem facing all religions is one of credibility...Of all the proofs and all the testimonials, nothing approaches the credibility inherent in martyrdom. How could mere mortals remain defiant after being skinned and covered with salt? How could anyone keep faith while being slowly roasted on a spit? Such performances seemed virtually supernatural in and of themselves. And that was the effect they often had on the observers. Christian viewers could 'see' that the hand of God was on the martyrs. Many pagans were also amazed...Accounts of martyrdom make frequent mention of pagans having gained respect for the faith from having observed, or even having taken part in, the torture of martyrs. The pagan onlookers knew full well that they would not endure such tribulations for their religion. Why would so many Christians do so? Were they missing something about this strange new faith? This sort of unease and wonderment often paved the way for new conversions."

-Rodney Stark, The Triumph of Christianity,

referring to the Roman persecution of Christians and why the Roman authorities were overmatched.



#### TUESDAY / MARCH 8, 2016

# **Revelation 3:7–22**

I like ending the week here, in the New Testament's only prophetic book, penned by the older Apostle John during his exile. We have read Jesus' command to endure as He taught His original disciples, we've heard from Paul and the author of Hebrews and the message is consistent: Stand firm to the end and you will be saved. Pastor Tom says if you live long enough, you will experience hardship. It is inevitable. And no matter how dark the days or how difficult the path, we have these words of comfort and promise from our Lord Jesus: *"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) Be forewarned, but don't be afraid. Be strong and courageous. And remember, *God is with you.* 

# Sacrificing

Followers of Jesus are called to a higher mission than to find personal comfort and tranquility in this life. An attitude of sacrifice, alongside faithful beliefs and practices, is an essential characteristic of an authentic, vital Christian life.

# Discussion Questions:

Alex and Brett Harris challenge young people to "do hard things," in their book by that title. Their message: *Let's not be a generation of self-centered materialists; let's discipline ourselves to follow Jesus and do hard things to His glory.* In the forward of the book, Chuck Norris says, "Today we live in a culture that promotes comfort, not challenges. Everything is about finding ways to escape hardship, avoid pain, and dodge duty."

In what ways is Norris' statement true for you?

What "hard things" is Jesus calling you to do? Bear in mind they may be small, repetitive, mostly unnoticed and fairly tedious things like being on time, reading your Bible every day, staying in touch with your family, controlling your temper, avoiding unwholesome media and entertainment, acting with integrity, not complaining, doing a chore thoroughly or without being asked, putting down your phone, being patient, praying before you start your day...

Refer to Galatians 6:7–9. What do you think is the cumulative effect of making daily sacrifices, no matter how small?

The old sacrificial system required the life of an animal to atone for sin. Since Christ became the once-for-all atoning sacrifice, what is the new system of sacrifice required of His followers? You may refer to 1 Samuel 15:22–23; Psalm 40:6–8; Psalm 51:16–19; Proverbs 21:3; Jeremiah 7:21–23; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:6–8; Matthew 9:13.

As a group, discuss this adage: A sacrifice isn't a sacrifice unless it's a sacrifice.

What daily sacrifices will you commit to practicing for the remainder of this Lenten season?

#### WEDNESDAY / MARCH 9, 2016

## Matthew 10:34-42

"Stand up for me against world opinion and I'll stand up for you before my Father in heaven. If you turn tail and run, do you think I'll cover for you? Don't think I've come to make life cozy. I've come to cut make a sharp knife-cut between son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law—cut through these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God. Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies. If you prefer father or mother over me, you don't deserve me. If you prefer son or daughter over me, you don't deserve me. If you don't go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you don't deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you'll find both yourself and me. We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help. **This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing." (Matthew 10:32–42, MSG)** 

#### THURSDAY / MARCH 10, 2016

## Luke 9:18-27; 43-48

Sacrifice is defined as accepting the loss or destruction of something for an end, cause or ideal. Which is how I've always thought of this passage— Jesus dying to save me from my sins, and subsequently, me losing my life to save it. The other definition of sacrifice is *the act of offering something precious to a deity*. This is the more biblical definition to be sure, but for some reason I've never thought of this passage in those terms. Even though I understand the biblical concept of sacrifice for the atonement of sin, I never think of Jesus sacrificing Himself *to the Father*. To take up my cross daily is to be like Jesus and *offer something precious to God*, because nothing is more "precious" to me than me.

#### FRIDAY / MARCH 11, 2016

# John 15:1–25

There is a screenplay I want to write. I've been mulling it for several years now, but today I believe it's more honest to say: there is a screenplay I want to have already written. I don't know how to write a screenplay, and I keep imagining it's something I'll figure out in the future—mostly because I know it will take a lot of time and effort. I want the screenplay, not the work of writing the screenplay. Jesus says His disciples will bear much fruit, which we all want to do. We want to earn that heavenly crown and hear "well done my good and faithful servant," at the end of life. We want the fruit that comes from being a follower of Jesus, but often we're unwilling to do the work it actually requires. Like me and my screenplay, we want the rewards without the sacrifices.

#### SATURDAY / MARCH 12, 2016

## Matthew 9:9–17

Jesus says the Lord "desires mercy, not sacrifice." To understand the meaning of this we have to look at the context. First, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees who He often criticized for their singular focus to outward appearances. Secondly, Jesus is making God's kingdom available to all—especially to those on the fringes of Jewish society, the known "sinners." God's words to the prophet Samuel are helpful here, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) The Lord prefers His people to offer mercy to sinners than to offer empty, meaningless sacrifices to Him.

**SUNDAY** / MARCH 13, 2016

# Matthew 10:34-42

Sermon notes:

#### MONDAY / MARCH 14, 2016

# Psalm 51

David was a passionate man—a lover and a fighter. He loved big, fought big and unfortunately, he sinned big, too. But David was zealous for the Lord, and the Lord loved David for it. God chose him to be king over Israel because of what God saw in David's heart. David wrote and sang songs to the Lord. David danced with "all his strength" before the Lord. David was absolutely crazy about God. And he "got" God, maybe more than any other person in the Old Testament (he was, after all, a man after God's own heart). David's role as king probably afforded him some insight too, since a king's court is typically filled with false humility, flattery, posturing and self-promotion. David would not dare approach his Lord and King in such a manner—he knew what really mattered—a humble and sincere heart that breaks over sin. That is a sacrifice the Lord values, and one we all can offer.



#### TUESDAY / MARCH 15, 2016

# Hebrews 13:8–25

This passage reflects the Jewish religious consciousness that if God was truly to be honored then praise must follow deliverance just as prayer springs from need. In the Old Testament, deliverance would usually be celebrated at the tabernacle or temple, before the assembly and with thank offerings. The writer of Hebrews demonstrates throughout the book that the old Jewish system has been superseded by Jesus, God's ultimate high priest and mediator of the New Covenant. The ritual offerings and sacrifices as prescribed by the Law have given way to the sacrifices that come from the heart of a person devoted to Christ— such as giving Him the praise He deserves, doing good deeds and being generous to others.

# Empowering

Followers of Jesus are empowered to do just that—follow Him and be His disciples. Jesus, our Teacher, prepares us for life in God's kingdom and equips us for every good work that He calls us to do. It is only by being disciples that we become capable of making disciples.

# Discussion Questions:

Open your Bible to Matthew 7:7–27 (we started our series here). Let's discover three (not so obvious) sources of power God has given us:

When it comes to following Jesus, the first rule of the kingdom of God is to ask. We should emphatically and repeatedly express our desires to know God better and to grow in Christ-likeness. He hears and responds generously.

Second, we are to put Jesus' words into practice (which first requires us to learn what they are). We may do so imperfectly at first, but Jesus will meet us in our efforts. He is where His words are.

Third, we decide. We understand it will be costly and challenging and, knowing that, we harness the power of decision. We make an intentional choice to be life-long students of Jesus.

These three working together give us a solid foundation, one built on the rock—so that as we face life's difficulties our strength and power is "structural," a part of our being—not a remote storm shelter that we must run to in times of trouble.

What, if any, is your personal experience with the power of prayer?

If you could you receive power from the Holy Spirit to help you do one thing (especially a hard thing) in the daily practice of your faith, what would it be? Have you asked for His help in that matter?

How does decisive and intentional discipleship form a bridge between initial faith and a life of obedience and fulfillment in God's kingdom?

#### WEDNESDAY / MARCH 16, 2016

# Matthew 28: 16-20

This event actually takes place after the death and resurrection of Jesus but before His ascension into heaven. In this passage, Jesus is empowering and commissioning His disciples to go and make more disciples, that is, to carry on the work and mission that Jesus began. We are looking at this passage out of chronological sequence because this empowerment and commissioning has been passed to us already from those original, first-century followers. It is a driving force that enables us to follow Jesus, learn from Him, practice what we learn, endure in our practices and make daily sacrifices to Him. To fulfill our mission, Jesus has given us His mantle, the power of the Holy Spirit, and His continuing presence. In short, we have everything we need to do what He wants us to do.

#### THURSDAY / MARCH 17, 2016

# John 16:1–16

Jesus promised His disciples that He would be with them always, and He did not mean "in spirit" like, "I'll be thinking about you while I'm away." He meant He would literally be present with them, by His Spirit. The Holy Spirit, also called the Companion (or Advocate) and the Counselor, would come to dwell in the followers of Jesus as His continuing presence, post-ascension. His Spirit is also referred to as the "Spirit of Truth" because He is the Spirit of Jesus who is "the Truth" (and the Way and the Life). Jesus testified to the truth while He was on Earth and His Spirit continues to do so—to the world as the truth-telling judge who convicts us of sin and to Christians as the truth-telling Teacher who reveals what He hears from God. As followers of Jesus, we have the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit, which is clearly a powerful thing.

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#### FRIDAY / MARCH 18, 2016

# John 16:17–33

Jesus is in the process of preparing His disciples for His death (which at this point in John's Gospel is only a few hours away) and resurrection. He's warning them that they will mourn but their mourning will turn into an everlasting joy. With Jesus' death and resurrection, He will open up a new source of power for His followers—direct access to the Father through prayer. Because of God's saving grace through Jesus, the priest and the prophet would no longer be required. Today all believers may enter God's presence with full confidence, not on our own merit but because Jesus, our high priest, has made us acceptable to God. And what's more, we are invited to speak directly to God in the Name of Jesus, which is a manifestation of His power and His presence.

#### SATURDAY / MARCH 19, 2016

# John 12:12–36

When Jesus raised Lazarus, who had been dead four days, back to life—He created the biggest stir to-date. When Mary anointed Jesus' feet with costly perfume—Jesus said it was to prepare Him for burial. Now many Passover pilgrims were openly and triumphantly welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem as the long-awaited King of Israel. This surge in Jesus' popularity frightened the religious leaders because the political unrest would put the Jews at risk with Rome. It was the anointing that moved Jesus' betrayer to action. It was the raising of Lazarus that moved the crowds to action, which in turn, moved the religious leaders to action. Jesus was hailed as King but five days hence, He would be dead—and He knew it. Jesus had to make every word count: *anyone who wants to be my disciple must follow Me. It means doing hard things, but it is the only way to gain eternal life. It is the only way to produce lasting fruit.* 

Your prayerful reflection:

Note: Palm Sunday, which we celebrate tomorrow, commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and begins our Holy Week observances. The day is also referred to as Passion Sunday as it marks the commencement of Jesus' journey to the cross. The word "passion" comes from the later Latin word "passio" which means "suffering, enduring" and refers to Jesus' suffering leading to and including the crucifixion.

**SUNDAY** / MARCH 20, 2016

# Matthew 28: 16-20

Sermon notes:

Note: Today is Palm Sunday on the Christian calendar.

#### MONDAY / MARCH 21, 2016

Acts 4

Again, we're moving ahead in the story to peek at the disciples after Jesus' ascension to see how they were empowered by the Name of Jesus and by His Holy Spirit to carry on His mission. We see they were able to proclaim the gospel message, to heal, to work miracles, to stand up against opposition, to have courage, to be wise beyond human learning, to be discerning, to speak boldly, to bring glory to God, to pray effective prayers, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be unified as a body of believers, and to provide for those in need. *Wow.* This is only one example, but it is a really cool picture of the various ways followers of Jesus are able to bring God's kingdom to bear on the world in which we live.

#### TUESDAY / MARCH 22, 2016

## 2 Peter 1:1–15

This passage helps bring this series together, look at what Christ's power has given us: everything we need for life, and everything we need for godliness. Think about that for a minute. *Everything* we need for life. And *everything* we need for godliness. As followers of Jesus, we have begun to participate in His divine nature. His redeeming work at the cross and the indwelling of His Spirit is renewing the image of God in us. The power of Jesus has made God's kingdom available to us today so that we may dwell in God and God in us. It is the power of Jesus that enables us to escape corruption and grow in virtues that produce a well-rounded and fruitful life—which ultimately serves to prepares us for the glorious life that is yet to come. We have everything we need right now to be true followers of Jesus. *Everything*!

# Transforming

Because of Jesus' resurrection, we have the capacity for true transformation. The entire Christian life is one of transformation! Followers of Jesus change and grow as we progress from one stage of our life in God to the next, until the moment we are gloriously transformed from death to life and made perfect in every way.

# Discussion Questions:

One definition of spiritual growth is, "the dynamic process whereby the Word of God is applied by the Spirit of God to the heart and mind of the child of God, so that she or he becomes more like the Son of God."

How is being content with "receiving salvation" while neglecting the work of transformation a cheapening of God's grace?

Do you view your life with God as dynamic? Why or why not?

In what ways are you more like the Son of God today than when you first believed?

Why do you think transformation is an important precursor to us permanently joining in life with God in the world to come?

Why do you think transformation of our hearts and minds is more important than transformation of our outward behaviors?

How does following Jesus, learning from Jesus, practicing what we learn, enduring in our practices, making daily sacrifices and being empowered by Jesus necessarily lead to transformation?

Under what circumstances might transformation fail to happen?

#### WEDNESDAY / MARCH 23, 2016

# John 20:1–23

Mary Magdalene was always so tender and attentive to the Lord's needs. He was gone, and now His corpse was gone too, and she couldn't do this one last thing for Him, properly anoint His body for burial. Jesus being crucified was the worst thing imaginable, and suddenly, the situation had gotten worse. I wonder if it was her loving care of Jesus that made Him choose Mary to be the first eyewitness to the most incredible, most miraculous, most blessed event in the history of the world or was it because she was just always "there"? I imagine the twinkle in Jesus' eye as He asked her, "Who are you looking for?" Then leaning forward to bring Mary into His gaze and gently speaking her name. Then Mary crying out, and Jesus scooping her into His arms and spinning her around. Mary holding Him as though He might disappear if she let go. Mary, afraid it was a dream. I imagine Jesus laughing—as happy to see her as she to see Him. *Mary! You're squeezing so hard. You don't have to hang on to me—I'm not going to the Father yet!* And Mary got to tell the disciples "the" news. She was the first to witness Jesus' transformation from death to life, and to become transformed herself from disillusioned, devastated and profoundly sad to overjoyed and forever changed.



#### THURSDAY / MARCH 24, 2016

## Matthew 26:1–56

Sometimes, most times, we don't know when transformation is happening because it happens by degrees. We are transformed by what we believe because those beliefs inform our decision making. We are transformed by our thought life—if a seed of a thought is planted and nurtured, it grows into action—for good or for ill. We are transformed by our prayers; they allow God to direct our hearts and lives. We are transformed by our experiences; growth most often comes from failures and hardships. We are transformed by the sacrifices we make and by acts of obedience, no matter how big or small. We are transformed by our habits because they have cumulative effects. Day by day we are being transformed—the question is, to what? Our ultimate transformation—our "glorification" depends largely on our daily transformation—what we call "sanctification" which is why following Jesus is such an important thing to do.

Your prayerful reflection:

Note: Today is Maundy Thursday (a.k.a. Holy Thursday). It is the first of the three days of solemn remembrance of the events leading up to and immediately following the crucifixion of Jesus. The English word "Maundy" comes from the Latin *mandatum*, which means "commandment." On the night He was betrayed, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples and then gave a new commandment to love one another as He had loved them (John 13:34).

#### FRIDAY / MARCH 25, 2016

# Matthew 27:27–54

One afternoon when my daughter, Sophia, was 3-years old, she sat at the kitchen table with her paper and markers. Out of the blue she asked, "Mom, what does sin look like?" "Hmmmm. That's a good question," I responded, not sure what to say. "Well, I know it's black," she said without looking up. "Why do you ask?" I inquired. "I'm drawing a picture of Jesus on the cross," she answered as she continued to color. We had often talked about how Jesus, who was perfect and without sin, took all the sins of all people throughout time on Himself when He hung on the cross. A minute later she presented her picture; she had drawn a black satchel hanging by its strap, looped over the crossbeam on Jesus' left side. "I put all the sin in a bag to make it easier for Him to carry," she said. Reflecting on this story makes me wonder if Jesus reconciled our sins one-by-one or as a collective whole. It makes me wonder if I could be as thoughtful toward Jesus as Sophia had been that day, and make my sin easier for Him to carry—not by putting it in a bag, of course, but by actually sinning less.

Your prayerful reflection:

Note: Today is Good Friday on the Christian calendar. It is the day we commemorate Jesus' sacrificial death on a cross.

#### SATURDAY / MARCH 26, 2016

## Matthew 27:55-66

During our trip to Israel, we visited the Garden Tomb, which is a close likeness to the tomb in which Jesus would have been buried. There is a groove in the ground outside where a stone would have been rolled into place. There is a bed carved from the rocky interior where the body would have been laid to rest. When you turn to leave, there is a sign that reads: *He is not here for He is risen*. It is sobering to stand inside a first century tomb in Jerusalem. It is even more sobering to realize there is one person in all of history who was mutilated, killed and buried, and three days later was completely transformed; from death to life; from perishable to imperishable; from defeat to victory. No other human, prophet or self-proclaimed god can make that claim—only Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the thing that changes everything, even (and especially) us.



SUNDAY / MARCH 27, 2016

# Matthew 28:1–10

Sermon notes:

Note: Easter Sunday. Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Beginning on Easter and continuing through Pentecost is the 50-day period known as Eastertide or Easter Season. A historic greeting during this time is: *He is Risen!* And the other person replies: *He is Risen, indeed!* 

#### MONDAY / MARCH 28, 2016

## Romans 12

Jesus said, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12:24) Dying, it seems, is key to transformation. If Jesus was going to transform ordinary sinners into people fit for life in God's kingdom, people who would share in His power, joy, knowledge and eternity, then He would have to die first. It was what was necessary. And the growth process, what we call "sanctification," means I have to die too, killing my own will and selfish desires so that Jesus can transform my whole heart, whole mind and whole life into the thing He desires.

#### TUESDAY / MARCH 29, 2016

# 2 Corinthians 3:12–18

Sometimes I think about what it will be like to be dead, which means, I think about what it will be like to be resurrected. I wonder about the first time I meet Jesus in the flesh: will I fall down and hide my face or look Him in the eyes? I wonder how intimate will it be? I imagine His reunion with Mary the way I do because I hope that's how it will be for me too—I want Him to scoop me up and swing me around. I want to bury my face in His neck, kiss His cheeks and smell His hair—I'm positive His hair will smell like a warm Oklahoma day after a spring rain (because that's my favorite). I hope one of us says something funny so our first encounter will be marked for all eternity by laughter. I know a lot of things will be different then, because they'll be made new—but I think some things, the really good things—the things that God thinks are good, will remain the same; things like a person's love for Jesus, hearty laughter and the smell of good earth after a rain.



# O O F O R DOUBT

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by Rev. Gloria McGee-Denton

# Room for Doubt

In an age of CGI (computer-generated imagery) and Photoshop, almost anything can be made to look true or real, so our default response is to question everything. Throw in awareness of a few centuries of political posturing, religious propaganda and unholy wars, and it's not surprising we would doubt that truth or good or God even exist. Skepticism has been conditioned into us, so it's a struggle to wrap our minds around stories like those of people walking through a sea after an unseen force held back the waters, talking animals, or a flood covering Earth for 40 days. They're just fantastic, as are stories of medical miracles, upwards of 5,000 people being fed with only a little bread and fish, prison doors being flung open and a man raising himself from the dead after three days. These things should cause us to raise our eyebrows in question.

"Unfortunately, in many religious circles, there exists an unwritten rule. Pretend. Act like God is in control when you don't believe He is. Give the impression everything is OK in your life when it's not. Pretend you believe when you doubt; hide your imperfections; maintain the image of a perfect marriage with healthy and well-adjusted children when your family is like any other normal dysfunctional family. And whatever you do, don't admit that you sin," observes Mike Yaconelli in Messy Spirituality. Phillip Yancey shares, "As a child l attended a church that had little room for inquisitiveness. If you doubted or questioned, you sinned. I learned to conform, as you must in a church like that. The danger of a church like that—and there are many—is that by saying, 'Don't doubt, just believe,' you don't really resolve the doubts."

#### **Doubting Well**

Asbury is not a church "like that."

First, as Yancey points out, we would be hard-pressed to find "a single argument against God in the older agnostics (Bertrand Russell, Voltaire, David Hume) or the newer ones (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris) that is not already included in books like Psalms, Job, Habakkuk and Lamentations. I have respect for a God who not only gives us the freedom to reject him, but also includes the arguments we can use in the Bible. God seems rather doubt-tolerant, actually." God encourages questions.

Second, we want to empower you to doubt well. By that we mean that your doubts would serve you, motivate you and lead you toward truth and understanding rather than lead the opposite direction. Doubt isn't a sign of spiritual or mental weakness, it's a sign of spiritual integrity and depth. Worshipping, witnessing or serving in the midst of doubt doesn't make you a hypocrite, it makes you faithful. We don't want you to fear your doubts but to use them. Invest energy in them, being just as eager to prove as to disprove, just as open to mystery as to mastery of the details, just as willing to believe as to not believe.

Third, in order to receive maximum benefit from this series, we must examine our own ways of thinking. Do we focus on thinking or on doing? Form or on function? Do we prefer linear

conclusions based on concrete information or circular, interrelated abstract reasoning? For example, if we were to discuss the famed "burning bush" at which Moses encountered God, would you want to take it to a lab for scientific analysis? Or would you conceive of the bush as a way to get Moses' attention and point to something beyond the bush? Throughout this series, we will be faced with controversy and mystery. If it were all black and white and certain, there would be no room for faith—and no adventure.

#### Dear Doubter

"I would say to those who are experiencing doubt, good for you! There is a blessing coming your way. Come join us in a mysterious journey. The key is that we stay engaged and ask questions because if you refuse to address your doubts through prayer, study, worship and fellowship with believers, you're in danger of remaining married to your doubts," says Asbury's Rev. Charlie Ryser.

Doubts are one of the most obvious things that people inside and outside the Church share. We all have questions that haven't been answered yet, so regardless of where we are in terms of belief or faith, we're all in this together.

-Rev. Gloria McGee-Denton

"A man may be haunted with doubts, and only grow thereby in faith. Doubts are the messengers of the Living One to the honest. They are the first knock at our door of things that are not yet, but have to be, understood...Doubt must precede every deeper assurance; for uncertainties are what we first see when we look into a region hitherto unknown, unexplored, unannexed."

-George MacDonald

## Doubt and the Bible

Author Philip Yancey says, "I admit that I'm at times a reluctant Christian, plagued by doubts and still recovering from bad church encounters. I'm fully aware of all the reasons not to believe. So then, why do I believe? In my own days of skepticism, I wanted a dramatic interruption from above. I wanted proof of an unseen reality, one that could somehow be verified. However in my days of faith, such supernatural irruptions seem far less important, because I find the materialistic explanations of life inadequate to explain reality.

"I've learned to attend to fainter contacts between the seen and unseen worlds. I sense in romantic love something insufficiently explained by mere biochemical attraction. I sense in beauty and in nature marks of a genius creator for which the natural response is worship. I sense in desire, including sexual desire, marks of a holy yearning for connection. I sense in pain and suffering a terrible disruption that omnipotent love surely cannot abide forever. I sense in compassion, generosity, justice, and forgiveness a quality of grace that speaks to me of another world, especially when I visit places, like Russia, marred by their absence. I sense in Jesus a person who lived those qualities so consistently that the world couldn't tolerate him and had to silence and dispose of him. I could go on and on. In short, I believe not so much because the invisible world impinges on this one but because the visible world hints, in the ways that move me most, at a lack of completion."

As we wrestle with doubt and the Bible, and the notion that seeing is believing, allow Yancey's words above to inspire you to use the Bible as a lens through which you can see things in new ways, and consider these along the way:

Observe your use of the four Wesleyan sources of understanding: Scripture, tradition, experience, reason.

How much of what you believe has actually been seen or proven to you?

Are you attracted to the Jesus represented in these readings? Why or why not?

#### WEDNESDAY / MARCH 30, 2016

### John 20:24–31

Thomas was vulnerable, honest and assertive in naming his need, reminding us to ask for help from God and from others as we wrestle with our own doubts. He didn't obstinately refuse to believe; he just wasn't able to believe yet. When Jesus appeared, He gently met Thomas *in the midst* of his doubt rather than scold or berate. Presented with the evidence, Thomas became a believer in the resurrected Jesus. Fully aware that the rest of human history would be asked to believe without the luxury of seeing, Jesus spoke a special blessing over those who are able to do just that. Verse 31 tells us the goal of this text: to present us with evidence so we, too, may believe and have greater life. Interestingly, the word translated as "doubt" in this text is related to the verb *apisteo*, suggesting someone who is "faithless" or an "unbeliever," and demonstrating that Jesus speaks to believing and unbelieving alike.

Your prayerful reflection:

#### THURSDAY / MARCH 31, 2016

### Hebrews 3:7–15; 4:12–16

People take three common approaches to doubt: antagonistic refusal, disengaged blasé, genuine curiosity. What words in today's text describe Israel's response to God? What warnings and advice are offered? Notice the urgency: "today if you hear God's voice speaking to you, do not harden your hearts," "now is the time," "whatever God says to us is full of living power," "so let us come boldly." If you're anti everything that has to do with Jesus, decide now to open yourself to new possibilities. If you're spiritually lazy, invest your own energy and don't allow your church or others to do your thinking for you. Pastor Dick Read explains, "Doubt is the starting point of faith. Doubt leads to rejection when the doubter chooses not to 'put to test' his or her doubts. Many times, doubters choose to become idle in their doubting and, frankly, just lose interest. They therefore never develop faith, nor do they deliberately disbelieve. On the other hand, every person of faith began with doubt at some point."

#### FRIDAY / APRIL 1, 2016

### Acts 17:1-34

While in Greece, Paul quoted respected poets and schools of thought when talking with a mixed crowd of Jews, God-fearing Greeks, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, using what they knew and accepted to introduce something new. With Jews, Paul referenced Scripture as proof of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus because what we know as the Old Testament was a source of authority and objective truth for the Jews. The Bereans dug into Scripture, searching for things they may have missed, and tested the new information in light of what they already held as correct. Setting the Bible aside for a moment, what do you know to be true and certain? How do you know? Now hold those truths against what the Bible says on those things. Most people find the teachings of Jesus and lifestyles of His followers to be in keeping with the values they already hold dear, which is a great starting place when addressing doubt and the Bible.

Your prayerful reflection:

#### SATURDAY / APRIL 2, 2016

### Matthew 16:13–17

Thursday's reading in Hebrews urged us not to procrastinate in addressing our doubts but to allow others to serve as sounding boards, voices of experience and insight, teachers and mentors. Yesterday's reading taught us to dig into the Bible so we're really sure about what it says and to take stock of what we hold true as a foundational for greater understanding. Today's text shows us that God will work through those things, but will also speak directly to us in the form of questions, ideas, desires and inclinations, offering aha-moments and clearing the fog, planting ideas that seem small and insignificant but that can grow into major turning points in our lives. Take time to articulate your doubts and uncertainties, list the things that just don't add up and ask God (yes, even if you're not sure about Him) to help you.

Your prayerful reflection:

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

SUNDAY / APRIL 3, 2016

### John 20:24-31

Sermon Notes:

#### **MONDAY** / APRIL 4, 2016

### John 9:1–41

Brennan Manning tells of a man who says this of Jesus, "Three years ago I was a drunkard. I was in debt. My family was falling to pieces; they dreaded the sight of me. But now I have given up drink. We are out of debt. Ours is a happy home. My children eagerly await my return home each evening. All this Christ has done for me. This much I know of Christ!" When Jesus healed a blind man, the Pharisees didn't want the story of his healing to be true. They summoned him, interrogated his parents, questioned his character and credibility, argued with him, coerced and threatened him, yet he claimed to know only one thing: I was blind but now I see! A person's entire world can change for the better as a result of an encounter with Jesus. When addressing doubt and the Bible, we must ask if we want it to be true or false, if we're willing to believe. Are you blind to the blessings and good that are credited to Jesus or do you see them as evidential proof of His compassion and love?

#### TUESDAY / APRIL 5, 2016

### Matthew 11:1–15

Like anyone facing death, John questioned his life's work. He had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River and joyfully exclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" But what if he were a false prophet, leading people astray because he'd been mistaken? Could this imprisonment be God's punishment? John was plagued with doubt. If he were wrong, everything he'd done and said was in vain—*and* he was a fool. Just as He did with Thomas, Jesus answered John's question with evidence: lives saved and forever changed for the better and, remarkably, good news given to the poor. The proof wasn't just the miracles. It was also the hope and unconditional love offered to those most in need. It is one thing to doubt the details of Bible stories like Noah's ark and Jonah's survival in the belly of a big fish, but it's another to discount all the intangibles found therein. Consider which gets greater weight in your mind.

Your prayerful reflection:

## Doubt and The Resurrection

The thing the disciples least expected was for Jesus to rise from the dead—they had no context for this in their experience. He appeared to them transformed yet recognizable, almost ordinary but a little extraordinary (a physical body that could be mistaken for a gardener, but one that could appear behind closed doors). An empty tomb and eyewitness accounts confirm it was not a vision or spiritual experience or delusion—it was something new.

Why is it such a big deal? If Jesus was raised from the dead, then He really is who He claims to be and everything He said and taught becomes credible. Then our sins really do matter and we really do have hope of eternal life by believing in Him. Other worldviews will not allow for a resurrected Jesus because it interferes too much with their goals and their preferred ways of living. Denying the resurrection makes easier to indulge the self with a shrug and a "YOLO" (you only live once) because *"If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* (1 Corinthians 15:32)

As you study this week, ask yourself these questions:

Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus? How about the future resurrection of believers?

What evidence carries weight for you?

If asked, how would you explain your position to someone who disagreed with you?

In what ways is it unfashionable to believe in right, wrong and resurrection in your sphere of influence?

Consider these thoughts by Yancey: "The great divide separating belief and unbelief reduces down to one simple question: Is the visible world around us all there is? Those unsure of the answer to that question live in the borderlands. They wonder whether faith in an unseen world is wishful thinking. Does faith delude us into seeing a world that doesn't exist, or does it reveal the existence of a world we can't see without it?"

#### WEDNESDAY / APRIL 6, 2016

### Luke 24:36-49

The disciples were naturally amazed and doubtful as there was no historical precedent for resurrection. Jesus met them in their doubt and offered physical evidence—His resurrected body with flesh, bones, nail wounds and the ability to eat. He offered foundational scriptural evidence— opening their minds to fully understand the metanarrative and words written over multiple millennia that hinted at and predicted His death and resurrection, along with the relationship between these events and human sin. As we consider doubt and the resurrection this week, we should be willing to believe that the impossible was possible, that the unprecedented set a precedent, and ask what that has to do with us.

Your prayerful reflection:

#### THURSDAY / APRIL 7, 2016

### Luke 16:19–31

The resurrected Jesus could have appeared to the chief priests, to the Pharisees and Sadducees, to the Greek and Roman leaders, to all the Gentiles around, but He didn't. He sure could've removed almost all doubt, but He didn't. Instead, He spent the 40 days between the resurrection and ascension with followers who already believed He was the Messiah. Today's parable offers an interesting perspective on this. A self-indulgent rich man wanted to warn his family to not make the same mistakes he did. He was then told, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." Everything they needed to know about turning and 're-turning' to God in faith and trust had already been given to them. He thought upping the ante would help, but he received another intriguing response: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

#### FRIDAY / APRIL 8, 2016

### Luke 24:1–35

From the very beginning, doubt was cast on the resurrection. Matthew 28:11–15 reports that the chief priests paid the guards to spread a false story to discredit the disciples, and Matthew 28:8–10 depicts Jesus appearing to women and instructing them to be the first messengers of the good news despite the fact that women weren't considered competent as witnesses in first-century Jewish culture. Even the disciples doubted at first. When Jesus appeared to the two men walking to Emmaus, they were confused and sad, but as they talked with Him, they felt something stir within their hearts. John Wesley said his heart was strangely warmed when he fully trusted and believed in Jesus, and Philip Yancey speaks of people who have a strong hunch there is something real in Jesus even when they're not sure what to do with that hunch. Our minds don't always understand what our hearts sense to be true.

Your prayerful reflection:

#### SATURDAY / APRIL 9, 2016

### Acts 7:54-8:3; 9:1-31

Saul was one of those Pharisees who hated Jesus and His followers. He heard Stephen's account of God's relationship with Israel through history and their continued unwillingness to yield to the leading of the Holy Spirit in keeping the Law and receiving the Messiah (Acts 7:1–53), then Saul approved of the horrific killing of Stephen as a means to shut him up and dissuade others from saying similar things. Saul burst through doors and dragged men and women from their homes because they believed in Jesus. Saul terrorized and brutalized–until Saul encountered the resurrected Jesus for himself. The skeptic no longer doubted but believed. The foe became a friend. The enemy became an ally. What a transformation!

SUNDAY / APRIL 10, 2016

### Luke 24:36–49

Sermon notes:

#### MONDAY / APRIL 11, 2016

### 1 Corinthians 15:1–27

I sat on our porch; my wife was upstairs dying [of stomach cancer]...I knew if God were to come to me, I'd ask only one question, 'Lord, why is Debbie up there in bed? And I think God would reply by asking gently, 'Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?' I think He'd keep coming back to the same question until I got His point. It was a horribly emotional time for me, but I couldn't get around the fact that the resurrection is the answer for her suffering. I still worried; I still wondered what I'd do raising four kids alone. Losing my wife was the most painful experience I've ever had to face, but if the resurrection could get me through that, it could get me through anything. It was good for AD 30, it was good for 1995, and it's good beyond that. If there's a resurrection, there's a heaven. If Jesus was raised. Debbie will be raised. And I will be someday too. Then I'll see them both. -adapted from an interview with Gary Habermas, PhD, DD, as retold by Lee Strobel in

The Case for Easter

Your prayerful reflection:

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

#### TUESDAY / APRIL 12, 2016

### Romans 6:1–11

We're back to the same question we had at the beginning of this week: Why is the resurrection such a big deal? Jesus answered it when He told His disciples that the truth would set them free, that He was indeed the way, the truth, the life, that He is the Resurrection and the life and those who believe in Him will never really die. 2 Peter 3:9 explains, *"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."* If the resurrection is true, we have hope of a better life before and after death. "At the end of the day, I'm a better guy believing in Jesus. I know what I was before, and I know what I am now. If I'm wrong, I won't ever regret the life I've lived because of Jesus," says Glen Grusendorf, Director of Recovery Ministries at Asbury.

Your prayerful reflection:

## Doubt and God's Goodness

"I hear from many suffering people who ask me how God must feel about what they are enduring. I point them to Jesus. We know exactly how God feels because God gave us a face, and we can see Jesus comforting a widow who lost her only son, healing even the servant of a Roman occupying soldier, restoring health to the blind, the crippled, those with leprosy. At the same time, we get a graphic image—like an ideograph—of what kind of life we should live, a life like Jesus." Philip Yancey goes on: "If the church does its job, people don't torment themselves wondering where God is. They know the answer. God becomes visible through people who live out the mission that Paul expressed so well: 'Praise be to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.'"

"C. S. Lewis referred to the 'megaphone of pain.' By its nature, physical pain interrupts our daily routine and forces us to pay attention to an urgent demand of the body. If I have something in my eye, I simply must take care of it. Perhaps suffering does the same thing in a broader context. Take the September 11 tragedy in the United States. That event had profound effects in our nation. People flocked to church because they needed comfort, and answers. We gained a new kind of hero: firefighters and policemen who gave their lives on behalf of others. We became aware of our interdependency on the rest of the world, and were ministered to by the leaders of so many countries who offered support. That same pattern can happen in families, in groups, in churches, when suffering strikes. Like a megaphone, suffering interrupts life and turns our attention to ultimate things. Some people ignore the megaphone, and some pay attention," offers Yancey.

As you consider the relationship between doubt, suffering and God's goodness this week, remember that God can handle your questions, your sadness, your anger. They're appropriate and healthy responses to brokenness. Pay close attention to your attitudes and emotions. Follow your thoughts to see where they go and observe what unhealthy patterns might be perpetuating your doubt of God's goodness.

#### WEDNESDAY / APRIL 13, 2016

### Mark 9:14-24

"When my eighteen-month-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer, I was unprepared for the pretending of my Christian friends...'I'm sure God is doing this for a reason. God can heal your daughter if you just have enough faith. Even if she dies, she will be better off.' I remember answering these people, 'I hope God is not doing this. I don't believe God promises to heal my daughter.' I could not, would not pretend anymore. Was I confused about exactly where God was? Of course. Did I have serious questions about my faith? Yes. Was I desperate, depressed, angry, resentful? Yes, I was all those things. I only wish others could have given me the space to be honest and that they could have been honest too...Even today, if you were to ask me why my daughter lived, I would have only one answer: 'I don't know.' I watched a lot of children Lisa's age die during the same period that she was ill, and for the life of me, I don't know where God was. I cannot pretend the mystery of God away."

-Mike Yaconelli, Messy Spirituality

#### THURSDAY / APRIL 14, 2016

### John 11:17-44

A sick child. The death of a good person. A hate crime. An earthquake. They all make us recoil. Twice, accusations were hurled at Jesus by those who had put their faith in Him: if only you had been here, this wouldn't have happened! They thought He should've prevented the pain, but instead He let nature run its course. Did they believe any less than the father in yesterday's reading? Did Lazarus himself hope for healing until the end? Are our relationships with the Lord tied to answered prayers? It's natural to ask where Jesus is in the midst of pain, and we have that answer in today's text. Jesus saw people mourning, and He mourned with them. He saw them weeping, and He wept with them—and for them. We see God Himself moved with empathy and compassion, present in a time of need, giving life in place of death not only to Lazarus but to all those who had come to offer comfort and walked away with faith.

#### FRIDAY / APRIL 15, 2016

### Job 1:1-22

Job is one of those texts that doesn't answer the "why" question or offer much on how God redeems suffering. In fact, while it makes God look powerful, it doesn't make Him look good. That is hard to wrap our minds around and challenges us to consider our responses to our own trials or those of others. "If we didn't deal very well with Job, we probably won't deal well with Jesus Christ. The mystery of why there are thorns on the rose eventually becomes a question of who God is. We can glibly say that God is good, God is merciful, kind and faithful. But a great many people on earth say, 'I don't have any evidence for that. Maybe you do, but I don't.'...And even in America, for all our wealth, there are myriad individual lives of suffering and poverty. Were we honest, maybe many of us would admit we do not have a lot of conviction about God's goodness either...in brutally honest moments they're not sure they believe or feel it. They may want to. That's a beginning, a work of grace, and one should not dismiss it," (Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering*).

Your prayerful reflection:

#### SATURDAY / APRIL 16, 2016

### 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10

Remember Paul the doubter and enemy of Jesus? Of the three types of suffering (natural/physical, moral/criminal, penal/consequential), Paul experienced them all. Paul examined his suffering and concluded that it had value and purpose. First, it set him apart from false teachers who would never endure such hardship for a message they didn't really believe. Second, it demonstrated his faith, grew his character and prepared him for greater challenges. He sought relief, but instead received a tremendous ability to empathize with sufferers and victims, deep humility and greater grace. Just as with so many prophets and with Jesus before him, the evil deeds that were intended for harm, God in His infinite wisdom and love, used for good. Some would define a blessing as something good. Paul would define a blessing as anything that draws us closer to God.

Your prayerful reflection:

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

**SUNDAY** / APRIL 17, 2016

### Mark 9:14-24

Sermon Notes:

#### MONDAY / APRIL 18, 2016

### Romans 5:3-10; 8:26-39

When you find yourself doubting God's goodness, consider this, "Some of us actually believe that until we choose the correct way to live, we aren't choose-able, that until we clean up the mess, Jesus won't have anything to do with us. The opposite is true. *Until we admit we are a mess*, Jesus won't have anything to do with us...Jesus is attracted to the unattractive. He prefers the lost ones over the found ones, the losers over the winners, the broken instead of the whole, the messy instead of the un-messy, the crippled instead of the non-crippled," (Yaconelli). Eugene Peterson adds, "When we sin and mess up our lives, we find that God doesn't go off and leave us—he enters into our trouble and saves us." 1 John 3:8 clearly states *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work"* and Romans 5:10 points out that God acted in love, even for His enemies.

Your prayerful reflection:

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

#### **TUESDAY** / APRIL 19, 2016

### Psalm 107:1-43

The Psalmist says: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; His love endures forever." We've spent the week considering suffering as the result of evil and sin in the world, something that none of us are immune to but rather subject to in various ways. Without any effort on our part, God provided a way to endure and eventually conquer the effects of sin. Today we're reminded that there are many ways God delivers people who are lost and disoriented, imprisoned by their own mistakes, sick in body and mind, and tossed amidst life's storms. While there is much pain in this world, we don't have to doubt God's goodness as long as we heed the admonitions of this psalm: Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story, and let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord.

Your prayerful reflection:

# Doubt and Imperfect People

As we address our doubts in regard to religion and the Church, Christians and hypocrites, it's helpful to avoid hyperbole and sweeping generalizations and instead talk about these things at their most basic level. That means we reduce the conversation to doubt and imperfect people. Romans 3:10 points out the shared state of those who believe and those who don't, *"There is no one righteous, not even one."* Bring many imperfect people together and the flaws are multiplied and magnified, tempting us to focus on those flaws and to pretend we don't have them ourselves. Unfortunately, imperfect people have inflicted so many wounds that the Church itself has become a stumbling block in our path to knowing God.

For example, the morally upright citizens of the day felt threatened by Jesus whereas the moral losers and social rejects were attracted to him. The Church today has exactly reversed that pattern. This bothers us on a very deep level. But—we can't have it both ways. The only way the Church is going to look clean and shiny is if those inside the church get their act together, keep their act together and keep all the not-yet-perfect people out—and many churches are still trying this. On the other hand, if the Church engages the people Jesus did, the Church becomes a bunch of moral failures and difficult people, but then continues to receive pressure to get their act together so they look like *real* or *transformed* or *mature* followers who represent Jesus well.

As you study this week, we invite you to again monitor your emotions, memories and thought patterns to see what they tell you about yourself.

#### WEDNESDAY / APRIL 20, 2016

### Titus 3:1–11

Paul's instructive letter to Titus reminds us there are standards of behavior and systems of accountability within healthy Christian community, but there is always a measure of grace and the memory that everyone started somewhere on their journey. In the midst of admonitions of how to do life together, Paul held up Jesus and the fact that no one is accepted or saved because of the good things they do but simply because of the loving, merciful nature of God. Inspired by the goodness of God, what is the good to which you think Christians should devote themselves? Why?

Your prayerful reflection:

#### THURSDAY / APRIL 21, 2016

### Matthew 14:22–33

Yancey asks, "Why doesn't the church look more like Jesus? Why are so many people content to live just like everyone else except that on Sunday they put on uncomfortable clothes and sit in an uncomfortable seat for an hour?" Because doing what Jesus did, loving like Jesus did, walking like Jesus did is just plain hard. As a fisherman, Peter knew how to read the winds and navigate the waves, and he respected the danger of the sea. Nevertheless, emboldened by his faith, he climbed from safety to try something new, made some progress and moved closer to Jesus. The impossibility of what he was doing and the possibility of failure crashed into his consciousness, and he began to sink. Was this success or failure? Christians start and stop, slide forward and backward, sidestep one barrier just to slam into another all the time. Only people who don't get it think the Christian life is boring.

#### FRIDAY / APRIL 22, 2016

### Romans 7:14-8:8

Slowly read verses 18b–19. Prayerfully consider how this plays out in your own life, listing the good that goes undone and the evil that gets done. Would you rather be held accountable for your actions or your intentions? In what ways can you apply that measure to others? Paul was truly contrite and repentant, not just for his failures but for his inability to exert control in his own life. His struggle clearly proves that even though the sin nature remains for believers, continual submission and turning to the Lord frees them from being enslaved to the inclinations of the sin nature.

Your prayerful reflection:

#### SATURDAY / APRIL 23, 2016

### Luke 5:27-32; 19:1-10

At 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes. Their talk was loud and crude. I overheard the woman beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39." Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?" "Come on," said the first woman. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all...I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?" [We threw her a surprise party the next night in that diner.] As we came to the end of our singing with "happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried...Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?" I prayed for Agnes, for her salvation, that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

-adapted from Dr. Tony Campolo, The Kingdom of God is a Party

**SUNDAY** / APRIL 24, 2016

### Titus 3:1–11

Sermon Notes:

#### MONDAY / APRIL 25, 2016

### Romans 14:1–23

We've already acknowledged that imperfect people don't always know how to act in any given situation, nor are they always able to carry out right responses. Paul tells us not to have the same expectations of everyone. Some are hateful and bitter, others cheat on their taxes. Some are overly proud of their gifts, while others lazily deny they have gifts. Some can fully trust God with their finances but are insanely jealous in their relationships. Though the Pharisees through all history might disagree, the Church is the right place for all of these people. Some have accepted salvation and forgiveness; but of others Jesus said, "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."

#### TUESDAY / APRIL 26, 2016

### Matthew 23:1–39

These are the most impassioned statements Jesus makes—followed by Him weeping over Jerusalem—showing that He spoke from a place of deep and genuine love for the very men He criticized. Somewhere, a lot went wrong. The Pharisees were expert lay leaders who interpreted and adhered rigorously to the Law, good guys who fasted and tithed. They should have been humble, compassionate and loving like Jesus, but they were the opposite. They were hypocritical and indifferent to the burdens they placed on others. Through their proud and self-righteous teaching, the Pharisees made it impossible for those they taught actually to learn the Bible's truths and come to God. They didn't know the heart of God, nor did they allow Him to access or change theirs. When people outside the Church doubt those inside the Church, these attitudes and behaviors are often to blame.

Your prayerful reflection:

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