



Fourth Day Bible Studies

This 30 day bible study course has been compiled to fulfill two purposes:

- 1. To assist those pilgrims who have not as yet developed a regular programme of bible study and,*
- 2. To remind all pilgrims of the talks given during the Walk and reinforce the key points.*

We pray that it will be a source of encouragement to you during your Fourth Day.

De Colores!

Priority

Reading: Matthew 6: 19-24 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth...”

You may or may not have noticed during this Emmaus talk on Priority that neither God nor the Bible were mentioned. This is because it is for each one of us to examine our own lives and challenge ourselves as to whether Jesus Christ is the priority in our lives.

Our modern world seems preoccupied with materialism – perhaps more so than at any other time in history. In this passage Jesus is challenging his disciples to put God first in their lives - trusting Him to meet their material needs here on Earth as well as giving Him priority in eternal issues. That same challenge echoes down the centuries to us.

He tells them that focusing on material possessions is not only misguided it is also foolish because they do not last. But he emphasizes that the worst aspect of such a preoccupation is that it ‘colours’ our entire attitude and perspective on life. We cannot have both God and materialism (or any other priority) at the centre of our lives. Inevitably one or other must take a back seat.

A priority is quite simply ‘what you live for’; what gets you out of bed in the morning. It is your passion, your driving force. It is:

- What fills your thoughts
- Where you spend your money, and
- What takes up your time.

Have you had time since your Walk to spend time with God and examine what comes first in your life?

Do you see the need for a change of priority? If so, what important things must you relegate to let God come first?

“Father, I know that I cannot serve two masters and that you must be the priority in my life. I ask you to fill me with your Holy Spirit and give me the determination and strength to live for You. Amen.

Priority

Reading: Matthew 22: 34-40 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart.”

Today we read of Jesus being tested by the Pharisees, an influential group of Jewish teachers who were dedicated to following the Mosaic Law to the letter. Their purpose here is to trick Jesus into contradicting the Law in some way. However his response is nothing short of brilliant. He creatively combines the laws contained in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

Jesus offers us in this passage a foundation for our entire lives –firstly a total commitment to God followed by a respect and loving concern for all those around us. And for the committed “Christ-follower” these are the head and tail of the same coin. If God is truly the priority in our lives then our love for Him must influence the attitude we show to those around us. His love in our hearts must flow through to them.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.” Jesus reiterates this as a command. In other words it is something that we must consciously commit ourselves to. It is not something that we do when we remember or when we feel like it. It has to be worked at consistently. Because of our inherently sinful natures we often find it easier to prioritise the material things of life. By contrast we often have to strive to put God at the centre of our lives.

If you have chosen to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, what effect is this having on the rest of your life? Can your nearest ‘neighbours’ see the difference that putting God first makes in your attitude towards them?

“Heavenly Father, Jesus’ summary of your Law comes as a real challenge. I know that many times I do not love you as I should and certainly I do not always show the love and respect for others that you demand. Strengthen me to do Your will and fulfill Your priority for my life. Amen.

Prevenient Grace

Reading: Genesis 45: 4-11 “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”

Prevenient Grace describes God at work in our lives, and in the circumstances around us, before we become aware of His activity.

This story of Joseph is perhaps one of the Bible’s best examples of God’s prevenient grace at work. You can be sure that when Joseph was stripped of his robes by his brothers, tossed down into a pit and then finally sold for 20 shekels of silver, God’s hand of grace was the furthest thing from his mind!

Yet as we read through the entire story in Genesis 37 to 45 we can see how God’s grace manipulated the circumstances to achieve glory for His name. Potiphar’s wife; the offences of the cup bearer and the baker and the meeting with Joseph in prison; the interpretation of dreams; Potiphar’s dream; the years of famine – these were not haphazard circumstances that conspired to reconcile Joseph and his family and bring them all into a time of great blessing. It was God’s grace.

However stressing that God has sovereign control over human affairs does not in any way absolve people from full moral responsibility for their actions and decisions. It was only when finally Judah (one of Joseph’s brothers) confessed their guilt, and showed true repentance, that forgiveness and reconciliation were possible. And then Joseph too was able to recognize God’s grace and declare in verse 5, “It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.”

Spend some time looking back over your life, particularly that time before you became a committed Christian. Can you recognize God’s prevenient grace at work? Which people and what circumstances conspired, through God’s grace, to draw you to Jesus? Have there been other times when you can look back and say as Joseph did, “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”?

“Dear Lord, it is often difficult for me to recognize Your hand of grace at work in my life. Forgive me and help me, in the power of Your Holy Spirit to trust You more fully. Amen.

Prevenient Grace

Reading: Romans 5: 6-8 “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

In understanding the concept of prevenient grace, we acknowledge God’s capacity to use even the worst of circumstances to bring glory to His name. And no circumstances in all of history could have looked as forlorn and hopeless as the sight of Jesus hanging on the cross. We can only begin to appreciate the desperate emptiness and despair that the disciples must have felt. Yet, as we joyously know, God’s grace was at work and has been since we first sinned.

In Genesis 3:9 we read of God’s first step, his calling out to Adam, “Where are you?” And from that moment His grace set in motion a plan to reconcile us and restore our relationship with Himself, through Jesus. And all of this as Paul tells us in this passage, “While we were yet sinners.” God did not wait for us to take the first step back to Him. He intervened in an act of pure grace, the ultimate demonstration of love, to re-establish the relationship lost in the Garden.

Our Christian hope is founded on God’s unshakeable love for us in Christ. It is that Love that constantly calls us, guides us, precedes us and encourages us in the darkest of circumstances. It does so through events; through people, both believers and unbelievers and through the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and minds - and all of this “at just the right time.” (v6).

Do you sometimes let circumstances get on top of you? Have there been times when you have despaired of God’s sovereignty? What have you done in those circumstances – would you react differently today?

Do you surrender yourself to God’s grace and accept that no matter how negative things appear, “that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him.” (Romans 8: 28)

Father, there have been times when I have failed to trust You and allowed circumstances to get the better of me. Help me to understand how much You love me and how You always want the very best for me. Amen.

Priesthood of all Believers

Reading: 1 Peter 2: 4-5, 9-10 “You are a royal priesthood.”

The popular notion that clergy ‘do ministry’, and the laity consume it, is wrong and certainly, in New Covenant times, unbiblical. In this passage Peter is emphasizing that, in Christ, we are one and we share a universal responsibility to represent Christ to the world and share his grace.

He is encouraging us, through constant communion with Christ, to become like him – a ‘living’ stone. However he recognizes that a single stone is of little use unless it is built into a ‘house’. Christianity is all about community – the individual Christian only finds his true place when he is an active participant in the Church of all believers.

Peter then goes from his allusion to the physical building to focus on those who occupy the building – the priesthood. We are a royal priesthood, set apart - literally ‘belonging to God’. There are two major characteristics of a priest which we are expected to display:

- The priest has access to God and brings others to Him. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, meaning *bridge-builder*, and the priest is expected to build the bridge between others and their Saviour.
- The priest is the one who brings the sacrificial offering to God. For the Christian this is the spiritual offering of every facet of life – complete surrender.

Peter’s descriptions are all-inclusive – they refer to anyone and everyone who has experienced the love, acceptance and forgiveness of God.

Have you been guilty in the past of sitting back and letting others do the work of God? What could you have done?

Are you an effective member of your church’s ‘priesthood’? Is there more you could be doing?

Heavenly Father, what a privilege it is to be chosen by You to be part of Your royal priesthood. Through the power of Your Holy Spirit keep me vigilant and willing to do Your service, whatever it demands. Amen.

Priesthood of all Believers

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27 “You are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.”

One of Paul’s favourite analogies for the Church is a body (see also Romans 12: 4-5). All the parts of the body work in harmonious interdependence and Paul recognizes that the Church can only achieve its goal of glorifying God if it works in the same way.

Just as Peter used the phrase, the royal priesthood, to describe us as members of the church, so Paul now refers to us as part of the body of Christ. And within that body we will have many and varied functions. We need to work together, each one pulling his or her weight, to further God’s Kingdom.

In order to achieve this unity God Paul says we must:

- Realize that the church needs all of us and we need each other.
- Respect each other. Whenever we begin to value ourselves and our work above others, the body disintegrates.
- Sympathise with each other. We are one body, and if one part suffers ultimately we all suffer.

At the end of this passage Paul speaks of the various acts of service we can perform in and for the Church. Whatever gift God has given us they have been given to us for a purpose:

- To make Christ real for other people.
- To be channels of God’s grace
- To tell out His glory in a lost world.

Do you find yourself working in harmony with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Where and why do problems arise? What gifts have you been given by God? Are you using them effectively to extend God’s Kingdom?

Lord, one day we will all live in glorious harmony in Your Kingdom. Until then help me to respect and sympathise with all my brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

Justifying Grace

Reading: Luke 15: 11-24 “His father saw him and was filled with compassion.”

The central theme of the Bible is the story of God calling us back into the relationship with Him for which we were created. Justifying grace is at work the moment we say ‘yes’ to that relationship in Christ.

This well-known story of the prodigal son should perhaps have been more aptly titled “The Loving Father”. Its lesson is more about the unconditional love and forgiveness of the Father than the sin of the son. In verse 20 we read that ‘while he was still a long way off’ the father saw the son and was filled with compassion’. The father was already looking out for his son and immediately forgave him without question. Our Father treats us in the same way when we make the decision to return to Him – we are forgiven and our relationship with Him is immediately restored, for all time.

Just as the prodigal son recognized, we can do nothing to merit God’s forgiveness. “For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this not of yourselves it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2: 8,9) Responding to God’s offer of forgiveness is an act of faith, a decision we make to accept the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf on the cross.

The Civil War American President Abe Lincoln was once asked how he intended to treat the Southerners when they were finally defeated and brought back into the Union. He replied, “As if they had never been away.” It is the awesome wonder of God’s grace that he treats us in exactly the same way.

Recall to mind the time when you first recognized or acknowledged God’s justifying grace in your life. How has your life changed since then? Are you ready, willing and able to share this testimony with others?

Father never let me forget or take for granted Your wonderful grace in forgiving my sin and restoring my relationship with You. By Your Spirit help me to grow this relationship day by day. Amen.

Justifying Grace

Reading: Romans 3: 20-28 “All are justified freely by his grace.”

The question that faces anyone with a belief in God is “How can I get into a right relationship with Him? How can I get closer to Someone who is perfect in every way?” To the Jews of Jesus time the answer was to keep to the Law meticulously. Yet as Paul tells us here in verse 20, “...no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law.” Paul goes on to tell us the real purpose of the law, “rather through the law we become conscious of sin.”

The Law is there to clearly point out our weakness and our sinfulness. Does this mean then that we can never come close to God? Certainly not! However the way back to God is the way of grace not of law; of faith, not of works.

The Greek word *to justify* is *diakioun*. This is a legal term which means to ‘treat as innocent’. There is no questioning the fact that, by any measure, we stand before God guilty of sin. Yet in His infinite justifying grace and mercy God treats us as innocent.

How can we be sure that this is the case? Because Jesus told us that is the way it is. He came to tell us that God loves and values every one of us. And by his death and resurrection he proves the truth of his words.

This is the wonderful good news of the gospel and it should certainly stir up excitement and love in our hearts. But we must always recognize that our salvation, our justification, is not about our feelings but about the unchanging grace of God and the powerful work of redemption accomplished by our Saviour Jesus.

Are there times when you ‘feel’ far from God, when you wonder how He can possibly forgive you? Do you, at those times, trust Him to treat you “just as if” you had never sinned?

Father thank You that through Your great love for me and Your infinite grace and mercy, I can come to You and be treated as innocent. But never let me forget what it cost You to make this possible. Amen.

Life of Piety

Reading: Romans 12: 9-13 “Cling to what is good”

The life of piety is giving our hearts to God and making our relationship with Him our life's priority. This means that our faith is not confined to the 'religious' aspect of our lives but is something that permeates our entire being and influences everything we do and everything we are.

In these verses in Romans 12 Paul gives us ten parameters to guide our life of piety.

Our love must be sincere – there is no room for cupboard love in a Christian's heart.

We must shun evil and seek only what is good and wholesome – how difficult that is sometimes in this age of mass amoral communication.

We must love one another – echoing an entreaty given by Jesus, “Love one another.” (John 13: 34)

Be humble and accord everyone respect and honour. There is no room for prejudice or back-biting in public or in private.

Resist laziness and lethargy. We may face the danger of burn-out but that's preferable to rusting away!

Keep our spiritual lives on the boil. Prayer and Bible study are vital ingredients in our relationship with God.

Serve the Lord. Never shy away from opportunities to do God's work – remember Jesus never shied away from his ultimate task on our behalf.

Always maintain hope and a sense of optimism. Romans 8:28 “In all things God works for the good of those who love Him.”

Trust God when things get difficult. “Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope.” (Romans 5:3,4)

“Pray continually”. (1Thess 5: 17)

Be generous. “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 40)

Be hospitable. “For by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

Evaluate your own life against these guidelines.

Lord, help me to make my relationship with You the most important thing in my life and then, through Your Spirit, enable my life to reflect and demonstrate that commitment. Amen

Life of Piety

Reading: John 15: 1-11 “Remain in me and I will remain in you.”

“I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2: 20) This is perhaps one of the most difficult realities for any Christian to grasp and understand. What does it mean for us to live in Christ and he to live in us? Jesus, in this passage, is giving his disciples an analogy of the vine and its branches which he hopes will make this concept clearer.

Although for some there may be a deeper and more mystical experience of 'living in Christ', for very many more this concept is best explained simply by the phrase 'keeping in close contact with Christ'. Just as the branches, if separated from the main stem of the vine and cut off from nourishment, will perish, so we, if we ignore the fundamentals of our contact with Christ – prayer, meditation, study – will wither and eventually die in a spiritual sense.

There was no mystery to the closeness of Jesus' relationship with His Father – it was built on these same pillars. In Matthew 14:23 we are told, as in many other places, that “he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.” And we read many times of Jesus quoting the most appropriate scripture from memory even to the Pharisees who made such study their life-long task.

For most of us 'remaining in Christ' will be, in reality, arranging our time and adjusting our priorities to ensure that there is rarely, if ever a day when we do not devote some of our time to him – alone.

But, Jesus tells us, there is a two-fold purpose to 'remaining in Christ'. Firstly it enables us to bear much fruit – it enriches our own life and the lives of those around us. But secondly, and perhaps even more importantly a life lived in Christ brings glory to God'. (v8)

Do you spend some time every day 'living in Christ' through prayer and study? Do you look forward to those regular times with him in worship and communion with other Christians?

Jesus, give me a burning desire to spend time with you, talking to you, listening to you and most of all becoming more like you. Amen.

Grow through Study

Reading: 2 Timothy 3: 14-17 “All scripture is God-breathed”

When we first come to Christian commitment we may not fully understand what that means – study helps us to mature in the fullness of that commitment. It is about giving our minds to God.

In its usual context study is associated with the intellectual accumulation of facts. But our Christian study goes well beyond that. Paul tells us that we are to be ‘transformed by the renewing of our minds,’ (Romans 12: 2) and in our reading he gives us some practical guidelines to achieve that through study.

Firstly we are to study scripture to ‘make us wise for salvation’. (v15) Although there is no ‘magic’ in the words of scripture themselves, they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. As a result, as Paul tells the Ephesians, “you also were included in Christ, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” (Ephesians 1: 13)

Scripture is also useful for teaching. Only in the Bible do we have first-hand and eye-witness accounts of God and His Son, Jesus. We cannot afford to ignore these if we truly want to grow in our faith.

Scripture is valuable for rebuking and correcting. This should not be interpreted as scripture is there merely to find fault. But as we read, God can use His words and our thoughts to show us where we are going wrong and where we can correct our thinking and behaviour.

Finally Paul says that scripture ‘equips us for every good work’. (v17) The study of scripture should never be a selfish pursuit merely for our own edification. It is to enable us to be more useful for God and those around us.

Are you committed to a regular study time? Do you have a real desire to know God and Jesus better through the scriptures? Have there been times when you have really felt that God is speaking to you through His Word?

Father give me a love for Your Word. Make me wise in reading it; teach me the lessons You want me to learn; show me where I am going wrong and equip me to go out to do Your work. Amen.

Grow through Study

Reading: Acts 8: 26-35 “Philip began with that very passage of scripture...”

In this passage Philip demonstrates the two most important aspects of spiritual study.

Firstly it is to build up our bank of knowledge about the God we profess to believe in and trust. On a purely human level, if there is someone whom we love, it is natural for us to want to spend time with that person and to get to know them as thoroughly and deeply as we can. Our love for God should be our motivation for immersing ourselves in scripture. Philip here shows that he knows the scriptures so well that he was able to “begin with that very passage of scripture...” (v35)

But there is a second and equally important aspect to our study of scripture and it is illustrated in the latter part of verse 35, “...and told him the good news about Jesus.” It is our responsibility not just to be familiar with scripture but to be ready and willing to share that knowledge with others. As a result of Philip’s explanation of the scripture he was reading, the Ethiopian Eunuch committed his life to Jesus and tradition has it that he went home and evangelized Ethiopia!

As much as our primary source of knowing more about God and His Son should always be the scriptures, we should never hesitate to expand this knowledge through other sources. Bible notes, such as these, can assist in our times of regular study, as can Bible commentaries and the many thousands of books freely available on every conceivable aspect of our Christian life.

Are you ‘hungry’ to know more and more of God’s Word? How regular is your study of the scriptures? Do you ask God to give you opportunities to share your ‘good news about Jesus’ with others? Are you eager to learn more through reading Christian books and magazines?

Father, Your Word is a lamp unto my path and a light unto my feet. Help me to read it more often; follow it more closely and always be ready to share its good news with others. Amen.

Means of Grace

Reading: Luke 3: 21,22 “Jesus was baptized too”
Luke 22: 19,20 “Do this in remembrance of me.”

At his last appearance to the disciples Jesus made them a promise which is to us and every one of his followers throughout history – “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” We see that promise being fulfilled in the practices, or means of grace, which connect us directly with him and God’s love.

The more formal means of grace are the Church sacraments (sacred moments) when Christ is represented and becomes present to us. The two that are observed by most Christians are baptism and Holy Communion.

Baptism, in what ever form it takes, is the outward sign of the inward work of grace that has taken place in a Christian’s life. In Jesus’ case it marked the beginning of his public ministry (Matt 3: 13-17). At Pentecost the baptism of the Holy Spirit marked the beginning of the church. For us, whether as children or adults, it signifies our new “Christ-like” identity.

Jesus himself instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion during the last supper with his disciples and he commanded them to continue sharing a meal in remembrance of him. It was a vital practice in the early church and Paul made sure that it was clearly understood. (1 Cor 11: 20-34) When we come together at the Lord’s Table we are coming to the table of God; we share God’s vision of His children together in peace and love; and the eyes of our understanding are opened as we recognize Jesus in the elements of bread and wine.

Do we fully appreciate the “sacred moments” in our Christian life? Are we sometimes too ‘hung up’ on the form of our sacraments rather than their deeper meaning and experience? Are ‘our eyes opened to recognize Jesus’ whenever we take communion (Luke 24:35)?

Heavenly Father thank You for the many ways and opportunities you give us to experience Your presence and Your hand of grace at work in our lives. Help us to be faithful. Amen.

Means of Grace

Reading: Mark 1: 35 & 6: 46 “He went into the hills to pray”
Matt 6: 5-15 “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.”

There are very many less formal and more personal ‘sacred moments’ in a Christian’s life which God uses as means of grace.

The first of these is prayer. Jesus invested time with God in prayer. His devotion to spiritual communion with his Father is an important model for us. (Luke 6:12, 9:18, 11:1)

Searching the scriptures – spending time each day reading the Bible, meditating on its meaning and applying its truths to our daily lives. (Matt4:1-11)

Worship. We need to develop a love and eagerness for God-centred worship. (Ps 122:1)

Fasting. Both the Old and the New Testament teach fasting as a means of grace. (Is 58:5-7 Matt 4:16-18) It can include more than refraining from food – it can include television, hobbies, gardening, in fact anything that can usurp God’s place at the centre of our lives.

Christian friends and activities can provide mutual support and nurture. It was a vital aspect of the early church and its one we need to foster today. (Acts 2:42-47)

Confession, forgiveness and reconciliation. The sin of unforgiveness is one of Satan’s sharpest weapons. He uses it to drive wedges between God and His children. Jesus himself spelt out the importance of reconciliation. (Matt 5:23,24) His brother James emphasized the point to the early church. (James 5:16)

Where do you need to more clearly focus your personal sacred moments?

Jesus, make me more aware of the very many opportunities you give me every day to experience your love. Especially help me to live in peace and harmony with those around me, “forgiving their sins as God forgives mine”. Amen.

Christian Action

Reading: Luke 10: 29-37 “Go and do likewise”

Christian action focuses on the call to each one of us to share Christ with the world in all that we say and do. It is giving our hands and feet to God.

In many ways this well known story of the Good Samaritan reflects our South African situation. “Who is our neighbour?” is a question that many of us ask ourselves in our darker and more secret moments. We are surrounded on all sides by need, some self-inflicted, but most of it the result of greed and inhumanity. What is our Christian response? There are no glib answers. But Jesus does provoke some thoughts in this parable.

Firstly the traveler was a man in real need despite the fact that he had brought it on himself. The road from Jerusalem was notoriously dangerous and it was stupid to travel it alone – he invited trouble. But that didn’t change his need.

Secondly the priest and the Levite were godly men. There was no questioning their religiosity. In fact the probable reason for not helping was that they feared the man was dead and touching him would make them ‘unclean’ and therefore unable to participate in the Temple worship. But that didn’t excuse their ‘blind eye’. They put ceremony above charity.

Thirdly the Samaritan was a man whose sense of charity materialized itself in action. How many of us are content just to ‘pray for others’ or offer ‘words of comfort’? Of course these are important but often they are not enough. What those in need are looking for is what our hands can give not what our lips can mouth. Real compassion results in action not just words.

Who do you think is your neighbour? You cannot meet every need but are you doing something to meet someone’s need? Is there more that you could be doing? Charity extends beyond giving money – how much of your time do you give for others?

Father, teach me to have a heart of action-filled compassion for all my neighbours. Amen.

Christian Action

Reading: James 2: 14-22 “his faith was made complete by what he did”

This passage is often misquoted to separate and unbalance the twin roles of faith and action in the Christian life. It is often claimed that James is arguing for salvation by works. This is a misrepresentation. James is writing to those who are believers – in other words they have already been *justified by faith*. He is now emphasizing that if their faith is real it must realise itself in a life-changing experience. He is condemning the profession of faith without the practice.

It is a sad reality that very often today faith and works are seen as alternative expressions of Christianity. “He is a good Christian” can be used to describe someone who is kind and generous but professes no religious beliefs. Equally the most devoted church-goer can be decried as “too spiritually minded to be any earthly use!”

In a ‘well-proportioned’ Christian life there is a balance between faith and deeds. Christian action is our grateful response to God’s grace. When we involve ourselves in Christian action we are living up to the image of God in which we were created.

To emphasise his point James uses the example of Abraham who was called by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Through his practical obedience Abraham was able to demonstrate and prove his love for God. - “his faith and his actions were working together.” (v22)

One of our primary ‘works’ is to share Christ with others. As much as our faith will always be a deeply personal experience, its expression should be seen in sharing our love for Christ with others in words and deeds.

What efforts do you make to demonstrate your love of Christ to others? How do you think you might react if you felt that God was making a major demand on your life as He did with Abraham?

Father, help me to get the right balance in my life between faith and deeds. Never let me lose sight of my responsibility to share my faith with others around me. Amen.

Obstacles to Grace

Reading: Exodus 20: 1-17 “And God spoke all these words”

Obstacles to grace are those things in our lives that interrupt our relationship with God and other people. God laid down the laws that should govern those relationships. However many in our society today are tempted to dismiss the Ten Commandments as outmoded.

“You shall have no other gods before Me”, (v3) We need to appreciate the glory of our God – the creator and sustainer of all life. We need to respond to our God who “gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16) so that our relationship with Him can be restored.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol.” (v4) Idols are anything in our lives that usurp the centrality of God. Many idols, such as money, career, sports, are not intrinsically bad or evil. They become so when they take on an importance and value in our lives greater than God.

“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord.” (v7) In our 21st century Western world God is not treated with reverence and respect – his name and that of his Son are used without thought. However even without blaspheming we can dishonour God through inconsistent behaviour – one life on Sunday and another the rest of the week.

“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” (v8) “There is never enough time nowadays!” God created time and He created enough of it. We misuse it and ignore His injunction to take time to rest, just as he did. It is in that rest that we can focus our thoughts on him, in gratitude and wonder for what he does for us.

“Honour your father and your mother.” (v12) All around us we see the collapse of family life. If we want to live as God intended then we have to treasure the opportunities that family life brings and acknowledge the demands it makes on our time and on our willingness to forgive; to respect; to appreciate; to affirm and to let go.

Father, Help me to always appreciate that you made these laws for my own good. Let me learn from them to your glory. Amen.

Obstacles to Grace

Reading: Romans 6:8-14 “For sin shall not be your master”

Paul tells us to “live to God” (v10) and, as we continue in the Ten Commandments, we can begin to understand the basis of that life.

“You shall not murder.”(v13) This is probably the easiest for us to dismiss out of hand – few of us have taken another person’s life. But the root of all murder is anger, hatred and unforgiveness – are we guiltless of these?

“You shall not commit adultery.” (v14) More than 50% of all marriages end in divorce and one of the primary causes is adultery. God created us as sexual beings and while sex can be one of the most powerful bonds in marriage, its misuse is powerfully divisive. We need to make a stand against immorality in all its many shapes and forms.

“You shall not steal.” (v15) A 1999 study in Britain found that three quarters of all workers admitted to stealing from their employers! In a world which idolizes money and the display of wealth the temptation to take what isn’t rightfully ours is enormous. It will remain so until we topple the idol of money and the relentless pursuit of it.

“You shall not give false testimony.” (v16) The use and abuse of truth is at the heart of our relationships with others. Jesus said, “I am the truth” and if we are to live like him and for him then all that we say and do must echo truth.

“You shall not covet.” (v17) So often we want what we haven’t got and what other people have. “What causes fights and quarrels among you?...you want something but don’t get it.”(James 4:1, 2) But James goes on to give the answer – read James 4:2-3.

Have you, in the past, dismissed the Ten Commandments as mostly irrelevant to your world? How can you read them in a different light and understand how they govern and enhance our relationship with God and those around us?

Father, your Son tells us that not one jot of your Word will pass away. Help us to understand and live by it. Amen

Discipleship

Reading: Mark 1:16-20 “Come follow me”

A disciple is a follower of Jesus who has responded with his or her whole being to Christ’s call.

In this passage, in which Jesus calls Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John, we can see some of the key lessons of discipleship.

The first thing we notice is that these were ordinary men – they were neither learned nor wealthy. They were fishermen.(v16) So often God chooses “the ‘foolish things of the world to shame the wise”. (1Cor 1:27) We must never think ourselves unworthy or unable to do the work of God – “My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2Cor 12:9)

They were going about their normal daily life. God’s call to us can come at any time. We don’t have to be in church or on our knees to hear His voice, we just have to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Notice how he called them – “Come follow me.”(v17) This was probably not the first time that these men had met or listened to Jesus. Perhaps they were already mulling over in their minds what he had been preaching. Perhaps they were already impressed by his charisma and authority. But their life-changing decision came when they heard his personal invitation.

Finally Jesus made them an offer – or perhaps more appropriately he set them a task, “I will make you fishers of men.”(v17) Jesus never calls us to a life of ease and inactivity. As he later told them, “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” (Matt 9:37)

Do I ever make excuses as to why I can’t do God’s work? Do I try to be sensitive to the call of the Holy Spirit all the time? Have I really said ‘yes’ to Christ’s invitation to become involved as one of his disciples? Have I accepted the challenge to be a fisher of men?

Jesus make me as willing as those first disciples to follow you – no matter where you lead, no matter the demands you make on my life. Amen.

Discipleship

Reading: John 21: 15-19 “Feed my sheep”

In our first passage we saw Jesus’ initial call to Peter to become a disciple, now we see him after his resurrection commissioning Peter to carry on his discipleship – specifically to “Feed my sheep.”(17)

Notice that the call of a disciple always initiates a task. A Christian disciple is not just an adherent to a set of beliefs, he or she is a worker for Christ. Jesus asks Peter to prove his love by giving his life over to the care of others. Like every disciple since, Peter could only really prove and demonstrate his love for his Lord by providing love, care and support for others.

But Peter’s commission went further – not only did it bring him a task, it also brought him death. Loving God and others invariably demands sacrifice – maybe not the supreme one as in Peter’s case. However discipleship is always a call on our time, our talents and often our pockets.

This story of Peter is also an illustration of the way in which every disciple is called upon in one way or another to be a leader. For John it was to lead others into the deep mysteries of the faith. In the case of Paul it was to lead his team of evangelists to the ends of the Earth. For Peter it was to be the shepherd who leads and cares for the sheep – a task in which even the humblest of us can share.

But we need to always remember that the style of Christian leadership is servanthood. Jesus was our perfect model as he humbly knelt to wash the feet of his disciples. (John 13:3-5) And no disciple is greater than his master.

Do I know what task Jesus has given me as his disciple? Am I willing to sacrifice my time, my talents and my money? How do I really feel about serving others?

Jesus, just as Peter gave up everything to follow you and take on the task of caring for your sheep, give me a heart to do the same and serve you with willing joy. Amen.

Changing our World

Reading: Micah 6: 6-8 “What does the Lord require of you?”

Changing our world is all about answering the questions – “How can I put my faith to work in the world?” “How will my faith affect my relationships?” To what areas of ministry is God calling me?”

In this passage from Micah, the prophet points clearly to the areas we are to address if we are truly committed to changing our world. “What does the Lord require of you but to act justly (change your world and your wider community), to love mercy (change those around you) and to walk humbly with your God (change yourself).

It is perhaps one of the ultimate truths of Christian work that you can change nothing until you yourself have been changed. Paul tells us that “if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone the new has come”. (2Cor 5:17) But you have to sustain and grow that new life in Christ – through a continuing commitment to regular prayer and study.

Your most immediate opportunity to change the world beyond yourself is your network of friends and family. Through genuine friendship you can share your life with others and ultimately share your faith in Christ. But genuine friendship starts with an honest assessment of your relationships with and your attitudes towards those you claim to love and care for.

Remember the motto: Make a friend; be a friend; introduce your friend to Christ. That’s the beginning of changing your world.

Are you continually growing to be more like Christ? Do you see value in everyone and affirm them rather than judge them? Do you see beyond people’s mask to their real needs? Do you, “do to others as you would have them do to you”?(Luke 6:31)

Come Holy Spirit and change my life to be more like Jesus – to see others through his eyes, care for them with his hands and love them with his heart. Amen.

Changing our World

Reading: Matthew 25: 31-46 “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Your community does not consist just of one-on-one relationships. You are an integral part of a wider society; a contributing member of a workplace; a participant in organizations and institutions. You influence all of these by the way in which you behave as a Christ-follower.

In this passage Jesus clearly shows us how, even unwittingly, you should be working to extend the Kingdom of God here on Earth. Your mission is to help Christ to change your community by acts of service and kindness. Jesus used the words of Isaiah to highlight his own identical ministry, “to preach good news to the poor; proclaim freedom for the prisoners; sight to the blind; release to the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”(Isaiah 61: 1,2)

You must always be willing to take a stand for Christ even at the expense of your own popularity. Speaking out against injustice and prejudice is not always easy; taking sides with the impoverished is frowned upon; standing up for justice and mercy in the face of anger and hatred can be disheartening. But “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”(v 40)

The success of your mission to change the world should not be measured in immediate results. Some Christians are called to plant, some to water and others to harvest. (1 Cor 3:5-9) None of us is called to be successful but we are all called to be faithful – to do what we can, with what we have, where we are.

When you look at the list of services that Jesus outlines how does it make you feel? How willing are you to stand up for Jesus? Are there times or places when, like Peter, it’s easier and safer to deny Christ? What do you think God is calling you to – plant, water or harvest?

Jesus, never let me fail to hear the cry of the needy; never let me fail to your face in theirs; but most of all never let me fail you. Amen.

Sanctifying Grace

Reading: Galatians 5: 22-23 “The fruit of the Spirit”

Sanctifying grace is the Holy Spirit at work in us to make us more Christ-like in our relationships with others. Here Paul clearly spells out those ‘fruits’ which should characterize us as belonging to Jesus.

Love. The New Testament Greek word for love is *agape*. It is an unusual word and it describes the deliberate effort - which we can only make with God’s help - never to seek anything but the best for everyone, even those who seek to wrong us.

Joy. This goes beyond an emotional feeling of happiness and wellbeing. It is the experience of bliss which comes from the sure knowledge that we belong to God as one of His beloved children.

Peace. This means not just freedom from trouble but everything that can contribute to our wellbeing – the peace of heart that comes from knowing that “all things work for the good of those who love God.” (Romans 8:28)

Patience. This is the virtue of being slow to anger. It is most often used in the New Testament to describe God. Perhaps the best illustration is to say that if God had been a man He would have wiped us off the face of the Earth long ago, but He has the patience that tolerates and forgives our sin.

Goodness and Kindness. These virtues are closely related. The best illustrations of the meaning of these words is from Jesus’ own experience. He exhibited ‘goodness’ when he drove the money-changers out of the temple and ‘kindness’ when he forgave the woman taken in adultery.

Do you always seek the best for everyone? Do you experience the deep-down peace and joy that comes from knowing and trusting God? Do you know when to be angry and when to stay patient? Do you actively pursue what is good, reject what is evil and forgive rather than begrudge?

Holy Spirit enable and empower me to display your ‘fruits’ in my life to the glory of God. Amen.

Sanctifying Grace

Reading: Romans 5: 1-5 “God has poured out His love into our hearts”

This passage provides a background to a continuing look at the ‘fruits of the Spirit’ (Galatians 5: 22-23) which Paul encourages us to pursue as we strive to become more like Jesus.

Faithfulness. This is the characteristic which defines someone who is reliable. You can implicitly trust all that they say and their actions will never be at odds with their words.

Gentleness. This is perhaps the most difficult of the ‘fruits’ to fully understand. The Greek word – *praotes* – has three meanings in the New Testament. It can mean submissive to the will of God. Alternatively it can signify a willingness to learn. Finally, and most often it can mean considerate. Perhaps the best illustration is that of a man who is angry at the right time but never at the wrong time.

Self-control. It describes a man who has mastery over his desires and rejects self-indulgent pleasure. It is used of an athlete who has disciplined his body. (1 Cor 9:25) It also describes a ruler who never lets his personal interests influence his decisions of government. William Barclay sums it up as the virtue that makes a man so master of himself that he is fit to be the servant of others.

It was Paul’s belief that, as we are *justified by faith* in Christ, God “pours out his love into our hearts by His Holy Spirit whom he has given us.” (Romans 5:5) The effect of this indwelling Spirit is to *sanctify* us, infusing us with character of Christ.

Are you always reliable in your dealings with friends, and colleagues? Do you know when to be angry and when to keep a cool and ‘gentle’ head? Are there aspects of your character you still need to control and master? What are they?

Father pour Your love into my heart through Your Holy Spirit. Mould my character and change in me those things that mar my witness for You. Amen.

Body of Christ

Reading: Acts 2: 42-47 “All the believers were together”

When we make our commitment to Christ we become part of a community of people, laity and clergy, with a common calling. From that moment we belong to the Body of Christ. In this passage we have the model for the Body of Christ set by the earliest Christians.

A learning Church. They “devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching.”(v42) They were consistently eager to “know this love that surpasses knowledge.” (Eph 3:19)

A ‘together’ Church. They “devoted themselves ... to fellowship”(v42) The Church of Christ is only ever a real church when its members are bound together with love. (John 13: 34,35)

A ‘sacramental’ Church. They “devoted themselves ... to the breaking of bread and prayer.”(v42) They were able to meet the problems of an antagonistic society because they first met with Him.

A ‘happening’ Church. There were “many wonders and miraculous signs”.(v43) They expected great things from God and attempted great things for God.

A sharing Church. “They gave to everyone as they had need”.(v45) They had a sense of responsibility towards each other, especially those in need.

A worshipping Church. “they continued to meet together in the temple courts.”(v46) God is glorified when His people meet to worship.

An attractive Church. “praising God and finding the favour of all the people.”(v47) Outsiders wanted to meet them and get to know them and the Christ they worshipped.

How does your own church compare with these early Christians? What can you do to come closer to this model?

Jesus, so much was achieved by your first followers in building your church, your body. Show me what I can do to ensure that my church follows their example and brings glory to your name. Amen.

Body of Christ

Reading: Matt 28: 16-20 “Go and make disciples of all nations”

The Body of Christ is a community with a purpose – it exists to bring glory to God and to follow Jesus’ final and great commission – “go and make disciples of all nations”.(v19)

Proclaiming the good news was the commission to all the disciples it wasn’t assigned to one or two with special gifts. We are all to be actively involved in building the Body of Christ. As Paul later challenged the Roman church, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:14)

The church’s mission is not only to *tell* the good news but, as importantly, to *be* that good news. It should be the model in the world of people living in harmony, caring for each other, sharing with each other and reflecting the sacrificial love of their Lord and Saviour.

The church is to be a beacon of active love and service in the community. The church must reach out to people where they live; serve them in their need and love them as they are.

But in giving his disciples this great commission he also gave them two assurances. Firstly he confirmed his authority, “All authority in Heaven and on Earth is given to me.”(v18) Finally he promised them his presence, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”(v20)

How seriously have you taken Jesus’ commission to you personally to proclaim his good news? Do your relationships with your Christian brothers and sisters reflect the love, harmony and care of the early church? What areas of service are you involved with in your community? Is this enough?

Holy Spirit, help me every moment of every day to recognize opportunities to tell out and live out the good news of God’s grace and love. Amen.

Perseverance

Reading: Phil 3:10-15 “Press on towards the goal”

The Christian life is rarely, if ever, an easy and logical progress towards perfection. It requires perseverance and mutual support.

Paul sets out his ultimate goal, “I want to *know* Christ”(v10) The Greek word *know* (‘ginoskein’) implies an intimate knowledge. Paul’s goal is not just to know about Christ but to know him personally – to share the way he walked; to share the cross he bore; to share the death he died and finally to share the resurrected life he lives for eternity.

“Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect.”(v12) But rather than paint a picture of pessimism Paul emphasizes his perseverance, “I press on toward the goal.”(v14)

He then uses two vivid ideas. The first is “to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me.”(v12) Christ takes hold of each one of us for a purpose – our goal must be to understand what that purpose is and then endeavour, through the Holy Spirit, to fulfill that purpose.

The second idea is expressed as, “Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead.”(v13) There is never any room for a Christian to rest on his or her laurels. We need to put past achievements behind us and keep our eyes firmly focussed on what is still to be achieved.

There are two keys to perseverance and both involve *keeping in touch*. Paul has already emphasized here the importance of increasing our knowledge and intimacy with our risen Lord Jesus. Later he highlights the second element, “Join with others.”(v17) It is vital for our growth and maturity to maintain close and regular ties with our Christian brothers and sisters.

Is your knowledge of your Saviour growing in intimacy? Do you appreciate the purpose for which Christ called you? Do you still know what you are aiming for in your Christian life? Do you keep in regular touch with other Christians?

Father, give me the perseverance to press on to achieve the purpose for which You called me, to Your glory. Amen.

Perseverance

Reading: Hebrews 10: 19-25 “Let us not give up meeting together”

This passage is a clarion call to perseverance. The writer urges us to take, and keep on taking, vital steps in order to sustain and grow our faith and knowledge of God.

Never neglect to spend time in the presence of God. As Christians we live in two worlds – one of time and space and the other of eternity. We so easily get caught up in the here and now, that we lose sight of our eternal God. Stop and listen, often.

Never forget what we believe in. Constantly remind ourselves of the foundation of our faith and the reason we first believed.

Never forget that we are just one part of the Body of Christ. It is easy to slide into a selfish Christianity where we think only of ourselves and what is happening in our own Christian life. Remember that selfish Christianity is an oxymoron!

And here the writer suggests some specific things we can do to encourage others. Firstly “spur one another on toward love and good deeds”(v24) Often this can be best achieved by setting an example for others to follow.

“Never give up meeting together” regularly with other Christians (v25), whether this be in the formality of a church service or with small groups. Never underestimate the value of the Emmaus Accountability group.

Finally “encourage one another.”(25) The world is full of cynics and critics. Our Christian duty is to build others up rather than precipitate their fall.

How often in the hustle and bustle do you stop to feel the presence of God? Are you more concerned with your own eternity than the here and now of others? Are you part of an accountability group?

Jesus, keep me aware of the steps I must take to sustain and grow my faith in you. But never let me forget to support those around me. Amen.

Fourth Day

Reading: Matt 5:13-16 “You are the salt of the earth”

Now you have left the three days of your Emmaus weekend behind, it is time to settle to the earnest task of making the most of your Fourth Day. In this passage Jesus gives us some very clear parameters as to how we are to live that day.

When we wish to stress someone’s worth and usefulness we often refer to them as ‘the salt of the earth.’ In the ancient world salt was highly valued, so much so that the Greeks referred to it as divine. In commanding us to be the salt of the earth Jesus is highlighting some of the characteristics that we must portray.

Salt is a pure substance. We are to be examples of purity in an increasingly godless world. We have to live in the world but as James put it, one must “keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27)

Salt is a preservative. It prevents corruption. We are to be persons who, by our presence, defeat corruption and encourage decency. In a world where standards of honesty and morality are in sharp decline we are to stand up for what is right and good.

Salt adds flavour. We are meant to add flavour to the lives of those around us but sadly we often do just the opposite. We lose the *radiance* that comes from being in the presence of God. Moses had to cover his face when he came down from meeting God on the mountain! (Exodus 34:29-35)

Consider your life at work and at home – are you an example of purity? Are you seen as someone who does not condone dishonesty and immorality? – even smuttiness!?! Do you radiate the joy and the peace that comes from knowing Christ?

Jesus, you told your followers that they were to be the salt of the earth. Please help me to live a life of purity and radiate the joy and peace that comes from knowing you. Amen.

Fourth Day

Reading: Matt 5: 13-16 “You are the light of the world”

This is perhaps the greatest compliment that Jesus could pay his followers, for he claimed to be just that himself – “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:5)

Again, as with the salt analogy, Jesus is shorthanding the qualities he requires of his followers - the character that they must radiate to the world around them.

First and foremost a light is there to be seen. A man’s Christianity is meant to be seen, visible to everyone. ‘There can be no such thing as a secret disciple for either the secrecy destroys the disciple or the disciple destroys the secrecy’.

It is also important to realise that Jesus said “you are the light of the world.” He did not say, “you are the light of the church.” Our Christianity needs to be visible in every facet of our life.

A light is a guide. Whether it be a torch or a lighthouse beam, the light illuminates the way to go. It is our responsibility to make it clear to others which is the right path. We are to be an example of the life to follow.

A light can provide warning; it tells of danger ahead. Often we must fulfill that function in the world in which we live. All around us we see the inroads that drugs, alcohol and illicit sex are making and the disastrous effects that they are having upon our society. We have the responsibility to be the warning light, the one who, despite the potential for scorn, stands firm.

Do family, friends and colleagues all know your stand for Christ? Is your life an example you would be happy for others to imitate? Do you make a stand against the things which are wrong in our society?

Father, above all else I want to be the light that illuminates the life you want us all to live and the love you want us all to show. Help me to make a difference that brings glory to Your name. Amen.