

The Commands of Christ

2020 FAST & DEVOTIONAL



Preface

Many of us have heard The Great Commission. If you haven't, Jesus gave his final command on earth to his first followers with this edict: "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." It is the quintessential verse for missionary work, sharing our faith, and discipleship. That's a lot from one command! This commission is quoted so often it becomes oddly routine. We know that it is important, but we forget why that is the case. The two parts that get lost are found in the second half of the commission. After Jesus tells us to go out, baptize, and make disciples, he then tells us how we ought to do it. First, we must teach others to obey Jesus' commands. And second, we must rely on His presence in order to do so.

When Jesus first started his ministry on earth, he displayed these two essential aspects through fasting. When Jesus went out into the desert, it says he was "led by the Spirit." Jesus never did anything without communion with The Father and The Spirit. As Jesus fasted, he emptied his earthly body and spirit. We cannot obey God's commands on our own; it is impossible! We need full reliance on The Holy Spirit.

This year during our church-wide fast, it is our hope that you learn the commands of Jesus, learn how to obey them, and teach them to others; not just for 40-days, but for all time! The commands of Jesus are both numerous and intense. There is a richness, depth, and profound purpose in every command. It's hard to know everything Jesus commanded, let alone to obey the commands, so we recognize the challenge this brings! However, as you fast, remember you are emptying yourself so The Holy Spirit can fill you. The truth is we can neither remember nor obey every command through our own strength. With Jesus empowering us, we can obey his commands and live like Him. And when we do, our world will radically change.

Before You Begin

BASIC HOW-TO

For each of the 40 days of this fast, we have composed a devotion for you to read. Each one was written by a different member of our team here at the church, and they cover a different command of Jesus. Before reading the devotion every day, get out your Bible and read the Scripture reference at the top of the devotion. Doing so will give you the proper context for what is written in the devotion. Take time to contemplate the portion of Scripture and the devotion as you read them. Try not to rush! After you've read each devotion, take time to pray for 10 minutes. Communicate back to God what He's told you through your reading and tell Him how you feel about what you've read. Most importantly, leave room for the Holy Spirit to speak to you.

Don't forget, we are doing this as a church because the Holy Spirit has led us to fast together, just as He led Jesus into the wilderness to fast for 40 days. There is power in us collectively removing distractions and focusing on God. We want to always be growing as a community, and that doesn't just mean numerically. Our community is large in number, but we want our spiritual depth to be even greater than our numerical attendance. If we devote ourselves to reading the Scripture every day, reading each devotion, and spending time with God in prayer, there's no limit to what God can and will do in this community!

WHAT IS FASTING?

To fast means to voluntarily abstain from certain foods, eating and/or drinking, certain activities or from items for an extended period of time. Biblical fasting is a discipline of voluntarily denying one's self in order to be available for prayer and communion with God. Since it's an ultimate act of self-denial, you are entering into an intense training in righteousness.

WHY FAST?

There are many reasons why people fasted in the Bible, and all of them are good. Some wanted wisdom and power, while others were repenting of their sins. However, there was one aspect of the fasting experience that each had in common: a personal encounter with the living God. As you begin to consider reasons for your fast, there is one that will

override all other reasons and that is to have a powerful, life-changing encounter with God.

WHY GIVE UP FOOD?

What is the number one thing you trust in for your survival and existence? Jesus said in Matt. 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God." If food is a higher priority to you than Him, you are placing it as an idol in your heart.

WHY GIVE UP SECULAR MEDIA?

As followers of Christ, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Just as nothing unclean was allowed to enter the temple we should be careful with what we allow to enter our hearts through our eyes or ears. As Christians we are called to discern what we watch, what we listen to, and what we think about (Philippians 4:8).

WHAT WILL WE BE FASTING?

Besides what we are fasting as a church listed in the snapshot below, we also encourage those participating to ask and listen to the Holy Spirit about giving up other things for the duration of the fast personal to them; such as social media, caffeine, and video games, etc.

40 DAY SNAPSHOT & BASIC INFORMATION

DAY 1-10	NO SECULAR MEDIA, MEATS OR SWEETS
DAY 11-20	NO SECULAR MEDIA / 1 MEAL A DAY
DAY 21-30	NO SECULAR MEDIA, MEATS OR SWEETS
DAY 31-40	NO SECULAR MEDIA / 1 MEAL A DAY

PREPARE SPIRITUALLY

Ask God to help you make a list of your sins. Confess every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance and accept God's forgiveness. Seek forgiveness from all whom you have offended, and forgive all who have hurt you as the Holy Spirit leads you.

PREPARE PHYSICALLY

Eat smaller meals before the fast and avoid high-fat / sugary foods. If you have a chronic ailment or are on prescription medication, consult your doctor and consider modifying your fast.

Practical Tips and Guidelines

EXERCISE MODERATELY

- During the days when we're fasting a meal or only eating one meal, exercise moderately if convenient and comfortable.

STAY HYDRATED

- Make sure to drink plenty of water while fasting.
- Drinking fruit juice during the fast will decrease your hunger pains and give natural energy.
- The best juices are made from fresh watermelon, lemons, grapes, apples, cabbage, beets, carrots, celery, or leafy green vegetables. In cold weather, you may enjoy a warm vegetable broth.
- Mix acidic juices (orange and tomato) with water for your stomach's sake.

REST & PREPARE MENTALLY

- Rest as much as your schedule will permit.
- Prepare yourself for temporary mental discomforts, such as impatience, crankiness, and episodes of anxiety.
- Expect some physical discomfort, especially on the second day. You may have hunger pains and dizziness. Withdrawal from caffeine and sugar may cause headaches. Physical discomforts may also include weakness, tiredness, or sleeplessness.

BREAKING THE FAST

- Begin ending the fast by eating certain foods gradually. Suddenly reintroducing foods to your stomach and digestive tract that you haven't eaten in 40 days will likely have negative, even dangerous, consequences. Try several smaller meals or snacks each day.
- Practice moderation and wisdom in what media you introduce back into your life after the fast is over.

Four Things to Consider

1. BE CONTENT THROUGH THE FAST

Avoid complaining about what foods you can't eat, movies you can't watch, etc. Avoid appearing gloomy for people to feel sorry for you or think how spiritual you are. On the contrary, do what Jesus says and "anoint your head, wash your face!" Act normal and carry on. We have the privilege and honor of giving things up for Christ, knowing He gave everything up for us. Complaining seems to almost negate the very purpose of this fast. We don't have to fast, we get to.

2. AVOID VIEWING THE FAST AS A "DIET PLAN."

In the past few years, we've also been guilty of somehow seeing the chief benefits of these next 40 days as getting a little slimmer, getting off caffeine, or not taking desserts for granted. But if we look at scripture, we see it as a time set aside for deep spiritual urgency, when God's people really wanted Him to show up in a big way.

3. REPLACING SACRIFICE WITH GOD

Sometimes we can get caught up in the "whats" of fasting without thinking about the "Who." For these next 40 days, there are things we should want to give up in our lives so that we might replace them with God. As Jared Wilson says in his book *Gospel Deep*s, "the soul has a palate and a throat, else Jesus would not bid us drink." John Piper says, "It is not just our bodies that are built for enjoyment, but our spiritual senses, the insides of our insides." The problem of course is that we are bent on thinking our

insides will have joy when our outsides do. But it doesn't work that way. It's actually the other way around. Food and drink will not truly satisfy our bodies until the bread and wine of Jesus's body satisfies our souls.

For the next 40 days, we get to savor and enjoy Christ without any distractions. If we just give up food and don't replace it with the presence of God, it is of no benefit to us. We'll only be unnecessarily hungry people.

Let's all take a moment to breathe in, slow down, and remember not just what we're about to do, but Who we are doing this for.

4. FASTING SUCCESSFULLY

If you sincerely humble yourself before the Lord, repent, pray, and seek God's face, you will experience a heightened awareness of His presence (John 14:21).

A single fast, however, is not a spiritual cure-all. Just as we need fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit daily, we also need new times of fasting before God. It takes time to build your spiritual fasting endurance. If you fail to make it through your first fast, do not be discouraged. As soon as possible, undertake another fast until you do succeed. God will honor you for your faithfulness.

Christian Media Suggestions

CHRISTIAN MEDIA

For those of you who are fasting secular media, we've compiled suggestions that you may enjoy during the fast. There are plenty of other options that you may find on Netflix, Amazon, Spotify or your preferred media outlet of choice. Listen and watch media that will uplift and encourage you spiritually.

MOVIES

- Overcomer
- War Room
- Silence
- Calvary
- Passion of the Christ
- Prince of Egypt
- Unbroken 2: Path to Redemption
- Breakthrough
- Hacksaw Ridge

MUSIC

- Hillsong United
- Phil Wickham
- Andy Mineo
- Alert312
- Kings Kaleidoscope
- Beautiful Eulogy
- NF
- Audrey Assad
- Mosaic MSC
- Elevation Worship
- Vertical Worship
- Cory Asbury
- Jesus Culture
- Passion
- Social Club Misfits
- Lecrae
- Influence Music
- Tasha Cobbs Leonard
- The Walls Group
- Todd Dulaney
- Travis Greene

BOOKS

- The Explicit Gospel - Matt Chandler
- Everybody, Always - Bob Goff
- Just Do Something - Kevin DeYoung
- The Prodigal God - Tim Keller
- In the Name of Jesus - Henri Nouwen
- Spirituality for the Rest of Us
- Larry Osborne
- The Cost of Discipleship
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- How Should We Then Live
- Francis Schaeffer
- The Screwtape Letters - C.S. Lewis
- The Way of the Warrior - Erwin McManus
- Simply Jesus - N.T. Wright
- Confessions - Augustine of Hippo

Vegetarian Friendly Restaurants

FAST FOOD

- Burger King
- Hardees / Carl's Jr.
- Del Taco
- McDonald's - Breakfast / Salad No Chicken
- Taco Bell
- Chick-Fil-A - Salad no Chicken
Waffle Fries
- Panda Express
- Starbucks
- Subway
- Jimmy John's
- Jersey Mike's Subs
- Dunkin' Donuts

QUICK SERVICE

- Newk's Eatery
- Panera
- Chipotle
- Blue Coast Burrito
- Koji Japanese Grill
- Zoe's Kitchen
- Papa John's
- Domino's
- Mellow Mushroom
- Uncle Maddio's Pizza
- Just Love Coffee
- Moe's Southwest Grill
- McAlister's Deli
- CoreLife Eatery
- Zoës Kitchen
- Blaze Pizza
- Freebirds Burrito
- The Curious Kitchen

RESTAURANTS

- Marina's on the Square
- Pad Thai Cafe
- Chuy's
- The Goat
- The Alley on Main
- Carrabba's Italian Grill
- Olive Garden
- Mimi's Cafe
- The Blue Cactus Cantina
- Red Robins
- Cracker Barrel
- First Watch
- Old Chicago Pizza
- Burger Republic
- Tandoor Indian Cuisine
- Taste of Thai
- Thida Thai - Smyrna

GLUTEN FREE / DAIRY FREE



Coconut Pineapple & Mango Overnight Oats

INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cup pineapple diced
- ¼ cup mango diced
- ½ cup old fashioned rolled oats
- ½ cup unsweetened vanilla almond milk
- 2 tbsp chia seeds
- 2 tbsp Shredded Coconut
- 1 tsp pure maple syrup

PREP 10-15MIN /
2 SERVINGS

STEP 1

Combine all ingredients in a 16 ounce mason jar, stir to combine, cover and store in fridge overnight.

Optional Substitute Toppings

- Strawberries
- Blueberries
- Raspberries
- Blackberries
- Banana
- Granola
- Cinnamon
- Raisins / Dried Cranberries

OTHER VARIATIONS

Peanut Butter

- ½ cup unsweetened plain almond milk (or sub other dairy-free milks)
- ¾ Tbsp chia seeds
- 2 Tbsp natural salted peanut butter or almond butter
- 1 Tbsp maple syrup (or sub coconut sugar, organic brown sugar, or stevia to taste)
- ½ cup rolled oats
- Top with crushed peanuts

Carrot Cake

- ½ cup unsweetened plain almond milk (or sub other dairy-free milks)
- ¾ Tbsp chia seeds
- 2 Tbsp natural salted peanut butter or almond butter
- 1 Tbsp maple syrup (or sub coconut sugar, organic brown sugar, or stevia to taste)
- ½ cup rolled oats
- Finely shredded carrot, walnuts and chopped date

GLUTEN FREE / DAIRY FREE



Creamy Thai Carrot Sweet Potato Soup

INGREDIENTS

- 1 tbsp coconut oil
- 2 cups diced sweet onion
- 2 cloves garlic minced
- 1 tbsp minced ginger
- 2 tbsp red curry paste
- 4 cups low-sodium vegetable broth plus more if needed
- ¼ cup almond butter
- 3 cups diced peeled carrots
- 3 cups diced peeled sweet potatoes
- ½ tsp sea salt
- ¼ tsp cayenne pepper
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Minced fresh cilantro
- 10 corn tortillas or flour
- ¼ cup cilantro chopped
- Sliced almonds to garnish

PREP 25MIN / COOK 25MIN
8 SERVINGS

STEP 1

In a large pot, melt the coconut oil over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic, and ginger and sauté for 5 to 6 minutes, until the onion is translucent. Stir in the curry paste.

In a small bowl, whisk together some of the broth with the almond butter until smooth. Add the mixture to the pot, along with the remaining broth, carrots, sweet potatoes, salt, and cayenne (if using). Stir until combined.

STEP 2

Bring the soup to a low boil over medium-high heat and then reduce the heat to medium-low. Cover and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes, until the potatoes and carrots are fork-tender. Ladle the soup carefully into a blender. (You will likely have to do this in a couple of times, depending on the size of your blender. With the lid slightly ajar, to allow the steam to escape, blend on low and slowly increase the speed until the soup is completely smooth.

STEP 3

Return the soup to the pot and season with salt and black pepper. If desired, you can thin the soup out with a bit more broth if you prefer a thinner soup. Reheat if necessary. Ladle the soup into bowls and top with minced cilantro, almonds, and a squeeze of lime juice, if desired. The soup will keep in the fridge for up to a week, and freezes well for 1 to 2 months.

DAIRY FREE



Mushroom Stroganoff

INGREDIENTS

- 2 tbsp grapeseed or olive oil, divided
- 1 large yellow onion
- 1 lb cremini mushrooms
- 3 cloves of garlic minced
- 2 tsp fresh thyme picked
- 3 tbsp flour
- 3 ½ cups vegetable stock
- 7 oz dry egg noodles
- ½ cup plain almond milk
- Salt and pepper

PREP 10MIN / COOK 20MIN

4-5 SERVINGS

STEP 1

Heat 1 tablespoon of oil in large skillet (or pot) over medium-high heat. While the pot heats, dice onion. Cook onion for 6 minutes, or until it's translucent and slightly golden brown on edges. Meanwhile, cut the ends off the mushrooms and slice. Add mushrooms to the pot and cook for 8 minutes, or until mushrooms have released all their liquids and are golden brown.

STEP 2

Reduce heat to medium. Add remaining 1 tablespoon of oil, minced garlic and freshly picked thyme leaves to the pot. Cook for 2 minutes. Add flour and mix well until vegetables are coated evenly. Then add vegetable stock. Scrape any brown bits off the pan and stir well. Bring liquid back to a boil.

STEP 3

Once boiling, add noodles and non-dairy milk. Use spoon to distribute the noodles so they're fully covered with liquid. Stir every couple minutes to ensure even cooking. Cook uncovered for 8-10 minutes or until the noodles are al dente. Keep an eye on your mixture: if noodles need more liquid, add extra stock in very small increments. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately and garnish with chopped parsley and cheese of your choice.

Day 1

LOVE GOD, LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Read Matthew 22:34-40

Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, and Sadducees are seen trying to trap Jesus. Jesus was an unknown Jew from a humble town, and just before this passage, he had schooled the learned elites. He taught them about the resurrection, proper placement of the political system, and imparted many other important commands. Jesus taught so well he left the crowd “astounded.”

This, of course, incensed his dissenters. So they asked, and I paraphrase, “if you’re so smart, Jesus, what’s the most important command you have talked about?” It was a trap because all of the commands are important. God’s law cannot be divided. We must obey every part! The trap was set, yet Jesus was unafraid to answer the question head-on. Jesus boldly proclaimed, “You must love God with everything! Your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Then he said that the second command is equal to it: “love [or look out for] those around you as well as you would yourself.” All of God’s laws, all the commands given to us by God, must first filter through these two commands. If we don’t obey these two, we cannot obey any other command. It is essential we understand both of them.

If we love God with all of our heart, it means nothing else takes precedence. What do you place above God? Do you care more about money, hobbies, sports, or even your own family? If you’re obeying God’s greatest command, Jesus is the king of your heart. Are the very depths of who you are turned over to God? Have you allowed God into the crevasses of your psyche? Is anything still hidden? Do you love God with all your mind? What do you listen to, watch, and fill your mind with? And do you give God effort every day, loving him with all your strength? Your love for God will drive your love for people. If you love people as Jesus commands, then you will notice others, care for them, and go above and beyond for them. Love God and love people, and you will truly live! All the commands begin here.

Pray for 10 Minutes

Day 2

FOLLOW ME

Read Matthew 4:18-20

Jesus's call to "Follow me" can come at any time, to anyone. In the midst of doing their jobs, going about their day, as usual, Jesus calls His first disciples. Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew respond immediately by leaving their plans behind and following Him. A call from the Lord changed the direction of their lives.

While Jesus was alive, He lived out the perfect example of what God has always intended us to be: loving, obedient, self-controlled and faithful children of God. It's not always easy to follow Him, but it's always worth it. If we are not following closely, the distance between us and Christ naturally gets greater. This is where the enemy sneaks in. Any foothold Satan can take, he will. Every single day we make a series of decisions, some tiny, some much larger. We decide to either follow Jesus's way or follow the worldly way. The Lord wants and knows what is best for us. Who better to follow than the One who created us?

Not only does following Him transform our lives today, our eternity depends on this. When Jesus tells us to follow Him, he doesn't mean to subscribe to His social media updates. Jesus is calling us to follow Him in a much stronger sense. Ask Jesus what you need to leave behind in order to be a good disciple. Once we understand and give our life to Jesus, we are considered followers of Christ and are expected to spread the gospel and make disciples. He has chosen us and gifted us for what He wants us to do. Read your Bible daily, even if for only 10 minutes. Talk to Him, confess to Him, dream with Him, just be with Him! Be in community with other Christ-followers. Serve and give as He did. Following Him is the best decision we can make. It truly leads to more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Pray for 10 Minutes

Day 3

DENY YOURSELF

Read Matthew 16:24-28

Here Christ gives us a command in three parts. He says that in order to be His disciple, one must 1. deny himself, 2. take up his cross, and 3. follow Him. These three things are presented as precursors to following Christ, things which we must do before we are able to claim that we are Christ-followers. Here, we're just going to focus on the first one, to deny yourself.

In order to find out why Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, let's work backward from the command. He tells us that if we want to follow Him, then we must deny ourselves (v24). Why should we follow after Him? So that we can find our lives (v25). Why should we find our lives? So that we can gain something of surpassing value, greater than the value of the whole world (v26). What is it that we will gain? Seeing the Son of Man coming in glory into His kingdom, and then being repaid according to our actions (v27-28). We deny ourselves in this life so that God may be glorified and we may have the privilege of seeing His kingdom.

So how do we deny ourselves in such a way that God is glorified and His kingdom advanced? Let's now take a look at all three commands (deny, take up, and follow) together. There seems to be a progression between the commands: deny yourself, then take up your cross, then follow Me. So motivated by the opportunity to glorify God and see His kingdom, we deny ourselves in such a way that we then take up our cross and then follow Him. Just denying yourself chocolate or social media isn't the ultimate goal. Denying yourself fleeting pleasures like these is only important if it leads to serving Him wholly and reaping the rewards of everlasting joy. If your self-denial doesn't result in increased obedience to Him, it doesn't matter. If your self-denial does result in increased obedience to Him, it's the most important thing you will ever do.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 4

BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER

Read Mark 11:15-19

God has called His house a house of prayer, a place where people gather to pay homage to and communicate with Him. Prayer is the heartbeat of every thriving congregation and should also exist in our personal lives. God hears the prayers of His people when they come with broken and contrite hearts.

Prayers are not just simply times of requesting or even pleading with God. They are conversations in which God is adored, sins are confessed, thanksgivings are lifted up, and requests are offered. When God's people come in humble adoration and openly confess their unworthiness, God hears, and He responds.

On the other hand, when people come before God with an attitude of pride or a sense of entitlement, the conversation quickly comes to an end. All too often people only approach God when they are unable to make it on their own or are in need as if He's their personal genie. He's not. He is the God of the universe, the One who sees and knows all, the One who makes the impossible possible, the great I AM, and the giver of life.

Prayer keeps us humble before our Maker and reminds us of our need for His mercy. We can come to God in need because nothing is too difficult or impossible for God to handle. But we need to come in the other moments as well. When was the last time you prayed? Are you praying consistently every day? Are you making your house a house of prayer?

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 5

ENTER THE NARROW GATE

Read Matthew 7:13-14

As Jesus concludes his Sermon on the Mount, he presents to everyone the ultimate choice. What he says is not for the faint of heart; it can be hard to swallow and even evoke shock and awe. He confronts and challenges us to pick a path: a narrow path or a wide path. The choice we make determines our eternity.

Jesus doesn't give us many options. We have the choice to enter through the narrow gate to the narrow path, which involves surrender and obedience, or we have the option to take the wide gate to the wide path, which seems like the easy way as it allows us to follow our own desires. It is in these moments where I want to ask God to take my free will and make the decision for me.

Not only can it be difficult for some of us to make any kind of choice, it is obviously difficult to willingly choose what is hard because we are naturally drawn to do what is easy. We would rather use the microwave instead of a conventional oven because it's faster and easier - but the taste? Meh. And did I mention society's encouragement to have a self-centered mentality (i.e. look out for self, greed is good, nice guys finish last, etc.)?

Jesus does not make this easy. The narrow gate must be entered individually, like a turnstile at an amusement park: only one at a time can enter. Because it is narrow, we cannot take any baggage with us! Charles Spurgeon said it like this: "You and your sins must separate, or you and your God will never come together. No one sin must you keep; they must all be given up."

What are you willing to lay down to fit through the narrow gate? It's a choice only you can make. The wide gate is fun for now but leads to destruction, and the narrow is hard but leads to joy, peace, the blessings of God, and, ultimately, eternal life. The choice is yours.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 6

LISTEN TO GOD'S VOICE

Read Matthew 11:15

In this passage, Jesus commands us to listen to Him. This command is spread throughout the Bible (Proverbs 3:6, Mark 4:23, Revelation 3:13). It's God's invitation to us to enter into His mind. We have the opportunity to hear God's thoughts if only we are willing to listen.

In Matthew 11, John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah. It's interesting that the herald of Jesus's message seemed to lose his own faith. At this time, John had been thrown into prison by King Herod. Many people, including John himself, expected Jesus to be someone else. They expected Him to come to Earth as a glorious king and free them from Roman oppression with the flourish of a hand. John the Baptist surely expected Jesus to free him from the bondage of prison.

When those disciples asked Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3), Jesus replied that the disciples should report to John what they hear and see. Jesus' ministry did not look the way people thought it would, but he didn't come to bring political freedom. Jesus came to free humanity from the curse of sin. All they had to do was listen to what Jesus said, to hear his voice, and to apply his message to their lives.

It was so easy for people to see Jesus and decide that he was not a sufficient Messiah. Do we know that Jesus and His word are enough? In the book of Romans, Paul says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). Do you struggle to hear God's voice? Do you wonder why your life doesn't look the way you think it should or why Jesus doesn't look the way you think He should? Are you spending time with Jesus in the Word? Do you have ears to hear what God has for you?

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 7

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

Read Matthew 7:7-11

These verses, like many in our devotions, are from the Sermon on the Mount. Most likely, this was a message that went on for several days, not just an hour-long sermon. The point of the message was to communicate just how much the Father loves His children, and in these 5 verses, Jesus tells us to keep seeking God in all we do.

How many times have we prayed for something over and over, but did not receive the answer we wanted? How many times have we searched Scripture looking for answers without getting the ones we hoped for? I know I've done it many times. I also know God wants us to ask for all things, seek Him in all things and wait on Him to answer us. We forget sometimes that He sees what we don't see and knows what we need even when we don't have a clue. Just as Jesus said, "if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead?" we sometimes think we know what is good for us when it's really not what we need at all.

Just as a good parent knows what is best for their child, our loving Father knows what is best for us. We need to remember this when we pray for things and don't get the answer we want. I remember praying for my sister-in-law who had cancer. I prayed for healing over and over, and it wasn't getting better. God revealed to me in prayer time that He was healing her in His time and it wasn't here on earth that she was going to receive the healing, it was going to be with Him. I cried so hard that day, but they were tears of joy, not sadness. God could be doing the same thing in your life. He could be answering your prayer in a different way than you expect. Do you trust Him that He is?

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 8

BE RECONCILED

Read Matthew 5:23-26

As Jesus is teaching His newly-called disciples, He gives this command to “First go and be reconciled to your brother or sister.” He gives this command, not as an option or suggestion. Instead, He presents it as a necessary component in the lifestyle of worship.

During this time, one of the greatest religious rituals in Jewish culture was to offer a gift, or a sacrifice, on the altar to the Lord. This was a practice deemed necessary to be in right-standing with God. But here, Jesus introduces this truth that God cares about more than religious action. In this moment, Jesus is telling the disciples, ‘The position of your heart matters more to me than any gift you could ever bring.’

What if the position of our hearts is not what we want it to be, though? How can we approach a perfect God if our lives are everything but? We must remind ourselves that cleaning ourselves up before we approach is not the Gospel. We are called as we are. We are loved as we are. But the perfect love of the Father will never leave us where He found us.

God is calling us to reconciliation because He is calling us to Himself. The act of reconciliation is an act of worshiping the Father. Christ has reconciled us to Himself. He has not counted our brokenness against us, so who are we to count the brokenness of others against them? The message of reconciliation has been entrusted to us by the One who gave His life to reconcile each of us to Himself.

This command to be reconciled can be a painful one. Invite God into the places you have been hurt, allow Him to heal and restore, and He will reconcile your heart. It is in this pain of surrendering that you will find the purest peace. Only with open hands can you lay down your pain. And only with open hands can you receive His grace.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 9

HONOR MARRIAGE

Read Matthew 19:4-6

In Christ's answer to the Pharisees' question about marriage and divorce, He recollects the Genesis narrative of God's creation of woman (Eve) out of the rib of man (Adam). In this context of creation and intention, those wondrous words about the unity of marriage are first heard: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and *cleaves* to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). So compellingly beautiful is this image, this calling toward the "one flesh" unity of marriage. Yet, how difficult it can be to live up to this reality - to obey the cleave command in and through the daily drag of married life.

It is not easy to love. It hurts. This is perhaps why marriage is often likened to a fiery hot crucible of cleansing. Speaking for my wife, I know the painful heat of being married to me has, at times, been almost too much to bear. All of my faults - my scornful pride, laziness, biting tongue, insensitivity - have confronted and burned her, causing great pain and strife between us. Marriage - like a salve - brings these "impurities" to the surface; there is no other human relationship that has so clearly been a mirror of my faults. In light of this confrontation with our brokenness, God's command to stay together takes on such profound import. Our cleaving to one another slowly initiates us into the reality that all of us can be loved, embraced, and - most importantly - healed and made new in the light of Christ.

So, we work our differences out. We struggle through tears and sweat to learn sacrificial love and long-suffering patience. In this way, my wife becomes the cross upon which my old nature is crucified. Our shared life becomes the arena wherein loving obedience is given the opportunity to take shape within the heart. Is this painful? Yes, for the moment. And if our marriage becomes destructive, and that saving/purifying union is lost, it is important to seek the counsel of a wise and caring pastor to help us through. But when we do the hard work now, our eternity will be beautiful beyond comprehension.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 10

BEWARE OF GREED

Read Luke 12:13-21

In this parable, Jesus cautions his followers to be on their guard against greed. He tells the story of a man who harvested a lot of grain and chose to build bigger barns to store even more grain. Jesus chastises this character in the story for storing up his possessions on earth instead of finding his riches in God.

When Jesus talks about the greedy man, he is not referring to Mr. Scrooge counting his gold coins, or a green-eyed monster stealing from children, he is talking about a man who chooses to increase his worldly possessions in order to stop working and “eat, drink and be merry.” God does not look down upon having wealth or even saving for the future, but he does tell us in this story that what we have in this life will not follow us into heaven. The man stored up his grain in bigger barns so he could be lazy when he should have given his surplus to the poor or back to God.

As Christians, we need to be careful that we aren't putting our possessions higher than our relationship with God or our loved ones. In order to keep greed from entering our lives, we must be open-handed, freely offering everything we have to God to do with what he needs. Greed creeps in when people are not open-handed with what they have, but rather closed-handed for the sake of protecting their “stuff.” If you find yourself more concerned with building your bank account than building relationships, then greed has already entered your life. Pray and ask God to show you where you can be more open-handed with your life, and where you can spend more time and energy building lasting relationships with God and with others.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 11

BE BORN AGAIN

Read John 3:1-8

In this section of John's gospel, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was an intelligent man with religious training. He became curious and was drawn by the "miraculous signs" that Jesus displayed. Nicodemus sought Jesus because he was convinced that Jesus had something to teach Him.

Nicodemus was a "religious leader" who understood God's laws and commands. And yet Nicodemus did not have the full depth of understanding God's Kingdom. Jesus had to explain to him there is more to following God than just head knowledge that we value so much in the natural world. Jesus tells him plainly this command: you must be born again. This, of course, drives further curiosity. What does it mean to be "born again." There must be something deeper, more profound than imparting information. Our spirit must connect with the divine spirit of God: The Holy Spirit. The baptism in the Spirit is often misunderstood (Jesus was clear about that) but it's essential that we do.

The essential piece to being born again is believing that Jesus came to earth to die on a cross for our sins; to save us. As Jesus is talking to Nicodemus he makes this clear (John 3:16-17). Yet, what Jesus wants Nicodemus to know first and foremost is that being born again has to do with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When you give your life to Jesus the Holy Spirit comes upon you. It is the Spirit who guides us, moves in us, and steers us from sin. You can have all the head knowledge of God and the Bible, but if you do not allow God's Spirit to speak to you and move in your heart and mind, you are not born again. Pray for the Holy Spirit to fill you and baptize your heart, mind, and soul.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 12

DO NOT LUST

Read Matthew 5:27-30

It's fascinating what Jesus talks about leading up to this command. He calls his followers to an ancient precedent: you must obey all of God's law! Jesus tells us not even the smallest detail can be ignored. As Jesus begins combing through the commands of the law, he references the specific command to not commit adultery. But then, Jesus does something unexpected, something quite radical. He explains that the tiniest details, the hyper-focus on the law isn't about the letter of the law, but the heart of the law! That's the focus.

When the Jewish law says, "do not commit adultery," it's not just about the act of adultery. Of course, the action is clearly wrong too, but it's also about everything that leads up to that sin. When Jesus says, anyone who "looks" at a woman lustfully sins, it's important to know exactly what he means. The Greek word for "looks" means "to arrange for something to happen." Therefore, anyone who even arranges in their heart and mind for lust to happen has sinned! This is why Jesus tells us to cut off anything that we use to arrange sin in our lives. In his hyperbolic example, Jesus says it's typically the eyes and hands that betray us.

We can do a lot of things to arrange lust in our lives. When we are at the beach or gym, we can arrange our position to look at the man or woman with the "good-looking" body. At work, we can arrange our conversations around the person who we find attractive or likable who is not our spouse. We can arrange our nighttime routines around the times and places where it's convenient to look at pornography. We can arrange our schedules to fit the lusts of our hearts. It's not just about the act, but how we arrange our lives! If you want to obey the command to not look at someone lustfully, you have to be strategic in how you arrange your life. What do you need to cut out? What do you need to cut off? And what do you need to add? Obey the command of Jesus and do not lust.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 13

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Read Matthew 5:43-47

Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. In chapter 5 of Matthew, Jesus is teaching the Sermon on the Mount and in verses 43–47, love gives us another way we can be more like our heavenly Father.

Loving someone who persecutes you is extremely hard to do. It's easier to not care about them and persecute them in return than to love them. How many times in our lives have we disliked someone because they disliked us? Jesus says, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Christians are called to love no matter who hates us or who wants to see us fail. We're called to love every person and reflect our heavenly Father through loving them. Love is a deep affection that we all want and need. Bob Goff says it this way: "But the kind of love that God created and demonstrated is a costly one because it involves sacrifice and presence. It's a love that operates more like a sign language than being spoken outright."

Before we can love our enemies, we have to forgive them. Forgiving them for what they have done to us is a step to loving them. We can't go from disliking them to loving them without forgiving them. It may be hard because they might have done something to us that we see as unforgivable, but if Jesus can forgive those who persecuted him and whipped him and nailed him to the cross, then why can't we? Loving them is not going to happen overnight, it takes practice and consistency. We can't continue living our lives and hating our enemies when we are called to love them. Do as Jesus did for you and loved you when you were still a sinner. Be bold and love people. Let today be the first day you love enemies and glorify God by doing so.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 14

DON'T BE AFRAID

Read Matthew 10:24-31

In this portion of Matthew, Jesus is instructing the twelve disciples in how they should conduct themselves. In verses 26-31, He's specifically talking about dealing with persecutors. Christ doesn't tell the disciples to watch their words or to remain hidden. Instead, He instructs them to boldly go forth, not fearing the ways of men.

The world will hate us because we believe in Jesus. He doesn't make any attempt to cover that up or sugar coat it. He tells us straight that in this life there will be strife (John 16:33). There will be gossipers and backstabbing people. He goes so far as to remind us that our persecutors can even kill our bodies! But they can't kill our soul. Instead, Christ says we should only fear the One who can destroy our body and our soul in hell. Pretty striking language, isn't it? It should leave us in such an awestruck reverence of God's power that the power of our persecutors seems minuscule in comparison (which it is!). Rather than fear the darkness, we should stand tall and let people know we are from the Light (Matthew 5:14).

Show your persecutors that all the things done in the dark will show up in the light. Clothed in the armor of God, stand in the light of Christ and know you are blessed when they insult you, persecute you and falsely accuse you because of Jesus. Be confident that He has overcome the world (John 16:33) and that your reward will be great in Heaven.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 15

RENDER UNTO CAESAR

Read Matthew 22:15-21

Sometimes, to understand Jesus, it's necessary to go back to the beginning. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female." Understanding this statement is critical to understanding Jesus's meaning in this fascinating story. Jesus had spent three years teaching about the coming Kingdom, and now He had entered Jerusalem like a king. During His teaching, the Pharisees attempted to trip him up, and Jesus turned their own story against them. They wanted him to pick a side, but that wasn't his way. He had something more beautiful in mind than they could imagine. He was announcing a new kind of Kingdom, something subversive that would completely upend the status quo. The crux of this story is this: how do believers live in two kingdoms at once?

How fitting is it that this year, 2020, is an election year? This year, people will completely lose their minds as a person with unattainable ideas competes against another with equally unattainable ideas. Why does the coin belong to Caesar? Jesus says it's because it bears his image. So think back to Genesis 1:27. Whose image do you bear? The metal, the paper, and the politics belong to Caesar, so give them over to him. You belong to God, and you owe him every bit of you. We are currently in the midst of a war, living in one kingdom while being called to another. How does that work? We live in these two kingdoms by practicing subversive loyalty.

What does subversive loyalty look like? It looks like Daniel being sold into slavery in Babylon and refusing to compromise his beliefs even to his detriment. Daniel wore the clothes of Babylon; he took a Babylonian name but did not sell himself over to them. He honored the leadership that God had placed in his life, but Daniel knew where his real home was. Just like Daniel, we are not to put our hope in any political party, nation, or news network. Jesus' command calls us to dedicate all of ourselves to the one who gave us life in the first place.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 16

HONOR YOUR WORD

Read Matthew 5:33-37

Honoring your Word is a difficult road to walk, but letting your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’ is an important part of being an effective and real Christ Follower. Talk is often cheap, and we sometimes mishandle commitments, but our goal is to obey this command from Christ and speak and act authentically and consistently.

People in the time of Jesus believed there were different levels of promises or ‘oaths’, which is why he brought up how people were swearing on “heaven,” “earth,” “Jerusalem,” and even their own “heads.” An easy comparison in today’s culture is a pinky swear to be above a normal promise. The difference is that in a Biblical oath, whatever you swore upon was like betting. A good example of this is in Judges 11-12. The problem was, all of the things people were swearing on they had no authority over, and the promises ended up having no more value than if they had just made a normal promise. Jesus states that our word should be trustworthy and simply be fulfilled through honesty and responsibility. The addition of empty words does nothing but make whoever is speaking look foolish and untrustworthy.

Consistency in the Gospel is one of the reasons we as believers are able to trust that it is the truth. Shouldn’t what we say and do reflect the same thing for us as Christ-Followers? Wouldn’t it be easier if our commitments in our workplaces, churches, and most importantly homes, were trustworthy? It isn’t always about saying “yes” and meaning it, but also “no.” This could look like being consistent in your faith, saying “no” to stumbling blocks, or even saying “yes” to following Jesus and truly living it. People believed in Jesus because He walked the talk and honored His Word. Imagine what the world would look like if we, as a united body of Christ, reflected Him in this manner.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 17

BE PERFECT

Read Matthew 5:48

In this section of Jesus's teaching, He issues a seemingly impossible command: "Be perfect, as Your Heavenly Father is perfect." By ending here with this idea, Jesus is doing two things. First, He is setting the bar for holiness so high that anyone with delusions of their own self-righteousness is confronted by how inadequate their own "holiness" is. It's impossible for us to be made right with God through our own works. The second idea is one of a different kind of perfection. The Greek word translated as perfect is the word "telos." It could also be translated as "complete," or "mature."

Jesus is saying that there can be an "imperfect" kind of "holiness"- where we pick and choose how many of the rules to follow, and have no deeper desire to be transformed on the inside. "Imperfect holiness" is half-hearted; it's submitting to the rules, but not really liking them. It's not necessarily breaking any commandments and focuses on everything you can't or shouldn't do, rather than looking for the ways you can love, serve, and follow God. Perfect holiness, on the other hand, is completely surrendered. It's going above and beyond what is required of us in an outpouring of love. It's being consistent in how we show love, how we respond when we're tempted, and how we respond when we're hurt or angered. In other words, Jesus is saying that true holiness exists when our inside demeanor matches our outside behavior. Being "perfect," according to Jesus, is when we live from the inside out - where our inside state is matching our outside behavior. It's being completely, fully surrendered to the purposes of God in every area - not just the ones people see.

This kind of whole-hearted, completely abandoned surrender is commanded by Jesus. Have you been willing to allow Him to completely transform your heart? Transformed hearts lead to transformed lives. It's only then that our obedience & holiness can be "perfect."

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 18

BE RIGHTEOUS IN SECRET

Read Matthew 6:1-4

In this passage, Jesus commands us to not do good deeds or give to others where people can see us. This may seem like a contradiction because Jesus Himself was recorded performing good works, healing, and giving in front of crowds of people. However, this command has more to do with our motives than with the number of people that see us.

The issue Jesus is addressing is the issue of self-praise, seeking others' approval to boost our self-worth, and puffing up our ego. Doing good works or giving to the poor are both great things, but our motive must also be good. These actions should flow from our hearts as a by-product of the love and grace that God has given us. The satisfaction of helping someone in need or doing something in God's name should be enough of a reward, knowing we are also putting a smile on His face.

This practice, of course, is easier said than done. We crave the approval of others to validate ourselves, to prove we are good Christians and that we're doing all the "right things." In the age of social media, this is an even easier trap to fall into! Constantly performing for the Internet puts undue pressure on ourselves and it turns our actions into something disingenuous. It's exhausting!

Maybe seeking the praise of others is something you struggle with. Many do. Before giving, before posting on social media, before sounding your trumpet to be praised after the good you've done, reflect on your heart. Do you have the right motive? Are you giving or helping someone to get something out of it? Understanding why you're seeking approval is the first step in overcoming it. The only approval we need is from God and God alone! Go to Him today and ask Him to examine your heart's motives and show you in what ways you seek approval that isn't from Him.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 19

SEEK THE KINGDOM FIRST

Read Matthew 6:33

Today, we're looking at what it means to seek the Kingdom of God first. "First" means before or above anything else. There's so much around us fighting for our attention, both good and bad things, and even indifferent things. As followers of Christ, it's important for us to be wise in what we are prioritizing.

Jesus spoke this command in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. At the beginning of this sermon, He had his disciples gathered close and was speaking to them, but by the end, crowds of people had given him their full attention, then followed behind him once he descended the mountain. As Jesus was speaking, He knew what these people needed to hear and would capture their attention. In that light, the importance of this command is highlighted. Jesus didn't say it on a whim. He knew his listeners, just like us today, were getting caught up in the details of their day-to-day lives, and needed to know that God should take the highest priority. Nothing has meaning outside of God. He created everything, including us, and therefore gives us and our lives their true definition. When we lose sight of God, our perspective is skewed. We don't know who we are, we don't have a framework for understanding how we should relate to one another, or why anything matters. It's only when we look to God first that we are able to properly understand ourselves and to make sense of the world around us.

In order to put this into practice, we need to be looking for the Kingdom everywhere, every day, in every situation. Make time to pray and study Scripture. Seek out the wisdom of others who are better at seeing the Kingdom than you are. As you grow in your knowledge of the Kingdom, ask yourself if you're living out the identity God has given you, and following His plan for what it looks like to be a citizen of this Kingdom. In doing so, you'll find the faithfulness of God will give you everything you need.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 20

KEEP WATCH

Read Matthew 26:40-41

Jesus commands Christ-followers to keep watch. Keeping watch is an important aspect of prayer that is often overlooked. ‘Watch’ means “a close observation” or “to be on the alert.” We see that Jesus walked over to his disciples and, instead of praying, they were sleeping! The disciples showed they were unaware of the spiritual danger because their guard was down. This time when Jesus commanded them to watch and pray, he was referring to more than staying awake physically. Soon they would be tempted to deny and abandon him, and they needed God’s help to stand fast.

Why does Jesus give us this command and why is it important for us to keep watch? Without prayerful dependence on God and continual spiritual watchfulness, the flesh would win at the first moment of weakness. Human physical weakness can lead to spiritual weakness and temptation. Jesus instructed the disciples to keep watch so they would not be tempted by the devil, and so their faith would not fail. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. No matter how good our intentions are, our flesh is weak, and if we depend on our own strength, we will get tired and weary.

It is important for us to develop a spirit of watchfulness in our prayer time. The enemy seeks to hinder the effectiveness of our prayers. He attacks by drawing our minds away from the key issues of prayer. If we aren’t intentional, we can develop a habit of praying shallow prayers. What are some of the temptations you have in your life? What are some areas where you have failed because of spiritual laziness? Spiritual watching coupled with prayer is what gives one the strength to survive temptations and difficult situations. Failure does not have to be the last word. Satan can win a battle yet lose the war. Get back up and be alert! Forgiveness is readily available. Here is the good news of the Gospel for everyone!

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 21

REPENT

Read Matthew 4:12-17

The fourth chapter of Matthew starts with Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and immediately after, Jesus began His ministry. The very first teaching taught by Jesus was to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Urging people to repent, He was clearly making it a priority for a healthy relationship with God. But why?

Repentance is essentially a change of the heart. It’s a sincere regret about wrongs that have been committed. All throughout scripture, God’s people are called to repentance. However, true repentance isn’t simply asking for forgiveness and continuing to sin, it should spark genuine change. Repentance should cause us to turn from wickedness and walk the opposite way. Almost every sin stems from pride. More often than not, pride is the main reason why people don’t repent! Jesus preaches repentance because He wants to renew our hearts with things from Him. Love, patience, joy, and peace are all attributes that God wants in our lives. Without a clean heart, God cannot give us these gifts.

Often times when I’m in an argument with a loved one or in the wrong, I tend to want to win. I’ll hold out until the very end even when things get uncomfortable. This causes us to be misaligned in our relationship because of pride. At the end of the day, no matter how trivial the disagreement or how much I try to defend my actions, I always know I should apologize. Displaying humility to that loved one is what mends disagreements and keeps us together. That’s where true healing begins. Whatever I’m holding on to is never as important as the relationship with that person. It should be the same with God. His ways are good and He wants what’s best for us. He wants us to experience life to the fullest, but our line of communication is blurred when our hearts are not aligned with His. What are some things that you need to repent for? What is keeping you from Him? Take time today to explore your heart and align it with His.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 22

JUDGE NOT

Read Matthew 7:1-5

Gene Simmons from Kiss once said that Matthew 7:1 is the one passage of the Bible everyone knows. Unfortunately, it's one of the most misunderstood scriptures as well. When Jesus was teaching the Sermon on the Mount, He hit on many crucial topics, but the topic of judging others has been one of the most tender as long as humans have existed. Why? Because we feel our actions can only be held into account by God, and people have no right to tell us how to live.

The misinterpretation here is that we think Jesus is telling us we aren't allowed to make judgments about others. But, as any parent can tell you, we have to make judgments all the time. Jesus wasn't telling us not to judge, but *how* to judge. He instructs us to judge with righteous judgment (Matt. 7:15-20), using the fruit of one's life to judge wisely. We are also challenged to deal with our own problems (the "beam of wood in our eye") before focusing on the faults of others (the "splinter" in our "brother's eye"). Jesus' point was not to avoid all judgments but to judge fairly, in accordance with His standards, and without hypocrisy.

The trick for us is learning to make righteous judgments without turning into a judgmental person. Being judgmental is by definition being overly critical in an unhelpful way. We must respond to this passage with knowledge that God does want us to make judgments, but they must be according to His standards, made with pure hearts without hypocrisy, and from a source of genuine concern for our fellow man. We are to be allies with the Gospel and righteousness, not critical adversaries to people that may be able to grow by learning from their mistakes. We all need to be praying for forgiveness for, and help in avoiding our own sins. We must pray that God fills us with sincere love for others and that He gives us the words and wisdom to lovingly and righteously judge the people and society around us.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 23

DON'T WASTE PEARLS

Read Matthew 7:6

After Jesus warns us against criticizing others and not being willing to look at ourselves, He gives another warning about protecting what is sacred and valuable. We all have valuables we aren't willing to give to just anyone. Jesus calls us to use that same care with the truth and the Gospel.

Jesus' first example is giving dogs what is sacred. During this time believers would make sacrifices to the Lord. He was using the example of taking the bones that were left and feeding them to the dogs. A sacrifice was an incredible moment of honoring the Lord for His love, His provision, and asking for the forgiveness of sins. Giving those bones to dogs dishonored the sacrifice.

His second example is giving pearls to pigs. A pearl is something not easily found and takes time to be formed. To find the best pearls a diver must dive deep, then force open each shell and dig through the muscle. Pigs are animals that were seen as the lowest of beasts. They were unclean, stinking animals. Pigs are consumers. They only want to eat and take constantly and are mindless in their consumption. Throwing pearls to pigs devalues the care a diver took in retrieving them.

Spreading the Gospel and spreading the truth the Lord taught each of us is extremely important and a responsibility of all believers. We must be careful to not be constantly giving truth to people who really don't care, people who want us to care about them but have no intention of changing their lives. People who are always combative to the truth are not worth pouring ourselves into. It's futile to try teaching holy concepts to those who really don't want to listen or make a change. We should never stop spreading the Gospel to non-believers, but we shouldn't get stuck reaching out to mindless consumers. Ask the Lord to reveal the people who truly desire the truth and take the opportunity to share with them.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 24

DO UNTO OTHERS

Read Mathew 7:12

Today's culture is all about self. It's constantly telling us to look out for number one, do what feels good, and consume whatever we want because we only get one life. This is the exact opposite of what Scripture tells us.

A long time ago a youth pastor of mine told me that whenever I see the word "therefore" in scripture, to simply ask the question: "What is it there for?" If we read before verse 12 in chapter 7, we see a list of things that describe God's grace for us. This list is what the "therefore" is there for. We are to extend grace to those around us the same way the Father has extended grace to us. We don't deserve His grace, and sometimes—most times—the people around us don't either. We are all human, therefore flawed, so it's not our good merit that determines whether we should be shown grace.

If we are to resemble the Father, we need to be quick to forgive our spouse when he or she wrongs us. We should be slow to anger when our boss has a bad day and yells for no reason. Jesus paid the ultimate price for us by dying on the cross, even though He knew many of us would deny Him and sin against Him. In response, He desires that we lay down our lives for Him and extend that grace as He has for us.

What would you do for the people you love, even if you knew they would turn away from you?

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 25

BE WISE & INNOCENT

Read Matthew 10:16-18

While preparing His disciples to enter the mission field, Jesus commands them to “be as wise as serpents, and innocent as doves.” He’s direct and quick to explain to them that the task before them requires both care and intentionality. Although it may be the most difficult and painful experience of their lives, the impact of their character and reputation reached far and wide, on display before people of authority and God himself.

None of us like to hear that this Christian life will be riddled with suffering, pain, hardship, and sacrifice. When reading this passage, you may have already tried to rationalize the command to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves,” as an instruction on how to escape the trials and persecution we will face. Jesus tells His disciples and us that persecution and strife will not only be possible but inevitable! “Remember the word I spoke to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...” (John 15:20). In short, Jesus is saying, “Count the cost. Are you sure you want to follow me?”

Does this stark, blunt reminder cause you to think, “What in this life is worthy of such a calling?” This is not just something to live or die for, this is a calling to live mindful of every decision and action we carry out. As we live out our days, we should have eternity in mind. The ultimate goal of our lives is not to be comfortable and dodge the worries of this world, but to lean into the grace and peace God gives us. We are to live in a way that is worthy of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Not only has he taken on the wrath of God for us, but we are also his messengers, and He chooses to use us as image-bearers of his Son to rescue others from an eternity without Him.

Ask Him today and everyday, to give you wisdom in your decisions and actions.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 26

FREELY GIVE

Read Matthew 10:7-8

The Kingdom of Heaven is about two significant things: our surrender to the will of God and God's desire to bring us healing, peace, and salvation. This passage, in particular, focuses on the kingdom worker's ministry and message. It was probably very moving for the disciples to see wonders happening through their own voice and touch.

In order to motivate the twelve disciples to freely give, Jesus reminded them that they did nothing to earn all they had received from Him. They had received mercy, position, influence, and authority freely from Jesus. God continues to do this today. We are so blessed with things like wealth and time, as well as the gospel itself and the ability to spread it to people around us without fear. We didn't earn any of this! It's all a gift from God. We get the opportunity to make authentic followers of Jesus Christ because of this free gift.

God loves us and wants us to have a genuine relationship with Him. Out of that relationship, we can better spread the gospel, give and pray for others with an open hand. The opportunities that we give don't have to be complicated or grand, they can be as simple as praying for your sick relative or talking to a barista about how God is working in your life. Everyone has something they are struggling with, so be the light to all those around you! We need to realize that as a part of the body of Christ we have been asked by Jesus, to carry out His work in this world in His name. Since we have been given so much, we should share His love and His word with others freely.

Where in your life have you not freely given? Take time today to ask God where you can be a light to others and share His love.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 27

INVITE THE POOR

Read Luke 14:12-14

In this story, Jesus has been invited to a beautiful banquet full of affluent and prosperous people. Jesus notices the host invited guests to this feast with a selfish expectation of his own future social advantage. Jesus commands us to be different, to humble ourselves and do good without expecting anything in return.

Jesus is not commanding us to ignore our loved ones, but is trying to open the eyes of our hearts to recognize the broken people near us, “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.” It’s so easy to love those we already love, our family and friends, with whom we have established relationships. But it is never easy to love people who are broken or people who are not like us. Jesus has been called the “Great Physician,” and He stated repeatedly that His mission was not to care for those who were well, but to minister to those who were sick. In today’s society, it might be someone who’s having a hard time making ends meet or a single parent who needs a break. You don’t have to go too far from your social circle to see that there are people in need.

When God puts broken people in our path, He also puts the desires in our hearts so we are moved to help them. There are many hurting people who are just looking for a kind word or someone to talk to. It doesn’t take much to make a difference in this world. If you are willing, God is able to use you wherever you are, whether you think you’re ready or not. We only have today, so let’s start letting God use us to accomplish His will one day at a time without expecting to receive anything in return.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 28

HONOR YOUR PARENTS

Read Matthew 15:3-4

When Jesus gives the command to “honor your father and mother” he is referring to one of the 10 commandments found in Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16. When God gave His people this command, He was setting up a parallel between the relationship a child has to their parents and the relationship we have with Him as our Heavenly Father. Just as it’s true that things will go better for a child if they obey their parents, things will go better for us if we honor and obey God because He knows best.

For some of us, the command to honor our parents brings pain because our earthly parents aren’t godly examples to us and their instruction isn’t wise to follow. The point of this command isn’t to have blind obedience to our parents no matter what, it’s to remember that under ideal circumstances, honoring the authority of our parents can teach us to better honor the authority of God.

When Jesus made this statement in Matthew, he was pointing out the hypocrisy in the hearts of the Pharisees. This is one of the many times Jesus came face-to-face with challenges from the Pharisees, and here they were trying to trap him into disrespecting a long-standing Jewish custom. But instead of focusing on these outward man-made traditions, he asked them to turn inward and examine their own hearts. In reality, the Pharisees were breaking a command of God to fulfill their own human religious tradition. God wasn’t their ultimate authority, they were.

We may not adhere to the strict and burdensome self-made regulations the Pharisees did, but we are not exempt from the error of holding religious tradition or self-imposed practices above God’s actual authority in our lives. We, as followers of Jesus, should show honor and respect to our parents because it shows the love of Jesus to the world. But the bigger question this Scripture leads us to ask ourselves is this: “Do I give God the ultimate authority over my life?”

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 29

STORE YOUR TREASURES IN HEAVEN

Read Matthew 6:19-21

Throughout the Bible, we are given several warnings against desiring earthly treasures over the treasures of heaven. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that what we treasure shows where our hearts truly lie.

We can't serve Jesus and ourselves. Often we come upon decisions that can either increase our treasures here on earth or increase our treasures in heaven. When we choose the treasures of this earth, we choose something that is fleeting and will eventually fall away. If we are obedient to Christ and align ourselves with His will, we are choosing to invest in what is eternal.

Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't buy things, neither is He telling us that having money is wrong. Rather, Jesus tells us that we should prioritize treasures of heaven over those of this earth. By following this command we are showing that we desire Him and his promises more than our own satisfaction.

We tend to lean our preferences toward what we can experience first hand and quickly. We often focus on what our finances can get us on Earth rather than what we can gain in eternity. Our finances should not dictate our obedience to Christ. Whether God blesses us with abundance or not, we should always be looking for ways to glorify Him. One simple way you can accomplish this, is by serving those around you. Look to your neighbors, your coworkers, your friends, and family; if they have a need that you can fill, then fill it! Serving others doesn't always have to consist of a monetary value. It can be as simple as mowing someone's yard, inviting a family over for dinner, or even offering to give a friend a ride to work. Take time today to evaluate how God has blessed you, and how you can use that blessing to serve someone you know. In this way, you will be storing your treasures in Heaven.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 30

BEWARE FALSE PROPHETS

Read Matthew 7:15-20

In Matthew 7, Jesus talks about the importance of right belief. He makes the statement that many are searching for life, but few actually find it. Jesus warns us against false prophets or people who would claim to speak for God but don't actually live doing so.

He then goes on to tell us how we can spot false prophets: look at their life, because in their life, there will be a difference in what they say and what they do. Words are powerful but are nothing without good character. A promise, commitment or contract means nothing if a person secretly determines not to honor it. With a false prophet, there is a hidden motive or agenda that departs from what is good and what is true.

The false prophet façade is one we have to understand and see our tendency to fall into its definition. We can live quoting the Bible to people, but not actually live biblically. We can have points of "preference" where we choose to live how we prefer, instead of how God prefers, in "private" areas of our lives, while pretending to be genuine Christians. We can even teach others to live the same way. This is the very idea of a false prophet: that we would twist the Gospel such that it becomes what we want it to be and not what God wants it to be. In this, we fail to put the genuine Gospel on display in our lives.

The ultimate end of the passage is this: right belief leads to right living. Are the words you say in private, the actions you take when you are alone, lining up with who you are in public? It is only an atheistic idea that what you do defines who you are. It is a Gospel idea that who you are defines what you do. Our challenge is to look at our lives, understanding that the God of truth, Jesus Himself, longs to purge everything false from all of us.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 31

FORGIVE WITHOUT END

Read Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness is not an easy concept for us to grasp because it is part of God's nature, not ours. This passage about forgiveness is part of Jesus' teaching about life in the Church. Verses 15-20 address how to deal with a fellow Christian who has sinned and this is what prompts Peter to ask how many times we should forgive someone. Jesus then replies with the parable of the unmerciful servant.

In the text, Peter asks Jesus how many times we should forgive someone and then asks if seven is enough. Jewish traditions said to forgive up to three times, so Peter asking about seven times is really generous in his culture. Jesus then commands us to forgive seventy times seven, (it could also be translated seventy-seven times). The actual number is not what is important here. Jesus ultimately means we should forgive over and over again with no limitations.

Perhaps some of us are struggling to forgive someone who has done us wrong. We must learn that those who have experienced God's forgiveness firsthand must learn to extend that grace and forgiveness to others. As Christians, we should want to extend that grace to others. If we don't, we may need to check our hearts. Do you find yourself wanting to seek revenge instead of finding a way to forgive? This is not saying once you have forgiven someone you have to fully trust them again. It is an understanding that you have moved on from the specific issue and are no longer holding it against them in your heart. This entire parable serves as a way to teach us not to act like the unmerciful servant who had all of his debts forgiven but would not extend that grace and forgiveness to a fellow servant. Who are you struggling to forgive and what is holding you back from offering them true forgiveness?

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 32

LEAD BY SERVING

Read Matthew 20:24-28

Something Jesus commands us to do as Christians is to lead by serving. In this particular part of scripture, Jesus explains to His disciples that “whoever wants to be great among you, must be your servant.”

Now, this could come off as a weird request to some of us, and it could cause us to think, “Why do I have to serve in order to be a leader? How is this important?” If you look back in Chapter 20, Jesus uses The Parable of Workers and the Vineyard to help paint an accurate representation of the Kingdom of Heaven, and at the end of the story in verse 16, Jesus ends by saying “So the last will be first and the first will be last.” I believe the same principle applies here. Our lives should never be all about us and our needs. Instead, Jesus is trying to show us that there is a much greater reward in putting others first.

Think about some areas in your life where you might need to take a step back and see if you have made it all about you. If you have, ask God to forgive you of those areas. Ask God to soften your heart and show you ways you can do a better job of putting others first. For some, that could be as simple as getting involved and serving in church. For others, it could be asking your neighbor how you could pray for them. Whatever that looks like for you, I pray you obey this command today.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 33

CELEBRATE THE LORD'S SUPPER

Read Matthew 26:26-29

Everything Jesus said is something he wants us to know. But sometimes there are things so important he wants us to never forget. One of them is His sacrifice, so he tells us to continually remember.

I hate eating alone. I have to do it sometimes, but I still hate it. I'd much rather eat with two or three people and have some good conversation. The best times are when the whole family gets together for a meal. When everyone gathers around the table it becomes a time of great conversation, laughter, encouragement, and sometimes deep discussion. Whether we talk about the future or good-ole' days, it almost always becomes a time of celebration. We always share what's happening in our lives now, but the best moments are when we take time to reminisce. There's something special about getting together just to remember.

When I think of what Jesus was telling His disciples here, I can't help but celebrate. He was introducing a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. The blood of animals sealed the old covenant. The blood of Jesus, the Messiah, would seal the new one. This was a brand new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus then made this assertion vowing not to celebrate this symbolic meal again until he meets with them in his Father's kingdom.

We are commanded to celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly to remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. Each week as we gather to worship together, we get the opportunity to remember and participate in the Lord's supper. We can gather around the "table" with a friend, spouse or maybe even our family, to remember, celebrate and anticipate. We anticipate because one day there will be this incredible reunion as the whole family gathers around the Father's table and participates in a meal that will never be forgotten. I hope you're excited. At this reunion, there will be praise, laughter, singing and a really amazing celebration!

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 34

DO NOT WORRY

Read Matthew 6:25-34

Throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus is giving his disciples instructions for what it means to truly follow Him. Through what he said to them, Jesus is also reminding us that He is our ultimate provider and sustainer.

When Jesus was preaching to His disciples, He was reminding them of their worth and encouraging them to not worry about the things they cannot control. He reminded them that when we seek the kingdom of God first, those things will be provided for.

When seeking a relationship with Jesus, He promises us that we will be taken care of and provided for. Once we know who our Father is and how much He values us, we can start to trust that He knows what we need, when we need it. The alternative—living a life putting our trust in worldly things, constantly worrying when God will provide the thing we so desperately long for—is an exhausting cycle.

When we worry, we are grasping at control over our own circumstances. Worrying causes us to drift away from God, creating insecurities, lack of trust, and a distance in our walk with Jesus. “Do not worry” is a lofty task to carry out if you don’t surrender daily to following Jesus. When we can’t see how God is going to provide, we must surrender, trusting that God is our perfect father who takes care of us.

In 1 Peter we are told to, “Cast all your cares on him, for he cares for you.” In order for us to cast our cares, we must be honest with Him about what we need and what is causing us to worry. We must share with Him things that are hard to hand over, and practice it every day. Jesus is the only one who can truly be our ultimate provider and sustainer. We have a comforter who not only wants to meet our needs but wants us to draw close to Him in the midst of our distress.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 35

GO TO OFFENDERS

Read Matthew 18:15-20

As we read this passage there are two ways to apply this scripture. First, is in a situation where an individual wronged another. Second, is when an individual knows a fellow believer is living in sin. Whichever situation we find ourselves in, the process is still the same and has the same goal, which is not condemnation but reconciliation.

This passage makes us uncomfortable because it talks about a confrontational process for dealing with conflict or sin within the church, and very severe, but necessary, consequences for those who won't move forward. It helps to remember again that the goal is reconciliation. It also helps to look at the rest of the chapter. This text is surrounded by parables and teachings on forgiveness. What will help us move past this uncomfortable feeling is remembering our purpose here on this earth: advancing the Gospel. When we realize this life isn't about us, suddenly being comfortable is not part of the equation. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial." "Everything is permissible," but not everything builds up. Paul understood that for the greater good, he would need to give up his worldly "comforts."

Holding people accountable and dealing with confrontation is something that the western church has not done well because we want the Gospel to be a comfortable fit for everybody. The effect of this is that people are not becoming true followers of Jesus. They are becoming followers of the version of Christianity that we are presenting them. If we see people we have relationships with living in sin, we need to love them enough to sit down and "offend" them for the sake of their salvation and the reputation of Jesus.

Lastly, not dealing with sin and offenses leads to bitterness, gossip and division amongst the church body. We are called to love one another, bear each other's burdens, and be unified. Those things are what God intends for His Church.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 36

BE MERCIFUL

Read Luke 6:27-36

Jesus commands us to love our enemies. He teaches us to have a positive attitude toward those we are at odds with by being sympathetic, having forgiveness, and doing good for them. By loving those who are against us, we are assisting them in finding their significance in Christ, because we're pointing them to Him.

God loved us while we were His enemies. We are directed by Jesus to extend those graces to our adversaries as well. If we are cynical instead of having mercy, we too will receive cynicism. In verse 31, Jesus says, "Just as you want others to do for you, do the same for them." To love our enemies is to treat them with selflessness, tenderness, and understanding, and these elements will be rewarded to us in their entirety.

Our initial reaction to our foes may be anger, vengeful feelings, or having hatred towards those who feel it toward us. For us to love our enemies may sound absurd or even impossible. However, there is no justification in this response. Jesus commands us to love our enemies. This is not a suggestion. Jesus did not tell us to persecute those who persecute us. We are to have extraordinary love, to bless, and to pray for them.

This will take a conscious act of effort on our part. This command must be practiced over and over, as it's not natural for us. We are to obey this command, and in our obedience, we will receive great blessing!

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 37

GO THE EXTRA MILE

Read Matthew 5:38-42

Jesus makes it clear that His followers should live differently and do better than what society expects. In this passage, Jesus' message is that when a person does you wrong, do not immediately turn around and strike back.

The most well-known verse in this section of Scripture is, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." This is one of the most misquoted, misunderstood and misapplied passages. This law was intended to restrict judges from unjust or excessive judgment. It was given so a judge would not give a death sentence to someone who hadn't committed murder. If someone knocked your tooth out in a fight, a judge could not sentence them to life in prison. The punishment had to fit the crime. Jesus takes this idea further in this passage, and instead of equal vengeance, showing mercy is the point He is trying to make here.

Giving is a demonstration of mercy. Instead of revenge, show mercy. When you consider each of these examples where Jesus is asking us to show mercy, you can see they are given for a reason. Notice that each of these examples is exactly where God has shown you mercy. When Jesus was struck on the cheek, it was our sin that wounded Him. You struck Him on the cheek, but He showed you mercy. He was struck for our iniquities. Did He forgive when this was done? Yes! He said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Sinful man made their complaints against Him, charged him, sued Him, and pursued Him to death by the law. Our sin forced Him to carry His cross where He did not want to go. He definitely went the extra mile.

Take these principles and examples that Jesus has given, but don't make them a law unto themselves. Take the principles and apply them in the wisdom God gives you to the circumstances of your life. Ask the Lord to reveal a way you need to show mercy today.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 38

FEED MY SHEEP

Read John 21:15-19

We must remember that this passage took place after Jesus was resurrected, which makes this exchange an even more powerful expression of grace. Before Jesus's death, Peter denied Jesus three separate times, just as Jesus said he was going to. Now, in his resurrected state, Jesus gives Peter three opportunities to express his love for him. What a gift! This is a beautiful picture of grace that we can all receive through Jesus. Peter's second chance didn't change the fact that he had denied Jesus three times, but it was Peter's chance to try again in spite of his wrongs. Furthermore, Jesus didn't just give a second chance to try again, but also a direction to move toward.

My wife and I have a small flock of sheep on our farm. When my wife goes outside and calls them, they come running up at the sound of her voice. However, when I call them they don't come. Why? The sheep know the voice of their shepherd, my wife. They have come to trust that voice, and they know that their shepherd is there to provide for them. Sheep need a shepherd. They need someone to care for them and protect them.

Here, Jesus gives Peter the responsibility to tend the sheep of His flock. Jesus was telling Peter this: "Take good care of the people I place in your path." Who are the people God has placed in your path? How is God leading you to take care of them? Are you gracious to them as Jesus is gracious to us?

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 39

REST

Read Matthew 11:28-30

In these few verses, Jesus is inviting people who are tired and weary to come to Him. These are people who are exhausted because they have been working hard and doing things in their own strength. Jesus is calling weary souls to come to Him. He promises them to be refreshed. However, Jesus does not promise a rest from work. This whole passage is about learning and working.

The first observation is that this invitation is for everyone, not just an elite group. We only have to be aware we have a need. If you're tired, He invites you in. If your burdens are heavy and more than you can bear, draw near to Him. What does He have for you in return? He offers real, genuine, rest for your soul. You may find things outside of Him that seem to resemble what we think is rest, but until you experience the peace of Jesus Christ, you'll never find the rest you're seeking.

How do we find the rest Jesus offers? We can only do so by coming out from under the yoke we're currently under. What is a "yoke?" A yoke is actually a board that has two arches in it you would put over two cows so they can pull a cart or a plow. The value of a yoke is that it halves the load. Without a one, a singular cow has to pull the entire load by itself.

When Jesus says to take His yoke upon you, He's saying He's going to share the problems that you already have. He's going to essentially take your stress on himself and bear it with you. He is saying "walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it and learn from me." His "yoke is easy and His burden is light" because He is with us and empowering us with His spirit. So draw near to Him and find the rest your soul needs.

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 40

PRAY FOR THE HARVEST

Read Matthew 9:35-38

If you don't know by now, know this: if we call ourselves Christians, that means we are to be followers of Jesus. This means we are supposed to follow in his steps both in word and deed. We know this because it was the last thing Christ told us to do on this earth (Matt. 28:19-20). We are supposed to be filled with compassion for the hurting and lost because they need Jesus just as much as we do. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Why wouldn't we want to make Him known to everyone around us? Jesus tells us that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. There are many who need to know Jesus and have a relationship with Him. There aren't many who are willing to introduce the real Jesus to those who need Him most.

Jesus follows this lesson by telling us to pray for laborers. It's essential we do that, however, we are not supposed to leave all the responsibility for harvesting to someone else. God didn't just send His followers to do ministry but participated in the work Himself.

The Bible also tells us that we should put Christ on like a garment (Galatians 3:27). We are called to enter the darkness and the mess of this world unashamed and boldly, knowing that God is surrounding us and equipping us to do His work (Deu. 31:6).

So pray for direction and the Holy Spirit to fill you, have compassion on those around you, then step into those conversations and make Christ known. Spreading the Gospel doesn't always mean holding a Bible study. It could mean having patience with that person at work or inviting the outcast to lunch. He wants His creation to know Him and have a relationship with Him. He doesn't call us to be comfortable but to be present and be the catalyst for Him to move.

Pray for 10 minutes

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