


Today

Jan/Feb 2018

refresh, refocus, renew

THE WHOLE BIBLE —
OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS



ALSO: FOLLOWING JESUS: LESSONS FROM LUKE

Friends:

Imagine the Bible, instead of being a thick book with a single cover, as a collection of 66 loose booklets. What would you do with a bunch of little books covering your desk or table? Or, thinking back to ancient times, what if your collection of these books was a basket filled with dozens of scrolls?



In important ways, our Bible is really a library of small books, written and edited by different people over centuries, ranging from historic chronicles, to song lyrics, to legal codes, to epic poetry, to personal letters. If you had all these gathered in a basket, it would be a challenge to keep them in order!

And yet, the Bible is a single document, a single story, a single history. For all its facets, the Bible simply tells the story of God and his people. From beginning to end, it's about how our creator God chose to rescue his wayward creation through a people he calls to himself.

Professor Dean Deppe explores the unity of Scripture with us this January, considering how the Old and New Testaments work together to tell God's story.

Then, in February, Pastor Reggie Smith considers how we can follow Jesus as we enter the season of Lent. Together we'll follow Jesus as he works his way toward the cross in Jerusalem as recounted in the gospel of Luke.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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Dean Deppe



**"Following Jesus:
Lessons from Luke"**
Reginald Smith

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ReFrame
Media

february

Following Jesus: Lessons from Luke

Reginald Smith

The gospel writer Luke was a doctor by trade. He wrote frankly about Jesus, the people who followed him, and those who opposed him.

This month's readings focus on Luke 6-18. Jesus and his disciples travel from village to village. Jesus teaches the people and heals many who have diseases. Crowds follow him as he travels. But Jesus also attracts opposition from people who question his motives—especially the Pharisees and other legal experts who oppose his interpretation of the Old Testament law. Throughout these chapters we see Jesus steadily heading toward Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die to pay the price for human sin.

This year, the season of Lent begins on February 14 (Ash Wednesday). So, interwoven in this month's readings are some reminders that Jesus is walking the road of suffering to the cross. Dr. Luke guides us with many important teachings of Jesus along that journey.

Dr. Reginald Smith is the director of the Office of Race Relations and the Office of Social Justice for the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He served as a pastor of churches in Illinois, New Jersey, and Michigan for over twenty years. Reggie and his wife, Sharon, have three daughters.

STOOPING TO OUR LEVEL

He went down with them and stood on a level place.

—Luke 6:17

Luke recounts many stories of Jesus' teaching and healing ministry. Though it was clear Jesus didn't want to be a celebrity, his reputation grew by leaps and bounds. People flocked to Jesus from all over; they wanted to hear what he had to say.

Luke wanted us to know that Jesus came for people of all kinds who struggled with just trying to make life work. They were from backwater parts of Judea where people kept looking for the Messiah to show up. Some journeyed from the ancient Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. Others came from Jerusalem, the religious center of the Jews.

Why would Luke include this information? To show that God wanted to mingle with all kinds of people, including the ones Israel's leaders would rather forget—people outside their

borders and beneath them in class. The religious teachers of Jesus' day preached a theology of exclusion. They thought the rabble from remote villages and the outsiders from Tyre and Sidon weren't worthy of the kingdom of God.

But Jesus broke ranks by putting everyone on the same level. Jesus talked about God's openness to receive all believers as citizens of his kingdom. Jesus showed that God stooped down and came to their level. Never before had they experienced such radical grace.

That's where I am—and you too. Can you believe?

Jesus, you came to seek out sinners like me. Help me embrace your power that brings the good news of your kingdom. Amen.

LOVE MY ENEMIES?

"To you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."
—Luke 6:27

This command sounds almost impossible. On top of that, these words of Jesus don't have much appeal. *Love* your enemies? In most situations, hate or disdain are the more natural reactions we would have for enemies.

But, as Jesus points out, loving people who already love us is fairly easy. There's a guaranteed return on our love investment when we love people who we know will love us back. He goes so far as to say, "Even sinners love those who love them." So just loving the people who love us is not enough.

In other words, people who are going to follow the Lord have to step up their game. Three times Jesus mentions that even sinners doing the easy work of loving or helping others by expecting something in return. Jesus challenges us to show love

that is radical and crazy by the world's standards.

Do you really want to be children of God? Then love your enemies, recognizing they are worth the same amazing grace you and I have received from the Lord. And even more—pray for them too!

That's hard to do, but it's what Jesus demands of us. And he gives us the grace and strength to follow his commands.

Father God, may our minds no longer nurse our grudges and rehearse our scenes of hurt and pain, but focus on your grace granted to us in Jesus. May we experience your love as we strive to love our enemies as well as our friends. Help us to follow you, Lord. Amen.

JESUS AND JOHN

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" —Luke 7:18-19

Jesus and John (the Baptist) had little in common. John spent much of his adult life in the wilderness. Jesus traveled from village to village with throngs of fans. John knew one way to preach—urging people to get right with God through repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). Jesus took his preaching to different levels, and he displayed God's grace and power in miraculous acts.

Luke does not waste our time with flowery statements. Jesus healed people of diseases that John wasn't capable of curing. Jesus evicted evil spirits that were bent on ruining people's lives. People who were once blind could share stories about Jesus giving them sight. John's disciples saw kingdom miracles as they saw lives changed through Jesus' ministry. And they reported all this to John.

Jesus told them to remind John of all they had witnessed. Jesus ministered to the blind, the lame, the leprous, the deaf, the dead, and the poor. These were the people whom God had chosen to include in the annals of grace. Jesus was pointing out that transformed lives made the most convincing proof that he, the Messiah, was the one who had to come, bringing the good news and new life of God's kingdom.

There are miracles in our lives today too. Are you taking note and reporting them?

Savior, help me to see you at work in the transformation of my life and in the lives of others. Help me to tell of those miracles too. Amen.

IN PRAISE OF THE LEAST

"I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."
—Luke 7:28

John's disciples had come to ask about Jesus. After they left, Jesus told John's story. John was a man who was fully alive to God, had great zeal for God's calling on his life, and yet was misunderstood by many people. Jesus set the record straight that John was a prophet, and more—not a person possessed by a demon and doing crazy things in the desert. Jesus made clear that John's mission from God was to prepare the way for Jesus' own work as the Messiah.

John baptized many people into new lives of repentance and forgiveness. More important, his ministry prepared people's hearts and minds for the coming of God's kingdom through Jesus, planned from the beginning of time. And Jesus gave John the best compliment a Savior could bestow, saying that "the one who is least in the

kingdom of God is greater than he." What does this mean?

Jesus' words showed that John was a humble, true servant of God and that they also could serve humbly and faithfully, bringing honor to God's kingdom as believers in him, no matter what background they came from.

Jesus lifts up people whom society calls untouchable, unworthy, or unredeemable. If you and I believe this, we are set to serve, for he exalts us too.

Dear Jesus, I admit that I need to repent and be forgiven. Show me the way to kingdom living in your strength, not mine, spreading your love and good news to all. Amen.

A WASTEFUL SEED STORY

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up."

—Luke 8:5

Imagine the setting: Jesus has been preaching in many towns and villages. On this particular day, a large crowd gathers from town after town. Jesus stops, looks at the crowd, and tells the story of a farmer who scatters seed that lands on the footpath, on rocky soil, among thorns, and also on good, fertile soil.

A lot of seed was wasted as the farmer spread it wide. But Jesus was not trying to teach people good planting practices. He was asking everyone to consider this story from the Father's point of view. It's likely that very few of his listeners caught Jesus' point in this parable. Even his disciples had to ask him what the story really meant.

Here's the scoop. Jesus himself is the sower as he spreads the word of God in all kinds of people's minds and hearts. Some pay attention and hear,

and others don't. Jesus ends the story by urging people to pay attention to his words so that the Word of God can root and grow in them. That's how the kingdom of God comes, under the conditions of God's patient mercy through his Son.

Are you someone whose heart is fertile soil to hear God's Word? And are you spreading that seed widely and wildly to others?

Dear Jesus, test the soil of my heart today. Thank you for wastefully spreading your good Word in my life. Make my heart ready to receive the gift of your life-giving Word, that it may grow and produce a crop to share with others. Amen.

WHO'S IN YOUR BOAT?

Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. —Luke 8:22

Many of the disciples were experienced fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. They had often weathered sudden squalls and treacherous waves. They knew that storms could come out of nowhere. So when Jesus suggested rowing to the other side of the lake, they knew they had to be ready for anything.

In the seas of life, we grow to learn that storms can sneak up on us. A bill out of nowhere can take a bite out of your paycheck. A parent suddenly becomes ill, and you become a caregiver. A child's bad decision can lead to a day in court and a prison sentence. Such storms cause our anxiety to rise to dangerous levels. We look for help from someone to calm us down, fix the problem, and restore life to the way it was.

The disciples never stopped to think what it meant to have

Jesus in the boat with them. And, to them, he wasn't doing anything! But, of course, he was sleeping—not worrying or getting frantic about the storm. The disciples spent so much energy trying to save themselves from the storm on their own power that they forgot to be still and recognize that Jesus is God, who had their lives in his hands. Jesus was in their boat. All they needed to do was trust in him.

You and I cannot control the sudden storms of life. That's the way life is. But Jesus is with us. And that's the best thing.

Thank you, Jesus, for being in our boat. Your resting does not mean inaction; it reminds us to place all our anxieties on you because you care for us. In your name, Amen.

REMEMBERING GOD'S MERCY AND CARE

[Jesus] replied, "You give them something to eat."

—Luke 9:13

The miracle of Jesus' feeding over 5,000 people appears in all four of the gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John saw something important in this event that would help us learn who Jesus really is.

Picture the scene: Jesus has been preaching and healing. It's getting late, and the people are getting hungry. To the disciples, it makes perfect sense to send them to nearby villages to eat.

But Jesus has other ideas. He calmly says to the disciples, "You give them something to eat." To the disciples, that doesn't add up. They can only find five loaves of bread and a couple of fish—that certainly won't feed this crowd!

Jesus uses this time to teach an important lesson. They have just been visiting in the surrounding villages, traveling without any money or provi-

sions. They have depended on the Lord to provide for them as they have brought healing and the life-affirming good news of grace, mercy, and blessing. But they have forgotten that God has done this. Jesus is testing them now to see if they realize that their providing Lord is right there with them, and they have failed to recognize it.

But we should not be too hard on the disciples. When we are called to bring God's grace and mercy into people's lives, we often forget, too, how the Lord has provided for us. We all have short memories.

Lord, help us, as we share your mercy and grace with others, to remember always the amazing things you have provided—and to tell about that too. In your name, Amen.

WHEN YOUR WINNING STREAK ENDS

"I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

—Luke 9:40

In the first part of Luke 9, we read that Jesus empowered the disciples to drive out demons, heal the sick, and preach the kingdom of God. And they had amazing success. They returned to Jesus full of excitement at what God had done through them. They were on a roll.

Then, just a short time later, a man brought his son to the disciples, but they could not drive out the demon that afflicted the boy. What happened? The disciples had been so successful earlier; why couldn't they heal this boy? (See Matthew 17:14-20 for some additional details to this story.)

Sometimes we need a losing streak to bring us back to square one: it is all about Jesus and never about us.

The disciples had to rediscover that winning streaks are not

about doing things their way, but about living life under Jesus' terms. Their failure represented a weak attempt to live life according to their terms. Jesus then said to them, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men."

It was in losing his life that Jesus won the victory over sin and death. It was in losing the applause and appeal of men and women, who hungered for a winner, that a "loser" would rescue souls.

Master Jesus, help me to realize that the greatest wisdom comes from giving up my world and learning to trust you even when I do not fully understand. In your name, Amen.

APPOINTED TO JESUS' TEAM

The Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.

—Luke 10:1

The seventy-two followers were about to make history by working together for Jesus. Out of so many people the Lord could have picked, he settled on these followers to do the work of spreading the gospel. Luke doesn't tell us how these people were chosen. But what is important is that they represented the gospel witness of the Master.

Imagine Jesus standing in front of the seventy-two pairs of partners. There must have been excitement and eagerness as they prepared for their journey. They had a world to change, and Jesus was going to send them out. The Master of the universe had given them a mission to go into the villages and towns with a message of healing and repentance.

Jesus told his team to display signs of his kingdom. They were

to heal the sick. They would heal people afflicted in mind, body, and soul because God had heard their cries for help. They would show up two by two and administer the power of God that lifts up hope for the hopeless.

Followers of Jesus are never meant to do ministry alone. We are not superheroes; we are broken vessels of grace who point people to the fountain of mercy in Jesus alone. We're called to walk side by side to minister to the bruised and battered wherever we are.

Jesus, lead us to follow wherever you want us to go and represent you in this world. Thank you for always being with us. In your name, Amen.

LEARNING FROM THE ENEMY

"A Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him." —Luke 10:33

A religion professor—an expert in the law of Moses and Israel—wanted to test Jesus. He asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And then: "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus responded by telling a story about a man, robbed and injured, who was ignored by the people's religious leaders but helped by a Samaritan.

In Jesus' day, the Jews despised Samaritans. They represented everything the Jewish people never wanted to be. Jews often avoided Samaria by traveling many miles out of the way so they wouldn't have to come into contact with Samaritans.

In Jesus' story, however, rather than passing by the injured man, the Samaritan showed compassion. He administered first aid. He brought the man to an inn where he could recuper-

ate. He even paid the bill. Jesus made the despised enemy of the Jews the star in this story.

By this time, Jesus' listeners—especially the religion expert—were informed of an error in their thinking. Jesus did not give them a mere definition of a neighbor; he showed them how a neighbor acted. Which of the three was a neighbor?

The religion teacher was forced to stop justifying himself by his intellect and degrees. He simply replied, "The one who had mercy." And Jesus told him to go and act similarly.

Who is my neighbor? And who has been a neighbor to me?

Savior Jesus, help us to show your mercy and love to everyone, including the people we have despised as enemies. Amen.

DAILY PROVISIONS

"When you pray, say . . . 'Give us each day our daily bread.'"

—Luke 11:2-3

In the culture of that day, bread was the primary staple on any table. In the Old Testament, the traveling Israelites complained that they had nothing to eat until God showered down "bread from heaven" (Exodus 16). *Manna*, which in Hebrew, means, "What is it?" was a food that God provided for them in the desert. They were to gather only as much as they needed for each day. And on the sixth day they gathered twice as much so that they wouldn't have to gather on the Sabbath day. God's miracle bread was a reminder that even a basic provision like food came from his hand—not because of their hard work or resourcefulness. And in the New Testament, Jesus challenged the people to trust God for their daily bread for life, health, and survival.

Jesus connected bread and prayer as two sides of the same coin. We are dependent on God for our food each day, and this reminds us to pray for our daily provisions. It also reminds us that we are daily in need of God's protection and forgiveness from sin. All of us sinners need God's protection and forgiveness daily, just as we need food and other supplies.

In this way Jesus teaches us to pray every day, recognizing that we need to trust the Lord and that he will supply what is needed for each day—to meet our physical as well as our spiritual needs.

Dear Jesus, keep our hands and hearts open to receive your daily provisions without fear or distress. You know our needs, and we trust you to deliver. Amen.

PERSISTENT PRAYER

"Even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need." —Luke 11:8

Who would knock on their neighbor's door at midnight and ask for three loaves of bread? Maybe a better question: Why did Luke put this story in his gospel account?

We may not be familiar with the Middle Eastern world, but Jesus told stories that fit the context of his times. Everyone who was listening knew what he was getting at in his stories. Jesus wanted to let everyone know about the hospitality of God by listening to and watching him.

In the New Testament context, hospitality meant everything. Hospitality trumped inconvenience. Jesus gave an example that everyone knew happened quite often. Unexpected guests showed up at all times of the night because travel was easier when the hot sun was not beating down. So the friend who

troubled his neighbor at midnight for bread was not asking something so unusual.

Jesus' words make sense to people who become frustrated that their prayers seem to evaporate into thin air and get no results. Jesus makes clear, however, that God will not violate his integrity. We are to keep on praying and trusting that God will graciously and generously supply what we need.

Jesus endorsed persistent prayer. We are to "pray continually . . . for this is God's will" for us (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

Master Jesus, I will knock, trusting that the door is open. Thank you for your hospitality that meets my needs today. Amen.

FOLLOWING JESUS ISN'T FOR WIMPS

"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."
—Luke 12:1

Jesus used an ordinary baking ingredient (yeast) to picture the power of sin in people's lives. It was Passover, and thousands of Jews were traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate this great feast commemorating their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. As part of their preparation for this event, people removed all of the yeast from their homes (see Exodus 12:14-20).

Jesus knew how to use current events to make a point. With people paying so much attention to yeast, he pointed out that the sin of hypocrisy could be just as penetrating as yeast in bread, working its way to affect every inch of life.

In this way Jesus warned his disciples against being hypocrites in their service to God. Discipleship was and is serious business. There is no such thing as being "on the fringe" or neu-

tral. We can easily find ourselves not living our real identity in the one true Savior.

True discipleship will involve suffering and self-denial. Choosing to do the will of God becomes more important than rejection or popularity. Discipleship means making people a priority rather than rituals and traditions. Loving your enemies pleases Jesus more than loving only your friends and family. Following Jesus means caring for the needy rather than giving priority to the rich, influential, and powerful. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and follow him if we would truly be his disciples. Can we do that?

Dear Jesus, help us to truly be your disciples. Please take hypocrisy out of our lives so that we may follow your ways. Amen.

VALUABLE

"The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." —Luke 12:7

In this discussion about discipleship and living faithfully for God, Jesus calls his listeners to recognize that they are valuable. Though they might be challenged even to give up their lives for the kingdom of God, that does not mean their lives are not valued by the Lord and God who made them. Indeed, God sent Jesus because he wants everyone to be saved so that they might not lose their souls in hell (see 2 Peter 3:9).

Jesus also uses a word picture about sparrows. Sparrows were often sold in the marketplace, and you could buy five for just two pennies. People may have thought sparrows weren't worth much, but Jesus says, "Not one of them is forgotten by God." Then, to highlight how much more valuable his listeners are to the Lord, Jesus says that God numbers even the many

hairs on their heads. "Don't be afraid," he says; "you are worth more than many sparrows."

Many of Jesus' listeners were poor and worn down; they often felt forgotten and worthless. The powerful, well connected, and religious elites virtually ignored them. But in God's eyes, each person is so valuable that he sent his Son to save them.

Today is Ash Wednesday. As we think about Christ's suffering and death (and our own unworthiness), we are called to remember that we are worth the death of God's only Son. We are valuable, and God does not forget us.

Redeemer God, help me to realize today how much I am worth to you. Amen.

HE SAW HER

When Jesus saw her, he called her forward. . . .

—Luke 13:12

Everyone probably knew her as the bent-over woman. She came to worship at the synagogue regularly. But she was recognized by her condition, not her identity as a child of God or even by her name.

Her neighbors saw her through eyes of pity. The religious leaders saw her as an example of someone who was not right with God and deserved her plight. She came to the synagogue every Sabbath crippled with pain, bent over in shame, and thirsty for the living water of healing from God. Yet no one paid attention or really saw her.

For eighteen years the religious leaders failed to pray with her on the six days when they had every opportunity to anoint her with oil and pray for God's healing. They were more focused on keeping their religious rules than seeing the need to bring

a daughter of Israel before the mercy seat of God.

But Jesus saw her. When he called her forward, she might have thought he meant someone else. But Jesus was speaking to her, and she slowly shuffled toward him, who saw her as a prisoner in need of being set free from her burden.

Do we see people this way—burdened and distressed? Do we bring them to Jesus for healing? In what ways can you offer comfort and prayer for someone like that today?

Savior Jesus, so often we work hard to keep up appearances, and we sidestep opportunities for compassion. Forgive me and help me to show mercy to people in need. In your name, Amen.

THE HIDDEN POWER OF GOD'S GRACE

Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?"
—Luke 13:18

Jesus' vision and the people's vision were not the same. The people imagined the kingdom of God was more like their ancient kingdom of Israel under King David and his son Solomon. Or maybe even like the Roman Empire, which spread rapidly through its vast military might and also built great cities.

But Jesus focused his listeners on the tiny mustard seed, saying that this was what the kingdom of God was like. This probably shattered the dreams of instant success that so many of the people wanted.

Mustard?!—it was such a small, slow-growing seed! No doubt the people were scratching their heads as Jesus' parable underwhelmed them.

Jesus was not trying to make a name for himself or to be a

conquering king by the world's standards. He taught that although God's kingdom might seem to have insignificant beginnings, it grew with the subtle, hidden power of grace and love and would eventually spread throughout the earth.

Growth in grace may be a slow process, but the result is everlasting life with God in his kingdom, which is even greater than the cosmos. Kingdom grace involves a lifelong walk with the Master, who is always paying attention to your life and nudging you to pay attention to his life at work in you.

Dear Lord, I am not patient enough to trust the process of grace in my life. Help me to resist the appeal of quick results and to trust in you for growth each day. Amen.

BEWARE OF COST-BENEFIT SPIRITUALITY!

"When you give a luncheon or dinner . . . invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. . . . You will be repaid at the resurrection. . . ."

—Luke 14:12-14

Maybe you know what cost-benefit analysis is. It is a process by which people calculate the costs versus the benefits of doing something. If the costs are too high, they will not waste their time and effort.

Cost-benefit analysis was at work with the host of the dinner party for Jesus. The Pharisee who invited him hoped to use the dinner as an opportunity to impress his guests. But the party did not turn out the way he had planned. Jesus used the opportunity to heal a man—on the Sabbath! Instead of this dinner being a setting where his smart religious pals could test Jesus and put him in his place, it became an opportunity for a miraculous healing. While learned men watched Jesus free a man from disease on the Sabbath, he gave them a doctoral seminar on the purpose of the Sabbath.

Jesus also noticed that the people attending the party chose places of honor for themselves. He saw a display of powerful people who were not doing things God's way.

When we serve only for personal gain, we are acting more like that host who was counting on a return from his investment. Cost-benefit dynamics may make us better accountants, but it will not make us effective disciples of Jesus.

Lord, when I am guilty of assessing my service to gain an advantage or to look good before others, change my heart. Like, you, may I serve others even if they can do nothing for me. Amen.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple."
—Luke 14:26

Crowds grew larger as Jesus passed villages and towns on his way to Jerusalem. People everywhere were cheering him on, attracted by his teachings. And his committed followers provided a solid support base. Even so, not everyone welcomed Jesus with open arms.

The people knew he was different from other rabbis. In general, his teachings were exciting and radical. And he was an amazing healer! But did anyone know the price they would have to pay to follow him?

With his focus squarely on Jerusalem, Jesus asked them to choose their true love. It was all or nothing. Jesus scanned the crowd and said, in effect, "If you want to follow me, you'll have to love me more than your parents, families, and siblings." Many smiles turned to expressions of confusion and

surprise. Cut all ties with family for Jesus alone? That was a lot to ask—for many, it was too much.

But that is what Jesus' disciples had done. They had spent years with him already, and they knew he was the Messiah, the promised deliverer of God's people (see Luke 9:18-36). Though they didn't understand everything, they knew their Master, Jesus, was the Son of God.

How about you?

Lord, discipleship on your terms leads to a cross. It calls me to embrace you as my only Savior in this life and the one to come. Help me to trust you, Lord, forever. Amen.

GOD CARES ABOUT LOST SINNERS

"When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'"

—Luke 15:9

Why would the woman in Jesus' parable turn her house upside down for one coin when she had nine others? It was just one coin, right?

Well, this parable is about more than coins. By making a poor woman the main character, Jesus was pushing cultural and religious buttons. Women were often looked down upon, and yet here Jesus gave a woman character credibility. In addition, though she was poor, she had been able to save some money—worth about 10 days' wages. It wasn't a huge amount, but to her, even one-tenth of it was valuable. So she lit a lamp in her humble, windowless home to find her lost coin.

Most of the religious leaders in Jesus' audience were quite well off, and many were wealthy. They wouldn't bother to look for something as insignificant as

one coin. Sadly, many of them thought it wasn't worth their time to bother with "sinners" either (see Luke 15:2).

When the woman found her coin, she called her neighbors and friends to celebrate with her. Jesus then drove home the point that lost people are so precious to God that all heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents. They are worth turning the world upside down, just to find them.

And Jesus did just that; he came "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10), including you and me. Do you believe it?

Lord, thanks for being the searching One who believed I was worth finding. Help me to value others as you do. Amen.

THE GREAT REVERSAL

"In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side." —Luke 16:23

In this parable of Jesus, the rich man lived in luxury. He never knew the harsh pangs of hunger or the weariness of working his fingers to the bone. He lived in a gated community to which beggars came daily. In those days it was commonly thought that wealth like his was a blessing from God because he was close to God.

Lazarus was a beggar who sat at the rich man's gate. He was covered with sores, and stray dogs came to lick them. The rich man probably wouldn't appreciate having to walk by Lazarus whenever he left or returned to his gated mansion.

The rich man and Lazarus were worlds apart on this earth, but they had one thing in common: they both died. Death brought them before the face of God, who judges all. And the roles were reversed for these men.

The rich man found himself in torment with no relief, and Lazarus lived in the comfort and loving care of God.

The name *Lazarus* means "God is my help." We need to acknowledge that we need God's help and guidance in the choices we make each day. Jesus calls us to care for people in need, using the resources God has given us. Just as God has cared for us, we can care for others. We can seek justice and lift up the disadvantaged and oppressed. As the season of Lent reminds us, we can follow the way of Christ, dying to ourselves for his sake—and finding full life.

Lord, help me to die to my possessions, my ambitions, and my hidden sins, recognizing that life is found only in you. Amen.

SERVING THE MASTER

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

—Luke 17:5

The apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. They desired a big bowl of spiritually fortified faith that would make them into superdisciples.

Jesus surprised them by telling them that even small faith would enable them to do great things. He might have had a mustard seed in his hand as he pointed to the power of smallness in bringing his kingdom. Jesus gave them exactly what they asked for—he chose little seeds like them to grow the fields of new believers in him as Lord and Savior.

What were the disciples to do differently than the Pharisees to prepare for the faith work of Jesus?

In the culture of that day, there was no such thing as an eight-hour workday with two coffee breaks. Servants were constantly

ready to be at the service of their master. Ambitious servants also tried to go above and beyond—to exceed expectations out of loyalty and love for their master. Jesus told his disciples to go beyond the bare minimum service to him as supreme master and Lord. He expected them to work tirelessly for the kingdom.

Followers of Jesus do not serve to get awards or accolades. Jesus' disciples need to serve out of love and thankfulness to him. Serving God is a matter of grace alone. Grace and gratitude are part of the harvest in the kingdom of God.

Jesus, help us to see that you work with small things so that the glory goes to God alone. I want to serve you because you first loved me. Your grace is enough. Amen.

CROSSING BORDERS

He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.
—Luke 17:16

This was not the first time Jesus traveled along the border of Samaria. He often crossed this border and others—and his critics might call it “crossing the line.” The Samaritans were half-breed cousins of the people of Judah and Galilee. To the Jews, the border with Samaria defined who deserved God’s mercy and who did not.

Borders were not only geographical. There were also dividing lines set up to avoid the spread of disease. The lepers in today’s story, for example, knew how to maintain their distance. Leprosy was dangerous. Lepers were forced to stay outside the community so that others wouldn’t get the disease.

The lepers begged Jesus to heal them. And he did so, cleansing them as they went to the priests, who were authorized to declare them “clean” again.

One of the lepers was a Samaritan. He trusted that God could be merciful even to a non-Jew. And as this man was healed, a flood of gratitude overcame him. He just had to give thanks to the Master, so he ran back as fast as he could and threw himself at Jesus’ feet in a posture of worship. He thanked Jesus for the healing he did not deserve, for hearing even the plea of an outsider.

Jesus always crossed borders for people in need of help and healing—in body and soul. Are we willing to do the same?

Gracious Master, thank you for crossing the border of sin and death for our sake so that we can be freed to have new life. In gratitude, and for your sake, may I do the same for others. Amen.

KNOWING THAT JUSTICE WILL COME

"Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!"

—Luke 18:5

Jesus told this parable to emphasize that his followers—including us—should “always pray and not give up.” It’s easy to get tired of praying for the same thing over and over again. It’s much more exciting when we see immediate results to our prayers. But things don’t always work that way.

The widow in this story had grown accustomed to being ignored. How often did she keep coming to see the judge? Again and again and again! The judge got very tired of her and realized she would not quit. The plea was always the same: “Grant me justice against my adversary.” The job of the judge was to enforce the laws of justice and make things right. She knew she had been wronged, and she knew justice would come, so she persisted till the judge finally helped.

The disciples began to catch the point of Jesus’ story. God, who is just, would always listen to their pleas for justice. But they didn’t always see justice and prayer working together. They could only see God’s silence and his slowness in making things right in the world. Jesus taught them a powerful lesson about persistent prayer, by which we learn to see God’s kingdom emerging even in the shadows of injustice and silence.

Are you learning this lesson too?

Dear Jesus, like the disciples, we need to learn patience and persistence in prayer. Help us to see your hand at work and be grateful. Amen.

TO BE JUSTIFIED

"This man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." —Luke 18:14

Jesus directed this parable to self-righteous people who looked down on others. This was a problem that needed to be exposed in the community of God's people. So he told a story about two men who went to the temple to pray.

One of these men was a Pharisee, one of the religious elite. He was a brilliant student of the law of God, and he was probably a leader and teacher among the Jewish people. He cherished the traditions and history of being a covenant child of God. He kept his nose clean by following the law precisely—and he expected all others to do the same. He thanked God that he was not like other people who did not keep the law faithfully.

The other man was a tax collector. In those days tax collectors were despised and viewed as traitors, because they gathered

taxes for the Romans, and they often charged high rates so that they could keep the extra money. But this man was repentant and asked, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Did you notice the Pharisee didn't ask for forgiveness? He figured he was already justified. That's the point of the parable. Trying to justify our position with God without his mercy is futile. We can't work our way into God's good graces. Thankfully God's mercy is available to us today through Jesus, who paid the price for our sin.

"God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I can do nothing to justify myself, but I know that you forgive my sins for Jesus' sake. Thank you, in his name. Amen.

LIKE A LITTLE CHILD

"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."
—Luke 18:17

In Jesus' day, receiving a blessing by a rabbi was a big deal. It was customary for rabbis to impart a blessing, a *barakah*, on children—and that sometimes included a prophetic message about the child's future.

No wonder these parents flocked to Jesus. Receiving his blessing would be a great gift—and he might even speak of the child's future. Would he reveal who might become a rabbi? Or a leader of the people? Or who would enjoy the blessing of long life?

The disciples saw these parents crowding around Jesus, and they weren't too happy. After all, Jesus was way too busy to take time for children!

But Jesus didn't want his kingdom fenced in like a private club. As the disciples tried to block the parents and children

from him, Jesus called the children toward him with open arms. The Master wanted them near, and he gave them the greatest blessing of all, saying, "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

The disciples needed to learn that, rather than being self-imposed gatekeepers of the kingdom, they were to invite people freely, recognizing that all who come to the Lord with the trusting dependency of a child may receive God's abundant blessings.

Jesus, thank you for encouraging me to come to you with childlike faith. I come with open hands, believing and trusting that you are willing to give good gifts to your children. In your name I come today. Amen.

LACKING?

"You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
—Luke 18:22

This ruler was challenging Jesus to a showdown, thinking he already had eternal life in his pocket. So Jesus, knowing where this guy was coming from, rattled off a summary of the law: no adultery; no murder; no stealing; no lying; no dishonoring of parents. The ruler proudly announced, "All these I have kept since I was a boy."

This man had long ago convinced himself he had done everything right for God. But Jesus knew the man's central weakness. "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow me."

Jesus' words hit the man like a tsunami. His possessions were what made him somebody. His life revolved around all the

things that brought him importance and acceptance.

What's more, the thought of giving his wealth to the poor probably made him cringe. These were the very people he saw as beneath him. The thought of handing over his hard-earned wealth to the poor did not feel like the eternal life he was planning for. To him, treasures on earth were much better than treasure in heaven.

The Jesus life always calls us to follow the Lord ahead of everything else in our lives, no matter the cost. Can we live the Jesus life?

Master, give me the desire to follow you, whatever the cost. Help me to live sacrificially so that I can help others in your name. Amen.

GREAT COSTS, GREAT BLESSINGS

Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!"

—Luke 18:28

The interaction with the wealthy ruler (Luke 18:18-23) left Jesus' listeners—including his disciples—with many questions. The people asked, "Who then can be saved?"

Peter exclaimed, "We have left all we had to follow you!" And Jesus understood Peter's concern. Jesus knew that his closest followers had left valuable relationships behind to follow him. They had left their homes, wives, children, aging parents, and promising careers. They had left the most crucial relationships people have in life. It was not about wealth or power for the disciples; they had left family relationships and all the blessed conversations and memories that go with them—all for the sake of being with and following the Son of God. So they needed reassurance.

Jesus laid out to a fearful Peter and a frightened crowd that

the blessings of full life in God's kingdom happen both now and in the life to come. He held out the promise that leaving family relationships for his kingdom vision would result in healing and restoration. Jesus promised that no one keeping company with him would be short-changed.

He assures us also that seeking his kingdom with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength will birth renewal in personal relationships that bless and model the healing of all relationships in God's kingdom. Everything begins and ends with Jesus.

Lord, we know that life on this earth can be tough. Help us to look forward to the time when all relationships are healed in your eternal presence. In your name, Amen.

DID I SIGN UP FOR SUFFERING?

The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

—Luke 18:34

Psychologists and counselors point out that people who come to see them usually begin a conversation by telling selective parts of their stories, sharing only what they want to tell. This is a form of self-protection. People need emotional mechanisms to hide their wounds from others who might upset their status quo.

It seems the disciples chose to protect themselves from Jesus. They were excited about following Jesus, but they shielded themselves from his talk of suffering and hardship. They wished he would only tell them what they would gain from placing their faith in him.

They put blinders on when he detoured them away from earthly glory to the glory of suffering. But he wanted them to get the full brunt of his vision of the kingdom. Jesus said the

Gentiles would grab him. But why would he allow the very people they hated to harm him? This was part of Jesus' main purpose. The Son of Man did not come to conquer the world through war; he willingly became a sacrifice to make salvation possible for the very people who hated him—along with all other sinners.

Jesus asked his followers to come and die with him. As we walk the road of Lent, looking ahead to Good Friday, are we willing to take up our cross and follow him?

Lord, I know that pain and suffering cannot be avoided in this life. Guide me to follow you faithfully, knowing that your resurrection power will overcome for good. Amen.



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