



May/June 2012

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

PEACE  
TO YOU

ALSO: WALKING WITH GOD

Friends:

When I was young, I took some piano lessons, but I didn't like practicing. The long hours of repetition were too much work. Years later, I am able to plunk out a tune, but only barely. I learned a lot about the piano, but I'm not much good to anyone as a musician. That would've taken more discipline!



The same might be said for our religious life. What does it mean to walk with God? We can say we love God, that we want to be Christ's disciples—but how do we live that out in the day to day? What disciplines might we pursue to become better disciples? This is our topic for the month of May.

Then we wrestle in June with what it means to be truly at peace. The nautical image on our cover recalls the gospel event when Jesus, awakened by his terrified disciples at sea, commanded the storm to be still. Christ brought peace to creation itself. But what does Christ's peace look like for us? What does it mean for us to be peacemakers?

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster".

Steven Koster

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**“Walking with God”  
Bill Sytsma**



**“Peace to You”  
David Zandstra**

**Managing Editor:** Eleanor Lamsma  
**Executive Editor:** Steven Koster

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**re** FRAME MEDIA

# this month

## Walking with God

**Bill Sytsma**

Though God's fingerprints are all over creation, it is easy for us to ignore his presence. Even people who believe in God can often fall into a pattern of living as though God is nowhere nearby.

When God called Israel out of Egypt to be his people, he made clear that he wanted to dwell in their midst. God's presence meant life would be different for Israel. Their daily routines would be altered to remind them that they belonged to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see the book of Exodus).

Because Jesus fulfilled the entire law of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17-18), Christians today do not need to practice the ceremonial customs that were given to the people through Moses. But in thankfulness for all that God has done for us in Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we practice walking with God by developing habits and routines that help us grow in our awareness of God's presence. This month we will consider how spiritual disciplines can help us know God's presence as we walk with him.

*Bill Sytsma is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (D.Min). He is the author of the book Follow the Leader and is serving as the pastor of New Life Christian Reformed Church in Highland, Indiana. He and his wife, Staci, have hosted support groups for families built through adoption. He and Staci are the proud parents of three active boys: Luke, Isaac, and Nico.*

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.*

—Philippians 1:6

A few years ago, my wife and I took on a home remodeling project. To make our basement waterproof, we had to go through an elaborate process of tearing out some of the concrete from the basement floor, burying new drain tile under the floor, and pouring new cement. Our house was a complete mess. I knew that the remodeling process would make a mess in the basement, but I hadn't considered how much dust and grime would infiltrate the main living area of the house.

While living in the middle of that mess, I couldn't help wondering whether the project was worthwhile. While our spoons were covered with cement dust and the sound of jackhammers drowned out any possibility of conversation in the house, it was almost impossible to imagine what the house would look

like. In order to endure the process, I had to continually remind myself that once the project was finished, our house would be a better place to live.

This month we will consider the way God makes our lives new. Philippians 1 reminds us that like a house undergoing a remodeling project, our lives are works in progress. God has a plan to make us new, but sometimes the process of remodeling our lives can seem rather messy. God promises that the project will be worthwhile.

Holy Spirit, help me to become everything you intended me to be when you first created me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## TRAINING

*Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*

—1 Timothy 4:7-8

Have you ever watched a gifted pianist perform? I am amazed at the way some people can sit down and use their fingers to create combinations of sounds that stir emotions, evoke memories, and cause others to move with the rhythm of the song. Most of us realize that the ability to create music with an instrument does require some kind of natural ability, or a raw gift; but we also realize that the ability to make music is only refined through constant training.

Very few people are able to sit at a piano and play beautiful music without having had any training. A gifted musician who is recognized for her ability has undoubtedly spent hours practicing her craft. With enough practice and time, she can do something with a piano that seems natural. In reality, it has

become second nature through time, practice, and training.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we admit that we are not naturally inclined to pursue God's desires or to please him. We don't automatically desire even to seek him in prayer.

But it's possible to develop a "second nature." In his letter to Timothy, Paul encourages his friend to train himself to be godly. Training means developing habits and practices that will transform you. Christians train by practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, study, worship, and service.

Heavenly Father, help me to develop the "second nature" of seeking to please you. Amen.

## WALKING WITH GOD

*Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.*  
—Genesis 5:24

My family lives near a paved bike trail. When you walk down this path, you say hello to people as you pass each other moving in opposite directions.

If the person you meet is wearing headphones and listening to music, it is better to merely nod at them. If you are riding your bike, it is polite to announce that you are about to pass the people walking in front of you.

It is possible to have a lot of human interaction while walking on this path, without really getting to know anyone.

Often you will see two people walking together. They talk together, match each other's pace, and enjoy each other's company. They are more than mere acquaintances who happen to be on the same path.

We don't know very much about Enoch. His entire life

story is summarized in a few words. The outstanding characteristic of his life was that he "walked faithfully with God." (See also Hebrews 11:5.)

When God calls us to walk with him, he is looking for something more than a mere friendly greeting as we meet him on the path. It is possible to recognize God as someone we admire as we meet him (often) on the path of life, but he wants more for each one of us. God wants us to match his steps, converse with him, and take time to get to know him more fully.

Lord Jesus, help me to recognize that you are with me on the path of life, and to find joy in the process of walking with you. Amen.

## GETTING SAVED

*Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*

—Philippians 2:12

You would think that winning the lottery would be a dream come true for most people.

Can you imagine the change that would happen in your life if your bank account suddenly grew by millions of dollars? You would probably look forward to long vacations, nice cars, and a life of relative ease.

But if you study the lives of lottery winners, you discover the sad reality that many of them flounder within ten years of winning a large sum of money. They receive the gift, but they don't know how to use it. Their prize ends up being useless.

It is easy to view the gift of salvation like a tremendous inheritance or a sudden infusion of wealth. When we put our trust in Christ, our sins are forgiven and our eternal future is secure. Without doing anything to earn

it, followers of Jesus receive a truly great gift. It is indescribably amazing (see 2 Corinthians 9:15)!

Today's verse invites us to put the gift of Christ's grace to good use. With God working in us, we are urged to "work out" our salvation.

Salvation is not something we receive and then take for granted. If we are to experience the joy and benefit that God has in store for us, the gift of salvation should be not only received but also used well.

Holy Spirit, help me to realize the full value of Christ's gift for me, and allow that gift to be worked out in my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

## BECOMING HOLY

*"You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart . . . to be my own."* —Leviticus 20:26

Have you ever tried to define the word *holy*? Most people have an idea that this word tells us something about God. If you look up the word *holy* in a dictionary, you will find other words like *sacred*, *divine*, and *righteous* in the definition, but that doesn't make the meaning much clearer.

Whatever we imagine when we hear the word "holy," we are probably not bold enough to proclaim that we consider ourselves holy. We know our own flaws and pettiness too well to try to argue that holiness is a description of ourselves.

If we look at holiness as a requirement for being with God, it can seem overwhelming and unattainable. But if we read God's message in this passage, we find that holiness is not so much a requirement but the final goal. God had already delivered

his people (from slavery—see Exodus 1-15) and had called them apart to give them a great inheritance. To be *holy* actually means to be "set apart to God." This doesn't mean separating from other people but becoming dedicated to God to serve him in this world.

God's call to holiness tells us that when we follow Christ, our lives will be changed. The habits and patterns we develop in order to honor him are not mere tokens that we add to our daily routines, but practices that will work to transform us. God loves us, and he wants to transform our lives to make us holy.

Father, give me strength to become holy. Guide my steps so that I may become what you intend me to be. Amen.

## HABITS FOR HOLINESS

*Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.*  
—Philippians 4:9

For many people, the word “discipline” has a negative connotation. We tend to associate the word “discipline” with the idea of punishment.

But discipline is not the same as punishment. To discipline someone is to train them to develop a pattern of behavior or shape their character. It often happens by developing habits so that doing a task becomes a regular part of our life, something we do almost without effort.

Many people today learn how to type at a computer keyboard. At first, the practice of making the smallest finger on your left hand move from the *q* to the *z* on a keyboard seems awkward and difficult. But the more you practice, the more natural it becomes. If you work at a computer keyboard often, you probably don't even think about the movement of that

finger anymore. The skill of typing has been produced in you through disciplined practice.

In our text for today, Paul instructs the Christians in Philippi to practice habits that will help them experience God's peace. He asks them to learn to seek God through disciplines such as prayer, worship, and the study of all that is true and right. They are to develop habits that may initially seem awkward and difficult but will help train them so that they may develop the character that God intends for them.

Father in heaven, grant me the discipline to develop good habits for shaping my character. Make me more like Christ each day. Amen.

## THE PRIMARY HABIT

*Pray continually . . . .*

—1 Thessalonians 5:17

Throughout history, Christians have developed practices that help them grow in their walk with God. These have often been called “spiritual disciplines.” A general list of spiritual disciplines would include worship, prayer, tithing, meditation, fasting, study, memorization, and confession. The list of potential disciplines could grow to a point where we might feel we could never do enough.

The purpose of developing spiritual disciplines is not to add accomplishments to our spiritual resumes. If we believe that we somehow might earn credit in God’s eyes by mastering a list of spiritual disciplines, we misunderstand how these practices are beneficial. They are not ends in themselves but simply a means to help us grow nearer to God.

In our text for today, the Bible calls us to “pray continually.” This statement teaches us that prayer is the primary habit that we seek to develop in order to grow nearer to God.

Some of the people I admire for their spiritual maturity have never fasted. Some are not good at memorizing Scripture passages. Yet every person I think of as a mentor in my walk with God has developed the practice of seeking God in prayer. Spiritual disciplines make us aware of God’s presence, and there is probably no clearer way to acknowledge his presence than to approach God in prayer.

Holy Spirit, please help me to know the wonder of dwelling in your presence through a life of prayer. Amen.

**BE SPECIFIC**

*Pray also for me, that whenever I speak . . . I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.*  
—Ephesians 6:19

When I first started praying in a group, large or small, I felt the need to pray for everything. At mealtimes, I would ask for forgiveness, offer thanks for food, request healing for the sick, praise God for salvation, ask him to bless missionaries, and express appreciation for living in a free country.

When we pray in vague terms, we often miss the working of God's hand. While it's not wrong to pray for "those who are sick," we should be mindful to pray also for people we know who are sick—and we'll be able to see how God answers (according to his will). If I ask God to forgive me for the sin of envying my cousin's business success, I gain a different understanding of my sin and God's grace than if my prayer asked God to "forgive my many sins."

In our verse for today, Paul makes a very specific request: that his words may be effective in presenting the gospel. Even though he mentions some general concerns for prayer, he also has one request that he wants others to remember.

When we bring specific requests to God in prayer, we consider our words carefully. That helps us avoid having our prayers become a mere listing of items that we repeat, often without thinking. And when we pray specifically, we grow to care more about our concerns (especially people!) as we grow closer to the God who hears us.

Lord Jesus, shape my prayer life so that I may see your work and grow nearer to you. In your name, Amen.

## PRAYING FOR THE KINGDOM

*"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*  
—Matthew 6:10

I was never able to understand the attraction of big cities. Traffic jams, aggressive drivers, and congestion have always been enough to keep me away from areas of high population.

A few years ago, my wife took me into the heart of Chicago. As we drove into the city, I felt anxiety rising within me as my shoulders became tense and my stomach felt queasy. After walking around for a while, we went to a building called the John Hancock Center, a 95-story skyscraper, the fourth tallest building in Chicago. From the observation deck of the Hancock Center, the city of Chicago looks completely different. The streets seem to make sense, the traffic flow seems peaceful rather than chaotic, and the view of Lake Michigan, Navy Pier, and other attractions helped me appreciate the city in a new way. I still think

driving on the streets seems chaotic, but I now understand that there is some kind of order that I can't see at the street level.

Often, our prayers can be focused on the chaos of the "street level" of our lives. We are concerned about health, finances, relationships, and decisions. Jesus does not deny the chaotic troubles of this world, but he invites us to see the world also from God's perspective as he teaches us to pray that God's kingdom will come, and that God's will may be accomplished.

Lord Jesus, help me to know you so that my desires may change. Shape my interests and pursuits so that I genuinely want to see your kingdom come. Amen.

## ASKING FOR A BLESSING

*The man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." —Genesis 32:26*

If you created a list of items you should pray about, you might include asking God to heal the sick and relieve those who suffer from injustice. You might pray that people who are far from God might have their hearts transformed. Your list might ask God to bless world leaders, victims of crime, and friends and family members who are enduring personal struggles. As you made your list, you might start to think that with all of the suffering in your world, it can seem a little petty and selfish to ask God to bless *you*.

Praying for others is good for our walk with God. It can soften our hearts to concerns outside of ourselves. But we are never told in the Bible that our prayers should be limited to the concerns of others. Asking for God's blessing for ourselves

should also be a significant part of our prayer lives.

First, when we ask God for a blessing, we admit that we need his blessing, and we confront the fact that we are not able to do everything we want to. We show that we need God's grace.

Second, when we ask for a blessing, we intentionally present our deepest concerns to God. This allows us to grow nearer to him, as we recognize that God really does care about us. We do not need to hide our personal concerns or desires from him.

Holy Spirit, lead me into a closer walk with you through the gift of prayer. Grant me your blessing, and help me to recognize the blessings you have already given me. Amen.

## RECOGNIZING GOD

*Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him.*

—Psalm 40:3

Who taught you how to pray?

When I was a child, we often had dinner with my grandparents on Sunday evenings. My grandfather almost always began his prayer with these words: “Our heavenly Father, we come nigh unto thee in the evening hour of this Sabbath Day.” His prayers were eloquent, had deeply meaningful key phrases, and a predictable cadence. I wish I could hear him pray again.

Many of us develop patterns to our prayers. We bow our heads and close our eyes, use respectful terms to address God, express gratitude for his grace, ask for his intervention in our concerns, and end with the word “Amen.” Sometimes we hear prayers that cause our hearts to be awakened by God’s majesty and mercy. Upon hearing such wonderful prayers, we may de-

sire to pray with the same eloquence.

The goal of prayer, however, is not to become better at praying. The goal of prayer is to make us more aware of God’s presence and power in our lives. Praying well is not an end, but a means to become more attuned to God’s work. If we think prayer must be confined to a pattern of bowing our heads, uttering standard phrases, and ending with “Amen,” the power of prayer will be limited in our lives. Prayer allows us to recognize God, grow in our awareness of his work, and enjoy the wonder of his love.

Open my eyes, Lord, so that I may see you working in this world, and so that my heart may swell with gratitude. Amen.

## GRATITUDE

*One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice.*  
—Luke 17:15

While I was in high school, one of the teachers from the business department taught us skills for pursuing a job. While helping us practice for interviews, she emphasized that the interview was not over until you wrote a thank-you note.

At first, I thought of the thank-you note as nothing more than an appendix to the interview. It was one more opportunity to make myself look good. As we practiced interviewing, I discovered that the intention to write a thank-you note changed the way I approached the interview. While answering questions and learning more about the potential job, I made mental notes of items to include in my thank-you note. The intention to express thanks made me more aware of the interviewer's concerns. I don't know if the thank-you notes changed or enhanced my image

in the eyes of the interviewers, but I know it changed my awareness of the interview process.

We may realize that prayer is an important part of thankfulness, but do we realize how closely prayer and gratitude are tied together? We might be inclined to believe that prayer is the appendix to a good day or a successful endeavor—it is good to include, but it doesn't add much to the substance of what has happened. But prayer does more than punctuate God's blessings. It helps us become more aware of God's goodness and contributes to a growing sense of gratitude toward God.

Dear God, may my life of prayer with you give me an ever-growing sense of gratitude. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

## PRACTICING SELF-DENIAL

*"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*  
—Mark 8:34

Have you ever practiced the discipline of fasting? Although most followers of Christ agree that prayer is a valuable practice, there is some debate about the discipline of fasting. Fasting is the practice of refraining from normal activities to focus our attention on Christ. Most commonly, fasting is about avoiding food for a certain period of time.

In today's verse, Jesus tells his disciples that following him will require self-denial and sacrifice.

We might be able to intellectually understand and agree with the call to self-denial. We might see the benefit of obeying Christ, even when it contradicts our desires. We might even sincerely pray that we would have the strength to obey him. However, when the time comes to lay aside our desires and obey God's commands, we falter.

It is not easy to say no to our own desires, especially when we have the means to satisfy our whims. The discipline of fasting helps us practice saying no to ourselves.

We do not gain virtue points by saying no to eating a hot dog or not eating chocolate during the season of Lent, but we do learn the habit of setting aside our desires to make room for pursuing God's will.

I confess, O Lord, that I often avoid doing the good I would like to do. I also admit that I regularly violate your commands, in spite of my best intentions. Make me new, so that I am able to obey your will. Amen.

## SUPER-SPIRITUALITY?

*"I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."*

—Luke 18:12

When you hear the phrase *spiritual disciplines*, you might think of missionaries who travel to foreign countries or people who have taken vows of poverty. You might think spiritual disciplines are reserved for eccentric or unique individuals who love the Lord—and you might not consider yourself a person like that.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees defined their spiritual stature by their disciplines. They believed they were superior because of their spiritual habits, such as fasting. That kind of mindset leads lots of people to believe that spiritual disciplines are only for the "spiritual elite."

But when Jesus tells his followers the traits he is looking for, he does not mention disciplines such as prayer, fasting, or confession. He indicates that he is looking for lives that have been transformed. He wants to see

followers who feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and clothe the naked (see Matthew 25). The purpose of disciplines is not to show our holiness. They are exercises that help us grow nearer to God.

Spiritual disciplines do not earn us favor with God, but they can help us grow. Even if you have never thought about practicing spiritual disciplines, you probably already have some habits that help you grow nearer to God. Whenever you pray, attend worship, read the Bible, or do daily devotions, you are setting aside time to develop a habit to help you know God more fully.

Holy Spirit, may the habits of faithful living draw me nearer to you. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## PUTTING ON A SHOW

*“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do . . . .”*

—Matthew 6:16

Jerry made a commitment to get physically fit, and everyone could tell. He had purchased everything that he thought would be necessary: new shoes, fitness apparel, workout videos, a gym membership, and a notebook to help him track his progress. He regularly made a scene as he left work to go to the gym for a workout during his lunch break.

Though everyone noticed a change in Jerry's routine, no one was able to discern a change in his fitness level. Even though his friends noticed his gym bag and different schedule, his body had not changed.

None of Jerry's friends realized that when he went to the gym, he gave a half-hearted effort to lift a few weights, read a magazine while walking slowly on the treadmill, and enjoy twenty minutes in the hot tub before

showering and returning to work.

Jesus warned his disciples about half-hearted efforts to grow nearer to God. In those days, many people approached spiritual growth in a way like Jerry approached physical fitness. The Pharisees would make a tremendous show about fasting, but they were more interested in showing their piety to others than in growing nearer to God.

If our spiritual habits are just shallow attempts to impress others, we will probably have no more than a shallow walk with God.

Lord, help me to avoid the temptation to appear holier than I am. Work in me to make me new. In Jesus, Amen.

## CONFESSION

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* —1 John 1:9

One of the classic spiritual disciplines is *confession*. We usually use that word to mean we admit our sinfulness.

In my life, the practice of confession has often been reduced to a cover-all phrase like this in my prayers: “Forgive me of my many sins.” It is a handy phrase, because it allows me to sanitize and distance myself from the evil that has been evident in my actions. Rather than recall my struggles with greed, lust, envy, and materialism; I can just acknowledge that I have committed “many sins.”

But when we make a blanket statement about our sinfulness, we have not really advanced our conversation with God; nor have we really taken an assessment of our personal integrity. God is willing to hear us speak about the reality of our actions. He loves us enough to allow us

the space to recall the ways we offend him, and he responds by reminding us that he loves us.

The practice of confession is counter-intuitive. We naturally believe that if we start to name all of our offenses, we will fall into a pit of self-loathing as we recall how badly we have behaved. The intent of confession, however, is to help us realize that no matter how often or how badly we have violated God’s standards, every time we name our sin, we can be assured that God’s grace extends to cover our faults.

Lord, I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. Fill me with your forgiving grace, that I may know your love. And help me turn from my sinful ways, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## OPENING OUR EYES

*He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*  
—Acts 1:9

Forty days after Jesus rose from the grave, he left his disciples and ascended into heaven. Since that day, we no longer have the physical presence of God with us on earth. That does not mean God is not with us, but it is easier for us to ignore him, because he is hidden from our sight.

Even in the Old Testament, God seemed to know that his people would be apt to ignore him. To combat this, God developed a series of patterns and habits for the people of Israel. Whenever they put on clothes, prepared food, entered their house, or groomed their hair, they were reminded of God's presence in their midst (for example, see Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Although they were not able to actually see God, their eyes were opened to the reality of his presence, as they learned to exercise his will in every area of their lives.

After Christ ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit taught his followers that the dietary restrictions, clothing regulations, and even the sign of circumcision were no longer necessary, but it was still important to be aware of his work in their lives, even though Jesus was taken from their sight. (See Acts 2:1-4; 4:2-47; 15:1-31.)

In the practice of spiritual disciplines, we develop an awareness of his work and presence as we strive to walk with him.

Lord Jesus, we praise you as you reign on high, and we ask that you will make us aware of your presence through your Spirit, even though we cannot see you. In your name we pray. Amen.

## CHANGED FOCUS

*Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" —Matt. 14:29-30*

I always feel bad for Peter when I read the story of his water-walking adventure. After seeing Jesus on the water, Peter proceeded to do something that most people would never dream possible. He walked on water! But when the wind distracted him, Peter got nervous and started sinking.

Did Peter do anything bad? In similar circumstances, I would be afraid too. I think Peter had a great deal of faith to merely step out of the boat. The other disciples did not venture out, and yet they were not scolded. Peter, however, was scolded for having "little faith."

But Jesus was scolding Peter mainly for letting himself get distracted. Peter had a moment of extreme trust, but he forgot about Christ's power as he noticed other forces surrounding him. He didn't realize that

the Lord who could empower him to walk on water could also keep him above water as the stormy wind and waves churned around him.

Peter had the faith to get out of the boat, but it was "little faith"—too easily distracted.

Walking with God means not only that we will trust him to do amazing things through us but also that we will maintain our focus on him when distractions rise up around us.

Lord Jesus, I confess that I am easily distracted and often worried by circumstances in my life. Help me to remember and trust in your power to sustain and rescue me. Amen.

## SIMPLIFY

*“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one.”*  
—Luke 10:41-42

Martha was having a busy day. She was making an elaborate meal for Jesus and his followers. She was a gracious hostess, but her grace turned sour.

The story does not tell us that Martha was wrong to make a nice meal, but she was foolish to allow the preparation of the meal to sour her opportunity to be with Christ. She was so distracted and overwhelmed by her preparations that her desire to be hospitable backfired when she accused Christ of not caring about her plans.

I feel bad for Martha. Whenever I hear this story, it is told as though Martha should have imitated Mary, who just sat and listened. That may sound good, but it doesn't always work well in life.

If I need to get something done, I want Martha on my side. We

want people like Martha to serve on committees, lead Bible studies, and plan events. If everyone only sat and listened, much would be left undone.

Jesus was not teaching us that we should sit still and do nothing, but he does challenge us to reconsider our priorities so that we can be near him. If we are overwhelmed to the point that we become angry at God for not paying attention to our plans, we may need to reconsider the value of our ideas.

Lord, help me to set my priorities so that there is room for me to grow nearer to you. Amen.

## MEDITATION

*"I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds."*  
—Psalm 77:12

With all of the access we have to information in our world, we have no shortage of things to think about. I can watch television programs that teach me how to prepare food or remodel my home. I can find scores and statistics from sporting events on the other side of the world with just a click on my computer. Or I can discover where my favorite actor lives and whom he is currently dating.

Because I have access to so much information, my thoughts can be stimulated by almost any whim. It is easy for me to obsess about things that are rather insignificant.

One of the classic spiritual disciplines that may be valuable today is the practice of meditation. We might think of meditation as a mystical practice that causes people to enter a trance-like condition. It seems so dif-

ferent from anything we do in our normal routines.

But meditation is not a practice that is only for spiritual mystics. In the Old Testament the word for "meditate" refers to talking to oneself. When we meditate, we set our thoughts beyond the trivial minutia of our whims, and we consider God's place in our lives.

Meditation helps us keep our thought-lives clear of the distractions that the world throws at us, and it helps us set our minds on the greater thoughts of God's plans and purposes.

As I set my thoughts on you, O Lord, show me the wonder of your ways. Help me to focus on you alone. Amen.

## A DAY OF REST

*"Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD."*  
—Exodus 16:23

For centuries the people of Israel had lived in slavery to the Egyptians. They did not have three-day weekends or vacations. Their lives consisted of working to build Pharaoh's kingdom. When God freed his people and called them to worship him in the desert, he set a new pattern for their lives. Rather than following an endless pattern of working, eating, and sleeping, they were to take one day off each week, to rest.

The Lord they met in the desert was very different from the slave-driving Pharaoh. They were compelled to be slaves in Egypt, but they were invited into a covenant relationship with God in the desert. They had to make their own bricks in Egypt, but they received free bread every morning in the desert. They worked endlessly for Pharaoh, but they were com-

manded to take a day of rest as part of their relationship with God. The Lord was so intent on blessing them that he even preserved their sabbath-day bread from the previous day.

Israel was to set aside time and space to make room for the God of Abraham to live among them. God's presence came with the promise of peace, blessing, and flourishing for all (*shalom*). Israel would not have seen this as an oppressive command, but as a gift of grace.

Have we set aside time in our busy lives to make room for God?

God of grace, thank you for the gift of your presence in my life. Help me to set aside time and space to enjoy you and your generosity. Amen.

## SABBATH

*"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." —Mark 2:27-28*

Years ago, one of my neighbors let me know that he did not want my dog stepping on his grass when I walked the dog around the block. I did not want to make him angry, so I made sure to pull the dog off the grass and onto the road whenever we walked past his house. I felt no joy in keeping my neighbor satisfied; I just did it out of a sense of obligation.

There are many things we do in life just to satisfy an obligation or to avoid someone's anger. We might even think that practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, confession, meditation, fasting, and Sabbath keeping would somehow reduce God's wrath toward us. But that's not the point of spiritual disciplines. We do them gladly out of thanks to God.

Jesus faced people who accused him of violating the Sabbath be-

cause he and his disciples picked and ate grain on that day. Those people looked on the Sabbath law as an obligation, and they tried to point out that Jesus and his disciples were not keeping the Sabbath requirements and were thus making God angry.

Jesus' response shows us that Sabbath was meant not to be an obligation but a gift. The gift of Sabbath is to renew and transform us by calling us to set aside time from normal routines to bask in the joy of God's presence.

Heavenly Father, I want to know your grace more fully. Help me recognize the intent of your gifts so that I may enjoy and celebrate your salvation. Amen.

## CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

*"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements . . . ."*

—Acts 15:28

The early church was struggling to decide how they would welcome new believers who had never been part of the Jewish tradition. The major issue was whether Gentile believers would need to be circumcised. Circumcision had been the sacramental-type sign of being an Israelite (Jew) since the time of Abraham. Some did not think the old sign was necessary, but many argued to maintain the practice.

After gathering the church leaders together, the apostles and elders decided that new believers did not need to be circumcised. Instead, they would need to observe certain dietary restrictions and refrain from sexual immorality.

The list of requirements for believers is striking. They did not restate the Ten Commandments, nor did they send a compre-

hensive list of cleanliness laws. They offered the new believers a short list of instructions that would help them grow. No one believed this list would make anyone perfect. The purpose of these instructions was to help the new believers begin to align their lives with God's plans for them.

The habits or disciplines we practice do not make us perfect, but they do help us walk with God and begin to experience his power to transform us.

Holy Spirit, help me to walk within your will so that I may be transformed to be more like Christ, in whose name I pray. Amen.

## THE TREASURE PRINCIPLE

*“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.”*  
—Mark 12:43

If you see someone’s checkbook, you can figure out a great deal about their priorities. We spend money on things that are important to us, and the way we handle our finances is a good way to check the condition of our hearts.

In the story of the widow’s offering, Jesus looks at the act of giving as something more than providing for the needs of temple ministry. After watching in silence while generous donors placed large amounts in the temple treasury, Jesus noticed that a poor widow donated two small coins worth less than a penny. Jesus was not impressed because of all that would be accomplished with two copper coins; he was impressed by the condition of the widow’s heart. Her gift revealed her priorities.

The act of giving can reveal the condition of our hearts,

and it can also be part of the process of shaping our priorities. Whenever we invest in something, we immediately become more attuned to our investment. When a newlywed couple buys their first home, or a young entrepreneur invests in her new business, they quickly learn about caring for their new purchase, because it is such a significant investment. The act of financially supporting ministries for God’s work is good for those ministries, but it is also good for our hearts, because in the process of giving, our hearts can be drawn nearer to God.

Holy Spirit, change the way I use the resources you have given me so that my heart may be drawn nearer to you. Amen.

## FAITH AND SERVICE

*“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”*  
—John 13:14

When you are young, parents can do things that you do not understand. They tell you how life was different when they were children. They explain that they are punishing you “for your own good.” They tell you to be home on time and to “stay safe.” I noticed this trend when I was younger. My parents weren’t the only parents who were “guilty” of these actions; my friends had parents who did the same things.

After I became a parent, something strange happened. I found myself explaining how life was different when I was a child. I tried to convince my children that discipline would build their character. I even set curfews and repeatedly told them to “be safe.” After taking on the responsibilities that my parents had, I started to understand them a lot more.

After washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus told them that they should do likewise. It might seem obvious that service is beneficial. When we practice service, we build friendships, contribute to the well-being of others, and learn to see concerns beyond our own lives.

One of the blessings of service that we often overlook is that we grow in our understanding of God’s love. As we take on the tasks of serving others, as Christ did, we begin to understand the ways God has dealt with his people. We learn of his character as we imitate him by serving others.

Lord, move me to serve others so that they may be blessed through the work you have done in me, and so that I may grow closer to you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## SIMPLE SERVICE

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.*

—Romans 12:6

When I think about all the good things a person can do, I get a little overwhelmed. We have so many possible ways to volunteer our time and resources. We have opportunities to serve lunch at school, deliver food baskets in the evening, read to children, rake leaves for senior citizens, teach Sunday school, serve on a church committee, write letters to prisoners, give money to different organizations, invite our neighbor to church, help build a home for someone—the list could go on and on.

But when God calls us to serve, he doesn't mean for us to get overwhelmed. He doesn't tell us that we have to do every good thing that we can possibly do. He tells us to use our gifts. God has a lot of people who are working to serve him. This means each of us can use our

individual gifts to serve God, without feeling guilty about other opportunities we may have missed. In Romans 12 the Bible describes the church as a group of people who focus on using their gifts to serve the Lord.

When we walk with God, we are called to action. We are supposed to show his grace to a world that desperately needs it. We recognize that our actions will not address or correct every problem that exists, but we can use our gifts and abilities to reach beyond ourselves to show God's grace through our actions.

Heavenly Father, activate the gifts you have given me, so that through my actions others may see your grace. Amen.

## HARNESSING THE SPIRIT

*"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*  
—John 3:8

On the main road between Indianapolis and Chicago the land is dotted with monstrous wind turbines. It looks like an eerie scene from a science fiction movie. Each turbine has three blades that turn to produce electricity whenever the wind blows between 7 and 30 miles per hour. On some days, all of the windmills are turning, but on other days, the blades are all stationary, because the wind is not blowing enough.

Indiana wind farms cannot control the wind, but well-designed generators can harness some of the wind's power.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and on this day we remember the way the Holy Spirit's power was evident fifty days after Christ rose from the grave.

The practice of spiritual disciplines is intended to help us

grow nearer to God. One of the dangers of focusing on our disciplines, however, is that we can mistakenly think that our spiritual growth is powered by our spiritual disciplines. Practicing spiritual disciplines is similar to building a windmill. Our disciplines do not compel the Holy Spirit to work on our behalf, but by developing habits that draw us nearer to God, we are in a better position to be propelled by the Spirit's power when he moves.

Holy Spirit, prepare my heart to be moved by you so that I am ready to respond whenever you call me. Amen.

## ASSIGNING VALUE TOGETHER

*The name of the LORD will be declared . . . when the peoples and the kingdoms assemble to worship . . . —Psalm 102:21-22*

In Psalm 102, the Bible calls people to come together to worship the Lord. When people come together, they are able to share how God has blessed each of them, and they are able to see how God has been at work in the lives of others.

There is something exciting about being in a group of people. When a room is crowded, it feels like something special is about to happen, and a sense of anticipation grows.

This is probably one of the reasons people like to attend concerts or live sporting events. We can watch a game on television or listen to music on the radio, but the atmosphere of being surrounded by others adds to the experience.

We can—and should—worship God as part of our time alone with him each day. But God of-

fers us opportunities to gather with others so that we can be encouraged in our faith.

When we gather together for the purpose of worship, we gain access to see God's work in the lives of others. We receive the opportunity to develop friendships, and we are encouraged as we see that we are not alone in the pursuit of growing nearer to God.

Our faith grows as we are encouraged by others while honoring our Lord.

Lord, help me to see your true worth. Bring others into my life who will help me know your value, so that I may treasure you above all things. Amen.

## SEEKING GUIDANCE

*Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said.*

—Exodus 18:24

The book of Deuteronomy says there has never been another prophet like Moses (Deut. 34:10-12). Moses spent forty days on a mountain speaking with God. He spent so much time in God's presence that his face began to glow (see Ex. 34:29-30).

You might think Moses received all his advice and the answers to all his questions directly from God, but that was not always true. In today's verses we read that Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, gave Moses good advice for making his job more manageable. In this situation God didn't tell Moses directly but used another person to bring this idea.

God regularly speaks to us through other people. Sometimes, he puts people in our lives who give us wise advice. At other times, he gives us people who set an excel-

lent example of handling tense moments with grace. God has regularly chosen to work within communities.

We like the idea of being "self-sufficient." We don't want to need help from other people. But God calls us into a community of believers. We grow nearer to God as we enjoy fellowship with others. It is helpful to realize that God can speak to us, lead us, encourage us, and caution us when we make it a priority to develop relationships with other Christ-followers who are willing to speak the truth to us in love.

Holy Spirit, we praise you for the gift of fellowship. Work in me so that I may offer your insights to others and be ready to receive your wisdom as well. Amen.

## THE PRIMARY PROMISE

*“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”*

—Isaiah 43:5

If you treat the Bible like little more than a list of promises, you can slip into thinking that life is supposed to be easy for Christians.

For example, you might think that if you are having trouble in your marriage, God has a promise that will make your marriage better. If you are struggling financially, God has a promise that will make your bank account swell. All you have to do is pick and choose the verse that contains your favorite promise, and life will get better.

The problem with that way of thinking is that the primary promises in the Bible are not that you will be healthy, wealthy, and wise. Instead God promises that he will be with you.

In Isaiah 43, the prophet does not say that God will prevent

fire and floods. Instead, God promises that he will be with us as we pass through fire and as floods overwhelm us. You may think this is a cheap promise, but if you understand God's nature, you can grasp that this is a tremendous gift.

God is the source of all good things, so having God with us is the best possible way to live. His presence does not guarantee that every moment will be blissful, but it does mean that we have the greatest blessings available. God's gift of himself is the greatest gift of all.

Lord Jesus, we praise you for being Emmanuel (“God with us”). Help us to know the true value of your presence. Amen.

## THE JOY OF THE WALK

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation . . . .*

—Psalm 51:12

The metallic, grinding sound was painful to hear. As I looked at my driving instructor, he stated flatly, “If it makes that kind of noise, something is wrong.” It should have been obvious. Even though I was just learning how to drive with a stick shift (manual transmission), I should have known that. The grinding noise indicated a problem.

In Psalm 51, the psalmist points out a nagging sound in his walk with God that indicated something was wrong. Sin in his life had caused disharmony with God—and, because of that, the joy of his salvation was lacking. The lack of joy is a grinding sound that indicates something is wrong.

When everything is working properly in a vehicle, there is a quiet, powerful rumbling of the engine that is not overwhelmed by grinding. When everything

is harmonious in our walk with God, joy is present. That is the way it is supposed to be.

If our walk with God is cluttered with sin, joy will be lacking. If we believe our walk with God is something that we dutifully and begrudgingly approach by fulfilling legalistic obligations, joy will be lacking. The lack of joy is an indication that something is wrong.

God created us to know him and to enjoy his presence. When we develop habits that help us walk in step with God, we will know the joy of his presence.

Lord, let me know the joy of your presence, and allow me to revel in the wonder of your grace and love. Amen.

# this month

## Peace to You

**David Zandstra**

When Jesus Christ was born, the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). The prospect of peace was and is badly needed in the uncounted and constant conflicts of our world. Only believers in Jesus are able to find real peace with God. With that peace in their hearts, they can glorify God and serve him as peacemakers in their families, friendships, workplaces, churches, communities, and countries. Let’s find out this month what it takes to do this.

*David Zandstra is a retired pastor living in Marietta, Georgia, having served five churches from New Jersey to California. Along with other ministries, he counsels clients of a pregnancy resource center. He acknowledges his indebtedness to the training and resources of Peacemaker Ministries. David and his wife, Margie, have three children and six grandchildren.*

## CRYING FOR PEACE

*He wept over [the city] and said, "If you . . . had only known on this day what would bring you peace . . . ." —Luke 19:41-42*

Have you ever cried over a broken relationship? Have you wept when your spouse abandoned you, when a friend slandered you, when the boss fired you, or when your child rebelled in hate against you?

Jesus had tears in his eyes as the crowds shouted his praises while he rode into Jerusalem on the last week of his life on earth. They were tears of great sadness. Despite the joyful celebration that day, Jesus knew that in a few days the religious leaders and residents of Jerusalem would reject him and crucify him.

They imagined they were close to God by their worship in the magnificent temple. But Jesus knew that their hearts were filled with pride and were far from God. Their insincere prayers and offerings were actually an offense to the Lord. Only Jesus could bring them

into a peace-filled relationship with God. But they didn't recognize him as the Son of God. The Jerusalem crowds executed the ultimate Peacemaker.

Jesus, however, laid down his life to pay for our sins, and then he took it up again, making it possible for all sinners to have peace with God! (See John 10:17-18.)

There is a cure for broken relationships and the destruction they cause. Jesus knows the pain in your heart. And he is alive now, offering healing and reconciliation. He can dry your tears if you accept him and his peace for your life.

Lord Jesus, you know the troubles in my life. Show me how to make peace with God and with the people in my life. Amen.

## THE SOURCE OF PEACE

*He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*  
—Isaiah 9:6

As I write these words, the streets of a Middle Eastern city are filled with protesters. They are raising their voices for justice against a dictator who has held power for decades by oppression and corruption. The government's forces have attacked the crowds; dozens have died, and hundreds are wounded. Would a change in regime bring any more peace and freedom? It's not a sure thing at all.

In the midst of the parade of nations whose power-hungry rulers have exploited their people for selfish gain, God promises a new kind of ruler for his people. He not only knows how to rule in peace; he is the very source of peace. He brings true peace because he is beyond sin and selfishness. His prophetic names clearly portray that he is God as well as man! If King David was "a man after

[God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), this king—Jesus Christ, a descendant of David—will bring God's heart of perfect love to those in his kingdom.

In this world, people will suffer under foolish and selfish rulers. Revolts and riots resulting in wars will inevitably follow. If we are to find peace and security in this troubled world, we must become citizens of Christ's kingdom. He is always willing to take us in.

Have you accepted him as your Lord and Ruler?

Precious Lord, thank you that your kingdom is not of this world. I want to live with you where righteousness and justice reign. I trust in you for my security now and forever. Amen.

**PEACE = SHALOM**

*You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.*  
—Isaiah 26:3

During a trip to Israel, my wife and I got to practice many times saying the one Hebrew word we knew: *Shalom!* Even today Jewish people use it to say “hello” and “goodbye.” It’s a beautiful word, because it conveys much more than a simple greeting. The word *shalom* in the Old Testament is often translated “peace,” as in the blessing that Aaron was commanded to speak over the people of Israel.

This peace involves much more than our modern idea of simply the absence of fighting. This peace presents a positive picture: a life filled with total well-being. *Shalom* means everything is working the right way, God’s way, resulting in rest for one’s soul, confidence in one’s mind, joy in one’s heart, harmony in one’s relationships, and prosperity for one’s walk in life. When you say “*Shalom*” to someone,

you are saying: “May you have this kind of peace.” Doesn’t that sound more substantial than “Hi” and “See you later”?

This kind of peace does not arise from our war-torn, conflict-ridden world. Isaiah reminds us that real peace comes from a deep, enduring knowledge of God and a complete trust in him. It is only in a love relationship with God that we can live with the blessing of having “his face shine” on us.

God of all grace, in the midst of fights and feuds, we yearn for your *shalom*, your peace through your Son, Jesus. Let us see and feel your smile on us today, especially when things go wrong. Amen.

**BEGIN WITH GOD**

*Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*  
—Romans 5:1

Jim came to counseling when his life was filled with trouble. He had been jailed and was on probation for domestic violence. He and his wife were separated; his children were in protective care. After a recent fight with his boss, he lost his job. The counselor was wise enough to ask about his relationship with God. That too was a subject of conflict, since his concept of a father had been deeply influenced by an abusive and detached dad.

Many of us have not experienced this degree of turmoil. But we all came into this world separated and alienated from our Creator. Our sin has separated us from God. Down deep, we sense God's judgment on our wrongdoing, and we reject him and rebel against him. But God, in his great mercy and grace, wants to turn us around

from being his enemies to being in a relationship of trust and loving friendship with our Maker. This radical change in our position resulted from the just and holy God sacrificing his one and only Son.

Jim learned and accepted how Jesus came to be one of us, died in our place to take the punishment for our sin, and conquered death to fill us with new life through his Spirit. Jim began to understand how wise, good, powerful, and comforting God's presence is. Jim turned from resenting our Father in heaven to yearning for him. God's peace poured into his life and overflowed into his broken relationships.

God of grace, how can I thank you enough for the reconciliation you have made? In Jesus, Amen.

## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?* —James 4:1

We all have experienced it—worn out at the end of the day, seeking some calm and rest at home. But then *shalom* in the home doesn't happen. The kids may be yelling at each other, or no comfort food is available, or you find that you have to deal with a clogged toilet.

"Can't I have a little peace around here?" you mutter in frustration. You cannot find the peace you want because of unfulfilled desires in your heart. In fact, most conflict comes from unmet wants in your innermost being, a lack of satisfaction with what you have.

Some desires—such as greed, revenge, and lust—are obviously wrong. Other desires are good—such as a loving spouse, obedient children, loyal friends, and a good-paying job. But even the good desires can become sources of conflict when they take

control of our thinking, deciding, and feeling. Watch out when "I desire" becomes "I need" or "I deserve" and then "I demand"—and then "I will attack anyone who gets in my way."

We must ask ourselves two questions: Is my desire for God's presence, love, and power greater than anything else? And are my wants the same as what God wants for my life? Paul testified, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. . . . I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12-13).

Lord, forgive me for selfish desires that resulted in fights with others. Empty my heart of demands and show me how to find peace in all you want me to do. Amen.

## THE REAL ISSUE

*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*  
—Colossians 3:5

Sue and Bob's mother died. She was a widow and left a modest estate. Her will named Sue, the elder sibling, as the executor. A small fee for this service was awarded to her. Bob didn't think this was fair and disputed another special gift his mother had set aside for her daughter. Bob broke off his relationship with his sister, and remained distant even to his death a few years later.

Family inheritances have often been a source of sad and bitter wrangling. A man in a crowd requested that Jesus settle an inheritance dispute. He refused and instead used the opportunity to address the real issue in this man's complaint. It was clearly greed. The god of money and possessions occupied top place in the man's heart.

Riches may bring some feeling of security for this life, but

it won't help us get eternal life and peace with God. For most of us, the desire for wealth is never satisfied. When you value dollars more than people, you will inevitably be in conflict with others. Fighting over finances is also a leading cause of marriage breakup.

Only dying with Christ can release us from this powerful desire for possessions. Only living in him can bring us satisfaction with his supply of our needs and a heart at peace.

Lord Jesus, remind me that my life does not consist in the abundance of my possessions. Help me trust that I have enough with your presence in my heart and what you are pleased to give me. Amen.

## PEACE WITH OTHERS

*"Be at peace with each other."*

—Mark 9:50

A church's long-time pastor announced his retirement. The congregation chose a young, gifted, visionary man to be his successor. It didn't take a year before the church was in deep conflict. Most of the elders opposed the new pastor's innovations and reorganization of the church's ministries. But many of those in the pews enjoyed his dynamic preaching and the challenges he brought to renew the church's mission.

People took sides, gossip spread, and charges multiplied. In another year, a split occurred. The new pastor left with half of the members, leaving behind a decimated and discouraged group. Believers who once praised God shoulder to shoulder could barely speak kindly to one another.

If we were perfect people, perfect peace would prevail. But we are not. We can be tempted

by distorted ideas and suspicions. The fellowship of the Lord Jesus, which is supposed to be an example of unity, becomes a battleground. Faith, hope, and love suffer.

Churches as well as marriages, families, businesses, ministries, and governments can become deeply divided. In such conflict we need to find the God of peace and call on him fervently to give us humble self-examination, persevering love, and overwhelming wisdom so that we can "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Lord of the church, pour out your grace and peace on churches that are in conflict today. Show us how to accept and love one another. Amen.

## OVERWHELMING PEACE

*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

—Galatians 3:28

Hostilities in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the world never seem to end. Many presidents and prime ministers have desired but failed to negotiate peaceful solutions in the world's troubled regions.

But there is another kind of peace growing between people in some of these lands. For example, though it is small and secret, there is a true peace that unites both Jews and Arabs who have found forgiveness and love in Jesus the Messiah. In the film *Forbidden Peace*, Tass, an Arab, and Moran, a Jew, tell of their faith journeys that changed them from being sworn enemies to becoming brothers in Christ. Many more stories of amazing reconciliation are taking place in this area today.

When we receive the love of God in our hearts, we have a

peace that overwhelms the prejudices and hatreds between nations, tribes, and other people groups. It defies the rejection, persecution, and suffering that allegiance to the Lord Jesus brings from society and even family members.

This peace began in Old Testament Israel, and it expanded greatly when the Holy Spirit empowered the mission of his church to bring the gospel to the world. If you look for it, you can find that precious peace in many war-torn places.

Father, your awesome grace is making a family of sons and daughters from every nation, tribe, and language. We praise you with one heart and one voice! Amen.

## THE PRIORITY OF PEACE

*Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

—Psalm 34:14

What could be more important than going to church to bring praises and offerings to God together with his people? In his message in Matthew 5, Jesus says that if we know someone has a conflict with us, we need to go and straighten things out before approaching God in worship.

We often think that if someone harbors a bad feeling toward us, it's their responsibility to approach us, especially if we think we have not caused their complaint. "My mother-in-law won't come to our home, and I don't know why," Laura said, explaining her problems to her friend. "I guess I'll just have to wait until she is ready to tell me." But Jesus says, "Don't wait; it's your move."

Why should we pursue peace-making even if we don't think it's our fault? First, separation between believers is the wrong

witness to the world around us. What's more, you may have done something to frustrate that other person without knowing it. Or perhaps you may not have. But it's helpful to know either way. We may find forgiveness for a sin or clear up a misunderstanding. Both are pleasing to God.

In addition, in our love for others, we don't want them to allow grudges to grow in their hearts. If we can help others to resolve their conflicts, especially with us, we should take the initiative toward healing.

Lord of my life, it can be hard to obey your command to offer my love to others. Give me courage to pursue peace with grace wherever there's a problem. Amen.

## ESCAPING CONFLICT

*"Whoever would love life and see good days must . . . turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it."*

—1 Peter 3:10-11

One of the wrong ways to handle conflict is to try to run away from it, hoping the problem will disappear. Jacob cheated his brother, Esau, and deceived his father, Isaac, to gain the family inheritance. His mother, Rebecca, then urged him to run for his life from the consequences.

Responding to conflict by escaping may include changing jobs, breaking up a marriage, moving away, leaving home, or changing churches. In extreme situations it may involve taking one's own life to avoid dealing with a serious problem.

But running away from conflict only postpones dealing with the problem. Sometimes when our personal safety is threatened we need to get some distance away. It may be helpful to call a time out to calm down, pray, and think about the next action

we need to take. But a temporary break should be followed by earnest efforts to seek help and to work to resolve the issue.

Many years later, Jacob returned to face the conflict he had caused by his earlier deception. But first the Lord met him face to face to humble and convict him. When he reunited with his family, Jacob was a changed man, trusting God instead of relying on his cheating schemes (see Genesis 32).

God of salvation, I have denied and avoided conflicts that I should have faced. Give me courage and wisdom to work on past problems as well as any that I am now involved in. Amen.

## ATTACKING CONFLICT

*They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"*

—Acts 4:7

At the time, the religious leaders believed they had eliminated the Jesus Movement by crucifying its leader. But now his followers were healing people in Jesus' name and proclaiming his resurrection! The council responded to this renewed conflict by arresting, intimidating, and threatening the apostles.

Many people act the same way when someone confronts them. They attack because they are more interested in winning the fight than maintaining a relationship with their opponent. They view conflict as a contest in which they need to control others. It usually begins verbally with insults and nasty names, cursing and condemning the one they see as their enemy. The hatred that builds up may escalate to physical blows—and in extreme cases, murder.

Many attackers in conflicts engage lawyers to sue their opponents, resulting in a wasteful expense of time and money. This approach to conflict will never find a peaceful solution. It only makes things worse.

We need to remember how God responded to the conflict caused by our rebellion against him. He could have unleashed his holy wrath and annihilated us, but he didn't. God approached us in mercy and love to deal with our sin and to reconcile us to himself, making peace by the blood of his Son (see Romans 5:8-11; Ephesians 2:15-16).

Father, how amazing that you have shown your love for me. While I was a sinner and an enemy, Christ died for me. How can I thank you? Amen.

## STEP ONE: GLORIFY GOD

*Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*  
—1 Corinthians 10:31

It took the better part of an hour for Martin and Rose to pour out a sampling of the hate-filled words and deeds they had inflicted on one another in ten years of their marriage. Their counselor responded, “I see where you are, Martin, ready to move out. And Rose, I see where you are, ready to file for divorce. But I have one question for both of you: Where do you see God in your relationship?”

“Do it all for the glory of God” sounds like nice language for a Sunday morning. But, in fact, it must be the guiding principle of everything we do. To glorify God means to honor our Savior and Lord by trusting him, obeying him, and imitating him in every situation—and that includes conflicts.

The church in Corinth was locked in a controversy between members from Jewish

and Gentile backgrounds over eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul instructed them in spiritual truths that would help them resolve this problem. “‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. . . . No one should seek their own good, but the good of others” (1 Corinthians 10:23-24).

The principle about glory to God could be stated this way: “The issue is not whether I am getting my way or you are getting yours. But is God getting his way in both our lives?” This is the only way to have peace with one another.

God, forgive me for wanting only my way. Change my mind so that I seek your will above all else. In Jesus, Amen.

## STEP TWO: REMOVE YOUR PLANK

*“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”*

—Matthew 7:5

Kristy and Matt enjoyed confessing each other’s sins. For every failure on their own part, they eagerly described a bigger one to blame on their partner. The peace in their relationship was decreasing, and their hostility was increasing.

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged” is one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible. People use it to escape criticism. But Jesus is not saying we cannot criticize one another. He is saying that first we must deal with our own wrongdoing. In fact, the “plank” in our own life may be greater in its sinful effect when compared with the “speck” in another person’s.

Only after we take responsibility for our faults can we help others see theirs. We must confront our own sin, confess it, ask for forgiveness, and get it under control. Then we can better

help someone else deal with their problems. If we don’t, we will always have a selfish, distorted view of the issues we’re fighting over.

How can we remove our planks? We must ask God to reveal our sins. He sees us perfectly. We must also study God’s Word to discern where we are falling short of obeying his commands. It’s powerful to expose our innermost thoughts and desires. Finally, spiritually mature friends can help open our eyes to see where we have failed.

*“Search me, God, and know my heart . . . See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24). Amen.*

## STEP THREE: GENTLY RESTORE

*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. —Galatians 6:1*

Do you know the story of Abigail, one of the wisest women in the Bible? The account of her encounter with David in 1 Samuel 25 is very interesting. David, his life threatened by King Saul, gets disrespected by Abigail's foolish husband, Nabal. With hate in his heart David musters his fighting men to punish this rich rancher. Abigail learns of her husband's insult and intercepts David with humble and gracious words. She reminds him that he needs to leave revenge in the hands of the Lord, who appointed him to be a righteous king. David listens and praises God for her intervention. He tells her to go home in peace.

The Bible tells us that we have a responsibility to speak to others about their wrongdoing. That's not easy! What if they don't listen? What if they say, "Who

are you to tell us what to do?" That's why we must be gentle, not harsh, when approaching each other. Our purpose must be conviction, not condemnation. If a person continues down a path of disobedience, they are departing from any usefulness to God and are on the way to self-destruction.

The move to restore someone takes great courage and wisdom. But God wants to supply both. Why would we not want to rescue that person and repair their relationship with the Lord and with others?

Lord, give me strength and gentleness so I may lovingly confront those who sin and assure them of forgiveness if they will repent. Motivate me by your mercy. Amen.

## STEP FOUR: BE RECONCILED

*Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.*  
—2 Timothy 4:11

When we deeply offend one another, it tends to cause a separation. Even after the wrong has been confessed and forgiveness granted, the broken, jagged edges of a once peaceful relationship can continue to cause discomfort, even pain.

Can abused family members ever get together under one roof? Can a marriage shattered by adultery grow in trust again? Can an embezzler be hired again? Can divided churches recognize their unity in Christ again? Can business partners who went separate ways work together again?

The answer is a resounding "Yes!" This is how God deals with us in our sin. When we offend him, he does not turn away from us. He earnestly desires to renew an intimate relationship with us and reconciles us through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:10).

Mark deserted and deeply disappointed Paul during their first missionary journey together. So Paul refused to take Mark along on his next trip. But sometime later Paul reconciled with Mark, who became helpful to him in ministry.

In this world of many wrongs, there may be good reasons why a person convicted of serious, repeated sins is not fully trusted again. But if we are followers of Christ, we should make every effort to make peace by turning enemies into friends.

Lord of amazing grace, thank you that in Christ you are reconciling the world to yourself. Help me to do the same to those who have sinned against me. Amen.

## RESTORATION

*Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*  
—John 21:15

As Jesus warned his disciples that his enemies were approaching, Peter boasted that he would defend him to the death (Mark 14:27-31). But when Jesus was arrested and brought to trial, Peter panicked and denied Jesus three times.

In John 21, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we find that Jesus has come to meet with Peter and the other disciples in Galilee (see Matthew 28:10; Mark 16:7). He had some tough and soul-searching questions to ask this disciple (John 21:15-19). Jesus wanted to restore Peter to be a part of the foundation of his church, which was to expand throughout the world (see Matthew 16:13-20; Ephesians 2:20).

"Feed my sheep," said the good shepherd (John 21:17; see John 10:11).

What reassuring words! What peace they must have brought to the turmoil in Peter's heart! And Peter did feed the Master's sheep soon afterward—on the day of Pentecost, by the power of the Holy Spirit poured out through Jesus (Acts 2).

By God's abundant grace, many other believers who have denied, disobeyed, and even rebelled against Jesus have experienced not only his forgiveness and reconciliation but also his restoration to fruitful service.

Lord Jesus, your love for me is so wide and long and high and deep that I struggle to grasp it! Fill me again with your fullness so that I may be useful in your kingdom. Amen.

## TRUTH MATTERS

*Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*

—Ephesians 4:25

Carl had a steady job, and his income was just enough to cover his family's expenses. He also had a debit card that he loved to use for lots of little things like snacks and drinks. His wife, Becky, who was trying to balance the family budget, would often ask how much he was spending. "I don't remember; I forgot to get the receipt," he would answer. His lack of honesty about the money was causing serious friction in their marriage.

In any relationship, there can be no trust without truth. Our society's legal system cannot function without people being sworn to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Suspicion and frustration replace peace between people when they tell lies and break promises.

Truth is precious to followers of Jesus Christ. He is the source

and substance of truth from God.

The first truth we need to know is that, although God created us to love and glorify him, we are sinful and unable to save ourselves from eternal destruction. The second truth is that God gives forgiveness and everlasting life through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. The third truth is that once we have believed in Jesus, we must walk in truth, being honest with one another.

Have you ever damaged a relationship by lying? How important is the truth to you?

Lord Jesus, I believe that you are the way, the truth, and the life for me. Teach me how to speak the truth in love always. In your name, Amen.

## BITTERNESS

*"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. . . .*  
—Ephesians 4:26

Michelle was born into a family with a long-standing grudge. She was aware from an early age that her mother and grandmother did not get along with one another. Family birthdays and holiday celebrations could not bring them together in one house. If one was invited, the other refused to come.

When Michelle became a believer in Christ as a teenager, this bitterness in her family saddened her. She attempted to be the peacemaker. She went to both her mother and grandmother to find out the cause of this resentment. To her great surprise, neither could remember exactly what had started the feud more than 20 years earlier. All they knew was that the other person was to blame.

Many of us have let not only a day go by with anger in our heart against someone, but also

weeks, months, and years. Let's be honest: time does not heal all wounds. The passing of time often hardens anger into bitterness. As we replay someone's offense over and over in our minds, it grows in importance and in the pain it has caused us.

God warns us that harboring resentment in our hearts is playing into the devil's schemes. Stored up bitterness may explode one day into verbal abuse or even violence. God tells us to grasp his peace instead of growing bitter and hateful.

Lord of peace, shine your light into my closet of bitterness and show me how to clean it out. Thank you for letting go of all my sins against you, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## FIGHTING WORDS

*The mouths of fools are their undoing, and their lips are a snare to their very lives.*  
—Proverbs 18:7

Here is a prayer I need to say more often: “Lord, make my words sweet and tender, because I may have to eat them.”

How many times has my mouth gotten me into trouble with others?!

James agrees, calling our tongues “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” A biting criticism, a careless remark, a sarcastic comment will separate you from your friends and wound the people around you. Inflammatory words will damage relationships.

God is the great communicator. The Bible is the record of his speaking at many times and in various ways, finally and supremely through his Son. And we are made in his image to communicate with him and with the other people he has made in his likeness. He speaks

to us in holiness and love and blessing.

We like to respond to God with words of praise and thankfulness. But we too often speak to others with cursing, slander, and rage. Their reaction to our words usually is returned in the same angry way. Then fighting breaks out.

“No human being can tame the tongue,” James writes. No person can, but God is able!

Let’s submit our tongues to our Redeemer, who can teach us how to transform our foolish words into blessings like his. Then peace will flourish.

O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight. (See Psalm 19:14.) Amen.

## HATEFUL WORDS

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths . . .*

—Ephesians 4:29

Thirteen-year-old Marcy had little use for her loud, obnoxious, smelly little brother. “You’re just a jerk!” she blasted at him again and again. Ten-year-old Mike didn’t exactly adore his older sister either. “You’re really stupid!” he would often fire back. Their rivalry and toxic words polluted the peace of their household.

Do you call people nasty names? The Bible calls this “unwholesome talk.” It literally means “trash talk.” It’s something that athletes often use in their sports competitions. But God says it’s wrong to insult, wound, tear down, cut up, threaten, or intimidate another person by our words. Hurtful words are hateful words.

Jesus reveals in his Sermon on the Mount that hateful words are not the real problem. The deeper problem is a hateful heart. And hatred in the heart

is equivalent to murder. Could it be that a few well-chosen put-downs are counted so serious by God? See what our Lord Jesus says. There is no escaping the verdict of his judgment. Words, as well as weapons, can wound.

What kinds of words should we use to replace our hate-filled ones? What can we say that would express care instead of disrespect? How can we be peacemakers by what comes out of our mouths?

Lord of love, I need to change my ways of communicating. Too often I show contempt for people by calling them names, but I need to change my heart. Fill it with your love instead of my hatred. Amen.

## HELPFUL WORDS

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. —Ephesians 4:29*

What kinds of words and expressions help bring love, joy, and peace into my life?

First, we must speak words of encouragement. When someone tells me I am doing a good job, that I am on the right track, that I have done something important, their words strengthen me for accomplishing more good things.

Second, sincere compliments build us up. When people say that I gave a wise answer to their question, that my example was an inspiration to them, or that somehow I changed the course of their life, I rejoice in knowing God is at work through me.

Third, thanksgiving must always be a part of our vocabulary. Read the first few verses of the apostle Paul's letters to churches and individuals. Quite often, after he wishes them grace and

peace, he thanks God for them. There were several difficulties Paul wanted to straighten out with the church in Corinth, but he still expressed gratitude for the spiritual gifts they were using. He encouraged them with promises of God's faithfulness.

Who could use an encouragement, a compliment, a word of thanks from you? Could it be your spouse, child, boss or employee, a government official, a church leader or member, a friend, or perhaps the clerk at the local market? Don't let this day end without delivering it.

Lord, your Word always builds me up. Help me to speak so that others may benefit and grow in joy and peace. Amen.

## REALLY SORRY

*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*

—2 Corinthians 7:10

Carla and Tom were excited to announce their engagement to their family and friends. The next day they went to a restaurant to make wedding plans. When Tom left the table for a few minutes and left his phone, Carla noticed on it several racy text messages from a former girlfriend, and she saw that he had replied in the same way. When he returned, she confronted him. All he could say was “I’m sorry!” over and over again.

An apology may not be the same as a confession. A person who is caught doing wrong may simply be sorry that he is caught, or that he has to pay consequences, or that whoever was offended has a problem with the offense. Many people in prison are sorry, but when they are released some go back to the same crimes.

A complete confession must have sorrow in it that begins in the heart of the offender. It acknowledges first of all that any sin against another person is also disobedience against God’s commands. It offers no excuses. It does not include words like *if*, *but*, or *maybe*. It recognizes the hurt that was caused, and that is not easy to do. A clear and simple “I am wrong” is the hardest thing for almost all of us to say.

Holy God, let your Word penetrate to the thoughts and attitudes of my heart. Expose my excuses for sinning against you and others. When I do wrong, give me a godly sorrow that will lead to your forgiveness. Amen.

## OVERLOOKING

*Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.* —Proverbs 17:9

Mindy was a new visitor at Grace Church. Helen, a lifetime member, invited Mindy to do a Bible study with her. Mindy happily agreed but forgot to meet Helen at the time they had set. Helen was disappointed but didn't gripe to others about it, and she arranged with Mindy to meet at another time. That meeting led to a fruitful mentoring relationship—and some time later, not without some ups and downs, Mindy came to know the Lord.

In many situations, the best way to resolve a conflict is to cover over the wrong and let go of the frustration it can cause. When faced with another person's failure or offense, we should ask ourselves, "Is this worth fighting about?"

Overlooking is not the same as letting others treat you like a doormat. It's a godly, active,

strong response to minor offenses. It imitates God's mercy, patience, and kindness to us. It is a form of forgiveness in which you put the problem behind you without making a fuss about it.

Some conflicts should not be overlooked—for example, when there is abuse of other people or there is behavior that clearly dishonors God. But overlooking small difficulties produces peace in our relationships, as we obey Jesus' command to "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). What should you overlook today?

Lord of mercy, I often make a big deal out of a small problem. Fill me with your kindness and compassion, and show me when I need to overlook and let go. Amen.

## CLEAR CONFESSION

*Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" . . . Then David said . . . "I have sinned against the LORD." —2 Samuel 12:7, 13*

It may shock us that David, "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), chose to sin deliberately against God. What could King David have been thinking? Did he really think he could get away first with adultery and then with murder to cover up his sin with Bathsheba? (For the background story, see 2 Samuel 11-12.)

David's actions might surprise us, but we have also seen Christian leaders caught in similar situations. Perhaps in their powerful positions they became proud and thought they could make up their own rules.

David later felt a deep sense of guilt. His words in Psalm 32 may well refer to this episode in his life. (See also Psalm 51.) And when God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David, he abandoned his coverup and owned up to his wrongdoing.

It's better to confess our sins before we are forced to do so by getting caught. Bearing a burden of guilt will handicap our spiritual growth in many ways. It will hinder our prayers and worship. It will dampen our joy and erode our confidence. It will entangle us with worry. What's more, continued denial will only damage our reputation with others when our sin becomes known.

Why not come to the God of mercy and experience what David did: "You forgave the guilt of my sin."

Lord, I have too often tried to deny my sin. Give me courage to open my heart in honesty to you and others. I trust in your steadfast, forgiving love. Amen.

## FORGIVEN TO FORGIVE

*"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."*

—Matthew 6:12

Amy took her big sister's beautiful new doll to play with, but she broke it. When her sister saw the damage, she yelled at Amy, "You'll pay for this!"

Any offense we commit puts us in debt to the person we have offended. They have a right to demand a penalty from us. That's simple justice. The penalty could be a fine, replacement of property, dismissal from a job, or alienation from family and friends (prison). When prisoners are released after serving time, we often say they have "paid their debt to society."

Sinning against God places us in a debt that is both un-payable and life-threatening. God warned Adam and Eve that disobedience against him would lead to certain death—physical, spiritual, and eternal (Genesis 2:17). But when our first parents incurred that debt, God

showed mercy and promised to send a deliverer so that death would not have power over them forever (Genesis 3:15; 1 Corinthians 15:55-57). That is forgiveness!

The release from our debt to God is available through Jesus Christ. He willingly took on himself the debt we owe by dying in our place. Now we can live without guilt and without the burden of paying that debt.

How much debt has God removed from you?

Lord of all grace, I stand amazed before the blood-soaked cross where Christ paid my debt. In your strength, help me to live for you. Thank you, Jesus! Amen.

## WE MUST FORGIVE

*"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them."*  
—Luke 17:3

"I can't forgive," Danielle declared, wiping her eyes. She had caught her husband embracing her best friend. "I'm so angry; I'm hurt; I'm disappointed!"

When our trust is torn and our security is shattered by others' sins, forgiveness is very difficult. But God's Word calls us to forgive, in his strength. We need to know that our forgiveness of others is linked to God's forgiveness of us. If we refuse to forgive, we show that we do not really accept God's forgiveness. If we do forgive, we show that we have accepted God's forgiveness with sincere gratitude.

The result is to release a person from being punished for their wrongs against us. This doesn't mean there are no consequences for crimes or that we let ruthless people walk all over us. But in God's strength, we can choose to forgive—even many

times (see Luke 17:4). How many times have you asked God for forgiveness for the same sin? How do you think he feels about it?

Jesus was denied and betrayed by his followers, railroaded by the religious leaders, beaten and crucified unjustly by the Romans, and jeered by the crowds as he hung in agony (Luke 23). Yet he died so that we could be forgiven and have new life forever with God.

He calls us to follow his example of life-giving forgiveness.

Jesus, my suffering Savior,  
I am hurting inside for  
what other people have  
done to me. I need to  
imitate your forgiveness.  
Set me free from my bad  
feelings and enable me to  
release them. Amen.

## REVENGE IS WRONG

*When they hurled their insults at [Christ], he did not retaliate . . . . Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

—1 Peter 2:23

Eric admitted to the marriage counselor that he had threatened his wife several times. “Do you have a problem with anger?” asked the counselor. “No,” replied Eric, “I don’t get mad; I get even.”

Revenge comes naturally to us. Movies and video games supply us with endless “blast the bad guys” scenarios. We think there is victory when our enemies are “justly punished” or “taken out.” But all that really does is remove the possibility of peacemaking and invite further retaliation.

God commands his people to do something supernatural: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” He tells us to let him be the judge; that is God’s place, not ours. And God will see that justice is done.

Sometimes we think that forgiving others—releasing them from

our punishment—is a weak, inadequate response. We might view forgiveness as letting people get away with their sin. But when we forgive, we turn our offenders over to God for his perfect justice. That’s actually a very powerful move to make, in God’s strength.

On the cross, our Lord Jesus looked weak to those who mocked him. But he was not overcome with evil. He was powerfully overcoming sin, death, and hell with goodness and grace for us.

Are you willing to imitate him?

Lord, forgive me for trying to get revenge. Teach me to give that up to you. Then please bring peace into my heart. Amen.

## DOING YOUR PART

*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*  
—Romans 12:18

"I've spoken to my neighbor several times about his dogs running loose," Joe said to his friend in frustration. "They dirty my front lawn where my kids want to play. But he doesn't do anything about it."

Sometimes we must deal with people who stubbornly resist working toward a peaceful solution. What do we do then?

In a conflict, we cannot control what others do. We can only take charge of our responsibility: "as far as it depends upon you." If you have done everything in your power to resolve a dispute, then you have accomplished what God wants from you. You can rest from the struggle and give God the problem through prayer, asking for his wisdom.

Remember that our Lord calls us to faithfully obey, not to gain justice or even satisfaction for

ourselves. He commands us to bless our neighbors, not curse them. In 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 we also learn there may be a better way than a lawsuit.

Joe asked God for wisdom and began to work on the problem differently. Whenever he saw his neighbor outside, he went to greet him with a smile and to chat with him, taking a large baggie with him. When they parted, Joe would say, "See you later! I have to clean up after the dogs that have been in my yard." Soon the neighbor controlled his pets.

Lord of wisdom, teach me how to be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone—especially you! Give me insight on how to live at peace with my neighbors. Amen.

## PROFILE OF A PEACEMAKER

*The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.*  
—2 Timothy 1:7

The apostle Paul invested a lot of time and effort in the church at Ephesus. His preaching of the gospel and heartfelt pastoring had brought many people to trust in Christ and thus to live transformed lives. The church also spread to grow in several surrounding cities. But when Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he heard of controversies and conflicts in the Ephesian church. He dispatched his trusted colleague and spiritual son Timothy to address the problems troubling the believers.

In his second letter of encouragement to Timothy in this challenging ministry, he gives a wonderful picture of being a peacemaker (2 Tim. 2:22-26):

“Flee the evil desires of youth.”

“Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.”

Avoid “foolish and stupid arguments.”

Do not be “quarrelsome,” but “be kind to everyone.”

Be “able to teach”; do not be “resentful.”

Instruct opponents gently “in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.”

Do you resemble this picture? Every one of us, not only church leaders, should be peacemakers. What parts of this description do you need to work on?

Lord Jesus, I want to be a peacemaker for you. Show me where I lack the character I need. By your Spirit, fill me with power and love to resolve the conflicts around me. Amen.

## SUPERNATURAL PEACE

*"In me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* —John 16:33

Jesus' disciples were shocked and confused. He had just said he would be leaving them. After three years of daily, intense mentoring under his leadership and teaching, he was going away, and it was not clear to them where he was going. This caused a lot of conflict in their hearts. On top of that, he explained that trouble was coming their way—from people who would hate them and persecute them and kill some of them (see Luke 21:12-19).

No wonder they responded in fear and anxiety! But Jesus assured them that he would not leave them alone in all this trouble. He would send another teacher, helper, and counselor. The Holy Spirit of God would come to live in their hearts! He would produce in them a beautiful array of spiritual fruit, including a highly prized

and needed peace (Galatians 5:22-23). They would become blessed as peacemakers, just as Jesus had taught them earlier (Matthew 5:9).

Do you have the Lord's peace in your heart? Are you confident that his comforting care is with you in any conflict? Do you know that in his strength you can be victorious in every struggle and trial? The Bible shows that Jesus' followers did so when the Spirit was poured out on them (Acts 2-28). You can too!

Holy Spirit, I want to be a peacemaker. Calm my fears, end my anger, answer my doubts, clear up my confusion. In your strength I will work and wait for the glorious peace of heaven to come! Amen.

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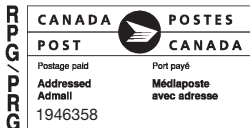
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