



Sept/Oct 2013

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**RIGHT-SIDE-UP
LIFE IN AN
UPSIDE-DOWN
WORLD**

ALSO: HAPPIER-NESS

Friends:

I grew up in a flat, forested landscape. I never noticed that I couldn't really see the horizon until I went somewhere quite different, like the big-sky prairie. Suddenly I could see nothing but open space around me stretching to a deep horizon—all under a massive sky. I felt quite exposed at first. But the new perspective showed me how small my horizons had been without my noticing.



In our devotions this October, Rob Toornstra walks us through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' words give us perspective, helping us to see just how upside down the world is, and how we can live right-side-up in it.

But first, in September, Keith Mannes speaks of "happier-ness." Like chasing a rainbow on the prairie, reaching for pure happiness is a self-defeating illusion. But living joyfully and biblically can lead us to happier places, where we can dwell with God and others as we were meant to do.

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

—Steven Koster

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**“Happier-ness”
Keith Mannes**



**“Right-Side-Up Life in an
Upside-Down World”
Rob Toornstra**

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re FRAME MEDIA

this month

“HAPPIER-NESS”

Keith Mannes

Everybody wants happiness. But it can be hard to find.

God, however, points us to attitudes and behaviors that enhance our lives as we serve him. The Lord of life offers us the key to joy-filled living, and he calls us to join with him to truly live.

My prayer is that as we live this month together, we'll find glimpses of what God has in mind for us.

Keith Mannes is the pastor of Highland Christian Reformed Church in Marion, Michigan. Keith and his wife, Alicia, have three children and two grandchildren.

“HAPPIER-NESS”—WHAT?

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” —John 10:10

Of course, “happier-ness” is not a word. But let me explain: according to God’s Word in the Bible, “happiness” in its full form does not exist in this world. We are living under a curse. It’s like living in a house in which nothing is level; everything in life is just a little “off,” and much of it is hellishly bent.

So I’m not going to sell you false promises. Let’s not use Jesus to try to sell a pipe dream. And yet here is a liberating truth: the message of God can make you *happier*. The core message of Jesus, if you accept it, will bless your soul. If you follow him and submit your life to his influence, his blessings will pour down on you and his goodness will fill your soul.

Jesus presents this fundamental choice: you can have life that circles the drain and eventually drops into hell, or you can have

life propelled by God’s power and goodness. Life, as God gives it, is far better.

It doesn’t solve everything right away. It doesn’t fix every problem. People get sick; people die. Life is hard. Things fall apart.

Jesus, in the short term, does not deliver full and complete happiness. Yet he makes “happier-ness” possible. Jesus promises life to the full—not complete on this earth, but with him in the future.

This month I am hoping we can search for that together.

Walk with me, Lord. Lead me on a clear path in this life and into the next. I am off-level in so many ways. Still, minister to me and set me right. In your name I pray. Amen.

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.
—Psalm 42:5

I have to tell you the hard truth: I am not, by nature, a very happy person. By genetics, chemical malfunction, and a history of some bad theology, I really struggle with depression. I have sometimes met with counselors, and I have sometimes used the medications they prescribed.

I fully believe in Jesus, but I can relate too well to today's verses. Though God has richly blessed me, on many days my soul is like a dead battery on a winter morning. I say to myself, "Hey—wake up! What's your problem? Put your hope in God!" Sometimes that helps, and sometimes it doesn't. So when I write to you this month about "happier-ness," I am not talking in the abstract.

Some Christians are just naturally bubbly for Jesus. The rest of us, I'm afraid, have to fight for happiness by faith. I find

that I need to choose it, discipline myself for it, and make hard choices in order to apprehend it.

Psalm 42 is the story of a believer battling back-and-forth for faith and for happiness of soul. If you struggle for happiness, that does not mean you are a bad Christian or a failure. You are just a normal human being, like the psalmist, coming forward by faith in a malfunctioning world. Keep working at it, friend. We'll fight by faith together.

Father, comfort and bless us in our struggles. I am weak, but you are mighty. Be gracious to us, and awaken our souls to your goodness. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

JESUS WELCOMES YOU

He welcomed them

—Luke 9:11

Life can be brutal sometimes. People can be cruel. And there are days when you wonder where Jesus is, and whether he is really doing anything at all. Yes, we wonder.

Then there's the matter of our sins. If you are beaten down because of your failures and mad at yourself because of your sins—well, what if you read today's Scripture every morning for a week, or even a month, and pictured yourself in it?

Big things are happening; Jesus' ministry is gaining momentum. The disciples, like a championship sports team, are on a winning streak. And Jesus is just now on a leadership retreat with his disciples. He has purposely come to Bethsaida, a quiet place, to avoid people.

But now he looks up and sees you, along with a multitude,

coming. If there was a time for Jesus not to want to see you coming, this would probably be it—you and lots of other messed-up people, all dusty and sweaty and smelly. You all need food. You all need to be taken care of. Here you come.

And Jesus welcomes you. Can you believe that? He *welcomes* you. Though I can't prove it, I think he is probably smiling.

Happiness starts with knowing that Jesus welcomes you. He welcomes you now, to himself and to his family. Someday, when you die, he will see you coming, and he will still welcome you. Yes, he will.

I am glad for this, Lord—that, despite my sins, you welcome me. I believe it. With my whole heart I say thank you. Amen.

DO YOU EVER GET TO HOME PLATE?

Worship the LORD with gladness

—Psalm 100:2

Let's suppose you want to help someone become a Christian. How do you tell the story about Christianity and what it feels like?

Let's try putting our faith story on a baseball field. Let's say first base is the guilt we feel when we commit sin. Then second base would be knowing we need to confess and repent of our sin. This follows the basic teaching that we are destined for hell without the saving work of Christ. A Christian accepts that hard truth.

Then let's say third base is the sense of duty and commitment we feel toward God. I cannot just relax in a comfortable recliner for Jesus. I must get up and serve him in the world.

Now, is that the *whole* story? Does our faith ever reach home plate?

It can, because home plate is expressed in Psalm 100. Here we see the happiness of belonging to God. We are like sheep that are safe in his pasture. We are like travelers together, happily sharing the story of God's love and faithfulness.

Friend, let's kneel together and confess our sins, and now that Jesus Christ has lifted the fears of death and hell from us, let's live for him by running down the final baseline, heading for home!

This is the complete story of the true happiness of salvation.

Father, some days I'm so consumed by guilt. Lift that, please, by your Holy Spirit. Other times I live on commitment and duty. I'm asking today for the joy of Christ. Lord, lead me home, please! Amen.

JESUS IS NOT A “HAPPY PILL”

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”
—Luke 9:23

Well-meaning Christians sometimes say things like, “Believe in Jesus, and he will make you happy,” or, “I believe in Jesus, and I am happy all the time.”

This can be discouraging, because there are many Christians who are not ecstatically happy. But Jesus did not die to make you emotionally ecstatic. He is not a “happy-pill.”

Following Jesus involves the grit of daily self-denial. To follow Jesus is to abandon all lesser goals and pleasures and to surrender to the ways of the kingdom of God.

If by “happiness” you mean that you have your life, your plans, and your possessions all stacked up like an ice-cream sundae—and Jesus is the cherry on top, then you will be most disappointed. You cannot gain the world and its idea of “the

good life” and have Jesus too. Life with Jesus involves tears, struggles, sacrifice, and holy commitment.

Strangely, though, in this self-denial, you find that God gives you back your “very self”—your soul.

Within your soul, you experience things that make you *rich*. You experience joy and peace at a funeral; you see Christians face illness with dignity and power; you experience how people love each other with an eternal love that doesn’t quit. When your life is full of these things, you are happier, much happier.

Lord, I know my life is full of imitation happiness. But I desire the real thing: Christ in my soul. Hear me and receive me, in his name. Amen.

THE HAPPY GIVEAWAY

“Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great”

—Luke 6:35

In the small town where I live, a little store makes donuts. They offer free ones, knowing that you will likely buy more. They also know that if you eat the free one, you will feel like you *ought* to buy more. It’s a known sales technique to create a feeling of obligation.

But Jesus does not work that way. True, the Bible speaks of owing our lives to the Lord, who died for us (see Romans 12:1-2, for example). But Jesus gave himself without expecting or demanding anything. He let people walk away. He will not manipulate for love. In this, he asks us to imitate him.

I’ve met Christians who are bitter and angry because they feel as if they have given, and given, and given (their faith, morals, money, and prayers) and yet their adult children, or their church, or their non-Christian

neighbors, or their ungodly government leaders do not respond according to their wishes.

What if we gave as Jesus gave, expecting nothing in return? Then we would be free from sinful drives, cheap manipulations, and the frustrations of feeling that people haven’t responded as we had hoped.

The gospel is a giveaway, even to enemies. If we take this approach, we will be happier, and so will the people around us.

Lord, help me to follow your instructions. It is difficult, and I am selfish. Father, bless the world; save souls; lead my loved ones in your ways. Help me to give as you have given. In Jesus, Amen.

ACCEPTING IMPERFECTION

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.
—1 Timothy 1:15

I once met a man who said that whenever he bought a new car, he would whack it with a hammer. That way, he said, he wouldn't get upset about the other little dents and scratches that would surely happen.

The apostle Paul was passionate about attaining righteousness (Philippians 3:7-11), but he was honest about his own imperfections (Romans 7:14-20). In today's verse, he openly accepts that he is like an old beat-up car. But he accepts his dents and dings, even as he drives on for God.

Maybe you would be happier too if you accepted the dents and dings of your own life.

A long time ago a woman came to our church. She wore fancy clothes, volunteered for everything, and worked extremely hard. Around church and in

front of others she was upbeat, but she was troubled and anxious at home, when she was out of the public eye. Finally she broke down and wept, unveiling the sinful burden she carried on her heart. She had been trying to cover a dent. How nice it was to tell her she didn't have to act perfect in order for God or the church to love her.

She's happier now that she has accepted imperfection. She is also happier in all she strives to do for God.

I wonder—would you be too?

Father, here I am again, wounded and a little beat up. I have failed you in so many ways. Help me to trust that your love is free and is greater than all my sin. Thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

HOPE FOR A FAMILY

Human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.
—James 1:20

Many years ago, Randy's son Joe married a girl named Brandi. Happily, Randy and his wife are able to participate in life with their children—events like Christmas dinners and visits with their grandchildren.

But those opportunities might not have happened, because Brandi was not a Christian when they married and she had a child by a previous relationship. While Joe and Brandi were dating, Randy's approach toward them involved a lot of yelling.

Randy's own father had been a nuclear-blast kind of man, and Randy had often been scorched. For most of Randy's adult life, he and his father rarely spoke to each other. After months of work with a counselor, Randy told me, "I don't want to be like my dad. I want life to be different for my family." We decided

that if Randy were to have a relationship with Joe and Brandi, there would need to be a context of love, not war.

It's possible to be a Christian with firm beliefs without scorching people with your convictions. We all deal with issues. Pray and work to sort those out. Choose to live your faith with warmth, spiritual power, and love.

To this day, Brandi has not yet become a Christian. But at least Randy makes a positive witness in her life. Randy's family has a happier future. So can yours!

Father, bless our loved ones. Give us wisdom in how to speak with them. Help us carry our burdens, and make us instruments of your love. Amen.

CHRIST, AND CHRIST ALONE

“You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.”
—Acts 8:21

The Bible tells us that Simon believed and was baptized. But he probably didn't realize to what degree he was just trying to *use* Jesus. Simon wanted glory, attention, power, and money; Jesus, it seemed to him, was his “ticket” to gain all this.

It's a common problem, unfortunately. Do you ever wonder what would happen to your church if it didn't serve coffee and donuts? If it didn't have cool music? If there weren't tax benefits to giving? If the sermons were long and boring?

What I'm asking is, if nobody is around, and if there is *nothing going on that benefits your earthly self*, are you still into Christ, and Christ alone?

Can you peel off the layers—your social self, your work-life self, your family identity, your financial status, your “dressed up

to look good for church” image? If you strip all that away, what is left? That's what Jesus sees. Your sin—but also the cross.

Do you recognize the message of Christ, his call, and his claim on your life? Have you truly taken hold of salvation?

Maybe you are unhappy in your soul because you are relying on things other than Christ to prop yourself up, but you have remained outside of true salvation.

Jesus. It's all about Jesus. You get that—right?

Lord, I pray today that I may truly be saved. I have so many false things in me, and so many superficial thoughts. Give me Jesus. Amen.

GOD WON'T QUIT

This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power.
—1 Peter 1:4-5

Larry, one of our church elders, was talking to John, a very religious man. John said his father was beginning to have dementia and was now, uncharacteristically, using language he would never have used before. He was not in his right mind.

John shook his head sadly, and said to Larry, "It's such a shame. My dad lived so faithfully for God all his life, but now, after all that, he's going to end up in hell."

Much Christian unhappiness results from such a view of the Bible's teaching. Many good Christians fear that their next misstep, their next sin, will cause God to change his heavenly plans for them.

However, as Peter teaches, we are shielded by God's power, and we are kept in his heavenly grace. We are weak and wob-

bly, but God is faithful. This is good news—powerfully good.

All Christians fall into sin, go through times of rebellion, are overcome with weariness or bitterness, and suffer mental illness. Sometimes we just lose it.

If salvation were all up to me and my power, I would surely be lost.

But it is not by our own strength that we are saved!

Trust God with this. Trust him, and in that moment of relief, be truly happy.

God, hold me close today and always. Often I get lost. Don't leave me to my own devices, and lead me safely home. For Jesus sake, Amen.

GOD'S DAMAGED FRUIT

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."
—Matthew 20:26

Dieter Zander was a high-profile preacher. Stunningly gifted with musical talent and speaking ability, he was a well-known, highly paid, sought-after Christian leader.

Now he works in the back room of a store that supplies damaged and "out of date" food to homeless shelters. He mops floors, unloads lopsided fruit, and crushes empty cardboard boxes for recycling. He wrote (*Conversations Journal*, "Kingdom of Cardboard and Spoils," September 2012) that perfect fruit is for the supermarket, but lopsided apples and pears are still useful to the homeless.

Zander suffered a massive stroke in 2008, with the result that his life, according to him, is not the perfect, public, supermarket-display fruit it used to be. He says, "There is no Stage Dieter here. No superman

seeking to wow the masses with feats of spiritual strength. It's just me. Just Dieter." He also says, "I come home from work and I think, 'It's good today.'"

Maybe, to be happier, we need to redefine what it means to serve God. We all want greatness. Jesus said, "No."

What can you do today to show humility and servanthood? Who are you when you are "off-stage"? Have you idolized your own importance? Today, think about God in the small, unseen tasks of life. Glorify him, even in imperfection.

Lord, I often want power and greatness. I can be proud and rude. Forgive me. Humbly I come to offer myself to you. Receive me, I pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

THE SWEET FLOW OF ETERNAL LIFE

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you.”

—John 15:4

In late winter, when sap begins to flow, you drill into a maple tree, and drops fall from the hole. You gather the liquid and cook it. Syrup like this is one of God’s simplest, sweetest miracles. (And you can pour it onto a pancake!) If you lived in a suitable climate, and if you had a maple tree, why wouldn’t you do it?

Jesus said, “Remain in me.” By praying and memorizing God’s Word, you can experience the flow of love and grace—rivers of it flow from the cross. It is God’s greatest miracle, to all eternity. God pours it, and it makes your life sweet. Knowing this, why wouldn’t you want to experience it?

I know why, because I too avoided this flow for many years. There I was, trying very hard to do the work of God

without the nourishment of God. That is not fun at all.

Talk to God every day. Just talk. Also memorize a piece of the Bible—happy verses, like Psalm 23; Psalm 46; Romans 5:1; Romans 8:1).

Don’t pray to make points, and don’t memorize to get a little star on your chart.

Praying and memorizing the Bible is like gathering the flow of God’s heart. Do it because Jesus is your life. Do it because God is how you breathe. Start small and do it consistently, and you will find your soul is growing.

Lord, help me; teach me from your heart, and grant me your wisdom and strength. Jesus, help me to remain in you. Amen.

HOMETOWN MISSIONARIES

“Return home and tell how much God has done for you.”

—Luke 8:39

Barbara deeply loved Christ and was blessed with a great husband and children and grandchildren. She served to great effect in her church. When she died, she left a powerful legacy of faith. However, she carried a guilt burden for most of her life.

Since childhood, she had always wondered if she should do mission work in some far-away country. When missionaries spoke in her church, she felt deep pangs of guilt.

It is really hard to serve Jesus happily if you think he’s disappointed in you, if you believe he really wanted you to do something else with your life than what you are doing.

In today’s Scripture, Jesus heals a man. The man begs to sail away and follow Jesus. But the Lord, as he does with most of the people he saves, sends the

man home to his own town, which is populated by people who are so afraid of Jesus that they have asked him to leave.

Jesus left, but he did not leave those people without a missionary. That’s why he placed Barbara in her hometown. And that’s why you are in yours.

It took years for Barbara to find peace on this issue. If we all could, right now, accept our hometown assignment from God, and if we could believe that Jesus is pleased with our ministries and our life, we would all be much happier.

Lord, you have placed me where I am. If ever I have missed a calling, please forgive me. But today I claim your calling to the life you have given me. Amen.

INNER BEAUTY

Your beauty . . . should be that of your inner self.

—1 Peter 3:3-4

George, an older Christian man, came to dislike his body hair. So he bought a bottle of hair removal cream, and smeared it like tanning oil over most of his body.

Within three days his entire body felt like it was on fire. He went to a doctor, who prescribed a powerful medicine. George confided to me, “Even then, I was still worried about the hair, so I asked the doctor what my options were. He suggested a few things, all of which were very costly. Then the doctor smiled kindly, and said, ‘Or, you could just go with what God gave you.’” As George told me this, we laughed at the simple truth of it.

Lots of people want to be exceptionally beautiful. Plastic surgery, botox—there’s so much pressure over outward appearance.

Peter, in the midst of giving other instructions, presents a deeply appealing truth about inner beauty. Wouldn’t it be great if these words were on every bathroom mirror? I wouldn’t say it’s a great sin to get liposuction or botox injections. It’s just that it won’t make you happier—at least not in the way God has in mind.

Be thankful for your body, and take good care of it. Nourish it in a godly way. Stay fit. Dress attractively. Wear a smile.

Go with what God gave you. You’ll be happier.

Lord, you have given me my earthly body. Thank you for your gifts to me. Help me not to covet others, and to be content, thankful, and confident in my soul for the way you made me. Amen.

REPENTING OF THE DARKNESS

The LORD struck Nabal and he died.

—1 Samuel 25:38

Sometimes chemical depression or harsh circumstances make it difficult to be happy. There are some things you can't control.

In this story from the Bible, however, Nabal is *willfully* unhappy. He has chosen it. It works for him. He is a selfish, mean, small-minded, greed-driven bully. And he likes it that way.

In the culture of that time, David was working the system appropriately. He and his small army were providing a protective buffer between Nabal and any roving gangs of raiders that might be around. Any reasonable person would be grateful.

But Nabal was not a reasonable man. He chose to see David as a threat rather than a gift. Nabal was so mean that even his wife called him a wicked man, and his name, in the original text, means "fool."

We all have bad days and hard times. But, sad to say, a number of people who call themselves Christian are also like this: abusive to their families, rude to others, mean in their dealings. It works for them, and they like it that way.

If you are that way, repent. Come to God and give it up. Change your ways. When you do, you will be happier, and so will everyone around you!

Father, I often act so foolishly. I need to change, in ways so deep and complicated that I don't know how to begin. Help me, Lord. Make me kind, generous, and peaceable. Send your Spirit to warm my heart. In Christ, Amen.

GETTING LOOSE FROM NABAL

Abigail acted quickly.

—1 Samuel 25:18

Sometimes happiness is a life-and-death decision.

Abigail's servant calls Nabal a wicked man, and Abigail does not disagree. The Bible shows that Abigail had a wretchedly hard life under the rule and ownership of Nabal.

Know, first of all, that when you connect to Christ by faith, you are out from under Satan's rule. That's the eternal truth!

But perhaps you are ruled by an earthly Nabal in your life. If you are being mistreated by someone, ask God to help you find a way out—and then take it. If you are in a situation where your children are in a harmful environment, seek God's wisdom (James 1:5) and take action to get yourself and them to safety. In a case like that, you need to make courageous choices and form alliances with godly people.

If you have a "friend" who bullies you or uses you, if you are dating a mean or unfaithful person, may I suggest you can do better? You need to claim the dignity of God and not allow yourself to be degraded.

I am not talking about routine struggles in relationships. I'm talking about abuse.

Rise up and be strong in Christ. Do not use violence; seek holiness. Refuse affairs and sexual sins as ways of coping. Do all things in a godly way, seeking help from God and from caring, godly people.

Lord, help me, for I am in distress. Guide me in this painful situation. Act on my behalf; guard and protect me. Have mercy, I pray. Amen.

A GOOD DAY'S WORK

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands . . .

—1 Thessalonians 4:11

You will be happier if you work at something today.

Take my neighbor Wilbert, who liked work so much that he believed God would give him things to build in heaven. Toward the end of his life, Wilbert's body lost its strength. His feet became swollen, his fingers ached, and he could no longer breathe well.

But Wilbert drove to the woods anyway and somehow managed to start his chainsaw. He would kneel down and cut a piece of wood. Then he would stop to breathe. Then he would cut another piece. After a while he would load a piece onto his trailer, and rest. And so on. With determination he managed to provide a winter's worth of firewood for him and his wife.

Maybe you spend all your spare time on Facebook, or

with video games, or watching sports. Too much of that, and your life will become like melting ice cream.

On the other hand, maybe you have lost your job or have become disabled in some way. There is no easy way through these sufferings, but taking on a task, no matter how small, even if it doesn't pay money, can give your soul a boost.

Live with Wilbert's attitude. Greet God with a prayer each day, and do something to honor him. You will be happier, and the world will be blessed through you.

Lord, I need strength and motivation through you. Please give me energy for the task at hand. Amen.

THE HAPPY DAY

“Why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!”
—Exodus 5:4

I live in a land of dairy farms. These days, a cow has a computer bar code on her ear, and when she steps up to be milked, an electronic device measures how much milk she has made. A glance at the computer screen will tell you if she is producing enough to earn her keep. And if she isn't, she may soon go to market.

Does that sound a bit like your life? Produce or perish?

Surely God cares that we work diligently and produce fruit for his kingdom. But God does not look at you the way a computer reads a cow. God's gift of Sabbath rest proves this.

The people of Israel were slaves, and God told Pharaoh to let them rest and worship the Lord. But Pharaoh allowed no rest for his slaves.

In the Old Testament, God commanded rest for people and animals—and even land. In the New Testament, Sabbath rest becomes an image of heaven itself. (See Exodus 20:8-11; Hebrews 4:1-11.)

Take a day and make it different for God. Worship him, and enjoy people. Shut off your cell phone. Refuse to gaze lovingly into the face of your laptop. Go somewhere. Or take a nap.

God is not a computer. You are not a cow. You cannot earn heaven. God loves you. Take a free day, and rest.

Thank you, heavenly Father, for the gift of rest. Forgive me for refusing it. I need your help with this, because my calendar is consumed with too many busy choices. Lord, help me to rest in you. Amen.

HAPPIER WITHOUT IT?

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.
—Ephesians 5:18

The Bible often speaks of people drinking alcoholic beverages. And, as many people point out, Jesus himself turned water into wine. Jesus himself drank wine. In very limited conditions, I also drink something with alcohol in it.

But mostly I wish alcohol would be gone from our world. The misery poured out from the necks of all those bottles and cans is just too much: the fatal car accidents, the ruined marriages, the fights, the abuse, the degrading things people do and say under the influence of alcohol.

The alcohol industry advertises that you will be sexy, popular, funny, and cool—in short, happy—if you use their beverages. But I have too often seen the opposite. In excess, alcohol wastes your mind, your time, your money, and your soul.

The same must be said for other addicting behaviors, from drugs, to gambling, to food. So I lovingly implore you: Please prayerfully decide not to give your life over to this waste, this toxin. Get strong with God!

If you or someone you love is lost in addiction, please find an AA group. They understand, and they know how to help you get your life back. With God, it really is possible.

If you can do that, you will most certainly be happier.

O God, guard us from becoming wasted and spent. Ruin and misery are piled up around us, and it is impossible to see a way through. Love us still, and restore us to yourself. Show the way, and bring healing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES?

"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
—Matthew 5:44

Seriously? Loving enemies? Praying for them? Isn't that going just a little too far? How can Jesus expect that of us?

An enemy moved into my neighborhood. He abused his girlfriend, dumped garbage illegally on our country roads and lied about it, and grew illegal substances in his house. That was just the first week. I hated him.

Then one day I saw him digging a plumbing trench in his yard. I knew what I had to do. I resisted, but finally I sighed and said, "OK, Lord . . ." I drove up to the guy's house and pulled out my shovel. Then I actually smiled and said, "Need some help?"

He looked at me with some confusion on his face and said, "Uh—sure." So we dug together for a while. I didn't say much. I

did not, just then, say anything about Jesus. I just dug.

By the time I left, I did not hate him anymore. And now when I drive by, he waves. Last week, I stopped by to talk.

I still don't understand totally how to live by this teaching of Jesus. But if you have mutual hatred with someone, try loving them somehow. You will be happier, because it's really hard to cherish hatred in your soul and to be happy at the same time.

Lord, what you're asking here is risky and dangerous. It creates a conflict in my heart. Father, overcome this conflict. Give me strength to obey, and may this help your kingdom to come. Amen.

FANTASIES

Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies have no sense.
—Proverbs 12:11

Have you noticed that there is, in people around us, an increasing fascination with “what might have been”? Misty songs about old high school loves: “Oh, where are they now?” Websites advertise, “Maybe someone is looking for *you* right now—maybe a former boyfriend or girlfriend.” Maybe I notice this because, as a pastor, I find that so many people fall into trouble on the Internet, clicking and scrolling through all their unfulfilled dreams and desires. This is often where marriages go to die.

Psalm 16:6 points out that there are boundaries in life, and living within them is good. David, who wrote this psalm, violated those boundaries at a horrible cost to himself and his family (see 2 Samuel 11-12).

Our verse from Proverbs presents a challenge: It is time to grow up, to be a person who is

mature in Christ and living with vigor in the real world today.

Working in the fields of life is difficult and calls for holy commitment. It can easily become tempting to mope around and dream lazy dreams of a life that God did not intend you to live.

No, God gave you this one—this life, the one right in front of you, along with the people and duties of today.

Repent of covetous fantasies, and, with prayer, praise, and faith, work the God-given fields of your life. Happiness grows there.

Grip me, Lord. Open my eyes to see the goodness and blessing of the life you have given me. Forgive me when I fantasize. Help me love and serve you well each day. Amen.

LOVE

"He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." —Matthew 5:45

God's love falls like rain on all people, even evil ones. "God so loved *the world*," says Jesus in John 3:16. God loves wayward children. He loves wounded and despised people. And if God loves in that way, Christians must love in that way too.

We can churn up a lot of unhappiness for ourselves and for others by trying to control, manipulate, or condemn other people. We can burn a lot of energy getting angry with secular people and shouting at them. But God's love rains down on all people—good and evil alike.

Jesus does not give me permission to hate and despise any other human being. If you're a human being, I am supposed to love you in word and deed, whether you are a Christian or not.

A soup kitchen in an inner city is a great place to practice this, because you don't have to ask anyone any complicated questions like "How did you get this way?" or "Are you ever going to change?" You just have to scoop some chili into a bowl and smile at another human being and say, "God bless you."

That's a good way to start. But somehow I think Jesus would do more than that.

Love. This is so difficult for us. But it is a happier way to live.

Lord, I know I need to be an agent of your love, but I have so many barriers and attitudes that hem me in. Father, show me how to love. Help me to love as you have loved. Amen.

LETTING GO

“Give, and it will be given to you.”

—Luke 6:38

This section of the Bible is well known for teaching the “golden rule”: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” And today’s verse, “Give, and it will be given to you,” is often used for fund-raising campaigns at churches and in personal finance classes.

But there’s really much more to Jesus’ teaching here. Look at everything Jesus is saying. The context of this teaching involves giving money away to enemies and willingly letting cruel people take your possessions from you. It’s about letting go of material things. It’s really about giving away your life.

My neighbor has a garden, and the rabbits and deer come and feed there. I get upset on her behalf, and I sometimes offer to take strong measures against those creatures. She shrugs and

refuses, saying, “Well, they have to eat too.”

She has chosen a happier approach. We spend so much time and energy protecting ourselves and making our life “happy”—mostly for ourselves.

In effect, Jesus is saying, “Give yourself, your faith, your witness, and even your money away.” Give, and keep giving of yourself—and the happiness of the kingdom of heaven will be given you.

This is a difficult task. Have you tried it?

Lord, I’m not sure I can really do this. I pray you will enable me to trust you and that you will give me wisdom, and also your mighty strength, so I can be a giver, to your glory. Amen.

I MIGHT DIE TODAY; GOD HAS IT HANDLED

"I am going there to prepare a place for you . . ."

—John 14:2

I could die today. So could you.

Do you ever just stop and face that fact? It scares me. What will happen when I die? And what will happen to all the people I love, and to all my dreams and goals, cut short?

Jesus says, in effect, "Trust me. I am getting a place ready for you." And the apostle Paul wrote, "No eye has seen . . . no ear has heard . . . no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). Paul was also torn between wanting to remain on this earth and wanting to live with Christ, "which is better by far" (Philippians 1:23).

Christians are either living a delusional dream, or they are in store for the truest and happiest gift anyone could possibly imagine. Either death is stronger

than God and is a chaotic event he didn't plan on and can't handle, or when we die we will fall like a ripe tomato into his hand, which is ready to receive us.

Embrace this happiness of soul: All the work God has empowered you to do is to his glory; all that is undone, God will attend to. Your sins are forgiven, and you have eternal life with him. God loves the people you love, and he will attend mercifully to them. And when you die, he will attend to you also.

Oh, Lord, ease my fears.
When it's time, carry me
safely home. Bless and
comfort me in this mighty
and unstoppable hope. In
Christ, Amen.

GIVE WHAT YOU HAVE, AT HOME

"I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die."

—1 Kings 17:12

Life can be harsh. We are up against death all the time. The woman at Zarephath was prepared to do everything she could for her son, even until the end.

If we could just do this in our homes today!

The world outside is a famine-stricken wasteland. So all a husband really has to do is start his wife's car for her once in a while. And a wife could spend five minutes listening to her husband. All a kid needs to do is say, "Thanks for supper," and carry the dishes to the counter—or maybe even volunteer to wash them. We might only have today, you know.

It shouldn't be too difficult. Just scrape a few sticks of basic kindness together. Really? You can't do that? Sure you can. Because God scraped up two big sticks

and made them into a cross. His Son died on them for a broken, famine-scorched world. He died for you. And me. He gave us all he had.

Living out salvation is really mostly about giving.

Happier homes start when people in a family make a gentle commitment: "I will give my family what I have; I will share what I have with them, even just little things."

My family is my blessing and my task, Lord. I realize this more deeply as I think about it. Help me to be less selfish. Use me to bless others today. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHRISTIAN FRIENDSHIP

Let us . . . spur one another on . . . not giving up meeting together . . .
—Hebrews 10:24-25

One snowy night, we had to cancel our church service. I did everything I could by phone, but still, two cars trundled into our parking lot. These people had not received the message, and they had come through the storm to be at church.

The first was Mary, whose husband had died just a month earlier. When I apologetically told her church was canceled, she just laughed and said, “Well, I guess I needed a drive in the countryside!”—and off she went back home.

Two minutes later, in came Dale and Faye. They also just laughed, and as we talked, I said, “Mary was just here too.” Then we talked some more, and they left.

A bit later, I texted Mary to see if she had made it home safely. She texted back: “Yep—and

Dale and Faye just stopped by for a visit!” We may not have had a service at our church, but fellowship still happened at Mary’s house.

Someone has to say, “Well, let’s take this moment and share our Christian fellowship with someone.” Someone else needs to smile and open the door.

That someone is you. We all need Jesus, and especially in the storms of this life we all need to share his warmth as we share our faith together.

Seek out and commit yourself to this kind of fellowship. You will be happier.

Thank you, Lord, for the Christians around me. Help us to love and support each other, making the most of the time we have together. Amen.

LOVE FOR THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT

“Bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

—Luke 14:21

Steve thinks the fluoride in the water is the government’s plan to make us zombies, and that the trails of exhaust from airplanes contain chemicals that make us mental slaves to the will of an elite group of powerful people who run the world.

Steve spends a lot of time surfing the Internet. He’s always in financial trouble because he does crazy things with his money. Steve doesn’t have any friends, partly because he keeps suspecting them of conspiring against him and partly because he exhausts the patience of everyone who tries to love him. He also gets bullied a lot, because, frankly, he is weird. Not dangerous, just weird. Steve is a human being, but one who has been dealt a tough hand in life.

We see people like Steve all the time—at the store, at the gas station, driving a car. Some are

mentally ill, and some are just plain different.

Jesus has people like Steve in mind for his special banquet.

So, stop in to visit people like Steve once in a while. Tell a joke. Be a friend. Give a little human kindness. Just give a little love. Because if you make up your mind to help Steve experience a little happiness, then God is happy, and you will be happier too.

Lord, bless the Steves of this world. Forgive me for thinking I’m normal and he’s not. Father, I need more love in my heart. Make me better at loving people. Amen.

BECOME A BIRD WATCHER

“Look at the birds of the air . . . your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

—Matthew 6:26

It's tough to learn from a bird if you never go outside and look at one. When Jesus says, “Look,” he uses a word that means “concentrate.” God's creation has much to teach us, and it can bless our soul.

Justin was going through a terrible time. Some of his own sins caught up with him. Then some bad circumstances smashed like a meteor into the orbit of his life. Everything broke apart, and his money was gone.

One day, after a deep conversation and prayer time together, I suggested to Justin that he walk out in the woods, climb a hill, find a rock, and sit for a while. He looked at me like he thought I might be crazy! But he did it.

It was autumn in Michigan, and the fall colors were in full glory on the trees. Justin texted me

that afternoon: “Have found that rock. View is awesome; life is grand. . . .”

Sometimes the best thing to do in times of trouble is to go out into God's creation. Concentrate on the beauty around you. Let God's greatness settle on you.

Even if you live in a city, find time to sit outside in a park, and maybe feed a pigeon. Learn Jesus' lesson from that bird: You are of eternal value; God is watching over your soul. It doesn't fix everything, but it will likely help to raise your happiness level.

Heavenly Father, watch over me; I need you every hour. Help me to trust you, and please keep me strong. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GIVING

“Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”
—Mark 10:21

I heard the activist and author Shane Claiborne tell of someone who actually did this. Claiborne showed a video of a young man who won two sports cars, some appliances, and a wad of cash on *The Price Is Right* game show.

If you’ve ever seen that show, you know how it is when people start winning: they jump, yell, cry, and pump their fists in the air, and it’s clear that the biggest, dreamiest thing they have ever imagined is coming true. And they are happy.

But this guy was different. After the show, he sold everything he had won, took the money, went to a village in Africa, and bought food, clothes, medical supplies, and equipment for growing gardens for the people who lived there. Then he lived there with the people for a while.

Most of us tend to think happiness is winning stuff in the game of life. In that video, however, the young man said giving it all away was the greatest thing he had ever done. And he was happy, with a deeper, richer, more eternal kind of happiness than any other he had ever known.

If you are deeply unsatisfied or simply bored (and therefore much less than happy), have you considered doing something lavishly self-sacrificial for God?

Lord, I have so much. My soul gets clogged with it all. Move and shape my will. Make me a generous Christian, ready to serve and bless others at all times. This scares me a little, so I need your help. Amen.

A MANNER OF LIVING

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.
—Philippians 1:27

As humans, we will often struggle to find happiness, but many Christians find it and triumphantly live it. They are committed to the *manner* of living by the gospel (“good news”) of Jesus—*whatever* happens.

When Gayle, at a young age, found she was dying of cancer, she still praised God. She set her mind on the hope of eternal life in Christ, and she died with power flowing from her soul to everyone around her.

Mike, Gayle’s husband, agonized over her illness and death but said, “I have decided to *press my mind* into what the Bible says. That’s the only way I can do this.” The *manner* in which Mike and Gayle lived set an example for us all.

As a pastor for many years, I have seen the manner in which many people have lived and

died. Even Christians lose their grip sometimes and fall into worrying and complaining. Sometimes I do too.

Yet, praise God, I have also seen Christians who face the worst—such as cancer, paralysis, or chronic pain—with the joyful determination of faith in Jesus. They acknowledge their suffering before God; they shed their tears; and they claim the eternal goodness of the Lord, whatever happens.

Today’s verses speak to a community of believers. Today, watch the manner of the triumphant ones around you, and follow their example.

Father, thank you for Christians who show what it means to live with you. Bless them with your power. Give all of us this blessing. In Jesus, Amen.

this month

RIGHT-SIDE-UP LIFE IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD

Rob Toornstra

Christian living can seem a daunting task at times. Even the inspiring, compelling words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount can seem to set the bar impossibly high, and we may despair of attaining the life that Jesus describes for us.

But this message given by Jesus presents a grand vision of the full life that God is re-creating in each of us as the Spirit renews us daily. In other words, the life laid out for us in Matthew 5-7 is a gift as much as a calling! This month, let's explore how the good news of Jesus brings the character of Jesus himself to life in us.

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A NEW WAY TO LIVE

Jesus . . . went up on a mountainside And he began to teach.

—Matthew 5:1-2

Not far from where we live in Oregon are what the locals call the Coast Range Mountains. These beautiful formations separate the rocky coast of the Pacific Ocean from the lush Willamette Valley that carves a path through the western half of Oregon. Having grown up near the Rocky Mountains of Alberta, I've always felt the name "mountains" was a generous title for the Oregon range. They are a delight for the eyes, but to me they don't quite look like mountains!

When Matthew describes Jesus climbing a mountainside, the locals may have wondered if he too was being generous. The landscape around the Sea of Galilee more closely resembled foothills. But Matthew chose his words deliberately. He was calling to mind a similar event from many centuries past. Exodus 19 describes the time when God's

people gathered at Mount Sinai while Moses went up the mountain to receive God's law. The law that Moses received was a guide to the covenant way of life that God called his people to follow.

Now Jesus was remaking history. As he began teaching from a "mountainside," he outlined for his followers a renewed way of life based on God's ancient law, explaining how we are called to live truly for our Lord. As we spend this month listening to Jesus, we will hear him challenge, encourage, comfort, and correct us. Are you ready to embrace a new way to live?

Lord, you offer a way of life that we deeply desire but cannot gain on our own. Help us receive this gift by faith in you. Amen.

ONLY THE OUTSIDERS ARE INSIDERS

“Blessed are the poor in spirit”

—Matthew 5:3

Not long ago, a frequent flyer achieved what only a handful of others have done: he logged his one millionth mile with the airline of his choice. The airline rewarded him with a VIP reception and a members-only reservation number. Best of all, they named a 747 jumbo jet in his honor! Status has its privileges.

Often the voices of our culture send the same message. We are told that the way to gain status is to earn it. We are rewarded for loyalty. We gain standing in our community or workplace by proving ourselves worthy, by presenting an ideal image of ourselves to those around us. Opportunities are open to those who know the right people and can fit the right mold.

As a result, many people think the key to spiritual happiness lies within ourselves. Work hard

to meet your goals! God helps those who help themselves!

Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount by turning that message on its head. Happiness isn't for those who think they can earn it! It's not for those who come to Jesus with a long list of achievements. It's for those who are empty. Broken. Bankrupt. The kingdom of heaven belongs to people who admit they have no way to enter in without God's help. He offers new life, full and free, to all who trust in his power to save. Give God your brokenness, and he will give you full life!

Gracious God, we don't like to admit our brokenness. But we realize we have nothing to bring you. Help us to trust in you to save us and to give us new life! Amen.

THROUGH TEARS, COMFORT

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

—Matthew 5:4

Grief is universal. We have all tasted the bitter pain of saying good-bye to a loved one who has died. Maybe you have shed tears at the funeral of your spouse, or you have endured the unimaginable pain of burying a child. That walk through the valley of the shadow of death may have been last month or many years ago, but the ache never goes away.

Unfortunately people don't always know what to do with those who mourn. Well-meaning folks may try to minimize the pain by using trite phrases or empty words. We might sentimentalize death, or deny the finality of it. Jesus cautions us that denying our pain is a dead-end road that offers little comfort.

In Jesus' kingdom, mourning is a reminder of comfort. Jesus himself, when confronted with the reality of the grave, wept

(see John 11). He mourned. He grieved. And he grieves with us in the loss of a spouse, child, or other loved one. He stands alongside us in our pain, and he sheds tears with us.

But that's not all. Jesus came not only to shed tears; he came to shed his blood. He faced death squarely, submitted himself to it, and conquered it.

Because he triumphed over death, we can be assured that one day we will live in a world without disease, mourning, or cemeteries. Knowing that Jesus has overpowered death offers us comfort when we mourn.

O God, the sting of death is bitter and strong. Yet it is not final! Comfort all who mourn; assure them that death is swallowed up in your victory. Amen.

MEEKNESS WINS THE DAY!

“Blessed are the meek”

—Matthew 5:5

A friend and I were stuck behind a slow-moving truck on a two-lane highway. We were unable to pass safely, and my friend kidded me: “You need to preach some sermons about learning to be aggressive!” I shot back: “You’re right! Perhaps from the text where Jesus says, ‘Blessed are the aggressive, for they will conquer the world!’” Of course, Jesus didn’t say that, but we had a good-natured laugh (and arrived home safely). This also helped me see how often we prefer aggression over meekness and brute force over gentle humility.

Jesus insists that under his leadership, aggression is out. Those who are meek and gentle, who are slow to anger and patient in the face of provocation, are truly happy. A meek person doesn’t fuel the fires of conflict with unfair accusations. Being

meek means letting your temper chill when you’d rather argue with your spouse. It means showing patience with your children. It means not losing your cool when coworkers repeat their mistakes.

Meekness is often difficult for us because it seems like weakness. But it’s really about patience and self-control, which require great strength. In going to the cross, Jesus illustrates that the path to great life is through longsuffering love. Jesus was humble and meek for our sake. His humble greatness is what gives us life! As we see the beauty of Jesus’ meekness, may we become more like him.

King Jesus, since we share in your victory, help us to be meek, as you have shown us. Amen.

AN APPETITE FOR GOD

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”
—Matthew 5:6

Many of us are hungry for approval. We want our parents to tell us they are proud of us. We want our employer’s stamp of approval on our work. We want our friends to think we are good enough for them. Deep down, this longing for acceptance comes from a longing to be found right in God’s eyes. We are hungry for righteousness.

Sadly, we often try to satisfy our hunger by gorging on junk food. We want approval from others so badly that we’re willing to compromise our convictions. We want to prove ourselves through our job so badly that we burn out on our career, sacrificing our family and our health. We want so badly to be morally acceptable that we build our lives on a system of rules, looking down on others and sinking into despair when even we don’t measure up.

These foods cannot satisfy our hunger for true righteousness.

Later in his ministry, Jesus illustrates how he satisfies hungry hearts. “I am the bread of life,” he says. “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Jesus offers us his own righteousness, and God credits us with it (even though we don’t deserve it) so that we can enjoy the acceptance and approval we long for. (See Romans 3:21-26; 5:6-11.) Are you feeding on the food that satisfies your deepest longings?

Lord God, thank you for the food you offer us in Christ so that we can be filled and enjoy full life. We love you eternally! Amen.

HAVE MERCY!

“Blessed are the merciful”

—Matthew 5:7

A trip to the grocery store can reveal something about our heart. I’ve caught myself observing what people buy or do—and jumping to conclusions about them. “What kind of person buys that much junk food?” I wonder. Or I think, “I would never take *my* kids to the store this late at night!” Sadly, we find it easy to make quick judgments about other people, and our conclusions are almost always negative.

Such an attitude does not fit with the way of life Jesus wants for us. Jesus wants us to treasure mercy as a quality of life under his authority. He wants us to embrace compassion and empathy for people who are broken, hurting, and sinful. He wants us to do what we can to alleviate the needs in our fallen world—stemming from hunger, poverty, and racism.

True mercy begins when our hearts are stirred by the pain and suffering that taint every corner of our world. When our hearts are pained with the way things are and we long for the way things are meant to be, we see the world as God sees it. God’s love for a sinful world is what prompted the greatest act of mercy ever. At the cross, God displayed supreme mercy as Jesus willingly took on our punishment so that we could be free from condemnation.

God’s mercy to us gives birth to a heart that loves to show mercy to others. To whom will you show mercy today?

Father, we confess that we do not deserve to be called your children. Yet, in your mercy, you adopt us into your family. Help us show your mercy to others. In Jesus, Amen.

PURE HEARTS

"The pure in heart . . . will see God."

—Matthew 5:8

"Just follow your heart!" We're sometimes encouraged to do this when we have to make a tough decision, and we tend to base our decision on what feels best at the moment.

Often we confuse "heart" with emotion or sentiment. So when Jesus invites us to treasure a pure heart as a quality of life in the kingdom of God, we may not immediately grasp what he is saying.

In the Bible, the heart is the center of one's being. It's where the will, intellect, and emotions intersect. What we value in our heart sets the course for how we live our life—how we spend our money, form relationships, and make decisions. The condition of our heart is immensely important!

A person with a pure heart is one who is undefiled by sin.

The Bible tells us that only those who have no sin in their heart are fit for God's presence. That would be cause for despair, but the Bible also assures us that no one except Jesus has a pure heart. His life was perfect in every way, and yet for our sake he was willingly banished from God's sight, as if he had an impure and imperfect heart.

If you believe the gospel, you are cleansed from your sin and impurity, and you receive the gift of a pure heart. If you are in Christ, one day you will see God!

Holy God, when we search our hearts, we are painfully aware of our impurity. We rejoice in the purity of Jesus. Confident in what he has done for us, we long to see you face to face. Amen.

MAKE PEACE!

“Blessed are the peacemakers”

—Matthew 5:9

Some of us may remember the 1960s as an era of peace demonstrations. Crowds would gather and demand change in social and political structures that were seen as unjust. More recently in the U.S., the Tea Party and the Occupy movements have echoed similar calls for change. Though we may be on different points of the political spectrum, most agree that our society is broken and in need of renewal. Indeed, Jesus shares a desire to bring restoration into our world. The full renewal of all society for good is what the Bible calls peace.

Biblical peace (*shalom*) is a robust picture of the world functioning as God intended. This is a world of right relationships between nations and peoples, where society flourishes and is prosperous, where the culture advances and the creation is

well cared for. This wholeness is what we long for. As Christians, we are called to be God’s agents of peace. We are called to work in banks, classrooms, boardrooms, playgrounds, and dairy farms seeking the renewal of God’s world.

But true peace is not a human endeavor. It’s our response to the God who is the ultimate peacemaker. God is so committed to making peace with a fallen world—with us—that he endured the willing death of his Son so that our relationship with him might be restored.

God has made peace with us; how will you participate in God’s mission of peacemaking today?

Lord, guide us as your children to be peacemakers so that your world may know peace. Amen.

BEING HAPPY WHEN YOU'RE HARASSED

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad"

—Matthew 5:11-12

As we read these words, millions of Christians around the world are being persecuted for their faith. Some will lose their jobs or face government harassment. Some will be locked up in prison cells. Some will be tortured or even killed because of their faith in Jesus.

Many of us will not face difficulties like that for our allegiance to Christ. But we might hear taunting from classmates who laugh at us when we state our beliefs. We might have to put up with people who accuse us of thinking we're "so much better than everyone else"! Family members might be angry with us for our beliefs. If we take seriously our calling as followers of Jesus, we *will* face insults, false accusations, or some kinds of persecution.

And for this Jesus tells us to rejoice! Know that God uses

hardships to refine and mature us as his children. He also shows us that as we suffer for our faith, we participate in the life Jesus lived.

When the world saw Jesus in all his perfection, they killed him. We must include ourselves among those who persecuted Jesus: it was our sin that put him on the cross. Yet Jesus loved and prayed for all who persecuted him. When we face the hatred of a sinful world, we will enjoy the blessing of God's presence.

Lord Jesus, you know what it was like to endure the persecution of this world. When others stand against us because of you, give us the comfort and courage to persevere. Amen.

SEASONED FOR SERVICE

"You are the salt of the earth."

—Matthew 5:13

Should you and I watch Hollywood movies, read the latest best-selling novel, or listen to music that doesn't mention Jesus by name? Is a woman working in a dentist's office doing "secular" work while her pastor is doing more important "spiritual" work? Christians have long grappled with how we should engage in the culture of the world around us.

Today we're looking at the first of two metaphors Jesus uses to help us understand what our relationship with the world around us ought to look like. In ancient cultures, salt served many purposes. Since it was a preservative, it was often seen as a life-giving agent. For that reason, God instructed his people to season their offerings with salt (Leviticus 2:13). This was a sign of God's life-giving relationship with his people.

Jesus suggests that we are the life-giving agent in this broken world. God calls us to bring renewal into politics, science, art, education, and every other area of culture. When we live out our Christian faith in all of these spheres of life, we give our world a foretaste of the world to come. This is not a mere human effort. It is the outflowing of what God has begun in us, through Jesus.

God kept his promise to preserve the world even though it meant going to the cross. Now he expects us to be agents of preservation and life. How will you do that today?

Faithful God, you preserved this broken world at a cost we cannot imagine. Help us live out our faith so that the world may glimpse your life-giving power in us. Amen.

SHINING BRIGHT

“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”—Matthew 5:16

Eleanor Roosevelt once suggested that it's more important to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Unfortunately, many people think of Christians as people who curse the darkness. And there is some truth to that. As Christians, we are sometimes known more for what we oppose rather than for being shining models of truth, love, and righteousness.

Jesus calls us to be light in a sinned-darkened world. We are light when we live all of life in the way God calls us to live. We are light when we treat our clients with integrity, and when we treat bullies with kindness (though without letting them get their way). We live as light when we represent a cause that may not be popular but is right. In fact, Jesus explains that it is impossible for Christians not to be light. We are either his followers—his light—or

we are not. A candle under a bowl goes out. A city on a hill lights the countryside. Authentic Christians radiate righteousness, truth, and grace.

Of course, this light does not come from within ourselves. We are the light of the world only to the extent that Jesus, the true light of the world, lives in us. When we were lost in darkness, Jesus came to us, full of grace and truth, and drew us into his light. How will you shine the light of Jesus into your world today?

Jesus, light of the world, your glorious light shattered the gloom of this world and offered hope! May our lives reflect the brightness of your grace. Help us to live as light in this world. Amen.

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

"I have come [not] to abolish the Law and the Prophets . . . but to fulfill them."
—Matthew 5:17

Two spiritual poisons are deadly to the soul: *legalism* and *lawlessness*.

Legalism implies that God loves and accepts us because of our performance. We ingest this toxin when we look at our own history of good behavior and think that's why God loves us.

Lawlessness says we are free to live however we wish because God's love is not based on our good works. We ingest this toxin anytime we brush aside the importance of obedience or minimize some sin in our life.

Jesus warns against both. To those who insist that God's law is unimportant, Jesus says he has come to obey God's law perfectly. Obedience to God matters so much that Jesus had to keep God's commandments perfectly (fulfilling the law) so that we might have salvation.

At the same time, Jesus warns that if we try to gain God's approval based on our moral performance, our goodness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were religious experts famous for their obedience to the law but still far from perfect, as Jesus often pointed out.

The good news is that although we cannot obey God's law, Jesus fulfilled it for us. Then he was punished for our sake as a law-breaker so that God might view us as law-keepers! As the gospel lives in us, may we live a life of obedience that flows from gratitude to Jesus, who frees us from both legalism and lawlessness.

Merciful God, transform us so that we may live lives of grateful, joyful obedience to you. Amen.

WHAT TO DO WITH ANGER

"If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you . . . first go and be reconciled to them."
—Matthew 5:23-24

Your colleague belittles you in front of your coworkers, and you silently plot how to get even. A driver rudely cuts you off on the freeway, and you hit the accelerator to show them what you think of their driving. Your parents made mistakes that have hurt you, and you've spent your adult life being angry over how they treated you.

Anger can be incredibly corrosive when we let it simmer in our hearts. It can eat away at marriages and friendships. It can ruin a career in one foolish outburst. Jesus warns us that if it is left unchecked, anger can escalate into name-calling, hostility, and even murder. We may think we are obeying God's law against murder if we don't kill. But Jesus warns that the root of murder lies in our heart if we let anger fester.

How do we deal with anger? Jesus calls us to be active in seeking reconciliation with our neighbors. Even if they are the ones who have wronged us, we are called to take it upon ourselves to make things right again. After all, that is how Jesus makes peace with *his* enemies—us! While we were yet sinners, Jesus died to reconcile us to his Father (Romans 5:8).

Grasping the enemy-love of God will melt the anger in our hearts. With whom do you need to make peace today?

Lord, in our pride we often hate those who have wronged us. You showed supreme love and humility by dying for us even when we were your enemies. Help us to be willing to do the same. Amen.

BREAKING FREE FROM THE POWER OF LUST

"Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."
—Matthew 5:28

We live in a sex-saturated culture. Billboards, magazines, best-selling novels, and blockbuster movies bombard us with images meant to tantalize, tease and, tempt. The adult entertainment industry rakes in billions of dollars each year. Lust has a vice-grip that holds countless people helpless in its grasp. Jesus clearly warns us of the dangers of both adultery and lust. He calls us to flee from the trap of sexual sin.

This is so important because the consequences of sexual sin are painfully and tragically destructive. Marriages have been destroyed because of it. It can enslave people in habits that create deep shame and self-loathing. Lives come apart when lust is allowed free rein. God's design for sex is far superior to the ways we degrade it. Human sexuality is to be a source of delight and

intimacy matched only by our intimacy with Christ. Lust and sexual sin eat away at God's purpose for sexuality.

At the root of lust lies a spiritual hunger for joy and fulfillment. We are mistaken if we believe sex can fill that longing. The good news is that God meets this need in his Son, Jesus. When we receive the supreme love and affirmation that God freely offers us, we can be free from the destructive power of lust. As lust loses its power, we become free to enjoy God's delightful gift of sexuality within the bounds he sets for it.

Savior, forgive us for twisting what you intended to be beautiful. Fill us with joy and delight in knowing that you can break us free from the power of lust. Amen.

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

"Anyone who divorces his wife . . . makes her the victim of adultery."
—Matthew 5:32

In these verses Jesus speaks into one of today's deeply painful realities. Many homes have experienced the shattering hurt of divorce. Your parents' divorce may have crushed you when you were a child. Your grown child may have become separated from his or her spouse. Or perhaps your marriage is fraying at the seams.

Jesus doesn't offer a loophole for rightfully pursuing divorce; he urges us to hold marriage in high esteem. Jewish custom allowed a man to divorce his wife for trivial reasons by simply obtaining a certificate of divorce. But Jesus says divorce is never a simple matter. While there may be times when a divorce is the lesser of two evils, a marital breakup always severs two people who were joined at the core of their being. Jesus wants us to do all we can to keep our marriages together.

Doing this requires constant nurture for marriages. As a church, as married people and as single people, followers of Jesus must take steps to promote healthy marriages. One reason we must value marriage so highly is that in it we illustrate for the world the selfless love and faithfulness God shows us. We, the church, are Christ's bride! In fact, God was so intent on keeping his covenant promises to us that he went all the way to death for us. *That* is true fidelity! How will you promote God's love today?

Lord Jesus, you remained faithful to us, even to death. By your Spirit, empower and equip us to value marriage as highly as you do. Amen.

TRUTH TELLERS

"All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No.'"

—Matthew 5:37

Are your words trustworthy? Maybe you've known someone who was good at making promises. She assured you that she would help you meet the deadline at work. He insisted that he would give you a ride home after practice. They promised to visit you more often. But life got in the way. She had too much of her own work to do. He forgot that you were waiting in the parking lot. They got busy with their own friends. They broke their promises, and it became harder for you to trust them.

Keeping our word matters. Jesus warns us here that we can easily fool ourselves into believing we are truthful people as long as we don't swear oaths we cannot keep. Jesus urges us to recognize that we not only must speak the truth but also represent the one who calls himself the Truth. God's eye is

on us not only when we invoke his name by swearing an oath; every word we speak is spoken in God's presence. That's why Jesus says oaths are not necessary. Our integrity and character should be such that our words are trustworthy even if they are not accompanied by an oath.

The gospel alone gives us courage to be people of truth. God's truth about us is that we are fallen people—and yet he loves us enough to go to the cross for us. How will God's truth and love motivate you to live the truth today?

Jesus, you are truth in the flesh. Sometimes in the way we live, we don't represent the truth well. Give us the courage to be people who speak the truth—and mean it. Amen.

THE EXTRA MILE

"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." —Matthew 5:42

Sometimes we hear the phrase "Don't get mad; get even!" Most of us want to fight back when someone hurts us. We want to prove we are right and the other person is wrong. The fabric of self-preservation is woven deeply within us.

Jesus would have us behave differently. In today's verses, he refers to an Old Testament law that required justice for a person who was wronged and also set limits on the punishment of an offender. The truth is that relationships don't function very well when all we focus on is getting our due.

Under God's rule, justice is tempered with great mercy. We must be willing to show kindness to people who take advantage of us. We must be prepared to give our time and resources to those who don't deserve them. We ought to serve where

and when we may not want to. Many of us will find Jesus' calling extremely challenging.

But Jesus empowers us to give and show mercy even in the most difficult situations. When he was beaten, he not only turned the other cheek; he offered his whole body to death. Jesus crossed an infinite distance to enter a fallen world, seeking lost sinners like you and me. God's justice is tempered with great mercy. May his grace empower us to go the extra mile.

Gracious God, you have given us far more than we deserve. You love us at a far greater price than we can imagine. Help us to reflect your beautiful generosity to all whom we encounter. Amen.

LOVING THOSE YOU HATE

"I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you"
—Matthew 5:44

Though we may not like to admit it, we all have enemies. Jesus assumes there are people in our lives we simply cannot get along with. A bully at school. An ex-husband. The person who works in the next cubicle. For whatever reason, your relationship with that person is tainted with animosity and hostility.

But Jesus insists that we treat with kindness even those who make our lives miserable. Most everyone is kind to people who are kind to them. The mark of true discipleship, however, lies in how we act toward people who treat us like enemies. Following Jesus entails praying for people who wish us harm, going out of our way to be friendly to the unfriendly, and offering to help someone who has hurt us.

Why? Because God's children must learn to mimic their heavenly Father, who shows kindness to people who don't deserve it.

Most of all, loving our enemies is vital because if God did not love his enemies, you and I would be eternally lost. God loved his enemies—including you and me—enough to die for them. (See Romans 5:6-11.)

May God's love humble us into radically loving the people around us who don't deserve it.

Wonderful, merciful Savior, you loved your enemies so much that you died for them. Forgive us when we limit how much we are willing to love others. Melt our hearts with your grace so that we may have the strength to love our enemies. Amen.

ANONYMOUS DONORS

“When you give to the needy, [give] . . . in secret.”

—Matthew 6:3-4

It’s possible to do all the right things for all the wrong reasons. We can read our Bibles, go to church, put money in the collection plate, live an exemplary life—all as a means of serving ourselves. We may be doing these things to ease a guilty conscience, to impress others, or to try to earn God’s approval or secure blessings from God.

Jesus calls all that hypocrisy. In those days, some people went to great lengths to do all the right things for all the wrong reasons. They made public displays of giving money to the poor. They made a great fuss as they brought money to the temple. They did all they could to draw attention to themselves. But their giving was not pleasing to God, because they gave to serve their own purposes.

Jesus wants our generosity to be motivated by love and

gratitude. When our hearts are awash in the richness of God’s kindness to us, our natural response should be generous giving in all areas of life—time, talents, and treasure. We should give without regard for any recognition or reward. Jesus, who was infinitely wealthy, became poor for our sake. Through his poverty, we gain riches beyond compare!

Are you generous in giving to people in need? What motivates your giving? May gratitude to our Lord always be our guide.

Jesus, soak our hearts in the beauty of your generosity and kindness so that we can overflow with grateful giving. For your sake, Amen.

HOW TO PRAY

“This, then, is how you should pray”

—Matthew 6:9

Prayer, like giving, can be a discipline we engage in for the wrong reasons. Prayer can become an empty ritual or a mere formality. Sometimes we may be tempted to pray only when we need a favor from God, or because we need help getting out of a jam. Jesus warns us that prayer can lend itself to hypocrisy. Jesus wants our prayer to be an expression of intimacy with God. In prayer, we enjoy the beauty and the majesty of God's presence.

Do you enjoy this communication with your heavenly Father? Or is prayer more like an awkward formality? Jesus invites us into rich fellowship with God and helps us to express ourselves to God. Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer to help us speak to God. If you are uncertain about how to pray, use the Lord's Prayer. Think about the

meaning of each line, and perhaps use your own words, and you will find yourself growing in relationship with God.

Ironically, even the Lord's Prayer can become a ritual. How can we prevent that? Jesus shows us that a sure sign that we are engaged in genuine prayer is that we grow closer to God's heart and forgive those who have wronged us. When we enter God's presence in prayer, we see that we are there only because God forgave us at great cost to himself. In turn, we are led to show God's gracious love to others. Do you enjoy a prayer life that leads you to love others?

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

HUNGERING FOR GOD

“Fast . . . so that it will not be obvious to others . . . but only to your Father, who is unseen.”
—Matthew 6:17-18

Maybe you are reading this as part of your mealtime devotions, with leftover food ready to be stored in the refrigerator. If so, your appetite may be satisfied, and it may feel a bit strange to be thinking about fasting.

Fasting was commonly practiced in ancient days. It was so important that Jesus assumes his followers were fasting: *“When you fast . . .”* he says. Its purpose was to heighten one’s awareness of total dependence on God. A person may have fasted to express the need for God’s forgiveness, or to ask for comfort in a time of grief, or to seek guidance and help.

Fasting can be a beneficial discipline for Jesus’ followers today. However, it can also lead to spiritual pride. In Jesus’ day, the religious elite were known to fast at the times and places when the market would be bus-

iest so that they would receive the most attention!

Fasting should draw our attention to God—not to ourselves. Fasting with sincere motives is rewarding because we learn to enjoy Jesus more deeply. We remember that our deepest needs are satisfied not by food but by the bread of life. Jesus fills our deepest hungers and our greatest longings. That’s why fasting is not a somber experience but a joyful one! Let’s feast on Jesus, even as we may fast from our food.

We come to you, Lord, hungry for bread we cannot purchase, longing for food we cannot afford. Feed us with the only nourishment that can truly answer our longings. Lead us to realize our dependence on you. Amen.

THE TREASURE OF YOUR HEART

“Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

—Matthew 6:20-21

At the deepest part of our being lies a longing. A hope. A dream. Something more important to us than anything else. Whatever it is that we treasure most, we will build our lives on it. Whether it is our job, our wealth, our standing in the community, our looks, or something else, we will go to great lengths to gain this treasure. Money and wealth are particularly dazzling treasures that hypnotize many into chasing after its false promises and empty security.

Sadly, much of what we treasure is like a mist. Some treasures are gone in an instant, and others slip away over a lifetime. But only one treasure lasts forever. Jesus wants to be the treasure of our hearts. He wants to be the unrivaled Master that we serve wholeheartedly.

The way to be free from chasing worldly treasures is through

worship. In worship we treasure the infinite value of Jesus, who gave his life for us. In worship we delight in the goodness and mercy of our God. We set our hearts on the beauty of our Savior, who loved us when we were unlovable.

When our hearts treasure Jesus through prayer, meditation, song, and Scripture, we are re-oriented to what is truly priceless for us. We make an investment that will last forever.

What does your heart treasure?

“LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Since you treasured us first, help us to treasure you as the Lord and Master of our lives. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT!

“Do not worry about your life”

—Matthew 6:25

Do you worry? Some of us worry about paying the monthly rent or mortgage. Some of us worry about the choices our children are making. Others of us are anxious about big decisions we must make about our future. With all the concerns in life, can Jesus really be serious when he tells us not to worry?

While we will never know a life without concerns, Jesus assures us we *can* know a life without worry. He points out that worry—any manner of pace-the-floor, can't-sleep-at-night fretting—is not helpful because it changes nothing. Worry doesn't add a single hour to life; it doesn't solve a single problem. And worry isn't helpful because life is more than our worries make it out to be! Followers of Jesus are called to live for so much more than the fleeting things we worry about.

Jesus reminds us that worry isn't necessary for a child of God. Your heavenly Father knows precisely what you need, when you need it. And your heavenly Father is good. The same God who paints the flowers of the field and tends the birds of the air holds every part of your life in his nail-pierced hands. The same God who loved you so much that he went through the hell of Calvary for you, loves you too much to leave your life to chance.

Don't worry! God is in control!

Creator God, you hold the vastness of the universe and the intricacies of the smallest molecules in your hands. Help us to trust in your perfect care for us, so that we may be free to build our lives on you. Amen.

DEALING WITH THE DIRT IN OUR EYES

"In the same way you judge others, you will be judged."

—Matthew 7:2

What do you do when your friend hasn't been much of a friend? How do you respond when your coworker brags about being dishonest? How do you answer a person who confides in you about their struggle with an addiction? It can be difficult to know how to respond, and unfortunately it is sometimes easier to wag our fingers accusingly at those who struggle with sin.

But Jesus leads us to take a different approach. While it is always appropriate to show genuine concern for people caught in sin, Jesus doesn't allow us to pronounce a verdict on them. God alone is the one who may judge a person's heart and actions.

Jesus wants us to do the humbling work of self-examination. Ask God to help you examine your own heart, and he will likely uncover your own weaknesses and shortcomings. As

painful as that may be, God can use this for our growth. When we have recognized our failures and struggles, we are in a position to come alongside those who struggle with similar sins.

As difficult as this is, it is possible because Jesus has dealt this way with us. Jesus is the truly righteous judge, but he takes the "plank" of our sinfulness on himself and grants us a full pardon. May his mercy compel us to act in kind.

Our God, we find it easy to find fault in others, and nearly impossible to recognize our own sins. You see us perfectly, and yet through Jesus you no longer condemn us. Help us to see others as you see us. Amen.

KEEPING PEARLS AWAY FROM PIGS

“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs.”
—Matthew 7:6

Scooter was our family dog, and during most of our dinner times, Scooter was confined to her doghouse. There was one exception each year. My dad’s birthday dinner was an occasion deemed special enough that even Scooter was allowed to socialize with us at the table. In fact, my dad even fed Scooter a piece of the prime-cut roast beef specially prepared for the occasion! Though she eagerly scarfed the roast, I’m sure Scooter failed to appreciate the fine delicacy she had been graciously given.

That is what it’s like when we offer godly counsel to people who are not ready or willing to hear it. Wisdom, correction, counsel, and rebuke are as precious as pearls. Proverbs 9 tells us that godly people welcome such input. But foolish people want nothing to do with wise correction. Instead, they will

tear you to pieces with arguments, resistance, or mocking.

Even though we have a responsibility to humbly correct people who are struggling with sin, Jesus urges us to discern whether a person is open to correction or counsel. If the person who needs correction is resistant to you, it is often better to step back, prayerfully ask God to soften their hearts, and wait until they are open to listening to godly wisdom. We must handle the precious gospel of Jesus with care, both giving and receiving counsel with careful discernment.

Father, you have entrusted us with the precious truth of your Word. May we receive its guidance as precious treasure, and may we share your wisdom wisely. Amen.

GOD THE GIVER

“ . . . How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”
—Matthew 7:11

Studies reveal that most people pray—and that they pray for a wide range of needs. People ask God for everything from a vacant parking space to healing for their loved ones. Yet the same research also uncovers the troubling fact that many who pray don't actually believe God answers prayer.

Jesus insists that God *does* answer prayer, and he invites us to come to God, trusting him to answer us. God is not a remote or inaccessible deity. Neither is he capricious, answering prayers at random. No, the all-powerful God who created the universe is a loving heavenly Father who delights in giving good gifts to his children.

Are you in need? Ask God to provide. Are you lonely? Seek God's presence. Are you in a crisis or conflict? Knock on God's door for wisdom.

Prayer involves a radical trust that God will provide in the best way possible. No, God doesn't answer every prayer in the way we might expect. But God promises that as a Father, he will care for his children. We can be assured of this because long before we were inclined to seek God, to ask anything of him, or to come knocking on his door, he did not withhold the supreme gift from us—the gift of his own dear Son.

What God-sized requests will you make of your heavenly Father today?

Dear Jesus, we marvel at your love as you stand before God's presence on our behalf, praying for us. Help us to ask you in humble confidence for great things for your glory and honor. Amen.

WALKING THE NARROW ROAD

"In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."
—Matthew 7:12

"I don't really need religion; I just try to be a good person and live by the Golden Rule." It's not uncommon to hear people talk like this, and usually they are trying to minimize God's demand for how we should live. As long as we treat others as we want to be treated, God should accept us—right?

Have you ever stopped to consider how demanding Jesus' words truly are? How challenging it is to meet the needs of others with the same creativity, energy, spontaneity, and devotion that we want from others! No wonder Jesus describes this way of life as narrow and small. Jesus points out that only a few are walking on this road.

Are you prepared to love your overbearing employer with kindness and courtesy? Are you willing to sacrificially meet the needs of your spouse, even if

your needs aren't met? Will you care for the least lovely persons around you without expecting anything in return? How about those who are truly difficult to love?

When we are being transformed by the love of Jesus, we can walk this way of life. Jesus alone lived and loved this way. And he calls us to follow, serving not in our own strength but in his. How will his love empower you to love others with his kindness today?

Merciful God, you love us in ways we do not deserve. Teach us to imitate your compassion. Fill us with your strength and love. Melt our hearts, that we may desire nothing more than to walk the road with you that leads to life. Amen.

WATCH OUT FOR WOLVES!

“Watch out for false prophets.”

—Matthew 7:15

When I worked at a coffee and donut shop, a police officer once tested my ability to detect a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. I failed the test; the authentic bill and the forgery were so similar that I couldn't tell the difference. Had the officer been a con artist, I would have been duped.

Jesus warns his followers about being duped by false teachers. Sadly, there are pastors, teachers, and other leaders who try to manipulate the flock of Jesus Christ. They teach ideas that are foreign to the gospel—and if believed, they can be harmful to our faith. Often the message sounds appealing. We are told that if we just believe, God will reward us with wealth or material blessings. Often we are made to feel as if it is our job to try harder and do more to earn God's approval.

But those are not the teachings of Christ or of faithful Christian leaders. Authentic teachers, preachers, and pastors can be identified by their fruit. They demonstrate a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ in their lives, and they cultivate the same fruit in the people they lead. Genuine Christian leaders will always point you to Jesus Christ.

When you seek leadership from Christian authors, teachers, or pastors, can you discern a genuine leader from a false one? If you are a leader, what are you doing to show authentic Christian leadership?

Good Shepherd, many seek to lead us astray by having us trust in them or in ourselves. Help us to discern genuine leaders from those who might do us harm. Amen.

WATCH OUT FOR FALSE DISCIPLES!

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven”
—Matthew 7:21

My wife, Amy, once worked for someone who spoke of his plans to begin a ministry serving the poorest of the poor. But his lifestyle told a different story. He was quick to belittle his employees and scream at them in front of customers. He was manipulative and controlling with people who were close to him. He also defrauded the company and the government.

Jesus has already warned us to be on guard against leaders who teach with improper motives. Now he warns us to be on guard against people who appear to follow Jesus but are actually far from him. It's possible to say all the right things and sound very spiritual. We may speak in pious language, correcting other people's wrong behavior or criticizing all that is wrong in our world. We may even busy ourselves with reli-

gious activities—all in the name of Jesus. Yet on the day of Jesus' return, the sobering reality is that some will be sent away because he doesn't know them.

It's not enough to speak for Jesus or even work for him; we must know him as our Savior and Master. Transformed by his love, we must be ready to do his will, laying down our life for him. Do you know Jesus, who laid down his life for you? Or do you merely sound as if you do?

Jesus, you demonstrated a life of true obedience by doing your Father's will, even to death on a cross for our sake. May we show the fruit of an authentic relationship with you by laying down our own lives in love each day. Amen.

A FIRM FOUNDATION

“That house . . . did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”
—Matthew 7:25

Western Oregon sees a lot of rain. As a result, some houses that are built near streams and rivers will slide down the muddy banks, collapsing into a heap of rubble.

Jesus uses this imagery to describe the tragedy of a life built on a poor foundation. The sandy foundation Jesus warns against is that of a life seeking to be accepted by God on the basis of our own good efforts. We tend to think that if we try really hard to be good, and we work strenuously to show God our strong moral character, God will love us, accept us, and bless us more. In the end, however, that way of life is disastrous. We end up crushed under the weight of our inadequacy or feeling self-righteous and prideful.

The trouble is, no one can hear Jesus' words and put them into

practice perfectly—well, almost no one. As 1 Peter 2:4-6 tells us, Jesus himself is the true rock, the sure foundation. He lived the life of perfection that we cannot live, and he gave up his life so that we can live. Because he took on our punishment, we can build our lives on Jesus and be assured that we will never taste the shame of our guilt and failure before God.

Are you building your life on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ?

Lord, “my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.” In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

BE AMAZED!

The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority.
—Matthew 7:28-29

When I reflect on the pastors and teachers who have helped to shape me into the person I am today, many faces come to mind. Some were pastors who ministered in my home church in Edmonton, Alberta. Others were professors at the colleges and seminaries I attended. Still others have been colleagues who helped me along in ministry. Each one modeled a genuine love for Jesus and a deep faith in him and his Word.

Yet none spoke with the authority Jesus has. Many of the disciples in Jesus' day were used to being around religious teachers and leaders. Unfortunately many were self-righteous and condescending. Eventually people sensed that their words carried little meaning. Jesus' words must have come as a welcome refreshment. The crowds were amazed with his authority, be-

cause he made the truth beautiful and amazing. Listening to Jesus, we have been challenged, comforted, and convicted. All the while, Jesus has taught with tenderness and compassion. His words call for a response: Will we surrender ourselves to him, or will we continue to live for the kingdom of this world?

Jesus shows the nature of his authority by laying down his life for us. He loved us all the way to the cross in order to win for us the life he has described. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus. Will you follow him in wonder each day?

Beautiful Savior, may the glory of your love draw us to follow you faithfully. May your Spirit work in our hearts so that our character conforms to you. In your name, Amen.

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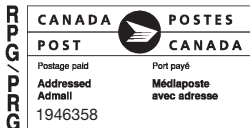


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