

Today

July/Aug 2018

refresh, refocus, renew

*Our Faith
Journey*



ALSO: THE DISCIPLINE OF HOSPITALITY

Friends:

My wife and I have long enjoyed having people stay with us. When we lived in Boston and Chicago, friends would come to tour the cities and be our guests. We also took in boarders over the years, offering young people a place to live while experiencing a little family life. Now we are using our home as a formal B&B in our spare time.



Hospitality is all about welcoming the traveler into rest and safety. It's about making space for people to dwell with you, even to the point of being inconvenienced. God has shown us the depths of hospitality—not only when he welcomed us into existence in his image, but also when he came to live in our mess and suffered in our place. In this issue of *Today* we explore both being on a journey and offering hospitality.

In August, pastor Lloyd Wicker examines hospitality from a biblical perspective, imitating Christ's sacrificial gift by which he makes room for us with him, even though we don't deserve it.

But first, in July, pastor Bret Lamsma sets us on a journey. We never stand still in the journey of faith, and we keep learning and growing along the way. We are all called to be travelers on the path to full life in Jesus.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

—Steven Koster

Today

July/Aug 2018

refresh, refocus, renew



“Our Faith Journey”
Bret Lamsma



**“The Discipline of
Hospitality”**
Lloyd Wicker

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 68, Number 4,
published bimonthly by
ReFrame Media, a division
of Back to God Ministries
International, at 1700 28th
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI
49508-1407. Periodicals
postage paid at Grand Rapids,
Michigan, and at additional
mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2018, Back to
God Ministries International.
Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture
quotations in this publication
are from The Holy Bible, New
International Version®, NIV®.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by
permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.

Cover photo: Bryan Minear



ReFrame
Media

Our Faith Journey

Bret Lamsma

july

Did you know that everyone is walking a journey of faith? Whether we are young or old, we are moving either toward or away from Jesus Christ. There is no standing still in our faith journey. Jesus taught this in all his interactions with people. He challenged everyone to be changed to have genuine faith and to know what it means to be a disciple, journeying toward his Father with every step they take. This July, then, may we all journey closer to God as we reflect on Jesus' life-changing teachings.

Bret Lamsma is director of faith formation at a church in Denver, Colorado, and has served churches in Michigan and California in youth, intergenerational, and educational ministries. Bret and his wife, Julie, have two children, and he enjoys hiking, camping, and visiting national parks with his family.

The Discipline of Hospitality

Lloyd Wicker

august

To most people, hospitality has to do with receiving and entertaining guests, who are usually on friendly terms with the host. The Bible reveals a calling to do that and much more. To show hospitality means living out the call to invite people to share Christ's love and presence, recognizing that Jesus invited people who were outcasts, marginalized, and sinners of all kinds to share in God's kingdom. Following his example, we are called to make room for strangers as well as friends, welcoming everyone into full life with God.

Lloyd Wicker has been a pastor for more than eighteen years and has served churches in Illinois, Washington, and California. He currently serves as a chaplain with the United States Navy in Sicily. Lloyd and his wife, Heidi, have three children.

ALONE

The Spirit sent Jesus out into the wilderness. . . .

—Mark 1:12

I'm kind of an introvert by nature, so my friends know that I like to spend time alone. Don't get me wrong—I like spending time with people too. But there is something about being alone that energizes me. My drive to church is about 25 minutes, and that's an important part of my day. Along the way I can spend time alone preparing for my workday ahead, and on the way home I can spend time preparing to be a dad and husband.

Jesus often spent time alone. At the very start of his ministry, he spent 40 days alone in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. What did he do in all that time? He no doubt spent a lot of it praying, fasting, and being energized for his mission by his Father in heaven. This was a vitally important time for Jesus' preparation to do the work he had come to do.

Likewise, we need time alone with God. When we are alone with God, spending time talking to him and listening for direction through his Word, we are being prepared for our mission here on earth. Our faith is formed as we seek God's guidance and wisdom. But in the busyness of life often the first thing we skip is time with God. Schedules get in the way, and time passes. We'd like to spend more time with God, but we can't seem to fit it in.

Here is your challenge for today: find some time to be alone with God as he prepares you for his mission in your life.

Father, help us to find time alone with you today. Prepare us for the mission you have for us, and form our faith in amazing ways. In Jesus, Amen.

STUFF

"Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."

—Luke 5:10

When our family goes on vacations, we love to visit national parks and historic sites. Between parks, seashores, memorials, and other venues, we have visited nearly fifty sites in the United States National Park system. The highlights of our trips for the kids? Not so much the natural beauty, scenic hikes, or history exhibits. No, the highlights are usually the gift shops. The kids find stuffed animals, puzzles, magnets, or other souvenirs, and I try to justify buying them as a "donation" to the park system.

In other parts of life, don't we also get sidetracked by gimmicks or gadgets or something else? We are often surrounded by magnificent events or people or tasks, and all we do is "take in the gift shops." We miss what is really there because we are distracted by the trivial.

Peter and the others had good reason to be fishing. It was their livelihood. They probably thought they would be fishing every day for the rest of their lives. And there wouldn't have been anything wrong with that. But God had something else in mind for them. Imagine what they would have missed out on if they had declined Jesus' invitation and remained in their boats!

Don't get distracted by the trivial things in life and miss what God might be calling you to do. The gift shop isn't all there is. He has so much more in store for us all.

Father, open our eyes to what you would have us do and where you would have us go. Help us to see beyond the trivial to the extraordinary. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

PASSION

“Zeal for your house will consume me.”

—John 2:17

My wife has been a school bus driver for more than ten years. She loves what she does, and she is great at it. Her passion for bus driving, taking care of students, and transporting kids is amazing. If anything gets in the way of her doing what she is trained for and loves to do, she will fight it. What makes her a great bus driver is her passion for what she does.

Jesus was passionate about doing his Father’s work. He longed to cultivate the faith of the people around him. If anything stood in the way of forming faith, he was passionate about getting rid of those obstacles. That’s what is behind today’s verses. Money changers and merchants had set up their booths and tables in the temple courts, where people from the nations were supposed to be able to come and worship God. Those vendors didn’t be-

long there, and it was time for them to go.

Jesus is just as passionate about forming faith in us. In all of our lives there are things that stand in the way of our spiritual growth. Maybe we hold a grudge. Maybe there’s a deep-seated sin we need to confess. Maybe the busyness of daily life or an addiction keeps distracting us. Whatever it is, Jesus is passionate about helping us get rid of it so that our faith can grow. He wants to clear out whatever holds us back from him.

Will you let Jesus clear out the things that hold you back?

Jesus, cleanse me from within. Clear out whatever holds me back from trusting in you and growing in you today. Amen.

NIGHT

A man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council . . . came to Jesus at night. . . . —John 3:1-2

When I worked in full-time youth ministry, I was available to students 24/7. I would play board games with them until very late at night, meet them for coffee any time of day or night, and get up early to have breakfast with them. I loved those times with students, but they were exhausting! I was younger then and maybe didn't need as much sleep as I do now. Just thinking back to those days makes me feel like I need a nap!

How fortunate for us that Jesus doesn't get exhausted! During his teaching ministry on earth, he needed sleep and times of refreshment away from people, but today, at the right hand of God, he is praying for us always. Even when he was living here, he didn't tell Nicodemus not to bother him at night. Jesus was available to people who wanted to spend time with him.

The same is true today. When I wake up in the middle of the night worried about things at work, or my family, or whatever else is going on in my life, Jesus is there to listen to me. When our kids can't sleep, we remind them to tell God what is bothering them.

Our faith can be formed at any time and in any circumstance. Faith formation doesn't take time off at night or on the weekends. It happens all the time. And Jesus is waiting for us and listening to us all the time. Don't be afraid to go to him at any time.

Lord, thank you for listening to us all the time. You answer us with gentleness and compassion and meet us exactly where we are. Amen.

STORY

“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”
—John 4:29

When I was in high school, some friends and I skipped school one day to go to a Chicago Cubs game. I can't say that was the worst thing I've ever done in my life—in fact, given the opportunity, I'd do it again. But we did all we could to hide our “playing hooky” from our parents and school. We were sure we would be in trouble if we got caught.

Our reading today shows that Jesus had an incredible conversation with a Samaritan woman. During that talk he revealed that she couldn't hide anything from him; he knew all about her. We might think the conversation would have stopped right there. But Jesus didn't dismiss her, as many others would have, and she didn't run away in shame.

That's not even the most incredible part, though. When their conversation was over,

the woman went back to her town and told everyone to come and meet Jesus. In fact, she used her own story to introduce everyone to Jesus.

We all have things in our lives that we aren't proud of. But there is nothing in our lives that Jesus can't forgive, and there is nothing in our lives that Jesus can't use to build our faith in him.

What's more, there is nothing in our life story that Jesus can't use to introduce others to him. All he asks is that we be open to his grace and tell other about his transforming work in our lives.

Jesus, redeem our stories, build our faith in you, and allow us to share who you are in our lives with everyone we meet. Amen.

AUTHORITY

They were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority.
—Luke 4:32

Being a pastor can mean that people think of you as different from most others—as if you are more spiritual and know everything about faith and God. I've never really gotten used to walking into a room and being seen as different or having authority because I am a pastor. It makes me nervous—as if every word I say has to count and everything I do is watched carefully.

I need to be constantly reminded that Jesus is the true authority and power. I'm nothing special, and I haven't accomplished anything by my own power. On my own, I'd just be a couch potato, watching TV reruns and eating Cheetos all day. But with God's power and authority, I can help lead a church and present his Word to others. God's power is so much greater than mine, and that's a really good thing!

I think we all need this reminder in our lives. Any time we begin to think we have all the answers, we need to be reminded that ultimately it all comes from God.

At the end of Jesus' ministry, he told his disciples that all authority had been given to him. Then he sent them into the world as his representatives (Matthew 28:18-20.) By his authority we are sent to bring his good news of grace and love to the world as well.

Our faith isn't built on our own abilities and strength. It is built on Jesus' power and authority.

Jesus, remind us every day that you are in charge. Your power and authority are supreme, and we are your people, living in your world and showing who you are to people every day. Help us, Lord. Amen.

FAITH

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."
—Luke 5:20

Perhaps you have heard the phrase "Faith can move mountains." Jesus actually talks about faith that strong later in his ministry (see Mark 11:22-25). I've always marveled at that phrase. I've spent considerable time in the mountains. I've lived near the Rockies, the Sierra Nevadas, and the Cascades in the western United States. Mountains are huge. They are ancient geological barriers that can weather any storm. They are solid and enduring, strong and unyielding.

But faith in Jesus is even stronger and bigger. The faith of the friends in this passage is strong enough to tear apart a roof to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus, because they know he can heal their friend. Jesus is so moved by their faith that he does what they want him to do—and he doesn't even criticize them for damaging

the roof! The amazing thing is that Jesus does even more than they have hoped. He forgives the man's sins as well as healing him from paralysis. In this way the friends' faith becomes an example to everyone there who has come to see Jesus.

Faith can move people to do incredible things. And in response, Jesus can make huge impacts in this world. He can heal and forgive. He can change the heart of an individual or the hearts an entire group of people. This is all because of his ability to see faith in anyone who comes to him, whether they walk or are carried by their friends.

Jesus, build faith inside us so we can see how you call us to act, trusting in you to make amazing changes for good in this world. Amen.

DO GOOD

"Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

—Matthew 12:12

What keeps us from doing good? Sometimes it's our busyness. Other times it may be that doing something good is not convenient. Or perhaps we just don't want to go against social norms, so we hold back. Whatever the reason, at one time or another, most of us have passed up an opportunity to do something good for someone.

The Pharisees presented Jesus with a difficult situation. Their laws said it was a violation to do work on the Sabbath, unless it meant saving a life. But here in the temple was a man with a withered hand. His life was not in danger, though. Should he be healed on the Sabbath?

Jesus didn't even hesitate. He asked the religious leaders what they would do if something bad happened to one of their precious sheep on the Sabbath. Of course they would

help the animal. And wasn't a person more valuable than a sheep? This man with a shriveled hand was precious to God. So of course this man could be helped on the Sabbath. Then Jesus healed the man.

Should anything stop us from doing good for each other? No.

Nothing stood in Jesus' way. We are his treasured possessions. He has done and will do whatever it takes to rescue us and make us whole. Healing, deliverance, salvation, care—none of these things is beyond reason for God to act. So nothing should stand in our way either.

Father, you never hesitate to pour out your goodness on us. Let us never hesitate to do the same for others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

BLESSED

“Blessed are...”

—Matthew 5:3

I often do my studying and sermon writing at a local Starbucks, and every once in a while I take a moment to watch people. In a coffee shop like this, one often sees hip-looking people buying expensive drinks and pastries from Millennial baristas. But sometimes something happens that sort of flips the script a bit. A homeless man walked in today and asked for some water. Everyone looked uncomfortable. He got his water, meandered around for a bit, and left. Then everything went back to “normal.”

In his teaching to the crowds, Jesus often flipped the script, saying and doing things that were not expected. “Blessed are the poor in spirit”? “Blessed are those who mourn”? “Blessed are those who are persecuted . . .”? This makes no sense to our “normal” way of thinking, and most of it makes us uncomfortable.

But faith isn’t formed in comfort. It is formed when challenged and when we aren’t allowed to sit smugly in our preconceived notions about people and the world around us. Faith is formed when Jesus looks at a crowd of people and points out that the ones who are blessed are those who realize they are not self-sufficient but depend totally on God. When we wake up to that realization, we are blessed as well.

Though we don’t deserve it, God’s blessing is available to all of us. Blessed are you, dear reader, when you know you depend on God, because his love will see you through.

Jesus, thank you for loving and blessing us, though we don’t deserve it. Amen.

SALT AND LIGHT

"You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world. . . ."
—Matthew 5:13-14

Our family went on a tour of the Jewel Cave National Monument in South Dakota last summer. My favorite part of a cave tour like that is when they turn off all the lights and there is nothing but darkness all around. You could stare at your hand for hours and never see it in front of you. Your eyes need light in order to see anything, so they can't see in total darkness. But once a light is turned on again, everything is illuminated. You can see the walls and the floor and the people around you. Even the smallest amount of light makes a difference in a totally dark cave.

Jesus tells his listeners that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They cannot be hidden; they are called to influence what is around them. The faith that Jesus forms in us compels us to do that. It doesn't just remain inside of us. It over-

flows from us and shines God's light in the darkness of the world around us.

In our conversations with people—whether they are friends or people we haven't met before—is there a right or a wrong time to talk about our faith in Jesus? Some friends and I were discussing that one day. But maybe that discussion was misleading. Light doesn't wait around, choosing the right time to express itself. Neither does salt. And neither does our faith. It makes an impact on its surroundings at all times.

Faith should always influence our conversations and actions. It has to—that's just its nature.

Jesus, allow our faith to flavor and illuminate everything we do and say every day. Amen.

LOVE

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. . . ."

—Luke 6:27

I don't know if I have any enemies. As a Chicago Cubs fan, the closest thing to an enemy that I can think of is a St. Louis Cardinals fan. But, then, my best friend is a Cardinals fan, so I'm sure that's not the kind of "enemy" Jesus is talking about. We might not like each other's baseball teams, but we don't curse each other or wish any harm on one another.

The world is filled with examples of enemies, though. Our Internet feed is bursting with people who speak out against each other and may wish harm on others. There are probably even people in my life who disagree with me to the point that they wouldn't mind if something bad happened to me. If I'm honest, I can think of a few people that I don't particularly like either. Some people are harder to love than others.

Jesus' words here are challenging. He doesn't just tell us to put up with our enemies. He tells us to *love* them. Love isn't just a feeling; it is an action. He calls us to actively love those who hate and mistreat us. These are hard commands to follow.

But if we are to have the kind of faith that Jesus calls us to, then action is needed. So we must actively love our enemies and pray for those who mistreat us. We put the lives of those people in the hands of Jesus, and we let go of grudges, hatred, and all the evil that may have been done to us. We also ask others to do the same for us.

Loving our friends is easy. Loving our enemies is a real step of faith.

Father, help me to love my enemies as only you can love. In Jesus, Amen.

FRUIT

"Each tree is recognized by its own fruit."

—Luke 6:44

We enjoyed gardening when we lived in California. Every year we would harvest a variety of produce from our small garden beds. One of my favorite photos from that time shows our son holding up a head of broccoli bigger than his own head. We also planted some fruit trees. But we didn't label some of them and couldn't remember which ones were peach and which ones were nectarine—until they produced fruit, that is.

In Luke 6, Jesus isn't just talking about trees. He's talking about people. People can be known by what they produce. On the outside everything can look good, but the fruit that is produced might not be as pleasant as the outward appearance.

Faith has a way of producing fruit in us. Faith that is founded on strong roots in God, his promises to us, his Word in

us, faithful prayer, and a community of believers around us can't help producing the fruits of justice, peace, good news, grace, love, and forgiveness. Good trees bear good fruit, and bad trees bear bad fruit.

What kind of fruit is faith producing in you? If the produce of your life isn't very good, it's time to take a look at the tree of your life. Take a look at what roots you have, and begin to develop the good roots of faith provided by Christ. When the roots are good, the fruit can't help being good as well.

Father, help us to examine the fruit of our lives. Fill us with faith that is strong from the roots up so that our fruit will be good and pleasing to you. Amen.

FOUNDATION

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

—Matthew 7:24

Have you ever seen pictures of a house fallen into the sea after a storm washed away its foundation? I can't imagine what it would be like to watch the house I call home ruined by a storm. It must be devastating and make you feel so helpless.

Jesus gives some building advice in the parable we have read today. But he is talking about more than building houses. He is talking about building our lives and making sure their foundation is firm, made up of wisdom and faith in him.

This foundation requires two things. It first involves listening to Jesus' words. Listening is really important and can be hard to do. I work with students a lot, and getting them to listen to instructions isn't always easy. Listening often means putting aside our own

ideas or agendas and paying attention for a while.

But listening is only the first step in the foundation of our faith lives. The next step is doing what he asks of us. If we only listen and don't do what is asked, we haven't really accomplished anything. Our faith can be filled with knowledge and belief, but if it isn't tied to action, it rings hollow. Doing is really important!

Is the house of your life built on the foundation of faith that involves both listening to what Jesus is saying and doing what he asks? That is the way of life Jesus is calling us to.

Lord, give me the faith that listens to your Word and does what you ask. In your name, Amen.

WHERE?

“Where is your faith?”

—Luke 8:25

Jesus often asked really challenging questions. And when someone asked him a question, he often responded with a question in return. He wanted people to think about what they were doing in life and why.

When his disciples woke him in the midst of a storm on the lake, Jesus could have asked a lot of questions: Where are we? What time is it? Which way to shore? Who knows how to swim? But he didn't ask any of those questions. Instead, he rebuked the wind and the waves, stood there in the renewed calm looking at his disciples, and asked them, “Where is your faith?”

When we think about it, even though we can understand the disciples' fear, maybe we should wonder about their reaction to this storm. Did they really think their journey with Jesus was going to end in a storm at sea?

How often might Jesus ask us where our faith is? Storms come up all the time: a cancer diagnosis, an empty bank account, the loss of a job, a broken relationship. All of these things can knock us off balance, and in the midst of them, our faith can falter. We wonder where God is. We question his judgment and love. But Jesus calmly asks, “Where is your faith?”—not in a condemning way, but with the most love and patience we have ever known.

Jesus' question begs the answer: “My faith is standing right there, embodied in Jesus Christ, who is in control of all things, even the fiercest storm.”

Father, thank you for reminding us that you are in control and you are always with us, even when we feel like we are sinking. Amen.

HEALED

"Your faith has healed you."

—Matthew 9:22

I have to be honest: this story confuses me on my best day and angers me on my worst. I have known many people with faith much stronger than mine who have died from illnesses like cancer, heart disease, and pneumonia. I can remember sitting in a small country church and hearing a pastor express his belief that if anyone was battling an illness like cancer, all they had to do was pray harder and have more faith and they would be healed. My wife had to work hard to keep me calm.

Even so, Jesus says quite clearly that this woman was healed because of her faith. So how do we understand the role that faith plays here?

First, faith is planted and nurtured by God and grows in us because of Jesus' work in our lives. It is a product of his closeness to us. While we do things to develop our faith, it is all in

relationship to God and not by our own works. Faith is from God, and this woman's healing happened in relationship with God through Christ.

Second, Jesus says that this woman's faith healed her. He doesn't say that everyone's faith heals all things. To think that all illness can and should be healed by the faith of the sick person isn't what Jesus means here. But Jesus is pointing out that faith is a strong and important component of our lives.

God's gift of faith in us can do amazing things for us and for those around us. Let's ask God to increase our faith today.

Father, by your gift of faith in us, heal us of the damage of sin in our lives. Grow in us faith that brings us closer to you. Amen.

FOLLOW ME

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. . . . Whoever loses their life for me will find it.”
—Matthew 16:24

Imagine going to a financial planner who tells you that if you want to save for retirement, you have to spend all your money. Or imagine talking to a dietician who says that if you want to lose weight, you need to eat as many cheeseburgers as you can. It just doesn't make sense. But Jesus' teaching here can sound almost like that: To find life, you have to give up your life for him.

Being a disciple of Jesus is often about not doing what the world says we should do. We live in a culture of hyper-individualism and self-interest. “Do what is good for yourself first,” the world says. “Look out for number one.” But following Jesus means doing what he asks and not always what I want. It means relying on his strength and power, not my own. It means putting his mission and purpose above my

own ambitions and goals. It means humbling myself and following Jesus, wherever he leads.

Discipleship is hard work. Even his disciples, who heard these teachings directly from Jesus, didn't get it right all the time.

Discipleship requires that we listen closely for God to guide us. It means that we get to know his Word and what it means for our lives. It means that we seek the counsel of believers around us and discern his calling in our lives together. It also means that we stop putting ourselves first and instead love God with everything we have.

Father, help me deny myself and follow you in everything I do. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

COST

She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

—Mark 14:3

There have been a few times when our family received very generous gifts. Those were times of financial need for us, and they were more appreciated than I could ever say. But, honestly, it took me a while to accept such generosity. Personal pride got in the way and made me feel guilty about accepting those gifts. But the bottom line was always that the people who felt led to give didn't do it out of guilt or duty. They did it because they loved our family and knew that God had blessed them to be a blessing to others.

We know that the cost of discipleship—following Jesus—involves relying on God and following his calling in our lives. The people who blessed our family were doing just that. The woman in today's story gave extravagantly to Jesus with no thought about her own needs or agenda. She

simply did what she was called to do.

Some of the people who saw this asked why she would do such a thing. That can happen when a person follows God's leading and shows generosity.

Surely there were other people more needy than our family when we received generous gifts. Surely the money spent on the jar of perfume for Jesus could have helped people in need. But Jesus was the one whom the woman was called to bless at that time. She followed God's leading in her that day.

What is God leading you to do? Whom is he calling you to bless today?

Father, allow us to hear your call and to follow wherever you may lead, no matter the cost. Amen.

COMMUNITY

“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”
—Matthew 12:50

I love the word *community*. Many of the student groups I have worked with over the years have gotten tired of hearing me talk about community. But I can't help it. I love the concept of people gathering together for the purposes of accountability, learning, fellowship, and mission. Besides, it's in the Bible, so it's got to be good!

Jesus was teaching a group of people about faith and the kingdom and discipleship. And while he was talking to the crowd, his own family came to speak to him. But instead of dropping everything and talking to them, Jesus continued teaching, and he even used his family as an example. “Who is my family?” he asked, in effect. “Those who do the will of my Father in heaven—they are my family.”

Was Jesus denying his biological family here? No, but he

was not going to put them ahead of doing the will of God.

Jesus redefined family and community here in a radical way. Instead of simply being a gathering of relatives or like-minded neighbors, the community became people we gather with for the purpose of faith, mission, and challenge in living for God.

Who is your family? Who holds you accountable to God's purposes in life, and who walks alongside you in both good and bad times? With whom do you gather for the purposes of faith-building, mission, and challenge? Wherever you find those people, there is your family—the community of God.

Father, thank you for the community you have built around me. Help me to find people to walk with me through life. Amen.

SATISFIED

They all ate and were satisfied. . . .

—Luke 9:17

I can remember the best meal I ever ate. My wife and I went out for a nice dinner to a fine restaurant with close friends. My steak melted like butter in my mouth. We laughed and talked about life and ministry and whatever else came to mind. We enjoyed everything about that evening so much—the food, the company, the setting, the emotions.

I remember leaving that meal totally satisfied—not just because I had enjoyed an incredible steak but also because everything about that night was amazing. I was full; I had amazing companions; I knew I was in the right place in my life; I felt blessed by God.

Jesus looked out over the crowd he had been teaching all day and knew that they were hungry. They were hungry for physical food, but I think they were even more hungry

for purpose and meaning. So Jesus fed them—completely. He stretched a few loaves and fish far enough to feed a massive crowd. But even more, he satisfied their need for the sustaining bread of life that comes only through him.

The only food that sustains our faith forever is the food that Jesus gives: the fullness of life that comes through his presence and mission and Word in our life. If we try to fill up on anything else, we will be hungry again. But if we fill ourselves with the bread that comes from God, we will be satisfied.

Father, feed us with the bread of life that comes from your Son so that we will always be satisfied. In his name, Amen.

WARNINGS

"If anyone causes . . ."

—Mark 9:42

I'll never forget a hike we took with students in a canyon in Arizona. The path was steep and narrow. One of the students was scared of losing her footing but still wanted to make the hike. So for the entire time, she held onto the back of my backpack for stability and security. I've never watched my footing so carefully, because someone along with me was relying on it.

I think about that hike when I read this passage. Causing someone else to stumble on a treacherous path would be cruel. Causing someone else to stumble in their faith could be devastating. Jesus took it so seriously that he said it would be better to tie a giant rock around your neck and drown than to cause someone to stumble. I've worked with students for many years, and while I've been a mentor and role model to many, I'm

sure I've caused some students to stumble as well. Those instances cause me pain.

Our calling as followers of Christ is to walk with others who are journeying the same way we are. We support each other in our faith. We strive to be there when questions are asked. We try to be a shoulder to cry on and a partner to laugh with. We journey together.

Jesus reminds us to be a support for others rather than causing them to stumble or fall. We must also watch out for the things in our life that can cause us to stumble. It's better to get rid of them than to fall.

Father, help us to hold each other up in our journey of faith, and help us to rid ourselves of the things that cause us to stumble. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LOST

“When he finds [the lost sheep], he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.”
—Luke 15:5

I don't lose things very often, but I once lost track of a student during an all-night event at our church. I left him behind when the rest of us left to go bowling. He had wandered off by himself to another part of the building, and, because we were running late, we left church in a hurry and didn't count how many students got into the vans. We were waiting in line for bowling when one of the other students got a text from the stranded boy wondering where we all were. I felt horrible and drove back as fast as I could to find him!

When we lose something that's important to us, we have a sense of urgency to find it right away. This helps us understand how seriously God takes it when a person gets lost in life—for he loves us more deeply than we can imagine. In this parable Jesus explains that his

Father will leave behind everything else and do what it takes to bring his lost child home (see also John 3:16). That kind of love and concern can be a huge comfort for us—and give us new life!

We all know people whose faith journeys have become derailed because of questions or conflicts. Perhaps it is a child or a parent. Maybe you have wandered away from God yourself and are lost. God doesn't forget any of us, no matter how far we might wander.

He is pursuing every lost person as his beloved child so that they can have full life. And when they are finally home, the celebration is amazing!

Father, thank you for pursuing us to rescue us and carry us into eternity with you. In Jesus, Amen.

FOLLOW

A man said to [Jesus], "I will follow you wherever you go."

—Luke 9:57

I remember playing “follow the leader” as a child. I loved the game because it was always an adventure. Where would the leader take us? What obstacles will we have to overcome? The leader could climb a tree or duck under a ledge or walk through a puddle. It didn’t matter, because wherever the leader went, the followers had to go.

In this story Jesus is walking along the road, and people are following him. Some seem willing to follow right away, while others need to take care of other matters first. Jesus warns those who are willing that the life of following will not be easy. He also tells the people who have excuses to forget them and follow him immediately.

Jesus’ responses seem a bit odd. Why try to talk someone out of following while chastising others who have excuses?

Let’s think about that together. Following Jesus—living the life of faith in him—is not easy work. It calls for putting others’ needs ahead of our own, and it requires sacrifice. It may be exciting at times, but it is not defined by things that often attract us—like the latest trends, an amazing new leader, or mind-blowing miracles. Those aren’t the reasons why Jesus calls us to follow. He calls us to share his message and to bring change for good in a broken world that doesn’t want change. He calls us to live by doing what’s right, but there’s always resistance to that. It may be difficult, but we can trust that as we follow our leader, he is always with us.

Lord, help us to follow you in every area of life and to trust you as our leader who is always with us. Amen.

GREATEST

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”
—Matthew 22:37

I like to ask students what they think Jesus means by “all your heart and . . . soul and . . . mind.” At first they usually look at me as if I have asked a really dumb question. Then their looks change while I sit there in silence, and they wonder where to start.

When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment, he gave a very familiar answer. It was a part of Scripture that most of his listeners would have known by heart (see Deut. 6:4-9). Some, though, might have been surprised to hear this described as “the greatest commandment.”

When you think about it, what does it mean to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”? And how about the second greatest command: “Love your neighbor as yourself”? These cover everything

in life, don't they? And it is one thing to say them, but quite another to live them out.

Yet that's what Jesus calls his followers to do: Love God with every part of your being, and love your neighbor. And living that out in every part of our lives—at work, at school, at the store, on the road, with family and friends, with neighbors and strangers—doesn't have to be complicated. We can trust that God is with us every step of the way to help and guide us.

Do you hear Jesus' call to live that way today—and every day?

Lord, help us to love you with every part of our being, and guide us to love our neighbors as ourselves. In your name, Amen.

DISTRACTED?

But Martha was distracted. . . .

—Luke 10:40

While driving my daughter home from school one day, I was getting frustrated that a stop light was taking so long. She commented that she wasn't excited to drive when she got older. We talked about that a bit, and I told her that while of course you have to be careful, driving is fairly easy. You just can't let yourself get distracted.

In our story today, Martha is described as distracted. Jesus was teaching a group of people at her house, and Mary, Martha's sister, was listening to him. Martha was doing what anyone would do when a group came to their home. She was making preparations to serve her guests. She was being a good host! But when she complained that Mary was not helping her, Jesus said Mary had chosen what was better. What did that mean?

Well, Martha was distracted by all sorts of things that had to be taken care of. And those things were good and maybe even necessary. But even good and necessary things can distract us from paying attention to Jesus.

Money, work, school, friends, and family are all good and necessary. But if we let them take priority in our lives, are we loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind? Today, when we have the Internet at our fingertips, and if we have extra income to spend as we like, discernment is needed, and we must be careful not to get distracted.

Are there any things in life—even good things—that distract you from following Jesus?

Lord, help us not to be distracted from keeping our main focus on you in all that we do. Amen.

ASK

"Ask and it will be given to you. . . ."

—Matthew 7:7

I love buying things for my kids. Whether it's a game, a stuffed animal, or a Lego set, I love seeing the look of joy on their faces. But I don't buy them everything they want. Sometimes we just don't have the money in our budget. Other times I know that what they want isn't good for them. And still other times it just isn't necessary.

Sometimes this passage in Matthew 7 baffles me. Jesus is telling his followers that whatever they ask for, they will receive. But many of us have asked God for certain things, and we have not received them. What does Jesus mean in this teaching?

Well, we're mistaken if we think of God as being our own personal genie. It's not as if God should give us a new car, a grand vacation, a raise at work, or an A on a test simply because we ask for it.

Jesus is teaching about God's character in relation to us. God loves us more than an earthly father loves his children. And as part of that, God wants us to be in communication with him, asking and seeking. In all of our living, God wants what is best for us. He wants what will bless us and lead us to follow him more closely. As we learn more about God and the full life he wants for us, we ask for things that we know are in line with his will for us. Sometimes we may be mistaken about those things, but no matter what happens, God is there, loving us and providing what we need. God always wants what is best for us. We may question that sometimes, but it's the truth.

Father, thank you for supplying what is best for us, though we don't always know what that is. Amen.

WORRY

"I tell you, do not worry about your life. . . ."

—Luke 12:22

I worry a lot. Sometimes it keeps me up at night. I worry about things at church. I worry about my family. I worry about my health. I worry about money. I don't think I'm alone in worrying about things. Most people I share my worries with say that they lose sleep over similar things. I guess worrying is pretty normal.

But then I read today's verses, and I worry that I'm not living the life of faith correctly. Ugh! I worry a lot even though Jesus tells us not to worry! A vicious cycle of worry and guilt sets in. Should I feel bad that I worry more than I should? More than Jesus wants me to?

Maybe Jesus told us not to worry because he knew we would. I love the examples he gives to help us not worry. Look at how God takes care of birds. Look at how beautiful he created flowers to be. Those

things are amazing, and God's care for them is elaborate and extensive. And yet God cares for us so much more than for birds and flowers. So why worry?

I don't think I'll stop waking up in the middle of the night from worry anytime soon. But the next time I do that, I'm going to read this passage and remember how much God cares for me. Then I'm going to lie back and rest in the care of the one who has made and loves and cares for me every second of every day. Can you do that too?

Father, help me to rest in the knowledge of your love and provision every day and night. In Jesus, Amen.

INVITATION

"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests."
—Luke 14:16

When we send out an invitation, it's natural to expect a response. One of my most frustrating experiences in ministry is when I get no response from someone after inviting them to an event. Even more frustrating is getting a response that's a lame excuse.

In this parable the banquet-thrower invites many people to his banquet. But when the time comes for the feast, all sorts of excuses are given. "I have to go and check on some property I bought." "I have to go and test-drive my new oxen." "I just got married—sorry, I can't come." We could argue that some of these excuses don't sound so bad, but they are excuses nonetheless. The response of the banquet-thrower? "Go out and invite more people! Go to the streets and alleys, the country lanes and roads, and urge the people to come."

Jesus is a banquet-thrower. He is inviting each of us to his amazing feast in the kingdom of heaven. His invitation goes out to everyone, everywhere! You might find yourself in the alleys or country lanes of life, but Jesus will still seek you out with his invitation. All you have to do is come.

Many of us have grown used to making excuses, however. "I have something else to do." "I have other people to see." Or maybe our excuses are more personal: "I don't feel worthy to go, because I've messed up. How could Jesus possibly want me?"

Jesus wants you. Please come.

Banquet-Thrower, invite us to your feast today, and create in us the desire to come. Amen.

SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. . . ."
—John 10:14

In youth ministry we try to communicate the message of Jesus to our students in practical, meaningful ways. Sometimes examples from popular culture can work pretty well. But pop culture changes quickly. For example, if I use the phrase "where everybody knows your name," people familiar with the 1980s and '90s will immediately think of the TV show *Cheers*. But barely any of my students today have ever seen or heard of that show.

Today's verse reminds me of that phrase from *Cheers*. Whether we admit it or not, we all like to be known. It can be heartwarming to walk into a room of people who know and appreciate us. It's a setting without barriers and preconceived notions, where people can be themselves and build one another up in love. It's a place of community!

Our good shepherd, Jesus, knows us, his sheep, and is willing to lay down his life for us. This is an incredible revelation in our journey of discipleship. We are not following someone who doesn't know us. Our shepherd knows everything about us and loves all of us the same.

Our faults don't drive him away. Our successes don't make him love us any more than he already does. And above all, our shepherd shows his love by laying down his very life for us. There's no place we can go and be known and loved as well as we are in the flock of Jesus.

Lord, thank you for knowing us and for laying down your life for us, for being our good shepherd and making us your sheep. In your name, Amen.

LAST

"Many who are first will be last, and the last first."

—Mark 10:31

I haven't won many awards. I'm not especially gifted at anything that might earn me an award or a trophy. I coached a middle school team a few years back, and we won some tournaments. That was great, but no "coach of the year" trophy came with it—and that's fine with me.

Winning can be a thrill, though. It's a pretty big thing for most people—and many of us are so competitive that we feel we just have to win. That's why today's verse is so countercultural. The first will be last, and the last first? That doesn't make sense. No one competes for the goal of being last. No one remembers the ones who come in last. But maybe that's the point.

The economy of the gospel isn't like everything else. Good looks and megatalent don't earn anything. In fact, very little that we value in this world—from wealth and prestige to power and posi-

tion—means anything when it comes to following Jesus. At times, our stuff and accomplishments can even get in the way of following Jesus.

Think of it this way: when we realize that the things we often rely on don't actually gain us anything, we find ourselves in a place where we are ready to rely on Jesus. We realize that everything good we have and all we have accomplished is a gift from God. And we are ready to share it with others, rather than holding on to it for ourselves. With love and generosity and making room for people, putting others ahead of ourselves, we begin to follow and act like Jesus.

Lord, help us to realize we rely on you for everything. May we follow your example and live for you. Amen.

SERVANT

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. . . .”
—Matthew 20:28

The story in our reading today often makes me laugh—mostly because of how uncomfortable it makes me feel. I wonder if James and John put their mom up to this task, or if it was her idea. I’ve had parents ask for some pretty interesting favors for their kids, but nothing compares to this. And when Jesus asks James and John if they could handle the challenges he would face, they are all for it. But they really have no idea what they’re talking about. The other disciples’ response is eye-opening too: they were “indignant with the two brothers.”

Jesus doesn’t let this moment go to waste. He uses it to teach about being a servant. Though the world prizes money and possessions, leadership and authority, Jesus’ way of doing things flips that upside down. The first will be last, and the last first—so we are called to

serve rather than to lord it over others. Serving people is key to what it means to be a disciple in Jesus’ kingdom.

Jesus doesn’t hesitate to use himself as the prime example. If anyone ever qualified as having authority, it is Jesus: Son of God, healer of all sorts of illnesses, with power over life and death, authority over demons, and much more. Jesus tells his disciples that he has not come to be served, but to serve.

If Jesus came to be a servant, then we, his followers, are called to be servants too.

Father, help us to see our place in your kingdom as servants of all. Help us to follow Jesus’ example and serve others. In your name we pray. Amen.

QUIET

"If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

—Luke 19:40

This month we have reflected on what it means to be a disciple, a follower, of Christ. Yet we have barely scratched the surface of how Jesus formed the faith of the people who followed him. He invited them on the journey and walked with them every step of the way. He challenged them to grow and learn. He taught, encouraged, and admonished them, accepting each one for who they were. He didn't leave them by the roadside to fend for themselves, and he didn't abandon them when they messed up.

Jesus calls each of us also to follow him in all areas of life, wherever that may lead. He encourages devotion and loyalty as we die to ourselves and our own ambitions and live for him.

In our passage for today, Jesus' disciples follow him into Jerusalem, proclaiming him as king (though soon he will lay

down his life for human sin, and then rise in victory over death). They praise him with every part of their being, honoring him as their Savior. When the religious leaders tell Jesus to keep his disciples quiet, he says that if they remain silent, even the rocks will praise him. As impossible as it sounds for rocks to cry out, it's impossible for Jesus' followers not to praise him.

The task of Jesus' disciples is to follow—to give him glory, honor, and praise. They continually point to him as their example. And they praise him in every situation with all of their being. That is our task too as followers of Jesus.

Father, help us to follow Jesus and to praise him every day of our lives. In his name we pray. Amen.

ROOM FOR OTHERS

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

—Matthew 25:40

The life of following Christ is not just about “me, me, me.” The gospels challenge us repeatedly to devote our lives to living for others. Jesus equates serving others with serving God.

All too often, though, our lives become consumed by our own plans. Our schedules may be filled with important, honorable things to do. Yet we often risk focusing only on our own plans and missing out on the opportunities God gives us to make room for others in life.

Matthew repeatedly stresses that if we love God, we will inevitably love others. In fact, if we don't love others, our love for God is in question. Love in action is not just for the people closest to us but also for people who are marginalized, suffering, and in need. When we care for such people, we

are actually showing our love for Jesus.

For many of us, the thought of showing hospitality tends toward shared time with friends and family. But do we consider hospitality as an active expression of our faith? The Bible calls us to “welcome the stranger” and “practice hospitality.” More than making room, hospitality calls for Christians to be ready even for the unexpected. While our deeds of compassion and mercy are not the means by which we enter God's kingdom, they show that we are part of God's family.

Lord, help us to see the opportunities you give us to care for others. Make us generous in compassion and care as we live each moment today. Amen.



ALEXA,

PLAY *TODAY* DEVOTIONAL

Today

NOW AVAILABLE ON ALEXA ENABLED DEVICES

VISIT [TODAYDEVOTIONAL.COM/ALEXA](https://www.todaydevotional.com/alexa) FOR MORE INFORMATION



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



Back to God
Ministries International

3475 Mainway
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8
905-336-2920
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional

Periodicals postage paid at
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at
additional mailing offices.

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



Back to God
Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional
