

Pondering the Gospels

by Ray Sanders

Gone Fishin'

We learn in the gospels that when Peter, Andrew, James and John encountered Jesus, while out fishing, they immediately dropped what they were doing and followed him. What was so compelling about Jesus that caused grown men to make a radical change in their plans? What avid fisherman do you know that would readily and enthusiastically drop his fishing pole for anything other than to bait his hook in preparation for another cast? What motivated these men to stop what they were doing and follow Jesus?

We find a hint in John 1:14 where the scriptures reveal Jesus was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. Can you imagine meeting such a person? Someone so full of love and faithfulness that such words were the only way you could think of describing them? Jesus was that kind of guy.

How did Jesus say people would know we are his disciples? Is it any surprise that his trademark would be the key to success? Simply put, it is by our love for one another. (John 13:35) Jesus said I will show you how to fish for people. I will teach you how to be fishers of men. In essence, Jesus was saying, I will show you how to love.

Love is irresistible. No wonder the apostles dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus. His love compelled their hearts to change. His love compelled them to love God, love others as they loved themselves.

It is interesting that Jesus compared his ministry to fishing. Anyone who has ever learned to fish knows the best way to learn is from a master fisherman. It looks easy but only because the master understands fish, he knows how to gain their attention. What he offers is irresistible and draws them in.

We would do well to stop what we are doing. Our strategies, techniques and gimmicks pale in comparison to what Jesus has to offer. We need to simply follow Jesus and let him teach us how to fish. Like a lot of novice fishermen, we tend to over complicate it. Jesus was full of love and faithfulness. People found him to be utterly irresistible. What a guy!

May others find us in pursuit of him and in so doing experience the love and faithfulness that comes when only on a fishing trip with Jesus. Needless to say, I'm hooked. How about you? See yah, I'm gone fish'n!

(Inspired by Matthew 4:18-22)

The photo of us was taken just a few days ago on our 3 year reunion anniversary. We celebrated by eating one of his favorite things, chocolate covered peanuts. We laughed as I had to wipe his hands and face from the mess he made from all the melted chocolate! (January 20, 2017.). SMOOCH!. So, where are you? Just checkin

Are You a Back Talker?

Back talkers come in all shapes and sizes. There are different kinds of back talkers. Some back talkers are courageous and spew sarcasm to your face as you make your point. They are arrogant know-it-alls. Their mouths run on and on like a runaway toilet overflowing with crap!

Other back talkers are cowards and talk behind your back. They are gutless wimps who can't face you so they pretend to be genuine and then the minute you exit or turn your back, the back talking begins.

Back talkers like these usually run in packs and are too stupid to realize that the family and friends they back talk with will do the same to them once they turn their backs. What a bunch of fakes! Spineless really.

I know family, friends, coworkers and have overheard total strangers who are professional back talkers.

How about you? Are you a back talker? Next time you are tempted to be a back talker remember this: Yakety, yak, don't talk back!

(Inspired by Matthew 5:22)

Keep Walking

Learning to walk in the shoes of another is to experience a journey from emphatic to instinctive empathy. When under consistent emotional distress and pain we become conditioned to build an emotional barrier between ourselves and others.

We become unable to empathize or take on the pain of others due to the level of discontent we ourselves have experienced. As a result, we fail to express empathy for others for sake of our own survival and in an effort to preserve our mental and physical wellbeing.

Quite simply, our pain has caused us to reach our empathy threshold. We are at our limit and are unable to take on the added emotional baggage of others strictly as a matter of preserving our personal sanity.

Living under prolonged conditions of abuse and dysfunction hardwires our brains for self preservation and leaves little room for empathy for others due to the level of personal stress we have endured.

It is not that we don't care, want to be unkind or are insensitive. We simply have nothing else to give. Our emotional tank has been tapped. It is bone dry and is in need of replenishment in its own right. We have been hurt and now our inability to recover has left us unable to empathize with others. The hurt multiplies not so much as a result of what we do but as a result of what we don't do as needs for empathy go unmet in the lives of others.

Only when we are removed from the negative environment are we in a position to consider utilizing our empathy reserves for others. Even then the thought of empathizing with others may come with reluctance for fear of needing to retain empathy for our own needs.

Once we have become stronger emotionally and no longer perceive the need for empathy ourselves are we then in a position to extend and grant empathy to others.

Until such time, our use of empathy will be emphatic and much less instinctive. With improved circumstances, greater self awareness and regular intentionality, our empathy for others will grow as we project the empathy we have had for ourselves into the lives of others.

Because we are in a better state of mind, the world will be a better place as we learn to express greater empathy for one another.

Walking in the shoes of another becomes easier as we have walked in shoes of our own. Nonetheless, we must keep walking! We're in this together!

(Inspired by Matthew 5:41)

Show the Way

Are you willing to listen? What I am about to say is radical, counter intuitive and counter culture, most of all. Maybe you have heard these words before but never knew the source. Perhaps, now more than ever, in times like these, the words of Jesus lead the way to better days.

“Love your enemies.”

“Do good to those who hate.”

“Bless those who curse.”

“Pray for those who hurt.”

“Give to those who ask.”

“Treat others like you want to be treated.”

If you are like me, these ideas and ways of Jesus are a bit hard to swallow. I’m more inclined to bare arms and raise a fist than to offer a hug and an ear of understanding. Do these suggestions sound weak? Try to implement them and you will soon discover, they are anything but soft. They are hard to accomplish and require incredible self control. To take such a stand is no sign of weakness. It is rather a sign of strength. To do so is as if to say to those whose motives are harmful, “Is that all you’ve got? Here, try the other cheek! Bring it.”

When you act and respond in ways of kindness, you are in fact a demonstrator, a protester of hate and a proclaimer of love. You are not a rioter but a revolutionist. You stand for what is good, right and loving. You are acting as a child of God. Rather than bite back, one up or prove your point, love is to be our only response and responsibility. The truth can and must be expressed in love. Love is not weak. Love is the strongest of adhesives. When all else fails, love prevails.

Hate won’t hold. Hate won’t last. Hate will burn out. Hate will lose. Why commit to a loving way? Because He taught us to be kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. Like Him we are called to be compassionate, even to those who hate. Certainly, there are things the Lord hates. He hates certain actions but always loves the actors. He hates all sin but always loves sinners. He hates it when we hate others, including our enemies. He loves it when we love those who hate us. Why? Because without love nothing will change. Love is the breakthrough. Love is the strategy. Love will win the day. Love will find a way, not hate. We must find and follow the way of love. It won’t be easy but it is the only way we will ever survive and stay alive. Give some thought to this approach the next time you respond to a post, upload a thought or open your mouth in a discussion with someone who doesn’t share your perspective. Remember, love will show the way, not hate!

(Inspired by Matthew 5:43-44)

Take Heart

A lack of blessing is not a sign of disapproval any more than prosperity is a sign of approval. It rains on the just and unjust alike.

The secret is to trust the Lord regardless of the circumstances.

Be careful not to equate God's love, acceptance and blessing with ease, comfort and abundance. There is no guarantee of comfort in a calling. God is often more evident during challenging times than times of ease.

Don't allow the blessings you observe in the lives of others to cause you to doubt your value, calling or obedience to God. He often calls the strongest to the hardest assignments. If it were easy, anyone could do it. You were hand picked to demonstrate what your daddy can do through a kid committed to his training program. Stay the course.

His coaching is to be desired more than applause from the crowd. Seek the blesser not the blessing. His presence not the present.

Enjoy the good times. Cherish the blessings. Express gratitude for abundance and prosperity but also recognize hard times bring refinement, experience and strength.

Be careful not to associate challenging times, rejection, setbacks or a lack of blessing with his absence. He is more present now than ever! God works all things together for good. We do well not to limit the means by which he nurtures, grows and matures his kids.

He is more interested in building our character, developing our trust and deepening our dependence on him than calming the waters, softening our seats and lifting our loads. He desires to make us stronger, more confident and more like him. Such is often accomplished through adversity, struggle and hard work. Take heart. He is with you and will see you through.

What a blessing!

(Inspired by Matthew 5:45)

Practice His Presence

Somehow it seems we have come to equate long prayers and long periods of prayer as a sign of spiritual maturity. Yet I have come to realize that the model prayer of Jesus, the Lord's Prayer, and the psalms of King David are quite short.

No doubt Jesus and King David prayed and no doubt they had calloused knees, but I dare say their prayers were less in length and more in frequency. They were looking for strength to be about the Father's business rather than being held up in solitude.

They practiced His presence in their coming and going, seizing every opportunity to talk and walk with God throughout the day. They didn't leave God in their prayer closets. Their prayer lives were built on relationship not ritual.

Consider this: The average teenager sends and receives 3,417 text messages per month, or between 7 and 8 per waking hour. That's more than a text every 10 seconds!

What might happen if all of us spent more time, 7-8 times per waking hour, texting prayers to God? Prayer is not so much about a time spent with God as it is an ongoing attitude or posture with Him.

I like what Lawrence said in his book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, "It isn't necessary to be too verbose in prayer, because lengthy prayers encourage wandering thoughts. Simply present yourself to God as if you were a poor man knocking on the door of a rich man, and fix your attention on His presence."

When we practice the presence of God we find ourselves in conversation, a dialog, with Him throughout the day.

Setting appointments with God is good but open interaction with Him throughout the day never leaves a man alone for He is with him always.

May we not ignore His presence in our lives but rather embrace and engage a living God who loves to hang out with His kids day in and day out! The key to prayer is inclusion. The more we include God, the more we pray. The more we pursue his presence, the more peace is paramount and power is prominent. Invite him in and he will help you out! Pray when prompted. Pray all day and you'll play to stay!

(Inspired by Matthew 6:5-15)

Three Little Letters

God put 3 little letters on my mind:

K. S. A.

Huh? Gotcha!

I put them up in this order:

ASK!

God has challenged me to ASK

And continue to ASK Him

To have a hand and say in all I do.

Three little letters

Are having a big impact.

I simply ask

And He keeps showing up

And making things happen! **In the Moment**

The temperature in Oklahoma City will be 70 today and 17 by tomorrow night. What a great opportunity to live in the moment and to appreciate the life I have today. Tomorrow will have enough worries of it's own. But as for today, I will live in the sunshine. I will take it all in and as the cold hard days roll in, I will remember the good times rather than anticipate and worry about the cold front to come. I will certainly do my best to be prepared and yet not be robbed of the joy of today. Who knows, it is Oklahoma after all. Like life, things can change in a moment for better or worse regardless of the forecast!

(Inspired by Matthew 6:25-34)

Unwanted Marble

Here is the honest truth. Not everyone likes you. Sorry to break the news but there are people who you simply rub the wrong way.

But you know the truth as well. There is plenty about you not to like. Nobody is perfect and there is a reason people don't enjoy being on the other side of you.

So what are we to do? Ask them to deal with it? Or would it be better to constantly seek their approval? Truth is, there isn't much we can do about it other than acknowledge that they make some pretty good points about who we are and then, with God's help, seek to be the man we want to be.

When we do, we won't be the man we were and we will be closer to the man we hope to be. Perfect? Be real. We all suffer from a dark side.

Don't excuse your faults. Don't discount the pain you have caused or ignore the backside of your tapestry. It's ugly. And it's the only side of you that some people see.

The only way you will convince them to take a deeper look at who you are is to keep knitting together the work of art that God wants you to become.

It's true. God isn't finished with you yet. Lean on him. Admit when you are wrong and then get back to being the best you, you can be.

We serve a God of second chances. Maybe it's time we give someone in our lives a second chance. Perhaps there is someone who needs to cut us some slack as well. Either way, none of us can claim everyone thinks we are great. Truth is, we're not. Let's focus more on helping each other up than tearing each other down. Let's lead with a ton of mercy and grace. When we do, love will follow. The tapestry will turn and the beautiful side of who we are will be all that remains.

For sure the dark side will always be there and our backside will be exposed from time to time but as love overlooks a multitude of sins we will find ourselves appreciating the wonder of it all, creatures created in the image of God. He is in the process of creating a masterpiece with each of our lives. Please be patient. God isn't finished yet.

Works of art take time. The sculpture of King David, by Michelangelo, was once nothing more than a piece of unwanted marble. Did you catch that? Unwanted marble. Michelangelo saw the potential of what could be. He took a chance and with the tap of the chisel shaved away the ugly in order to reveal what was hidden beneath.

Sculptures are messy to create. But in the end, no one can help but wonder how the artist took something so hard, so plain, so basic and even incredibly ugly and turned it into an amazing, mouth-dropping display of what can be when submitted to the Master's hand.

You and I are often rejected as unwanted marble. It's true, we really are ugly ducklings. But in the right hands and with the right heart we can stand as an example of something only God can create. We become beautiful when touched and led by the Master's hand.

(Inspired by Matthew 7:3-5)

Who's Your Daddy?

Who's your daddy? Do you love your kids? Would you do anything in the world for them? Do you want the best for them? Do you sometimes have to correct and disciple them? Could they do anything to make you love them more? Do you desire for them to trust you? Do you desire for them to be with you? No doubt. Now, remember. You are God's kid. Does he love you? Would he do anything in the world for you? Does he want the best for you? Does he sometimes have to correct and discipline you? Could you do anything to make him love you more? Does he desire for you to trust him? Does he desire for you to be with him? No doubt. Who's daddy are you? Who's your daddy? 2/2 You know how much you love your kids. Do you know how much God loves you? Rest and trust in these truths. Fear not. Why worry? Why doubt? Your daddy has got this. Act and live like a King's kid with Jesus as your Lord. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise. Let Daddy know what's up. He's got really big muscles

(Inspired by Matthew 7:7-11)

The 3 mph Jesus

Jesus was a walker not a runner. Why? He was never in a hurry. He was never late. He was always at the right place right on time. The disciples were always trying to get Jesus to hurry up or go one way or another. Jesus stayed the course and kept the pace.

Jesus built margin into his day. For sure he had plenty of things to do, people to see, places to be and projects to complete. But if Jesus did anything, he proved people were more important to him than any project or place of importance. Walking, not running, not only allowed Jesus to stop and smell the roses, that he had created, but it also provided him time to not just see but to also notice.

What did he notice? Little children, hurting people, disreputable sinners and scum bags. He loved them all and challenged them to listen, learn and lead others to do the same. His invitation was always on point, come follow me and be my disciple. It wasn't an invitation to the fast track or the limelight. No, it was a call to serve and give your life away in care, concern and compassion for others.

Some refer to Jesus as the three m.p.h. God. Jesus wasn't in a hurry. He knew that slowing down and opening your life and time up to those around you would bring huge rewards and garner eternal results.

What gear are you running in? Or should I say, walking in? We live in such a fast paced world heading to nowhere fast. Everything is built on speed but rarely on meeting the needs of those we blow right by. Consider reigning in the gallop and start noticing those the Lord brings your way.

Don't be surprised if your life isn't interrupted by rich conversation and sprinkled with much deeper meaning and purpose. The project will wait but the people will otherwise be passed by. As you go throughout your day, remove the goggles, back off the throttle and set a pace that allows you not only to see but to notice the people the Lord brings your way today.

(Inspired by Matthew 9:9-13)

Vrooom!

Life is a lot like a 5-speed stick shift. Sometimes you hit reverse. Other times you shift into low. Then even still there are times when you are flying down the highway in overdrive. Wherever you are in life you will have to pass through neutral at some point. While you can't stay there, sometimes you just need to coast and take it easy. One thing is for sure, you can't stay there. But sometimes getting where you are going requires an occasional shift into neutral. You have to rest to be your best. Hit the brakes now and again. Take a break, shift into neutral or you might just have a breakdown. Vrooom!

Restful Thinking Versus Restless Thinking

I am sure that if you are like me, your thoughts are often filled with things related to challenges at work, home and life. My mind is often filled with restless versus restful thinking. I have found most of my days and many of my night's are filled thinking about such things. I love what I do and I love doing it with others who love doing it too! That said, I appeal to you, as I appeal to myself, to consider the perspective that there is really only one who is worthy of consuming my thoughts and time so consistently, his name is Jesus. I don't feel guilty for loving the tasks he has given me. In fact I am grateful! But if I am not careful, I can become so preoccupied with the things I want to do for Jesus that I stop being with Jesus. Jesus says his yoke is light. I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like the yoke I am carrying is very heavy. So heavy I worry about how I will carry it or accomplish the task. Jesus said come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. He calls on us to rest and renew our minds and our strength in him. I love my life and I love working. God is doing amazing things among us but nothing is greater than the personal and meaningful relationship he desires to have with each of us. By all means don't quit thinking about all you hope to accomplish and never stop trying to be your best, but may we also be ever mindful of the one who has called us, loves us and desires to join us in the battle and the journey.

I heard this week that anxiety is brought on by imagining the future without Jesus in it. Surely he is with us today, tomorrow and forever. No wonder He so desired for peace to be with us for he knew we are prone to wonder from his presence. You are greatly loved and appreciated by God. Your skills and abilities were created for this very moment in time. How fun to work and play together in this calling! Rest in him this weekend and come back Monday ready to be a world changer once again!

(Inspired by Matthew 10:31)

Dog Tired

What are the things that give you energy, strength and make you want to live another day?

Are you feeling worn out and dog tired? Maybe it is time to start cutting out the things in your life that drain, strain or distract from your calling and purpose and start adding in and continuing things that help you gain, maintain or expand your calling and purpose.

Certainly, there is no guarantee of comfort in a calling and this is not to say hard work is bad or there is no gain in pain. But maybe, just maybe, we are overextending ourselves in our go, go, go culture! Jesus reminds us that his yoke is easy. Easy? Really, Jesus? Easy? Yes, easy.

We may be physically and mentally drained but when it's his yoke, he promises to carry the load and the burden or to give us the strength we need to prevail. As we trust him to deliver, he renews our strength and gives us rest.

Carrying a heavy yoke? Make sure you aren't trying to do Jesus' job. The portion of the yoke he has given us to carry is to trust him for the outcomes he has called us to fulfill.

Rest in him. When you are drained and strained come to him. When you are weary and heavy laden he will give you rest, renew your mind and strength and encourage you in the calling he has laid before you, not on you.

(Inspired by Matthew 11:28-30)

What Are You Thinking?

Ever wondered what someone was really thinking? It's hard to know what is really on someone's mind. They say one thing, but they may be thinking another.

Would you like to read minds? Probably. Would you want other to read yours? Probably not. Be warned, reading minds might be easier than you think. How so? Matthew 12:34 gives us a hint to the heart and mind of humankind when it says, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

Want to be a mind reader? It's easy. Listen to what people are talking about. It may not be what they say, but how they say it. It may not be the words they use, but the body language they exercise to deliver the message. Make no mistake about it; what is on their minds is coming through. Listening is the key to becoming a mind reader.

Now here is the real question. What are people hearing from you? What you are talking about provides a clue. What's on your mind? Are you spending most of your time talking about others rather than being an encourager? Do people hear you speaking about the great things God has done in your life, or do they hear you grumbling about your latest fight with a family member, church member or coworker?

From the heart the mouth speaks. What is on your mind will come out. What is on the inside will eventually surface. As my wife often says to our girls, "It's just as important to be pretty on the inside as it is to be pretty on the outside." Why? Because who we are comes from the inside. As Proverbs 23:7 says, "For as [a man] thinks within himself, so he is."

The words of our mouths often reveal what is on our minds. So what are you talking about? It's something to think about.

(Inspired by Matthew 12:34)

A Heart Condition

“I just don’t understand.” This seem to be a rather populate phrase of late. More and more many are discovering that they are less and less in the mainstream of thought, philosophy and culture.

Leaning on our own understanding can become a vicious cycle of thinking that never releases it prey. If we have trouble understanding a perspective, situation or person, it may be because we tend to see but not notice or we tend to hear but not listen. When participating in a discussion it is easy to place our thoughts on what we want to say next or to build a rebuttal for what we are hearing rather than genuinely seeking to figure out how in the world the opposing view could be held with such strong conviction.

During opposing encounters it is helpful to recognize that consensus and compromise may not be possible now or in the future. Lowering our standards is not the goal. Committing to truth is essential and must be expressed in love. Seeking first to understand paves the way for dialogue and interaction that might not otherwise take place at all. The more we truly notice and listen the more we can hope to gain understanding.

We must also come to realize that never fully understanding is a real possibility. As we focus on being interested in another person and less on being interesting to them, we demonstrate our ability to understand and know the reason for their perspective. There is a reason we have two eyes, two ears and one mouth. We should notice and listen at least twice as much as we talk. It’s not only polite, it is appropriate. Why is it that we don’t notice and listen as much as we should?

The issue is not so much a matter of bad eyesight or poor hearing. The root cause is a matter of the heart. We have a heart condition. Often, unknowingly, our hearts harden over time and we are less and less tender, compassionate and loving in our approach. We think we know better and it shows.

A strong heart is to be desired but a hard heart will ultimately kill us. When we develop a hard heart we make up our minds, close the book and place a seal on the matter never to reopen the case and consider if more insight or input might bring about a broader and more enlightened view.

Remaining open minded doesn’t mean we will or should change our mind but one thing is for certain, a hard heart will never learn new approaches, better methods or improved techniques if it is set in its ways. A heart of stone lacks the ability to pump life into an otherwise capable and healthy body.

Let’s not let hard hearts prevent us from seeing and hearing clearly as we seek to understand and know the truth of a matter through eyes that notice and ears that listen.

(Inspired by Matthew 13:12-15)

Cut the Discord

Are you sowing discord? If your initial response is no or I am just sharing the truth about someone, providing important insight about their character or just thought you might need to know a little tidbit, then it is very likely you made the top 6 things God hates! (Proverbs 6:16-19)

Not me! My motives are pure. I'm just speaking the truth. Really now? Would you share the same insight if the person you are defaming was in your presence? How cowardice! Do your words and actions heal or hurt? Does what you say help make things better or people more bitter? Are you encouraging peace or poisoning the well?

Insecurity is likely at the root of your motivation. Admit it! Your subtle stirring of the pot, your passive aggressive behavior and your insinuations are causing discord. You hide behind the appearance of innocence but in your heart it is yourself you are actually trying to build up at the expense of others. Call it what it is. It's evil, mean and shameful. God hates it. Stop it!

You know in your heart whether your words and actions are contributing to quarreling, squabbling, bickering, wrangling, feuding, contention, disagreement, dissension, differences in opinion, disputes, disunity, opposition and infighting. You may not be in the middle of it but you may very well be adding momentum to the flywheel of discord. Blessed are the peacemakers not pot stirrers. Keep on stirring up discord and see where it gets you.

People eventually wise up and realize that if you are talking and putting down others in their absence you are likely doing the same about them when you plant your seeds of discord and water them with flattery and a warm conniving embrace.

Be honest with yourself. It's time to cut the discord. You are loving to hate

(Inspired by Matthew 15:18-20)

Love God but Hate Church?

There might be at least 10 reasons why you are avoiding the hive.

1. You bought into the lie that church is a place

The church is a people not a place. Wherever the people of God gather is the church. It's a body not a building. The key is in the gathering not the going.

2. You go to get not give

This isn't about the offering plate. It's about a give and take attitude. If you only gather with the church for "take-aways" you miss one of the best parts of gathering. It truly is more of a blessing to give than to receive. It's in sharing who you are with others and what God is doing through you, since the last gathering, that keeps you coming back. Get involved. There are plenty of spectators in life. Get in the game.

3. You don't like the music

So you feel worship during the church gathering has become more like a concert or worse, a funeral. You might be onto something. Worship isn't about listening and watching a performance it's about expressing our gratitude and thankfulness to the One who has graciously blessed us with life in ways we never imagined.

4. Church people are hypocrites

You are on a roll. Truth is, we all are. Since when has anyone claimed otherwise? There is a good possibility there is room for at least one more hypocrite at your local church gathering. The fact that the church is full of hypocrites might be the best sign a church is worth joining.

5. You are embarrassed

Deep inside you are afraid you won't fit in and might stand out. Heaven forbid you might not know all 35 stanzas of a hymn from the year 1835 or some new hip praise song fresh off the stage of youth camp. Who cares? This isn't auditions for American Idol! The root here is pride. Your personal pride needs to be swallowed before you can be properly spiritually nourished. Sorry, this might sting a little but there is more to this one that goes beyond the surface.

6. You feel judged

This is a real possibility but it likely has more to do with how you see yourself than how you see others. If you feel judged rather than loved, by a regular gathering of believers, you might want to run. Before you do, make sure your own insecurities and perceptions aren't clouding reality.

7. The preacher stinks

No I'm not talking about a lack of cologne. We're talking about his delivery. Let's face it, preachers have strong competition. We are a sight-and-sound generation that has grown up being entertained with pre-produced programming. It's nearly perfect because all the boops and bumps have been edited out! We rarely experience live theatre, let alone live oratory, anymore. Embrace the humanness and the imperfection of the live gig. Focus more on what the presenter says rather than how he says it. Wouldn't we all rather have a good meaty burger rather than a bunch of bologna served on a fancy platter? You get the point; we need to cut the guy some slack.

8. You don't know anyone

Well there is at least one way to change that. It's been said about friendship that you have to be one to have one. Chances are there is someone at the gathering who feels the same way as you. Find each other!

9. You hate wearing a tie or high heels

Who doesn't? This is a sure sign that you haven't met with the church lately. Church clothes are history. They are a thing of the past. Come as you are is where it's at. That's not to say you can't wear a tie and high heels. It never hurts to look your best. But if you feel pressured to get all dolled up to fit in, you best double check. You may have entered a beauty pageant not a gathering of the church.

10. You're just too tired

There is a good chance you really are too tired. The Western culture rewards good work with more work. There is a reason it is called a work week. We have abandoned the Sabbath and it shows. Our 24/7 approach has taken a toll. We need to rest more, do less, and take a time out. It's hard to get pumped about attending another meeting when you have just finished 3/3 another 80-hour work week. The key? Work/life balance. If you are too tired for a Sabbath, you are working too much. Once you find some margin in your life, it's amazing how the thought of gathering and being with others who inspire and encourage you to face another week at work becomes a good idea!

A closing thought and a bit of advice. Don't go to church. Start by being the church. When you do, chances are you will gain a desire to start gathering at the hive with others like yourself. There is nothing more fascinating than a bunch of bees getting together. When they do, it sure is sweet. It's all the buzz!

Bonus point: Perhaps you aren't even sure whether a life of faith is relevant in today's modern world, let alone the thought of being a part of a local church gathering. Are you up for a little challenge to your thinking? For the next 31 days read a chapter from the book of Proverbs in a modern translation or paraphrase. If you don't agree that what you discover is relevant for today, I'll send you a jar of honey! Yes, I'm for real.

(Inspired by Matthew 16:18)

Offended?

Have you been offended? What should you do? Lash out? Stuff it? Pout? Ignore it? Run away? Tell others about it?

Here is a novel idea. If someone offends you, go to them privately and make them aware of the offense. You might be surprised to learn they had no idea that they had offended you. Or perhaps you were too sensitive or misunderstood their intentions.

If the person listens and agrees, you have had great success. But if you are unsuccessful, consider taking one or two others with you, who love you both, in a second attempt to try to work things out. Hearing others perspective on the matter might help resolve the issue.

Still not successful? Then you might have to agree to disagree or involve a greater body of authority to resolve the conflict. It might even mean making a necessary ending.

Maintaining valuable relationships are worth the effort. But they do require healthy communication, plenty of compromise and a desire to understand another person's perspective. We don't have to agree on everything. Discussions don't have to turn into arguments. And even the best of friends have differences of opinion.

If being right or having your way comes at the cost of a long-term friendship or important relationship, it might be time to determine what really matters most in life. It might be time to overlook an offense and lean into, not away from, those you claim to love.

(Inspired by Matthew 18:15-17)

Freedom from Low-Life Scumbags

What do you require in order to forgive someone? Do they have to apologize? Ask forgiveness? Be remorseful? Make amends? Make up for your loss? What if they do none of the above?

What happens when you harbor or hold onto unforgiveness? Who does it hurt? Does it hurt the person who has offended you? Perhaps to a certain extent but one thing is for sure, holding on to unforgiveness hurts you.

First you are hurt by the actions of the one who violated you and then you hurt yourself by holding on to unforgiveness. By not forgiving you are allowing the offender to control you and own part of who you are. Unforgiveness leads to bitterness and resentment. In essence you are robbed of your joy and are punishing yourself for something someone else did to you in the first place.

The solution? Forgive. Release the unforgiving power that someone else otherwise has over you. Does forgiving mean that justice is not served? No! We can seek justice while at the same time giving forgiveness. Everyone gets hurt in some way or another by somebody at sometime. How long we hurt has a lot to do with how long we wait to forgive.

Jesus encourages us to forgive those who have hurt us. He realized that forgiving others minimizes the hurt and releases us sooner to be about the business of loving others.

Let go of the hurt today. Let go and forgive the rotten, low-life scumbag that has caused you pain. If you don't, they win. Take control of forgiveness before the lack thereof takes control of you! Be free of the low-life scumbags!

(Inspired by Matthew 18:21-22)

Know What?

When you love your family and you love your friends you are doing the work of the gospel.

Jesus said the world will know we are His disciples by our love for each other. What better place to do so than among family and friends!

Friends and family are a great opportunity to demonstrate the great commandment and love.

(Inspired by Matthew 22:36-39)

Let's Roll Back History

Imagine the headlines of the day some 2,000 years ago. The headlines read: Was he or wasn't he? Prophet? Rabbi? Messiah? Revolutionary?

Regardless of your opinion, something happened 3 days later that has us talking about it even today. Was his body stolen? Did he awaken from a stupor? Or was he the divine Son of God resurrected from the dead?

His disciples were asking the same questions about now as they scattered and hunkered down in fear for their lives. Their leader was dead. Or, so they thought. Many will die for what they believe. But no one will die for a lie. Something happened to that little band of brothers that changed history that Sunday morning. They encountered the truth. It was no lie. It wasn't a Sunday School story for them. They had lived with him, dined with him and nearly died with him. But now, they would live with him as the reality of who he really was sunk in.

Who do you say he is? No man can convince, coerce or convert you. Like his disciples, he will draw you unto himself. He will reveal himself to you and like Peter he will ask, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being."

The question remains now some 2,000 years later. Who was this leader? Did his followers knowingly die for a lie? Something radical happened to bring them out of hiding. Surely they could no longer deny or doubt, he was alive. That conviction, that reality, changed the course of history as still today we consider, who was this man? Was he divine? Was he the son of God? If so, how might his life impact mine?

Listen and watch for him in coming days and don't be surprised if he doesn't reveal himself to you in amazing ways!

(Inspired by Matthew 26:56)

Given to Care

Jesus didn't just see, he noticed as his critics watched and scrutinized! Jesus was aware and sensitive to the needs of others. He was given to care while others were prone to criticize and critique. Jesus empathized with the weakness while critics emphasized how others had fallen short. Jesus consoled. The critics condemned. He sought to be helpful as others were hurtful. He came to save lives while pundits sought only to destroy it. His approach was far more than an attitude, persecutive or modus operandi. His way was a way of life. It was an outflow of who he was. He was in the game. He was not a spectator. He joined us in our pain, suffering and hurt. He didn't just see, he noticed and took action with no regard to rules, regulations or traditions. Sometimes in life you just do the right thing because it's the right thing not because it is called for in a rule book. We get a glimpse of a real life situation in the gospel of Mark, chapter three. It is clear in the passage that Jesus was focused on the needs, hurts and pains of others. He truly felt their suffering and as a result was not applauded but rather criticized for it! It is easy to overlook his passion for people because of who he was. We look past the naysayers and just see it as just another day in the life of Jesus.

We overlook his actions until we find ourselves in the story. Like the man with the deformed hand that Jesus healed, we find ourselves impacted by a man that didn't just see, but noticed our pain and suffering and reached out to us and did something about it despite the pressure to play life by the book and the letter of the law.

Jesus finds us right where we are, reaches out to us, asks us to take a step in his direction in order that we might be transformed by the touch of his hand.

Here is the good news. Jesus is still meeting us where we are today. No matter what struggles we face, mental, emotional or physical, he notices, he cares and he is prepared to walk with us despite what others might say or think. He doesn't just see. He takes notice time and time again!

As life brings others our way, will we just see or will we also notice? Will we empathize or emphasize their weaknesses? Will we seek to console or condemn? Help or hurt? Breathe life into the situation or drive the final nail in the coffin?

The choice is ours. When we recognize the need for compassion, mercy and grace in our own lives it tends to manifest itself as love in the lives of others.

Let's choose love today and grant life in the lives of others as we don't just see but notice the potential that waits to be awakened within them.

(Inspired by Mark 3:1-6)

The Color of Love

What do you have in common with your friends? ,Geography? Race? Economic status? Faith? Politics? Causes? Work? Friends? Problems? Addictions? Gender? Age? Hobbies?

I contend that we tend to be friends with people who are most like us. They like us because they are like us! Okay, fine. But if “likeness” summarizes our world of friends, I hate to tell you, I believe we are missing out on a world of fun and our lives are likely more boring than they need to be. Speaking strictly for myself, I confess, I like being around people who are like me but I also get a kick out of people who are just, well, lets say, different! The so called “different” people add spice to life, break the routine, shatter the mundane and open my mind and life experiences to whole new worlds.

Too much of the same thing is boring. Different is intriguing but not defining. Different is diverse but not defining. Different is in the details but not defining. Different is fun. Different is the spice of life. Different is who we are but not what we are. We are brothers from a different mother but our blood bleeds red. Since Cain and Abel we have been shedding brotherly blood, not brotherly love, way too much. Being a pink pig in a red pig world is no big deal unless of course you are the only pink pig and have no friends. You do realize you are “different” don’t you? To somebody, somewhere you represent the epitome of different! Some may even think you are weird. And in some ways you likely are! 2/2 Now there is a difference in being different and weird. Weird tends to wander into the unhealthy side of different. But sticking strictly to the familiar and predictable is a little weird as well. So I vote for doing things a little differently this week. Why not invite that “different” person out to lunch or to share a cup of coffee? Better yet, have them over for dinner! Wouldn’t that be weird? Not really, unless you think making friends and being friendly is unhealthy and “different”. What matters is love for one another. Love is colorblind. Color is a state of mind that must not define or divide. What color are you, inside? It’s what is under the skin that defines you. Let’s get below the surface. It’s about character not color. Let’s walk to the beat of a different drummer. Let’s lock arms and walk together with hearts that beat as one people, regardless of skin color. The things we choose define us. We can’t choose our skin color but we can choose love. May the color of love be what defines us inside and out.

(Inspired by Mark 3:7-8, 13-19)

Asleep at the Rudder

Do you ever feel as though the Lord is asleep at the rudder while the raging storms of life are crashing down on your dingy? The waves are seemingly relentless, never ending as they pound your boat. The storm is fierce. It is taking its toll. You are taking on water to the brim. You bail water as fast as you can all while the Lord sleeps appearing oblivious to the turmoil and pending doom and devastation that is certain to unfold as the boards creak, the joints loosen and the world around you begins to fall a part. In a panicked frenzy you scream at the top of your lungs, "Don't you even care that we are going to drown!"

From a stupor he rubs his eyes, yawns and stretches out his arms and in an instant everything calms down. "Why all the fuss? I was sleeping so good. Is there a problem? Can you guys quiet down? Can't you see I'm trying to catch a cat nap? Have a little faith. I got this."

Say what? Are you kidding? The whole world was crumbling in and then the sleeping beauty wakes up from a nap and everything is all better? Seems ridiculous, but yes. The truth is, he does care. He is fully aware and he wants us to take a cue from him and chill out. Come what may, he's got this. Sink or swim. We are in the boat with him. Could there be a better place to be than in a dangerous boat with the captain who created the sea?

In life, our boats will often be filled with waves and waves of challenges but when we have a little faith, we can experience the wonder of his power as we too are filled with awe as he rolls over and goes back to sleep having calmed the storm.

(Inspired by Mark 4:35-41)!

Believe

I am manned upon a rudderless boat adrift at sea.
Oarless and low on rations with no land in sight
I look to the horizon for hope in a future that may or may not exist
 for my fate is in the hands of the sea.
Yet I believe, I trust and I draw strength from Him
For He has guided me through many a storm
 and although these waters are calm, deep and lonely,
He is with me, come what may.

Board the Boat

It's time to board the boat. You have to rest to be your best. Even Jesus believed in rest. Check out what he said to his close friends after a very long season of intense service to others. He wasn't being lazy, irresponsible or staging a cop out. No, Jesus was following his daddy's example. He appreciated the benefits of a good afternoon nap. Jesus said, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." –Mark 6:31 Jesus and his apostles had gotten so busy that they didn't even have time to eat. The passage goes on to say, "They left by boat for a quiet place, where they could be alone." Is it time for you to breakaway, board a boat and be alone with a few great friends and the Creator? We all have busy seasons and hard work is a good thing. But if a busy season never ends, we are certain to burnout like a sizzling never ending summer. Don't forget to board your boat and drift away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Find that calm cove, that resting place where you can unplug and just be. Rest is not a luxury. Rest is a necessity. When you are tempted to burn a little more oil, light the other end of the candle or to go that extra, extra mile, remember, the words of Jesus, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." Yes, you have to rest to be your best! 2/2 Learn to be a "restler" when you wrestle with whether or not to take a break. If you don't break, you are on your way to being broken. Hit pause and board the boat.

(Inspired by Mark 6:30-32)

Watch Out

Are you grateful or grumbly? Do you tend to focus on what is annoying or what is amazing? Would others describe you as a buzzard or a butterfly? One looks for something rotten while the other is in constant pursuit of something sweet!

There are plenty of problems to fill the day. The priority we give our problems determines the altitude of our attitude. When we look for the pearl among the pigs, the diamond in the rough and the rose among the thorns, something counter intuitive happens inside of us that helps put problems into perspective.

An attitude of gratitude helps push back the darkness, pain and suffering that sneaks into our lives. Gloom begins to lose its grip on our spirits when we choose to embrace the good that desires to cheer us on.

When you are tempted to grumble, try to counter the urge by recognizing a few things you are grateful for in your life. We often get what we are looking for in life. What we see is what we get.

What are you looking for? Watch out, you might just get it!

(Inspired by Mark 7:14-23)

What Do You Want?

Often times we walk through life with a sense of want. But for what?

Jesus asks a blind man, “What do you want?” My first reaction was, “Uh ... Hey, Jesus. Isn't that a little too obvious?” You would think that if a blind man was screaming out to meet a man known for healing the sick and giving sight to the blind, he must have one thing on his mind, sight!

One thing we know for sure, Jesus understood people. And if he knew anything, he knew people don't always know what they want, even when it is obvious. Can you relate?

So back to my original question, “What do you want?” Is it obvious? Sometimes we have to slow down long enough to know what we want. It is kind of like being hungry but not knowing what for. Ask any guy who has ever taken a pretty girl out for dinner and you will understand. Some things are less than obvious!

So, what can we learn from the story that might help us discover what we want and how to get it?

1. Slow down! Take time to know what you want. Listen to your heart and your head will follow. The blind man knew what he wanted.

2. The blind man wasn't going to let anyone stand in his way. It has been said that if you don't have a vision, somebody will give you one. The blind man may not have been able to see but he did have a vision!

3. The blind man cried out believing that Jesus would give him what he wanted. He had faith. He believed. One thing we can know for sure, if what we want doesn't require faith, then we probably don't want enough! What? I don't want enough? It is very possible. If what you want doesn't require God, then it is very likely you can handle it on your own. But if you really want to see things happen, start to want something that requires God to get involved.

I have come to learn that there are somethings that the Lord will only do by invitation. He is a polite gentleman. He doesn't require us to invite him into our circumstances. Oh, but when we do, we start to SEE things like we have never SEEN before. The blind man knew what he wanted? Do you? The writer of the book of Hebrews challenges us with this thought, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.”

Does what you want require faith? If not, perhaps you don't want enough!

(Inspired by Mark 10:46-52)

What Do We Want?

We want more but of what we do not know.
We complain but aren't sure what we really want.
We want to be happy but are unclear of its source.
We want answers but can't form the questions.
We want peace but continue to stir.
We want love but are searching in all the wrong places.
We want joy but hold onto hate.
We want success but are unable to define it.
We want to unlock freedom but can't find the keys.
We want things and we want things to be better but things are only getting worse.
What we really want, but fail to realize, is God.
What we long for is Him more than we know.
We want His will but aren't certain where it is found.
The wants and desires of our hearts are hidden in the delight in the Lord.
When our wants are His wants we find all we are looking for in Him.
The answer is not in what we want but rather in what He wants.
There within we find all we could ever want or need.
When we want Him we find Him.
When we search for Him, He will be found
and in Him we discover all we could ever hope for.

What Am I Saying?

Living with Low-Lives

It's easy to hate religious zealots but it's hard to not to love a guy like Jesus. The passage below does a great job summing up Jesus' approach to friendship. Notice who Jesus hangs out with. One thing is for sure, he wasn't seeking the limelight or popularity polls. Quite the contrary, he was hanging out with a known bunch of lowlives!

Shortly after Jesus meet an unpopular local figure, Matthew the tax collector, his new buddy was throwing a party. Jesus was hard to miss at the center of all the fun! Don't miss the most beautiful part of the story. It's easy to focus on all the hoopla surrounding this small gathering of scum buckets and pass right by the unconditional love, utter acceptance and genuine friendship that was on parade. This crowd of bandits had gotten use to being judged, put down and marginalized. But with their new buddy, they were having fun, celebrating and caring much less about what the local pious religion folks had to say or think.

It kind of makes you wonder where you would have found yourself on that day, doesn't it? Would you have been popping the top off of a few cold ones or popping off barbs and stingers at the losers painting the town red?

I think Jesus loved to have fun and to party. Especially with folks who didn't always find themselves as part of the "in" crowd. Sometimes we need reminding that Jesus wasn't a real fan of religion or man's traditions. He did teach us to love God and love others. One thing is for certain, Matthew was a changed man once he made friends with Jesus. The carpenter from the little town of Nazareth tended to have that affect on people. Yeah, he didn't come to judge the world but to save it. To save it from itself, others and the sin that holds us all back from life to the fullest. Read this little passage below, you sorry ole' sinner, and then ask yourself, like Matthew, how could you resist having a friend like Jesus? Matthew 9:9-13 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him. Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor-sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." "They said what Jesus had told them to say, and they were permitted." Mark 11:6

Is what I am saying from God or self? Results may wait in the balance. They said what Jesus told them to say and they succeeded. What might be limiting my potential? Am I being permitted or forbidden? How much does what I say influence outcomes? Is what I say based in self or in Him? "Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them." Eph 4:29b "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you." Psalm 19:14a "The tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire." James 3:5 "If you want to enjoy life and see many happy days, keep your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn away from evil and do good. Search for peace, and work to maintain it." 1 Peter 3:10-11

(Inspired by Mark 11:6)

What Are You Afraid of?

What are you afraid of? The drive within us is often driven by fear. Fear of loss. Fear of losing control. Fear of betrayal. Fear of success. Fear of not being accepted. Fear of failing. Fear of not being good enough.

Fear is a great motivator. It is the cousin of pain. Pain too has been known to motivate. But there is a better motivator. Despite these tendencies in our hearts to yield to fear and pain, within us is a sense that there is something stronger, more enduring and accepting. That longing is love.

The greatest motivator in all of life is love. Oh what a soul will do to find it, even more to keep it. Love inspires, encourages and motivates in ways we deeply desire and long for. There is no fear in true love. Love is the perfect motivator.

No wonder Jesus clarified which of the 613 commandments was the greatest. In summary, he said, love God and love others as you love yourself. He also reminds us to fear not, for he is with us. Fear comes easy. Pain is an unwelcomed adversary. But love is greeted with open arms, gladly accepted and deeply desired.

What are you afraid of? Fear loses its power when wrapped in the arms of love. Fear is a strong motivator but it is like a sugar high. It is like downing an energy drink. A shot of adrenaline only lasts so long. Lasting and sustaining drive is rooted in love.

We have to be careful not to allow ourselves to be influenced by fear's ability to drive us. The signs are clear worry, doubt and anxiety are all indicators that the fear factor is at play and often works, if only for a while. Fear has a short shelf life. Lasting, positive and endearing motivation comes from knowing we are loved, accepted and adored. God loves us and is for us. He is in our corner cheering us on. The enemy relies on fear. The Lord recognizes love as the greatest motivator of all. What role is fear playing in your life? From where does your drive and motivation come from? Love conquers all. When you realize how much you are loved, fear begins to be recognized as a cheap substitute for lasting motivation. The more you give love, the more you receive it. Don't be afraid to give love away! Fear not. Give and receive love today.

(Inspired by Mark 12:28-34) Weary of Worry?

If you went to the doctor with a health concern would you accept or reject the prescribed remedy? If you went to the Lord with a concern with worry would you accept or reject the prescribed remedy?

It is not always easy to accept what the doctor orders and sometimes a spoon full of sugar does help the medicine go down. Likewise, faith the size of a mustard seed helps take care of a mountain full of worry.

If you are weary with worry, it might be time to refill your prescription. The Master Physician's prescription for worry:

“Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.” – 1 Peter 5:7

Forever Treasured

What a sweet reminder we see in the life of Mary as she treasured the experiences she shared with her young child. She captured the tender moments. She did not let them pass without relishing them, cherishing each and every one and writing them as memories on her heart.

Babies grow up fast. Life does not wait to enlist their services. Before we know it, we look up and they are gone.

But like Mary, we can pause. We can freeze time if only for a moment and treasure the memory of the little blessing that was ours if only for a while in our presence but forever in our hearts.

(Inspired by Luke 2:19, 51)

Step into the Fray of This Present Darkness

We live in a multidimensional world. There is more to this life than what is seen. Satan and his demons are very powerful and active. The life we live is not a game. We aren't playing around. This is serious warfare. We must live with a sense of urgency and gravity.

We are at war. Every day is a battle. The enemy is real and seeks to devour, defeat and destroy us. We are on the front lines of the battlefield. The enemy is a schemer and isn't messing around. We are to gear up and put on "the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." (Ephesians 6:11)

Fight the good fight, finish the race. Keep the faith. (2 Timothy 4:7) Notice it says fight not play, finish not quit. It says keep the faith. Do not lose heart. We are not called to sit on the sideline. We are not commissioned to watch passively as the wolf runs wild among the sheep. No, we are called to fight. To finish and to win.

We are called to be warriors. Soldiers of God. Knights in the Lord's army. We are called to be people of valor, dignity and honor. Our commander is anything but apathetic. He is a force to be reckoned with. May those who oppose him feel the weight of his presence and may we be found among those who take a stand with our leader as the enemy stands down!

We are called to fight not flight, dignity not debauchery, purity not perversion, virtue not vulgarity, decency not deceit, accountability not atrocity, peace not pain, family not freaks, facts not fantasy, compassion not collusion, deliberation not deception, liberation not loathfulness, hope not hate, faith not fear, and love not lies.

The stakes are too high and the battle too fierce to lay low, hide out and wait for the danger to pass us by. We are called to lock arms, step into the fray and lead the way to a better way of life. "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." (James 1:12) "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. (John 10:10-13) In a fight between a sheep and a wolf the sheep doesn't stand a chance, unless there is a shepherd. We must trust the Good Shepherd is tending his sheep and remember, he is on our side!

(Inspired by Luke 4:13)

Left Alone

There are times when being left alone is anything but lonely. Being left alone by its very nature confesses that we are out of sight but certainly not out of mind. Being left alone is nothing close to abandonment. There is a big difference between being deserted and being granted time alone.

Being left alone is a gift others give us when they get lost, disappear or provide plenty of space for solitude. It is in our aloneness that we rediscover who we are, who we have become and who we want to be. We are not alone when learn we have companionship with ourselves. It is here where we are as available as we choose to be. Being left alone provides incredible opportunity to live life void of distractions that often hide us from ourselves. In our elusiveness we are able to retreat from the spotlight, reflect, remember and unwind from all that has bound us. It is here in the aloneness, not loneliness, that we find serenity, peace and confidence to encounter others apart from ourselves.

Once we have collected ourselves we are better suited to give ourselves to others until such time that we desire, yet again, to be left alone. Time alone leaves us not lonely or empty but rather happy and full of appreciation for the time we had to be quite simply, left alone.

(Inspired by Luke 5:16)

If You Say So, Jesus

It had been a long day. Traveling with Jesus could wear a guy out. The crowds had been huge, the sun would soon be setting and then Jesus made the request, "Go deeper."

I can hear the murmurs, "Did he just say go deeper?" As usual, Simon was the first to speak up for the group, "You do realize we have been working hard all day and the fishing forecast has proven to be true. We have nothing to show for our efforts. But if you say so Jesus." These professional fishermen loved their leader but taking fishing tips from a carpenter was hard to swallow. Nonetheless they aligned their actions with his request and the results proved outstanding. Go figure!

What can we learn from this outlandish fishing story? The followers of Jesus were ANTSY and APPREHENSIVE about Jesus' ideas. Can you relate? Despite their reluctance, they took ACTION and they found themselves being AWESTRUCK and ASHAMED. Jesus had proven, yet again, that he could be trusted. Seeing the results, they were determined more than ever to be ALL IN.

We aren't too unlike those worn out fishermen. We find ourselves tired and worn out. We have been giving it our all but our all just isn't good enough. Our nets are empty. And then Jesus challenges us, "Go deeper." We respond, "Are you kidding Jesus? After all that we have been through lately you are calling us to go deeper? Okay, if you say so Jesus!"

We reluctantly pull ourselves up by our waders and head into deep waters. And like the disciples we find ourselves awestruck and amazed at the results. And yes, a little ashamed that we doubted the carpenter. Sometimes we need reminding of whose team we are on. He might just call for a "Hail Mary" and ask us to go deep!

Is the Lord calling on you to do something that seems to be pointless, hopeless or a long shot? If so, He might just be calling on you to go deep! When we align our ways with His ways, the results are amazing, when like the disciples, we are all in! GO DEEP!

(Inspired by Luke 5:4-11)

Courage to Quit

Let's be honest. Not every road we head down takes us to where we want to go. Sometimes in life we find ourselves at a dead-end on a dirt road wondering how in the world we ended up here.

For some it's a dead-end job. For others it's one drink too many. For many of us it's just going with the flow. We take what comes our way and end up floating down stream like a log heading for the rapids. Or worse, a gigantic waterfall. Like life, it might look beautiful to onlookers but if you're the one about to fall off the edge, nothing could be more desperate.

Heading down the wrong path can have horrible outcomes unless we get a wake up call. Falling asleep at the wheel can ruin us. Dreams become nightmares unless we muster the courage to quit!

No one likes to be called a quitter. Since our parents were cheering us on as toddlers, "Never give up!", rings in our ears and reminds us to stick to it no matter what.

Seriously? Never give up? Never quit? Truth is, there are plenty of things we need to quit. If we don't we will eventually find ourselves at the end of our rope, grasping to hold on to the life we so desperately hoped for.

The ancient scriptures use a different word for quit. It's not as vogue or politically correct to use in a sentence these days but it is still a good word and it's exactly what we need to do if our lives are to take us to our desired final destination. The word? Are you ready? Here it is. Brace yourself. The word is REPENT! Stop. Quit. Turn around! Repent! There you did it! Say it again! Repent! That wasn't so bad now was it?

Time and time again the Lord encourages his kids to repent. Why? Because he knows what's down stream. He has seen the future and unless we QUIT what we are doing, we will soon find ourselves in a world of hurt. Repent isn't an ugly word. Repent is a beautiful word. It is like the road sign that warns of a dangerous curve ahead. Can you imagine driving through the mountains without the frequent yellow signs that warn us to quit doing what we are doing or we will soon be looking at the mountain from the bottom of a cliff!

Sometimes we need a friend to give us a good nudge with a gentle poke in the ribs. Friends don't let friends fall asleep at the wheel. Friends don't let friends drink and drive and they certainly don't let friends just drive their lives into the dirt.

Sometimes we need to listen to that still small voice that gently reminds us that we need to quit what we are doing and make the change. He is a big God but he whispers in the ears of his kids. "I love you. I want the best for you. The way you are heading is going no where. Come follow me. Not only will I show you the way home, it will be an exciting ride to the finish line."

It's time to quit. For sure there are some things we need to continue. But if we are honest with ourselves, it's time we quit the direction we are heading and let Jesus take the wheel!

Pump the brakes today before you find yourself at the end of a dead-end life. You can do it. It will take courage to quit but you will soon be looking back really glad you did!

(Inspired by Luke 5:27-32)

Revolutionary Thinking

In a world that struggles to define words like life, marriage, baby, rainbow, sex, God, tolerance or woman, is it any wonder that Jesus said the greatest of these is LOVE?

Surely, on this we can all agree, what the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, I'm not a hippie, liberal, tree hugging, right wing, gun slinging, pacifist, conservative, vegan, religious zealot. Does the description above confuse you? It should. I'm embarrassed by all the name calling, back biting, trash talking, venom spewing rhetoric that has become the norm. Last time I checked, none of these strategies worked at changing anyone's perspective on anything.

But I have seen love work. Nothing would make me happier than for us to lose all the labels and start loving. Jesus said we should love our enemies. One thing is for sure, there appears to be no shortage on those.

So, what do you say we straighten our backs, hold to our standards, lean into our faith and find someone we hate and give them a big bear hug? Regardless of whether they wear a cowboy hat or a turban, crossdress or dress like the 80's, wave a rebel flag or rainbow banner, drink from a plastic bottle or straight from the stream, like meat or crave vegetables, vote republican or don't vote at all, come on, I dare you to not compromise your beliefs but open your arms, find someone not like you, someone you disagree with and love them to pieces rather than pick them apart.

What? Am I crazy? Yeah, I know, they hung a guy on a cross for this kind of revolutionary thinking years ago. Rumor has it He wins in the end though. I'm sticking with Him and counting on Him to bring about the change in the people I disagree with, hate and yes, love.

Am I suggesting live and let live? Look the other way or a revolution of apathy? No! I simply believe love is our only responsibility. Love is to be our only response. By all means, stand up for what you believe. Make your point and fight for the forgotten and underserved. But in so doing, do so with love. Otherwise you are boxing with the wind. You will throw a lot of punches and not one will connect. You will burn a lot of energy and get no where.

Go for it. Reach out and LOVE somebody today. Hate is easy. Loving the unloving is hard. What are you made of? Are you full of love or full of hate? Now, come here and let me give you a big hug!

(Inspired by Luke 6:27-36)

Equal Value

Which of these dollars is more valuable than the others? Some are clean, fresh and crisp while others are dirty, worn out and beat up. Truth is, they are all of equal value. Dollars are a lot like people, some are clean, fresh and crisp while others are dirty, worn out and beat up. But the truth remains, they are all of equal value. We do well to remember that our value is not based on our outward appearance or what we can produce but rather who we really are, created with value by the Lord, the one who sees our worth regardless of our condition

20 in 2020

At the beginning of 2020 Stephanie and I got a crazy idea after having read Mark Batterson's book, *Double Blessing*. The idea from the book was to basically pay it forward. When blessed, blessed someone else as well.

We decided to come up with our own version of the challenge and decided we would each keep a 20 dollar bill tucked away in our wallets and then go throughout our day asking the Lord if there was anyone he thought might need a little blessing and reminder that he was near. Would it really be more blessed to give than receive? Would it be fun giving away hard earned cash during such uncertain times? It wasn't much, but hey, we might need that money!

Well as you might expect, it turned into being a real hoot! More times than not we actually found ourselves not just giving the money to just anybody that came our way. We learned to rely on divine discernment to guide our generosity. We wanted to make sure we were utilizing the funds as the big man upstairs desired. Such a mindset really heightened our awareness that it really wasn't our money and that our goal was for him to be pleased with how we utilized the blessings we too had received.

Sometimes it was very obvious where the \$20 was to go, other times we consulted with each other to determine if we were on the right track. We had so much fun catching people off guard. They would say things like, "Oh, this is way to much." "Let me get you some change." Other times people expressed sheer delight and gratitude.

The more we did it the more we wanted to do it. The more we wanted to do it the more we wanted to give. We new it wasn't much money but boy were we ever getting a bang for our buck.

As 2020 comes to an end we can't even remember where all the money went but we know it was a blessing and as Batterson would say, "A double blessing." We can honestly say that it was more blessed to give than it was to receive. In fact, had we received an unexpected \$20 in 2020, I can almost promise you we would have assumed it was given to us so we could give it to someone else. We learned that when it comes to giving, what goes around truly comes around.

With 2021 just around the corner, we have decided to go for it once again as the new year comes to town. Give some thought as to whether you might want to join in on the \$20 Challenge. For you it might be \$100, \$10 or \$1. The dollar amount isn't what matters. It is the fun that comes looking for ways to be a little blessing in a big bad world that needs hope, inspiration and belief that there is a God that knows our names and when we least expect it, he might have someone else he loves serve as his messenger of love in the nick of time.

(Inspired by Luke 6:38)

Now Hear This!

How would you like to say something today that would remain relevant even 2,000 years from now? Consider this phrase: “Pay attention to how you hear.” Not who, what, where or when but HOW. The word how means in what way or manner; by what means. Basically, consider the source.

That statement was made by a physician named Luke nearly 2,000 years ago. Could the physician of old have ever imagined a world of instant information full of sound bites, Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, Instagram images, cable news, social media, Sunday newspapers, radio broadcasts, highway billboards, public TV, tabloid magazines and internet feeds? No way, José!

Stop and think about it. “Pay attention,” as the good doctor prescribed. We must be mindful for the real exponential potential for misinformation that is vulnerable to bias, manipulation and ulterior motive.

It was then and it is today; truth is hard to find. Truth is not subject to opinion, perspective, circumstances or preferences. Truth is absolute. It is not relative or subject to change. It was and will always be, true. We would do well to take the doctors advice, “Pay attention to how you hear.” Always consider the source.

What’s more. Test what you hear against the truth that has withstood the test of time. Weigh what you hear, where you hear it, how you hear it, when you hear it and who you hear it from against the principles and teachings provided in God’s word.

In this we can trust. He is a reliable source. No propaganda, spin or half truths. No need for a fact checker. No “fake news” in the Word. You will only find the Good News there!

(Inspired by Luke 8:18)

Carry On

I have been reminded recently that Jesus sent them out with POWER and AUTHORITY but NO SECURITY because FAITH was all they needed to accomplish their calling. If they were rejected, and they were, they were to shake it off. It wasn't a reflection on them but a realization of the hearts of those they were trying to love. Their calling?

1. Share the Good News
2. Restore health to those who are hurting.

Pretty straight forward. What a loving act of service. There was no compromise in the message nor dilution of the healing salve. As apprentices of Jesus, we have been called to share the Good News, not a watered down Gospel. The truth brings healing and sets people free. Our purpose is to bring healing and hope to those we encounter.

There is no room for hate in the heart of a Jesus follower. Some will reject the remedy. That is their choice. Nonetheless we are to carry on with no security but certainly under the power and authority of the One who empowers us through faith, for without it, it is impossible to please Him. Lead with love and mercy and grace are sure to follow.

Keep the faith. Carry on mighty warrior. Carry the light into the ever present darkness. Love will lead the way. His name is Jesus. He is the way, the truth and the light.

(Inspired by Luke 9:1-6)

Back-to-Back

God likes pairs. No not the fruit! Teams! Somethings were just made to work in pairs; boots, socks and disciples! The Lord sends us out two by two. We are not made to go it alone. His smallest team is two. Grab a buddy and follow the Lord. Why? Because two with him is hard to beat!

Signal Lights Provide Spiritual Change

Growing up as a kid one of my favorite neighborhood games was “*Red Light, Green Light.*” As several children stood a few feet away from the person leading the game, the leader would turn his back to the group and yell, “Green light!” The object of the game was to reach the leader before he turned back around and yelled, “Red light!”

Red light, green light now describes my daily drive to work. It seems they are rarely green when I am passing through. While I was sitting at a recent red light, the Lord gained my attention in a whole new way.

In this fast-paced world, we rarely take time to stop and refresh spiritually. Psalm 46:10 encourages us to be still and know that He is God. A major key to knowing God is being still. Red lights have become my reminder to stop, be still and know that He is God. In the midst of the storm, be still. Don’t worry. Don’t panic. He is in control. Nothing will happen that He has not allowed. He provides the peace that surpasses all understanding.

There are times when I experience a yellow light at an intersection. Yellow lights now serve as a reminder that I need to yield my ways to His. I need to surrender my will to Him on a daily basis. Many interpersonal conflicts could be solved if we would simply yield to others. Rather than push for what I prefer, I am learning to defer to the wishes of my Lord and others. Yielding is often a good thing. It signals a life filled less of self and more of Him.

Green lights are my favorites. They remind me that we are to go! Be doers of the Word! Put feet to your faith. Take action. Don’t look back. Forget the past and press on toward the future. Wherever he leads I’ll go, the old hymn proclaims.

I still enjoy a good game of “*Red Light, Green Light.*” The object is still the same, get as close as you can to the leader. In this case the leader is Jesus. The closer I get to Him the more my life, not just signal lights, changes.

(Inspired by Luke 10:38-42)

Tingle Time

Listen up. Prayer is a dialogue. Otherwise why would the Lord have said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” John 10:27 So much emphasis is put on us doing the talking. What if we spent as much time listening as we did talking during our prayer time? What if conversation with God wasn’t by appointment but was a lifestyle? What if in our coming and going we talked to God and God talked to us? Can you imagine enjoying being with a friend who did all the talking? What if we began to recognize that still small voice that is ever present, ever whispering in our ear throughout the day through scripture, nature, circumstances, revelation and meditation.

We would do well to listen as much as we petition when it comes to being a friend of God. Abraham was called a friend of God. We have that same opportunity. What does a great friendship look like? Simply put, I believe great friends enjoy shared experiences. In essence, they enjoy life together.

I am convinced God is in a mad pursuit of an awesome friendship with us. Relax. The pressure is off to fill the dead air. Stop talking and start listening and you might just be surprised who speaks up!

Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” And the Lord said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle.” 1 Samuel 3:10

Are your ears tingling? If not, maybe it is time to speak less and listen more.

(Inspired by Luke 11:1)

Watch What You Watch

What you watch and give your attention to affects who you are and what you believe. Flat screens of every shape and size are shaping our minds and our culture. There is no denying that our eyes are a portal to our inner selves. We must be mindful of what we allow to illuminate our souls.

A wise man once said, “No one lights a lamp and then hides it or puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where its light can be seen by all who enter the house. Your eye is like a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is filled with light. But when it is unhealthy, your body is filled with darkness. Make sure that the light you think you have is not actually darkness. If you are filled with light, with no dark corners, then your whole life will be radiant, as though a floodlight were filling you with light.”

It never ceases to amaze me how the principles and teachings of Jesus remain relevant for life today. Watch what you watch! What you watch has a way of permeating every part of your being.

(Inspired by Luke 11:33-36)

Change Is a Choice

Change your way of thinking or change will change you. You have the power to change. Change is a choice. There are times in life when we need to come at things differently than we have been known to practice. Our predictability can become problematic. Why do people change? There are any number of reasons that can be given but one thing is for certain, people only change if they want to. What needs to change in your life? If things keep heading in the direction they are now, where will life take you?

Will relationships improve or implode?

Will finances flourish or falter?

Will your health be good or gruesome?

Will you thrive at your work or tank?

Will you worry less or worry more?

Will you have faith or live in fear?

Will you make the call or call it quits?

Will you ask for forgiveness or accept failure?

Will you be better or be bitter?

Will you resolve the conflict or reload for combat?

Will you book the vacation or build your vocation?

Will you take a break or tank at the bottom?

Will you be a problem solver or problem causer?

Will you be a giver or a taker?

Will you serve or sit?

Will you grow or stay grounded?

What will happen if nothing changes? How long until the consequences of your actions lead to a new reality? Snap out of it. Make the break! Call on the Lord, phone a friend and take the first step in the direction your life was meant be. The choice to change is yours. Change or change will change you.

(Inspired by Luke 13:5)**FIG-ure It Out!**

As the story goes, a man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. Finally, he said to his gardener, 'I've waited three years, and there hasn't been a single fig! Cut it down. It's just taking up space in the garden.'

"The gardener answered, 'Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I'll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.'"

Can you relate to the owner of the fig tree? Is there something or someone in your life that just doesn't measure up to your expectations? You've waited, watered and wondered if true potential would ever be met. With no signs of progress your disappointment grows with no signs of fruit! It's time to cut your losses, abandon ship or get out of Dodge! It's over! Burn it down!

Maybe you are like the gardener. You can't deny the facts. The evidence is in and the test result aren't favorable. But somehow for some reason you see a glimmer of hope. With just a little more time and a little more love the fledgling fig might just start to bud. You offer a second

chance, a foul ball instead of a strike and you offer to take it from here. If all else fails, you too will sharpen your axe.

But then again maybe you can relate most to the fig tree! People have invested in you, cared for you, sacrificed for you, encouraged you, looked the other way, extended mercy, offered grace and somehow loved you anyway. Seeing where your choices and lack of gumption have gotten you in life, like the fig tree, you decide to grow up! Or else! Or else, you might be cut off, cut out or worst of all, cut down!

Maybe today is your wake up call. The owner has had enough, the gardener has offered a second chance with limits and now the future, or the lack there of, is in your hands. The choice is yours to make. Either way, time is running out. It's time to sprout and FIG-ure it out!

(Inspired by Luke 13:6-9)

We Will Stand

You want to compromise? Don't bother.

You okay with mediocre? Then by all means, take a pass.

Looking for a participation trophy? Please stay on the bus.

But if you want to work hard, pull your own weight and then some, let's do this this. If you don't have to be asked to come early and stay late, then get on board. If you believe good enough is good enough for the opposing team, then tighten your boots. If excellence is your goal and you are willing to work for it, even if we lose, then sign up. It's not about winning. It's about an attitude and a mindset. It's about teamwork, brotherhood and sacrifice. It's about commitment and discipline. It's about swallowing your pride and living in humility as you consider it to be an honor to give all you've got in service to the Lord so long as He gives the strength, mercy and grace to lay it on the line for others. Even when it hurts. Even when they don't notice. Even when they don't care. And even when they lack appreciation. We will stand and those who stand with us, will be our brothers!

(Inspired by Luke 14:25-35)

A Stop for Pig Slop

Do you know someone who has blown it? They had the tiger by the tail and then let it loose? Everything was going their way. They had the right pedigree, the right circumstances, the right career, the right touch and the right size bank account and then, like an idiot, they blew it! What a waste. They made a stop for pig slop.

What if they hit bottom, had an awakening or came to their senses, but were flat busted, broke and shattered? What if they wanted to come back? Start over, reset or begin again? Would you take a chance on a comeback? What would be required?

There is a family in scripture that lived to tell of such a tale. The wild child hit the road to find himself and ended up finding himself knee deep in pig slop.

Wallowing with the pigs he came to realize he wasn't quite as clever, industrious and creative as he thought he was. He had failed and failed big time. Rather than eat leftovers fit for hogs, he swallowed an oversized piece of humble pie and headed for home. He expressed his sincere regret and with real remorse for his wrongdoing, set out to make things right.

The reaction to his awakening was met with mixed reviews. His dad saw him coming from afar, ran out to welcome him home, set him up with new digs and called for a celebration.

Why did the father notice his son coming from such a distance? I can't help but believe he lived with great expectations. He had been praying God would grant his son wisdom. The dad waited and watched anticipating the answer to his prayers. What parent, of a wayward child, can't relate?

His older brother wasn't quite so fast to celebrate the recovery. After all, if the call for seconds was going to come, it sure wasn't going to be at his expense! His wayward brother had emptied his own wallet full of inheritance money. There was no way he was going to let his pocket get picked by such an idiot.

Who could blame the older brother? We all know people that enable bad behavior. Parents who continue to clean up their kids messes long after they have been able-bodied adults. Some people never grow up and certain parents help keep it that way.

But then there are parents that recognize when the light bulb comes on in their kid's head. They truly have turned from their wandering ways and have made the turn toward a life worth living.

Such was the case with the father of the wayward son. He had no choice but to celebrate recovery. His son was lost but now was found. He was heading the wrong direction and made the course correction. He was dead, in so many ways, and had now come back to life. What's not to celebrate?

Yesterday was yesterday. Tomorrow may never come. Today is today and today is a day for celebration. Everything is right in the world and it is time to party!

We all know a wayward soul. Perhaps it is us. Someone who has fallen of the wagon, derailed the train or took a trip to nowhere fast.

Some may never make their way back home. It is often a choice of their own that leaves them adrift in outer space. But when they do come to their senses, have a breakthrough or a great awakening, love is to be our only response and responsibility.

Why? Because in reality, we are all wayward kids and need to find our way back home to a loving God who runs to us with open arms, welcomes us home and throws us a party in celebration of our recovery! If only we will make the turn towards home.

Are you the wayward child? Maybe today is your wake-up call. Perhaps it is time to swallow a piece of humble pie, express sincere regret and real remorse for all the wrongdoing you have stirred up. Today is the day to set out to make things right. Are you the resentful sibling? Are you rolling your eyes in disbelief at the continued compassion and the never-ending extension of mercy and forgiveness? If so, reel in your index finger. Quit pointing at the perpetrator and start looking in the mirror. It is there that you will begin to discover what it means to desire mercy, grace and unconditional love.

Are you the enabling parent who constantly rushes in to clean up the mess? Do you keep you helicopter on the helipad ready for takeoff and rescue? Stop pretending you are the savior! Sometimes people have to fall down in order to grow up. Helping can hurt. Tough love is sometimes required in order to reach maturity. Quit stunting your kid's growth!

If you are the parent that calls out to God on behalf of your kids, if you have cried yourself to sleep in anguish out of concern for your child and if you can't help but anticipate, desire and expect better days, hang in there. I think I see a tired, worn out, remorseful kid on the horizon. He smells of pig slop and has humble pie on his breath, but it might be time to fire up the grill and start celebrating recovery!

(Inspired by Luke 15:11)

The Money Mentality

Are you afraid to make money? Some are afraid money will possess them, that it will cause them to lose focus and perspective.

Truth is, it's not the money, it's the mentality. Money has the ability to do wonderful things. Money in the right hands can provide food for the hungry, shelter for the needy and presents under the tree. When money is put in the wrong hands, fingers get sticky, greed sets in and hearts harden. The power of money is exchanged for overindulgence, self centeredness and extravagance.

Lets be honest, there isn't much that money can't make better. But money can't buy you love, happiness or a ticket to heaven. Money can provide an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others while providing hope and opportunity.

If I had to choose life with more or less money, I'd choose more. However, the more money I have the less of it I hope to keep as I share it with others. I would never trade a dollar for an ounce of integrity, honesty or confidence. But I would spend all I had if I knew it would buy peace on earth and good will towards men. So far money has failed to measure up in this regard. Contentment, not cash, is the key to happiness. Contentment is found in your mentality not your money.

Nonetheless, when money does come our way we must not fear its power to possess but rather release it to do good. Holding it tight will squeeze life from the holder. No amount of money is worth missing a calling. We are certain to find our calling when we are motivated to find it regardless of the money associated with what we find. The key to life is maintaining a mentality that is content regardless of the money that happens to come and go. While the love of money is the root of evil, love is the greatest blessing of all. The more we love, the more likely we are to depend less on money.

(Inspired by Luke 16:9-12)

Big Dogging It

I recently viewed a photo of what was referred to as the largest dog in the world. With hind feet on the ground, the Great Dane in the photo placed its front paws on the shoulders of his more than average- sized owner. The thought went through my mind, “I wonder what it cost to feed that dog?”

Ego is another three letter word that also varies in size and cost a lot to feed. Arguably, I have met certain individuals whose egos could qualify as the largest in the world. While I have no photographic proof, their actions and attitudes often validate my perspective.

Like the Great Dane, these human beasts stand on their hind feet and use the front paws to push others down and keep them in their place as they pronounce their greatness. Large egos are feed by making others feel small and by doing everything possible to inflate and promote their own.

The next time you encounter a Great Dane-sized ego, just remember, when compared to smaller dogs, Great Danes have a much shorter life expectancy. They may appear larger than life but in the end, they burn out, die off and ultimately lose the race. Big egos are hard to feed. Big dogging it results in limited effectiveness.

Live small and live long!

(Inspired by Luke 14:7-14)

When Darkness Reigns

The moment when darkness reigns is the darkest hour of all. Hope fades. Confidence dwindles. Energy drains. The enemy has won. The agony of defeat weighs heavy as the reality of losing what we had been fighting for slips painfully through our fingers.

The reign of darkness takes many forms. The loss of a job, the untimely death of a loved one, the regretted doctor's report, the tragic accident, financial ruin, moral failure and perhaps worst of all, betrayal by someone closest to us, each is a reminder that we are not in control. We are subject to circumstances and forces that appear to come out of nowhere.

Life changes in a moment and before we know it, everything turns dark. Darkness reigns. Life is hard. The thought of surviving escapes us. Holding on to die another day seems impossible. We are crushed, devastated and distraught.

Yet somehow, whether by way of the time that heals all wounds or the numbness that has overcome us, this is something we get through. We find a way to remember, darkness reigns but only for a moment, not forever.

If for nothing else, the Lord's people are known for come backs. For centuries he has gained a reputation for using all things to bring about better outcomes for underdogs. What darkness intended for evil, he rewires, reignites and repurposes for the greater good. No one looks forward to dark, ugly and painful days. Try as we might to avoid them they run us down and run us over but they don't have to ruin our lives.

We can prevail. We can rise above it and we can use it in ways we never dreamed possible. When you find yourself looking up from the bottom of the pit, keep looking up.

Don't give in and don't give up. Your lowest moment may very well be the launching pad for a new beginning, a greater purpose and a life full of meaning despite your darkest hour.

(Inspired by Luke 22:47-53)

Carry On

Just when you think you can go no further,
when you've lost all hope at the end of your rope,
just when your giddy up has got up and gone
and your want to has got up and went,

a spark is ignited, a glimmer appears,
your focus sharpens, your strength renews,
your energy boosts,
the sun begins to rise and you begin to realize
you have broke through.

You have survived and what seemed certain to take you over has in fact been overcome. You did it. You prevailed. You held on. You persevered only to discover that apart from Him you can do nothing. Not even quit. Like a warrior fresh from battle, you kneel before the King ready to accept yet another challenge despite knowing it will be hard and insurmountable. Yet, to stay too long would be to miss the adventure and conquest that lies ahead. You wipe your brow, renew your spirit, take a deep breath and ride yet again into the thrill of the great unknown, knowing that should death come, you are not defeated but rather you have lived life to the fullest strengthened by your faith and call. You my son, must carry on!

Happen to Be

Have you ever felt like Simon? Simon? Who is Simon? Is he the guy that the childhood game of “Simon Says” is named after? I don’t think so, but maybe.

There is a line in Luke 23:26, about a man named Simon, that recently caught my attention. It is the little phrase, “happened to be.” Depending on your perspective, Simon happened to either be in the wrong place at the wrong time or he was at the right place at the right time. Some might even say he was at the right place at the wrong time or at the wrong place at the right time.

Regardless, we have all had days like these, days when we happen to be. Simon was just out minding his own business and the next thing he knows he is seized by a group of soldiers and forced to carry a heavy burden for a stranger accused of a crime. Not exactly the kind of day you wake up looking forward to. You could say he rolled out on the wrong side of the bed and didn’t even know it!

What was Simon’s reaction to having his day interrupted and his rights thrown to the wind? I wonder what Simon said about that day. Did you catch it? What did Simon say? As in, Simon says! We really don’t know what Simon said but something tells me Simon had a lot to say about that day. Things like; “Hey, what’s going on here?” “What did I do to deserve this?” “You’ve got the wrong guy.” “This isn’t fair.” “Somebody call the police!” “Who do you guys think you are?” “Am I going to jail?” “You are violating my rights.” “I want my first phone call!” “Mommy!”

We have all had days like these. Somebody totally highjacks our day. It could be as serious as running a traffic light and causing a terrible accident or as minor as interrupting our Sunday afternoon nap with a blaring boom box. Either way, somebody, somewhere, some how, has violated our space and we are left with a burden that’s not our own.

But then again Simon may have had other things to say that day. Things like; “Is that Jesus?” “He healed my cousin’s wife.” “I heard of this guy. A lot of people say he is the Messiah.” “Jesus, needs my help? No problem. I’m in.” “Me? I get to lighten the load of God’s son? How else can I help?” “Thank you Jesus! Stay strong! I just happened to be here but I am so glad I was.”

We can all relate to days like these. Days when the unfortunate circumstances of another provides us an opportunity to step in, bare the brunt and lighten the load. What did Simon say on days like these? We really don’t know. But the better question might be, what do you say on days like these when you just happen to be in a place to play an important role in the life of someone you may not have otherwise known. Someone, who might just be destined to change the world as you happen to be crossing paths on the windy, desolate and lonely highway called life.

(Inspired by Luke 23:26)

Sucker-Punched

Robbed by a sucker-punch? Being robbed of possessions is a real bummer but being robbed of your life, loved ones, friendships, hopes, dreams and happiness takes the bottom to an all time low. Coming out of the daze as your world is spinning out of control you soon realize, you weren't just robbed, you were sucker-punched! So this is it? TKO? This is as good as it gets? Maybe, unless you decide to dig deep, grab hold of your faith and take your life back. You can sit there, lick your wounds, wonder why, cry about it, seek revenge, boil in rage or you can take control and let it go and rebuild. There is power in hitting reset no matter how bad you've been robbed or how hard you've been sucker-punched.

The race doesn't always go to the swift, nor the victory to the strongest warrior but if you are still standing and drawing air into those lungs, you aren't finished yet. You may not know which round you are in but one thing is for sure, there is more to come and your name will be on the ticket to the title fight.

Don't give up. Rise above it. Grab hold of those boots straps. Look the robbers in the face and challenge them to another bout. With the Lord at your side and a friend who sticks with you closer than a brother, you are a force to be reckoned with.

The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy. Did you catch that order? He steals first and then seeks to kill and destroy. You're still breathing. You aren't down for the count. He may have stolen from you and slid in a nasty sucker-punch but little does he know he has awakened a mighty warrior stoked and ready for the comeback of the century!

Be humble. Work hard. Pray daily. Seek the Lord and you will soon find yourself among those who have lived to tell about the agony of defeat but even more so, the sweet taste of victory.

Victims no more! Press on in the Lord!

(Inspired by John 1:5)

Reputation Versus Reality

Reputation is what others choose to believe about you as truth. Reality is what God knows about you as a matter of fact. Remember, men once believed the world was flat. God created the world and upon hearing the news, flat out laughed.

Reputation is based on what others think about you. Reality is based on what God knows about you. One is tainted with lies. The other is wrapped with unfailing love. One holds grudges. The other provides a way of escape from your past. One holds you captive by death with no hope for reconciliation. The other provides the freedom of new life through redemption.

Live in the light of his love today. It will do your heart, mind and soul a world of good!
And that's a fact Jack!

(Inspired by John 2:23-25)

A Tiny Cell

A people pleasing prison is a torturous state of mind,
where acceptance is ever elusive and judgment all the time.
Freedom is held hostage by critics who cast critiques.
Their position on your mindset is never quite unique.
You are captured in a tiny cell. Bound by unbelief.
From the fear of disappointment, there never is full relief.
Peace escapes you, never to be embraced, as the bars of inadequacy separate happiness from
your face.
The keys to unlock your horror are not found in the warden's hands,
but rather in the heart, of the conflicting inner man.
Your fate turns to freedom as the answer lies within.
Acceptance is inside yourself, where it's really always been.
What others come to think of you, is not what you've become.
Learning to love and like yourself, is where you've come from.
The approval of mere mortals is appealing if only for a while.
Fleeting and fickle, they often hate your style.
Such pursuits are futile and brutal in the end.
No consensus will be found among them, our critical fellow men.
You were beautifully crafted, by a designer who forever loves you so.
His approval is all that matters and all you need to know.
So do what only you can do, and forget about the rest.
Be you for who you really are. At this you are your best.

If Only We Will See It

Great peace comes when we wake up each morning simply looking, with excitement, for how God wants to use us throughout the day. When we are available, he makes our days full of meaning, purpose and adventure.

Our role is to simply explore and discover where he is at work and join him in the fun and adventure. We don't have to make anything happen. There is already plenty to do. The calling he makes on our lives is a daily expedition led by him. All we have to do is relax, see the opportunity, follow his footsteps and hold on for the ride that is often right before our very eyes, if only we will see it!

“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”— the things God has prepared for those who love him.” 1 Corinthians 2 : 9

Prayer: Lord, today and every day, help us see and embrace your calling for our lives with wisdom, grace and humility.(Inspired by John 5:19)**The Happy Meal**

Imagine you are at a remote conference in the mountains with more than 5,000 other attendees. The keynote speaker goes longer than expected and the next thing you know it's dinner time but all the restaurants are closed. It's looking like somebody is about to go to bed hungry!

Then you happen to overhear the speaker tell the event coordinator to have everyone cool their jets, sit down and get ready for a Happy Meal. A Happy Meal? Yes, a Happy Meal. If you are hungry, it's after dark and a 10 mile walk back to town where everything is closed and someone offers you dinner, that is definitely a Happy Meal.

This isn't exactly what happens when Jesus feeds the 5,000 but it sure sounds close! At the end of a long day with more than 5,000 in attendance, the people needed to be fed but there were few provisions. Seeing the need, Jesus called on his apprentices to feed the people. Their response to the idea was priceless, “Uhh, Jesus, that's a lot of Happy Meals. We forgot to call the caterer. This crowd is huge and we only have a couple of fish and five loaves of bread.”

Jesus' response? “Great! Let's eat.” The rest is history. Everyone had all they could put down and then some. Twelve baskets of leftovers was the outcome.

It's not everyday that Jesus pulls a rabbit out of a hat. Yes, there are times when there are more bills than money at the end of the month. But it is times like these, that Jesus was made for. No Jesus isn't president of the money tree and he is not a super hero that always sweeps down to rescue us from reckless living and poor financial decisions. But he is Jesus. We should never underestimate what he might do. More times than not it's not about the number of fish but the size of our faith. We tend to have a scarcity mentality and Jesus wants to scale. He sees an opportunity to take what we've got and turn it into more than we could ever imagine.

Jesus didn't grow a movement based on prosperity or poverty, Yes, he did have a treasurer on his team but he lived on the road using a rock as a pillow. Jesus built his life on the promises of God. He called on us to seek the Lord and His ways first and then to leave the rest up to Him. Jesus knew that if God could take care of the sparrow, He can take care of us too. Here is the key. Jesus took what he had and asked God to bless it.

Maybe today we need to take inventory and ask God to bless what we have, to multiply it and use it for His glory. The results are up to Him. Our job is to seek the Lord first, break the bread, distribute the fish and watch Jesus go to work as we all sit down and enjoy a Happy Meal.

(Inspired by John 6:1-15)

Leading Losers

Losing leaders are easy to spot. But trying to lead losers is not so easy. Losers lay back and blend in. They stay out of trouble catching the wake of others as they coast in the current of those who are making it happen.

They rarely make waves but one thing is for sure, they are nothing but dead weight. They say yes and appear compliant and in agreement when inside they dig in, undermine and short circuit success with apathetic, passive-aggressive behavior. They are the ultimate abdicators.

It may take a while, but great leaders eventually smoke the losers out. They recognize the cancer they are to the movement and hit the eject button once the losers have been identified.

It's true, a bad apple can spoil the batch. Unfortunately, leaders are all too often blamed and are eliminated because they failed to throw out the losers they were leading sooner rather than later. Their efforts to rally the troops, motivate the slackers and cradle the cry babies, fails. Ultimately the buck stops with them and their long suffering, patient, tolerant approach is rewarded with a walk down the plank themselves.

Unless rightfully identified, the very losers responsible for taking on the water begin to lead the beginning of the end of the organization as they continue to go unrecognized.

The rot decays the organization beyond recovery way before the stench draws the flies.

In order to survive and thrive, leaders have to make the tough decision to cut the losers they lead loose from the tribe! Otherwise the leader may very well go down with the ship, or worse, watch it bubble to the bottom of the ocean as the losers hold onto the top of the mast to the point of no return.

(Inspired by John 6:61-67)

Tricky Business

Believe it or not, not everyone has your best interest at stake, not even if they appear so. There is a reason why consumer advocates proclaim, "Buyer beware!" Trickery is alive and well.

Simply put, things aren't always as they appear to be. Friendships, good deals, strategic partners, ingredients, headlines and advertisements say one thing yet produce another.

Don't be so naive, not everyone's motives are as pure as spring water. There are plenty of hucksters and conmen out there peddling Kool Aid and propagating falsehood. Rooted in selfish ambition, these so called, prophets of truth, are in fact in pursuit of power, prestige, position and money! They are looking out for number one and you and I need to make sure we know who has Uno on their jersey.

These smooth talkers lure us in with deceptive kindness, manipulative offerings and apparent acceptance. As they cast their spell we are lured into their web of entrapment. If we aren't careful we will get burned because we failed to discern. There is real danger in believing everything you hear. Knowing the truth sets you free from entrapment. Trick me once, shame on you.

Trick me twice, shame on me. Why are we so gullible? Perhaps we are just too lazy to check the source, test the spirit or read the fine print. Regardless, if we aren't careful, we will way over pay in more ways than one. We have to see through the trickery!

Such is not a call for paranoia but rather awareness. It is not always easy to see things for what they are. We need to slow down, think it through, ponder a bit, check our emotions and then apply a healthy dose of discernment to our decision making. The magician's cry is a great reminder when it comes to discerning the truth, "Now you see it and now you don't." Sleight of hand is alive and well and reaches far beyond pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

The next time you are in a position to consider buying into something that just seems too good to be true, consider it as a sign that it probably is! We need to be as wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove. We need to be nice but not naive! Everyone wants a good deal and we always want to be frugal and thrifty. Unfortunately, there are others who play on this desire and are shady and shifty.

It is hard not to get burned. But when we learn to discern, we shine the light on a lot of tricky business.

(Inspired by John 8:32)

Love Always

By deeply desiring to demonstrate love and acceptance of people, there are times, if we are not careful, that we are actually approving, accepting, accommodating and advocating sin. It is one thing to love all people, it is another to approve, accept, accommodate and advocate sin. Certainly, it is impossible to legislate morality but as believers we do have an obligation as followers of Jesus to love God and love other as we love ourselves. That does not mean we approve, accept, accommodate and advocate sin. We are obligated to speak the truth in love. Being hateful, rude and unkind is not an option and should not be approved, accepted, accommodated or advocated as well. After all, to do so would be sinful. It is possible to love someone and not approve, accept, accommodate and advocate their choices. This applies to anything that the Lord, not a court, not a majority or a society, calls sin. Jesus is the standard for this principle. He loved sinners, hung out with sinners and was deeply criticized by the religious elite for doing so. Jesus loved sinners so much that he challenged them to a better life. He called on them to turn from their sin and turn to God. Beautiful. That is the heart of the gospel. God loves sinners so much he would do all he could to assure they didn't settle for less and wallow in what he knew was second best. Sin has a way of tricking us into thinking it is as good as it gets. How sad to settle for Hershey's when you could have had Godiva! We must not confuse love with approval, acceptance, accommodation and advocacy. Nor should we be hateful, rude and unkind. 2/2 Ours is not to judge and silence is not agreement, but we are to speak the truth in love, ALWAYS.

(Inspired by John 8:1-11)

Blind Allegiance

Blind allegiance occurs when we fail to realize or acknowledge the truth and therefore choose to follow an ideal reality rather than reality itself. We humans have an amazing ability to shape and see things from a perspective that supports our desires not necessarily the facts. It is here where the line between oblivious and the obvious begins to blur. Without doubt, an informed mind makes the best decision. Prescription without diagnosis is considered malpractice. Real danger occurs when we rely too much on hunch or speculation. Information is important. The right information is essential.

Information isn't the same as revelation. Truth reveals reality. The trouble with information is how much of it you have. Do you have all the information? Are you missing information? Is what you have misinformation? We can believe we know that we know that we know until, we are enlightened on what we don't know. Sometimes we may never know all the information. At other times, only time will tell.

I love the insight that can be gleaned from the ancient book of Proverbs; "The first to state his case seems right until another comes and cross-examines him." Or how about this one; "The one who gives an answer before he listens — this is foolishness and disgrace for him." Be careful what you listen to. Garbage in. Garbage out. Trick me once, shame on you. Trick me twice, shame on me.

Let's be mindful of the games that are often played to influence our thinking and ultimately, our lives. This reality is often referred to as propaganda, gaslighting or manipulation. If you find yourself needing a good dose of truth and in need of a time-tested source for reality, put the book of Proverbs on your reading list. Doing so will help center your thoughts on perspectives that you consider.

The good news is that when you know the truth, it sets you free, free from worry, doubt, anxiousness and perhaps most of all, confusion and chaos. Be aware of the propensity to drift into blind allegiance. Stay enlightened. Check your sources and trust the One who brings all things into the light of reality.

(Inspired by John 8:31-32)

The Patient Thief

He is patient. He prefers sooner than later but he will wait so long as he gets what he wants. He will take your life now or trim time off at the end. A slow death is still a win, it just takes more work. If he can't take it now he will teach us to abuse it so it eventually becomes less effective and even useless. His purpose is threefold, to steal, kill and destroy.

Steal – take, remove or rob.

Kill – stop, eliminate or end.

Destroy – leave no memory of, no recollection of or of no influence.

This applies to our . . . Bodies Lives Work Careers Education Minds Joy Happiness
Families Marriages Relationships Money Reputations Talents

Pick one. Pick two. He has. He has our numbers and he knows our weaknesses and plans to take full advantage of our handicaps. He never plays fair but always to win.

His strategy has been revealed. He hopes we will forget it or ignore it but if it has to do with taking, stopping or eliminating our influence, count on it; he is all in and involved.

He wants to destroy our influence to the point there is no memory or history of us. If he can't destroy, he will settle for a kill that has limited memory associated with it. If killing isn't an option, he will accept thievery. He will take what is ours, especially if we choose not to use a gift or a talent.

He is on the prowl seeking whom he may devour. He is real and plays for keeps. "For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." (Eph 6:12)

We must know our enemy. And it is not us! It is not each other. It is him! Jesus is a giver not a taker. He redeems, makes new and reconciles. His plans are to give life abundantly. "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life." (John 10:10)

Make no mistake about; there are two plans for our lives. One for evil, the other for good. Be aware. Be alert. Be prepared. And be on guard against the schemes and strategies of the enemy.

We are at war and we are the ultimate prizes. We are the desired trophies and the reason for bragging rights. A price has been paid for our lives. Don't let it be stolen, killed or destroyed. Our lives are far too valuable to be wasted.

(Inspired by John 10:10)

One at a Time

Crying is okay. It washes away some, but not all of the pain. Sharing a burden with the Lord and others brings further healing but some wounds are simply deeper than others. The scars from such trials can bring resentment or remind us of the victory that has been won.

You my friend have lived another day on the battlefield of life. But yet remember, too many have settled for simply being alive and have yet to really live. You my friend are not one of them. Your scars and your pain have not been wasted for you are one of the the lucky ones who have found purpose and meaning in life amidst the the trails, tribulations and yes, the joy and happiness that comes your way!

Live on my friend. Live on! Embrace the moment. Cherish the memories as you experience all life has to offer each and every day! One step, one day, one life and one hurt at a time!

(Inspired by John 11:33-36)

What Have We Become?

We worked hard. Paid our dues. Put in the time. Did the right thing. Went the extra mile. Gave it our all and didn't look for accolades or awards. But what have we become?

Toward the end of "THE BOOK" there is a passage that reads, "I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting. But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first."

Oh to come so far and accomplish so much but without love. There is another passage that speaks to this dilemma. Here is an excerpt. "If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing." I Corinthians 13.

Let us pause and reflect and regain our composure. We can do so much yet but with little impact if we leave out love. The challenge from Paul the apostle is clear, "Do everything with love." 1 Corinthians 16:14.

With love, my love. With love.

(Inspired by John 13:35)

Cues Are Clues

Take note today of the insights God provides throughout your journey. Actively be on the look out for his promptings. Doing so will change your perspective on circumstances, events and happenings. These nonverbal cues are often clues to how God is trying to communicate with you. As you begin to recognize them, they will have deeper and more meaningful purpose as you see them as his attempts to connect with you. He leads quietly from behind! He is in pursuit of a loving relationship with you. This is why you were created! He pulls you in close and hugs you whispering softly in your ear. He does not yell or scream at you but rather gently woos you into his presence. Be sensitive and in tune with his leadings and promptings. He speaks in many ways if only you are listening. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." Isaiah 30:21

(Inspired by John 14:26)

Peace by Piece

It seems at times that peace is ever illusive. Just about the time your heart is at rest something creeps in and gives you a wet willy. Out of nowhere, as you are minding your own business, influences outside your control, right or wrong, pick and poke at your peace of mind. Is it possible to protect ourselves from the never ending cascading turmoil? Is peace possible? It's a big deal. A lack of peace leads to all kinds of ancillary issues. Stress, anxiety, worry, frustration, fatigue, confusion and anger are just a few of the side effects that a lack of peace produces. So what is an otherwise peaceful person to do? What is the key to tranquility? Somewhere, someone once said, "Don't sweat the small stuff." In other words, practicing peace by piece is the secret to serenity. We must be selective. Rather than wear yourself out fretting over every little issue that pops up like the pesky varmints at the "Whack a Mole" game at the local arcade, we need to be selective when we decide which piece disturbs the peace. Certainly, some things warrant a disturbance. There are times when we need a wake up call. But let's be honest, most of the things that ruffle our feathers aren't worth the dust they disturb. Time takes care of the majority of the peace busters and selective hearing nearly takes care of all the rest. It's time we holster the feather duster! Quit stirring it up! Like my mother use to say, "In the word ignorance is the word ignore. Ignore ignorance." We would do well to ignore a large portion of the ignorance that seeks to disturb the peace, those pesky little pieces of stupidity that threaten to rattle our peace of mind. We can gain peace by piece. Pick the piece that is truly threatening the peace and let everything else simply trickle away like water off a duck's butt. 2/2 Swatting at flies has little effect on stopping the insanity. Stop waving and flapping your arms! You look like a scarecrow in a wind storm! Isolate the stinky piece and remove it. Peace by piece! When we do, "peace by piece", we gain back the calm we so desire, one piece at a time.

(Inspired by John 14:27)

Life on the Curve

Do you remember that feeling you had as a little kid when your dad would drive fast over a big hump in the road? Your tummy would flutter and for a brief movement you felt as if you were air borne. It was a little scary at first but before you had time to look over your shoulder you were asking him to turn around and do it again! Rides with dad were more than a road trip they were an adventure!

I'm not a kid anymore but the older I get the more I am learning that God loves to take His kids on exciting rides. However, it is not so much about arriving as it is about getting there. Please allow me to explain.

Life is about intimacy with God. It is as if God is saying, "It is not about what you do, it is about me and you." It's about the time we spend together out on the open road.

I know it sounds so simple but I have discovered an intimacy with God that I had previously tried to obtain only through systems and processes. I use to make appointments with God, now I am truly learning to walk with Him. In essence, I have had a spiritual awakening rooted in learning to pray.

I have learned that prayer is much more of a dialogue. I don't have to carry the conversation with God. Prayer is as much about listening as it is talking. He reveals things to me as I listen. I heard that a reporter once asked Mother Teresa what she said to God when she prayed.

"I listen," she said.

"What does He say," the reporter probed.

"He listens," Mother Teresa replied. Isn't that beautiful!

It was if the Lord said, "Ray, when you sit down with your wife do you pull out the A.C.T.S. guide for discussion?"

"No, Lord. I think that might insult her. We have a free-flowing conversation."

"Then why do you come before Me with your predetermined processes, lists and systems?" God revealed.

Trust me. I am not knocking a good prayer plan. But my prayer plans put God in a box. I have discovered He can keep up with my A.D.D. wandering brain. In fact, when I am still long enough, I am discovering that He tends to take a few tangents Himself! It's all good!

As of late I have been asking God to give me specific direction for my life. I was doing a considerable amount of talking but it was as if He had gone deaf. God saw through my motivation. I wanted the assignment more than I wanted Him.

Once I realized God was more interested in my relationship and time with Him than Him telling me what I needed to do, funny thing is, He began revealing His plans.

Like the disciples on the road after the resurrection, Jesus was with them but they failed to recognize His presence. I have been walking with Jesus for years, only now, as I bask in His presence, am I seeing Him at work in my life like never before. "It's not what you do, it's you that I want," the Father keeps reminding me. "You will discover your marching orders in time alone with me in prayer," He says.

Our job is to act in the same way as Abraham. When God prompted Abraham, He simply said go. That was it, one step of faith at a time. No map, no destination, no schedule, just him and God on a journey. One day at a time on the road with God. Nothing less. Nothing more. Little-by-little.

So many times we beg God to reveal his plan so we can get on the road to doing His will. We forget that He is so much more interested in the journey than the destination.

We want clarity on a plan from point “A” to point “B”. Once we think we have our marching orders we tend to thank God and tell Him we will take it from here. We like the straight line. Sure it takes faith to step out in the direction of point “B” but I am convinced that God desires for us to live a little more on the wild side. I think He likes us to live life on the curve. He is the “river of life” after all. Have you every followed a straight river? No! Rivers wind! They are full of curves ... and surprises!

Curves require faith. Just because we are heading in the right direction doesn't mean there won't be curves. I believe the curves are there by God's design. Why? Because they keep us close to the one who has been down this road before. Sure there are straight-aways between the curves but the real excitement is found living on the curve. Not knowing what is right around the bend or just over the hill brings the thrills. God likes surprises. He is never caught of guard but He loves giving His kids surprises. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Life without curves requires little faith! No curves. No surprises!

When life throws you a curve, left your hands in the air and hang on for the ride. As the burdens pile on your shoulders allow them to bend your knees before your Father. He knew this curve was coming and He knows what is coming down the road. Hang on; He is more likely to press on the accelerator than to pound on the brakes! Why? Because He loves it when He get's to take His kids for a ride on the wild side!

(Inspired by John 15:5-7)

What Is Your Purpose?

We all have a desire for our lives to have meaning and purpose. What is your purpose? Or, better yet, what is God's purpose? Discovering your purpose starts here! Once you know God's purpose you can begin to adjust your purpose to his. Where can you find God's purpose? The Tora? Tarot cards? The whole of scripture? Horoscopes? The Ten Commandments? Church?

Jesus summed up God's purpose with 3 basic values: Love God and love others as you love yourself. Bottom line? LOVE. When we filter our actions and decisions through love we gain incredible insight to our purpose and role in life. God's purpose becomes our purpose. Simply put, love God and love others as you love yourself. We tend to want to over complicate it but when we go about our day simply looking for someone to love it is amazing how our lives begin to take on meaning and purpose. Try it! Tomorrow morning when you wake up make it your goal to love God and love others as you love yourself. Important point, most don't struggle with this one, but some do, don't forget to love yourself. God does. He loves and values you so much that he wants to hang out with you on life's journey. God loves you and so should you! You are worth it. Got it? Okay, let's get going and see just what happens when we start living out our purpose by loving God and loving others as we love ourselves!

Ready? Set! Love!

(Inspired by John 15:12-13)

Pinocchio's Dilemma

Are you a puppet leader? If you are, deep inside, despite the persona you present, you know you have the title, you have the position but like Pinocchio, your every move is controlled from behind the scenes. You are not your own man. You are a sycophant. A yes-man.

The master manipulators pull your strings and play you like a rag doll. The minute you have an original idea or fail to comply, they gently pull your strings with threats and innuendos. Fail to follow and before you know it, they cut you off, take you out and drop you to the floor like a useless head of lettuce.

This is especially so if the limelight seems to have gone from the so-called creator and onto the beloved carved creation who succeeds. Things go well so long as you and the other puppets in the production play along, dance to the music and keep their "noses" clean. Question not, look the other way, limit your critique, ignore your gut, stuff your character, simply comply and all will go well.

It's sad really. Like Pinocchio, puppet leaders deeply desire to be real and to be genuine. They yearn for freedom from the powers that be, those passive aggressive control freaks that subtly circumvent, twist the strings and maneuver like a snake in the grass.

They go unnoticed until Pinocchio eventually has enough. He can no longer ignore his conscious. He breaks free and becomes a real leader. A real man, not a yes man but a man led by his heart and the real Creator.

Retired major league baseball player, Adam LaRoche, captured the essence of Pinocchio's dilemma when he said, "In life, we're all faced with difficult decisions and will have a choice to make. Do we act based on the consequences, or do we act on what we know and believe in our hearts to be right?"

Every puppet leader will ultimately come face to face with who he really wants to be. A puppet on a string, with a title and a position, or a real man, a real leader, beholding to God alone and led by strong convictions and a clear conscience.

(Inspired by John 15:19-21)

For As Long As God Grants You Breath

One minute, everything in the world is in perfect peace. Then in less than a second, everything changes. What once was is no more. Like a rug pulled from beneath your feet, it was there one instant and gone the next. Laughter turns to tears, joy to pain, intrigue to utter shock. Blindsided. Out of nowhere. One word, one second, one action turns the world on end. Who you were is no longer who you are. Innocence becomes insanity.

You had no choice in the matter, either. Victimized, you stand paralyzed in disbelief. What you once held dear is ripped from your grip. The line you held no longer holds and the enemy cackles an evil laugh as he steals precious memories and trades them for utter evil and dismay. He positions for the ultimate kill in pursuit of complete destruction. But deep within side you courage begins to swell. The human spirit fights to survive. Not today will the opponent's victory be won for today the sun has not yet set. It has not been totally darkened by the gray sheets of gloom and disparity. A second wind begins to bring much needed relief. Beacons of hope break through the muck as your head rises yet again above the fray. You are alive! 2/2 You may have been knocked down but through true grit, determination and the will to prevail, endurance brings you to a new day where once again you will embrace the happiness that once was yours. Even still you turn to face the challenges of a new storm brewing on the horizon. Nonetheless you chose life and to live it to the fullest so long as God grants you breath. You rise, hold your head high and walk bravely toward the adventure that lies ahead. This is life as you have come to expect it. A life imperfect and full of unwelcomed surprises but life it is and the life you must live come what may.

(Inspired by John 16:33)

The Cold Blade of Betrayal

If Jesus can be betrayed so can we. One in 12 of Jesus's disciples betrayed him. That's an 8% default rate. Wow!

Zechariah 13:6 seems to point to the future that was to come. "I was wounded at the home of friends!" Don't miss the exclamation point. Appalling! Awful! Hurtful! Unthinkable! But yet betrayal lives on at the hands and home of friends! Nothing is more painful than falling under not so friendly fire.

Betrayal is the worst. Why should we be surprised when we are betrayed by a friend? If we haven't been, we will be. It hurts. It is confusing. We are left wondering why. What did we do? What went wrong? We were so close. There must be some misunderstanding.

In fact there is. The cold blade of betrayal goes in quick but it is removed painfully slow. Healing from such a wound can take a life time. Unless, unless we recognize we are warriors and in battle there are unfortunate casualties. Not only will we be beat up and knocked down as we seek to defeat the enemy but we will lose friendships in our quest for victory.

Traitors are within every army. They hide within our closest of relationships undermining, back biting and wishing us less than our best. Betrayal is rooted in self preservation and deep insecurity. Our strength and influence intimidate the weak. They only feel stronger when they are outside of our shadow. Unfortunately, they conclude that betrayal is the only way to escape their own inadequacies. For the traitor they seek to eliminate the standard we represent and now live life on their own terms, according to their abilities and desires. Although the unit is weaker as a whole, there is no remorse so long as the traitor remains king of the hill.

Yet, every day the traitor lives is a reminder that one like him waits among the ranks ready to act at the opportune time. Betrayal continues to thrive and he finds himself held prisoner by an enemy of his own making. The betrayer has been betrayed!.

(Inspired by John 18:1-5)

Take the Carpenter Fishing

Take the carpenter fishing. The seasoned professional fishermen had been fishing all night long. The fish weren't biting. An observant carpenter stood on the shore with a different perspective. "Any luck?" he asked.

"Not even a nibble," came the reply from the boat.

The carpenter had a subtle suggestion, "Try the other side of the boat." The fisherman stopped, looked at each other and thought to themselves, "Who does this guy think he is? He should leave the fishing to the professionals."

About the time the fishermen were about to give the carpenter a piece of their minds, their leader turned to the team and said, "Hey, why not? We have tried everything else!" One tweak and their nets were full.

What made the difference? Listening to the carpenter. Jesus is the carpenter. When we invite the carpenter into our lives we gain the added benefit of divine direction. Yes, he may be a carpenter by trade but he is also the creator of the universe who is willing to come alongside us as we are willing recognize how the insight he provides can be trusted, even when we don't understand.

Listening to the carpenter requires faith. It requires trust. We may scratch our heads and dare believe we know better. But one thing is for sure, everything is better when we take the carpenter fishing!

(Inspired by John 21)