

Crown of Thorns

A Devotional Guide for
Lent 2019

Prepared for the Members and Friends of
Friendship United Methodist Church
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Introduction

During the season of Lent, we are called upon to look inside ourselves, to examine our spirituality and prepare ourselves for the resurrection of Easter. The season lasts forty days (not counting Sundays) in remembrance of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness. Traditionally, it has been a time of prayer and fasting, a time of denying oneself in order to share in the journey of Jesus to the cross. In many of the mystic traditions, devotees would place a pebble in their shoe or a thorn in their clothing as a constant reminder of the suffering of Jesus: each step taken, each movement of the body, caused a small pain that drew their attention to the one who gave himself for them. In modern times, we have de-emphasized the role of fasting, but devotion and self-denial are very much a part of our tradition.

This study guide follows the last weeks of Jesus' life as told in the Gospel of Luke and invites us along his journey. Its title seeks to remind us to see in him the pain and suffering that he endured for the sake of others as he encountered opposition, skepticism, doubt and unbelief. However, it also invites us to see how this same pain led to glory for those whose lives were changed by their contact with him. Thus, we are invited to journey with Jesus on his way to the cross in preparation for us joining him at the empty tomb. Just as the disciples and others in the story discovered thorns in their flesh, we are invited to feel our own thorns and how the grace of God can transform those thorns to crowns of victory.

What you get out of this study will depend on what you are willing to put into it. The journey may not always be pleasant: it is never easy to deal honestly with the pain of our lives. It is a journey that will require dedication and discipline, honesty and integrity. Yet the rewards of the journey are clear: from the thorns of life comes a crown of glory! I pray you Godspeed on this journey of faith.

Roy

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and

'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The ministry of Jesus begins with a journey into the wilderness, a barren land bereft of life, a place where few were willing to go. In Hebrew mythology, however, the wilderness was a place where God had not yet finished creating, the place where the power of God was battling the forces of chaos. This theme is clearly implied in the exchange between Jesus and the Satan. The temptations offered required Jesus to place himself in the position of importance and blessing, to allow even the power of God to revolve around his needs and desires. The reader is drawn to remember the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden and how they ignored the created order and placed themselves above the law of God. Unlike Adam and Eve, however, Jesus rejected the temptation, placing himself firmly within God's power, allowing his own desires to take a subordinate role by seeing them as secondary to the will of God. It is in this new power of God that Jesus' ministry begins.

It is also in this new power that our journey of Lent begins. We are invited to look past the needs and desires of our own lives, even past our own comfort, so that we may see the grace of God at work in our lives, knowing that this power takes us past our pain, past our temptations, past the discomfort of life so that we may embrace the new life God brings to us.

Lord, as I begin my journey, I call on you. Grant me the grace to look past myself and see Jesus, to know his pain that I may also see his glory, to die with him that I may be raised anew. Guide me along the way in the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Luke 9:57-62

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

One by one, Jesus called persons to discipleship with the invitation "Come, follow me." One by one, those who were called began to make excuses. All of the excuses were legitimate and, in the proper time, necessities for the lives of those who offered them. Yet, Jesus rejected each one of the replies as being less important than following him. The urgency in Christ's call is unmistakable, an urgency that places discipleship above the security of home, the support of family and the fulfillment of other obligations. As Luke tells the story, there is nothing more important than following Jesus!

Those invited to discipleship may have thought that the demands Jesus placed on them were too extreme. Indeed, discipleship often seems immensely demanding. Yet, we must remember that discipleship is not an activity; it is a way of life. There is no such thing as part time discipleship or an "occasional" disciple. Only radical commitment of the entirety of life can place us in the center of God's creative power and enable us to fully experience God's grace. Anything less than full commitment only gives us a glimpse of the Kingdom; the ability to let go of all other things in order to follow Jesus puts us squarely in the heart of discipleship and enables us to walk the path Jesus walked.

Lord, it is difficult to give you my all. There are so many things that I need to do; there are so many things I want to do. Yet I want to follow you. Help me to see the fullness of your grace; lead me beyond the needs of my kingdom so that I can embrace the fullness of yours, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 10:1-12

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

No doubt the disciples had trouble responding positively to the call that Jesus issued to them. They heard Jesus say, “*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,*” but they could not see themselves as those laborers. Perhaps their reluctance was because they did not like the terms of the contract: no purse, no money, no set itinerary, living life totally dependent on the hospitality of others and the grace of God. It was a lot to ask! Yet, they did respond.

We can understand the reluctance of the disciples, for we share in their reservations. We want to be a part of the church, but we have trouble seeing ourselves so totally committed. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that ***we are called***. Our baptism sets us aside for ministry in God’s kingdom. If the vineyard is to have laborers, they must come from among us: they must ***be*** us and we cannot ignore the claim God has upon us. The question for us is not “Are we called?” but “To what is God calling us?” To be a disciple means to minister on God’s behalf.

Lord, you know that I want to be a disciple and that I even claim to be one. But you also know my reluctance and fears to make a total commitment to you. Forgive my reluctance and strengthen me for your service so that I may work within your vineyard. Amen.

Luke 10:17-20

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Surely there was a great deal of anxiety when the seventy left Jesus to travel about the countryside sharing the Good News. It was a new experience for these that had been sent and the conditions that Jesus placed on their discipleship were rigid and austere. No doubt many felt that it was a high price to pay for a journey into unknown territory. Only a short time later, however, anxiety was transformed into a new reality as the disciples encountered the power of God's Spirit. The cost of discipleship paled in comparison to the joy of serving. From the jubilant report that they gave, it was clear that the seventy received far more from their ministry than they gave.

Such is the reward of discipleship! Do you remember a time when you entered into service for the church reluctantly, yet found yourself tremendously blessed? While we do not become disciples out of our desire for gain, when we give of ourselves unconditionally the return on our investment far exceeds our expectations. Not only are we helping others to understand the Gospel, our own souls are strengthened and uplifted in the power of God's spirit.

Lord, take away my fear of the unknown so that I can serve you and find the joy of your Spirit that I seek. Lead me into new ministry and let me know that my discipleship makes a difference in your Kingdom, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 10:25-28

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

The question asked by the lawyer was a question asked by many: "What do I have to do to live forever?" Nevertheless, what is remarkable about this dialogue is the answer: "Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus somehow knew that the lawyer had the answer within him. Jesus also knew that this was the heart of the gospel message and that all the teachings boil down to this twofold understanding of God's expectations.

Perhaps the lawyer's question is also our question. We want the most out of life, both in quantity and in quality. Thus, the key to our question also lies in the lawyer's response. If we want the most out of life, two things are required: love of God and love of neighbor. But it is not enough to *say* that we have this love. As the author of James reminds us, true love is seen in our actions. To live a full life, we must be willing and able to demonstrate the depths of our love through our actions. Thus, the old adage proves true: it is in our giving that we receive the most.

Lord, I affirm my love for you and I try to love my neighbor, but I confess that my love is not always that visible. Help me to translate my feelings into my actions and to embrace the fullness of life that you have for me, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 10:29-37

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The story of the Good Samaritan has had a long life in the Church and in the general public and has become a model of behavior for individuals and institutions. Yet, there are other characters in the story that Jesus wanted his hearers to see. The Priest and the Levite were honored men in their society, worthy of the respect and leaders of the people. If anyone enjoyed the grace of God, surely these two were counted among that number, but their actions showed a flagrant disregard for the man in the ditch. Instead of these two leaders, it is the lowly Samaritan, a man despised and put down by popular society, who exemplifies his love for God by extending love to his neighbor. Jesus demonstrates that it is neither the position we hold, nor the honor bestowed upon us that makes us neighbors: it is concrete acts of compassion given unselfishly.

In similar fashion, we must realize that it is not our position in life that makes us a disciple, or the good things others may say about us. The fullness of our discipleship is not realized in the things we intend to do or what we claim to be, but the extent to which our actions toward others demonstrate the love and compassion of God, especially those actions directed toward those who cannot help themselves. Thus, once again we are reminded that the way to live a full life is to give ourselves to others.

Lord, it is sometimes difficult for me to love my neighbors. I know I should, and I even want to in my heart, but there are so many things that get in my way. Yet I long to be the Samaritan and live compassionately. Remove this thorn from my life by teaching me how to live like Jesus. Amen

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The story of Mary and Martha is a bit confusing. Jesus often taught that discipleship and service go hand in hand, yet this story appears to present Martha's desire to serve as a hindrance to her faith. Mary's lack of service, on the other hand, is commended by Jesus. What is the message here? Jesus seems to imply that Martha's service "distracted" her from what was most needed at the moment: her relationship with the Master. Mary is commended because she focuses her attention on Jesus.

In I Corinthians 13, Paul affirms that without love, it does not make any difference what we do. Faith is neither devotion nor action, but a combination of the two. Often in our lack of faith we rush out to do something in order to ease our conscience, but even our gifts to the church can become poor substitutes for our personal devotion. Instead of seeing discipleship as an either/or proposition, we must understand that it is both/and: both devotion and service. Without this understanding, our faith becomes a pretense, not an act of discipleship.

Lord, help me to find the balance in my life. Still my busy-ness so that I can listen to you; energize my complacency so that I may be of service to you. In all things, make me a disciple fit for your Kingdom. Amen.

Luke 11:1-4

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

*Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."*

In response to the request of the disciples, Jesus gave them a model for their prayer life. Beyond the words themselves, the prayer that Jesus taught them focused on the components of what prayer should be: (1) Praise for God; (2) submission to God's will; (3) petition for the necessities of life; (4) request for forgiveness, accompanied with repentance in the form of forgiveness offered to others; and (5) a request for the strength to resist temptation in whatever form it may come. Perhaps the disciples also noted the casual familiarity of the words Jesus used to convey this model: words spoken to an intimate friend, not addressed to some remote deity that was removed from the realm of human struggles.

Every Sunday morning, we repeat the words of Jesus (with a few extra lines) as our own prayer. They have become so familiar to us that we can say them without much thought. Yet, sometimes the comfort and familiarity become a problem, making our words hollow and empty. Jesus leads us to look beyond the comfort in order to understand the meaning of our prayers; to know that we pray to put ourselves in a trusting relationship with God, submitting ourselves to God's will and relying upon God for the necessities of life. There is no room in this prayer for what we want in order to satisfy our selfishness, only for what God wants for us. From this we learn the meaning of prayer: a conversation with God that places us in God's keeping.

Lord, I know that I do not pray often enough and that sometimes my prayers are hollow and empty. Sometimes my prayers are more about me than anything else. Yet I know that you hear me and that you love me. Lord, teach me to pray like Jesus. Amen.

Luke 11:5-13

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him. And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

These short parables that Jesus offered focused on the love and faithfulness of God, which far exceeds any human equivalent. Behind this teaching is Jesus' notion that the disciples are ignoring the generosity of God, which seeks to give to them in greater abundance than that for which they are willing to ask. The disciples heard the key to sharing God's abundance as a simple formula: knock, seek, ask. But there is a catch: these stories are about the necessities of life, not about the luxuries. The focus is not on the things that come from our selfish longings, but on the things we need to be good disciples.

The point of the parables for us is that God is more willing to provide for us than we are willing to admit, but God is not concerned with our selfish longings. Requesting the necessities of life and discipleship places us in a trusting relationship with God, dependent upon God's grace and recognizing God's abundance. Thus, we are invited to move away from attempts to manipulate God for our own agenda and place ourselves in the heart of God's will. Our prayer must not be "Lord, bless me," but "Lord, make me a part of what you are blessing."

Lord, open my eyes to see the abundance of the blessings that are already before me. Lead me away from my desires so that I can become a part of what you are blessing, through Jesus. Amen.

Luke 11:33-36

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.”

As children we often sang, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna’ let it shine.” Then it was a song we sang to enjoy being in church. As we grew up, however, we may have had trouble moving away from the cuteness of the song in order to understand the profoundness of its meaning. The call of Jesus is to allow the light within us, that is, the light of God’s Spirit, to shine forth and illuminate our surroundings. Like a candle on a stand, the Spirit that shines from our lives allows others to see us for what we are. Like moths to a flame, this same Spirit draws people toward us to share in the warm glow they see within us. When this happens, God is seen in and through us and made known to those around us. Conversely, a light covered by a basket, kept within the confines of our own possessiveness, is a light that is not shared and bears witness to our selfishness. We know that selfishness and faith are incompatible: thus, to have faith is to share faith. To be filled with the Spirit means to let the Spirit shine upon those around us: a spirit that does not shine is not God’s Spirit.

Lord, let your light burn within me and set me ablaze. May the light of your Spirit shine from me in such a way that I cannot hide it from those around me and that I become a beacon for those who are lost. Amen.

Luke 11:37-41

While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.

The point Jesus made to those around him actually had nothing to do with washing their hands before supper! Instead, the issue focused on the ritual cleansing prevalent in Jewish society during his time, a symbolic act of washing away the influences of the Gentile world and the "unclean" members of the Jewish community. In both these cases, contact with these persons was outside the boundary of the Law and was considered an act of disobedience. Engaging in this act of ritual cleansing devalued the lives of those different from themselves and yielded to the chauvinistic prejudice that saw others as inferior. It was not the lack of ritual cleansing that rendered a person unclean, Jesus was saying, but the resentment and prejudice that people hold within their hearts. It is not what is on the outside that counts, but what is on the inside.

If we really want to be clean, we must focus on clearing out our prejudiced feelings rather than concentrate on an outward show of righteousness. The ritualistic practice of religion is a poor substitute for a vital faith. As we consider the thorns that prick our faith, we must realize that some of those thorns come from within, out of our own disregard for others and our willingness to allow ostentatious displays of religion to be a substitute for vital piety.

Lord, as I look at my life I realize that sometimes my religion is more show than go. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me that what is on the outside might truly reflect what is on the inside. Amen.

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Who can hear this parable and not find wisdom in the decision of the rich man, who found the opportunity to plan ahead and work toward the growth of his estate? Yet Jesus presents this decision in a negative way and what is wisdom in the eyes of most is folly in the eyes of God! In an indirect fashion, Jesus is inviting his hearers to shift their thinking away from the wisdom of the world and toward the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God decries the desire to store up the treasure of possessions and promotes the wisdom of radical dependence on God. The value of a person does not depend on the abundance of possessions, but on the wealth of the Spirit. To long for the blessings of the material world draws one away from God.

As we consider this parable, it easily comes as an indictment of the lifestyle prevalent in our society. We measure our worth and the worth of others by the abundance of their material goods. We even equate God's blessings with that same abundance. We must ask ourselves the question, *"If all my possessions were taken away, what would I have left?"* Perhaps a little more time spent on our relationship with God would mean that the answer to the question would be a little less dismal.

Lord, I long for those things that cannot be bought or sold. I long for the presence of your Spirit that will let me know that I am rich. Grant me new wisdom that I may see the true wealth in my life. Amen.

Luke 12:22-31

He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

An ice storm knocked out the power to the middle-class neighborhood and essentially closed the roads. For two days there was no electricity, so the family huddled by the fireplace, bored to tears. With no T.V., no stereo, no computer games, there was nothing for them to do. After a few hours of this boredom they began to remember special events in their lives and tell stories from their memories. The hours passed quickly into night, then to day, then to night again and the stories continued, accompanied with raucous laughter. When the power was restored, the family looked back on these three days as some of the best they had spent together!

It is hard for us to hear Jesus' admonition to not worry about food, clothing or the other necessities of life. Our nature is to be concerned about our existence. Yet we must understand the point of Jesus' message: when we become preoccupied with the external things of life, we lose sight of what is really important. In their absence, our anxiety over *things* gives way to a dependence upon God. Freed from the distractions of the material world, we are able to focus our attention and energy on our relationship with God and with one another. With our hearts in the right place, we find our true treasure.

Lord, help me to keep my life in focus. Turn my attention away from the distractions of the material world so that I can see you more clearly. Help me to find my treasure in those things that last forever, especially your gift of love; through Christ. Amen.

Luke 12:35-40

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

The dedication of the servants in Jesus’ parable was remarkable: they anxiously awaited the return of their master solely for the privilege of serving him! For these servants nothing was more important than this service and nothing distracted them from their serving, including their own need for sleep. While Jesus clearly linked this parable to what we would call the second coming, the point he made was not for the future, but for the present. Tying this parable to the rest of his teaching, this parable pointed out the spiritual need for service to God to take precedence over all the other things in life.

Jesus’ point is well made. It is not enough just to respond to opportunities for service when they present themselves: we must anticipate these opportunities and even seek them out. It is one thing to say “yes” when asked to help out: it is an entirely different matter to look for those opportunities in every moment of life. This is the kind of service to which Jesus calls us. And what happens when the master returns and finds the servants anticipating his arrival? He girds himself and serves the servants! Jesus invites us to look at our own service and ask the question, “*How Faithful are we?*”

Lord, I like to serve you, but I also like to be asked. Sometimes I just don’t see what needs to be done. Open my eyes to see the needs more clearly and grant me the motivation to serve you better. Then I will await your blessings, through Christ. Amen.

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The parable of the fig tree almost seems out of place when coupled with the remorse over those killed at Siloam. The theme that links the two is repentance: the death of these persons was not due to their sinfulness, yet surely sinners are doomed to die; repent, for your death may come sooner than you think! The lesson from the figs offers both hope and judgment: God's mercy is patient, yet God's judgment comes swiftly. God seeks to care for God's people, to cultivate and nurture those who have faith, to anticipate the fruit they will bear, but if the fruit does not come, they serve no purpose in the orchard.

The message for us is quite simple, although a bit harsh: either repent and start bearing fruit or get out of the way! Only those trees that bear fruit belong in God's orchard and only those saints whose faith leads to service belong in God's Kingdom. We don't like to hear these words because they condemn our complacency, yet we *must* hear these words if we want to be faithful disciples and counted among the saints. Bearing fruit is not an option: it is an expectation.

Lord, I confess that I have been more willing to receive your grace than to offer my service. Forgive me and be patient with me. More importantly, nurture and prune me that I may become productive for your Kingdom, through Christ. Amen.

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

While we certainly rejoice with the woman who was cured, we must also appreciate the position of the leaders of the synagogue. After all, the Law prohibited anyone from performing acts of healing on the Sabbath, acts that were considered to be work, in order to focus the people's attention on their devotion to God. The only problem that the leader had was that he was so narrowly focused on fulfilling his obligation to the Law that he missed the opportunity to rejoice in the manifestation of God's grace!

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in upholding our traditions and rules that we miss the opportunity to truly worship God. Often in our worship we become so enamored with following the customs of the church that any change from those traditions becomes distracting and even offensive. When this happens, we have confused our priorities, seeing worship as the way we honor our traditions rather than our traditions as a means to enable us to worship God. Like a thorn in the flesh, what is supposed to honor God actually becomes an obstacle to our devotion. We can only be truly faithful when the thorn is removed.

Lord, open my mind to things that are new and different. Enable me to see past the pain of my discomfort and instead see a new pathway to your Spirit. Let me rejoice in what you bring rather than scoff at the change, through Christ. Amen.

Luke 13:18-21

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

The parable of the mustard seed is one of the best known of all. Combined with the image of the leaven, the meaning is quite apparent: the Kingdom of God, once planted inside the soul, grows to uncanny proportions. It is interesting to note that Luke ties these two parables to the previous passage of healing on the Sabbath. The point seems to be that we are not required to make major leaps of faith in the understanding and practice of the faith; rather we move forward in small ways, which grow and mature within us. A minor shift in our faith today can become a major new direction in months and years to come. The growth of our faith does not require us to throw out everything and start over, but to be open to the little differences that lead us to a new understanding of who we are, who God is, and what God expects from us.

Growth in faith requires us to constantly examine ourselves, looking for ways in which we can grow. Yet growth is never instantaneous. Often the things that make the biggest differences in our relationship with God begin as small adjustments in our ideas or in our daily routine. The key rests in our willingness to embrace these new things and give them the opportunity to grow.

Lord, plant your seed within me today. Open my eyes to see the newness that you are bringing and nurture the things that are good for me and my relationship with you that my faith may grow; through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Luke 13:22-30

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

Make no mistake: we are saved by the grace of God and nothing else. We cannot earn that grace and nothing we are able to do can secure our salvation. Grace is a free gift from God. Sometimes, however, people fail to appreciate that which is given without effort or expense, and God's grace is no exception. Because it is a free gift, people automatically assume that God somehow is obligated to offer grace and salvation, regardless of the character of one's life. In theological circles, this idea is known as "cheap" grace. This parable warns the reader against cheap grace. The true disciples will be found standing at the door, waiting expectantly for the master to invite them in.

The growth of our faith is not something that we can put off until tomorrow. Either the time for faith is now or we find all sorts of ways that we can put off until tomorrow what we should have done yesterday. The urgency of Jesus' message must ring clear in our ears: don't put off the growth of your faith, the repentance of your dependence on the things of this world, or the opportunity to express your devotion to God; only the diligent and faithful enter the door.

Lord, I know that I have put off doing many things. I always seem to look toward tomorrow as the time my faith will grow. Teach me the meaning of today and fill my faith with the urgency of your kingdom, that as you open the door, I will be ready to enter; through Christ. Amen.

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

On his way to Jerusalem Jesus was confronted by the reality of his journey: Herod was looking to kill him. Most people would have turned away from such threat. Others might have gone, but with anger and resentment in their hearts. Still others would have used the opportunity to lash out against Herod and the establishment. Jesus did none of these. Instead, he was moved to compassion and tears for the people of the city. In this brief passage, Luke showed his readers the compassion of God, which goes against the norm of human behavior.

The compassion of Jesus for the people who would bring about his death points to the nature of God's love, which seeks to redeem the very people who bring offense to God's kingdom. Instead of lashing out in anger, God reaches out in compassion, to gather all the adversaries under wings of protection. Thus, beyond the offense of our sin and our reluctance to repent stands God's loving embrace, which enfolds us with the wings of grace.

Lord, I often find myself on the outside because I feel the guilt of my sin. I don't know how you could possibly love me for the things that I have done. Yet you stand there with arms outstretched, wings ready to gather me in. Enfold me in those wings even now, O Lord, and let me feel the warmth of your embrace. Amen.

Luke 14:1-6

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this.

Undoubtedly this story sounds familiar. Although it lacks the detail of the earlier story (Luke 13:10-17) and the person healed is different, it is essentially the same story: it is the Sabbath and Jesus brings about healing, which angers the leaders. The setting of this story is not the synagogue, however, but the leader's home. One may wonder how the host could witness the continued infirmity of one of his guests (or perhaps servants) and remain oblivious to the man's plight. Perhaps the continuing visibility of the man renders the host complacent, to the point that he no longer notices the problem. It is Jesus who breaks through the veil of complacency and ignores the proscription of the Law in order to express compassion to the man.

There are always people around us who have special needs. Indeed, the continued presence of such people is so common that their needs often go unnoticed. The compassion of Jesus leads us beyond our self-imposed blindness, however, to share their suffering and address the needs of their lives. Complacency can quickly become a thorn in our faith that distracts us from the calling of God and the example of Christ.

Lord, lift the veil of complacency that clouds my vision. Enable me to see the needs of others and to respond to those needs in an act of compassion, that your love may come to them through me. Amen.

Luke 14:7-11

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This brief teaching from Jesus is not about where a person sits at a party: it is about how people see themselves in relation to others. Those who sit in the place of honor automatically assume that they are better than others, and those who sit at the lowest place in order to make a show of being asked to move up miss the point altogether! These become like Adam and Eve, whose sin was that of placing themselves in the center of the garden and ignoring God’s sovereignty. Those who are humble, though, and place themselves in a lower seat, do so because they see themselves as no better than the rest. They see life from a different perspective, looking at others rather than down upon them. Jesus points out to the disciples that it is only from this perspective that they can see the role of the servant.

Even though we are seldom conscious of it, we are guilty of the same sin that Jesus points out in this teaching. Our lack of humility can take many forms, but it always separates us from others, causing distinctions that rank people in order of importance. It is only when we can ignore these distinctions that we are able to see people for who they are.

Lord, I like to sit in the place of honor and take pride in who I have become, but I don’t like causing division and separation. Grant me the humility to see the worth of others by knowing that I am truly no better than them in your eyes. Amen.

Luke 14:12-14

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Once again, this story is not about a dinner party at all, but about people's relationships with others. Just as Jesus calls people to humble themselves when they are guests, he also calls on them to honor others when they are the host. The host who invites those who can repay the favor does so in expectation of a return. His motives are wrong. The servant who serves in the expectation of a reward is not serving others but serving himself.

The Christian who comes to church just so he or she can get to heaven is a selfish Christian indeed! The joy of Christian service does not lie with the reward received, but with the opportunity to serve God by serving others. In fact, when we serve with the expectation of a reward, we are really serving ourselves and not God. True service responds to the needs of others without asking, "What's in it for me?" In this story Jesus invites us to examine the motivation for our discipleship and service, to see who is really at the heart of our actions: ourselves or God.

Lord, I like to serve, but I also like to be recognized for my service. Lead me past my vanity and pride and help me to see the true meaning of my devotion. In this way, take away the thorns that distract me from true discipleship. Amen.

Luke 14:15-24

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Like many of the parables Jesus told, this story is a two-edged sword. On the one side stands the judgment of God for those who were invited and chose not to come; on the other side stands the compassion of God for those who had been excluded, for whatever reason. While Luke intended for the Pharisees and other leaders to hear the judgment, he also wanted the outcasts to hear the word of grace. Between these two edges is the theme that runs throughout this entire chapter: we must come to regard ourselves as persons in relationship with those around us, and that relationship must take the form of compassion and understanding. Even those who are deemed lowly on the social ladder are worthy of love and respect, for they, too, have been invited to the feast of the Kingdom.

As we hear this story, we are invited to see ourselves in it. Where we see ourselves determines how we regard the story. Sometimes it comes as condemnation for our lack of respect for the host; sometimes it comes as grace in the knowledge that we are also included among those invited. In either case, we must hear God's invitation: come to the banquet! What is left for us to decide is how we will respond to the invitation.

Lord, I hear you inviting me in, but I am not always willing to respond. There are so many things that get in the way, so many things that I have to do. Help me to realize that none of these things is as important as joining in your banquet. Amen.

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

For the disciples, to follow Jesus meant to break with the tradition and pursue an unpopular path. This pursuit often meant rejection by their family and friends. A person who was tied to the necessity of a family's love would pay a high price for discipleship. Thus, in order to follow Jesus, they had to be willing to let go of their love of their family and enter into a relationship that could only be characterized as hate.

Of all the teachings of Jesus, this one is probably the hardest to accept. There is no other way for us to interpret this than to know that Jesus is really talking about hating our families. We must not, however, assume that this is a universal pronouncement. Rather, we must see these words in relation to the rest of the paragraph. The message that Jesus puts forth is that we must weigh the cost of discipleship and decide if it is worth it. Hating our families is not a condition of discipleship, but it may be the price that is paid for it. To understand this passage, we must come to accept the fact that in order to be a disciple of Jesus there are sacrifices that *have* to be made. We cannot follow Jesus and the ways of the world: we have to decide what is most important for us.

Lord, making sacrifices is not something that comes easy to me and the thought of sacrificing my family is appalling. Yet I do want to follow you. Help me to know what is right and have the courage to make the commitment that you seek from me. Turn my heart from the world and help me embrace your Kingdom. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

These two parables are simple in their imagery and profound in their meaning: no person is so insignificant that God does not take notice of and seek to reclaim him or her. Can any other image proclaim the love of God with such clarity? No matter how far one wanders from the fold, no matter how long one has been lost, God has not forgotten; God's desire is even stronger than the shepherd, who is willing to go out on a dangerous journey in search of the one who is lost. This is the heart of Jesus' message and the message that Luke wants his readers to hear throughout his gospel.

God's love for the lost is unmistakable and we must realize that, as disciples, we are called to follow the example that Jesus sets forth for us. Just as God has expressed compassion in seeking us out to be disciples, we must express compassion to those around us who are lost by seeking them out and including them in the Church. It does not make any difference how long they have been gone, why they left or where they have been: all that matters is that they belong to God and what belongs to God must be brought back into the fold. Thus, the same compassion that includes us as God's own calls us to practice evangelism among the lost souls among us, not to judge or condemn, but to include.

Lord, there are many that I miss in church, people I used to see, but see no more. As I consider your call in my life, teach me how to reach out to them in love and give them a place to belong and way to come home; through Jesus the Shepherd. Amen.

Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father[e] said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

In Luke's unfolding story of the Gospel, the parable of the Prodigal Son serves as a bridge, uniting the previous section with its focus on God's compassion with the next, whose focus is on servanthood. In the welcome return of the son is seen the compassion of God, echoed from the two previous parables. The hearer rejoices in the unconditional love of the father for his wayward son, yet the shadow of the older brother looms over the reunion. The celebration of the return is diminished by the jealousy of this older sibling, who cannot understand why his own faithfulness has not received a greater reward.

While the attitude of the older brother is clearly seen as selfishness and jealousy, we can also catch glimpses of ourselves in his attitude. It is hard for us to celebrate when new

people rise to positions of leadership, because we feel slighted and overlooked. We are no longer the center of attention, so we are prone to criticize their leadership and reject their ideas without giving them due consideration. Yet the affirmation of this passage is that we have not been rejected: we share in the fullness of God's kingdom. We are invited to lay aside our jealousy and join in the celebration. Instead of rejecting those wayward souls that offend us, we are called to reach out to them, to welcome them in and to celebrate with them, for they have come to share in the abundance that has always been ours. Rather than take away from us, their return simply adds to the fullness of God's kingdom.

Lord, I know how easy it is for me to become jealous over those who are new and different. Teach me to honor them and to join in their celebration, that together we may enjoy the fullness of your Kingdom. Amen.

Luke 16:10-13

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

“Mammon” is a Semitic word for riches or wealth that has been gained through shrewd dealings with others, translated here as “*dishonest wealth*.” On the one hand, the ability to deal shrewdly with mammon may indicate the ability to be a good steward of the riches of God (see vs.1-9), but, on the other hand, trusting in the power of mammon is contrary to the role of the servant. The point that Jesus is trying to make is that God does not call us to serve the world, but to serve the Kingdom. While the disciple’s service is *in* the world, it must not be *of* the world. To be a servant means to reject the false assumption that the power of the world (mammon) can bring about deliverance and to accept unconditionally the transforming power of God.

As we discovered earlier in this study, to be a disciple means that the true treasure of our lives rests in God’s Kingdom, not in the material world. The thorns of abundant possessions and shrewd business sense often keep us from seeing this truth. Because we have things in abundance, we assume that God has blessed us. Only when we can see God’s blessings apart from the material world can we truly understand what it means to be blessed. To serve God does not require us to give up all that we have, but to give up our dependence on it for a definition of success and blessing.

Lord, as I consider the blessings you have given me, help me to look past the material world and see your Spirit. I long for that faith that will let me see your abundance, even if I have nothing at all. Lead me past this bramble bush so that I may further journey toward your Kingdom. Amen.

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The foreshadowing of the resurrection is unmistakable in this passage, along with the accompanying word of reproach: if the people have not understood how to live based on the Law and the prophets, chances are they never will. Beyond these words, one could easily infer that the issue being presented by Jesus draws a line between those who are wealthy and those who are poor. The Rich Man, having received his reward on earth, is doomed to suffering while Lazarus, who suffered on earth, is rewarded with eternal bliss. However, a more careful reading exposes a deeper issue. The problem is not that the Rich Man has wealth as much as it is that he treats Lazarus, who represents the poor, with casual indifference. Even beyond the grave, Lazarus is no more to him than a menial servant. Thus, beyond the message of the resurrection, there is a word about how to relate to other people: the person sitting outside the gate is not there for use or abuse, but as an opportunity to show compassion to others. It is better to live life as a poor servant than as a rich person who uses others for his or her own comfort and pleasure.

It is easy for us to look past the poor, to blame them for their plight or regard their poverty as some kind of justice. It is harder for us to see them as people of worth and value, yet this is what Jesus expects of us.

Lord, forgive me for those times when I have looked past the poor or, worse, seen them as objects of disdain. Lift me beyond my comfort so that I may be able to live a life of compassion to others. Empower me to love others as you have loved even me. Amen.

Luke 17:1-4

Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

There are two parts to this teaching: taking care of those who are susceptible to temptations and forgiving those who give in to those temptations. In both cases, the norm of behavior is compassion. Compassion leads one to become a positive role model for others and not a stumbling block. Compassion also leads to forgiveness toward the offender. Jesus quantifies forgiveness by saying "as many as seven times a day." His audience knew what he meant: seven was the number for completion (seven days of creation, etc.), so he was calling for complete forgiveness. Thus, a servant must not only be willing to be a role model for others, he or she must also be the example of complete forgiveness.

It is a sobering thought to realize that others look to us for an example and a role model. Will they see God in us? Can God count on us to model complete forgiveness in our relationships with others? We often talk about "forgive and forget," implying that forgiven acts no longer have a bearing on us. Better yet, however, is "forgive and remember, loving anyway:" loving others even though we remember that they have wronged us. Only this ability to look past the transgression and express love is an example of complete forgiveness.

Lord, while I certainly want others to forgive me, it is harder for me to forgive them. Teach me not to judge others because of the sin they commit. Empower me to love them as sinners, even as you love me in the midst of my own sinfulness. Amen.

Luke 17:7-10

“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

The job of the servant is to serve. Although the word used by Luke is translated here as “slave,” the meaning of this passage remains the same. To hire someone to cook and serve dinner yet seat them at the table and wait on them is unthinkable! No, only when servants have completed all the assigned responsibilities do they have time for themselves. No thanks is expected, no special favors, no honors or recognition: it’s all a part of the expected duties. Servants who expect to be served by their masters live in a world of disillusionment.

This is a hard saying for us, pricking us like a thorn in the flesh. We are God’s servants and cannot expect God to be the one who waits on us. We are not to understand our service to God as deserving accolades or rewards: the only thanks to be expected is the satisfaction of a job well done. We like to be recognized for what we do and a simple “thank you” often goes a long way, but is this why we serve? When we shy away from service that does not promise a reward, we are not being faithful servants and disciples. We are not called by God for what we will get out of it, but because of what we can do for the Kingdom.

Lord, as I think of my service, I realize that I really do like to be thanked for what I do and to be recognized for my efforts. But I hope that this is not the reason that I serve. Help me to find the joy of serving as its own reward and not look to be repaid for what I do for your Kingdom. Amen.

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Ten were cleansed, but only one returned to give thanks. The thought of such blatant disregard for the gift of healing is abhorrent. Luke further adds to the poignancy of this story by demonstrating that the one who returned was a Samaritan. The least likely recipient has become the most grateful. Furthermore, it is clear that those healed did nothing to deserve their healing: it was purely an act of grace.

We are appalled to think that such an act of healing could be taken so lightly by the nine. We know how Jesus must have felt, for when we do something nice for others, we like to be thanked. Yet, are we willing to admit that we are just as guilty as they? How often do we really take the time to thank God for the grace in our lives? When we do offer our thanks, how sincere is it? We are quick to ask God for help when we are in need, but are we just as quick to return the thanks? The message in this story for us is that the true servant lives in a state of constant gratitude, incessantly offering God thanks for all the moments of grace through worship and praise.

Lord, I often take your grace for granted. I have felt it so much that it has become a familiar friend to me. Yet help me to never become smug or complacent and teach me how to live a life of constant gratitude so that I never forget that my very life is a gift of your grace. Amen.

Luke 17:20-21

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

The question asked by the Pharisee is familiar: "When will we see the Kingdom of God?" Behind this question was his desire to have God make sense out of the confusion of the world and to right all the wrongs. But the answer Jesus gave was not the answer hoped for: instead of the external evidence of the Kingdom, it focused on the internal realities of one's life. "*The Kingdom is within you*" Jesus said. This did not mean that people had within them the power to secure their own salvation, but that God had already come into their lives and that what they needed was already a part of their spirit. Rather than look for a miracle of God's presence in the world, Jesus invited the Pharisee to see the miracle of God's abiding presence.

We often hope for and even look forward to the time when God will come to set the world right. We long for evidence that God is moving life toward the ultimate goal of a heavenly Kingdom. Yet the witness of this passage, as well as the whole message of Jesus, is that what we long for has already come. We need not hope for a day when God *will* come, but to recognize the God that has *already* come into our lives and to look within ourselves for the power of God's Kingdom that makes us who we are.

Lord, help me to recognize your Spirit that is present in my life. Help me to realize that you have already given me what I want and need. And help me to become the kingdom present in the lives of others, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This parable surely caught its hearers by surprise. They heard the Pharisee proclaim his righteous actions and knew that he was on the right path. Prayer, fasting, tithing ... all these were disciplines that would elicit the respect of their society. There was no doubt in the mind of the hearers who the righteous one was in this parable and who was justified in the eyes of God. The tax collector, on the other hand, was the epitome of sinfulness. However, when Jesus brought the parable to a conclusion, the lines of separation were not as clear as the people thought and his stunning conclusion upset the tables completely. How could such a sinner be justified?

The surprise ending is as much for us as the original audience and is every bit as disturbing. It appears that the righteous actions of the Pharisee are exactly what God would want. In fact, they are the very things that we hold up as signs of faithfulness. Thus, we must hear this parable as an invitation to change our way of thinking and reconsider what it means to be righteous. It is not the things we do that make us righteous: it is the grace of God. When we judge our right relationship with God (that’s what justification means) by our own actions, we place ourselves in control. The tax collector was justified only because he knew that his salvation was an act of God’s grace. The Pharisee was not a bad person, just one who was blinded by his own achievements and unable to see the fullness of God’s grace.

Lord, all my life I have been told to live righteously. I have worked to do the right things in my life so that you would be pleased. Now I know that my salvation is not about what I do, but what you have done. Thanks. Amen.

Luke 18:15-17

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

For the disciples, excluding children from the circle of teaching was expected. Until they reached the age of accountability, their place for learning was in the home. Jesus had more important things to do. They thought that they were doing him a favor, but he quickly turned the tables on them. Then he absolutely stunned them with his blanket pronouncement: *"Unless you become as children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven."*

When we were children, we could not wait to grow up. Now that we are grown, Jesus says that we have to be like children! Make no mistake, this parable is not just about children in worship: it is about how we approach our faith. Jesus invited us to move past a faith that is based on logic, reason and rules and find the wonder, simplicity and open acceptance that characterize the lives of children. Instead of the probing and pessimistic *"why?"* of adulthood, Jesus invites us to consider the optimistic and hopeful *"why not?"* of a child. The Kingdom of God rests on this hopeful optimism. In becoming like children, we open the door to all the newness that God brings to us, not bound by rules and regulations, which can easily become a limiting thorn in our flesh, but set free to experience life in its fullness.

Lord, as I look at my life, I realize how important laws and traditions are, but I also know that I can get so caught up in them that I forget about you and what you really want. Set me free, in the power of Christ, to find the newness and hope that you offer to me and find the joy that children know so well. Amen.

Luke 18:18-30

A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.'" He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God." Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

Luke's preference for the poor shows forth clearly in this story. While the author presents the story from his own particular perspective, the reader must be careful not to see this teaching as a universal judgment: people are not banned from the Kingdom of God just because they have money. Rather, these words are directed toward one individual, a man who was outwardly blameless with regard to the Law, but still incomplete in his soul. Already a man of great character, Jesus invites him to take the next step, a logical step, toward becoming a fully committed disciple. Selling his possessions was not a requirement for his salvation, but a necessary step toward following Jesus, freeing him from the burden of his holdings.

Jesus also invites us to take the next step in our faith. It is easy for us to become like the rich young man, so content and comfortable in our lifestyle that we have trouble releasing it so that we can move forward in our faith. Growing in our discipleship often means that we have to let go of something, whether it is our preference for material wealth, our time of leisure or habits that take up our time. We have to make a decision: is my attachment to the things that give my life pleasure and meaning standing in the way of me becoming a better disciple? Sometimes the things that we enjoy the most can become thorns in our flesh.

Lord, following you is the most important thing for me, but it is also one of the most difficult. Teach me to let go of those things that hold me back and to have the courage to take the next step toward your Kingdom, in the grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 18:31-34

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

Jesus knew what lay before him in Jerusalem. He also knew how important it was for him to confront his earthly destiny. In spite of the pain and suffering that he faced, even the reality of his own death, Jesus was resigned to the fact that he had to go to Jerusalem. The disciples did not understand this. *"Why would Jesus so eagerly place his life in jeopardy when it could be easily avoided?"* was undoubtedly the question on their mind. The only answer to this question was that Jesus regarded his love for others, indeed for all humankind, to be more important than his physical well-being or even his life.

This is a component of faith that we have a hard time realizing and dealing with. The willingness of Jesus to embrace pain and death is so foreign to us that we cannot understand it. But we do not have to understand it: all we have to do is accept it. All we have to do is accept the fact that Jesus was willing to make this sacrifice for all humanity, and that means for us as well. The pain that Jesus was willing to accept is a testimony to the depth of his love and serves as an example for the living of our faith: sometimes faith means embracing the pain of our lives for the sake of others rather than avoiding it. Sometimes it means running through the brambles in order to get where we need to go.

Lord, I do not like to hurt and I do not like to suffer, but if that is what is necessary for my faith, I am willing to step forward and embrace what comes. You have given me Jesus, who wore my crown of thorns: help me to wear a crown for others and for your Kingdom. Amen.

Luke 18:35-43

As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Then he shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

The faith and persistence of the blind man was remarkable. Against the protest and insistence of the crowd, he cried out to Jesus in the belief that the Lord could restore his sight. Jesus willingly honored his request and the no-longer-blind man set out with the disciples on a new journey following Jesus. There were two kinds of blindness that day. One was the physical blindness of the man that was healed by an act of faith; the other was a spiritual blindness that stood as an obstacle to faith.

As we consider this story for our lives, we are awestruck by the healing of faith and incensed by the reluctance of the crowd (which may have included the disciples). Unfortunately, the shortsightedness of the crowd is probably closer to us that we are willing to admit. Often, we do not avail ourselves of the love and support of the Body of Christ, either because we do not believe they can give us the support that we need or because we do not want to bother them. The witness of the story, however, leads us to understand that faith requires a sense of volition on our part, not listening to the crowd's discouragement, but reaching a hand out to Christ in order to be helped.

Lord, I know that you can help me and that your desire is to make me whole, but it is often hard to admit my need and even harder to humble myself enough to ask for help. Teach me to have enough faith and courage to draw from you the strength I need, through Jesus. Amen.

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Zacchaeus had a life changing experience, but it would not have happened if he had not been so determined to see Jesus. When most people would have given up, defeated by their obstacles, Zacchaeus found the means to overcome those obstacles by climbing the tree. Furthermore, confronted with his own shortcomings by the gracious Jesus, he was willing to take responsibility for his life and actions and make any restitution that was necessary. His faithfulness and determination were rewarded with an intimate time with Jesus.

There are two parts to this story that we must hear. The first is the determination that leads us to see Jesus, overcoming the obstacles in our path. Instead of being defeated by them, the Gospel invites us to climb on top of them as a means to discipleship. The second part is the willingness to offer our shortcomings to Jesus. The thorns in our flesh often become so familiar to us that we do not even notice them, but when we are willing to offer them up for scrutiny, then (and only then) can the thorns be removed and our wounds healed. Furthermore, the healing of our wounds means an intimate relationship with Jesus, in which we are honored and blessed. The first step, however, is our responsibility.

Lord, as I consider my own discipleship, I realize that, like Zacchaeus, I have a lot of thorns in my flesh. But I want, more than anything, to walk with you. Pull out the thorns and ease my pain through the power of your grace. Amen.

Luke 19:12-26

“A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, ‘Do business with these until I come back.’ But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to rule over us.’ When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, ‘Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds.’ He said to him, ‘Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.’ Then the second came, saying, ‘Lord, your pound has made five pounds.’ He said to him, ‘And you, rule over five cities.’ Then the other came, saying, ‘Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.’ He said to him, ‘I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest.’ He said to the bystanders, ‘Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.’ (And they said to him, ‘Lord, he has ten pounds!’) ‘I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

In Luke’s version of the parable of the talents, Jesus presented a focus that is easily ignored. The disciples expected Jesus to ascend to the throne of Israel and establish an earthly kingdom, so Luke presented the parable with a social dimension as well as a personal one. The stewardship of individuals is a personal matter, but the reward for faithfulness comes in geographical terms. Likewise, the consequence for poor stewardship is death! Surely Luke intended for the first century readers of his gospel to understand the urgency of being good stewards of what God had entrusted to them!

How hard it is for us to accept this parable! Yet, there is a Truth here that we must not ignore: our stewardship of God’s gift does not only affect us, it affects those around us and even the entirety of the Kingdom of God! Good stewardship is not only a matter of personal choice, it is also a matter of social responsibility and of faithful discipleship. We are not solitary beings, responsible for our lives alone: we are social beings responsible for the creation God has given to us and for the Body of Christ. To live as good stewards means to understand our lives of faith as part of the much larger Kingdom of God. We must not and cannot live lives solely for ourselves. What we do (or don’t do) affects the lives of all, including the life of the Church.

Lord, I never realized that I had such a large responsibility. Help me to look past my own life and see my stewardship in the context of your Kingdom. Lead me to be a better steward than I have been, that your Kingdom may be better than it has been. Amen.

Luke 19:29-40

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Those who journeyed with him knew what that meant. Standing before the gates of the city, the disciples realized that they could not change his mind. Jesus, himself feeling the weight of his decision in this critical moment, entered the city to spend what would be the last week of his earthly life. Yet instead of walking the streets in somber defeat, the disciples raised up a cry of jubilation, hailing Jesus as if he were a king returning in triumph! Even Jesus let go of the weight of his concern and reveled in the glory of the moment as the crowds shouted "Hosanna!" In spite of what had been and what was to be, they all found the time to rejoice!

Is this not what worship is meant to be? As God leads us from the pain of the past into the uncertainty of the future, we find the opportunity to rejoice in the fact that God is the one who is leading us. Our worship is more than recitation of prayers or the singing of familiar hymns: it is the opportunity for us to shout "Hosanna!" to the king of our lives. For a time we are able to celebrate our victories and let go of our fears in order to have a joyous moment in God's presence, there to offer our thanks and praise. The pain of the thorns that plague us is, for the moment, forgotten in the wonderful gift of God's deliverance!

Lord, help me to let go of my fears so that I can truly rejoice with you. Receive the gratitude of my heart as a sacrifice of praise and let the jubilant sounds of my rejoicing bring honor to your name: through Christ my Savior. Amen.

Luke 19:45-46

Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers."

The money changers were not bad people. In fact, their presence in the Temple provided a valuable service to the pilgrims who journeyed to the holy site to offer their sacrifices. By changing the foreign currency and by selling animals acceptable under the Law, these people enabled others to worship God. All they were doing was their part for the Kingdom. It was not just their corruption or insincerity that Jesus reacted against: it was their understanding of what it meant to worship God! Jesus was striking out against the reality that their worship had degenerated into a mechanistic formula for appeasing God or eliciting God's favor: all you had to do was offer the right sacrifice and you had done your duty.

While we want to cheer Jesus on in his chastisement of the evildoers, we must also admit that our own worship can sometimes be as far off the mark as the moneychangers. Instead of the specific acts that we do, true worship is based on the sincerity of our hearts. When worship becomes an obligation or when we are afraid that if we don't worship, God will punish us, then we have forgotten its true meaning. Only when we enter into that intimate covenant relationship with God that is honest and sincere can we truly feel the presence of God's grace. Thus, the moneychangers become for us a symbol of all those distorted notions about our faith that lead us to regard our rituals as more important than our relationship.

Lord, cleanse the temple of my heart and strip away the pretense of my faith. Enable me to know you in the intimacy of a covenant so that my worship and my life might be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

Luke 20:9-16a

He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

This parable creates an unmistakably judgmental tone, directed at the Pharisees and the leaders in Jerusalem. The judgment, however, was not for them alone, but for all who took the providence of God for granted. The sin of the tenants was found in the mistaken belief that the vineyard was theirs, to do with as they chose. Jesus was very clear that the vineyard belonged to God and any behavior that did not honor God's sovereignty was unacceptable.

We must also come to realize that the gifts of God are not for our blessing alone, but for the edification of God's Kingdom. When we become selfish with those gifts and use them to promote our own self-interests we become like the tenants. When we are not willing to share our gifts freely, reveling in the mistaken idea that they are ours to do with as we choose, we heap judgment and condemnation upon ourselves. Only when we remove this thorn of our false pride and vanity, our belief that our blessings are God's reward for being good, can we truly understand and appreciate what it truly means to be blessed by God. Being a disciple means being a good steward of God's gifts and being a good steward of God's gifts means that we are willing and able to give God the praise for what we accomplish in life and that we are anxious to share the blessings of God's gifts with others, for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Lord, thank you for the many gifts you have given me and for the blessings they represent. Take away my selfish notion that they are my reward for being good and help me understand how to better use them for your Kingdom. Amen.

Luke 21:1-4

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

It is easy for the reader of this story to quickly surmise that the moral is: "*It's not the quantity that counts, but the quality.*" While this may be true, it must never be an excuse to withhold our giving to God. His point is that the widow gave from her heart all she had because she realized that all she had came from God. In a supreme act of trust and faith she was willing to put her entire livelihood in God's hands. The rich, by contrast, were putting in lavish amounts, but not in the faith that God was the one who would take care of them. Instead of placing their dependence on God, they placed their trust in the power of their possessions to provide what they needed.

God does not expect us to put everything we have in the offering plate. God does, however, call us to place our trust in God's providence and God's ability to take care of our needs. The Church has long advocated the Biblical principle of tithing as a means of being good stewards of our possessions, but it is a practice that many find hard to accept. We are afraid that we won't have enough to pay the bills or support our lifestyle. Our fear of being able to provide for ourselves becomes a thorn in our flesh, keeping us from placing our complete trust in God's providential care. While it is true that *why* we give is more important than how much, it is also true that *why we don't give* may turn out to be an even more important question.

Lord, teach me how to give. Instead of worrying about how much I need, help me to think of the joy I can share in my giving. Help me to live so that the gifts from my hands are as great as the desires of my heart. Amen.

Luke 22:14-23

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

Although they did not recognize it until after the resurrection, it was in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the wine that the disciples came to understand Jesus' gift of himself. Equating his body and blood to the elements of the meal, Jesus showed the disciples that what was about to happen was nothing less than the gift of his life for them and for the world. In the early days of the Church every time Christians gathered for worship they repeated the act of breaking the bread and pouring the wine as a way of sharing in that sacrifice once again, making the events of that night their own. They had come to realize that this gift meant that their sins and burdens were taken away by his self-sacrifice.

Likewise, when we share in communion we participate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus again and enter into a new relationship with God. The Maundy Thursday service we observe is a means of placing ourselves at the table with Jesus, sharing in this somber yet glorious moment of his life and his relationship with his disciples. By receiving the bread and wine we share in that covenant relationship wherein Jesus gladly offers himself up for us, to prepare a way for us into the unknown world of death.

Lord, as I remember that night, I give thanks for the gift that Jesus gave me: not the gift of food or possessions, but the gift of himself. Enable me to live my life in the fullness of that gift, knowing that the Spirit of Christ is always with me, but never more closely than when I share the holy meal. Amen.

Luke 23:32-38

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

They stripped Jesus of all his earthly possessions. The only thing left was a crown of thorns and an inscription above his head: *"This is the King of the Jews."* Nothing of his life was left, save the crown that he wore: a crown of pain woven from the sin and brokenness of the world. As Jesus died, he carried that crown with him.

The crown of thorns that Jesus wears on the cross is made of the thorns of sin and grief, agony and despair that he has willingly taken upon himself. Our sin and the sins of the world rest upon his head. Only when we realize this can we accept the sacrifice of Christ as our own. More than any event in history, this is an act of salvation. As Jesus has given himself to us in bread and wine, so now he takes from us the agony of our suffering so that it might die with him. What has been the source of our pain throughout these weeks rests upon the head of our savior.

Lord, as I face this day again, I do so with gladness and sadness. I am glad that my thorns have been taken away, but knowing that the sin of the world caused Jesus so much pain saddens me. Yet I rejoice, O Lord, that he did it for me, and I worship and honor him. Amen.

Luke 23:50-56

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

Joseph of Arimathea carried the body of Jesus away. The excitement was over, the crowds had gone: Jesus was dead. Nothing was left except a broken body and a crown of thorns. The disciples had long since scattered, their hopes for triumph dashed upon the reality of the cross. Joseph alone came forth, whether in pity or in embarrassment, to do what needed to be done. He carried the limp and lifeless body of his savior in his arms, preparing to lay him to eternal rest.

In a symbolic way, we are all Joseph of Arimathea, carrying the body of Christ to the tomb. Our devotion has led us to this point, not to run away and hide, but to boldly step forth when no others will. It is not their responsibility; it is ours. No one can carry Jesus in our lives but us. We journey to the tomb that we may honor Jesus with a proper farewell. Our job is done and there is nothing left ... except a crown of thorns.

Lord, as I remember that day, help me to realize how important it is for me to bear the body of Jesus. Help me to carry the weight from the cross to the tomb, from my pain to my hope. I know that this task is my responsibility, that no-one can do it for me. Help me to be faithful, Lord, even to the very end. Amen.

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

"He Lives!" That's the cry that went up from the disciples. The body that lay in the tomb was gone. Perhaps they thought that he had not really died ... perhaps they thought that a miracle had occurred. Whatever the case, they knew what it meant: Jesus had conquered death! The hope that they laid in the tomb had now become a reality. The crown of thorns placed upon his head was now a crown of victory: the worst that the world could offer was swallowed up in the miracle of God's grace!

As we contemplate the meaning of Easter for us, is not this the message? The pain and suffering that we placed upon the head of Jesus as a crown of thorns has been transformed into a crown of victory. The triumphant Jesus wears the crown through all eternity so that we don't have too. We have been set free!

Lord, you have taken away the pain and suffering that I have worn for so long and you have healed the wounds caused by the thorns of my life. I rejoice in the resurrection of Christ, knowing that I, too, have been raised and given new life. I praise your name and join their unending hymn: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again! Glory to God!" Amen.