



Shine!

Lenten Study

Day 1

Read: Matthew 5:14-16

Introduction

Lent is a time for serious spiritual introspection, a time to look into ourselves to measure the extent to which we are living the life Christ calls us to live. The purpose of this Lenten series is to help us do that. Scripture tells us, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (v.16). This is something Christ clearly expects of us and there are practical ways to do it, to be the light of Christ in a dark world.

There is a lot of need out there in the world and we Christians are called by God to respond in constructive ways. Individually, and as the Church, we are to be Christ to those in need. This series is a clarion call to be Christ in our day.

What do people see when they look at us? Do they see something different in us, people who have the aroma of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15) and show forth the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)? Too often the world looks at the average Christian and sees nothing different from the non-Christian or the person of some other faith. Or maybe they see someone who seems narrow, opinionated, and no fun to be around. That doesn't sound like Jesus, who was warm, open, and welcoming even to “prostitutes and sinners.”

Is the light of Christ shining, and shining brightly, in us today? If not, what are we hiding? Certainly we shouldn't be hiding our lights. We are to be light-bearers for Christ. The world needs to see Jesus! Over these forty days, the focus will be on challenging us, to help us see the multitude of practical ways in which we can show Christ to the world around us.

May God bless you in being the light of Christ to your world. Shine!

R&D In what ways do you believe you are shining the light of Christ into the world around you?

Prayer: Help me, Lord, each day this Lent, to be open to what You want me to learn about being the person You call me to be.

Day 2

Read: Luke 16:1-8

Something to Think About

Let's first think about that sort of odd parable in which Jesus seems to be commending a dishonest steward, our reading for today. One way of looking at why the manager in the parable commended the steward is in verse 8: “For the people of this world are more shrewd with their own kind than are the people of light.”

Does it occur to you that those of us who are called to be the light of Christ should be spending chunks of time thinking of how we can influence others for good just as we do in

thinking of ways to earn money or otherwise meet our personal needs and desires? That is one thing the Lord seems to be saying in this parable.

Of course, we have responsibilities to our family, our co-workers, our church, our community, and ourselves to do all sorts of things that just need to be done. And, there is nothing wrong with being creative (shrewd) in how we deal with those things. But how creative are we in shining the light of Christ in dark places?

When I asked myself this question I thought about the prayer my wife and I were saying each week for people we knew in our neighborhood. Why not send a copy of that prayer to the people for whom we pray, asking them to let us know how to pray more effectively for their specific needs?

Prayerfully ask yourself the same question and see what you come up with. But don't stop there. Keep on asking and keep on doing because that is how you can let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

R&D What creative thing might you do today that would shine Christ's light?

Prayer: Lord, somehow we got too busy making tents.

Day 3

Read: John 14:6-14

Active or Passive?

In verse 12 Jesus tells his followers (and us) that we will do greater things than he has been doing. That was because he would be returning to the Father and we would be receiving the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us in his absence. Now, of course we don't think we will individually do greater things than Jesus, but he apparently meant that at least as the Body of Christ (the Church) here on earth, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we would.

So, how do we view this Holy Spirit within us? It seems to me that Christians look at the Holy Spirit either from an active or a passive point of view. Those who believe in the Holy Spirit in a passive way might say that they believe the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture, that he did miracles through the Apostles, that he provides comfort in times of need and is otherwise sort of there in the background of the Church and of our lives. Those who believe in an active Holy Spirit look to him to work through them and the Church in a wide variety of ways, basically doing the same things Jesus did.

If you are to shine as the light of Christ in your world, which way works for you? Can you and the Body of Christ of which you are a part do the things Jesus did, and even greater things (at least when viewed in the sense of the whole Body of Christ) if the Holy Spirit is only passive in nature?

R&D How active is the Holy Spirit in your life?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, and fill the lives of your faithful that we may know you and the power of Christ's love that you have available for us in all we do.

Day 4

Read: Matthew 7:24-29

We Have Authority

When Christ spoke, people listened. They were astounded at his teaching because he spoke with authority, unlike the other Jewish teachers of his day (v.29). Through his actions, such as when unclean spirits submitted to him, they saw his authority demonstrated (Mark 1:21-28). In giving his followers the Great Commission, Jesus claimed the authority granted unto him to send them forth (Matthew 28:18).

Christ's authority remains in his Church today, and resides in individual Christians. In *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser says that the incarnation began with Jesus and has never stopped. "God's physical body is still among us, just as present, just as physical and real as when God was in the historical Jesus. Now he is in the Body of Christ and in the lives of individual Christians. We enflesh Christ now, in this time." It is as we allow Christ's authority to be manifested through us that the world will see that the Church has answers to the world's needs. Churches, in this sense, are to be hospitals, not museums; Christians are to be instruments of God's healing power to the world around us rather than people who are focused solely on our own needs and desires.

For the authority of Christ to be freed from within us, there are at least four prerequisites that need to be met: (1) we are in a right relationship with God, (2) we are in a right relationship with our neighbor (defining that word broadly), (3) we know the authority from which we speak, and (4) our actions are authenticated by the ways in which God has equipped us. In this manner, Christ's light can shine through us into a very needy world.

R&D *How do you shape up against these four principles?*

Prayer: *Equip us, Lord, for every good work You have for us to do.*

Day 5

Read: Ephesians 1:15-23

The Relationship with God

When we are born of God a total change comes over us. We experience what the apostle Paul called having the eyes of our heart enlightened (v.18). God, who commanded that light shine out of darkness, now shines in our heart "to give us the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). Our eyes are opened to see and our ears are opened to hear the voice of God within by the power of the Holy Spirit. God speaks to our heart, perhaps not in specific words but in a multitude of ways, to guide our thinking. We are now ready to discover whatever the Lord has for us to be and do.

We experience within ourselves the mighty working of the Holy Spirit and come to know the gifts of the Holy Spirit operative in our lives. We experience a peace that passes understanding. We sometimes feel a joy that is inexpressible. We sense love being poured into us because God loves us so much. We become able to distinguish good from evil. In these and countless other ways, we grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

Physical birth gives way to spiritual birth and we are born again into an abundant life in Christ. We have been born to be God's people in the world around us. The light of Christ is to shine through us to everyone, but especially to those who have not yet experienced this second birth.

R&D *What does God have in mind for you right now?*

Prayer: *Give me the opportunity, Lord, to speak Your truth into situations of doubt and unbelief, Your love into situations of need.*

Day 6

Read: Luke 10:25-37

The Relationship with Neighbors

Consider our reading for today, the familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan. An expert in the law challenges Jesus with the question of how to inherit eternal life. When Jesus asks him what the Law says, he responds with loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus assures him that if he does this he will live. But then the man wants to know who his neighbor is, leading to the parable. In it a man is beaten by robbers and left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass by him, but a Samaritan stops and cares for him.

The priest and the Levite who passed by him in the story would perhaps have justified themselves on the basis of Leviticus 21:1-3 (to touch a dead or bloody person would have left them ceremonially unclean), and Jesus undoubtedly included them in the story to show how people tend to rationalize their inaction. Likewise, Jesus chose a Samaritan as his “hero” in the story because the legal expert who had raised the question would have hated Samaritans...just the opposite of what one should feel if he wants to love his neighbor. And, Jesus reverses the way we would tend to look at the question involved: instead of “Who is my neighbor?” it is “To whom am I a neighbor?”

An answer would be: the one to whom I sow the seeds of God’s love, because that is exactly what the Samaritan did. Anthony Bloom once said: “It is an error to think that man’s connection with life on earth ends with his death. In the course of one’s life one sows seeds. The seeds develop in the souls of other men and affect their destiny, and the fruit that is born of these seeds truly belongs not only to those who bear it but also to those who sow.” Every day of our lives is a day of sowing some kind of seeds. We have the opportunity to sow the seeds of God’s love everywhere we go. Or we might say we have the opportunity to shine the light of Christ’s love everywhere we go.

R&D *To whom might you be a neighbor today?*

Prayer: *Lord, may all who come behind us find us faithful.*

Day 7

Read: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

The Authority by Which We Speak

If you will permit my using such terminology, when Jesus captures the heart of our soul, there is the opportunity for Scripture to capture the mind of our soul. As John Bunyan pointed out, if we do not allow Scripture to capture the mind of our soul, our soul is starved of the thing it most needs. Our relationship with Jesus can hardly grow if the primary means of feeding it is ignored, and it is the authority by which we speak as Christians.

For those who understand this, the Bible brings a bountiful harvest to the soul. Its teachings captivate the soul, allowing us to rely on what it says and thus be guided in our

everyday lives. Just as we grow in the “knowing” of our Lord Jesus, we grow in knowing what Scripture would have us do in order to be living within the will of God. By it we are taught how to please God in everything. What’s more, the Bible is more than a guidebook; it is the living word to inspire us and give us hope. It is God’s book. It is His story, for our edification in all aspects of our lives.

To the one who believes Scripture, its promises are of more power than all the promises of mankind. This is how Christians down through the ages have accepted pain, suffering and death when promised, as an alternative, the things of this world. They have taken their stand with Jesus, and they have believed that the Bible reveals the fullness of how that stand is to be taken.

Scripture shines the light of Christ into our lives.

R&D What do you need to be doing to increase your knowledge of Scripture?

Prayer: “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.”

Day 8

Read: Romans 12:3-8

Being Well Equipped

God equips each of us for ministry to the needs of those around us, especially by gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4). And some people are also equipped by what they have experienced in life. Some years ago I had the pleasure of meeting a widow whom God used to minister to women who had recently lost their husbands. I met her at a time when I was working on ways to help people discover the ministries to which God was calling them. I have no idea what this woman’s spiritual gifts were, but she had graciously survived the tragic death of her husband.

Here was a woman who, by the grace of God, had coped with the loss of her loved one. Through that experience, she had learned how to help others faced with the same problem. Christ’s compassion flowed through her as she ministered to widows all over the town where she lived. Someone asked her why she felt competent to help widows although she had received no special training. “Your church staff have undoubtedly had extensive training in how to minister to the bereaved,” the person said. “Why should they send you?” “Because,” the widow replied, “they have never lost a husband.”

It may be military terminology, but it so well applies to the situation: “The battle scars of life provide us with the battle ribbons of ministry.” Each of us has undoubtedly had a tragedy of life—or at least a “battle scaring” experience—that well equips us to minister to those who find themselves in the same situation; and that lets Christ’s light shine through us in a special way.

R&D What life experience has equipped you for shining Christ’s light into the life of another?

Prayer: Make us ever conscious, Lord, of the needs of others.

Day 9

Read: Proverbs 16:18

A Little Humility Can Go a Long Way

Here's a great story from the book *Lead Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges. After Blanchard had received his doctorate and was working at Ohio University, he wanted to take a course on organizational behavior and leadership taught by Paul Hersey, a well-known professor. When he asked if he could audit the course, Hersey told him, "No." The only way he would be allowed to take the course was for credit. Because Blanchard had his PhD and Hersey did not, the temptation was to let pride stand in the way, even though he knew "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."

Fortunately, Blanchard's wife confronted him with his pride and prevented him from missing the opportunity that would be vital to his career. He enrolled in the class and wrote all of the required papers. When the class was over, Hersey approached him and invited Blanchard to collaborate with him in writing a textbook on organizational behavior. "It's hard for me to sit still and write," said Hersey. Earlier in his career, Blanchard had been told that he had no gift for writing. Blanchard's response to Hersey was, "We should make a great team...you can't sit still to write and I'm not supposed to be able to write. So let's give it a try." The result was a classic textbook now probably in its umpteenth printing, and the two went on to produce books that have sold millions of copies.

C. S. Lewis said, "According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison. It is through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind." Pride goes before destruction, but a little humility can go a long way toward letting Christ's light shine through our lives.

R&D *Is there any way that pride is standing in the way of your being a light-bearer today?*

Prayer: *I'm willing to be a donkey, Lord, that Christ can ride into the lives of others.*

Day 10

Read: Matthew 28:16-20

Making Disciples

Jesus gave us a Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel. In it, he makes it clear that he has *all authority* in heaven and earth. Under that authority, his followers are to go into all the world *making disciples*. This means baptizing people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded. He follows with the promise that he will be with us always and to the end of the age.

Think what is packed into these few words. As we go forth in Jesus' name, we are under his authority. We're not just to "hope we can do the best we can" as we follow his instructions; we are a part of his incarnate Body on earth empowered to do the work he has given us to do. We are not just to offer salvation, we are to make disciples...something that goes much further. We are to do it throughout the world ("all nations") and we have Jesus' promise to be with us in the process.

Evidence that we are disciples includes fulfilling our calling to make disciples of others. How about checking on how we are doing in that regard? Are we being effective in both telling the story and living the story of God's love in the presence of those God would like to see us

leading to discipleship? Or have we told the story but have done nothing else for them (getting them into a church or a Bible study group, for instance)? If they are not nourished, their faith may soon die. How about those whom we know to be facing serious challenges in their lives? We fail them if we are not nurturing their growth in faith, mentoring them, and helping them deal with their problems. The issue is discipleship. Jesus commissioned us to make disciples. That is a process. It doesn't end with proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God. It ends when the one who has been brought to the Lord is himself a disciple, ready to go make disciples.

R&D What next step might you take to help another person move into discipleship?

Prayer: We know, Lord God, that the world will not be brought to Christ by people who simply "go to church" most Sundays. Awaken us to Your Great Commission.

Day 11

Read: Luke 9:1-6

Learning from the Living and the "Dead"

When we are called to positions of Christian leadership and responsibility (v.1), it can be a major breakthrough in our lives and a great opportunity to let our light of Christ shine for the benefit of others. It can also lead to a new level of relationship with the Lord. Depending on what is being asked of us, we might be filled with some qualms about being able to perform as well as expected. But the fact that we have been called to do it, and the confidence that others have shown in us, should motivate us to do the best we can. We can be grateful to the Lord when we are given opportunities such as this, and we should be confident that God would not call us to do anything without also giving us the strength and ability to do it well.

Having said that, in order to fulfill what is expected of us, Francis de Sales, the French devotional writer, said we should seek assistance from the living and the "dead." To seek help from the living means building a relationship with those who are best able to prepare us for the challenges ahead. We look to those whom we admire because they perform effectively and in a spirit of Christian servanthood, and we take seriously what they have to share with us out of the abundance of their experiences.

Seeking help from the dead means relying on the example of those saints of God who have gone before us, as we discover them in Scripture and by way of their writings; and from our own personal knowledge of "heroes of the faith" who have blessed our lives but have now gone to be with the Lord. Each new challenge of leadership is an opportunity to seek spiritual growth by learning from the giants of the faith who have shared their journey in ways we can read about and from whom we can draw guidance and inspiration. God wants us to have the humility to be under the authority of those who have cut the pathway before us as we enter new territory on His behalf.

R&D To whom might you turn for answers today?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for those who have gone before us who have passed the flame of Your love from one generation to another down through the centuries.

Day 12

Read: 1 Peter 1:3-7

Stand Firm

In a recent talk, a friend stressed how important it is, in the age in which we live, to take a stand. He said we need to: stand up for Jesus, stand out from the crowd, stand beside our brothers and sisters in Christ, stand in the place of Jesus, stand in the power of the Holy Spirit, and stand against the powers of darkness. In our reading for today, Peter pointed out that our character is developed and our faith is purified when we are tested.

Ours has been called the “post-Christian era.” We live in a time when the Judeo-Christian principles that once determined the moral and ethical standards of our country are being greatly eroded. We are shocked at what we see and hear on television and in motion pictures; or, worse still, we have been numbed beyond the shock, and have begun to accept as “normal” things that Scripture would call sin. It is into this situation that Christians are called to take a stand.

Today will be another opportunity to stand firm, to attest to Gospel truth; and it is another way in which the light of Christ should be shining through us. The world is sick, and needs that healing truth as much today as it has at any time in the past. But, just as the bone structure of the human body allows us to have freedom of movement, standing firm in Christ is not blind rigidity, but freedom that is based on a sound foundation.

R&D *In what ways does God want you to stand firm today?*

Prayer: *If I live my life only for You, Lord, it will benefit everyone else.*

Day 13

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

Going to God

The best way to live is to be in communion with God all day long, as Paul encourages us to do (v.17). We can be in contact with Him as often as we recognize the opportunities to do so. We don't have to wait for there to be a special time for prayer; we can go to God with every thought, feeling, or decision that we encounter. Even in the midst of going about our daily duties, carrying out our work, talking with others, we need to realize that any time is a time we can go to God.

Within this type of relationship, the Lord can warn us when we are about to say or do the wrong thing. That is the Holy Spirit working in us to guide our life. If, as a result, we realize the danger before it occurs, we should not resist the Spirit. If we fail to obey these warnings, our perception of the guidance the Spirit wants always to give us will fade and the light of Christ within us will fade as well. By refusing to pay attention and be obedient we grieve the Spirit. We do so at our own loss.

When we fail to realize or choose to ignore this guidance and have said or done the wrong thing, we can keep short accounts with God by going to Him in repentance. We swallow our pride and go to God for His forgiveness, which He is merciful and generous to give. The result of the practice of going to God and offering everything to Him in these various ways is the comfort, freedom, strength, and grace that cannot be attained in any other way. And, as N. T. Wright has pointed out, prayer is a Trinitarian function: we pray to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Name of Jesus.

R&D *In what sense do you need to go to God today?*

Prayer: *Lord, may I keep the line of communication open with You at all times.*

Day 14

Read: Philippians 4:4-7

Enjoying Life

When my wife and I took a cruise to Alaska led by Chuck Swindoll some years ago, he told us that we would be seeing spectacular scenery and we should exult in the Lord (v.4) rather than being irritated by our fellow-passengers who might be concentrating on the slot machines. (Apparently on a prior cruise one of his folks had started lecturing the gamblers!).

According to the French spiritual director Fenelon, we are not meant to deny ourselves the opportunities we have to enjoy life in the normal course of things. God wants us to enjoy life. People who are so strict in their view of entertainment that they leave little room for themselves or others to find enjoyment in the lighter aspects of life are not effective witnesses of their faith. Where amusements are innocent in themselves and come in the ordinary course of life, there is nothing wrong with participating in them within the bounds of reason. A stiff, judgmental attitude, on the other hand, only gives worldly people a mistaken impression of the Christian faith as dull and boring.

God wants us to go forward with a simple heart in peace and joy. It is in this manner that we show forth the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and the light of Christ can shine through us. The person who does all in the presence and power of God is still being faithful when engaged in what does not seem serious or substantial work so long as such activity is wholesome in nature and is carried out in a sportsmanlike manner.

There are specifically those activities in which we find ourselves involved in the course of our vocational and social obligations. These also come to us as a part of the graciousness of God and therefore we don't need to avoid them if they are good for our mental, physical, or emotional health. There is no freer heart than that which God leads by simple faith.

R&D *In what sense do you need to free up your life?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, although I hope I take You very seriously, help me not to take life too seriously.*

Day 15

Read: Proverbs 15:22

Making Good Plans

There is a famous prayer that goes, "Make me ever mindful of the needs of others." A wise friend switched the wording around and would pray, "Lord, make me needful of the minds of others." As our brief reading for today tells us, we show wisdom when we seek advice from those who know more about the matter facing us than we do.

Sometimes we seem embarrassed to ask for guidance. We feel that, because of our age, experience, position, or whatever, we are supposed to know what to do. Asking someone's advice seems an admission of weakness. Such an attitude is simply evidence of pride and lacks wisdom. We proceed at our own peril.

Others of us have a sort of tunnel vision. We are locked into one way of thinking and don't want to be confused by the thoughts of others. We may well miss the best solution because our minds are closed to other ideas. Others—even if they don't have the experience or expertise that we do—can enlarge our vision and broaden our perspective. It is wise to seek all the help we can get when we are making plans. We can make a practice of getting to know those people who have sound minds and good advice. If we are open to their ideas and suggestions, we will be much more likely to succeed, whatever our endeavor.

These principles particularly apply to our spiritual life. Being a part of a Bible study or prayer group puts us in contact with others whom we can grow to trust with our hearts and minds in the most important part of our life. Just having a prayer partner or Christian friend who is spiritually mature can be a blessing in helping us deal with the issues we face. Why try to go it alone when we can benefit from the Body of Christ, others who have been gifted by God to help us along the way? If we want to be Christ to our world, we need to let the light of Christ in others shine into our lives.

R&D Whose mind are you needful of today?

Prayer: Help me to remember, Lord, that one of the ways You communicate with us is through the lives of others.

Day 16

Read: Galatians 5:22-23

Joy in the Heart

Joy is an inner quality in the life of the Christian. A fruit of the Spirit, it is a work of the Holy Spirit within us. Our inner attitudes do not have to reflect the outer circumstances surrounding us. Joy is centered in our relationship with God. That is the anchor that holds us in place regardless of the situation we are in. If we truly know that our life is in Christ, and that what really matters at any given time is what he expects of us, we can have joy in the midst of the worst kind of trouble.

The joy we have in our heart can bring joy to others. We can do it by a cheerful look. The people in the world around us—regardless of their culture, religious persuasion or whatever else—can spot joy in another person when they see him or her. We have the opportunity to be ambassadors of Christ and conveyers of the Good News just by genuinely smiling at others. A woman once asked Mother Teresa this: “You have this fantastic worldwide ministry, and I am just a housewife in Peoria, Illinois; what can I do?” Mother Teresa told her, “Just smile a lot.” A cheerful look brings joy to those around us.

It is, however, a heart issue. A forced smile won't work. It is only the true reflection of joy within that shines as the light of Christ for the benefit of others. That is why it is so important to commit our lives into the Lord's hands at the start of each day and remain in a right relationship with Him through the course of the day.

R&D How might you bring joy to someone today?

Prayer: Lord, You bless us in so many ways; as we reflect on that, how can we not have joy?

Day 17

Read: Mark 12:28-34

Someone Jesus Loves

We know that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and we know that our neighbor is anyone with whom we come into contact (Luke 10:25-37). A Christian friend takes this command so seriously that he tries, in all his contacts, to look at the other person as someone Jesus loves, and therefore someone to whom he should show love. He has found that this attitude opens doors for him to share with others what Jesus means in his life. As a result, he has been able to share the Gospel, the Good News, in leading people into a relationship with Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

My friend's plan is easier said than done for me. Here are two examples. My wife had agreed to let a vacuum cleaner service man come by the house to look at our vacuum and service it without charge. He also wanted to talk about our heating and air conditioning system for the house. My immediate reaction was a negative one; he would be coming at an inconvenient time and we already had reliable people who took care of the things he wanted to look at. And people like that aren't just out to do a good deed; they want to sell you something. I was not looking forward to that guy's visit. Then the Lord convicted me that I was not showing the attitude that my friend would have shown.

The other situation is just the general one of being in contact with a lot of different people in a lot of different circumstances during the course of any day. I just forget about my friend's plan in the course of daily living.

But, you know what? It is nonetheless a good plan. It is a great way to shine Christ's light. I'm going to try to do better; how about you?

R&D Are you willing to look for Christ in at least one person today?

Prayer: Help me to remember that, because of You, Lord, people saw in me someone who needed to be led to You.

Day 18

Read: Acts 8:26-39

The Hand of God

People do not come to Jesus Christ by their own will, wisdom and power, but by the gift, promise, and drawing of the Father. This is what theologians call prevenient grace. It is the grace of God that goes before any conscious presence of divine grace within us, working in our lives before we are aware of it. Just as God sent Philip to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch in our reading for today, He will use any means to reach us. John Bunyan said that this gives good reason for us to stand in wonder at the effectual working of God's grace to bring all people to Jesus Christ.

What was the means God used, either directly or indirectly, to bring you to Jesus? Was it moving you to a new location, some other shift in the arrangement of your life, the loss of a loved one, or some other dire situation? Was it a book—perhaps even the Bible—that caught your attention, hearing friends or neighbors speak of spiritual matters, seeing God at work in the lives of others, experiencing God's grace in relieving you of some great anxiety, or coming under the influence of godly counsel? Was it some combination of all of these things?

We should take notice of such providential incidents, because they are the hand of God, prevenient grace. They were sent and managed by His mighty power to do us good. God will join Himself to our chariot so as to accomplish the good He has in mind for us. He will also use us as His means of grace in the lives of others the more we are conscious of and responsive to His Spirit in our lives. Not only are we beneficiaries of His prevenient grace, we can be the instruments of that grace in the lives of others. Indeed, that is what being the light of Christ is all about.

R&D *How might God use you to reach another person for Christ today?*

Prayer: *Here I am, Lord; send me.*

Day 19

Read: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Seed Sowing

One of the wonderful things about the parables of Jesus is that they can shed light in many directions, each direction helping us to see some vital facet of life. For example, the Parable of the Sower can be interpreted in a number of ways. One is to think of it from the standpoint of the person sowing the seeds.

As Christians, we are to sow the seeds of God's love. Consider what this parable says to us about preparing to do that. The person who would sow actual seeds must prepare in certain ways. He would insure that he has the proper seeds, he would be sure it is the right season for planting, and he would have the determination to do what needs to be done to produce an abundant crop.

How does this apply to us if we are going to sow the seeds of God's love? Let's start with having the "right seeds." The seeds of God's love must be firmly planted and growing in our lives for us to be able to convey that love to others. What would be the "right season" for sowing? Just as the soil must be prepared to receive real seeds, our sowing of God's love will be most effective with those who are receptive to what God is doing in our lives...people with whom we have a relationship or whom we sense are in need of our love because of what is going on in their lives. And what about determination to do what needs to be done? If we seek to be disciples of Christ who will make disciples, sowing the seeds of God's love should not be a chore but a joy. The light of Christ can shine from us into the lives of others when we "sow seeds" in this manner.

R&D *If you're not sowing the seeds of God's love in the lives of others, how might you begin to do so?*

Prayer: *Embolden me to want to act, awaken me to the opportunities to act, enlighten me with the words to speak, and use me, Lord, to accomplish Your purposes in the lives of others.*

Day 20

Read: Romans 12:1-2

A Servant's Heart

There are many ways to give, and the best way is the giving of ourselves. Our reading for today makes it clear that we Christians are to place ourselves on the altar of God for Him to use

us in the world. And Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45). As Christ’s people in the world today, we are here to serve.

If we turn our lives over to the Lord first thing in the morning, we can begin the day by asking ourselves how we can be of service during the day. If we are sincere in doing this, the Lord will remind us of all sorts of things we can do for others as the day moves along. The servant attitude spawns many opportunities to serve that otherwise we might never have realized were there.

Our opportunities to serve are endless. They can start with being attentive to our spouse, children, and co-workers and their special needs. It can mean giving our seat to an older person, holding the door open for others, allowing a driver to get into the lane of traffic in front of us, or other acts of common courtesy. It can be volunteering to do something someone else would otherwise have to do. It can be calling on someone who is lonely or in need. Making a contribution to a charity or other worthwhile endeavor is also an act of servanthood.

The giving of ourselves because of the love of God within us is not a one-time effort. We don’t do what we are moved to do and then spend our time rejoicing in our own righteousness or wondering why others are not following our good example. Instead, having a servant’s heart is a lifelong process, a godly, light-shining way of looking at life.

R&D How might you demonstrate, even if just to yourself, that you have a servant’s heart?

Prayer: What good are we to You, Lord, if it is not to serve others?

Day 21

Read: 1 Timothy 6:3-10

Reputation

Do you ever think of what kind of reputation you have? As Christians, our focus should not be on the accumulation of wealth, power, or prestige. It should be on doing the will of God. It is true that God can lead us into a vocation that results in our attaining wealth, for instance; but that is very different from seeking wealth for its own sake. As today’s lesson teaches us, there is nothing wrong with having money; it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil.

A Christian’s reputation, on the other hand, is a pearl of great price. If we want to be effective in this world as God’s people, there is nothing we could more highly treasure than to be thought well of, to be trusted, and to be dependable; in other words, to have a good reputation. It is then that people will be open to Christ’s love, through us. Thus, our reputation should be well guarded by our living in accordance with God’s purpose for us. Others are always watching to see if our actions are in line with our professed beliefs.

Furthermore, we can be much more content within ourselves if we focus on what we can be grateful for (our reputation) rather than always wanting something we don’t have (great riches). Reminding ourselves of the blessings God bestows on us is much more satisfying than yearning for things that are beyond our reach. If we can start thinking more about what we have than what we want, our life will improve. We’ll find we have something much better than silver and gold, and it has a much better shine.

R&D What kind of reputation do you want to have?

Prayer: *Lord, there's an old saying, "Help me to be the person my dog thinks I am." Some real truth in that!*

Day 22

Read: John 14:1-4

We Would See Jesus

There are two great evils that hang over life: sin and death. If we had eternal life but could not conquer sin, there would be no hope in us. If we were surrounded by all the good things of life but the shadow of death nonetheless hung over us, there would be no hope in us. Hope springs from the knowledge that there is one through whom both sin and death can be defeated. We would see Jesus, who conquered sin and death, who can show us the beauty of holiness, and speaks to us of eternal life in his Father's house.

We have all experienced the disappointment of our failures. At the end of the day, we may well say, "I wish I had not said or done that." We know that what we have said or done would not have been Jesus' way of handling the situation. We are sorry and we feel repentant. Or we learn of the death of a young person or a parent with young children, and we are distraught that such a thing should happen. Such things remind us of the reality of sin and death all around us. Yet, in the midst of our disappointment with ourselves or the pain of loss, there is still hope in us. We would see Jesus.

We can look at him and see our humanity without the stain of sin, and we can also know that the Cross is not the end of life. Jesus conquered all on our behalf in the Garden of Gethsemane. Based on what we now know about sin and death, let hope reign in us today. It is only as Christians let the light of Christ shine from their lives that others can come to know what we know about overcoming sin and death.

R&D Take a moment to rejoice in the hope that is in you. That hope can shine through your life today for the benefit of others.

Prayer: I pray today, Lord, for those who have gone through life without knowing Christ and the joy of living in hope. My heart breaks for them. They have missed so much and, short of the miracle of finding You at the last, are doomed to eternity without You.

Day 23

Read: John 3:1-21

The Great Awakening

My friend Tom Gracie told this story on himself. He had led a teaching mission in a church, and then returned there some time later. A man came up to him and told him that he had been converted to Christ at that teaching mission. Gracie asked the man what he had said that had touched his heart sufficiently for him to give his life to Christ. "Oh, it wasn't anything you said or did," the man replied. "Actually, what happened was that one of the candles on the altar went out and no one relit it. I'm sitting there unhappy enough that my wife had literally dragged me to church with her, and I'm thinking, 'What kind of a church is this that lets the candle go out and won't relight it?' And then God says to me, 'You've been sitting in church all these years and your candle isn't lit!'"

In today's lesson, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, and thus a leading Jew of his day, came to Jesus by night in hopes that no one would know that he was

seeking answers from this itinerant Jewish miracle worker. He was a bright man, and he expected intellectual guidance. However, instead of speaking to Nicodemus' mind, Jesus spoke to his heart. There is nothing anti-intellectual about the Christian faith; and, in fact, God wants us to *know* what we believe about Christ. But there is more to faith than intellectual acceptance; it involves spiritual rebirth.

Spiritual *birth* comes in knowing that there is a God, someone over us on whom we are dependent. Nicodemus had that knowledge. Spiritual *rebirth* is accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior: the essence of John 3:16. From the initial contact he had with Jesus, there is no reason to believe that Nicodemus took that step of faith. However, the fact that he joined Joseph of Arimathea in arranging Jesus' burial (John 19:38-40) gives us an indication that his candle was finally lit. If we are to be the light of Christ to the world around us, we need to be sure our candle is lit!

R&D *How well is your candle lit today?*

Prayer: *Shine, Jesus, shine in me and through me.*

Day 24

Read: John 15:18—16:4

Acknowledging Christ

God has surprises in store for us and some of them invade our comfort zone. An international conference on evangelism was held in the United States, attended by Christian leaders from all over the world. An African clergyman going through Customs as he entered the country was asked if he had anything to declare. He replied, "I declare that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior."

God may surprise us with situations in which we, uncomfortably perhaps, will be expected to acknowledge Him and our commitment to Him. In our reading for today, Jesus made it clear to his disciples that that would happen. Jesus tried to prepare his followers for the persecution they would face. In fact, in the years that followed Jesus' life on earth, the disciples experienced a great deal of persecution and martyrdom. And, as hard as it may be to believe, more Christians are being martyred in our day than at any time in the history of the world.

The persecution we face in the free world is of a more subtle form, but it is persecution nonetheless. If we are spiritually conscious of what is going on around us, virtually every day we have opportunities to acknowledge Christ in some situation or circumstance in which he is being derided or misunderstood, or in which Jesus needs to be held up that others might be enlightened by the truth in him. It is as we acknowledge him that we can know he will acknowledge us before the Father in heaven. The more the light of Christ shines through us, the more opportunities we will have to acknowledge him.

R&D *Be prepared to acknowledge Christ in some situation today even if it is just saying "God bless you" to someone you encounter.*

Prayer: *In praying for world mission, help us to remember, Lord, to ask for strength and guidance of those who face persecution daily.*

Day 25

Read: Luke 12:22-34

Loving the Law

The discussion was about Internal Revenue Service audits, and the men engaged in the conversation were prominent and wealthy. One seemed especially relaxed in the midst of a heavy discussion about the hazards of such audits. Finally, someone asked him why he was so quiet. “I never cheat on my taxes, and I keep good records; why should I worry about an audit?” he replied.

Many people, including many Christians, tend to look at Scripture as legalistic and restrictive, as though God has given us a lot of rules and regulations that will keep us from enjoying life. Of course, just the opposite is true. God has given us “the Law” to protect us that we might live life to the fullest. It is by fulfilling God’s will for us through Scripture that we are free to live life without fear and without regret. Just like the guy who didn’t have to worry about an IRS audit.

There are certainly a lot of people in our world today who covet financial gain. They know that money represents power, influence, and success. For many, money is god. They think of little else. It is true that money can buy certain comforts and offer some security. However, obedience to God is far more valuable than wealth, because it is a heavenly treasure rather than an earthly one. Discover today the freedom that comes from obeying God in all things and let the light of Christ shine through you to those with whom you come into contact all day long.

R&D Reflect on the peace within you that comes from being obedient to God and walking the path that He has for you.

Prayer: Lord, we become at peace about money when we realize that it all belongs to You, and You bless us with the use of it while we are here on earth.

Day 26

Read: Hebrews 13:8

Christ’s Love

Christ’s love is not like human love. Our love tends to vary with our emotions, but Christ’s love is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His love has no ebbing or flowing, going too far or falling too short, no uncertainty. Of course, our perception of his love may not be consistent. He shows his love in a manner to fit our real needs, and often we do not know our real needs but only our perceived ones. Furthermore, our consciousness of Christ’s love also depends on how closely we walk with him.

Christ’s love does not lead us along wrong pathways. It is always in harmony with God’s will for us. Anything thought to be Christ’s love that is contrary to Scripture is not his love but a deception. One purpose of Christ’s love is to shape us into people who love as he does. Because we do not fully know love, he teaches us of it through the indwelling Holy Spirit to the extent we are openhearted to receive the message.

Christ’s love persists. It cannot be tempted to abandon us no matter what happens. Christ’s love will continue to shine on us until all that is imperfect is subdued and yields to it. He wants to make us pleasing and wholesome, not because we are so but because he loves us so much. We will be the light of Christ today just by letting his love flow through us.

R&D *To whom do you need to show Christ's love today?*

Prayer: *"For all the promises of God find their Yes in Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 1:20)*

Day 27

Read: 1 Peter 1:3-9

Life's Experiences

Life is a training ground for eternity. Life is an academy to educate us in the details of how God wants us to live. It is a refining process. Some like to think of it as the polishing of stones as they are rubbed together over a period of time in a creek bed or a tumbling machine. Others use the illustration of silver and gold being purified by fire (v.7), removing the dross. Neither illustration is a comforting one.

Each person must be exposed to this purification process if we are to grow spiritually and emotionally. We are to be shaped into the image God has in mind for each of us, or to fall short of that goal. We can be conformed to God's will if we are open to correction and if we are surrounded by those who love us enough to correct us when it is needed. If we seek to grow in the knowledge and love of God, there is no clearer sign of movement toward that goal than a willingness to be corrected. The best fruit of humility is knowing that we stand in the need of correction. (Although I don't want to set myself up as a model of humility, I can use this series as an illustration of the point. By getting several people to read the early drafts of it, I was able to see shortcomings in it that I would never have seen otherwise. Fortunately, rather than being defensive, I was able to be objective about the criticisms and (hopefully) this is a better series because of it).

Life is like a hospital in which we have the opportunity to be spiritually healed. We are all, to one degree or another, spiritual invalids who should seek to be cured. We can be healed if we are willing to undergo the necessary treatment. Those afflicted with physical ailments that require surgery must make the choice to undergo the operation or suffer the consequences. It is equally so concerning our spiritual ailments. Wholeness requires correction and cure, and life gives us the opportunity to experience both. Sometimes our light needs a little adjustment to allow it to shine all the brighter.

R&D *What corrective action might God have in mind for you today?*

Prayer: *"Mold us, Lord, of sterner stuff; help us to be strong. Structurally, is clay enough to move these feet along?"*

Day 28

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Reconciliation

Some years ago, I asked a Christian friend to write an article for me to use for one purpose, but I used it for another, although both purposes were for the glory of God. I was devastated when the friend vehemently reacted to what I had done. My first response was defensive; but, before trying to justify myself, I decided to give myself some time to cool off and to pray about the situation. As I did, I began to see things from my friend's point of view. The result was that I was able sincerely to ask for forgiveness and to begin to build some new bridges of relationship with him.

God calls us to a ministry of reconciliation, not only with Himself but with each other. He wants us, in our relationships with others, to go further than forgiveness; He wants us in harmony with one another.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (v.17). On the inside, Christians are brand new people. We have new life in the Holy Spirit. With that new life comes a continual flow of opportunities to live in a new way. God shows us, in Christ, how to be reconciled to Him. He has forgiven our sins and is working to make us whole. In that process, He has shown us the way to reconciliation and the means of encouraging others to be reconciled to Him and to one another. And, as we go about this ministry, we are ambassadors for Christ! What greater privilege could there be than to serve God in this way? And, He’ll show us new and better ways to do it every day, if we just let Him. Shine!

R&D How might God use you as a minister of reconciliation in some situation you are concerned about?

Prayer: Make me, Lord, an instrument of Your peace.

Day 29

Read: Matthew 18:19-20

Companionship

There are many spiritual blessings of being in a small group, and sometimes unexpected ones. Three other men and I were in such a group years ago when I faced a crisis in my ministry. Our ministry had been given a dump truck to send to Honduras at a time when that country was recovering from a devastating hurricane. When the truck arrived in Miami for shipment, however, it was in terrible condition. The last thing the people in Honduras needed was a broken-down truck. As I shared this with my group, one of the guys said, “I know a Christian in Miami who owns a trucking business; if the truck can be repaired, he’d be glad to put it into shape for shipment without any charge.” I called the man. “Would you believe I know about that truck,” he said, “and that I can see it in the parking area across the street right now?”

We Christians should never think that we are independent and don’t need the help of others. Nor should any of us be excused from helping others. The Church, as the Body of Christ, can only be effective when its members work together for the common good.

Small group companionship is the ideal place within which to experience what the Body of Christ is all about. In an intimate group Christians can be honest with one another. A level of trust can exist in which we can speak both “off the top of our heads” and “from the bottom of our hearts” and not feel judged. Not only will we get the encouragement and support we need for everyday living, but sometimes, through the ideas of others, we’ll be as surprised by God as I was in getting that truck fixed! If you’re not in a small group, consider the opportunities it provides to shine your light while also getting it re-charged.

R&D What has been your experience in participating in a small group or groups?

Prayer: Lord, a cohesive small group is like strands of cord bound together to make strong what otherwise would have been weak.

Day 30

Read: 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Mature Thinking

Our conscience is like a barometer to measure our maturity in Christ. It helps us examine ourselves as to whether we show forth the marks of a child of God. Do we truly love our neighbor as ourselves? Do we keep the commandments of God? Does our lifestyle reflect our reverence for God so that people know that He is our priority?

As we look within ourselves, what do we see? We should see a person untroubled by our actions because they have been for a godly purpose. We should see a person who is at peace. We should find within us a soul that is alive to God, one that delights in Him. A mature Christian is compassionate toward others and full of gentleness and patience.

As we mature spiritually we know within ourselves that, by the grace of God, we are following the pathway He has set for us. If Jesus is the Lord of our lives, our conscience informs us day by day the thoughts we should have and the things we should do. We have a God-given sense of satisfaction when we have shown love to our neighbor, honored our parents, and kept our body pure because it is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Conversely, our conscience convicts us when we have not. The testimony of our conscience is a work of the Spirit as we mature in Christ. And the clearer conscience we have, the brighter the light of Christ can shine through us.

R&D Reflect on your conscience as a barometer of your love of Christ.

Prayer: Keep me growing upward, Lord God, that I may be increasing in the knowledge and love of Your Son Jesus Christ every day of my life.

Day 31

Read: Hebrews 3:7-13

Vulnerability

Although an introvert, over the years my ministry has required that I do a lot of public speaking. One way I handle that is by beginning each talk with humor. It makes me feel more comfortable with the audience. A friend gave me a list of some of the amusingly awkward things people put on automobile accident reports, and they were a great “ice-breaker.” Then, someone else gave me what, unthinkingly, were equally funny things people said in asking for support from governmental agencies. I used them only once because my friend Mary had the courage to tell me I was making fun of uneducated, desperate people who were pleading for help.

Perhaps it’s too easy for us to harden our hearts to God and to the ways He would reach us through others. Hardening our hearts means stubbornly setting ourselves against God and what He wants us to learn in the school of life. No matter how affluent a society we live in today, there are always those who are “down and out.” They are vulnerable, and we need to be sensitive to that, which I had not been in the illustration above.

Just as circumstances of life leave some people in a vulnerable condition, there is a way in which all Christians are to be vulnerable as well. We are to be vulnerable in the sense of being indefensively open to what God wants us to learn from the experiences of life so that Christ in us shines with a true light and not a false one. I thank God that, by His grace, I didn’t harden my heart to Mary’s courageous words as I had hardened it to those not-so-funny-after-all pleas from the poor.

R&D *Is there any heart-hardening going on in your life that might dull your light of Christ?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those brothers and sisters in Christ who stand for You in difficult situations and guide us away from the hardening of our hearts.*

Day 32

Read: Acts 2:1-11

Power from on High

We Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, but what about Pentecost, the day to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church? By neglecting Pentecost, perhaps we also neglect the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Consider these thoughts taken from Maxie Dunnam's *The Workbook on Abiding in Christ*. The promise of Pentecost was primarily one of power. The thing that the non-Christian world sees lacking in Christians is the presence and power of God in our lives.

As Dunnam points out, "The New Testament teaches that we were promised fire, not a feeble flicker. We are to be like a city set on a hill, not a smoldering candle hidden under a bushel basket. We are to experience fulfillment for our hunger, the joy and radiance of a wedding feast, excitement like that of a man finding a treasure hidden in the field that leads him to sell everything to possess it." The power from on high is in Christians through the Holy Spirit; and we are to witness to that reality in every aspect of our lives.

Furthermore, Ephesians 4:30 warns us not to grieve the Holy Spirit, and 1 Thessalonians 5:19 says we are not to quench the Spirit. Dunnam notes that there is active and passive sin in relationship to the Holy Spirit. "We grieve the Holy Spirit by doing what he tells us *not to do*. We quench the Holy Spirit by refusing to do what he tells us *to do*." The light of Christ is to shine forth from us in power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

R&D *Reflect on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life today.*

Prayer: *May the Light of Christ shine forth from our lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Day 33

Read: Psalm 27:7-14

God's Problems

How about a fresh way of looking at prayer? From the *New Living Translation* of the Bible, Psalm 27:7-8 says, "Hear me as I pray, O Lord. Be merciful and answer me! My heart has heard you say, 'come and talk with me.' And my heart responds, 'Lord, I am coming.'" Maxie Dunnam says, "What a beautiful expression of the very foundation of prayer."

Prayer is a natural part of human life. People who are not Christians and have no interest in being Christians still regularly comment on prayer: "I don't have a prayer of winning that contest"; "Pray that I'll be able to pass my exam"; "If all else fails, pray." And, in fact, many of those people actually pray, even if they would not think of it as such. Prayer just seems to be part of who we are. People spend a lot of time searching for meaning, and prayer is a way of doing that even if they don't know whom they are addressing in their prayers. For the Christian, as the psalm says, it is a heart response to God...a way of talking with Him, at His invitation.

People who are serious about prayer ask questions about the sovereignty of God (why pray if God is going to do whatever He plans to do anyway?), the free will of people (do we pray

against the will of others when we ask God to change them?), and the healings that don't seem to happen the way we pray. Dunnam says, "All the questions, objections, and contradictions surrounding prayer—and they are many and monumental—all of them are God's problems, not mine; because prayer is God's idea. God has commanded us to pray." Obediently honoring God is at the heart of being Christ in our world today. Shine!

R&D *Reflect on your prayer life and how it might be improved.*

Prayer: *Dear Lord, You are as close as my inner self; why talk to myself when I can talk with You?*

Day 34

Read: John 2:1-11

Building Memories

Some years ago my wife and I were in New York City for a meeting. There was a musical playing on Broadway that she very much wanted to see. Several people with us at the meeting were planning to go to the show, and we were invited to join them. However, when we learned the price of the tickets, I immediately said, "No." As a result, although my wife was very understanding about my decision, while our friends were having a wonderful evening, we had a terrible one. But I learned an important lesson that night: there are times when a financial sacrifice is appropriate if it will build joyful memories for the ones you love.

The wedding at Cana was an instance in which Jesus had to make a sacrifice in order to build joyful memories for his mother and others. The incident occurred at the beginning of his ministry and at a time when he did not want to be seen simply as a miracle worker. Yet, he was in a tough situation. Apparently his mother had some responsibility in connection with the affair; and, when the crisis arose, she asked Jesus for help. He responded by turning the water into wine.

Some may wonder about Jesus being at a wedding—a purely social occasion—when he was just beginning the most important mission the world has ever known. But, are not social occasions a part of our mission? If God is going to use our light to shine in the lives of others, we need to be in contact with others. Jesus valued social occasions because they gave him opportunities to reach people. The work that God has for us to do can be accomplished in times of celebration as well as in other settings. And, people are open to one another in a special way at such times because they are times for building joyful memories.

R&D *What social occasions give you the opportunity to shine the light of Christ?*

Prayer: *Lord, You are with me wherever I am. May I not miss the opportunities You give me to let the Light of Christ shine through me.*

Day 35

Read: Luke 15:11-32

Hugs

Probably, we have all had the experience of hugging someone who really didn't want to be hugged. Sometimes it may be our loved one who is really angry with us, and to accept a hug would seem like forgiving us too easily. Or maybe it is someone who is offended by that type of

intimacy or thinks it inappropriate to the situation. Or perhaps it is someone who just doesn't know us well enough to be able to accept our hug. Whatever the reason, it is an awkward experience. We have been vulnerable enough to offer the hug, and its rejection leaves us feeling unworthy or excluded or perhaps even ill-mannered.

The good news is that there is someone who always wants to hug us no matter how unworthy we may be. His name is God.

That is what the story we call "The Prodigal Son" is all about. When we think we can do things on our own, and don't need God, it is like resisting His hug. That is the picture of the younger brother who, as soon as he was of age, wanted to take his money and run. The warmth of his father's love was not enough to keep him at home. He had better things to do.

In the end, of course, he could find no satisfaction in his self-pleasing pursuits. Things that seem like "fun" for their own sake—in the anticipation and even in the execution—ultimately have no lasting satisfaction if they weren't the very thing the Lord wanted us to do. Fortunately, the son had the sense to return to the father and his awaiting hug. God the Father is always there awaiting us with the warmest possible welcome. Will you let Him hug you today? I don't know about you, but that certainly makes my light shine.

R&D Take a moment to let God hug you right now.

Prayer: Lord, my heart aches for those who do not know how much You love us.

Day 36

Read: Luke 8:40-56

Interruptions Are Ministry Opportunities

As a person who has a compulsion to stay focused, interruptions have always been a problem for me. In contrast, writer-priest Henri Nouwen told this story from his days at Notre Dame. He was talking with a colleague who was a theology professor. The man said that his biggest problem had always been that interruptions interfered with his work at the most crucial times. He was able to deal with this only when he realized that those interruptions were his opportunities to show God's love to others in need. It's not that interruptions interfere with ministry, they are ministry!

Jesus demonstrated that truth in our reading for today. A man named Jairus interrupted him with the plea that he attend to his daughter who was dying; and then, on the journey to do so, Jesus is further interrupted by a woman with a bleeding problem. In neither instance did he turn the person away. Instead, he gave each person and situation the time and attention needed.

Interruptions are special opportunities to be Christ to the world around us. Jesus shows us how. In the case of the woman with the bleeding problem, he does more than serve as a source of healing. He knows that it is important for her to testify to what has happened to her. That reinforces her faith and witnesses God's healing power to those around her. In the situation with the young girl, he not only brings healing, but is concerned about the child's practical need for something to eat.

We all face interruptions, perhaps many times each day. What a liberating experience it is to quit grumbling about them and see them, instead, as opportunities to let Christ's light shine through us into the lives of others.

R&D *What is your attitude about interruptions, and how can you better be Christ in the midst of them?*

Prayer: *I'll know I have gotten the message, Lord, when I start praying for interruptions!*

Day 37

Read: Matthew 4:1-11

Fasting

Some years ago, I was testing my vocation and decided to enter into a three-day fast for the Lord's guidance. By the third day, I was sensing the Lord's leading toward continuing in the work in which I was already engaged until He clearly gave me guidance in another direction. On that third day, when the mail arrived, there was a letter from a dear friend who had no idea that I was in the midst of a fast. He wanted me to know that, in thanksgiving for my ministry, he was in prayer and fasting for me. What confirmation!

Jesus, of course, is our example. Although not many of us will fast for 40 days as Jesus did immediately following his baptism, there do come times in our lives when we may want to consider the benefits of fasting. For Jesus, this was the beginning of his ministry, and he needed preparation for what was ahead. That included intimacy with God the Father, as his course of action was set before him. It also gave him the foundation for resisting the temptations of Satan which he immediately encountered.

As a spiritual discipline, fasting fell on hard times for many years, and is just now beginning to re-gain a place among Christians. From time to time, religious and political leaders call for days of fasting and prayer as a means of showing the seriousness of a resolve or to deny funds to self that could be made available to the needy. Fasting takes our focus off ourselves and opens us to better communication from God, brightening the light of Christ in our lives. However, if we have not fasted before, skipping a meal or two is not likely to be harmful, but it is advisable to get some guidelines from a knowledgeable source before undertaking more serious fasting.

R&D *What has been your experience with fasting?*

Prayer: *Lord, fasting can take the focus off of ourselves so that we may more adequately focus on You.*

Day 38

Read: James 5:13-16

Prayer Is Action

When our friend called to ask for prayers for his wife and himself, I could hear the desperation in his voice. Not only was he worried about her physical condition, but he was not well himself. Perhaps the thing that weighed him down as much as anything else was that neither of them felt God's presence in their plight and they just didn't have the energy to pray.

Years ago, Helen Shoemaker wrote a book entitled *Prayer Is Action*. She wrote it at a time when the focus of many churches was almost entirely on the "social gospel," meeting people's physical and emotional needs. The point of her book was that prayer is also something we can *do* to meet human need.

Many people have trouble praying for themselves and others when they are ill. They just don't feel like doing anything, even praying. They become discouraged about their situation and impatient to begin feeling better. They don't sense God's presence and love.

For those of us whose friends are sick while we are well, this is our call to action. In our reading for today, we are told that those who are sick should call upon their brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for them. Christians are a part of a community of faith. We have not only the privilege but also the obligation to pray for those who are sick, and we have the comfort of knowing that we can expect their prayers when we are ill. That's a light that shines in both directions.

R&D *For whom do you especially need to be praying today?*

Prayer: *I pray today, Lord, for loved ones who are facing surgery and those who are recovering from it.*

Day 39

Read: Matthew 25:31-40

God's Hidden Presence

Jesus is always with us, but often we are not conscious of it. The experience of Jesus' hidden presence is perhaps common to us all. The ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta was so effective because she saw, in all the sick and dying to whom she ministered, the hidden presence of Jesus. In his Parable of the Last Judgment Jesus said, "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (v.40). Our Lord Jesus wants us to be looking for his hidden presence in the people and circumstances that we encounter in the natural course of our daily lives.

But there is another facet of our lives as Christians having to do with Jesus' hidden presence. It is when we feel separated from him, when our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling, and we sense no relief from the troubles we are in. We may remind ourselves that Jesus loves us and promises to be with us, but where is he? We know God is with us through His indwelling Holy Spirit and within the Body of Christ, the community of faith of which we are a part, but it sometimes doesn't seem like it.

Henry T. Blackaby said this: "You can respond to the silence of God in two ways. One response is for you to go into depression, a sense of guilt, and self-condemnation. The other response is to have an expectation that God is about to bring you into a deeper knowledge of Himself." Needless to say, the latter is better. The end result will be a Christian who is more available to God in the future.

R&D *How have you dealt with times of God's hidden presence?*

Prayer: *Faith in God is built on what we have seen Him do for us in the past. Help me, Lord, when I am not sensing Your presence, to not forget to remember.*

Day 40

Read: Luke 24:13-32

God's Felt Presence

It is a common experience of Christians to feel God's presence in the reading and study of Scripture. When a particular passage speaks directly to our heart concerning some issue on our minds, we can get that warm glow of understanding that is a gift of God. Sometimes the words of Scripture will literally "jump off the page" as we seek the Lord's guidance. When we are "down" and need spiritual uplifting, the reading of a psalm or other beautiful passage of Scripture can warm our hearts (v.32), lift our spirits, and remind us of God's love.

Prayer, of course, can also open the door to the felt presence of God. People who practice meditation and contemplation do so because it brings them into the felt presence of God. That is largely what those prayer experiences are all about. But even our simple prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition can connect us with God in such a way that we perceive His presence with us. John Bunyan said, "When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words than thy words without heart." Concerning the attitude with which we come to prayer, Father Andrew wrote, "Let us seek so to prepare our souls that the Lord entering may find a place prepared for him." And Larry Christenson said, "Prayer is a not a pious exercise. It is doing serious and significant business with God." If our heart is in the right place, God can make His presence felt in prayer. Going forth in His presence and in the power of the Holy Spirit is where the light-bearer wants to be.

R&D Reflect on what you have felt and learned over this Lenten series, particularly ways in which you can shine Christ's light into the lives of others.

Prayer: Having been once again reminded of all that Christ has done for us on the Cross, may we exult in him, letting his light reflect through us into the world around us. Shine!

by Harry Griffith

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