

Be Careful What You Pray For:

Taking the Lord's Prayer Seriously



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Day One: Be Careful...

Why would a book on prayer be titled, “Be Careful What You Pray For?” After all, shouldn’t we try to encourage people to pray, not discourage them with a warning? Doesn’t the Bible tell us to pray more, not less? *Pray at all times and on every occasion in the power of the Holy Spirit. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all Christians everywhere. Eph. 6:18* Doesn’t Jesus urge us to turn to his Father in prayer for everything? *Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it. Mark 11:24* Why, then, should we “be careful” when it comes to prayer?

Try this-close your eyes and say the Lord’s Prayer as fast as you can. No, don’t keep reading, try it as fast as you can and I’ll wait..... Unless you are exploring or very new the Christianity, you found this to be an easy exercise. Like the Pledge of Allegiance or your cell phone number, the Lord’s Prayer is something you know so well that you can say it without even thinking about it. Am I right? Are there times you just say it and not a single word or thought lingers in your heart or mind for a moment after? Ironically, just before Jesus gave us this prayer, he warned his disciples: *“When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do.” Matthew 6:7*

“Be careful” means “be full of care, not care-less” about this and every other prayer you pray. Like an old friend, and old pair of shoes, or even an old friend’s pair of shoes, we can become so comfortable with the Lord’s Pray that we take it for granted. Maybe its time for us to dust off one of the greatest gifts Jesus ever gave us and show more care when we say it. I hope this book and time together will help us do just that.

I also hope that during this next month we will all become a little nervous about praying his prayer. Why? Because his prayer is not really about changing God’s heart or mind. God already wants to give us things and love us and forgive us. This prayer is really about being changed ourselves. Many have said that “prayer changes things.” But “be careful” when you pray this prayer for it will change you.

Questions for Reflection: Have there been times when you were careless with this prayer? Was there a time you prayed this very care-fully?

Day Two: Lost in Translation?

When I was young, one of the hardest family visits we ever made was to see my great Aunt Amelia. All the way as we drove in the car to her house my mom would say to us, “Remember to be careful. Don’t touch anything!” Those were good words of warning because every room in Aunt Amelia’s house was filled with ceramic vases on stands, porcelain nut dishes on rickety tables, and walls hung with her collections of bone china plates. My poor mom had to bring her three bulls into a china shop every time we went! As I think back on it I am kind of sad. Although Aunt Amelia loved those things but she could never really share them with us kids. Instead of eating off the plates or drinking from the tea cups, we had to “be careful” not to even get near enough them to admire them.

One way to be careful with the Lord’s Prayer is to leave it alone. That is, to use the translation of the Lord’s Prayer that has been around since the King James Translation of the bible was made in 1611:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. Matthew 6:9-13 (KJV)

There is no question it is a beautiful, poetic and timeless translation. But sometimes I think it is a lot like Aunt Amelia’s treasures. There it hangs to be admired but not to be touched or used or understood. After all, when is the last time you used the words, “art,” “hallowed,” “thy,” or “thine?” Of course, the last time you prayed this prayer. And what do children understand of “debts” or “trespasses” as we usually pray it? And what does it mean, “lead us not into temptation?” Does it mean that God is the one who tempts us? Isn’t

Satan the great tempter? It often takes two years of confirmation class to help get students comfortable with this prayer. What does that mean for the person who just walked into worship for the first time and tries to pray it?

We cannot deny the value of this translation. It has been a comfort to centuries of Christians and we know it by heart. But if we are to be really full of care for it, should we be willing to leave it alone or take it off the wall, dust it, and hand it on to our children regardless of the discomfort or memorizing it costs us? Perhaps in the process, we will see it in new ways and learn to care even more about it. Take the "Lord's Prayer" challenge these next 30 days and pray this translation, one that keeps all the meaning but makes it understandable to your children, grandchildren, and all the children of God who need to pray it with care. Pray it aloud each morning and evening this month, try to memorize it, and teach it to your children.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen

Questions for Reflection: Is your faith on a shelf getting dusty? How will you "dust it off" this month so that you can use it, share it, and not worry about it breaking?

Day Three- Our Father...

"Mine!" a child yells as he snatches his toy back from a playmate. Possessiveness starts young in our culture! And it does not end in childhood no matter how many times parents try to teach sharing. But how much do we adults like to share? We live in neighborhoods where each family has their own lawn mower even though it would make more sense to share one between several families. We get upset when we drive the car and find out that the last driver changed our seat position and radio stations. We even feel uncomfortable when someone steps up too close to us to talk because they are entering into our space! "Mine!" we yell as we snatch back our toys.

If each person inhabited their own little playroom we'd be fine. But we have to live together and this produces stress. Our solution in this culture is simple: "This is mine. That is yours. If you leave mine alone and I leave yours alone we will have no problem." It may seem funny, but think about it. Why do most families have so many televisions in their houses? So each person can watch what they want to when they want to. No sharing- No conflicts.

Unfortunately there is a downside. No sharing-No community. We avoid the conflict by avoiding contact. And yet in the very beginning when God looks at Adam in his own little playroom paradise He realizes: *It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion who will help him. Genesis 2:18* Adam had everything but someone to share it with! Our way of avoiding toy fights is safe but it is about as enjoyable as watching a comedy by yourself in an empty movie theater.

The worst example of this attitude is sometimes shown how we share God today. "You have your understanding of God and I have mine. We'll be fine if we leave each other alone." We talk of a "personal relationship with Jesus" in a way that makes it seem like a "private relationship" with him. Jesus forces us together when he begins his prayer, not with "My Father," but with "Our Father." He knew that this would

cause trouble! Perhaps he hoped that by making us say it again and again we might begin to share God with each other! It was his dream for our selfish world: *My prayer for all of them is that they will be one...John 17:21*

Questions for Reflection: What is a time sharing something brought you nothing but conflict? What was a time sharing brought you closer to someone? Are you willing to share your understanding of God with others without getting defensive? What do you think you can learn from others' views of God?

Day Four-Our Father

Imagine you are a young child who has just awakened from a nightmare in your dark room. What name would you call out for comfort? If you had lived in a certain castle in England would you have called for, "*Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith?*" If you were in a peculiar house with a white exterior would you have screamed for, "*Mr. President of the United States of America?*" Of course not! You'd yell, "Mommy" or "Daddy," because no matter who they were for other people, that is who they were for you. And when you wake up from a nightmare you need a parent, not a title.

There are countless titles for God. *Creator of Heaven and Earth. Ruler of the Universe. Mighty God. Lord of Hosts.* Each title tells us something wonderful about our God. We should treasure those names and use them in prayer whenever we can. But when Jesus looked at his twelve followers he knew that they would be in for some difficult and challenging times. They needed to be able to turn to God in a simple, personal and intimate way-like the children they were. So he gave them an incredible gift. He told them they could use the same simple title he used when he prayed-"Daddy."

We've dressed things up a bit in the Lord's Prayer by using the word, "Father." But, do not be mistaken, Jesus wants you to think of God as the daddy who comes to your rescue and the mommy who wipes away your tears. God is more than just a parent. But, when we need to, we know what we can call him!

Questions for Reflection: What does God look like to you? How we imagine Him is how we will often relate to Him. Does he look more like a King, a Shepherd, a Creator, a Judge, or a Father? God is all those things and more! Are there any images of God that you have that are not helpful at this time. Are there any you want to explore more?

Day Five-Our Father Pt. Two

Two problems seem to arise when using Jesus' form of address for God, "Daddy." One is that there are people for whom a fatherly image is not at all a positive one in their lives. The other is that using this name seems to line God up on the male side of humanity. If neither of these concerns affects you, read on, because they both bring up interesting points. If you've ever had a problem with calling or thinking about God as a father, let's explore the possibilities together.

Despite the strong words of the Ten Commandments to, "*Honor your Father and Mother,*" some find little to honor in their relationship to one or the other or both. There are a sadly significant number of people

who have had addictive or abusive parents. Instead of being able to turn to their parents for support, encouragement and love, they have experienced neglect, discouragement, and anger. Yet we were made both with the need for such parenting and the desire to honor it. Jesus offers, to all who have not had the parenting they needed or desired, his Father, who perfectly supplies what our parents could not! If you never had a parent to love and honor, now you do!

Why not "Our Mother in Heaven?" Make no mistake, God is not the kind of Father who can fix a flat tire but is unable to tenderly bandage a skinned knee. God's character runs the full range from nurturing to defending, from leading into battle to wiping every tear, from mighty acts to gentle words. While God is experienced as the ultimate loving parent, God is actually above all such definitions and divisions. Neither "Our Father," nor "Our Mother," tells the whole story!

Why use gender at all then when referring to God? Because God is a person we can't really use "It." Because God should never be confused with "Mother Earth" or any other such goddess we don't refer to God as "She." When it comes to referring to God in a masculine gender perhaps the best answer is the simplest - "because Jesus did."

Questions for Reflection: Is the image of Father a hard one for you? Is the idea of God being motherly a problem for you? Why?

Day Six- In Heaven

She sweeps her arms in a circle in the midst of a pine forest and says, "God is here, in each rock and tree." He peers through a microscope as a cell divides and whispers, "I have seen god." A guru tells his students, "God is in each one of you." A young student reads a book of poetry that tells her, "You are your own god." While the New Age movement of the 80's seemed new in its spirituality, it was, in fact, quite ancient. Since humans have had the ability to explore the concept of a God or gods, we have been torn between two basic tendencies. One is to locate our deity too far away and the other is to locate Him (or Her) too close to home.

The New Agers made the same mistake as those other religious movements back in early Jewish history; they conceived of god as being too close to home. They saw their gods as tied to the cycle of birth and death, planting and harvesting. Baal, a constant focus of the prophets' wrath in the Bible, was the god of fertility, whose dying and being born again ensured the growth of the fields. With the proper sacrifices he could be encouraged to produce a bountiful harvest. What harm was there in that belief? Imagine thinking that we could manipulate God! If God is too close to home we mistakenly think we can control God. And that is one step away from trying to be God ourselves.

So, our God is "in Heaven." That is, our God may have made all things but He is not bound up inside of them. He is above them and beyond our simple control. We pray for abundant blessings from God, but we cannot force the Almighty's hand with any sacrifice. God is God, trees are trees, people are people.

Yet, God is not too far away either. It is God who made us in His own image. It is God who sent his Son from heaven to bless, teach, heal, guide, and save us. It is God who blesses all believers with the Holy Spirit which is not some kind of force we can direct but how God directs us. Our God is in heaven but his love touches our hearts.

Questions for Reflection: When has God seemed too far away for you? When has God seemed too close for comfort? How does Jesus bridge the gap people experience between themselves and God?

Day Seven-In Heaven

People are willing to die to get to the heaven they imagine. We tragically see this in the mistaken acts of terrorists who become suicide bombers to get there. We know this when we hear the stories of saints who bravely accepted their executions as but a prelude to the everlasting blessings to come. St. Paul wrote, "I consider the sufferings of the present nothing compared to the glory that awaits." What images of heaven do they hold that allow them to so easily let go of this life?

Some imagine a place like earth only infinitely better. The vision of heaven shared by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah is a place on a mountain top where health, happiness, safety and peace is experienced in the presence of God. Jesus described heaven as a mansion with many rooms and a wedding feast without an ending! In the book of Revelation we don't quite get the harps and clouds of medieval imaginations, but we do get streets of gold, singing angels, and a glorious throne.

For others heaven is less a place than an experience that lasts forever. If Hell is eternity in the absence of God, Heaven is being with Him forever. Again, Christians have turned to Isaiah for this description: *Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return to Jerusalem, singing songs of everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be overcome with joy and gladness. Isaiah 35:10.* The Bible tells us that heaven is an experience and a place that makes death nothing more than a gate to something inconceivably greater!

The thought of heaven is not simply a comfort to the dying. Jesus announced that the Kingdom of Heaven was with us through him. That means that when we follow, trust and serve him, we get a taste of heaven in advance! The occasional glimpses we get, the fleeting feelings we experience can serve to strengthen us for faithful living each day and prepare us for the heavenly joys to come!

Questions for Reflection: What ideas of heaven have you carried around in your mind? Have they been biblical images or did they come from other sources? How has the assurance of heaven for the faithful helped you in a time of loss? How has the promise of heaven helped you live a more faithful life?

Day Eight-Bible Study on the Lord's Prayer

REFRESH: What do you hope heaven is like?

READ: Matthew 6:5-15 (NLT)

"And now about prayer. When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I assure you, that is all the reward they will ever get. [6] But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father secretly. Then your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you.

[7] "When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered only by repeating their words again and again. [8] Don't be like them, because your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! [9] Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored. [10] May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven. [11] Give us our food for today, [12] and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. [13] And don't let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

[14] "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. [15] But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

REFLECT:

is one of the commandments: *Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name. Exodus 20:7* Remember I said to “be careful.”

Another way we can honor God’s name is to humbly think of ourselves as His representatives, ambassadors, or agents in this world. Some people we meet will not know anything about God. Once they find out that we are associated with God they will begin to judge who God is by how we act! We have a real opportunity here. If we treat them with love, kindness, and understanding they may come to know God and honor Him. Some people we will meet do not honor the name of God. Perhaps they were treated badly by those who were supposed to be His ambassadors. If our behavior toward them is godly they may change their mind and come to respect Him again. We are wasting our breath in this prayer if we will not do what it takes to help others honor his name as well.

Questions for Reflection: Do you have a habit of misusing the name of the Lord? How could you speak to someone you know that misuses His name around you frequently? What is one way that you can honor God’s name at work? At home? At church? With friends?

Day Ten- Your Kingdom Come

When we think of the age of kings we think of it as a time of honor and nobility. Some admire this time so much that they hold festivals where pretend knights have pretend battles with pretend swords while the rest of the crowd gnaws on semi-raw turkey legs. While the time of kings may have been pretty good for the kings, knights and lords, it was a very difficult time for the other 99% of the population. Peasants were virtually slaves, growing crops and fighting wars for the kings while starving and dying themselves. Peasants could not choose where they would live, how they would earn a living, or even who they would marry. Ah, Camelot!

God knew what it was like to live in such a kingdom. When he had delivered his chosen people, the Hebrews, from their slavery to one tyrant in Egypt he hoped they had learned their lesson. He wanted to be their king, their one and only king. But no sooner had they arrived in the land that He had promised them did they start to beg to have their own king. He told his servant, Samuel, to pass along this warning: *This is how a king will treat you. The king will draft your sons into his army...while others will be slave laborers...The king will take your daughters from you and force them to cook and bake and make perfumes for him...He will take away the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves...He will demand a tenth of your flocks, and you will be his slaves. 1 Samuel 8:11-18* And it will come as no surprise that this is exactly how the kings of God's own people treated them!

Knowing this, it is a brave thing for us to pray for God's kingdom to come. For in God's kingdom we are under his supreme and unquestionable reign. We are praying, in a sense, to be peasants whose lives are completely ruled by Him. In God's kingdom we give up control of our present, put our lives into His hands, and surrender all plans for the future. And yet, throughout the centuries, people have prayed this line with deep longing in their hearts. They know what we sometimes deny, that we are all peasants under the rule of one tyrant or another. For some it is a flesh and blood dictator, for others a haunting past, for others a very present addiction, and for many the foolishness of trying to run their own lives. The more we pray these words, the more we ask God to be the King of our hearts and our minds and our lives instead of any other monarch. We joyfully pray these words because the only one we can trust to be a loving, merciful, and gracious king is the King of King and Lord of Lords.

Questions for Reflection: How do you feel about God being your king? Is there anything in your life you wouldn’t let Him be King over? Is there any fears you would have about letting God rule your life?

Day Eleven-Your Kingdom Come!

Every four to eight years in November we elect a new president. We usually know who won the next day after the election. But they won't actually become the new president until the end of January. The outgoing president is still in charge but really doesn't have much power anymore. The incoming president is not officially running the country but is already making major decisions for the future. It can be a confusing time in our nation but for those excited about the new president it is a time of joyful anticipation.

This is what it is like for us when it comes to God's kingdom. Jesus announced that the Kingdom of heaven was coming but is not completely here yet. We live in this time of transition and that can be confusing. For example, if God's kingdom is marching in, then why does Satan seem to still have so much power to tempt us and attack us? If the kingdom is so close that we can taste it, why is there so much sin and evil and trouble all around us? If the kingdom is so near, why do those who believe suffer so much from persecution? If this kingdom is "at hand" why do so many not turn their lives around so that they can become subjects of the king? These are logical questions that can cause us to doubt that the kingdom is really coming. Jesus knew his disciples needed convincing and pointed out to them that all of his healings and miracles were signs of its arrival: *But if I am casting out demons by the power of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you. Luke 11:20*

While we are praying for God's Kingdom to fully come to us, we don't just sit on our hands. We live "as if" it is here. If you want to know what it looks like "as it" turn to the fifth chapter of Matthew. In his kingdom the poor are rich, the sad are comforted, the humble are in charge, the hungry are filled, the merciful receive mercy, the pure of heart see God, and the peacemakers are called the children of God. In his kingdom we do not live with anger but seek to restore relationships, we do not let lust rule our lives but pray for strength to resist temptation, we turn the other cheek, love our enemies as ourselves, give to the needy and seek only God's reward. In this time of "neither here nor there" Jesus asks us to trust him and his message even more. As he looks on our distress he speaks to us in reassuring tones: *...don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom. Luke 12:32*

Questions for Reflection: Has living in this time of "already but not yet" been particularly hard or frustrating to you? Have you had difficulty believing in the arrival of the Kingdom when you still see the problems all around you? Have you had a "taste" of the Kingdom that keeps your hope alive?

Day Twelve-Your Will Be Done

If we want God's will to be done, the first thing we have to do is ask Him to break our will. This is no easy task, even for God, because there is nothing stronger in our lives than our own wills. From our first breath to our last, from the moment we wake to the moment we fall asleep, we are pursuing our own ways, our own wants, our own will. We will work hard to get our way or we will cheat to get our way. We will make great sacrifices to accomplish our goals or we will sacrifice others to achieve them. We will plot, scheme, plan, strategize, agonize, and antagonize to get what we want in life. You can blame our biology which seeks self-preservation or our psychology which seeks self-gratification. You can blame our parents who modeled such self-serving behavior or our culture that encourages us even as it tries to steer us in ever more lucrative directions. This is not something that can be fixed. It must be broken.

Ironically, the world, even Satan himself, may help God to break our wills! For there are only a very few of us who end our lives singing with satisfaction, "I did it my way." Most of the time we are pursuing our will we come into conflicts with all the others pursuing their own. When we choose the road we will travel we often end up lost or wrecked or stuck in a ditch. We find ourselves bruised, battered, bloodied and bowed. If we are wise we will turn to God in this state and find a wonderful blessing: *The sacrifice you want is a broken spirit. A*

broken and repentant heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalm 51:17 Other times, God cannot wait and does the breaking Himself! This may sound awful to ears that have grown up hearing that "God is love." But it is precisely because God loves us so much that He may break our will so that we can experience something better: *Oh, give me back my joy again; you have broken me—now let me rejoice. Psalm 51:8*

But we don't have to wait for the world, Satan, or our loving God to break our wills. We who pray this prayer are saying that we want God's will to be done! Even if it is hard. Even if it is not our will. Even if it will cost us everything and get us nothing earthly in return! We line ourselves up with Jesus who told his disciples: *For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do what I want. John 6:38* We find that when we are doing God's will we are strengthened and encouraged: *Then Jesus explained: "My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work.. John 4:34* We come to realize that while seeking our will was sending us down a dead-end, seeking God's will puts us on a never-ending highway: *And this world is fading away, along with everything it craves. But if you do the will of God, you will live forever. 1 John 2:17* Most of all, we cherish being partners with the one whose fame and fortune was not found in living for himself, but doing God's will even on the cross!

Questions for Reflection: Is there a time when your will was broken by life? What is your reaction to the idea that your will has to be broken before God's will can take its place? Have you experienced that already? Is it worth anything to be partners with Jesus in doing God's will?

Day Thirteen-May Your Will Be Done

"I have a very important mission for you," the shadowy figure whispers with urgency. "For the sake of your country, will you accept it no matter what the dangers?" You swallow once, step forward, reach for the envelope he is offering you and say, "I will." Shaking your hand he says, "Then God bless you," and leaves the room. With trembling hands you open the envelope and discover your mission.

Don't you wish it happened that way when you finally mustered up the courage to say, "I will" to do God's will in your life? Unfortunately there is no envelope and no clearly detailed plan inside to show you how to proceed. Some people get discouraged because they have heard stories of amazing people who knew exactly what God wanted them to do with their lives. But that is not the way it usually happens. Some of us feel like we are getting our instructions on puzzle pieces. We won't really understand what it was all about until the puzzle is nearly finished. Others feel like they have picked up the phone but no one is talking on the other line. Others try out all sorts of things and wonder if they are on the right track.

Discovering God's will for your life isn't always easy but there are things you can do to become more receptive. The **first** is to let God know that you really want to do His will. He already knows your heart, but often this prayer will help change your mind in the process. The **second** thing you can do is to read the stories in the bible about those who did God's will (and even those who resisted it.) Look at the story of young Samuel who finally answered God's call after three tries. (Can you hear me now?) *And the Lord came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, "Yes, your servant is listening." 1 Samuel 3:10* Or look at the story of Saul/Paul, the persecutor of Christians, who received this calling: *... Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. Acts 9:15* The **third** approach is to ask several trusted people who know you well to help you. Tell them about your talents, hopes, dreams, passions, and opportunities. Pray with them about it. It is amazing how God can reveal to others insights that will help you to know the way to go!

Questions for Reflection: Have you experienced any frustration in trying to figure out God's will for your life? What clues has he left around for you? Who are the people around you that seem to know what God's will is for their lives? How will you get help to discern God's will for your life?

Day Fourteen-On Earth as in Heaven

It is fun when children want to be just like some superhero. Do these kids dream of sitting in an office all day and have meetings? No, they dream of being be faster than a speeding bullet and able to reach tall buildings in a single bound. Do they long to teach 3rd graders how to multiply and divide? No, they see themselves swinging from building to building by webs that shoot from their wrists. Most children grow up, (some collect comic books) and move on to more realistic goals like become investment bankers and making their first million before they hit 26. But they lose something in the process, don't you think? There is something great about aspiring to save the world like a superhero that you don't find in grown-ups who just want to save eight cents a gallon by driving to the next gas station.

But when we pray "may your will be done on earth as in heaven," we can be kids again. For we are saying, we don't just want to see God's will done in some average, imperfect, incomplete way. We want to see God's will done as the superheroes would do it-amazingly, perfectly, completely. We want to do your will like those angels in heaven who have been and will be doing it for all eternity! It's a lofty aspiration but a good one. We aren't angels so we probably will mess things up a lot. But if we don't aim at this target, who knows if we will hit anything?

How do they do His will in heaven? The Psalms tell us that they serve him: *Yes, praise the Lord, you armies of angels who serve him and do his will! Psalm 103:21* Is there a way that we can be angels who serve God by serving each other here on earth? We also know that they worship God: *You alone are the Lord. You made the skies and the heavens and all the stars...You preserve and give life to everything, and all the angels of heaven worship you. Neh. 9:6* Even if our voices are not angelic, do we lift them up in praise in worship each week? Do we try to adore Him as they do 24/7 & 365? Do we honor God's greatness as they do in heaven? *Give honor to the Lord, you angels; give honor to the Lord for his glory and strength. Psalm 29:1*

We can and should try to imitate on earth the angels' ability to serve, worship and honor God in heaven. Of course we cannot reach that standard! What is interesting is that while we may be beneath them in perfection we are above them in His affection. They may be his angels but we are His children. They may be with Him in heaven but he sent His Son to earth to save us! And one night, in Bethlehem: let heaven and nature sing, let heaven and nature sing, let heaven, let heaven and nature sing!

Questions for Reflection: What kind of superhero did you want to be? What kind of superhero of faith would you aspire to be? Is your aim toward earth or are you aiming heavenward? What "angelic" behavior would you like to work on this week?

Day Fifteen-Bible Study on Doing God's Will

REFRESH: Think of a time when you went against everyone's advice and guidance and it was a (humorous) disaster.

READ: Acts 9:10-19

Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord!" he replied. [11] The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you arrive, ask for Saul of Tarsus.* He is praying to me right now. [12] I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying his hands on him so that he can see again."

Day Sixteen-Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

I can remember when you'd sit down at a fancy restaurant and they'd plop down a basket of rolls on our table and we'd all dig in. At school our sandwiches were made of fluffy white bread so soft it bruised in our lunch bags. At home there would be fresh crunchy loaves from the Italian bakery on Michigan Avenue. Daily bread? There was hardly a day without it! But now? Now with all those low carb diets bread is the enemy! "Don't give us our daily bread, Lord. Can't you see we are on a diet?"

But the people listening to Jesus' prayer weren't worried about Atkins. They were worried each day about getting enough to eat. While we fret over what to make for dinner each night, they were anxious about having anything to make at all. For most of the centuries this prayer has been offered, this request was a matter of life and death. It can be hard for us to ask for our daily bread with the same intensity or experience. While we would never say that we don't need God for life, we might not think we need him for nourishment.

To pray this with care we might want to put ourselves in the Superdome in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. Imagine that you've fled your home, taking nothing more than a suitcase under arm and a child under the other. For the first few days things seem better: there are cots to sleep on, the toilets still flush, and there is food to eat. Then one morning your child looks at you and says, "What are we going to eat today?" There is no store, no pantry, and no supply. No bread. Now pray that prayer and see if anything has changed. What does it feel like to have no other option but to pray for food? That desperate feeling of dependence is what millions experience each and every day.

When we pray this way two things happen to us. The first thing is that we realize how much we really do need God for everything, even our daily bread. *You cause plants to grow for people to use. You allow them to produce food from the earth— Psalm 104:14* Even if we have plenty now, too much, we cannot forget for a moment that there would be no daily bread without God's gracious giving. Even if the store shelves are always full in our town, they would be empty without God's bountiful blessing. *You open your hand to feed them, and they are satisfied. Psalm 104:28*

The next thing that happens to us is awareness of the need others have for daily bread. Have you ever considered that our prayer to God for daily bread may have been answered in surplus so that we can share it with others? Can we spend less money on diet programs and more on supporting the local food pantry? Can we learn to cut the carbs and increase the compassion? Will we pray this prayer for others and with others who need what God has abundantly supplied to our nation? John the Baptizer, asked "what should we do to show our repentance?" answered this way: *"If you have two coats, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."* Luke 3:11 Jesus tells us that feeding others is really feeding him! And here are the rewards for sharing our daily bread with others: *Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me... Matthew 25:34*

Questions for Reflection: How do you remember that everything comes from God and is a gift that we don't deserve? How intentionally do you "share your bread" with others in need?

Day Seventeen-Give us Today Our Daily Bread

There are those amongst us that get up nearly every morning to run, bike, lift or workout. We would feel strange if we skipped more than a few days of our regime. There are others of us who make one extra stop each day on the way to work to pick up a "vente non-fat latte." We would really be hurting if one day we were running late and couldn't pull in! There are those of us who watch the clock for their favorite television show or football game. If the phone rang and it was the Lord Almighty on the other end we would still feel bummed out that we were missing our program. But who among us would feel more than a twinge of guilt for missing our daily bible and prayer time? (How did you feel when you skipped Day 7 last week?) The truth is,

many of us are more committed to our exercise programs, more addicted to our morning coffee, and more obsessed with our TV shows than with reading the bible.

There are certainly many things to tempt us from spending time in God's Word. Immediately after Jesus was baptized he went out into the desert to fast and pray for 40 days. As he neared the end he was literally starving. Satan, that caring creature, offered to feed Jesus by turning stones into bread. But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People need more than bread for their life; they must feed on every word of God.'" *Matthew 4:4* For Jesus, asking for daily bread is more than asking for food for the body, it is asking for nourishment for the soul. While no one can argue that without food our bodies will perish Jesus is saying that without God's Word our spirits will not live. How many of us have spent a lifetime daily feeding our bodies, feeding our desires, and feeding our minds while neglecting to feed our faith?

It is one thing to know that we need to read the bible. And another thing to do it! The problem for most of us is simply that we have not set up a good plan that really fits our lives. Just as we get our workout clothing we must first go to the Christian bookstore to pick up a bible. Look at the many translations available and the features that come with them. Which one is easiest for you to understand? What notes, references or maps seem to be helpful? While you are there pick up a bible highlighter. That way you can highlight certain verses you really like. (It's OK to write in the Bible!) Then think about the best time of day to read. When are you least likely to get interrupted and most likely to be able to focus? (I didn't say this would be easy) Then decide what you want to read. For most of us, the best place to start is the gospels, which tell the story of Jesus. Now, be realistic. How much time do you have? In most cases, if you can read just one chapter a day you will be in good shape. Then say a quick prayer about what you've read. It doesn't sound like much, but it's not meant to be a seven-course meal. It's your daily bread. Now that is good eats!

Questions for Reflection: What daily activity in your life would you really miss? Can you imagine reaching the point where reading the bible was that important to you? How committed are you to getting to that place?

Day Eighteen-Forgive Us Our Sins

Much to Satan's delight, we have nearly banished sins from our faith vocabulary. A woman's affair with a married man is not a sin; it's "getting her groove back." Downloading music illegally from the Internet is not a sin; it is "peer to peer sharing." Political corruption is not a sin; it is "business as usual." Fudging on your taxes is not a sin; it is "creative accounting." Exploiting the poor is not a sin it is "sound capitalist practice." Using your cell phone to cheat on a test is not a sin; it is "technological enhancement." Sins are just so old-fashioned and judgmental that we really don't need them these days. Of course we don't need them. We are doing so well loving God and our neighbors as ourselves, aren't we? Not talking about sins has not made them extinct. It may even have encouraged their multiplication. *People who cover over their sins will not prosper. But if they confess and forsake them, they will receive mercy. Proverbs 28:13*

Maybe we should shift our focus from sins, the visible symptoms, to sin, the underlying illness. We are born as creatures separated from our Creator. While God is perfect, almighty, and eternal, we are imperfect, weak and mortal. This is the state of sin (some call it Original Sin). Although it is not the fault of an innocent baby, since Adam and Eve were ejected from the garden we all share their punishment. In this state of separation from God we no longer act like we were created in His image. We instead act completely opposite His loving nature by hating, His generous heart by stealing and His saving nature by destroying. We are by nature sinful and if God did nothing about it we could hardly be blamed.

But God has done so much to help us turn away from our sinful nature that can't act so innocent. God has given us laws to guide, consequences to teach, and prophets to preach. Most importantly, God sent Jesus not simply to wipe away our sins but to end the separation that began in the garden. *So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful kindness rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 5:21* This does not mean that

those who believe Jesus died for them will never sin. It is just that sin will no longer be all that they can do! So *you should consider yourselves dead to sin and able to live for the glory of God through Christ Jesus. Romans 6:11* By the grace of God they are free from the bondage of sin to love, bless, heal, serve, praise and rejoice!

What this means for our problem with sin today is that naming and attacking sins today is like treating the symptoms of an underlying disease. While we cannot stand idly by and let sin prosper, our ultimate goal is to lead people to the one who can cure their sickness from the inside out. *For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death. Romans 8:2* This must be our constant goal too. The closer we get to Jesus, the less sin runs our life. The nearer we are to God, the harder it is for our old sinful nature to control us. The more we allow the Holy Spirit to act in us, the greater our chances of winning rather than sinning!

Questions for Reflection: Have you focused too much on your sins and not enough on your relationship to God? How does this way of looking at sin help you to understand the sins that you seem to commit the most?

Day Nineteen-Forgive Us Our Sins

"I'm so sorry," the young man says as he gets out of his car and approaches yours. You had just stopped at a red light when he plowed into your new Lexus. His car stereo is so loud you can hear it from your driver's seat, you can see in your rear view mirror that there were five kids piled into his compact, and it smells like he may have had something to drink. "I'm so sorry," he repeats, "Can you ever forgive me?" You look in his eyes and somehow know that he really is sorry, really means it, and won't likely do it again. What will you say? What will you do? Does it make any difference that this young man is your son?

Jesus looked down from the cross and saw soldiers spattered with his blood gambling for his clothing. He squinted in the noonday sun and observed the smirking faces of the religious leaders who had plotted his downfall to protect their power. He looked in vain for his own disciples but most had already run for their lives. In his mind's eye he saw the terrible things you and I did last month, last year, twenty years ago. He looked and then he spoke what he felt deep in his heart: *Jesus said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing." Luke 23:34* And he died there on the cross to buy that forgiveness, to prove that forgiveness, to earn that forgiveness for us. Not because we said we were sorry. Not because we won't do it again. Only because we are his Father's sons and daughters.

For when it comes to God, we are always the one who caused the collision. We are always at fault. We deserve the anger, the Breathalyzer, the ticket, the suspended license. And yet, when God looks in our eyes he can't help but see the eyes of his only son. The son given to the world beautiful and full of life. The son the world gave back broken and lifeless. And God can't help but hear the echo of his son's word, "Father, forgive these people." And so God does. Again and again and again. He has to! The Father loves the Son and the Son loves us. Oh, to be sure, God loves us too or he never would have sent His Son. *God has purchased our freedom with his blood and has forgiven all our sins. Col. 1:14* To be sure, God hears our genuine requests for forgiveness and grants it. Make no mistake; God is never fooled by those who don't mean it. But hear this, son and daughter of God, no matter what accident you've caused, you are still His child. What's a Father to do but forgive?

Questions for Reflection: When did you make a mistake that your parents' forgave? How did you act after they forgave you? How do you feel before and after asking God for forgiveness? Does His forgiveness change you in any way?

Day Twenty-As We Forgive Those Who Sin Against Us

The dangerous thing about Jesus' stories is that sometimes you find yourself in them. This is especially painful when you turn out to be the bad guy. For example, there once was a king with a subject who owed him tons of coin. The deadbeat fell on his face asking for break and the king gave him one by wiping out his debt. And there I am! I am the guy who owes God a pile of pesos and yet find myself set free by His loving mercy and grace. I am so grateful, so happy, so relieved! But wait, the story continues... No sooner did this fortunate man leave the king's presence than he came across a guy who owed him a few bucks. When the poor guy couldn't immediately repay the small amount our debt-free buddy tosses him in jail. The king gets word and is justifiably furious. *Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'* Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid every penny. Matthew 18:32-34 Ooops. That's me too.

You too? I know there are some wonderful souls who actually find it easier to forgive others than forgive themselves. But they are a rare and dying breed. Most of us are grateful to avoid Jail and go directly past Go, God be praised! But when it comes to forgiving others, really forgiving them, well, that's another story. What does it mean to really forgive another? It means taking seriously their sin against us for one thing. Too many people make too little of the sins committed against them and never get around to forgiving them. When a co-worker cuts you down day after day with her biting sense of humor, you may just let it go. Instead of brushing it off you need to call it a sin, let her know what it is doing to you, and forgive her all the same. Why bother? You can't heal if you deny you are wounded. Another way to really forgive is to look at it as a two-way conversation that has gone south. What is your role in this offense against you? Could you have headed things off before it was too late? Could you have made a greater effort to understand where he was coming from? There is always the kind of forgiveness that means you stop counting. Many of us carry a scorecard around that tally up every offense against us. Then we proudly show that record to everyone for their sympathy and admiration. Forgiveness means tearing up the scorecard. It is hard work to forgive. It cost Jesus his life and it will cost you plenty as well.

But what are the consequences? Jesus is pretty clear: *If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.* Matthew 6:14-15 The wonderful thing is that while this is true so, happily, is the opposite: if we forgive we will be forgiven. But this is not always sequential. In reality, I think most of us find ourselves forgiven and so we forgive. Unlike the man forgiven much, those who know how this was done in Christ leave the king's castle pumped up to forgive! And when we forgive a new cycle begins. Those we forgive feel more able to forgive and off they go. Oh, sin and Satan are always ready to break the cycle. But God's forgiveness will win out. Not even the death of the king can stop it!

Questions for Reflection: What seems to hold you back from forgiving others? What seems to help you forgive others more easily? How does knowing you are forgiven help you forgive?

Day Twenty One- As We Forgive Those Who Sin Against Us

Do you run your relationships by the motto, "Once bitten, twice shy?" That is, do you have the tendency to keep anyone at arm's length who ever hurt your feelings, talked about you behind your back, or didn't return your weed-wacker on time? (Got you with that one, didn't I?) You were starting to get friendly with the new

woman in accounting. One day you overheard her say something not too complimentary about your work to another employee. You forgive her, sort of, but the next time she offers to buy you coffee you decline. And the next time and the next time. One of your good friends doesn't return your repeated phone calls to get together for lunch. When he finally calls back and apologizes you say, "That's alright," and you let it go. But the dates he suggests just don't work out and you never get around to lunch. It seems like many of us make an effort to forgive the sins against us. We know that this is what Jesus wants so we put on a brave face, take the abuse, and try to let it go. Forgive and forget. But what we let go of is the relationship and what we forget is the person who committed it. We end up forgiving the sin but not the sinner! While this may a great defensive mechanism in nature it doesn't do much to build community. In theory and sometimes in practice, we could "forgive" everyone in our lives but end up alone.

This is not what Jesus had in mind. Do you remember the story of the son who prematurely asked for his half of his father's estate? He blew it all, realized he had made a huge mistake, and headed home looking, not for acceptance, but just a job. Big brother who has been responsible all the time sees him coming down the road and quickly closes his shades. He may be willing to forgive his prodigal brother but he doesn't want him back. in the family. But what about the Father? He sees the son, drops what he is doing, runs down the road like an idiot and embraces him. Is the Father going to forgive the sins of his son? Duh. But notice more importantly what he actually happens: *His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'* "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began. Luke 15:21-24 The son thinks his sin has cost him his relationship to the Father. But the Father's forgiveness restores that relationship and they are family again. That is real forgiveness. It is how God works with us and how we are to work with each other. Anything else is just forgetting, not forgiving.

Questions for Reflection: Have you ever found yourself putting up walls to protect yourself from others instead of reestablishing the relationship through forgiveness? What would it take to bring those walls down again?

Day Twenty Two-Bible Study on Forgiveness

REFRESH: Take a few minutes to write down on a piece of paper the sins of the past week. Turn them over to God in a prayer of confession. Then SHRED, TEAR, BURN OR FLUSH THEM DOWN THE TOILET! That is what God will be doing if your prayer was sincere.

READ: Matthew 18:15-22 (NLT)

"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. [16] But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. [17] If that person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. If the church decides you are right, but the other person won't accept it, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector. [18] I tell you this: Whatever you prohibit on earth is prohibited in heaven, and whatever you allow on earth is allowed in heaven.

[19] "I also tell you this: If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. [20] For where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them."

[21] Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

[22] "No!" Jesus replied, "seventy times seven!"

Day Twenty Three-Save Us from the Time of Trial

It may be one of the deepest held and most cherished convictions of Christians: "God helps those who help themselves." It has a robust, responsible, independent quality to it that men find irresistible. Women, too, are attracted to its no nonsense, anti-whining, roll-up-your-sleeves and get busy quality. Unfortunately it is wrong. In fact, although many think it is a bible verse, it is in fact a line right out of Greek mythology! Our God may help those who help themselves but He also helps those who do not. And there are many times it does not appear that God is helping those who help themselves while it appears those who are just sitting around are getting all the help. Jesus said it this way: *For your heavenly Father gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust, too. Matthew 5:45* "Well that's just great!" you think, "What's the point of trying then?" If you have to ask this question you may have forgotten that your success in life is not how well you do but how what you do glorifies God. He's got your back in eternity. But on this earth, He chooses to bless as he chooses to bless.

But the more damaging aspect of this myth is that it leads many people to this conclusion, "I can save myself by my own actions." After all, this phrase assumes that if you don't do something about your salvation, neither will God. What this means is that God will act-when you act. You, in effect, determine what God will do. And that makes you God. This is blasphemy in sugar coating. Under this kind of thinking, God must bless you when you have been a good boy, God must reward you because you're a perfect girl, and when you reach the pearly gates, God will simply have to let you in because of what you have done. Who needs the cross? Who needs a savior? Who needs Jesus? We help ourselves. Does this sound exaggerated? Take this test. Walk around the house and look at everything you have worked so hard for. Now say aloud, "I didn't earn this, I don't deserve any of this, and if it was all taken away I would not complain for one moment." (No fair starting with the dog your spouse wanted.) It's hard, isn't it?

If God only saved those who could save themselves heaven would be a ghost town. We are all on rooftops waiting for the helicopter to come before the flood carries us away. We are all babies slowly starving to death unless mom comes to feed us. We are all motorist stranded on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere hoping the tow truck is coming. We are helpless. Martin Luther's last words were in this vein, "We are all beggars." But those were not words of despair from his dying lips. They were whispered words of hope. We are all beggars that only God can save. We don't need a slogan to motivate us to be successful, responsible citizens. We need a savior who will meet us in whatever hole we've dug and lift us out. And that is just what he has done: *When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Romans 5:6* We've already received all the help we need. Now we live in the joy of that salvation!

Questions for Reflection: Were you taught or shown that "God only helps those who help themselves?" Did it ever cross your mind that this meant you were out of luck if you didn't have the strength to help yourself? What does it mean to gain your motivation for living a good life from the gratitude of being saved instead of trying to save ourselves?

Day Twenty Four- Save Us from the Time of Trial

I always had a problem with the traditional translation of this line which was, "Lead us not into temptation." It sounded like God was the one who would lead us into temptation instead of out of it! The bible clearly shows Satan as the one who tempts from offering Eve the fruit to giving Jesus the option to accomplish his mission without suffering. Certainly God could lead us into temptation: He can do whatever He wants. There may be some times where God doesn't remove temptations from our paths; there may be some times where God lets us resist them on our own. But it would be not be God's normal modus operandi to lead us into temptation. God knows we find enough on our own!

But what if we think about the kind of temptations that surface in a "time of trial?" In an actual court trial there is the temptation to lie. In a trial of wills between a parent and child there is the temptation to express anger verbally or physically. When we are put on the spot at work we are tempted to blame others. When we are trying to fit in at school we can be tempted by peer pressure to choose inappropriate behaviors. When we are cut off on the highway we can be very tempted to do something equally threatening. When we pray this prayer we are saying, "God-help me avoid situations where I may be tempted to choose the wrong response instead of the one you want."

This is brought to a deeper level when we realize that many who have prayed this over the years were brought to trial because of their faith. Jesus knew this would happen to his followers. He knew that they were weak and might very likely fail. In the time of trial around Jesus' death Judas succumbed to temptation for money or power and betrayed him. Peter, the rock, crumbled at his time of trial by denying that he even knew the Lord. Jesus tried to reassure his disciples then and us now: *But beware! For you will be handed over to the courts and beaten in the synagogues. And you must stand trial before governors and kings because you are my followers. This will be your opportunity to tell them about me—yes, to witness to the world. When you are arrested, don't worry about what to say in your defense, because you will be given the right words at the right time. [20] For it won't be you doing the talking—it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Matthew 10:17-20* Lord, save us from this. But if we must go to trial, let us hear your words, "I am with you always."

Questions for Reflection: Has there been a time recently when you faced a trial. Were you tempted during that time to choose a way you knew was not pleasing to God? What kind of support, encouragement, and strength might other give you in times of trial? What can you do now to prepare for the times of trial ahead?

Day Twenty Five-Deliver Us from Evil

"Why?" she whispers when the doctor tells her she has cancer. "Why?" he screams out when the sergeant comes to the door to inform him his daughter has died at war. "Why" we ask when hurricanes blow the tops off of lives, when waves crush the hopes of millions, when wars never end, when the innocent child dies at the hands of a sick person. "Why?" There may have been a time when people didn't ask that question as much. That was a time when people might answer, "It was God's will." While that answer turns our stomachs and sends many running from faith it is not wrong even if it is not completely correct. Either God can do anything, including stop evil, or God is not really God. That much is true; painful, but true. But wait, don't go away just yet.

If we can set that answer aside for a moment there are others that may help. Sometimes the answer to "why" is that some people choose evil and cause it for others. Why they make that choice is another matter but God seems to have allowed them to make such a choice no matter what it costs those around them. Maybe God lets them have their freedom because He also wants us to have the freedom to choose good. Sometimes the answer to "why" is that the collective effect of our sin in this world lets evil gain a foothold. In a world with superabundance for some and poverty for many it is the poor who suffer when the storms come. They shouldn't have to but unless we share what we have with others they will. Another answer to "why" is that the devil, knowing He lost the war on the cross, still picks his battles against God and God's people. "Pleased to meet you," he says in holocausts and famines and disasters, "hope you guess my name." The last answer may be the best but it is a non-answer. It was given to Job who asked God "why" when everything he had was taken away. God's reply is..."you cannot understand." You may not like that answer, but Job trusts God enough to say: *And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. Job 1:21*

Still not satisfied? None of these answers really help us come to grips with the "why?" of life. But that may be because we are not really looking for an answer. We are looking for something more important. We are

looking for reassurance that someone still cares, that we are not alone, that there is more to life than what we are going through. What is more devastating to a woman whose husband walks out on her; the loss of the relationship or the loss of the briefly held conviction that she was loveable? What hurts more, your house blowing down or finding out that no one cares about it? What is harder to take, losing a limb in the war or finding out that when you come home no parade is waiting? Behind all these "whys" is the longing to hear a word from God that He loves us, a sign that He is still there, and a promise that "everything will turn out alright." That word, that sign, that promise may be hard to discern each time we need it. We need each other to reassure, encourage and understand. And we need to remember that Jesus came to suffer under evil so that we will never doubt God's true heart of love for His world. When you ask "why" the next time, remember he asked "why" on the cross for you! And then read what Paul said: *And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. [39] Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39*

Questions for Reflection: When was the last time you asked, "Why?" How did God help you through that question? Were you satisfied or do you need to go back and reflect on it? Can others help you find faith and healing? Can you help them?

Day Twenty Six- For the Kingdom, the Power

At first you notice the lights go out. But it is daytime and that's not a big problem right now. Perhaps your computer shut down abruptly and you lost what you'd been working on. Remember why Jesus never loses a document? Jesus saves! Then you hear, or rather, don't hear, the hum of the air conditioner. It's kind of nice for about four and a half minutes until the sweat starts to form around your collar and drip down the back of your shirt. The phones would work but you bought a bunch of cordless ones that depend on a base that is now dark and silent. The stove top won't glow cherry red but that doesn't matter because you only have an electric can opener. And the freezer starts that slow process of defrosting you never quite got around to and now don't want to. Worst of all-no "Desperate Housewives" tonight. What will you do?

Who's got the power? Most of the time it appears that we do. (or at least FP&L does) But then the winds blow and the lines go down and we got nothing, nada, zip. One minute you are a young man mowing your own lawn, fixing your own car, and running a business. The next thing you know you have a lawn service, a mechanic and a gold watch. One minute you are a young mother able to gently but firmly keep control over your darling children. (Did I miss that minute?) The next thing you know your only semblance of control over your teenagers are the car keys. Who's got the power? We may get to act like we have a little for a little while in life, but we never really have the power. Funny thing is that we spend so much time trying to get power and keep it. It's like trying to hold water in your hands.

Jesus didn't look very powerful as he stood there before Pilate. Jesus had been arrested in the middle of the night, run all over Jerusalem, and beaten nearly to death. Pilate, not really wanting to condemn this fool, asked him questions but received no replies. In his anger Pilate screams, "You won't talk to me?" Pilate demanded. "Don't you realize that I have the power to release you or to crucify you?" Then Jesus said, "You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above." John 19:10 -11 Whose got the power? Maybe the one who died for others and rose to life again? Pilate doesn't have the power, neither do any power brokers, rulers, terrorists, abusers, or any of Satan's minions. There is no real power apart except the power of the love of God as seen through that sacrifice. Those who believe in that power trust God's word that "My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." And we join Paul who says, *...I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. 2 Cor. 12:9*

Questions for Reflection: What kind of “power plays” have you been caught up in lately? When’s the last time you fooled yourself into thinking you had the power? How does it feel to know that even our enemies have no power over us?

Day Twenty Seven- And the Glory are Yours

Self-help author Stephen Covey writes that we should, “Begin with the end in mind.” In business seminars executives are encouraged to think about what empire they want to end up with and proceed along that path. Parents are urged to think about what qualities they want their children to possess and instill those early and often. Engaged couples are counseled to imagine their relationship at their fiftieth anniversary and work toward that blissful time. How are Christians supposed to begin with the end in mind? Should we be aiming our lives toward that day when we hear the words? *Then the King will say to those on the right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Matthew 25:34* We certainly should want to hear them, but that is not the end we should have in mind.

In fact, the people that hear those words of welcome seem rather befuddled. In this story, God apparently sorts out the “sheep” and the “goats” by their kind or neglectful actions in life. The “bad” goats seemed shocked by the judgment but that is not surprising. People who rarely lift a finger to help another in need are amazingly able still think of themselves as good. (I’ve never met a goat who admitted he or she was baaad) What is interesting here is that the sheep are surprised too! They didn’t even know that they were doing the kind of things that the Father was looking for. What were they, just really nice people who did nice things and got lucky in the end? Some say yes and say that this opens the door of heaven to non-Christians. But I think it was not the actions that got them the commendation but the attitude.

I think these sheep are Christians who know that God loves them already and that his Son has paid the price for their eternal life. In gratefulness they simply love God with all of their heart and mind and soul and strength. When someone is thirsty they give them something to drink for God’s sake not for the sake of a reward. When someone is in prison they go there for God’s sake not for the sake of reward. And when someone says to them, “Hey, you are really great for all the good things that you do,” they simply smile and say, “Thanks. But give God the credit.” Johann Sebastian Bach, a simple Christian man with an unmatched musical gift, sought no praise in his lifetime. He signed all of his works, “To God be the glory.” And that is the end we should have in mind as we begin. We shouldn’t live a certain way to get earthly rewards or heavenly jewels. We must live in such a way that God will get the glory.

Questions for Reflection: How does this change your motivation for doing good things? If the end for you is to have lived a life that glorifies God, what does that mean for you right now? How would you like your life to give God glory years from now?

Day Twenty Eight- Now and Forever. Amen

It takes 30 seconds to say the Lord’s Prayer. It has taken you about 15 minutes to read each of these daily reflections. If you were in a group you did bible study for a little over an hour. And we are now at just about a month on this series. Right now it may seem like all this adds up to a lot of time. But this is not even

the blink of an eye in your eternity. In fact, your whole life up to now is less than one tick of the clock and not even a tock. In Psalms its say, *Our days on earth are like grass; like wildflowers, we bloom and die. Psalm 103:15* Since our hours, days and weeks seem so short we are so filled with now that it can be hard to think about forever. Now and Forever. Forever and Now. This is both the marvelous experience of time and a tremendous opportunity for people who pray this prayer. We are to live now and forever to give honor to the one who is both Now and Forever: *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." Rev. 22:13*

We must live now. Jesus said, *So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today. Matthew 6:34* He was certainly a great example of living now. Although he knew the cross awaited him, he packed each moment full with praise and prayer, teaching and healing, loving and chiding, blessing and challenging. I am sure that, at some point, his human body just had to shut him down from time to time as his spirit yearned to glorify God on earth with every second. He is our model and example. Let no rose pass by un-smelled, no child's head un-patted, no smile un-retuned, no need un-met. You only go around once in life. Love and live each moment.

But we will live forever. We know the gift and its promise: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16* That means we will always have heaven on our minds. We are not bound to earthy time or the stress, strain and limits it brings. No trial is too long for us because we will have eternity. No task is too impossible for those who know where they will end up. No job is too dangerous for those who know the one who holds them forever in His hands. And it can serve to focus us on what is truly important. So you have a few pounds to get rid of. What will that matter in heaven? Is St. Peter going to say, "You really showed a lot of love on earth but what about those love handles?" So you don't make that next promotion at work. Is God going to stop you on the way up Jacob's ladder for that? Live in the moment but live for eternity. And may the God of now and forever bless us now and forever. Amen

Questions for Reflection: What is one worry about the present that you need to let go of? Is heaven on your mind very much? How will the "forever" perspective change your view of "now?"

Day Twenty Nine- Being Care-Full but Not Careful

I still have the first guitar I ever bought. I can remember when I worked a whole summer at camp to earn the \$175 I needed to buy it. I knew everything about that guitar-spruce top, sealed tuners, full neck stabilizer... I have newer guitars. The latest one is an electric guitar with an on board synthesizer that can make it sound like a Gibson Les Paul, a '57 Strat, a banjo and a sitar! But the one thing it can't sound like is my first guitar. A friend recently lent me a Martin guitar that is one of the most beautiful guitars I have ever played. My fingers can glide across the strings and frets with no effort at all. But it just isn't as beautiful as my old guitar. I saw a concert last week where the singer played a gorgeous sounding Taylor guitar I could have died for. Looking at the guitar catalog I would at least have to give up my right arm to buy it! But it just wouldn't be as valuable to me as my old guitar.

This Lord's Prayer is like my old guitar. It is practically the first prayer any of us learn so it should seem childish. We say it every day or at least every week. so it should be worn out by now. There are longer prayers, more poetic prayers, and perhaps more favorite prayers ("Be Present at Our Table Lord" to the tune of the Addams Family Theme Song). But, there is no better prayer than this one. Why? He gave it to us! The more we say it the more we do what Jesus asked us to do. The more we believe it the closer we are to trusting Him. The more we understand it the more care-full we will be about it. When I say that prayer, it's like picking up that old guitar and playing a new song every time!

Were you careful this month? Did you keep your defenses up? Did you successfully avoid being changed in some small or big ways? I hope not! I know that writing these reflections changed me! I

approached each day's topic with no preconceived outline. I often crafted whole paragraphs that touched me deeply and didn't work at all! Then there were times my fingers couldn't keep up with my heart (or my spell check-please forgive my trespasses on spelling and grammar). As I wrote I could feel the spirits of Jesus, Paul, the psalmists, Martin Luther and countless other Sunday school teachers, professors, teachers and my wife (I'm done, honey) Oh yeah, and I can't forget my parents (hi, mom and dad). In the end I know I learned more than I taught and was changed more than my words will cause any change in the reader.

If you have changed I am sure it is for the better! That is the way it works with prayer. Maybe you will be a little more comfortable with thinking of God as your daddy, more committed to putting God's will first, better able to see bread as something given to share, sin as something more than sins, and living your life for his glory. I'm not sure what this prayer and the reflection on it has done to you but I am certain that it is not over yet. Add this prayer to your morning drive or your evening nightcap. Teach it to your children (especially the new translation). And when it comes time to say it next Sunday in worship-pray it with care!

Questions for Reflection: Look back over the month? What line of the Lord's Prayer means more to you now than it did? What issues have been brought up that you want to explore further? What will change about your prayer life? What will you be reading or studying next?

Day Thirty-Bible Study on Praying from the Heart

REFRESH: Take a deep breath and let it out! You made it! Now try this exercise:

Kneel on the floor and extend your body forward as you are comfortable and pray

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

Lift your arms in the air from a kneeling position and pray:

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Hug your arms around your stomach and prayer:

Give us today our daily bread.

Stand up slowly but keep your head down and palms up and pray:

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Put hands out as if to say stop and pray:

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

Lift your hands and eyes up and pray:

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

READ: Luke 18:9-14 (NLT)

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great self-confidence and scorned everyone else: [10] "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a dishonest tax collector. [11] The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don't sin, I don't commit adultery, [12] I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'

[13] "But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' [14] I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored."

REFLECT:

1. What is it about having "great self-confidence" that can get you in trouble with prayer?
2. When is the last time you went to the church just to pray for awhile? Is that something that you would like to do? Are the others that would pray with you?

