



# WHAT MATTERS?

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## ***What Matters? ~ Week Two***

***Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.***

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17)*

**Day One:** Restoration—Returned to our original identity and purpose.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ has reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)*

Restoration is serious business. I recently found a website of a French craftsman, who specializes in restoring antique furniture and other heirlooms. The website states, “Jean-Jacques Bernard takes great pride in his history of meeting and exceeding his client’s expectations, while maintaining the integrity of the original woodwork.” The words, “while maintaining the integrity of the original woodwork” caught my eye. This emphasis is so important to Mr. Bernard that he personally subscribes to the “French Charter of Restoration for Antique Furniture.” The charter’s objectives state,

- Each article has a separate existence and must be considered in its entirety.
- It has a history, its original shape, the materials it is made of and information about the technology used to manufacture it.
- The responsibility of the restorer [are several]: to protect the article, restore it to its true form, help understand it and therefore ascertain that its aesthetical and historical tenor survive.

Under the rules that govern the restorer’s relationship with the article we read:

- Any intervention means a modification of the article. The restorer must abide by the physical, historical, and aesthetical entirety of the article on which he works.
- It is contrary to the ethics of restoration to modify or hide the true reality of an article.

In short, Jean-Jacques Bernard’s craft as a “restorer” requires (1) that he appreciate each article as unique, a one of a kind, (2) that he know ‘ the article by learning everything he can about it, and (3) that he bring the article back to the original design and purpose of its creator. In doing those things he will bring great joy to the present owner.

The website goes on to tell about a 150 year old clock, a family heirloom of incredible value. It fell from the wall one evening and was smashed to pieces. The owner swept all of the broken pieces that he could find into a bag and brought them to Jean-Jacques in hopes that he might be able to salvage any of it. A few weeks later he returned to Jean-Jacques' shop to find the heirloom completely restored and in perfect running order. He exclaimed, "It's incredible! You're a magician!"

King David found great joy and comfort in the "magic touch" of God on his own life: "The Lord is my shepherd . . . He restores my soul." He understood that God had sought him out when he was lost and restored his broken soul to be whole once again. Being a shepherd, David also knew that it was impossible to restore himself. So many times he had gone searching after lost sheep only to find them in completely helpless situations. It was up to him alone to save the young lamb's life.

Likewise with you and me. It's completely impossible for us to restore ourselves to what God originally intended us to be. Try as long and as hard as we might, it's not going to happen. For us to be restored to what we were meant to be, we must be restored to our God, since our life and purpose are wrapped up in Him. Thus the prophet's prayer, "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!"

St. Paul tells us, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ has reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."* Jesus made us new again—that is, He gave us back ourselves—by bringing us back to Himself. He took our lives and purpose, broken by sin into a million pieces, and made them new again in Himself. Like Jean-Jacques Bernard, Jesus' appreciates each of us as unique. He knows us perfectly and completely, and is determined that everything He intended for us to be and do will not be lost. His healing touch restores each of us to the original design and purpose of why He made us. In so doing He brings great joy to the owner—God Himself.

An essential part of that "wholeness" is that we are in "perfect running order," that is, we are back in the service of our Lord. Our service is not one of hanging on a wall in our Father's house, keeping perfect time. Rather, He has given us the ministry of restoring others just as we've been restored. He knows that such work will give as much joy to us as it does to Him.

**Prayer:** Lord God, You have redeemed and restored me. May I reflect Your handiwork in my life. Amen.

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**Day Two:** Restoration—Our Father’s statement of value

*Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost. (Luke 15:6)*

Begin this devotion by reading Luke 15:1-10. Two things stand out in these stories that tell us how valuable the “lost” items are to the ones who lost them: Diligence and Joy. Jesus cast the stories from the vantage point, “Which of you owning . . .” to emphasize that something or someone is never simply lost. They are always lost to someone else who cares very deeply for them.

The owner of one hundred sheep was so concerned about the one lamb that had strayed that nothing else seemed to matter to him. He left the other ninety-nine in order to recover the one lost. At that point, the lost lamb was more valuable to him than all the other ones combined.

Likewise, the woman who lost one of her silver coins committed herself fully to the search. Jesus said that she lit a lamp, swept the house, and sought *diligently* until she found it. That’s simply to say, nothing else mattered. She swept every nook and cranny, investing every waking moment in the search. She didn’t stop searching until she found it. It’s possible that she (and her poor husband) missed out on breakfast, lunch, and supper that day, and perhaps a good night’s sleep as well. None of that mattered to her—only the coin. That coin was valued!

When each of the seekers found what they had lost they could not contain their joy. They had to call their friends and neighbors in order to celebrate. Obviously, the neighbors knew how much each of those lost possessions meant to the owners. Their recovery was worth a party. “So,” Jesus tells us, “*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.*” Our restoration is a big thing to God. He made searching for us his highest priority and didn’t quit until He found us. Nothing else mattered! Because of His diligence each of us has been restored to Him. Here we are not talking about sheep, coins, or other property. We are talking about you and me as *God’s children*. Can there be anything more distressing than a child who is lost? Is there anything that brings greater joy to a parent, then to have His child finally found? He has us back safe and sound. Nothing else matters.

**Prayer:** Lord God, We thank You for seeking us when we were lost. As You continue to seek the lost use us in Your search. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

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**Day Three:** Restoration was a choice. God didn't have to.

*But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

Many of us might still remember the Greek story about Daedalus and his lost son, Icarus. As is often the habit of young men, Icarus thought his father's advice about flying too high was a bit restrictive, so headed straight for the sun and to certain death. What tragedy! Icarus perished, and Daedalus bore the grief of his son's foolish decision for the rest of his life.

For those of us who have raised an Icarus, or been one ourselves, we connect immediately and deeply with the plight of Daedalus. There may come a time in our relationship with our children when we must watch them make choices that will ultimately bring them to ruin. To stop them would be to control them and in so doing turn them from real children into puppets made of wood. Depriving them of their choice to reject love's wisdom and embrace a fool's pride accomplishes very little. We may control their choices; we don't control their hearts. Only they do that.

So what's a parent to do? Simply choose to "outlove" them. That's what God did and continues to do with us. When looking back on my Icarus years what stands out is not so much the abundance of my foolishness, but the super abundance of God's love for me. St. Paul once wrote, "*But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Romans 5:20).*" The more I rebelled from our heavenly Father—the more I pushed Him away—the more He chose to love me. At that point love really is a choice. In the face of my ungodly self-centeredness and personal rebellion against our own loving Father, He chose to "outlove" me. That is, He chose to love me more than I could ever possibly hate or hurt Him. He chose to "outlove" you, too.

Jesus once said, "*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). That makes sense to us. We might be willing to sacrifice ourselves for someone who truly matters to us and to whom we truly matter. We'd give up our life for one of our children. We might even be willing to sacrifice ourselves for someone of noble value, or for a noble cause. But we were none of these things. As fallen and broken people, we had no personal connection with God. We cared nothing about Him, caring only about ourselves. That's what it means to be a sinner. In

fact, St. Paul tells us that we were actually God's enemies when He chose to restore us to Himself. That means that we were not looking for Him and, as lost as we were, we were not looking to be found.

So, why all this bother on God's part? The answer is simply, He wanted to. He chose to "outlove" us and won't change His mind. Despite our lack of love and respect for Him, despite our contempt of His will in our lives, and despite our very cruel and self-centered dismissal of all that He gives and does for us every day, He chose not to reject us or abandon us to our own devices. Instead, He chose to do all within His power to "outlove" our selfish selves, and in doing so, restore us to our true selves—His beloved children.

When we say, "all within His power and love" we mean just that "All." He "outloved" Himself on the cross in order to end this madness on our part and to show us, finally, how much we matter to Him. It was the only way that He could tear down (or maybe melt down) the wall of hostility that we constructed between ourselves and Him. With the wall gone we are free once again to belong to Him and be the people He made us to be.

Can we choose to walk and ignore this incredible love? Absolutely. Can we choose to reject what He has done for us and continue to go our "Icarus" ways? For sure. But one thing we cannot do, we cannot force God to change His mind about loving us with all of His heart, soul, mind, and strength. That remains His choice.

**Prayer:** Lord God, we thank You for choosing to out love us restoring us to our true selves. Amen.

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**Day Four:** God's cost, the Cross

*For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

Crosses and the torture of hanging on them bore a very different weight in the minds of those to whom Jesus first spoke these words, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24). Jesus’ disciples had seen many crosses dotting the highways and byways. Undoubtedly they had pushed past more than one procession of Roman soldiers leading a cross laden criminal to his execution. No insulation of time or civilization protected His disciples from the raw connections of men bearing crosses. Crosses had a single purpose—executing criminals. They didn’t simple torture their victims; they killed them.

Bearing our cross, then, is not so much about *accepting our suffering* in this life as it is *owning our sin* and its eternal consequence. It’s at this point we begin to consider the cost of discipleship. More than that we begin to grasp the price Jesus paid to restore us to Himself. If bearing my cross is, essentially, owning my sin, then, weigh what Jesus did when He went to the cross in your and my place. “*For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21). In choosing to bear our cross, He chose to own our sin, all of it.

Jesus once compared Hell, the place of the lost, to a debtor’s prison. In those days people went to prison for failure to pay their debts. The economics were simple: Each day in prison worked off a portion of the debt. Pay the debt, gain your freedom. So why does Hell last forever? Answer, the debt of our sin is that large.

Our debt, that’s what our Lord was addressing on the cross. Jesus’ cross was Rome’s judgment against evil doers; it was also God’s. “*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.*” Not only did our Lord die a criminal, He was forsaken by His Father. From the depths of hell He cried out, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” Jesus knew that the cross meant complete and eternal separation from His Father. And he went there anyway.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews notes, “*that for the joy that was set*

*before Him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising its shame” (Hebrews 12:2).* His joy stemmed from the fact that you and I would not have to endure the cross. We would not have to stay in hell’s prison until our debt was paid. He paid it in full. The cost was His life; His reward, our restoration.

**Prayer:** Father, Your love is beyond comprehension to make Your Son be and bear our sin, so we may be righteous. Amen.

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**Day Five:** Restored relationships, Getting unstuck

*We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4)*

The Gospel accounts of the first Easter divide into two sets of activities. The first set focuses on Jesus’ disciples faithfully traveling to our Lord’s tomb where they expected to find His still, lifeless body. Mary Magdalene and other women arrived there very early that morning only to find the tomb empty. Upon hearing the women’s report, Peter and John made a hasty visit to the tomb and even went inside to examine its contents. Later that morning Mary Magdalene returned to search for His missing body.

We really can’t blame them for going to His tomb. That’s where their Lord had been laid to rest. It was the last place they had seen Him, so it became their point of focus. The real point, however, was that He wasn’t there any longer. He had risen. Jesus had finished His business with death and had moved on. In order for the disciples to find Him they, too, had to move on from the place of the dead to find Him elsewhere. The problem is, they couldn’t. They were stuck.

That’s where we meet the second set of Easter activities. Jesus went looking for His disciples at their “tombs,” that is, where life had stopped for them. He personally sought each of them—some on the road, some in the upper room, one back at the tomb, another on the seashore. Each was stuck in his or her own tomb. Mary was frozen by inconsolable grief; Thomas by overwhelming doubt. Peter was stuck in his guilt for denying his Lord when Jesus needed him most. The rest were immobilized by fear.

He found each “dead” disciple and with a word brought each back to life. “Mary,” he said, and her grief turned to joy. He told Thomas, “Do not be faithless, but believe,” and doubt evaporated. Hearts burned within confused disciples as the Lord open the Word and their minds to understand it. Peter’s guilt lifted as his Lord spoke with him by the sea.

What makes life stop for us? What losses get us stuck and discourage us from living the lives and doing the work the Lord entrusts to us? Perhaps circumstances outside of our control forced us to give up important hopes or dreams. Or, our sinfulness persuaded us to surrender our integrity or purity

in a moment of temptation. Maybe our loss is a broken relationship or a loved one's passing. Those losses can trap us like a personal tomb. Our lives stop at that place and can go no further.

It's in these dark places that our resurrected Lord comes looking for us. There He speaks a Word to us that raises us up and gives us back our lives and ministries. "*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*" He asks us gently. And by "the living" He is referring to you and me as much as to Himself. "These tombs are not our place anymore. I was finished with them when I rose from the dead and you are finished with them too. You were raised with Me in your baptism. From this day forward you and I live on the outside of the tomb."

Living on the outside is the business of our faith, the confidence that is ours in our resurrected Lord. It means that we do not let lost hopes or dreams rob us of pursuing new hopes and dreams. It means that we cling to God's life giving Word of forgiveness instead of our past sins, and we move on in His grace. We live the reality, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.*" It means that we apply completely God's life giving Word of forgiveness to relationships that have been broken by sin, thus giving the opportunity to rebuild them in Christ. It means that the loss of our loved ones who died in the Lord is temporary. We remember the angels' words, "Why do look for the living among the dead?"

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, enlighten our dark places and free us from our self made tombs so we receive back our lives and ministries. Amen.

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**Day Six:** Restored purpose, Beyond forgiveness

*“Feed my lambs.” (John 21:15)*

One of the Easer stories begins with Peter telling the other disciples, “I’m going fishing.” There was a lot more to his words than simply an announcement of his evening plans. He was announcing his decision to return to the business he had been in when Jesus first called him to be a disciple. He had failed miserably at the discipleship job, so was going back to something that he thought he could manage. “I quit. I have to.” Peter concluded. I failed Him when He needed me most. He called me “the rock” and I crumbled like a sandcastle. I am no longer worthy to be called His disciple. Peter was stuck in his sin and its guilt.

As with other disciples, Jesus came looking for him. He found him on the sea having fished and struggled all night. He needed to be raised up and restored. So Jesus and Peter went for a walk along the shore. Three times Jesus asked him a question, “Simon, do you love me more than these?” The words pierced Peter’s heart like a dagger. His thoughts returned to the upper room where he promised the Lord that even if all the other disciples abandoned him, he would stay. Using Jesus’ standard for love, he vowed, “Even if I have to die, I will not leave you.” There’s no greater love than that.

But Peter hadn’t loved Jesus more than the others. He hadn’t loved Jesus at all. He knew that and it was tearing him apart. He was truly and deeply grieved. Only Jesus’ word of forgiveness would remove his guilt and heal his soul.

Jesus’ words of forgiveness are profound. He said simply, “Feed my lambs.” By them he told Peter, “Simon, you are still my disciple. You are not only restored to me. You are restored to Me and the man I called you to be the first time we met. Friend, we have a world to save; let’s get to it.” It was not enough for Jesus only to restore Peter to a relationship with him as brother. Jesus wanted Peter to experience the fullness of his grace by including him in His Father’s plan to restore all creation.

There can be no greater way to tell someone that you forgive them after they have failed to do what they promised, then, to put them back to work. And that’s what Jesus does.

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, may Your Word remove my guilt, heal my soul, and restore me to serve You. Amen.

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**Day Seven: Trust Restored**

*But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Timothy 1:12)*

Does God trust you?

That's probably a question we do not ask ourselves very often. But it's one that's very important. Does God trust us? We know that He loves us. The Gospel itself begins with that fact: God so loved the world . . . God most certainly loves us, but does He trust us?

The question is very important in understanding our relationship with God, or better, His relationship with us. The entire story of God's relationship with us turns on the fact that God not only loves us, He trusts us. When we speak of God's love we picture ourselves as the object of His affection. God loves us and we receive His love with gratitude. When we speak of God's trust, however, it changes the picture slightly but significantly. Not only does He trust us, He entrusts to us those people and things that are precious to Him.

For example I love my children very much. They have been the object of my devotion and affection from the moment they were conceived. They know that I love them; that I would give them anything and everything that they truly need even at the point of personal sacrifice. While they depend on my love to grow up and grow strong in their own ability to love, at some point in their lives they also need to know that I trust them. How pleased my children were when each got behind the steering wheel of the family car for the first time. Even though they had a lot to learn about driving, they knew that I had confidence in them being able to drive and do it safely. They were even more pleased when they got their driver's licenses and were allowed to take the family car out on their own. They knew that I *trusted* them, because I *entrusted* into their care something very valuable to me. Having my trust as well as my love played a large role in them growing to mature adulthood.

Now let's say that one of my children did something irresponsible with my car and as a result smashed it up pretty good. I wouldn't stop loving him. In fact, I would run to his aid and protection. But would I still trust him? That is, would I entrust to him my car to use again?

The question, “Does God trust you?” is not only very important, it is also very difficult for us to answer, especially when we consider the many times we break trust with God. We sin daily and greatly. Each sin betrays the trust that God places in us. We trace that betrayal all the way back to our first parents, Adam and Eve. Consider the trust God placed in them when He entrusted His creation to them to rule and serve it in His behalf. Consider what their personal rebellion against God did to that trust. They chose to misuse and discard that which God had entrusted to them. Inheriting their sinful nature, we, too, prove ourselves untrustworthy of the treasures God has entrusted to our care, be they spouse, family, friends, neighbors, vocation. You fill in the blank.

Thanks be to God, however, that His grace triumphs over our sin. God’s grace not only moved Him to make us His own once again but it moves Him to continue trusting us with His treasures. As we daily awaken to our vocations as spouse or parent, sibling or friend, boss or worker, we do so as forgiven children of God, trusted by Him to serve in His stead and with His promises. His choosing to continue “entrusting” these treasures to us speaks a holy absolution as powerful as His words, “I forgive you for my Son’s sake.”

It also gives us courage to do what He has entrusted to us to do. More often than not we doubt ourselves and our ability to follow through on what God has assigned to our care. We probably have good reason, especially when we look at our long list of failures in the past. But God asks us not to base our confidence, or lack thereof, on our failures but on Him alone. Can we learn to be confident of His trust in us when we are unable to trust ourselves? Furthermore, He stands alongside us with the grace needed to honor the trust He has placed in us. He makes it His responsibility to enable us to live and serve according to His heart’s desire. Thus St. Paul can look back at his own life and ministry and confess with all confidence, *“I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”*

So, does God trust you? How we answer that question speaks volumes about our understanding and confidence in the grace of our loving God and what He has made us to be in His Son.

**Prayer:** Lord God, we value Your love and treasure Your trust. As You forgive our faithless moments may we be found trustworthy. Amen.