



WHAT MATTERS?

Written by Rev. Dr. Robert Newton,
former President of the LCMS California-Nevada-Hawaii District

What Matters?

Week Six ~Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Our theme verse this week suggests that living the abundant life God has given to us is difficult. Like running a marathon, it demands patience, perseverance, and above all faith. It also recognizes that there are things in our lives that weigh us down, that even cause us to stumble in our desire and ability to live lives that reflect who we are in Christ and what he has made us to be in this world. Stuff gets in the way. This week, we need to explore a number of the sinful thoughts and behaviors that get in the way of our ability to trust our loving God above everything else and live His abundant life for others. While our exploration is a bit of a downer—our sin—the ultimate goal is not to focus on ourselves but on our Lord Jesus Christ for the remedy. For that to happen, we will use God’s Word to shine its light on our souls. Like a spiritual x-ray machine His Word searches our souls to identify what’s not working right with the intention of applying the healing of His forgiveness and the power of His grace.

What Matters?

Week Six ~ *Stuff gets in the way*

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day One: It’s all about me.

“Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.” (John 8:34-36)

Jesus once told the people who had come to believe in Him, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”* His words offended them. “We’re Abraham’s children”, they retorted, “we’ve never been slaves to anyone.” They seemed to have forgotten four hundred years of slavery in Egypt and the several years of their captivity in Babylon. In both cases God personally came to their rescue and set them free to be His own people. More than that, they missed Jesus’ point. He wasn’t talking about being slaves to other people and needing to be set free from them. The slavery to which he referred was slavery to our own selves. Jesus calls it being *“a slave to sin.”*

How is it possible to be a slave to my own self? It’s simple. I’m a slave to me, when I am the single focus of me. God designed you and me to live lives that reflect Him, that invest themselves primarily in other people. When I put myself ahead of others, that is, use them to serve my own wants, needs, or pleasures, I become a slave to myself. Such self-centeredness is driven by the slavish fear, “If I do not take care of ‘number one,’ who will?” It’s believing the lie that Satan told our first parents in the Garden of Eden, “You’re in this thing alone. Neither God, nor anyone else really cares about you. If you don’t put yourself first you will lose big time.” That fear, even though it’s built on a lie, has haunted all of us since the Garden, and it drives us to make choices that serve ourselves regardless of whom we may hurt in the process. That’s slavery!

It’s also self-consuming. All of us are all too familiar with cancer. Cancer cells are completely self-centered; their DNA is all twisted up. Consequently, cancer cells cannot regulate themselves, nor can they respect the boundaries of other healthy cells. They simply consume everything around them until there’s nothing left. In the end they even consume themselves. The end is death. So it is with slavish preoccupation with self. It feeds an insecurity

that grows with each bite of self-centeredness. That's why St. Paul warns us that being slaves of sin will only lead to death (Romans 6).

Jesus put his finger on our dilemma, our slavish preoccupation with self. He also offered a cure: Himself. *"So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed."* Jesus dealt firmly and finally with the power of sin by dying on the cross. St. Paul tells us, *"And you who were dead in your trespasses . . . God made alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him"* (Colossians 2:13-15).

Jesus set us free by cancelling the debt of our sins, thus freeing us from their legal obligations. Satan uses these legal obligations to fill our hearts and minds with the guilt and fear that drive our insecurities. He replaced our insecurities with His peace. He also set us free by disarming Satan and his minions who use our sins to keep us enslaved. Jesus literally "stripped" Satan of his legalistic "weapons", rendering him powerless to enslave us anymore. His slavish control over our lives ended at the cross. In our baptisms, you and I joined our Lord Jesus on His cross, and died with Him there. Regarding our baptisms, St. Paul tells us, *"We know that our old self was crucified with [Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin"* (Romans 6:6). This "old self"—that part of each of us that's totally consumed with itself—has been crucified. It, like Satan does not have the power to enslave us anymore, unless we choose to let it.

As God's children, we actually have choices here. We choose to live in the reality that Christ has set us free from sins' chains or we continue to let Satan's hollow lies enslave our hearts and minds. Paul reminds us that we have *"put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator"* (Colossians 3:9-10). Literally we have "stripped" ourselves of our "old self," in the same way that God "stripped" Satan of his power on the cross and have "clothed" ourselves with a "new self" made in the image of our heavenly Father. This "new self" belongs to God and lives the abundant life that we have been talking about in these devotions. We really are new creatures in Christ. Paul tells us that our "new self" is being renewed or "restored" in knowledge, that is, God's truth, rather than Satan's lies. This restoration continues to grow in us, day after day, as we learn to see ourselves as the new people Jesus freed us to be and, at the same time, learn to turn a deaf ear, or better yet, a dead ear to Satan's enslaving lies. The fact

of the matter is simple and sure: We are no longer slaves to wretched self-centeredness unless we choose to be; Jesus set us free.

For personal reflection: All of us have fears or concerns that cause us to focus on ourselves at the expense of others around us. At the same time, we know that Jesus set us free from such slavish insecurities. What fears and concerns cause you to focus on yourself at others expense? How can you use your freedom in Christ to address your fears and concerns?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You have set us free from the bondage to sin in ourselves. Let us use our freedom to provide for others to live freely in You. Amen.

Week Six ~ Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Two: My comfort zone.

“Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves lest we be dispersed over the face of the earth.” (Genesis 11:4)

Read Genesis 11:1-9. It’s Moses’ account of the “Tower of Babel.” The story points out our basic insecurities as sinful human beings and our preoccupation with building “comfort zones” around ourselves for protection.

After the great flood that destroyed all the inhabitants of the earth except for Noah and his family, God began once again to restore His creation.

Repeating the same words he first spoke to Adam and Eve, the Lord told Noah and family to *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” (Genesis 9:1)*. You can hear in His words the divine call to live an abundant life. To do that Noah’s descendants needed to leave the comforts of the ark and their own company and venture out into the world. They did what God asked them to do, at least for a few generations. Eventually, however, they said, “No more. The more we “scatter” the more vulnerable we become. Let’s gather in this place, build a city and settle down.”

The city they designed had two important features: walls and a tower. The walls protected them from wild animals and unfriendly people. The tower intended to reach into the heavens, both to challenge the sovereignty of God, and to provide a perch from which to spot any approaching danger threats while they were still a long way off. With a tower to predict impending danger and walls to protect them when it arrived, Noah’s descendants felt secure. They had created a comfort zone, a place in which they could control their environment. The problem, however, is that they sacrificed fruitfulness for security.

Like the Babel folk, we too feel the need to control everything in our lives, present and future, in order to maintain a “comfort zone”—a place where we feel less anxious. So we tend to build walls to protect ourselves against what we perceive as threats—other people, needed change, investing ourselves for Christ, etc. We also build various “towers” in the hope of predicting the threats in our future so that we can avoid them. The need for protection and prediction are not wrong in themselves. We live in a broken world. But when these needs become preoccupations like “The Tower of Babel” they

impede our ability to live fruitful lives for others. They work against the “Trust” we need in order to make a godly difference in others’ lives. Like a seed locked in its “husk” we remain insulated from the pain and brokenness of this world and at the same time unable to “produce the abundant fruit” of restored lives.

In response to the rebellious actions of the inhabitants of Babel, the Lord called to Abraham: *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Genesis 12:1-3). In contrast to the Babel folk’s penchant to guarantee themselves security and blessing by building a walled city, God promised those blessings and more to Abraham in leaving his “city” behind. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews notes, *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God”* (Hebrews 11:8-10).

God called Abraham to exchange the protection of his walled city for a tent. A tent can’t match a brick wall for stopping an enemy’s arrows. God called him to give up a humanly secure home for a life of wandering as a foreigner in a land that would become his inheritance at some unknown date in the future. The protection and prediction he needed in order to feel secure were not his to create or maintain. They would come from God alone, if they were to come at all. They were built completely on the promises the Lord made him when He called Abraham to join Him in the Family Business. Abraham could experience the abundant life the Lord promised by following Him in faith, or cling to manmade securities at the expense of God’s blessings. You and I are the blessed result of the fact that Abraham believed God’s Word and followed.

Scripture calls us “children of Abraham” and as such are heirs of the same promises that God made him. Like Abraham we’ve been called to live by God’s promises, lives of faith set in stark contrast to those who commit themselves to building for themselves manmade securities. We’ve seen in recent years just how secure these human “comfort zones” have proven to be. Like castles made of sand, they can’t stand up against the forces of this

broken world. Abraham's faith in God's promises rather than man's accomplishments proved wise. The Lord calls us to such wisdom and to follow his example.

For personal reflection: What are the "comfort zones" in your own life that compete with your ability to live an abundant life? How are they working for you? What promises has God made that offer the security you need?

Prayer: Lord God Almighty, You have called us to give up the illusion of control, and follow You. Help us make a difference in this world until the day we enter the heavenly promised land. Amen.

Week Six ~ Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Three: Walking by sight, not by faith

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14)

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” God is the One who asked the question. He asked it of His good friend Abraham. You see, Abraham and Sarah were stuck. They’d left their home and family, their planned future and security at God’s request, to venture off to a strange and hostile country. They lived in a tent, wandering from place to place, armed only with faith in what the Lord had promised them—a name, a family, and an inheritance. Twenty-five years later they were still venturing with no name, family, or inheritance in sight. Abraham at nearly 100 years old and Sarah at 90 and still childless, they were running out of time. Promises might be promises, but biology is biology. These weren’t in sync and that’s what got them stuck.

Please understand, Abraham and Sarah trusted God with all their hearts. They weren’t struggling with which God they would serve or whose will they would follow. God’s will was their will, His work their work. They joyfully followed God’s lead, joining Him in His Business of restoring the world. They understood that they were to have a son and that their descendant would bless all the nations of the earth. They knew God would keep His promises to them and to the world; they just didn’t know how. So they decided to help Him out by taking matters into their own hands. They would accomplish God’s work their way. If they could “see” that is, *control* the various factors that needed to go into the process of bearing the promised son, they could guarantee the outcome. That’s what it means to “walk by sight and not by faith.”

Sarah figured that they could improve the odds for God keeping His promise if they cut their liabilities in half. Instead of two old people trying to have a baby, what if one old person tried to have one using a younger partner. The plan made sense to Abraham so they proceeded. Abraham slept with Hagar; Ishmael was conceived. Abraham and Sarah had their promised son. God’s work was accomplished. Almost.

How often do we try to accomplish God’s work our way? Like Abraham and Sarah, we succeed, almost. Like diligent Marthas, in our desire to serve the Lord, we become *“anxious and troubled about many things” (Luke*

10:41). What's worse, in our more anxious moments we are tempted to abandon or adjust the promises of God by taking His matters into our own hands. By so doing, we effectively "shorten the hand" of God, at least as He would want to work in and through our own lives.

J. Hudson Taylor, the legendary 19th Century missionary to China once wrote, "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply." Following God requires more than desiring to do His will; it also requires doing it His way. God's will and work always require more of us than we can manage on our own. His plans and designs are not those of a human being, even a super human being. Being divine, they lie beyond the realm of human capacity. Doing God's work is not impossible. It's just humanly impossible. It takes God's ways to accomplish God's Business. That's what He wanted to teach Abraham and Sarah. He intended for them to learn to look with the eyes of faith to God to supply what was needed to do what He was asking of them. In short, to "*walk by faith, not by sight*" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Walking by faith is not walking blindly. God gives us plenty of signs by which to gain our "bearings" so that we do not wander aimlessly. God gave Abraham the stars of heaven as his sign, a sign that Abraham could use as "True North" in guiding his every step. The Lord told Abraham, "*Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.*" Then, after a few minutes He added, "*So shall your offspring be*" (Genesis 15:5-6). What was the sign Abraham was supposed to see in the heavens? What were the stars telling him in those few moments in which he gazed heavenward? It was more than the fact that he would have millions of descendants. True, he needed to know that. But the real question was not, "How many descendants will I have?" but, "How will I have so many descendants?" How is it possible?

That's the question the stars were asked to answer. "Abraham, look at all of us. We number in the millions, don't we? Abraham, how did all of us stars get here?" Good question. Scripture tells us that God made the stars on Day Four of Creation Week. People—Adam and Eve—didn't show up until Day Six. They weren't much help. So, how did God make all of those stars without any human assistance? That was their question. Here was their answer: "By His Word, alone." God said, "*Let their be lights in the expanse of the heavens . . . And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years. . . And it was so*" (Genesis 1:14-15). And so they implied, "Abraham, if God was able to make us in a day from nothing, with simply the Word of His mouth. Don't you think He is able with His same Word to

give birth to a mighty nation through an old man and his wife?”

Thus, God’s question at the beginning of this devotion, “*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*” God addressed it to Abraham; He addresses it also to us. Is anything too hard for the Lord? What is God laying on your heart to do for Him and for others? Hopefully it is something a lot bigger than you can personally accomplish. Tonight is a good time to go outside and look heavenward. (Hopefully you’ll have a clear sky.) Count the stars; ask the question. Then, walk by faith.

For personal reflection:

- 1) What shortens the hand of God in your own life? That is, what keeps you from doing the things God has placed in your heart to do?

- 2) What did the stars have to say to you when you looked up at the heavens?

Prayer: Dear God Almighty, we think we see so clearly how You will accomplish Your will through us. Give us the trust to walk by faith as we live our days as pilgrims of the tent. Amen.

Week Six ~ Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Four: Love my enemies? I don't think so.

“But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?” (Matthew 5:44-47)

Jesus put His finger on a giant mud hole that really bogs us down in “running the race.” It's called “Conditional Love.” We heartily concur with Him that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Our problem is that we operate with a definition of neighbor very different from the one our Lord uses. Neighbors in our minds are those who like us, and for the most part, are like us. In other words, they do not cause us pain or anxiety. They do not pose a threat to our security. Those who pose threats are not neighbors; they are more like enemies. Does Jesus want us to love them too? Where do we draw the line?

We may not have any enemies, but we know people who are very different from us, generally nonChristians. Their lives and behavior are a turn off and we place them just outside our circle of neighbors and, by inference, just outside the reach of God. Like the church leaders of Jesus' day we grumble about them and the problems they cause us and others. They challenge, even threaten the way of life we enjoyed in our more Christian community of a few years ago. They've upset our Sundays, competing for our families' time and attention with soccer games and camping clubs. They've stripped us of our right to pray in public, even to greet each other with a Merry Christmas. Worse, they're attacking the very Christian values—marriage and family—upon which our nation and communities stand strong. We have good reason to grumble!

Our Lord, however, asks us to open our eyes to see these people from His vantage point. From His view they would be seen as potential causes for rejoicing rather than for grumbling. We need to consider His kind but thought provoking words to the devoutly religious people of His own day. *“Which man of you,”* He asked, *“having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the*

one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. . . Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:4-7). The context for his reflection was the fact that these good people were grumbling about people in their own communities who were living lives contrary to God’s Word. What really got their goat, however, was the fact that Jesus chose to call these sinners his neighbors. He even invited them into his home and ate dinner with them. *“This man receives sinners,”* they grumbled, *“and eats with them.”* (Luke 15:2).

Interestingly enough, the cause of their grumbling stemmed from the fact that these “sinners” were actually *“drawing near to hear [Jesus].”* They were coming to Him. What was it about Jesus that they found so attractive? What made Him different from the “Christians” of His day or the churches to which they belonged? Why were they comfortable coming to hear Jesus in His home, but not comfortable to meet with God and His people in the Temple or local synagogue? What might we take away from this story for our own consideration? Are there “sinners” in our own community that don’t draw near to us on Sunday morning but might be willing, even desirous to draw near to Jesus to hear Him? Is that even possible?

We struggle to “love our enemies” while Jesus gladly receives sinners and even eats with them. I believe that you and I would all agree that we are glad He delights in eating with sinners. Every Sunday I look forward to joining Him at the Table and eating the meal He consciously and carefully prepared for sinners—His own Body and Blood. Where would we be if He didn’t live by His own words: “Love your enemies.” I recall the words from St. Paul that we looked at a few weeks ago, *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. . . For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”* (Romans 5:6-10).

Jesus personally changed you and me from being His enemies to being His kin, sons and daughters of His Father. The Family Business focuses on doing the same for those who are still His enemies. That’s what lies behind His command to “Love our enemies.” If they are our enemies, then they must also be His enemies too. As His enemies, He loves them enough to die for them and by so doing to reconcile them, along with us, to His Father.

That makes them His brothers and sisters. That makes them our brothers and sisters too. Being family, they become a lot easier to love.

For personal reflection:

- 1) St. Luke tells us that “sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.”
 - a. What do you think they found so attractive about Jesus?
 - b. Why do you think they were comfortable coming to hear Jesus in His home, but not comfortable to meet with God or His people in the Temple or local church?
- 2) Are there “sinners” in our own community that don’t draw near to us on Sunday morning but might desire to draw near to Jesus to hear Him? How would we address that reality?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You loves us so You came to live among us the life we should live and die the death we should die so we are no longer enemies but friends. Let us reflect Your love to those we label enemies as they may become our brothers and sisters in You. Amen.

Week Six ~Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Five: Physician, heal yourself.

“Doubtless you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well” (Luke 4:23).

Read Luke 4:16-30. The story takes place in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth at the very beginning of His public ministry. Just prior to this story Luke tells us that Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist, where His Father publicly consecrated Him as the Messiah by anointing Him with the Holy Spirit. From there He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to face the temptations of Satan for forty days. Returning from that ordeal, *“in the power of the Spirit,”* Jesus began to preach and teach in the synagogues around the Sea of Galilee. Now, He was returning to Nazareth after being gone for some time. The people were delighted to see Him and hear Him preach. Jesus had become somewhat of a celebrity.

The first part of Jesus’ sermon drew great approval from the congregation. *They marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.”* We would have too. Jesus was explaining to them that their time of waiting was over. God’s promise of the Messiah—a promise He made to their ancestors thousands of years before—was being fulfilled right in their presence. God had sent Him and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit to proclaim God’s favor to the destitute, to give sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free. In short, their Messiah had come to restore them to their position as God’s chosen people in the world. That was truly Good News.

It didn’t stay good news, however. Jesus went on to explain to His friends and other town folk that they needed to address a serious problem: Their sense of entitlement. *“Doubtless you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.”* The people of Nazareth were overjoyed at the thought that one of their own was the promised Messiah. But they stumbled over the fact that He was the promised Messiah for the rest of the world as well. Their admiration turned to murderous anger when Jesus reminded them that God had, on more than one occasion, reached out to minister to people who were not Jewish. There was the widow of Zaraphath in Sidon (the home country of the wicked Queen Jezebel). The Lord sent the great prophet

Elijah to care for her and her family while many widows in Israel went hungry. Likewise, the Lord used the prophet Elisha to cure Naaman (the commanding general of the Syrian army, responsible for attacking several Israeli villages) of his leprosy even though many lepers in Israel continued to suffer. Jesus made it perfectly clear to his hearers: You cannot truly embrace Me as Messiah without also embracing my universal mission. That was simply too much for them.

God's people wanted Him as their personal Messiah, but rejected His messianic mission to the nations. Rejecting His mission led them, finally, to reject Him as their Messiah with the result that their position in the Family Business was *"taken from them and given to a people producing its fruits"* (Matthew 21:43). Luke records that Jesus left his hometown that day and made his home in a different village. We don't know if he ever returned. Their sense of entitlement cost them everything.

That sense of entitlement is something that we stumble over too. We begin to think that as God's forgiven children, we are more deserving of His grace or blessings than those who do not yet know Him. Or worse we may even think that he owes us something. We begin to dictate to God where, when, and whom He may serve rather than following Him wherever and to whom-ever He wants to go. We embrace Him as our Savior, yet struggle with His mission to the world. Like His hometown, this inseparable connection between Savior and Mission becomes the very stone on which we stumble.

Entitlement suggests that, as God's children, we deserve His favor. We don't. Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we were *"by nature children of wrath,"* not children of God. God's wrath and eternal punishment is all that we "deserve". He continues, *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved."* (Ephesians 2:4) Grace and entitlement are antonyms. One cannot stand with the other. Either we grasp what God offers us in grace—His eternal riches in Christ,— or we grasp that to which we are entitled—God's wrath.

Praise God that He did not give us what we deserve. Grasping that reality is a sure cure for a bad case of entitlement.

For personal reflection:

Consider what God owes us by entitlement.

Consider what God has chosen to give us by His grace.

Prayer: Lord God, we thank You that You do not give us what we deserve. Mercifully You withhold justice. We thank You that You give us what we do not deserve. Graciously You forgive, love, and provide our eternal home. Amen.

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“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Six: Den of thieves (Hoarding)

“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17).

From the Garden of Eden to the present participation in the Family Business seems burdensome to God’s people. Our service with Jesus as priests in this world is by definition self-effacing and we find that uncomfortable. We came into the Family by grace alone without any merit or worthiness on our part. There’s nothing that we bring to or contribute to it. Jesus washed us clean by His own blood and clothed us in His robe of righteousness. His robe is a priestly garment of eternal service to others. That’s why we find our priestly robes so uncomfortable. It takes a lifetime to grow into them (Ephesians 4:15).

When God’s people abandoned their priestly call God sent his prophets to call them back both to Him by faith alone and to their vocation as His priests to the world. When they continued to disobey His call He brought their prideful self-absorption to ruin and scattered them among the nations. But even that disciplinary action was in accord with their divine call at Sinai. He scattered them as his priests. He brought them to repentance in Babylon and raised them once again as His own people, which included their priestly vocation.

God’s prophetic word to Israel reached its climax in Jesus’ speech to the religious leaders as He cleansed the Temple during Holy Week. Important for understanding our Lord’s actions are the words He spoke while overturning the tables of the moneychangers, and driving out all who were selling and buying animals for sacrifice: *“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”*

We generally connect His words with the selfish behavior of the Temple staff—tampering with the scales that weighed out the money or with the prices of the different offerings. They were essentially “robbing” the saints who were coming to worship God in the Temple. The context, however, suggests that He was speaking to something much deeper than cheating people out of their money. His real concern rests in His words, “My house

shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.” Our Lord was teaching that they—His own people, elect by Him to be His precious possession as His priests for the nations (Exodus 19)—had taken the salvation that was intended for the other nations and kept it only for themselves. God’s people had effectively stolen the inheritance of eternal life that belonged to all peoples.

There are several ways in which to be a robber. One way is to break into a neighbor’s home or business and steal what belongs to him. Another way, as Martin Luther reminds us, is to choose not to help our neighbor keep his property or business. A third way to steal is to choose not to give to my neighbor what is actually his own. For instance, if I were the executor of an estate and it was my responsibility to distribute to all the heirs their portion of the estate but I chose instead to keep their portions of the inheritance for myself, then, I stole their inheritance from them. That is what our Lord meant in these words, “but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Consider what He’s saying. Rather than using the Temple as God intended it, a giant distribution center of God’s universal grace, His people turned it into a den of robbers. A “robbers den” is the place where thieves stash their stolen treasure and hide out from those who would bring them to justice. That’s what God’s people were doing. They used the Temple to hoard all of the grace God had given them to give to the other nations. They went there regularly to get whatever grace they needed for themselves all the while thinking, “God’s grace protects me. It even hides me from the punishment I deserve for my self-centered hoarding.”

This robbery lies at the root of our rebellion against our Father. It also lies at the root of God sending His true Son into the world for our salvation. A few weeks ago we looked at the Prophet Jonah as a sign of Israel’ rebellious hoarding of God’s saving Word. Like Jonah, they refused to be God’s restoring voice to the world. Our Lord Jesus, however, did not use the Jonah’s story primarily to condemn His people. He pointed out that as Jonah was “dead” for three days and nights in the belly of a big fish, He would lay three days and nights in the heart of the earth. Jesus was telling us that He would pay for our robberies on the cross. And like Jonah, we would also be raised up with Him from the grave and be given a new life by which we continue to participate in His Father’s plan to bring salvation to the nations. Consider the incredible kindness of our God—our Father has, in His Son, set us free from hoarding and given us a new opportunity to be about His Business in the world.

For personal reflection:

- 1) In what ways have you or your congregation been tempted to turn your church into a “den of robbers”?

- 2) What does the “Sign of Jonah” mean for you?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us not to horde Your grace and restore us to faith in You and living out our calling as priests in the world. Amen.

Week Six ~Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Seven: Recalculating!

“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand’” (Matthew 4:17).

Having used GPS devices for several years now I find myself both amazed at and grateful for the genius that lies behind their development. My GPS has proven to be a true travel companion. Furthermore it has become a real lifesaver for my marriage. Priscilla’s frustration at my inability to pull into a service station to ask for directions has all but vanished, and my “male pride” of having to know where I am and where I’m going at all times remains intact. Over time I’ve grown to depend on my GPS like a trusted friend. True, it is only a machine. But its almost human voice breaks in at just the right time to guide me along the way. No matter where I find myself, no matter how hopelessly lost I am in some unfamiliar community, my GPS calmly and confidently directs me to my chosen destination.

The feature of my GPS that I most appreciate is its ability to “recalculate.” When I get off the course that it set for me, it simply adjusts itself to direct me from where I am at present to where I need to be. It doesn’t become frustrated or give up on my inability to follow its directions. It simply recalculates based on *our* present position, keeping the goal in mind of where *we* ultimately want to be. Furthermore, it never says, “Listen Bob, if you keep getting off course, I am not going to be able to help you.” Nor, “Listen Bob, if you had listened to me in the first place we would not be lost.” Nor, “Listen Bob, you are going to need to find your own way back to the course I laid out for you, and then, I will take it from there.” All it says is “Recalculating.” No guilt, no reprimand, no long conversation about what went wrong. My GPS simply begins again from the place that I lost us, recalculates the best route from there to our chosen destination, and starts leading us once again. By following its lead I eventually hear it speak those wonderful words, “Arriving at your destination on the left (or on the right).”

Consider the work of Christ’s Spirit in our lives. More perfect than any GPS He is able and willing to lead us on the divinely mapped route of our life and purpose as Christ’s people in this world. Daily and often we choose to get off course. We find ourselves hopelessly lost and bogged down in the *“sin which clings so closely.”* That’s when we need Him to call us to

“Repent,” or if you will, “Recalculate.” Repentance is not an exercise in self-abrading and condemnation—how we let ourselves and our God down again, or how could we have been so foolish to allow this situation to take place. No, it’s following that clear, gentle voice of the Spirit, “Recalculating.” “Let’s begin from where *we* are at this moment and proceed to where our Father has designed us to go.” The Kankanaey people, whom Priscilla and I served as missionaries in the Philippines had a word for such a person: Kailian (ka-ili-an). It means simply, “Companion on the road.” What a fitting description of the Holy Spirit.

Like a GPS, the Holy Spirit is never lost because He secures His bearings, and ours, from a source outside our present context and situation. A GPS zeroes in on a number of satellite signals coming from outer space which inform it at all times of its exact location. With those bearings it is able to guide with confidence. The Holy Spirit zeroes in on our crucified and risen Lord. He stands above time and space, unaffected by past, present, or future realities of our fallen world. Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Pointing to Christ, the Spirit calmly and confidently leads.

The secret to running the race, to living the Abundant Life is learning to trust the Holy Spirit to get us where we need to get each day as we navigate our relationships and responsibilities. Wouldn’t it be great if we followed the Holy Spirit’s lead as we go about our Father’s Business? No anxiety producing behaviors, just recalculating through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For personal reflection:

- 1) How does the idea of “Recalculating” shape your understanding of “repentance?”

Prayer: Dear Jesus, as we hear, learn, and take Your Word to heart, may the Holy Spirit guide us in the living of our days. Amen.